
Gap-Closing Retention Strategies

Retention: *The process of keeping employees within the organization by taking steps to help prevent unwanted turnover.*

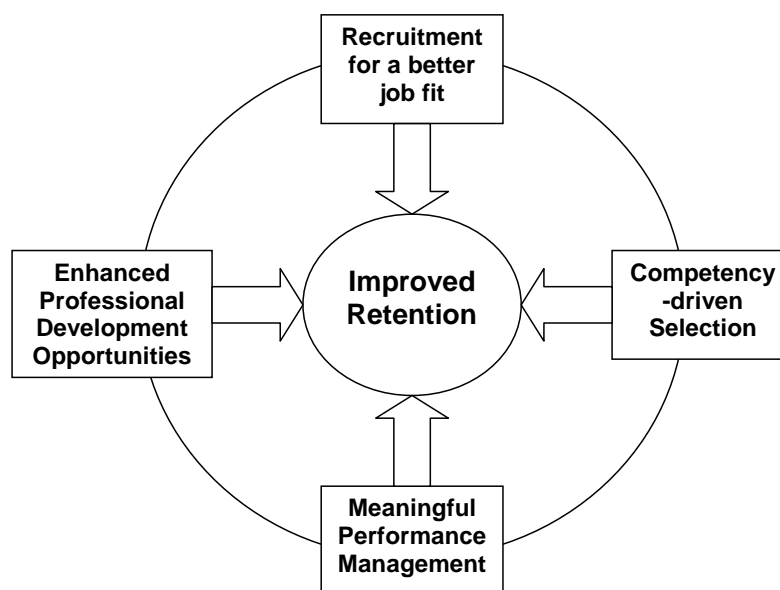
You may have identified high employee turnover as a serious threat to your agency's ability to achieve its strategic objectives. Workforce instability and high turnover result in compromised program effectiveness in many human services agencies. Your gap analysis may have revealed both staffing gaps and competency gaps due to high turnover.

Building your Competency Model into all of your Human Resources management (HRM) processes will have a positive impact on employee retention:

- Recruiting and selecting employees with the competencies associated with successful performance will result in a better job fit.
- Aligning performance management and professional development processes with the Competency Model should strengthen employees' abilities to effectively meet the challenges of the job.
- Employee loyalty and retention increase when employees clearly understand what is expected of them and receive constructive feedback on how they are doing.
- Providing competency-based development provides employees with the insights and tools necessary to become better workers and prepares them for future advancement.

The figure below provides a graphical representation of how HRM processes affect employee retention.

HRM Processes and Employee Retention



Getting Started

The reasons for high employee turnover are generally multifaceted and no single “quick fix” will solve the problem. Identifying the reasons for employee turnover in your organization is a critical first step to designing your strategy to combat it. Although human resources may have the ultimate responsibility for designing and implementing the strategies for reducing turnover, involving other key areas of your agency is critical. We recommend assembling a Retention Strategy Team, including employees and frontline supervisors of the target classification may who can provide valuable insights. The team will work through the following steps:

Step 1: Identify the Reasons for High Turnover

Although there are a number of causes for high turnover that are endemic to many human services agencies, it is important for your agency to understand what causes high turnover among your employees. Possible reasons include:

- Low salaries
- Heavy workloads
- Paperwork and other administrative burdens that detract from the employees’ perception of the “real work”
- Poor supervision and/or lack supervisory support
- Unavailability of training and/or insufficient time to participate in training
- Low morale, often arising from organizational cultures that do not support and value employees
- Risk of violence

For a detailed discussion on the causes and consequences of turnover among child welfare workers, see the [Turnover Tool Kit](#).

Gather information: Through your [SWOT analysis](#), you may already have gathered the data you need to help identify the causes of turnover in your agency. You’ll use this SWOT information along with data from other sources to give you the broad perspective necessary to develop effective solutions to turnover.

Other information sources include:

- [Exit interviews and surveys](#) (EIS) provide valuable information about why employees leave an organization.
- Staff focus groups and surveys are helpful for gathering information about employee satisfaction and turnover intention.
- Detailed employee turnover reports provide insights about why employees leave the agency and help answer questions such as:
 - Is turnover within the first year after hire much higher than among more experienced employees?
 - Is there a relationship between college degree/major and tenure?

