

Managing the Knowledge Worker

5 Strategies to Keep Your Employees Connected

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First, it was e-mail. Then telecommuting. Now BlackBerries, Palm Pilots, Instant Messenger, web-enabled, Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, extranets, blogs, VoIP... the list goes on. Unless you're extremely techno-savvy, technology is changing faster than you can keep up with it.

For leaders in today's knowledge workplace, these technological changes create a need to manage employees differently. People no longer walk down the hall to your office to ask a question. Instead, they send e-mail. Employees no longer talk to each other during meeting breaks. Instead, they listen to their voice-mails, read their e-mails, or check the Net for the latest news.

Managers must work harder to ensure that employees stay connected with the company and with each other. In a workplace where employees have greater knowledge and expertise than ever before, where the generation of memo-writing employees is clashing with the instant messaging twenty-somethings, business leaders need to balance the diverse needs of all employees.

Here are five strategies that will help leaders lead in this era of knowledge work:

1. Rely on the expertise of your employees.
No matter where they work, where they live, or what they do, people love to talk about themselves. They thrive on sharing their knowledge and ideas. A leader of knowledge workers, who are experts in their fields, must engage these employees. Present them with problems and ask for their input and solutions. Create a collaborative culture, rather than rely on the top-down approach. If employees come to you with a problem, work with them to develop a solution.
2. If you don't know what your employees want, ask.
If you don't know what motivates your employees, ask them. If you don't know how best to communicate with your staff, ask them. Where the pace of change and the influence of technology are impacting businesses, and where the generations who grew up with Game Boys and Nintendo are

entering the workforce, managers can't possibly know what all employees want.

This also requires that managers be creative in how they adapt to the diverse needs of their employees. Some employees want tuition reimbursement to get an MBA; on-site massage therapy and a games room wouldn't hurt either. Older employees may want a fully funded pension plan.

3. Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!

A report published by career consultants Penna Sanders & Sidney in 2003 says that one-third of all employees begin actively looking for a job as soon as they start working for an employer, and 70% of employees are always on the lookout for a better opportunity.

One way to combat this trend of decreasing employer loyalty and rebuild employee confidence is to increase communication. The once a year state-of-the-nation staff meeting is not enough. Ongoing one-on-one communication between manager and employee is critical. Find out what your employees are thinking – what they need from you to be successful, what problems they face – and listen to what they have to say.

Use e-mail and voice-mail. Breakfast roundtables with the President may work. Consider lunch and learns with different departments. Inform employees of company news first before they read it on the Internet. Use various communication methods to appeal to the needs of all employees.

4. Set the tone.

Leaders must set the tone for how employees act at work. You must walk the talk, not just talk the talk.

If you don't want employees answering cell phones during meetings, don't answer yours during a meeting. If you want employees to eat in the lunchroom rather than at their desks, you must eat in the lunchroom. If you want employees to give you feedback, you must ask for feedback, and then respond openly and respectfully to the feedback you receive.

Whether you realize it or not, employees watch you to determine which behaviours are acceptable and which are not.

5. Balance high-tech with high-touch.

No matter how wired your company is, leaders must remember the need for high-touch – the human side of managing people. Employees are not robots (even if they sometimes sound like them!) – they need human contact. They need to be kept updated and informed about their

company. If they work from home most of the time, even more reason that they need to feel included as part of a team. Appreciation helps. So does a simple pat on the back. Or an appeal to their expertise.

The wired workplace has made our lives easier in many ways. But it has also created some significant human resources challenges. Sometimes keeping it simple is all you need to do. Remember to say "hello" in the morning and "goodbye" at the end of the day. Ask questions when you don't know the answers. Put aside pride – replace it with curiosity.

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