

ARE FREE AGENTS



CATCHING YOU BY SURPRISE?

By Lori L. Silverman

Imagine the following situation. You've been working for months to get some new jobs into your business. Finally, it's paid off.

Now you discover that you need to hire another highly skilled employee in order to fulfill these contracts. After several weeks of searching for the perfect candidate you make an offer. It's accepted. Two days before the person is to begin work with your company, you receive a phone call telling you that the individual has decided to work for another firm.

What about this scenario? You have groomed an entry level employee for several years, providing him with training, as required. His work is better than most and he receives accolades from others on a regular basis. One day he walks into your office and tells you he is quitting in order to open a company that will contract services to several firms in the industry—in return for more and varied employment opportunities, increased decision making, and the potential for a higher income.

What's going on in the world of work? What is making these situations more common?

You turn to your friends, family, and colleagues for answers, but what you hear doesn't make sense. Free agents. Highly skilled individuals who are committed to themselves and their skills, who freely roam from company to company, project to project, assignment to assignment, adding value along the way until they discover a better opportunity to

contribute down the road. They believe in themselves and what they have to offer. They are convinced that work should be fun, personal, and meaningful. They trust that freedom will bring them a higher sense of security. They know they have talent, just like star athletes who move in and out of various teams in their sport of choice.

As an employer, it's in your best interest to understand and embrace this shift in thinking. It is not going to go away. In fact, the number of free agents is on the rise, thanks to corporate downsizing and restructuring efforts. Recognize that in a world where intellectual capital is at a premium, free agents may just have the upper hand.

Keep a constant handle on what motivates each of your employees and figure out to provide it. Look for ways to make work personally meaningful for them so that they can see they are making a strong contribution to the firm, to the customer, and to themselves. Always have a back-up plan when hiring for key positions and a plan for quickly filling vacancies when they arise. Consider alternatives to regular full-time employment: outsourcing services, contracting specialized work when needed, allowing employees to work nontraditional hours. Acknowledge that lifetime commitments to one organization, unless you own it, may be an artifact of the past.

Chances are that many of you who are reading this article are free agents. What brings you joy in work? Now, how can you replicate that feeling for others? The time to start is now. Tomorrow may just be too late.

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