

# BUSINESS FORUM

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## Employees often depart because they're pushed

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Guest Columnist

As we begin 2005, news from the employment market is decidedly more upbeat than it was a year ago. Of 16,000 U.S. employers surveyed in **Manpower's** most recent quarterly survey, almost one in four expects to increase first-quarter hiring.

Meanwhile, the **Society for Human Resource Management** reports that 75 percent of U.S. workers are either actively or passively looking for new jobs, and that almost 40 percent of human resource professionals have noticed a recent increase in turnover.

If you are an employer whose success hinges on finding and keeping good workers, these reports may have grabbed your attention. If not, they should have.

The economic outlook dictates that all employers who aspire to become "employers of choice" will need to redouble their efforts. This means understanding what attracts employees to your company, what makes them want to stay, and what pushes them out the door.

The SHRM survey (of 506 employees) also reported the following top three reasons employees are looking

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to leave: better compensation elsewhere (43 percent), better career opportunities (32 percent), and dissatisfaction with opportunities at the current job (22 percent).

This might lead you to believe that in three out of four turnovers the driving motivation for the departure is the worker being pulled out of the current job by the magnetic attraction of an outside offer. In fact, more than 80 percent of managers believe that employees leave mainly for better pay and opportunities elsewhere. Of course, as the job market improves, the "pull factor" comes more into play, and the fact is, most departing employees do get more pay and a better opportunity.

What intrigues me is how little thought and attention is paid to the "push factors" — the unacceptable working conditions that push people to the door so that when a better offer comes along, it is easier to take that last step across the threshold. The really revealing question we should be asking is not "Why would you leave?" It's not even: "Why did you leave?" Rather, we should be asking: "Why did you start thinking of leaving?"

Distinguished business professor Thomas Lee at the **University of Washington**, who has studied em-

ployee turnover most of his career, has developed what he calls "the unfolding model of turnover."

The main idea is that the decision to leave an organization unfolds gradually, beginning 63 percent of the time with a shocking realization or disillusionment by the employee — as when a new hire gets no coaching and feedback in the first 30 days or realizes the job is somehow different than promised. Employees may start weighing the pros and cons of leaving and think about it for weeks, months or years before an offer finally "pulls" them out, during which time they are "disengaged."

As we know, some quit and leave, while others quit and stay.

During the past year, I was privileged to be granted access to the **Saratoga Institute's** database of surveys completed over the last six years by 19,700 U.S. workers in 17 industries. My analysis of these surveys, combined with my own research and exit interviewing experience have led me to quite different conclusions about employee turnover.

First, low pay and poor opportunity for advancement are factors that push employees out, but together they make up only about 28 percent of turnover root causes. (Sixteen percent leave because of poor career growth and advancement prospects and 12 percent leave because of various pay-related frustrations.)

That leaves 72 percent motivated

to leave by other factors — namely not being respected and recognized for their contributions, insufficient coaching and feedback, dissatisfaction with the job itself (usually due to poor hiring and job assignments), stress and burnout due to work/life imbalance, and loss of trust and confidence in senior leaders.

Employers who are interested in attacking the root causes of employee disengagement and turnover — and reducing the inestimable costs that go with it — would be well advised to put their energies and dollars into preventing and correcting these kinds of issues, which are typically indicative of toxic cultures or poor management practices.

The SHRM survey revealed that the majority of human resource professionals surveyed consider "competitive salaries" and "career development opportunities" to be the most effective retention strategies. Here's hoping that in 2005, more employers will broaden their employer-of-choice strategies to address the full spectrum of root causes.

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