

Why are you still in your old job?

“What’s wrong with you? You are with the same Organisation for 3 years. You will soon be called a fossil.”
– Employee comment, ITES industry.

“I plan to work here until I retire.” This was a statement in our Great Place to Work® Institute’s employee survey, which is popularly known as the Trust Index survey.

Our experience in India over the last few years convinced us that this is a wrong statement for the survey in India. The best employers would all have high positive scores in most areas, except this one. In fact, this statement had the lowest score, even for the Top 25 Great Places to Work.

There is an old adage. If you can’t improve your employee scores, change the survey! About a year back, after a great deal of debate, the statement was changed in our survey. Today, we have a statement that says, “I plan to work here for a long time.” Only now, have the scores gone up for this statement.

Much has been written about the talent shortage in India and why people do not stay for a long time, let alone till retirement. Most good companies analyse exit interview data to find out why people leave.

I spent a good part of last month visiting four Organisations to find out why people stay. The Organisations vary from ITES to hospitality to consulting to brand services. The only thing common were the profile of employees. While the Organisations and the employees by themselves can be called a convenient sample, the employees had one thing in common. Almost all employees interviewed were less than 30 years, with a majority being less than 25 years of age. Considering that more than 50 per cent of our population is less than 25 years in age, the focus group discussions I did might have some significance. I asked one common question to all. “What makes you stay in this Organisation?” Here is what I found.

1. Compensation

While none of the Organisations were in the top quartile in their industry on pay, compensation was a key driver not just in deciding to leave, but in deciding to stay as well. As one employee put it-*“Give us money or give us a life.”* The only consolation for Organisations is that regardless of compensation levels there is a wide variance in retention levels in various teams, which to some extent may be attributed to the difference in the nature of work and the leadership style of the manager, amongst other factors.

2. Personal convenience

Employees who have stayed longer have quoted personal convenience with respect to location, transport, shift timings and security etc as influencing factors. Ease of access to workplace and pick up and drop near their home is an influencer in their decision to stay. Importance of personal convenience seemed to be inversely proportional to the skill level/

complexity of the job. Employees in jobs that call for a higher level of expertise seem to be less worried about personal convenience. For example, employees in the creative department of a brand services firm would rate the “Creative culture” as more important than personal convenience.

3. Learning and exposure

This is perhaps one of the biggest drivers for the new generation. In all the four Organisations a large component of learning came from working with clients, and meeting their requirements. There was also a pegging order for various departments/processes/projects with some perceived to be better learning opportunities than others. In fact some of the above departments/ processes seem to have a stronger employer brand than the Organisation’s employer brand. For example, employees do not join Organisation X, but they join the marketing department of Organisation X. The challenge for many Organisations in some new economy industries with their division of labour is to sustain the learning curve after the first one year. Unlike the Apprenticeship models of the past, in most Organisations, learning comes from the job/ process or the client, rather than the supervisor.

Some common tools used by Organisations to enhance learning and exposure were internal job postings, training programmes, certification courses, and global exposure.

4. Career Growth

Career growth (read rapid promotions) is the single biggest reason for staying back for those employees who have got rapid promotions. There are significant social pressures to quit, on employees who do not get rapid promotions. In three of these Organisations employees gave examples of fulfilling career growth inspite of not having requisite technical qualifications, e.g. housekeeping person heading sales or a matriculate doing design production work.

The high growth of many organizations poses serious challenges with systems, processes and infrastructure forever lagging behind. However, high growth is also what enables many Organisations to give rapid promotions, which subsequently becomes a stated and expected need. If you are riding the high growth tiger, you will find it difficult to dismount.

5. Freedom and Empowerment

“One of our guests was unhappy with something in one of our restaurants. Our Associate (entry level employee) offered him our most expensive champagne on the house! When senior management came to know about it she was publicly applauded!” Employees in this hotel know that customer service is not a poster in the Training room. This hotel has used Freedom and Empowerment not only to drive customer service, but also to build employee engagement. Talk about killing two birds with one stone!

6. Camaraderie

Most employees, who have stayed a long time, talked about getting into a “comfort zone” with managers showing a high degree of flexibility towards personal and work life issues. It is common for employees to swap shifts between themselves, use flexi time informally when required and shift to more convenient shifts for specific period of time e.g. before taking maternity leave or after coming back from maternity leave.

Interestingly, while there were many examples of supportive bosses, there were not many examples of leaders inspiring employees to remain with the Organisation or to give their best.

In a recent interview in Economic Times, Nandita Gurjar, VP HR of Infosys BPO was quoted as saying, “ Many top level and mid level employees have started hopping as many as 2-3 companies in a year. And these are the same people who once counseled entry level employees towards loyalty and persuaded them to stay put. At the end of it all entry level employees realize it is a hoax.”

In my days in manufacturing in the past it was not uncommon to have middle managers with high levels of integrity (Doing what they say). Today in the new age economy, this is a challenge with respect to retention. A manager can hardly inspire her team members to stay, if she is applying elsewhere.

7. Stability and Job Security

Interestingly, even in an industry teeming with employment opportunities, stability of the Organisation and by implication, job security, emerged as a key motivator for many employees. Employees gave examples of an entire process being taken out of the Organisation, but all employees being relocated to other processes *of their choice*.

While employees are no longer willing to commit staying for a long time, they nevertheless appreciate Organisations which offer stability and better security. If this is a factor in retention, Organisations should be able to make it a core part of their deal to employees, particularly in growth phase. Unfortunately, employees are no longer willing to believe that organizations will protect their jobs during any down turn, unless an Organisation has a track record of doing so.

8. Work- Life Balance

Interestingly, in many of the groups interviewed I found a small, but distinct group of employees who are willing to be reconciled with lower growth provided they get the work life balance they are seeking. Apart from obvious categories like double income families with child rearing responsibilities, some young people want more time to pursue their interests apart from work. This is, however, not a major trend, yet.

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