

Strategic commentary

Creating a culture of care: retention in today's competitive market

Thought leaders share their views on the HR profession and its direction for the future

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Job-hopping, while not new, has gained mindshare in the past few years. LinkedIn's 2015 Global Job Seeker Trends: Why and How People Change Jobs study found that the number of active job-seekers had grown by 36 per cent over the previous four years ([LinkedIn, 2015](#)), and Gallup found that half of the US employees are actively looking for a job ([Mann and McCarville, 2015](#)).

Opportunities to make a switch abound, as 11,000 baby boomers retire each day ([Kessler, 2014](#)). Driven by increased competition for talent, according to a Bersin by Deloitte report, it now costs companies an average of \$4,000 ([O' Leonard et al., 2015](#)) over the course of 52 days to fill an open position ([Erickson, 2015](#)).

Retention has never been more crucial, but are businesses doing enough to create a culture that drives employee loyalty? Unique company perks and wellness offerings are attempting to strengthen employee loyalty but with varied success. As a result, a new umbrella approach to these initiatives is gaining traction: building a culture focused on care. However, how do care and wellness combine?

Caring for employees inspires loyalty

While some employers explore the latest trendy incentives (think pods, nap pods, ping-pong tables or fully stocked fridges), new research indicates that when it comes to retention, the new competitive advantage may be as simple as caring. According to one study, people who worked in a culture where they felt free to express affection, caring and compassion for one another were more satisfied with their jobs, committed to the organization and accountable for their performance ([Barsade and O'Neill, 2014](#)).

When employees feel supported by their organization, they will develop a stronger attachment to it. One of the simplest ways employers can support and show care for employees is through office wellness programs. These types of programs vary between organizations but all have the same goal in mind – to keep employees healthy.

Caring goes beyond kindness

Many wellness programs – traditional and trendy alike – already fall under the umbrella of caring. Though they look different from office to office,

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employees can expect a safe working environment, a management team that listens to specific needs and access to the tools they need to be the most effective workers. Despite good intentions, there are occasions in which employee care needs more attention:

1. **Food culture:** While it may come as a surprise, food is an incredibly important piece of any office's wellness plan. The relationship with food can be a place where care and wellness collide. Top-performing groups get pizza parties and every birthday is accompanied by cake and ice cream and important meetings are stocked with donuts and catered lunches. Are vending machines stocked with sugary snacks? Do employees have access to a fridge where they can store lunches they bring in themselves? It is difficult to think of ways to celebrate and show care without contradicting healthy eating initiatives, but it is possible.
2. **Office design:** Does the company practice what the wellness program preaches? Providing gym memberships and encouraging exercise can be a form of caring, but there may be some missed opportunities within the office space itself, especially when it comes to the office's attitude toward movement. For instance, telling employees that movement is important by providing gym memberships, but then not offering them alternatives to sitting at desks and conference tables all day in the office.
3. **Employee accommodations:** Office jobs can cause physical pain. According to a survey conducted by the American Osteopathic Association, two in three office workers have experienced physical pain in the past six months, while nearly one

in four believe that it is just a standard part of having an office job. Though companies may be focusing on creative wellness perks, they may also be missing employee physical pain points ([American Osteopathic Association, 2013](#)).

Reinventing the wellness plan: think "inside the box"

Creating a culture of care and wellness starts with thinking "inside the box" – or the built office environment:

- **Food culture:** Work with employees to establish a new food culture. It may be too soon to eliminate sugary treats, but try offering more fresh fruits and vegetables, whether in the cafeteria or at corporate events. Reframe thinking about food as a trophy or reward. Look beyond sweet treats for other ways to recognize accomplishments by the team, such as a traveling trophy or other small rewards.
- **Office design:** Construct a space that encourages movement. Create opportunities for safe physical activity during the day, such as walking meetings, guided stretch breaks and sit-stand workstations at employee desks or in other common areas throughout the office. Add a few tall bar tables in the cafeteria to provide places to break up sedentary time. If employees bring their laptops to lunch, this offers them an alternative to sitting. It has even been reported that employees who get a healthy mix of sitting and standing during the workday are more likely to exercise in the evening because of reduced work fatigue.
- **Employee accommodations:** A great way to demonstrate care is to take a proactive approach to comfort and ergonomics, in the one place the employee spends

the bulk of their time – their desk. Access to sit-stand workstations gives employees flexibility in managing their personal comfort, while staying productive. Environments that help employees give their best efforts help promote job satisfaction. A recent study found that 62 per cent of sit-stand desk users showed greater job satisfaction and nine out of ten said sit-stand workstations change office culture for the better ([Ergotron, 2017](#)).

To create a caring culture at the office, business leaders should think about the types of perks they are currently offering and reassess if their approach also supports the health and well-being of employees. Some changes will come easily, others will require investment and strategy, but all will impact every businesses' most valuable asset, its people. To remain competitive, businesses must attain and retain top talent – a caring culture that promotes health and well-being might hold the secret to staying power.

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