

5 PROVEN WAYS

to motivate and retain
your technology team





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You've managed to piece together the "DREAM TEAM." Your tech staff works like a well-oiled machine, keeping your company humming and thriving.

And then it happens: dissension. For whatever reason, your employees have grown unhappy and you find out they're searching for new employment or losing productivity.

What did you do wrong?

Did you hire the wrong people?

Did your company push them away?

Or is it a combination of numerous factors?

In order to retain employees, you must build an environment that fosters loyalty and growth.

You have to be careful about how you approach these employees, and you must build an environment that fosters loyalty and growth.

HOW DO YOU DO THAT?

There are five key areas for which you must apply a certain level of attention if you plan on retaining your tech staff:

1. [The work environment](#)
2. [Education](#)
3. [Hardware/software programs](#)
4. [Perks of hard work](#)
5. [Recognition](#)

This guide will break each of these points down so that, in the end, you have the tools you need to make sure your staff doesn't seek out greener pastures or lose focus. Let's begin with the bigger picture.

1. Work environment

One of the biggest problems that plagues IT is burn out and too much work. It's an industry of triage and when something breaks, you can bet IT is on the call. That can easily lead to over-stressed workers and, ultimately, a mass exodus.



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It's very easy to expect your staff to answer the call "whenever necessary." It makes sense, especially in certain industries. Your business must run, and run smoothly, which could mean having staff members on the clock after hours and weekends, with 70-80 hour weeks being fairly common. If you find yourself making such demands, it's time to rethink.

Many times these after-hour work binges can be curtailed by simply hiring another staff member. The extra hands and experience will go a long, long way to getting situations under control well before it's time to start working into the night.

Of course, overworked staff is not the only issue. The environment, as a whole, needs to not only be conducive to efficient work, but to teamwork and trust. How can a work environment help gain the trust and loyalty of your team?

TEAR DOWN THE WALLS!

The cubicle farm is the go-to form factor for most offices. Thing is, in general, workers hate them. It says "You're not worth a real office, so we'll give you this pretend one." A December 2013 study in the Journal of Environmental Psychology found that employees in cubicles are the most frustrated when it comes to noise level, air and light quality, ease of interaction and a variety of other factors. So, instead of the old five-foot wall treatment, open the space up. Give the IT department an overhaul that enables your staff to not only work more easily together, but also gives an open-air feeling of freedom and trust. Of course, not every department is conducive to such design. If that's the case, do what you can to avoid the dreaded cube farm.

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A December 2013 study in the Journal of Environmental Psychology



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Work environment (Part 2)

A quality work environment doesn't end at the physical. You have to consider the emotional and psychological as well. Answer these questions:

1. Does your staff feel free to express themselves?

2. Do they trust their fellow employees?

3. Do you run your department with an iron fist?

4. Are you tolerant to bullying, hazing or hatred?

5. Does your staff feel they can come to you with issues?

6. Do they have autonomy and ownership over their work?

The answers to the above questions are crucial to a positive, productive environment. Employees are sensitive to their needs being met. Employees, regardless of whether they're in marketing or IT, need to be able to express themselves. Consider having a less strict dress code, encourage an internal social platform where staff can show off their personalities, offer monthly gaming nights, etc.

Trust is almost tantamount to success. Can you trust they'll get the job done in a timely fashion? Can they be trusted to work with sensitive data? That's all obvious. But the need for staff to trust one another isn't always first to mind when trying to manage a department. The IT staff works very closely with one another and must be able to extend the hand of trust and have it returned. Without that fragile bond, you'll find staff refusing to work with one another, not sharing tasks (for fear they won't get done properly), or

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simply withdrawing into themselves. This means you must pay close attention when hiring new employees. Make sure to ask yourself if a prospective employee will work well with the current staff. You might even consider having your staff help to vet interviewees to gain insights into their personalities. It's often most important for the people who will be working with the candidate to decide if the person will work well on their team. Your staff might want to know of a possible hire:

What makes you panic?

Which character would you be in the "Star Trek" universe and why?

Where do you stand on open source?

If we had to work through the weekend, would it bother you that you couldn't shower?

Though these questions might venture slightly into the realm of the silly, they can really help you figure out if this prospective hire is a good fit.

