

## **Professional Development: An Investment Rather Than a Cost**

*Chief Elected Officer: What could be worse than spending time and money on employees to pursue professional and career development opportunities only to lose them?*

*Chief Elected Officer: Not doing so and keeping them!*

We think it's time professional development became an important component of any association's or not-for-profit organization's strategy. Professional development is a competitive management tool that ensures organizations have the talent and competencies needed not only to achieve, but also to exceed, organizational goals.

In good times, organizations can't afford the costs and missed opportunities created by lackluster employee engagement, low morale and high turnover. And when times are more challenging, the last thing an organizations needs is to lose its key people. This not only results in the loss of intellectual capital, decreased productivity and increased hiring and training costs, but also carries with it the negative impacts on member, donor and stakeholder relationships and service.

A key factor in employee motivation and retention is providing the opportunities employees want (and expect) to continue to grow and develop their job and career enhancing skills. In fact, this opportunity to grow and develop is one of today's most important factors in employee motivation. In addition, younger employees now arrive at organizations with different expectations than their parents. Raised during an era marked by rapid technological change and instant access to data, they respond best to work that is more meaningful, permits them to learn cutting-edge skills, and lets them discover their own ways of accomplishing tasks.

Tangible rewards – pay raises, bonuses and extended benefits – played a dominant role in earlier eras when work was generally more routine and bureaucratic, and when such rewards were often the only motivational tools available to organizations. Pay remains an important consideration for most employees, of course, and low or uncompetitive compensation can be a powerful de-motivator. After accepting a position and resolving remuneration issues, however, such issues become less important than many senior managers may think. And day-to-day motivation, whether we accept it or not, is often more strongly driven by less tangible, or intrinsic, rewards.

Intrinsic rewards, such as the availability of professional development opportunities, are also strong predictors of employee retention. This is the 'right' kind of retention: retaining those employees who are highly competent, self-motivated and self-managing rather than those employees who can't afford to leave.

Those employees who are provided with professional development opportunities continually enhance their skills and bolster their self-confidence. These people face less chance of burnout, since they experience more positive than negative feelings while on the job. And since their job satisfaction is higher, they're less likely to report stress symptoms, practice habitual absenteeism, and are far more likely to feel they are developing professionally and making a meaningful contribution to the organization's well-being.

Professional development creates a strong win/win scenario for employees and organizations alike. It's a scenario that suits the times. It's based on the shared desire that employees' work makes – and will continue to grow and make – an effective contribution to an organization's goals and other meaningful purposes. In other words, it's performance driven. It also embodies the self-management and professional development demanded by today's younger workers.

The good news is that professional development no longer depends on large outlays of money to generate that extra effort. Local face-to-face opportunities and an ever-expanding host of online professional development opportunities make it feasible even when funds may be tight.