- Are there turnover differences from one work unit and another - perhaps attributable to supervisory style or the nature of the specialized functions within work unit?
- Are there turnover differences between employees in different age groups, race/ethnic groups, or by gender?

For more information about developing and analyzing detailed turnover reports, see the [Turnover Tool Kit](#)

Step 2: Develop and Implement a Retention Strategy

Once you've identified the underlying causes of high turnover in your agency, the next step is to identify solutions that address the root causes. The [Turnover Tool Kit](#) is a comprehensive, step-by-step guide to developing strategies and solutions to address high turnover. Your Retention Strategy Team can adapt the ideas into specific approaches that can be implemented in your agency.

The [Targeted Solutions to Turnover Matrix](#) on the next two pages identifies the major underlying causes of high turnover along with strategies that are targeted to address these causes.

Causes of Employee Turnover

Solutions to Employee Turnover	Admin./ Paper Work	Bens.	Burn-out	Career Growth	Client Rescs.	Suppt. from Commtty.	Court Issues	Hours Conflict	Job Fit	Org. Culture	Pay Issues	Profess. Devel.	Profes- slsm.	Safety Concerns	Super- vision	Inadeq. Training	Unmet Job Expects.	Work. Conds.	Work- load
Adv. Hiring			x																x
Behav. Intervs.									x								x		
Career Lad./Tier				x							x	x	x						
Caseload Reduc.			x							x			x			x			x
Competitive Pay											x								
Degree Incentive				x							x								
Diversity Progs.										x									
Flex Time/Job Share			x					x		x									x
Good Place to Work			x		x	x	x			x					x	x			
Improve Phys. Environ.			x							x								x	
Job Restruct.	x		x				x		x				x				x		x
Job Rotation			x	x			x	x				x							
Just Ask			x	x				x		x		x			x	x	x	x	
Mentor			x	x			x		x	x		x				x			
Paperwrk Reduc.	x		x						x								x		x
Perform.-Based Pay										x	x								
Perform. Mgmt.				x						x		x			x				
Realistic Job Prev.	x		x						x								x		
Safety Support														x					
2nd Lang. Incent.											x								
Super. Develmt.												x		x	x				
Telecommute			x					x										x	x
In-Serv. Training	x		x		x		x			x		x				x			
Tuition Assis.		x		x							x	x				x			
Univ. Partners.									x			x					x		

Possible Causes of Turnover among Children's Services Worker - Defined

Cause	Definition
Administrative/Paper Work	Caseworkers, who want to do "real social work," become frustrated with administrative duties such as paperwork, transporting clients, meetings, etc.
Benefits	Inadequate benefits to meet employee's basic needs, primarily in the areas of health care, retirement and vacation.
Burnout	Caseworkers find themselves emotionally unable to work productively and may find it difficult to continue working. Burn out may be caused by high levels of stress resulting from heavy workloads, erratic hours, poor supervision, the emotionally draining nature of the work, or simply because the employee is a "poor fit" for the job.
Career Growth	Employee feels that there are few promotional opportunities to "grow" as a caseworker either professionally or financially.
Client Resources	Caseworker becomes frustrated with the agency's inability to meet some of the basic needs of children and families. May also be frustrated with lack of other community resources.
Community Support	Caseworkers do not feel that their profession and/or agency is respected in the community. Negative media coverage.
Court Issues	Caseworker may be uncomfortable in court room situations, feel disrespected by attorneys and judges, and placed on the defensive. May feel court is another administrative burden that detracts from social work role.
Hours Conflict	Caseworker may be required to work long hours to stay "caught up." Some jobs require working overtime or being "on call" during evenings and weekends, thus interfering with personal and family life.
Job Fit	There is a poor match between the requirements of the job and the employee's skills, values, and/or personality.
Organization Culture	The atmosphere of the agency is not one that employees regard as being supportive, positive, or one where they feel valued by supervision and upper management.
Pay Issues	Pay is insufficient to meet basic needs or expectations. Pay may not be competitive within the community. Agency's internal pay practices may be regarded as being unfair.
Professional Development	Agency does not provide training or other developmental opportunities to improve professional skills or to prepare for promotional opportunities or career advancement.
Professionalism	Caseworkers believe that the child welfare job has become so structured and regulated by policy that their opportunity to function as a professional has been eroded.
Safety Concerns	Workers have concerns about their physical safety.
Supervision	Poor quality supervisors do not provide the leadership skills necessary to support and develop their staff.
Training Adequacy	Basic skill training is inadequate to provide new employees the basic skills necessary to do the job. Skill training for experienced employees is inadequate or the employee does not have the time to attend because of other work priorities.
Unmet Job Expectation	New employees find the job to be very different than they thought it would be when they accepted it.
Working Conditions	Poor physical surroundings -- inadequate office space and equipment, buildings in bad repair or bad location, inferior technological equipment and support.
Workload	High caseloads, and otherwise heavy workloads, create stress and anxiety.

