

Need new employees? Hire the ones you let go

by Jessica Miller-Merrell



The economy is like a pendulum, and when it starts to swing back toward prosperity—as it appears it has started to do—your organization might miss some of those talented employees you had to let go during the recession.

Why not hire them back? You can source, hire and train new employees, but there's something lost—something more than productivity—when you let a long-time staff member go. It's the experience, insight and industry knowledge that walked out with every pink slip you issued.

Adding to your troubles, talented people who survived the layoffs and stuck by your side through rough times may now be recruiting targets for other companies that are in the same boat as you.

So you need to add talent. *Solution:* Hire some former employees.

The boomerang boost

First thing to do: Create an employee rehire policy. Keep it simple. Start by determining why an employee left the organization. Ask if the person's former manager would consider rehiring him or her. **Tip:** Build this question into the exit process for every employee so it will be easy to find qualified rehire candidates in the future.

Rehires, often referred to as boomerang employees, may come back to your organization in the same or a different role. The great benefit to the organization: They already understand its culture, know what is expected and are familiar with the work environment.

Don't limit your consideration of rehires to employees let go in a layoff. Other candidates are those who left for what seemed like greener pastures or people who retired and then realized they weren't quite ready for that.

Coach's call-back

Inviting them back could immediately boost your company's productivity and talent. I call this the Coach Snyder Effect.

Bill Snyder became head football coach of the Kansas State Wildcats in 1989. What Snyder did for the Wildcats is nothing short of legendary, and his list of awards and accomplishments through the years are amazing. But in 2005, Snyder retired and Kansas State tried to move on.

It didn't. In fact, the team took a nosedive. Soon, calls for Snyder to return from retirement started churning. And in 2009, the popular coach returned to the sidelines—a rare return in college football. Kansas State football has made a quick return to glory. Not a shabby performance for any coach, let alone for one who had already retired.

Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz has a similar story. He returned to lead the coffee chain in early 2008 when it was struggling. Upon his return, he made tough management calls that resulted in store closures, layoffs and menu changes. This boomerang made an impact, as Starbucks sales have continued to soar since his return.

Another successful boomerang is Jay Leno, who retired as host of “The Tonight Show” in 2009, making room for replacement Conan O’Brien. But ratings suffered, and Leno reclaimed his old position to positive reviews a year later.

Stay in touch with alums

Should you bring back your organization’s lost employees? Before you start sifting through past-employee files:

- **Establish a line of communication.** Keep in touch with your organization’s “alumni.” Consider setting up a LinkedIn alumni network or publishing an e-newsletter that goes out periodically to former employees.
- **Demonstrate value.** Offer something of value to your alumni community to engage former employees and to spark a conversation between them and their former managers. *Examples:* a free résumé-writing class or webinar.
- **Build a rehire database.** Like a talent pipeline within your organization, your rehire database can include ratings, information and insights from previous managers. Build a “most-wanted” list and target your “must hires.”

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