

# Pop The Question ... and other effective things to do to keep the staff

By Gerry Romano, CAE  
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It may make you sweat, for you never can be sure what the response will be, but it's essential to do if you're seeking a commitment: Pop the question. Asking your employees, "What will keep you working here and happy?" can help reinforce (or help bring back) the good feelings that brought you together. Querying your staff can also assist you in figuring out ways to diminish their interest in pairing up with new employers.

Funny how such a simple-and fairly obvious-effort can go unextended by executives eager to keep more of their employees longer, say consultants called in to help high-turnover organizations do a turnabout. In discussing retention, these consultants emphasize the importance of asking workers what they want from their jobs-and don't want.

Consultants and the organizations they assist have heard enough from employees to give you a good idea about what your staff may want from you. Although it can't be emphasized enough that you must query your staff about its particular wants and needs (for assistance, see sidebar, "Conducting Staff Assessments"), the staff responses you'll find in this article from assessments conducted at other organizations can help prepare you for the activity. You'll find the most frequently stated responses here, and you'll also find out about numerous retention practices being employed. Some are complex; some sound mundane, but are not as commonplace as you might think; others are simple but brilliant; and a couple are a bit wacky. All are getting results.

## **With current conditions, why commit?**

The retention methods relayed by association executives, corporate executives, and human resource consultants are of a wide variety, but they have this in common: All respond to recently stepped-up concerns about the ability of employers to retain workers in today's sizzling job market. (The U.S. Department of Labor announced on June 2 that the unemployment rate for May was 4.1 percent-still rather low, although higher than the 3.9 percent reported for April, which was a 30-year low.) With employers' feet to the fire like never before, organizations are taking additional steps to appear desirable to job candidates and existing staff alike. While many people can afford to be choosy today when considering their present positions and new opportunities, organizations can ill afford the tremendous costs associated with turnover (see sidebar, "Breaking Up Is Expensive To Do").

The situation is challenging for both nonprofit and for-profit employers, but associations say that businesses have the edge, due to their general ability to provide greater compensation. It's not only emerging-everywhere dot.coms that are luring professionals from associations; it's all kinds of businesses, presenting the promise of greener pastures.

As a result, while associations "don't have to pay the top dollar, they have to pay a competitive salary," says Susan Waters, CAE. "The days of people slaving away for peanuts because they believe in their cause are over."

Waters speaks from the helm of the 58-staff Massachusetts Bar Association, Boston, where she's been executive director for seven years. She'll soon move to the other coast to head the 80-staff California Society of Certified Public Accountants, Redwood City, and will apply the same thinking about compensation: that competitive salaries are critical to staff retention. "The cost of living-particularly housing in any urban area-has become so high," Waters says, "that people can't even think about working for what many associations-especially the charities-have paid in the past."

Small associations, in particular, can suffer, as experienced by the Arizona Society of Association Executives, Phoenix. As executive director, Luz Rubio runs the show, with the assistance of one part-time administrative person. Rubio reports frequent turnover in office positions in Arizona from the overheated economy combined with "corporations paying more and offering better benefits than nonprofit associations can." She points out, too, the pinch felt from large associations with bigger budgets than hers, pulling away people by offering better pay.

It isn't all about money. In fact, several executives comment that when considering jobs, people in general concentrate less today than in the past on compensation. Those who continue to place a high priority on how much they're paid combine that interest with a diminishing need for stability and, in today's market, are prone to jump to new jobs. So long as an opportunity offers professional as well as financial growth, people feel more secure than before in making a switch.

Alex Oponski, vice president of administration at the Des Moines-based Iowa Bankers Association, and a member of ASAE's Finance & Administration Section Council's Human Resources Committee, elaborates on this trend: "With unemployment low, employers are going to pay higher salaries. At the same time, there is less emphasis placed on long-term employment. Society now is more mobile. People have more opportunities to change, and change is less threatening to them."

### **What's sought after most at work**

Weight loss and sports aside, it's hard to think of a more popular topic of discussion than balancing work and personal lives. While that indicates that people are determined to find more time to devote to families, friends, and individual interests, that doesn't translate into a societal work backlash.

