

ShortList

First four months crucial to long-term consultant retention

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Efforts made to "attach" new consultants in their first 120 days on the job have the biggest influence on whether they become long-term, productive employees, or add to the industry's high churn rate, says an engagement specialist.

New hires become a retention risk after the first four months if the company fails to communicate how important the recruiter is, socially and practically, to the business, said **Anthony Sork**, the managing director of workplace management specialist Sork HC.

After this period, the ability to influence a consultant's "attachment" ends, and they start making decisions about whether to stay or go, he told *Shortlist*.

Recruitment companies and in-house functions clearly have the expertise to make good hiring decisions, so the explanation for the industry's high churn rate in the first 18–24 months is "attachment perceptions", he said.

"They have failed to actually consider the bonding process that is occurring through the eyes of the employee."

Recent figures from remuneration specialist Hart Consulting show staff turnover in the recruitment industry **sits at 38%**, compared with 15–20% churn in the wider market.

Sork said recruitment leaders must take responsibility for new consultant retention, and can achieve stronger engagement using "attachment drivers" that include accurately representing the job, providing incremental learning, and frequent face-to-face contact.

"Attachment is influenced most significantly by what is called the 'primary carer relationship', which is the one-up manager... If you have high attachment, you have a low risk of attrition, and you end up with a high level of discretionary effort and performance from that individual going forward."

Failing to engage consultants during this critical early period means they are more likely to be "tempted out of your business", said Sork.

"When you actually have a look at the patterns of attrition and people exiting over the first 18 months of employment... overwhelmingly, it's the employee choosing to leave, not the employer choosing to exit the person who has joined."

Further, poor attachment leads to having more "passengers" in the business, or those who are capable, but unwilling to put in the extra effort, he said.

"You also end up with people who have low attachment, who don't have confidence in what else they can do and end up staying for a longer period of time. You end up with low attrition of those people, but with lower performance."

Invest in managers' behavioural training

Leaders must invest more into training managers to understand engagement, and how their behaviour affects consultants' desire to work with the business, Sork said.

"You can have a competent manager who is a tyrant. They can fill out all the forms, fill out the schedules and balance the books, and do all the things they're meant to do, but it comes down to the way that they carry themselves with their staff... They can be driving engagement down within their teams," he said.

"There is no way of abdicating responsibility and impact as a direct manager of employees. In fact, the direct manager will always be the most influential person at each phase of engagement."

Leaders should also focus on tailoring managerial styles to individual consultants, because "broad-stroke" initiatives only have short-term effects, said Sork.

"Unfortunately, we spend enormous amounts of money doing engagement interventions and initiatives, and you can spike engagement overall for a period of time... and then you come back to, 'how are the managers actually carrying themselves?'"

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