Another important rule to remember is this: If you run your department with an iron fist, you will eventually push staff members away. You cannot be inflexible and expect any sort of loyalty. There's a vast amount of work out there for IT pros. If they don't like where they work, they can easily find another gig. So running the department with a rigid rule of law will only drive those staff members to jobs where they have more flexibility and freedom. Two areas of flexibility you can easily offer are hours worked and where employees work. You can allow your IT staff a bit more flexibility in their schedule, especially since some work simply cannot be done during normal work hours. This can lead to such things as split shifts. Also, a lot of the work done in IT can be managed remotely. Allowing staff to telecommute some or all of the time will go a long way to making them happy.

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There is, however, one area you must rule with an iron-clad gauntlet. Bullying, hazing and hatred have no place, well, anywhere. If you hear of such behaviors, it is your duty to stop them immediately. If those same behaviors continue, action must be taken – even if that means firing the offending staff.

Of course, you may never know of that bullying if your staff doesn't feel like they can come to you with issues. You must foster an environment that tells your staff you have an open door. To facilitate this, you might either post specific office hours that are dedicated to staff interaction (where staff members can walk in, unannounced) or you could even work outside of your office, in a common area, during certain periods throughout the work day. Without that open door, your department will never trust you or the environment in which they work.



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2. Education

If there's one thing that is certain, the intellectual prowess of the geek must be challenged. It's not enough to be left to the daily grind of develop, deploy and repair. No. Employees must be put to the test in the classroom (or virtual classroom) as well. Of course, the education of your staff has the added benefit of giving your team even more skills with which to pull from and allows them to produce more quickly and efficiently while staying on top of best practices and the latest technologies. But above all, employees consider paid training a solid benefit.

InformationWeek's 2013 U.S. IT Salary Survey found professionals rank "training opportunities" as a more valuable perk than "commute distance," "bonus/promotion opportunities" and "corporate culture and values." When it comes to the type of training they want, 75 percent of the 14,000 respondents said technology-specific courses were the most beneficial to their careers.

A similar study by Computerworld looked at the 100 Best Places to Work in IT 2013. Of those companies profiled, employees were reimbursed, on average \$5,471 per year for technology and \$6,399 for continuing education programs. If you don't offer paid training to your employees, they can find a company that will.

BUT WHERE DO YOU FIND TRAINING?

The most obvious location is vendors. For nearly any major software or platform, you can find a certification. There are several online platforms that offer on-demand training at affordable prices, as well as traditional classroom-based classes that can run thousands of dollars per. In larger communities, you'll find user groups that hold regular meetings and often help connect their members to training.

The dollars you spend on training will go a long way to ensure employee retention. If you invest in them, they will invest in you.

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*InformationWeek's
2013 U.S. IT Salary
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3. Hardware/software purchasing programs

Purchasing programs are an outstanding way to prove your dedication to your staff. These types of programs allow your staff to purchase hardware, software and other goods through channels they may not have access to outside of work. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District offers their employees the ability to purchase products at reduced costs from companies like:

- Microsoft
- Adobe
- T-Mobile
- Verizon Wireless
- AT&T Wireless
- Sprint
- Apple
- Dell
- Lenovo

Think about it: Your IT staff is made up of geeks of all kinds - and geeks like their toys. Having the ability to gain access to an employee purchase program (EPP) will go a very long way to making employees happy. Of course, not every company has this option available. If you already have purchasing set up directly through a vendor (such as Dell, Lenovo, LG, Verizon, etc.), you should call those companies to find out if they extend to employee purchasing. If your company spends a good deal of money with a particular vendor, chances are they might offer such a plan. For the smaller companies, it might behoove you to do a "purchase assistance program," where you (the employer) will offer to pay a percentage of any piece of technology that will help further the employees skills, even if said technology is used at home.

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These types of programs must be regulated and offered with the understanding that products are not to be purchased and re-sold. Extending EPPs beyond technology is yet another way to help gain employee retention. For instance, you could partner with a local gym to give employees free (or greatly reduced) memberships. Ask around, and you'll be surprised what you come up with.

4. Perks of hard work

Let's face it, one of the easiest ways to gain loyalty is increasing employees' salaries. It's been the "gold standard" for a very long time. At the end of the year, you offer up your employees a standard "cost of living" increase at least and bonuses (often based on productivity or merit). Without this type of incentive, you'd be hard pressed to retain your staff at all. Similarly, refusing to think beyond the "standard" can have the added effect of keeping your company locked into tired ways of thinking.