Consultant John Izzo, based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, brings up a survey of graduating university seniors in which 60 percent say that they will never let their work life be more important than their personal life. "And working women say that balance is their number one issue in terms of work satisfaction," Izzo adds.

At the same time, Izzo believes that, in the minds of many, what we do for a living is more important than ever. He has been collecting and conducting research for his latest book, to be released from Prentice-Hall this fall: *Values Shift: The New Work Ethic and What It Means for Business*. He mentions a 1998 Gallup poll that showed that 60 percent of Americans view their work as a form of their identity. Izzo sees the strong link between work and identity as a call to organizations to provide more developmental opportunities to employees. More than ever, people are looking to learn and grow.

**Land of opportunity.** Creating a nurturing environment is a big positive for employers. Executives and consultants interviewed for this article underscored learning and career development opportunities (both formal and informal) as critical staff keepers. In addition, two staffers cited such opportunities as a primary reason for staying on the job.

David Gammel decided recently to leave the Employee Relocation Council, Washington, D.C., "to get some new experiences at another association and to get a bit more growth." In his new role as Web site director at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Rockville, Maryland, Gammel expects to build on the Web experience gained at ERC. But that's not to say that he stood still while working at ERC-or that the association didn't get a great return on its investment in him. Gammel stayed seven years, working his way up from a temporary administrative employee to a director position. That couldn't have happened, he points out, without the "really excellent things ERC did to retain me over the years. Whenever I expressed an interest in a certain area or had an idea for a project, as long as it fit in with the overall plans of the organization, I was usually told to go ahead and try it."

Interestingly, once Gammel concluded that it was time to look beyond ERC for professional growth, he considered employment with a dot.com that he thought could provide a great learning experience. "I turned down a job at an Internet start-up company in which the salary was good and stock options were included, which could have been worth quite a bit. But the normal workweek there was 80 hours a week. They told me up front. The guy who was interviewing me was very wise in that he said, 'We just like to get all of these things out on the table; this is how we work here.'

"I thought about it and talked about it with my wife," Gammel continues, "and we decided that this really wasn't where we wanted to go with our lifestyle. So I decided to turn that job down and look for something that was more compatible with how we wanted to live."

**Flexing not only minds but schedules.** ERC earned another gold star in Gammel's book by letting him work on flextime so that he could earn a master's degree.

Flexibility is appreciated by Teresa Foster Welch, too, who mentions the flextime policy at the Dallas-based National Athletic Trainers Association as a key contributor to her contentment there. That, and the many chances to grow professionally ("the main reason I've stayed at NATA"), have kept Welch on staff practically 10 years-and counting. She's moved up from executive director's assistant through other positions to the one she now holds-director, marketing communications-and has no current plans for moving on.

**Gee, everybody's so nice . . . and fun . . . and casual . . .** It's true, isn't it? People like to work with good-natured people. And for good-at-the-core organizations with a pleasant environment. And with members and volunteer leaders who appreciate staff and show it.

On top of that, isn't it great to get some laughs while at work? And to leave the stuffy suits at home?

These are additional, often-mentioned attributes of workplaces where people want to be. When considering her reasons for sticking so long with NATA, and the possible reasons of some of her long-time colleagues, Welch says, "I think a lot of it has to do with just the atmosphere here. For example, we have Employee Appreciation Day each year, when we send the staff out to do

something fun. Our board of directors buys us lunch once a month ("us" equals 36 staff). Those are nice things to show that the association cares about you and that our board appreciates what we do."

**Work that's exciting.** According to Izzo, research shows that one of the best predictors of headhunter resistance is exciting work. "Sit down often with people to find out what they want to do and to keep them informed of what opportunities lie ahead," he advises. "Let them know about juicy projects on the horizon."

### **Ways to keep them wed**

NATA Executive Director Eve Becker-Doyle, CAE, will smile when she reads what Welch said, but she probably won't be surprised. Welch's comments are in close sync with those made by Becker-Doyle during a separate interview about what she believes makes her staff stick around.

And the numbers show that there is, indeed, a lot of NATA stay-put. Becker-Doyle, herself, who chairs ASAE's Finance & Administration Section Council's Human Resources Committee, has been at NATA since 1993. And here's her record of retention for the past two tight-job-market years: In 1999, 3 left the staff of 35; by end-May this year, out of 36 staff, 4 had departed.

