

Minimizing the Impact of the Economy on Your Team

Today's financial managers are under more pressure than ever as they strive to maintain a team of talented and motivated professionals under difficult business conditions. If you're like many, you have had to ask employees to handle more work with fewer resources to support them. While this can easily translate into higher stress levels among your staff along with declining morale, it doesn't have to.

Our third annual *Robert Half Global Financial Employment Monitor* evaluated how companies worldwide are managing staffing issues in the current economic downturn. More than 4,800 hiring managers in finance and human resources across 21 countries participated in the survey. Following are some findings that may prove beneficial when overseeing your own employees:

Communicate, communicate, communicate

When business conditions are poor, it is common for rumors to spread. People often have a fear of the unknown and when little information is provided by leadership about difficult situations, employees may expect the worst – whether it's layoffs, demotions or that the company is closing altogether. So, be sure to explain how your organization is addressing challenges. While you'll want to instill confidence that the company is well-equipped to persevere through this period, it's also helpful to invite staff to help define problem areas in their jobs and recommend solutions.

Thirty-one percent of survey respondents said they have increased the level of communication between management and employees due to the economic downturn. Consider using an intranet site or suggestion box as ways for staff to easily submit their feedback on your business. Brainstorming sessions are another useful way to generate ideas and include employees in the problem-solving process.

Be proactive about burnout

Rising workloads, insufficient staffing and employee worries about the economy's impact on the business can significantly affect productivity. Take note if your top performers are starting to make careless mistakes, miss deadlines or use more sick days. These may be signs that it's time to make changes.

Talk to your employees regularly about their projects, so you can get a sense of whether they're overwhelmed. Consider reassigning work, postponing less critical initiatives or bringing in temporary financial professionals when demands are high. You'll not only alleviate stress but also show that you're in touch with the needs of your group.

Expect recruitment difficulties

While hiring activity is nowhere near levels of just a few years ago, some organizations are adding staff. In some cases, turnover of critical team members leaves managers with little choice but to find replacements; other firms are experiencing growth. It may seem like companies would have an easy time finding candidates today, and, indeed, there are many exceptional employees in the job market today who were not available in a better

economic climate. Still, 56 percent of hiring managers polled in our survey said they are having difficulty finding skilled job applicants for accounting and finance positions.

How could this be the case, given the high unemployment rate? Companies are looking for individuals who have the qualifications necessary to make an immediate impact on their teams. As a result, firms frequently compete for the same type of talent: The survey found U.S. employers are facing the greatest competition recruiting professionals in financial management, tax and treasury, and general accounting. Recruiting is made even more difficult in the current environment where employers must wade through hundreds of responses from unqualified candidates. Specialized recruiters can help to narrow the applicant pool to accounting and finance professionals who meet your precise needs.

Don't forget about retention

Also be careful about being complacent when it comes to keeping the staff you already have, believing employees should feel fortunate just to have jobs. Individuals with top-notch skills and experience are always in demand, so if they feel unappreciated they may pursue other opportunities. More than half (53 percent) of all hiring managers surveyed for the *Global Financial Employment Monitor* appear to recognize this risk, noting that they are either concerned or very concerned about keeping their best performers over the next year.

Since most firms are not in a position right now to offer significant pay raises or bonuses, other retention means must be sought. While money is of course key, in today's environment, professionals are particularly concerned about job stability. Employees will appreciate your efforts to inquire about their career goals and discuss the steps necessary to achieve those objectives. You can help them by offering progressively challenging assignments and access to training.

One of the keys to surviving economic challenge is not just having an eye on the bottom line but also paying attention to the way in which you manage staffing resources. Make sure you are building a strong and effective team and doing your part to maintain job satisfaction. You'll be in a better position to address business needs today and in the future.

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