

Mission Ready

Volume 3, Issue 11

December 1, 2001

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Retaining Your Best People, Part One

A popular song during World War I expressed a significant cultural shift in America. Entitled, “*How do you keep ‘em down on the farm, after they’ve seen Pa-ree?*”, the light hearted ditty actually described an awakening of American youth, who, upon returning from the war in Europe, had no interest in resuming their lives on the family farm. They moved to the dynamic “big city,” instead. This demographic shift signaled the end of the family farm in even more profound ways than did the Industrial Revolution.

A similar shift has been taking place for the last generation, or so, in the business world: the day of the “company man” is over.

Many of us can remember a relative who worked for one company his or her entire working life, ending up with little more than a gold watch upon retirement. That watch may have been the only gesture of gratitude made by the respective company, throughout our grandfathers' or grandmothers' career. That's because the company of eighty years ago could depend upon the American culture, itself, to keep our grandparents in place. A self respecting citizen was expected to remain with one company for an entire career, baring some unforeseen circumstance, such as bankruptcy of the organization. Those who spent a mere decade with one company before moving on were considered job hoppers with unstable employment histories.

Today, no company can depend on the

surrounding culture to keep its employees “down on the farm.” Business magazines, talk show hosts, and career consultants are telling us that a person who works for one organization for decades has misplaced loyalty, at best, or is without personal ambition and afraid to leave his or her comfort zone, at worst – we can only imagine that no one got around to telling this to Jack Welch.

Senior management must have an awakening of its own, and realize that its best employees are at risk *every day of the week*. Not only are competitors trying to steal them away, the very culture in which they thrive is encouraging them to move on. Virtually every business guru is exhorting the upwardly mobile aspirant to jump from one company to another, with each step being higher than the last. Career consultants advise even the happy employee to interview frequently, in order to gain a real-time measure of his or her worth in the marketplace. Those of us who are disposed to feel loyalty to the company are encouraged to look upon ourselves as free agents; after all, we are reminded, the organization would lay *us* off without blinking an eye. The modern company would be wise to realize its vulnerability, and never let up on its efforts to retain its best personnel. In next month's issue, we will reveal how one great organizational model—the United States Marine Corps—maintains the highest re-enlistment rate, while offering the fewest “perks” and the least creature comforts of all the armed forces.