An employee quits but now wants to come back: Should we rehire him?

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He cleaned out his cubicle, everyone wished him well, and you turned your attention to filling the gap his departure created at the company. Little did you expect that this employee who quit last week (or two weeks ago or last month . . .) soon would be back at your office asking for his old job.

After getting over the initial surprise caused by this unexpected turn of events, employers face the dilemma of whether or not to rehire. Before welcoming someone back or shutting the door on him for good, however, managers need to reflect on what is best for the organization.

Here is a look at things to consider before rehiring a former employee and what a rehire policy after an employee leaves a company needs to cover:

Past performance

The first – and perhaps most important – question to ponder is whether or not the employee is worth hiring back. If the person was not particularly an asset to the company, the answer is simple: Don’t rehire. However, if you’re dealing with a stellar performer who the organization was sorry to see go, bringing her aboard again could be a smart move.

When considering the employee’s past, also think about how this person affected others on staff. If the atmosphere at the workplace noticeably improved since her departure, reinstating could damage the budding boost in morale.

The position

Discussing the issue of a former employee returning is a moot point if the vacancy already has been filled and no other suitable position exists. If the role remains open, however, rehiring might be in a company’s best interest since this action saves on recruiting costs and time, restores productivity, and fills the void with a proven entity who knows the organization and its culture. When available talent is limited due to geography, job market, or the need for specialized skills, rehiring may make sense.

If the organization is in the process of examining candidates, the ex-employee need not immediately jump to the top of the list. Someone from an exciting pool of applicants who could add new energy and skills to your business might be a better choice. Likewise, grooming someone already on staff to take over the role might remain the most attractive option.
Reason for departure

Someone who quit to move in with his fiancée who lives 200 miles from your office but now is back in town because she jilted him at the altar presents a far different scenario than someone who discovered after a month that working for your competitor down the street at Company XYZ isn’t his cup of tea. The factors surrounding why the person left in the first place and why he wants to return now can play a significant role in the decision to rehire.

Many managers rightly express concern that employees who seek their old job after figuring out greener pastures were not all that green may simply be biding their time until the next promising opportunity comes along. The person sheepishly claiming to have made a mistake by leaving may still be scouring the job boards after being rehired. After all, the reasons why he sought alternate employment in the first place likely still exist. As Jo, a marketing manager from Chicago, states, “My feeling is that if they’ve gone to the trouble to look elsewhere, sent their resumes out, interviewed, and have done all that it takes to get a good job these days, they’re probably not happy with the work, the pay, the benefits, the people they work with, etc.”

In some cases, knowing why the person left or why he wants to return are not clear. Information obtained from the exit interview may provide clues and serve as a starting point for the rehiring discussion.

Be leery, though, when an ex-employee comes crawling back quickly with claims that the other job “fell through” before even starting. While this situation could have legitimate reasons that have nothing to do with the worker, the possibility also exists that the person failed a drug test or had something disturbing revealed during a background check.

Level of professionalism

Common courtesy dictates that someone leaving an organization provide an employer two weeks of notice before departure. This period allows time for redistributing workloads, tying up loose ends, getting a leg up on finding a replacement, and performing other actions vital to maintaining productivity after the vacancy. People who quit without following this protocol risk burning bridges – including jeopardizing chances of returning at a future time.

Likewise problematic are employees who “go out with a bang.” A manager really needs to think hard about the consequences of rehiring someone who made a scene when quitting or decided to give some fellow workers a piece of his mind on the way out the door.

Company policy

Finally, company policy can prohibit a willing manager from hiring someone back. Many employee handbooks specifically state that failure to give the proper two weeks’ notice bars the individual from ever working for the company again in any capacity.

Before rehiring, employers must address issues such as seniority, vacation and sick time accrued, and reinstatement of benefits. While organizations often make case-by-case decisions for former employees who left in good standing, others have spelled-out guidelines. This information proves helpful when a manager and the person who wants to return sit down for discussion. It keeps leaders from being charged either with favoritism or with purposely trying to “get back” at the person who quit.

How each organization approaches the status of these things varies widely. For instance, some allow coming back at where the person left off, especially if the absence was under a month. Many treat the returnee as a new hire sent back to square one regardless of how long or short his departure. Other places create a written agreement stating the rehire will regain his former status after six months of satisfactory service.
The possibility exists that the former employee may not like the conditions set forth and express discontent. With a written rehire policy, management simply can point to the document and leave the ball in the individual’s court. If the person chooses to walk again, perhaps parting ways truly was meant to be.