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## Hang onto your staff!

Corinne Mills The last 18 months has been a bit of a white-knuckle ride as we have faced the most precarious economic conditions for decades. The need to reduce costs has meant that HR activity, particularly in the financial sector, has focused necessarily on restructuring, paring down head count wherever possible and curtailing non-essential learning and development. Corinne Mills Employees are understandably anxious about hanging onto their job at a time when the job market is still looking pretty grim. The January Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development Employee Outlook survey suggested, however, that the HR challenge on the near horizon is not about letting people go but about keeping them. Many individuals who would perhaps have moved some time ago have been deterred from doing so by the turbulent job market. This is confirmed by the survey which reveals that 37 per cent of staff want a new job within a year.

When teams have been pared down to their leanest, the swell of people heading for the door at the earliest opportunity presents a potentially serious threat to an organisation's operational capabilities. So when the upturn comes and the business prospects are brighter, how are employers going to keep key players in post or at least delay their departure?

### Psychological contract

Forty-five per cent of the respondents to the CIPD survey said that they did not feel their manager was open and honest. The legal and psychological contract between staff and the organisation has been sorely tested during these difficult economic times. If an employee does not have some sense of trust and confidence in the organisation then it is not a surprise that they are off at the earliest opportunity. Line managers have a huge responsibility for this. They can single-handedly uphold or scupper an organisation's reputation based on their communication style and relationship with their staff. If they want to hold onto their key people then they need to make sure that managers are fully briefed, rehearsing them if necessary, so that they know how to communicate effectively with their staff during difficult transitions.

The provision of outplacement support for staff who have been made redundant is enormously helpful, psychologically and practically, for those who are leaving as well as those who are staying. Even where there is no budget, processing the invoice for an outplacement service and offsetting the sum against the individual's final redundancy amount will cost the organisation nothing but save the individual hundreds of pounds on VAT and tax. For individuals worried about job security in

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their own organisation, supported exits can be a reason for staying and reduce the attractiveness of a risky external job move.

### Career conversations

In many organisations the only time individuals get asked about their career plan is at their recruitment interview. They may never get asked again. Even appraisals tend to be focused around what the organisation wants, rather than the individual's career aspirations.

To retain key staff, employers need to understand what employees want career-wise. It may be a promotion, work/life balance, security, to be an expert in their field, or none of these things. Unless the employer knows what the employee's career motivators are, then they are unlikely to be able to predict whether the employee sees themselves as having a future within the organisation or not. If it becomes apparent that the individual does need to move on, then at least the employer will be prepared.

Career conversations can be facilitated by training and briefing HR teams and managers, providing career development workshops and/or using an external specialist company to provide one-to-one career coaching sessions.

### Personal development

In a recession, the opportunities for internal career progression are often reduced. For organisations that recruit staff precisely because of their drive and ambition, this can present a problem. Rather than just treading water, however, there are lots of ways in which staff can enhance their employability and position themselves for future roles. Low-cost solutions include being mentored or mentoring others, learning and deploying new skills, training others, developing peer and professional networks, reading and research, taking up external voluntary roles, etc. Targeting individuals to achieve personal development goals is likely to help them feel they are moving their career forwards with the organisation rather than stagnating.

### Job enrichment

The CIPD quarterly survey revealed that job satisfaction is at an all time low of 35 per cent, therefore, keeping staff engaged and motivated is important if they are not to seek fresh challenges elsewhere. Depending on their role, there are lots of ways to enrich their role which need not have cost or resourcing implications. Examples could

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include widening their exposure to other parts of the organisation. Perhaps they could be delegated more senior tasks, write a research report, join a project team, contribute to the company newsletter or help facilitate social media networks for the organisation. Explaining the purpose of the 'stretch' activities and the skills and behaviour being looked for will help them understand its value and the organisation.

Finally, financial services has been one of the sectors most affected by the downturn. The upturn will bring fresh challenges but HR can get a head start on many of these by starting to look more closely at the ongoing needs and career aspirations of their staff.

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