

Recruiting and Retaining the Knowledge Based Worker

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The significance of the work environment has been recognized as a tool for the branding of a company, as well as, for the productivity of the individual worker or team. The new economy addresses the significance of the work environment in recruiting and retention of employees. The new economy requires the facility communicate our corporate culture to our employees. The holistic view holds our facility as an extension of our living system. Therefore, an emphasis must be placed on the ability of a workplace to support the culture of an organization and the organizational system that drives it. In a knowledge-based world, our workplace becomes the community that feeds us new ideas, allows idea exchange with others, and provides a place for solitude when needed. Our urban neighborhoods provide a metaphor for the mix of spaces now desired in the corporate workplace.

ASID, with the support of industry partners, commissioned a study to determine the degree of importance placed on the physical environment in attracting new workers, and retaining existing. The white paper findings were based on interviews conducted in a quantitative study of office workers. Interesting data was revealed, as respondents named the physical workplace as one of the most important factors in accepting or leaving a position. Compensation ranked the highest in “top of mind” factors; however, the office workplace was a close second, along with company benefit packages. This ranked the importance of the workplace well above daily activities, job satisfaction and coworkers. Further, seventy three percent of the respondents voiced dissatisfaction with their current workplace.

Two trends are fueling our recruiting and retaining challenge. While in a tight labor market with the unemployment rate hovering in the four percent range, statistics tell us that the knowledge worker unemployment rate is as low as one percent. The second trend involves the retention challenge of today’s learning organization, which spends more on training and development than at any time in history. Fortune top 100 companies spend an average of 43 hours per employee per year, with corporate universities in proliferation averaging \$1600 per employee vs. the \$400 spent just ten years ago. Our new assets in the new economy are our employees, our customers, and our reputation.

McKinsey and Company recently released a report titled the “War for Talent”, outlining the demographic evidence that within fifteen years we will experience a 15% decline in workers ages 35-45. Yet demand is anticipated to increase 25% based on the US economic growth prediction. The other dynamic that will further the competition for workers is the electronic marketplace of people. With the digital resume predicted to follow a similar growth and saturation path as that of e-mail, we have a phenomenon of a workforce that is able to shop employment while on the company watch and Internet connection.

Connectivity and interactivity have enabled an economic model that is customer driven. Likewise, our employees become our customers and accessing their thoughts on how to best support their productivity has taken on increased importance. What are knowledge based workers seeking in their work ecosystem? These four items were repeated again and again.

- Comfort: ergonomic issues, indoor air quality, personal control of temperature and lighting, the ability to personalize their environment
- Access: access to coworkers, equipment and outside views; access to good communication with individuals, team and departmental; access to meeting rooms (large enough to accommodate technology and project based data)
- Privacy: both from auditory and visual distraction; a place for concentrated study
- Flexibility: ease of adaptability to new work process and new technologies; support of telecommuting and alternative work strategies

The study also revealed the employee being recruited held different criteria in a workplace than the existing employee, which we desire to retain. The prospective employee holds first impressions in high regard. These include the appearance or aesthetic, cleanliness and neatness, and well-lit space with attention shown to new furnishings and equipment. However, the seasoned employee's priority list had less to do with these surface issues, focusing instead on access and the quality of the lighting. The desire for support of productivity and efficiency and the ability to personalize their workplaces were paramount in the study. Of the three fourths dissatisfied with their current work environment, lack of outside views, lack of privacy, temperature, poor visual appeal, noise and uncomfortable furniture were most often listed.

A further revelation is that age and income do affect the views of the typical workplace, with Baby boomers and people who earn more than \$35,000 being more vocal about their dislikes in the workplace. Gen Xers, known for their entrepreneurial DNA, as well as those on the lower end of the pay scale tend to just move on when dissatisfied with the work environment.

The study serves to underscore our highly trained workforce, our new "workplace audience", are better educated employees and associates with a higher expectation. They tend to function more as an entrepreneurial unit, are highly motivated, and monitor their own performance in project-based work. We must give them the tools (a well planned facility) coupled, of course, with an organization that mirrors the philosophy of the facility. It is also important to remember the holistic integration of the organization.

Knowledge is sticky, and must come out of the cubicle in order to allow it to build upon itself. In a knowledge-based world the more information exchange we encourage, the more ideas are shared and the better potential to expand creative thought. The sharing of an employees network, one of the valuable assets brought to a knowledge organization, is an example of what is often contributed during such idea exchange. This type of information, as well as educational and other work experiences are examples of what can be left with the organization as employees move on. In a knowledge based workplace we must allow for the creation of areas for social experience, areas that promote a sense of community and align with corporate values, as well as balancing the privacy requirements of the individual.

From the hierarchy of yesterday to the teams of today, to the network of tomorrow, our physical workplace must shift with the changing cultural, organizational structure and technology interface that is evolving our planet.