Retention Strategies To Reduce Employee Turnover

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This month, the US Bureau for Labor and Statistics reported that 3.6 million employees voluntarily quit their jobs in September 2018. Every employee that voluntarily quits costs an employer, on average, 16% of their annual wage. And to make matters worse, high turnover rates come with high replacement and training costs, decreased efficiency of all employees, and ultimately decreased profit. When turnover happens, businesses lose experienced staff and endure negative impacts to the bottom line. This could mean bad news for you and your business.

These statistics indicate that the issue of employee turnover is a challenge that many businesses face. As a result, turnover is widely researched and studied, which means that you don't have to guess why your employees are quitting. You can focus instead on implementing new workplace strategies and policies to avoid the most common turnover pitfalls and retain your most valuable staff.

Define and Share Your Culture

When considering the culture of your gym, you should ask yourself, "What does my gym stand for and how does our leadership and staff treat our customers and each other? In a business context, culture is defined as the values and principles that support the management structure. How you manage your gym determines the behaviors and actions of the daily work practices of the staff. **In short, culture is your gym's personality**.

Columbia University research shows that a culture of productivity, respect, pride, and trust is an important indicator of job satisfaction and reduced turnover. If you haven't defined your gym's culture, work together with your staff to create one, but don't roll out a list of changes and expect your culture to change overnight. Create values and implement small changes over time that support the vision you have for your gym and brand.

Hire Smart

Retention starts before employees are hired or ever pull a shift. An article published by the American Economic Association says that how prospective employees find the jobs you have available depends on the economic climate, current job market, geographic concentration, and the wages your gym offers. In a competitive job market, it can feel impossible to find qualified staff, but how you hire can have a profound impact on reducing turnover.

During the interview process, you can determine who is the best match for your business. Traditionally the interview process gives employers a chance to learn about a prospective employee's personality, skills, and abilities, and that's a good place to start. But the interview is also the time to be transparent about your culture, what the job duties are, and learn about the prospect's goals and expectations.

Hiring and Interviewing Checklist

- When you are hiring new employees, you should have a **written job description** that outlines the duties and expectations of the position you are hiring for. Be sure the job description is readily available for posting and sharing to the appropriate job boards, email lists, and professional networks.
- **Define your interview process from start to finish.** For instance, what is the format and sequence of the interview process? Do you check references? (You should.) Do you have a standard set of questions you ask? (You should.) Ensure all staff members involved in the interview process are aware of their role, the hiring timeline, and the expectations for the new employee before kicking off interviews with potential new staff.
- Ensure the content of the interview **clearly states the requirements of the job** to the prospective employee, such as: "In a four hour shift; you will spend an hour sanitizing rental shoes, and two hours vacuuming chalk dust off of the floor." Consider offering prospects the opportunity to shadow an employee in their expected role so they will have a realistic expectation of the type of work they will be doing.
- **Communicate your gym's culture** during the interview. High quality applicants will seek out high quality employers, and having a well-defined culture is a large contributor to their decision-making process.
- Ask prospective employees about their **specific goals and timelines** during the interview. Answers to questions like, "Where do you see yourself in 6 months?" will give you more information about your new hires than asking where they see themselves in 5 years.

Developing a standard operating procedure for hiring will require an up-front time investment, but these efforts will help offset the potentially devastating costs of turnover by making the hiring process more efficient and effective.

Train, Train, Train

Just the same way that you progressively and consistently train your gym clients, you should also be training your new employees. Never assume that your employees know how to perform their job duties until they've been trained on how to do their job, you have checked off the skills they've learned, and you have asked if they have any questions. Having a training protocol in place is an important part of building a strong team in your gym, as research shows that untrained workers change jobs more frequently. When staff are trained properly they are not only more productive in their role, they also have an increased expectation of their role over time, meaning they are more engaged in their work, more cooperative, deliver better service to customers, and are less likely to quit.

Meet Basic Employee Needs

When you say it out loud, it sounds pretty obvious, but meeting basic employee needs takes thought and planning. Basic employee needs include offering competitive wages and a schedule that works for your employees.

Paying a competitive wage shows your employees that you value and appreciate the work they do. Follow these guidelines to manage your employees:

1. Provide clear parameters and a consistent schedule for wage raises. Communicate this information to new hires, and work with them to set goals and expectations for the first evaluation cycle. You should incentivize good performance with rewards such as raises, more hours, or growth pathways, and deter poor performance with negative consequences, such as reduced hours, probation, or termination.
2. When you near the end of the first evaluation cycle, remind your employees to prepare for their first evaluation meeting.
3. When you reach the end of the first evaluation cycle, sit down with your staff one-on-one to discuss their performance. Revisit the goals and expectations that were set at the start of the evaluation cycle. Follow through on the commitments made with the rewards/consequences established at the start of hire. Don't be afraid to ask for their feedback on your performance as a manager and their experiences working for your company.
4. Set expectations and goals for the next evaluation cycle and update the rewards/consequences accordingly.

If you tell a new hire that in six months you will review their pay and consider a raise, make sure you follow through. Working a job without a pay raise can leave employees feeling as though they are working a dead-end job with no growth, and no one wants to work a dead-end job.

Implementing a schedule that works for staff can be a great benefit and can be good for your business. Cornell University research shows that when flexible schedules are implemented in businesses; retention goes up and absenteeism goes down. Flexible scheduling can take many different forms depending on the roles your staff have at the gym: split-shifts, compressed work week or a results-only work environment. If you still publish a rotating schedule, your goal should be to have it forecasted at least 2-3 weeks out.

Have Clearly Defined Career Paths

Just as you probably have a strategic growth plan for your business, you should be able to define opportunities that you can offer your employees. A career path is an opportunity for employees to develop their skills and advance in your business. Offering your employees a career path shows employees that as you are growing your business, you are also investing in them and in their success. There may not be many employees that want to make a career out of scanning member cards at the front desk, but they may be interested in routesetting, operations, marketing, event management, business development, coaching, or program management. Columbia University reports that businesses that promote from within benefit from lower turnover and more productive employees. When outlining career paths, remember that your business will benefit from committed employees who are given opportunities to develop their own careers.

Putting It All Together (PIAT)

Hiring and keeping great employees takes preparation and planning. If you haven't already created a human resources department you might feel at a disadvantage, but you can still re-evaluate hiring practices. As smaller businesses pay a higher cost for turnover, it's worth the time and investment to develop a plan for how you want to manage your human resources. Putting it all together can be a challenge, but the investment will be worth the payback of retaining employees who not only represent your brand but help to grow your business. Make this process manageable by tackling one task at a time:

- Define your culture and outline values and principles.
- Standardize your interview process and create written job descriptions.
- Evaluate and incentivize employee's performance consistently and regularly.
- Schedule regular trainings to keep staff engaged.
- Implement pay increases and offer flex scheduling.
- Develop career opportunities as your business grows and your employees develop skills.

About The Author

Amanda Ashley is a writer, climber, and a climbing mom. From her early days spent training on the musty community woody in The School at the New River Gorge to training in modern mega climbing gyms all over the West, she's seen the rise of climbing gyms and the evolution of routesetting up close and personal for the past 20 years. Amanda writes about climbers, routesetting, changes in climbing movement and performance, and the climbing industry. Amanda's work has appeared in Climbing Magazine, Climbing Business Journal, and the Utah Adventure Journal..

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