

Best Practices for Keeping Manufacturing Employees

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From signing bonuses to flexible shifts to attract working parents, manufacturers have been focused on creative recruiting to address the labor shortage. But recruiting is only part of the solution to the labor crunch: manufacturers also need to up their game in retaining and investing in current employees.

Keeping employees includes more options than just pay or benefit increases — and some of those options are best practices even without a labor shortage. The current employment landscape is increasingly focused on companies' demonstration of their values and commitment to employees. Accountability, performance management, goals, training, and regular check-ins all play a key role in employee retention.

Holding employees accountable for their actions may seem counterintuitive as a retention tool, but it makes a big difference in workplace culture. Supervisors and managers may be reluctant to call slackers or troublemakers to account when they are short-staffed, figuring that they need every warm body. That lack of accountability can backfire, however, because when good employees see coworkers violating rules or slacking off without consequence, they wonder why they bother to be a team player. Resentment grows, morale plummets, and production goes down as more and more employees slow their pace.

But when accountability is paired with recognition and appreciation of good work, morale stays high. That can be as simple as a quick word of praise: “good job today” or “I’m glad I can count on you” or “thank you for continuing to be so reliable.” When employees see that misconduct is not tolerated and that their good work is appreciated, they will be more willing to shoulder the extra work needed to cover open shifts, at least in the short term.

For the longer term, it helps to have a performance management system that provides direction on where employees can improve or grow and guidance to help them succeed. Having employees set individual goals lets them see their progress over time, and showing them how their individual contributions tie into the company's performance makes them part of something bigger, contributing to a sense of teamwork. Manufacturers that take advantage of AI tools to measure individual employee productivity and efficiency should be sure to balance competitive-driven operational needs with the human factors that enhance employee recruitment and retention.

As a side benefit, consistent accountability and an objective performance management system will naturally result in records that can be used to defend against legal challenges to employment decisions, making your lawyers happy. The real benefit, though, is in retaining employees and keeping morale high.

Adding goals, whether for the individual or the line or shift, also can help with retention and morale by turning the monotony of routine tasks into something more. In addition, discussing goals and performance on a regular basis provides an opportunity to see if the

employee is satisfied with their job or pining for a new challenge. Those who are getting bored or restless may appreciate an opportunity for new tasks or more frequent check-ins.

Change things up through job rotation or cross-training boost retention by keeping those restless or bored employees challenged. Encourage employees to spread their wings and provide opportunities for growth.

Regular check-ins and engagement surveys can help with retention by keeping the lines of communication open and making employees feel valued. More than simply asking employees how they are doing, it means taking the time to listen, to consider their ideas or concerns, and to follow up to let them know that their input is appreciated.

These practices all have one thing in common: giving existing employees your time, attention, and feedback. Taking a moment to check in with an employee or spare a word of praise may not take much time or effort, but it will boost that individual employee. Making such actions part of the company culture will take more effort, but it will create a workforce that knows it is valued, is less inclined to believe the grass is greener elsewhere — and is more willing to tough it out when labor shortages happen.

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