

In this issue, *Nicola James*, Managing Partner, Thomas Brooke International, looks at why some employees leave their new company after a short time

# On-boarding and retention: the other side of hiring

Few things are more frustrating than investing in a new employee who leaves the company after a short time.

Yet almost anyone who has managed people has experienced this. Sometimes you have a level of concern from the beginning of the individual's employment, other times it can come as a complete surprise. While it's never a good thing in itself, it is always worth taking a serious look at the situation to see if something can be learned for the future to prevent the same thing happening again. It can be uncomfortable to do this objectively, because it's rare that the employee has no good reason – usually there's something (or someone) within the company that is the primary motivator for their departure, though not always. Let's look at a few of the most common scenarios and what you can do about them – or hopefully, how you can avoid them by learning from others' bad experiences!

Over the years recruiting in the industry, I've had a few occasions where an employee left the company after only a short stay. They almost always fall into one of two categories:

- This job is not what I thought
- Someone else offered me a way better opportunity

Usually there's an element of both. Let's look at a couple of examples and see what we can learn.

## SALES REP

Katy joined her new employer to build sales in a new channel. She knew there was a big hill to climb and she had positive expectations because she had previously led similar initiatives. In fact, she was eager to meet the challenge and had the right contacts on the customer side to get traction almost immediately. This seemed like her dream job and she fully believed in the benefits of the product and its positive environmental impact. She fitted well with the team at the corporate office and also with the executive leadership of the parent company. Yet after only two months, she tendered her resignation for a job outside the industry altogether. The President, to whom she reported directly, had no idea there was a problem until she walked into his office on Friday afternoon to give notice. What went wrong?

First of all, in this instance, the other opportunity was immensely better financially – more than a 50% improvement in salary plus potential for some ownership in the company. That is hard to beat, certainly. But why was she even willing to listen to another company after so short a time on her existing job? This is where the story gets more uncomfortable but also where we can learn something.

Everyone knew there was a lot to do to get this new line of business going. But even the President – who is relatively new to the company – underestimated the resistance internally. The long-time Location Manager at one of the key facilities manufacturing the products had previously been responsible for putting together pricing and capacity information. He was unwilling to change his ways and pass on the information required by prospective customers to figure out the size of orders that could be reliably fulfilled. The entire facility, under his leadership, had a very poor attitude, was unresponsive and unhelpful to Katy as she opened doors with prospects and she found herself unable to fulfil the basic promises she made about providing clear price, volume and delivery commitments.

Since the Location Manager did not report to her and the President did not take aggressive action to require an improvement in his performance in this regard, there was nothing Katy could do. There were no consequences for this manager and he just kept doing things the way he had done them for years before Katy showed up, which was basically to do as little as possible. She had never met with him during the interview process and, thus, his resistance was a major difficulty she had no way of anticipating.

Katy had no support internally; and while she was constantly trying to find ways to get the information, even offering to do the calculations herself if the location would provide the raw data, she began to see the road ahead as much longer than she had anticipated. Instead of a positive challenge to lead growth of an environmentally friendly product line with a group of people committed to making the world a better place, she found herself in a no-win situation where, despite her ability to create the opportunities, she was being undermined internally. When the

President failed to take action to deal with the situation, despite being aware of it, she understandably began to wonder what else she would come up against that hadn't been disclosed during the interview process. When the new company approached her with an enticing offer, she was willing to listen.

Would Katy have left even if the situation at her existing employer had been different? Maybe. But I am not so sure. Having talked with her extensively before the hire, I knew she was truly excited about the role and the financial opportunity was a good one. It would take a while to reach its potential but it offered uncapped commissions and real growth potential. Being a loyal individual she really wanted to make it work. But when I called Katy for our six-week check in after hire, I could tell she was surprised and disheartened by the very avoidable issues she was facing internally. There was no inherent reason why the product could not be sold to this new channel and Katy was actually opening doors sooner than anyone had expected to generate real orders; yet this key individual internally, who had direct influence on her ability to succeed, was effectively sabotaging her efforts even without being intentionally malicious (let's assume the best of this individual).

What can we learn from this? As we have to refill this position, I can guarantee you that conversations with the President about consequences for the Location Manager's attitude and lack of co-operation will be front and centre. That individual needs to understand they have to improve or move on. But knowing what we now know about the culture of the organisation, I will also be looking for candidates who are stronger leaders and drivers, who will take a more aggressive approach to getting what they need or escalating the situation until something is done. And here, much of the key to the solution is in making sure someone knows what they are getting into before they start. That is really the biggest issue Katy encountered; and this type of surprise more often than not leads to a quick exit. I am much more likely to dig deeply in interview questions about someone's past success overcoming internal resistance. That may be the greater decision factor than their ideal channel experience



