Retaining Your Employees-- A New Perspective

by Leslie Ann Fox, MA, RRA

Opportunities abound for HIM professionals—but how can you, as a manager, create a work environment in which employees will want to stay? This process begins with managing yourself. Here's a new way to think about employee retention.

Unemployment is at a 30-year low. The economy continues to expand at a healthy rate. And advances in medical science and patient care, changes in reimbursement systems, pressures for cost containment, and strict data compliance requirements demand more quality health information than ever.

It's no surprise that meeting the demands for skilled health information management (HIM) professionals challenges managers in all types of healthcare organizations. When opportunities abound, as they do for people skilled in medical transcription, coding, clinical data collection, database development, and other important HIM practices, the pressure on managers and organizations to have strategies in place for "employee retention" becomes intense.

Employee retention is a complex issue, and developing new strategies to address it requires a thoughtful approach and a new perspective on how work is accomplished today. Faced with this issue at an earlier time, this author would probably have suggested a basic problem-solving approach. I would have viewed employee retention as a problem requiring an analytical process for evaluating the reasons that people say they leave or stay in an organization. Based on results specific to an organization, I would have encouraged managers to develop action plans to reinforce the positives, seek ways to fill voids, and correct the irritants that demoralize employees and lead to resignations.

More Flexibility

It is not appropriate to be so glib about this topic today, because the nature of the issue is different than in the past. We are seeing profound changes in staffing in organizations.

For most of this century, the traditional workplace staffing paradigm was a model in which a hierarchy of mostly full-time employees performed the work of the business. The hierarchy included a board of directors or trustees, executives, managers, and line staff. Today, a more flexible model is replacing the hierarchy model. In the emerging flexible model, work is done by a combination of full- and part-time employees, independent contractors, consultants, and professional and support staff provided by third-party staffing companies on a full-time, part-time, or as-needed basis.

One might argue that the problem of employee retention has led to the new paradigm. It's likely that several forces in our society—including the demand for better productivity, high-quality services, and increasingly specialized technical skills—brought about this change. Workers benefit from this model by having more options to accommodate lifestyle needs. Organizations benefit by being able to demand a higher degree of accountability for performance factors.

Today's HIM managers are challenged to be creative and flexible in finding ways to get work accomplished. How work is best performed by knowledge workers in this highly technical age of information is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Each specialized function in HIM can have a variety of "mix and match" approaches to achieve the necessary objectives. This requires "designer-managers" who customize a work solution from several sources.

For example, a transcription solution might be developed in which in-house staff and telecommuters are employed directly by the healthcare organization to do time-sensitive patient care reports such as histories and physicals, consultation reports, and emergency room reports. Discharge summaries and operative reports might be outsourced to a transcription service. Relationships with several on-call independent contractors might be developed as a back-up mechanism.

More Accountability

Another important aspect of the new workplace paradigm is a subtle shift in the distribution of responsibility. Creative work solutions result in "multi-source" workers becoming a team, each with responsibility as individuals for making their new work units a success.

In the traditional workplace, the employer organization, through its managers, assumed responsibility for successful outcomes. The organization and its managers were responsible for the performance of the workers. They planned the work, assigned it, trained workers, set the standards, evaluated work, rewarded people for good performance, and penalized them (sometimes) for poor performance. In essence, workers have been expected to follow policies and procedures whether or not they had input into their development.

In our highly technical "information age," that model is far less effective. Today's managers supervise individuals with skills so technical and specialized that the managers usually cannot perform the tasks themselves; thus, the relationship system must function in more egalitarian ways. In *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, Peter Drucker points out that "Knowledge workers are not subordinates; they are associates."[1] Managers and workers each must take responsibility for their own roles in the success of the work unit, and they must share responsibility equally for the overall success of the unit.

This bodes well for worker satisfaction. For years, research on employees has shown that compensation alone does not guarantee job satisfaction; growth potential, an opportunity to have some control over one's job and life, and work that is challenging consistently ranked higher on the list of important elements of job satisfaction than salary and benefits. Drucker points out that "...most knowledge workers will have to MANAGE THEMSELVES...Most people work with other people and are effective through other people...To manage oneself, therefore, requires taking relationship responsibility."[2]

Employee Retention in a New Light

In the new workplace paradigm, the "employee retention" issue is no longer solely an employer's problem; it is a shared responsibility for the success of the combined employer-worker-contractor teams that agree to do the work of the organizations. In a more fluid and flexible world of work, people will move in and out of work teams as the needs of workers and the organization change. The successful outcome of the work performed is dependent on the success of relationship systems developed for the purpose of accomplishing specific tasks. When individuals find a relationship system attractive, they are more likely to stay until the job is finished or (whenever possible) leave at a time or in a way that will not seriously compromise the success of the team. In this light, employee retention as a management issue is transformed into a shared challenge for managers, contractors, and workers to better understand and manage themselves in relationship systems.

As organizations' designer-managers craft each work solution, they should view the combined group of service providers as a team and participate in facilitating their success through relationship development. The managers and workers in the contracting organizations and the independent contractors must also understand relationship issues and take responsibility for contributing positively to successful relationships in the organizations they are serving. Ultimately, success of the teams should be measured in work outcomes, such as timely completion of work.

Understanding the Role of a Leader in a Relationship System

Understanding how relationship systems function and honing relationship skills are of paramount importance in the new flexible workplace model. The theoretical basis that I favor for understanding relationship systems is Bowen family systems theory, a well-known theory widely used in the field of family therapy.[3]

Psychiatrist Roberta Gilbert, of the Georgetown Family Center, says that in the workplace "...primary emphasis is on competency...however, difficulty in the relationship system of the workplace often means that personal competency and efficiency suffer."[4] In other words, if individuals can't manage themselves in poorly functioning relationship systems, they often may either quit or be fired.