Using the Competency Model to Improve Supervisory Effectiveness

In many human services organizations, ineffective frontline supervision is one of the major reasons for high employee turnover. In their best-selling book, *First, Break all the Rules*, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman present convincing evidence to support the long-held notion that frontline supervisors are key to retaining talented and productive employees. There is a very direct link between the quality of supervisors and employee morale, loyalty and commitment and job retention.

“.....people leave managers, not companies. So much money has been thrown at the challenge of keeping good people – in the form of better pay, better perks, and better training – when, in the end, turnover is mostly a manager issue. If you have a turnover problem, look first to your managers.”¹

Many human service agencies tend to promote the frontline staff with the best technical skills on the often-mistaken assumption that they will make the best supervisors. Others promote those with the greatest length of service, believing that experience equates to leadership.

Just as with frontline staff, selecting supervisors based the length of their experience, their technical knowledge and skills, and aptitude for the work does not necessarily equate to excellent performance. The best supervisors are generally those who coach, develop, provide support and build trust among their staff.

Building the right Competency Model for supervisors in your organization is just as important – if not more important – than for frontline staff. Integrating your model throughout the HRM processes that impact supervisors is done the same way as for workers, and the process you use to build the model and is exactly the same as for frontline staff.

¹ Buckingham, Marcus and Curt Coffman. 1999. *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Recruitment and Retention Challenges Requiring Basic Systemic Changes

Although many organizations think of recruitment and retention as very different HR issues, the fact is that in many – if not most – instances they are the “head and tail” of the same coin. The very issues that cause high turnover – low wages, heavy workloads, unsupportive supervisors and managers, the absence of community support – are the same issues that make it difficult to attract top-quality job applicants. Although most agencies understand these conditions, they’re often difficult to overcome. In many cases, the solutions aren’t found in new approaches but rather in unwavering perseverance.

- **Low wages and poor benefits** – Many human service agencies offer wage and benefit packages that are seriously inferior to those offered by other employers seeking applicants with similar education, skills and competency sets. Many applicants who would

be a good job fit in a human services agency don't rank a "high salary" as an important criterion when searching for a job.

Yet, most won't consider a career in human services if the wage and benefits package won't support a reasonable standard of living, and/or is seriously non-competitive for similar work. By the same token, low wages and poor benefits are contributing factors in the decision of many capable human services professionals to leave the field.

Human service agencies must continue to educate legislators, commissioners, boards of directors, and the public about the costs and consequences of sub-standard pay and benefits.

- **Difficult work and heavy workloads** – Employees of human services agencies, both public and private, are often faced with almost insurmountable challenges – demanding work and too much of it. An unmanageable workload is the major reason for high turnover in many human services agencies. The "community reputation" as an agency with unmanageable workloads is also a major barrier to recruiting top quality employees.

All too often, reductions in workload occur only after tragedy strikes or as the result of court orders or consent decrees. Nonetheless, when this happens, dollars are found to hire additional staff. If priorities can change after such events, priorities can change before they occur. In some agencies, the dollars that could be saved from reducing staff turnover (resulting from heavy workloads) is enough to hire additional staff, thereby reducing workloads.

Although it may not have immediate results, engaging in educational campaigns, lobbying efforts, and other strategies to reduce workloads must also be a part of many agencies recruitment and retention agendas.