

Burnout and the High Cost of Turnover

By Paul Sullivan

We recently hired a new legal secretary. I received resumes this time from candidates who were well paid in their current positions and yet were interested in moving – not for more income, but for better working conditions. In fact, a couple of them were willing to take less money just to escape their current situations, where they feel overworked, underappreciated, and basically burned out. Could one of these candidates be your employee?

A law firm can be an intense and stressful place to work. There are always deadlines and crises, demands from clients and competitive pressures from other firms. Everyone is asked to produce more with less, which affects not only staff members but associates and firm owners, too.

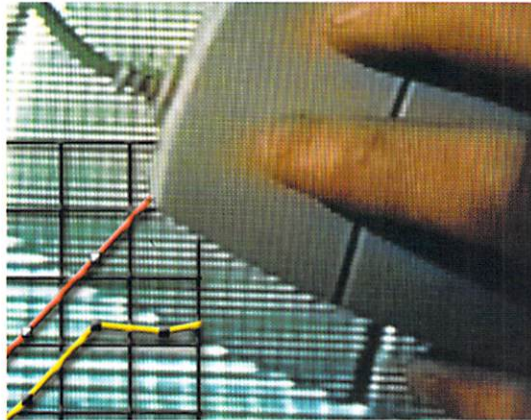
Do you have employees complaining that their work isn't as fulfilling as it used to be? Do they overreact to minor situations, indicate they are overwhelmed, even complain of physical ailments? Do you have employees who no longer laugh or have fun at work? Do they consider work a chore? Do they worry or lack enthusiasm?

How about you? Have you lost your enthusiasm for your work? Is it becoming a drag? Are you questioning the value of the tasks you perform?

If you can answer "yes" to many or all of these questions, then burnout is percolating in your office, and you shouldn't ignore it.

Why should you care?

You should care because it's going to cost you dearly. If your employees decide to move on, the costs will be greater than you think. It's usually your best employees who develop burnout. By their nature, superstars put more of



Does burnout have your best employees looking elsewhere? Learn the warning signs and find out how you can create a less stressful working environment.

themselves into their work, spend more time, and take things more seriously. They will put up with burnout conditions only so long before moving on. A hard-working staff is great, but an overworked one is a disaster waiting to happen.

Often, burned out employees will try to overcome the problem by spending more time and effort at work and becoming more personally involved. That only makes the situation worse. They may even find that their extra efforts only create an expectation from management that they will work at this level continuously.

Burned-out employees suffer more from illness, too. Work-related stress is thought to contribute to headaches, muscular pains, fatigue, and sleep disorders and can increase the risk of heart disease.

What does turnover really cost?

Turnover costs hit you hardest where you may not see it. You will experience the direct costs of hiring and replacement, but the not-so-obvious costs of reduced productivity and perhaps even diminished client service can have long-lasting effect.

The first costs you feel are related to the person leaving. Once a person gives notice, his or her productivity will decline rapidly. In addition, you will probably pay direct and administrative costs related to accrued vacation, sick time, stopping payroll, COBRA notification and processing, and the various forms needed to process the resignation. But your biggest expense related to the turnover won't be known for some time – that's the loss of knowledge, skills, and perhaps even contacts the person is taking out the door.

Next come the costs related to recruitment and replacement. There is advertising and the time it takes for you or someone on your staff to interview prospective employees. You may also incur overtime costs from other employees covering the vacant position and suffer lower productivity in other areas because people are trying to fill the position. Perhaps the biggest risk is that you won't find someone qualified to fill the position. All the while, this disruption to the normal routine can quietly undermine client service.

Once you find a replacement, bringing him or her to the level of the former employee takes time. Your new hire will probably face new or different technology. Someone will have to take time to train the new person, meaning that two employees – the trainee and the trainer – will be underperforming.

What can you do for yourself?

The first thing you can do is create an environment where burnout and high turnover don't exist. It begins with you. If you're stressed, it's likely your staff is too. Stress is often self imposed. You can't completely escape it, but you can manage it. Highly motivated people often set goals so high they can't be achieved – dial down your expectations.

Perception also plays a big role in any event. Make sure problems aren't blown out of proportion.

What can you do for your employees?

Deal with the causes, not just the symptoms. Encourage communication with everyone in your office. Lack of communication causes misunderstandings that in turn create stress and cause mistakes.

Monitor workloads. Employees may be reluctant to tell you they are overburdened. Typical signs are working late, working over lunch, repeated rushing to meet deadlines, or simply expressions of frustration.

Following are some tips both you and your employees can use to ratchet down stress:

Maintain a sense of humor. Look for the absurd in every situation. Believe it or not, laughter enhances your immune system, relaxes your muscles, and actually blunts pain.

Exercise. Brisk activity releases endorphins, which elevate your mood, increase your stamina, and reduce your fatigue. Even a brisk walk outside or down the hall can help. If you try, you can make exercise part of your daily routine. You'll find that your exercise regimen energizes you and makes you more productive.

Analyze your work. Do you accept assignments outside your responsibility just so you won't disappoint someone? Learn to diplomatically say "no" when you can.

Find someone you can talk to. Sometimes just venting to someone else relieves stress. Perhaps the other person can offer a perspective on your situation that you haven't thought of.

Leave your work at the office. Focusing on something other than work energizes and refocuses you. When you return you can take a fresh look at your situation.

The impact of employee turnover on your bottom line is dramatic. You can't buy employee satisfaction with a paycheck alone. By creating a healthy work-

ing environment you can prevent the stress and related costs that occur when burnout rages through an office. ■

Paul Sullivan is the office administrator of Quinn Johnston Henderson & Pretorius, with offices in Peoria and Springfield. He is

also an adjunct consultant with Olmstead & Associates of St. Louis, and he serves on the ISBA Law Office Economics Section Council. For more practice management tips read The Bottom Line, the LOE section newsletter (free to LOE section members—to join, call (800) 252-8908).

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