



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H031A7
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
AUGUST 01, 2016

ARTICLE **EMPLOYEE RETENTION**

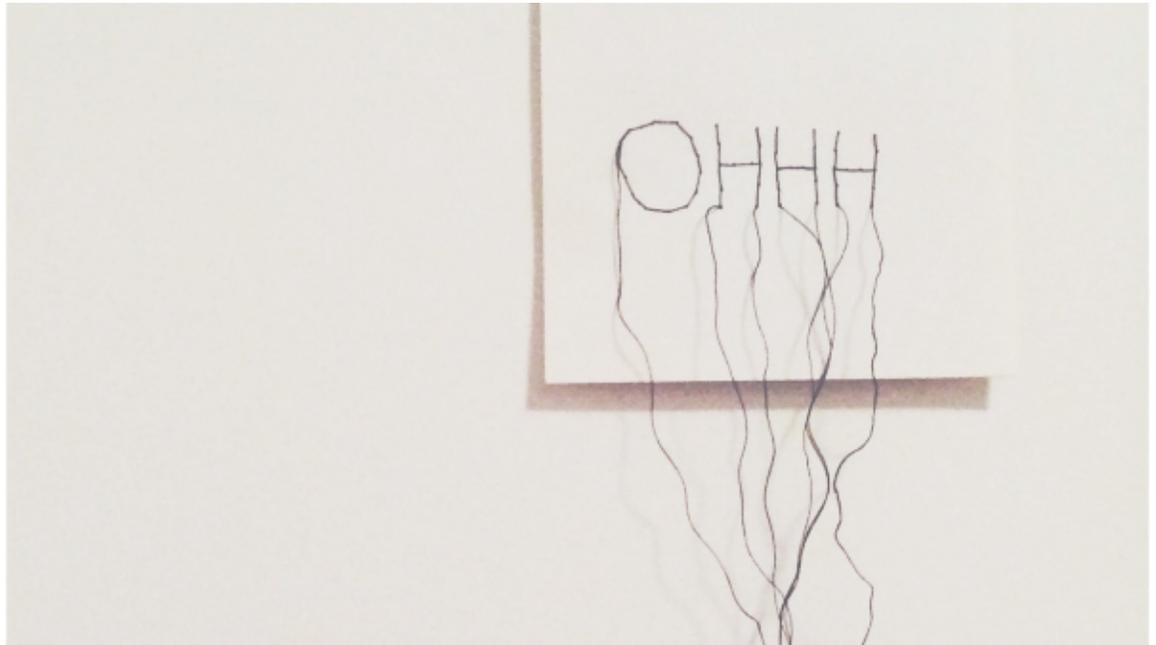
Why You Should
Interview People Who
Turn Down a Job with
Your Company

by Ben Dattner

EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Why You Should Interview People Who Turn Down a Job with Your Company

by Ben Dattner
AUGUST 01, 2016



Successfully competing for top talent involves both selling jobs to the best candidates and retaining the highest performing incumbents. In order to be seen as an employer of choice with a compelling value proposition for employees, many companies measure turnover and conduct [exit interviews](#) with departing employees to gather feedback about the experiences people had working there and the reasons why they're leaving. But a less common practice is to track how many people turn down job offers at your company, and an even less common practice is to actually gather feedback from

candidates who receive offers but don't accept them. Like "exit interviews" these "declined offer" interviews can yield a lot of information about your own organization as well as valuable data about your industry and competitors.

While academic institutions often gather feedback from students who are accepted but do not matriculate in order to improve student recruitment and retention and to better compete with rival institutions, doing so with job candidates in a systematic and consistent manner is rare in the corporate world. As with other kinds of selling and marketing, you may learn as much, if not more, from the feedback of customers who choose not to buy as you learn from those who do.

If you don't solicit private feedback from people whom you've interviewed (and even if you do), they may provide unsolicited public feedback on websites such as [Glassdoor](#) about their experiences being interviewed at your organization. "Declined offer" interviews and feedback can also give you advance warning about factors that may cause your offer rate to decline, enabling you to take proactive steps to prevent it from happening.

The feedback that candidates provide can fall into several categories. There may be some factors that are completely out of the company's control – for example, if the candidate ultimately decides to pursue another career path or work in a different industry or geographic location. Other feedback may be within the company's control, but difficult to change in the short term, such as the quality of facilities, the title or level of the job in question, or the compensation and benefits package being offered.