Beyond those noted by Welch, here are the variety of NATA policies and practices that Becker-Doyle believes is behind the association's retention record.

- ?? **Leave for family activities.** All employees may occasionally take up to four hours of leave to attend education-related activities important to the employee's household.
- ?? **Invitations to family members.** In another effort to recognize the importance of family life, Becker-Doyle tells staff who need to attend business dinners or other after-hours functions to bring along their partner or another guest.
- ?? **Good-attendance incentives.** Employees who work a calendar year without taking any sick leave receive \$100 and an additional personal leave day the next year.
- ?? **Fitness benefits.** NATA pays 50 percent of an employee's fitness and wellness program (so long as it passes approval by the association-for example, aerobics classes or smoking cessation sessions), up to a maximum of \$100 annually.
- ?? **Professional/personal development benefits.** Funds are applicable to both professional and personal development seminars.
- ?? **Employee Appreciation Day.** This day (mentioned earlier by Welch) replaces the nationally recognized Professional Secretaries Day. NATA department directors plan a surprise for all others on staff. One year, the activity was a shopping spree, for which staff were taken to a local mall and given \$100 each (\$50 to part-timers) and one hour in which to spend it. A pizza lunch followed.

?? **Tickets to sporting events.** When members (who are athletic trainers) occasionally offer tickets to games, NATA distributes them to staff through a rotation system that allows everyone to take a turn at using tickets.

## **Strategies of several associations**

Tickets to sporting events are also a staff pleaser at the Realtor Association of Greater Fort Lauderdale, Florida. CEO Rene Edward Galvan occasionally takes all 22 employees to a Marlins game, not only for fun but for team building.

Following are additional effective recruitment strategies from Galvan and other association executives.

**Compensation strategies.** Galvan places himself squarely in the it's-not-for-the-money camp when considering why people change jobs these days. So long, he says, as we're talking about career-minded professionals: "With them, the biggest factor in turnover is a lack of opportunity." He allows for an exception, though: changing jobs for significantly more money. Based on his beliefs about retention, Galvan strives to provide staff with an environment that fosters growth, and he ensures that salaries are competitive with the local market and the overall association market. He also offers incentive compensation. And he uses paycheck distribution as a chance to connect with staff, handing out checks himself, and as he does so, expressing appreciation for the job his staff is doing.

**Helping staff see the big picture.** Galvan notes that he focuses a great deal on communication, trying to make sure that all staff are kept abreast of the vision and issues of the association. One way in which he does that is by bringing in members to deliver presentations to staff about the issues of the industry represented by the association. This helps staff to feel more connected to the membership and to feel like a part of the industry.

Susan Waters concurs that to retain staff, it's critical to engage them fully in the association. She suggests using staff meetings "to teach the mission and history of the organization and the values that drive it. Regardless of what job positions people are in, they also need to know how their piece fits into the overarching organizational goals. People don't want to just come in and do something for eight hours a day and then go home and forget about where they work. For a person to feel commitment to an organization and stay, that person must feel proud of the organization and of what he or she does there."

**Adapting to individual personalities.** Eileen Packer, CAE, supervises a staff of two as CEO at the California Dietetic Association, Playa Del Rey. All three have been on board for 11 years. One of the secrets to this retention is Packer's principle of paying attention to individual personalities. "Get to know your staff," she urges executives, whether the staff is small, like her present one, or large, like the one she supervised-and got to know-before. "Then adapt to their personalities. Treat people in the manner that their personalities warrant." Packer provides this example: "Some people need recognition from a visual standpoint-accolades on a stage or other places, in front of people-and others just want a pat on the back, and others want it in writing. Those are the kinds of things that you have to find out about people."

**Showing excessive amounts of appreciation.** Alex Oponski boasts that the Iowa Bankers Association turns Professional Secretaries Day into Employee Appreciation Week. "Each day of

the week, we have a little something for the employees (which number 85). This year, on Monday we had a breakfast. On Tuesday we gave them an Iowa Bankers key chain. Wednesday was an ice-cream social in the afternoon. Thursday was supposed to be a little gift (they're still to be distributed, once they arrive from the vendor). Friday we treated everyone to Subway sandwiches."