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In other words, you won't grow. Incentives need to stretch beyond the simple. There are plenty of other perks you can offer staff to bolster loyalty. Many of these perks can be given as incentive to work harder, learn more, mentor other staff, etc.

NON-STANDARD PERKS COME IN MANY FLAVORS:

Just make sure these perks are actually of value and attainable. Do not dangle a carrot in front of your staff only to have them find out it's a worthless carrot, you won't honor that carrot, or that carrot is just too hard to reach.



Extra vacation



Company cars



Telecommuting



Titles



Company shares



Tickets (or season tickets) to local teams



Shortened work week

Create a tiered system with the least valuable perk on the bottom and work your way to the top.

If managed poorly, offering perks can get you into a bit of trouble. What you don't want to happen is that your employees are only motivated by collecting these perks. Make sure:

- *Goals are clear*
- *Perks aren't handed out randomly*
- *You do not play favorites*
- *To limit the amount of perks an employee can be rewarded in a given period*

Offering these rewards allows you to give employee incentives year round (as opposed to the standard end of year bonus/raise). The combination of the two (or three, if you give out both bonuses and raises) would be a serious incentive for your staff to remain on board.



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Sometimes, offering bonuses and raises just isn't enough. According to an October 2013 survey of 2,000 adults by Glassdoor, a site that profiles companies and positions, 76 percent of employers have started awarding new perks like flexible schedules and telecommuting. To compete with these companies, you must get creative in what you offer. That creativity will pay off in other ways as well. First and foremost, it will show your staff that you have their best interests in mind. Thinking beyond the norm can eventually reflect in your company, giving it a certain mystique to more easily draw the better prospective employees.

5. Recognize

We've established the fact that staff like to be challenged, enjoy a purchase (or two), and respond positively to perks. But we're missing the easiest (and cheapest) means of staff retention: recognition. People want to be recognized for their achievements. Within so many companies it's easy for successes to fall by the wayside and failures to be brought to light. Although some managers consider that an effective means of keeping staff on their toes and working hard, that method will eventually cause staff loyalty to fade.

WHY?

When you make a habit of only recognizing failure, you send a clear message to employees that success is only valued as a means to your bottom line. You may think that agenda hidden, but most employees eventually solve that puzzle. When they do, attrition will quickly rise. When a company, from management up, fails to recognize the efforts of those who help build the foundation, the internal fabric begins the slow process of rot.

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The pat on the back that recognition offers will go a long way to ensure your employees know you see and value everything they do. But don't think you should just send that employee an email or leave a voice message. Depending on the person and how they react to attention, consider making recognition public. Send out a company-wide email or make announcements of achievements at company meetings. If you make these recognitions public, your staff will know you "get it." That connection is crucial, especially within the world of technology. Working with management who has no comprehension of the job challenges is a hard sell to the IT elite. That you



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understand the challenges helps the staff know you will not expect the impossible and that you are aware of the work necessary to complete a task. When you work without such an understanding, you have no idea what should or should not be expected.

But even beyond the expectations, recognizing a job well done is the simplest method of team building. And although many find “Team Member of the Week” awards to be on the cheesy side, they do actually work, especially if you allow the team members to pick the person instead of management. Just be sure your team doesn’t turn it into a popularity contest, but rather a way to recognize everyone on the team at different points in time. If you go this route, do not just make an announcement at a weekly meeting. This “achievement” needs to come with an award – even if that award is a goofy plunger painted gold to resemble a statue. This is all about building chemistry between workers and an environment those workers actually want to be involved in for 40-60 hours per week. If, with a simple gesture of recognition, you can give your team something to cheer about, everyone wins.

Staff retention grows harder and harder with every new generation. With the old tried and true system of incentives not nearly as effective as it once was, it’s time to start thinking beyond the norm. When your staff understands the extent at which you are willing to go to keep them around, they will repay you with hard work and loyalty.

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Jack Wallen is an award-winning novelist and tech writer whose career spans over twenty years. Jack has written thousands of technology-centric articles for the likes of TechRepublic, Linux.com, Right Networks, Ghacks, Computerworld, and Pluralsight. Although his primary focus has been Linux, open source, and mobile technologies, Jack has also covered management, business, employee retention, careers, and just about every topic imaginable.