However, the feedback that is most likely to be useful and within the company's control is also likely to be the most sensitive and difficult for the candidate to feel comfortable sharing. It might be hard for a candidate to openly tell a hiring manager or a human resources business partner that she thought the hiring manager was unfriendly or unfocused, that some interviewers conveyed a low level of enthusiasm about working at the organization, that there were too many interviewers in the mix, or that different interviewers seemed to convey divergent ideas about the company's strategy and plans, the level of authority or responsibilities in the role, the key challenges of the role, or what would be necessary for success.

Therefore, it's helpful to collect feedback via a third party such as an external search, consulting or research firm; an internal market research, branding or analytics department that is outside of both the hiring area and human resources; and/or anonymously through web surveys or via email. By sharing feedback with a third party outside of the hiring process or via an anonymous technology platform, candidates can be sufficiently candid and specific about their experiences and suggestions without having concerns about burning any bridges.

It's helpful to inform candidates who decline offers that their participation in a "declined offer interview" will be much appreciated, that there are no hard feelings, and that when requested and feasible, their individual feedback can remain confidential or anonymous. Knowing that the

organization will keep the door open for other potential future opportunities and is committed to continuously improving its competitiveness as an employer might also encourage candidates to participate and provide their honest perspectives.

Here are some questions that you can and should ask the candidates who got away:

- What did you see as the potential positive aspects of the role and/or working at our organization?
- What were your concerns about the role and/or working at our organization?
- What were the most important factors in the decision you made?
- What feedback or suggestions do you have about your interviews, interviewers, the interview process itself, or how we could have improved your overall experience as a candidate?
- Can you provide any observations about, or feedback or suggestions for the hiring manager, Human Resources, or the organization overall?
- What additional feedback or suggestions can you provide about how we might present a more compelling value proposition to candidates like you in the future?

This kind of feedback can provide ample opportunities for organizations to develop theories about how to improve their processes, branding and the candidate experience. It's important to understand, though, that personal sensitivities and organizational politics will inevitably come in to the hypotheses that people develop, the interpretations they make, the conclusions they reach and the "stories" they tell themselves and others. The hiring manager may believe that HR didn't manage the candidate's timing and logistics properly, while HR may believe that the hiring manager isn't a good interviewer or doesn't represent the company well. Both the hiring manager and HR may believe that the CEO should have cleared his calendar to meet with the candidate earlier in the process.

This means it's important to frame this feedback collection in a positive, forward-looking way, to keep an open mind, and to ask candidates who received but did not accept offers open-ended and non-leading questions to get their true impressions and feelings. If they decided to take a different offer, or to remain at their current job, it's helpful to know which criteria they used in making their decision, especially if it was a hard choice for them to make.

The hiring manager and HR can also compare and contrast feedback from those who did not take offers with the feedback from those who did, and try to ascertain which controllable factors might make the difference in the decision making process of future candidates that the organization wants to attract. For example, the organization may realize it needs to train hiring managers to be more friendly and focused during interviews, or to ask more relevant job-related questions. Or, the hiring manager can seek out a more diverse and enthusiastic group of interviewers who may also represent the organization better to different kinds of candidates, and potentially build more positive interpersonal chemistry with them.

Getting all interviewers aligned about how they will describe the role and the company's future direction can help present a unified front and ensure that the candidate does not perceive disorganization or inconsistency. HR may decide to put a limit on the maximum number of interviewers a candidate will see, as Google does (generally, there's a maximum of four interviews, as Laszlo Bock, SVP of People Operations at Google describes in his book *Work Rules*) which can also help ensure that the process is not too time consuming or burdensome for either the candidate or the organization. Also, setting a time limit on how long after interviews a hiring decision must get made can help ensure that the organization provides timely responses to interviewed candidates rather than making them wait too long for an offer.

It's not easy for any hiring manager, HR department or organization to confront rejection and deal with it constructively. However, by having the courage and discipline to gather, learn from, and productively act upon the open and honest feedback of candidates who got away, you and your colleagues can enhance your employment brand, sell your value proposition more effectively than your organization's rivals, improve the candidate experience, and boost your offer acceptance rate in the future.

Ben Dattner is an executive coach and organizational development consultant, and the founder of New York City-based [Dattner Consulting, LLC](#). You can follow him on Twitter at [@bendattner](#).
