

Boomerang Employees: Bring 'Em Back

By Andrea Ballard, Foster Pepper & Shefelman, PLLC

Employee turnover is one of the biggest expenses for organizations. Losing and replacing employees can cost one times the salary and benefits of the departing employee. And the average Gen Xer flees a company about every 18 months. So what's a cost-conscious legal manager to do? One method of combating high turnover costs is to focus on bringing back boomerang employees – those people who used to work for you, departed on good terms, and may be candidates to bring back into your workplace.

People leave a firm for many reasons: more money, a promotion and greater flexibility are only a few. Sometimes family situations, such as young children or elderly parents, require their full attention. Often employees see no possibility for career advancement in their current position. And even employees who are happy in your organization may feel the need to gain a different perspective – especially if this was their first job.

To encourage boomerangs, you need to plant the seed during the resignation. Take the advice of Dr. John Izzo, author of *Values Shift: The New Work Ethic & What it Means for Business*. “When a valued employee says they are leaving, there are two things an employer should do. First, ask if there is anything you could change that might cause them to reconsider. Second, tell them, in no uncertain terms, if you ever want to come back for any reason – I will try to find a job for you, so call me. Many managers have told me stories about people coming back. Pride can keep people from even calling unless you make it clear that the call is welcomed.”

How do you identify employees who may be candidates for boomeranging? Really listen to them when they tell you their reason for leaving. Some circumstances, such as the care of young children or an elderly parent, are going to change over the years. You can follow up with them occasionally to see how their new lifestyle is working for them and notice if there seems to be a longing to return. If people are leaving for a job with a start up company, find out where they are going and keep track of whether the company stays in business. Make sure those ‘pie-in-the-sky’ promises of a great salary and fantastic job opportunities turn out to be both realistic and in line with the expectations of your former employee. If you read that the company they left for is beginning reductions in force, give them a friendly call – they may be worried that their status as “last hired” places them in jeopardy.

Most importantly, don't discount the social aspect of work. People spend a great deal of time in the office these days and form many friendships at work. While a former employee may not keep in touch with you, you can bet they're maintaining contact with some of their former co-workers. Keep your ears open to see if anyone mentions any disillusionment with the new job. Many employees won't ask for the chance to come back – they may be too embarrassed to admit their ‘fantastic opportunity’ turned out to be an unqualified disaster. If you hear of any dissatisfaction, grab the opportunity and give them a call. Dr. Izzo also suggests, “Companies should develop an e-mail newsletter to send to former employees and treat them the same way universities treat their alumni. Update them on exciting events, new contracts, people happenings, and positions you are trying to

fill. The goal is to make people feel like they are still part of the ‘clan’.”

Why would you want to rehire a former employee? There are several reasons. First, there are savings in recruiting and training costs. A former employee knows your office procedures, computer systems, and, most importantly, many of the people. They will be able to hit the ground running when they return to work without the typical six months to a year it normally takes for new employees to be fully functional. Second, this employee can spread the word among the other employees that perhaps the grass is *not* always greener! Returning employees give morale a real boost when they tell their co-workers about the outlandish hours, broken promises and many of the other harrowing experiences they had at their “dream job.” Another benefit of a boomerang employee is the outside experience and new perspective they gained when they left your organization. They are returning with new experiences, new ideas about how to make things work, and a renewed sense of commitment to your firm.

Some employees may be reluctant to return to your office because of concern about their resume and career history – they fear they may be viewed as indecisive or suffering from wanderlust. “When a company takes someone back, that usually means two things...they left on good terms and the company was sorry to see them go,” says Sam Hunter, partner at Woods & Associates. “It looks good on a resume.” Reassure your boomerang employee that returning to your firm is likely to be seen as a positive in terms of their career history.

You can also provide incentives for former employees to return to work. For example, many firms allow employees returning within one to two years to have their previous service counted toward vacation accrual and sabbatical dates. Salary is another issue to consider – if a raise was due to the employee right before he or she left, you can consider bringing them back at a higher salary.

Even the best firms with the most progressive human resources practices are going to lose good employees. According to Dr. Izzo, “Today's employees, especially younger employees, want variety and will often leave even if we treat them well. We should start thinking about people working for us several times in a lifetime instead of once for a lifetime.”

3 Steps to Encourage Boomerang Employees

By Dr. John Izzo, author of *Values Shift: The New Work Ethic and What it Means for Business*

1. Let people know you would welcome them back before they leave.
2. Call former employees every 6-8 weeks during the first year just to keep in touch (and make it personal, not just business.)
3. Send former employees an e-mail newsletter with company happenings and positions you want to fill.