**Helping staff in quirky ways.** Oponski also notes that many on staff have made it known that they're following a popular low-carbohydrate diet, so for the staff appreciation breakfast, he made sure that he ordered eggs and bacon, "not only rolls and muffins. We try to make a conscious effort to take the various quirks, if you will, or preferences of the employees into account."

**Lunching together-and leaving business behind.** "Lunch and learns" are regular events at Oponski's association. Employees bring their lunch, and the association brings in a local expert on some subject to speak. Past presentations have ranged from leasing versus purchasing cars to etiquette to lawn care.

Roger Herman and Joyce Gioia are Greensboro, North Carolina-based management consultants who have conducted staff assessments for corporations and associations and helped them use the results to improve retention. The authors of *How to Become an Employer of Choice* (2000, Oakhill Press), Herman and Gioia highlight two programs put in place by organizations they've worked with on retention issues.

**Telecommuting.** The Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business, Alexandria, Virginia, developed a telecommuting program that helped an excellent employee who wanted to relocate but to stay on staff. She now performs her role as director of education and communications from North Carolina.

**Child care.** Herman and Gioia worked with the Opryland Hotel and Convention Center in Nashville, Tennessee, to assess staff needs. The organization hosts several programs of value to employees. A particularly notable one is child care. And none of this "Arrive by five to pick up your child or we'll charge you a dollar a minute." Opryland employees work around the clock, and so does the child care facility. It's open 24 hours per day.

## **Love your staff like your customers**

You know the mantra about the customer always being right and the organizational command that workers satisfy the customer's every whim? John Izzo opines that the work world is now starting to see unfold "the natural sequel to that: keeping the worker satisfied."

Lynn Ware agrees. From her corporate consulting experience as president and CEO of Integral Training Systems (ITS), Menlo Park, California, Ware concludes that "employees are almost like customers right now. Just like customers, employees have a lot of choices about where they can shop and they have preferences about brands. It's no longer the case that they have to do anything their employer wants in order to have a job."

**Consider the manager-subordinate connection.** Ware notes that while power is with the worker in general today (and perhaps especially in the high-tech firms with which she does most of her consulting), it's the top talent who hold most of the cards. She discusses a training program

developed by ITS specifically for that category of staff: "Our message in what we teach companies is: 'One size fits one.' You really have to understand the person you're trying to retain and craft the work experience to that person. The best people have a lot of choices about where they can work, and they know it."

While ITS's "Retaining Top Talent" training program is mainly used by corporations, it is rooted in a belief that may apply to any type of organization. As Ware explains, "We're trying to create loyalty between the employee and the manager instead of between the employee and the company. We pretty much think that devotion to the company is dead these days as a result of the downsizing that happened in the '90s.

"There's a lot of research to support that," Ware continues. "If people have loyalties to the manager-they feel they can learn from that person, the manager is excellent at rewarding them and recognizing them and helping them gain new skills, the manager is good at creating a working team where people respect one another-then this is a manager everybody wants to work for and stay with."

One of Ware's clients discusses her backing of the manager-focused retention approach. "The corporation can only do so much to slow turnover," says Barb Karlin, who's in charge of recruitment and retention at the e-finance firm Intuit, Mountain View, California. "Individual managers have to take ownership of the challenge."

**Consider your people great.** The nature and location of Intuit's business make the company especially vulnerable when unemployment is low-thus Intuit's current accelerated interest in retention. Aside from training its managers, the firm has been trying other things. One of them is rather unusual-so much so that it caught the eye of *Fast Company*, which featured Karlin in the February 1999 issue. She explains:

"Intuit's president felt that we needed to focus on bringing in and keeping great people as a competitive advantage for the company, and he wanted senior-level attention to that goal." As a result, Karlin was given a title that got her a page in *Fast Company's* series "Job Titles of the Future": director of great people.

"I spent 19 years in marketing, bringing in new customers and keeping them," Karlin told *Fast Company*. "Now I do it with employees instead of customers. The stakes are equally high: If you lose great people, you lose success. It's that simple."

Karlin's simple thought is one worth retaining by any organization that's serious about keeping employees happy and committed to the job.

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