Central to the theory is the concept of "systems thinking," which requires a change in orientation from a focus on individual behavior to awareness of the mutual interdependence of individuals in a social system such as a work team or department in the workplace. Systems thinkers see individual behavior as a reflection of how relationship systems function.[5] For example,

anxious behavior is contagious. As the anxiety in a system increases, individuals may spread their anxiety to others. In a more anxious state, most people do not concentrate as well, tend to make more errors, and become less efficient. Under highly anxious conditions, the most vulnerable people in the system may behave in ways that are increasingly disruptive to the system, thus compromising the quality and productivity of the work unit. Vulnerable people may be those who are lower in the hierarchy or whose individual history makes them more susceptible to poorer functioning when in contact with an anxious system.

The late Murray Bowen, creator of Bowen family therapy, described human behavior on a continuum from "calm and thoughtful" to "highly anxious." One's position on that continuum varies over time and is affected by personal history, current stresses, and the most prevalent level of functioning of others in the system. Work systems in which the most prevalent and influential behavior leans toward the calm, thoughtful end of the continuum generally function at a higher level, resulting in higher quality and more efficient work output. Respect for individuals is sincere and highly evident, collaboration is creative, and the system demonstrates a high degree of adaptability.

When a leader in a system focuses on individual behavior rather than how the whole system is functioning, the behavior of the others becomes more anxious. Reactive behaviors increase, such as gossiping, blaming, withdrawing, petty conflicts, and under- and over-functioning for others. Absenteeism and tardiness rise. In the extreme, members of the staff may start developing physical or mental illnesses. That's when people start to leave the system.

The combined work units that many departments use today to get work done are just as susceptible to these behaviors as traditional employer-employee systems. However, the emphasis on individual responsibility and the flexibility in today's systems may moderate these effects to some degree. Workers' increased mobility to move from setting to setting through third-party contractors or through their own efforts as independent contractors provides some relief in more intense systems.

Five Principles for Self-Management

The concepts of human relationship systems described in Bowen family systems theory can be used to develop principles of self-management that make a relationship system attractive to managers, employees, contractors, and temporary staff, as well as to the customers it serves. The following are examples of principles based on the theory. Whether you are in a leadership role or you are a temporary worker on a one-day assignment, these principles are equally valid and important to the success of the systems in which you are currently involved.

- *Focus first, last, and always on your own behavior*. When there is a problem in the system, reflect on your own role in the problem. Frequently assess your own level of anxiety. Become aware of the behaviors you exhibit when you are anxious. Work at managing your own reactivity.
- *Communicate, communicate, communicate*. In highly anxious systems, communication is compromised because people under stress usually cannot listen very well. They also believe that they do not have time to communicate. How one communicates is an excellent way to assess the level of anxiety. Frequently interrupting, being repetitive, talking too much, talking too little, being unclear, using language inappropriate to the setting, are all signs of high-level anxiety. In an open system, goals and objectives are clearly stated, and feedback is frequent, honest, and two-way. Communications are calm, respectful, and fact-based.
- *Focus on facts rather than feelings*. Facts enable the thinking part of the brain to take control. In more anxious settings, working out of the emotional brain only escalates anxiety. Respond to emotional input from staff or coworkers by encouraging them to cite factual examples of the problem or concern.
- *Don't take sides in a triangle*. Frequently conflicts between two individuals will send one or the other, or both of them, looking for a third party to take sides. Be as neutral as possible. Taking sides is more likely to escalate the anxiety in the triangle's outsider position, possibly sending that person off to spread the anxiety further in the system. If it is necessary to take a position, gather the facts as best you can, state your own position based on those facts, and stay in contact with both parties. Be prepared to tolerate any resulting reactivity and avoid getting into the reactive mode yourself.
- *Work at becoming a calm presence in the system.* Just as anxious behavior is contagious, so is being calm. Don't be one who "fans the flames." Calm, thoughtful responses to anxious colleagues may calm them down so that they may function at higher levels. That is the goal of the relationship system in the workplace—to function as successfully as possible.

A Strategy for Employee Retention?

Is this a promising strategy for managers who want to retain their employees? I will let you draw your own conclusions. As you do, consider just 10 of the many reasons why people decide to leave their jobs, culled from research results developed and published by John Sullivan, a professor of human resource management at San Francisco State University:[6]

- no one asked them to stay
- feel isolated and "in the dark"
- unhappy with the mix of job responsibilities
- a lack of resources or support
- no personal ties to the team
- don't feel empowered, appreciated, or that they are "member/owners"
- a lack of autonomy
- work isn't fun any more
- no group pressure to stay
- having a "bad manager"

Do these sound like the answers one would hear from someone leaving a well-functioning relationship system?

Notes

1. Drucker, Peter F. *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1999, p. 18.
2. *Ibid*, pp. 163, 184.
3. Fox, Leslie A. "Bowen Family Systems Theory: A Theoretical Framework for Organizational Change Agents." *Journal of AHIMA* 65, no. 4 (April 1994): 49-52.
4. Gilbert, Roberta M. *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking About Human Interactions*. Minneapolis, MN: Chronimed Publishing, 1992, p. 161.
5. Fox, Leslie A. "Systems Thinking vs. Individual Thinking." *ADVANCE for Health Information Professionals* 9, no. 12 (1999): 16.
6. Sullivan, John. "Retention—Why Employees Leave." Gately Consulting Web site. Available at http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/gately/pp15js09.htm.

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