

7 Tips for Better Employee Retention

by Jennifer Newman

As architecture, engineering, and construction (A/E/C) firms suffer from a shortage of experienced design and construction professionals, the industry finds itself in the middle of a talent war.

According to a survey by Building Design+Construction, 58% of respondents say it takes four-plus months to fill the most difficult positions. Meanwhile, in a study conducted by the Center for America Progress, the cost of losing an employee can run as high as 213% for highly-trained positions, meaning to place a highly-qualified employee making \$80,000 a year could cost the company a staggering \$170,000. It stands to reason that employee retention is among the top priorities for A/E/C firms today.

These seven tips can help you win the employee retention battle as part of the greater talent war.

Make a Great First Impression. Hire the right people and ensure they don't just fit the role but also the company culture. Be sure to define their role and expectations clearly; no one likes a bait-and-switch. Start them off with a streamlined onboarding process, so they feel welcome and comfortable in their position and understand your firm vision, procedures, and culture. Finally, celebrate their addition to the team.

Transparency and Communication. Transparency can give employees a sense of ownership in the company. Open, honest and unambiguous communication can eliminate job uncertainty and animosity within the company culture. Create strategies for open feedback, online forums, and town hall meetings, allowing employees to ask questions of top leadership.

Make it Their Mission to Engage. Companies with highly-engaged employees have turnover rates 31% lower than those with employees who are less engaged.

Retention increases when employees feel that they have a sense of meaning and purpose and can connect how their jobs contribute to the mission and move the company forward. Engage your employees in your firm's mission, vision, and goals and encourage employees to share and implement ideas that can improve processes and policies. When employees feel like they're part of your story, you will keep them inspired, engaged, and on board.

Vicky Golie, CPSM, Marketing Director of Salt Lake-based architecture firm Babcock Design, attributes the firm's employee retention success to engagement. "We work hard and play hard," says Golie. "We have a standing committee that meets regularly to strengthen our culture, keep moral high, make things fun, and strive for a work-life balance."

Invest in Your Employees Growth. A drive to continually grow and improve is part of what makes a great employee. Communicate openly with employees about their career paths and empower employees to set their own goals. Give them the training, tools, resources and mentoring they need to achieve those goals. Couple this with simple, goal-based performance reviews and the result will be a highly motivated employee that stays for the long haul.

Mike Johnson of MEP firm Van Boerum & Frank Associates (VBFA) of Salt Lake City, says employees tend to look at firms with a solid work history and future growth opportunities. "Great firms offer stability, support and mentoring at every stage of your career," he said.

Recognize and Reward. Employees who feel valued, appreciated and needed are likely to support management decisions, accept organizational changes and stay loyal. Show your employees they are valued and appreciated by recognizing them and celebrating their successes and efforts with specific, tangible rewards.



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Fran Pruyn, Senior Principal at architecture firm CRSA states: "It can be something as simple as periodic gift cards for extraordinary performance. Reward your people, and they will reward you with their loyalty."

Work-Life Balance. For many people, work-life balance means more than having time to spend with their families or on activities. They want to contribute to a firm that cares about them as individuals. Give employees the opportunity to connect with one another and make a difference. Organizations that prioritize employees increase the bottom line. When employees feel valued, it encourages them to provide better customer service to clients.

Doug Lineback, a 28-year employee at VFBA said, "the firm gives employees the resources and equipment to do their job well and stay healthy, as well as providing a friendly atmosphere where the owners encourage employees and are interested in their family."

Compensation. Be sure that you are paying your employees what they are worth or better and ensure you are rewarding them on a regular basis with raises and bonuses. Offer competitive benefits that include flexibility based on individual needs, positions and skills. ■

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