



Holding on to talent at Virgin Mobile



As Head of Shared Services for Virgin Mobile, Richard Roberts heads up a team responsible for all matters relating to HR policy and procedure across the company. This includes recruitment, reward and employee programmes. Richard and his team work closely with the Business Partners team which sits within HR.

Virgin Mobile employs around 750 people in its Customer Centre based in Trowbridge, Wiltshire. The location itself presents a unique set of problems. The lack of resource is compounded by shift work which is a necessary part of the job. This lessens the attraction as the rest of a potential employee's family will most likely work normal hours.

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Retention is a complex issue

Although Virgin Mobile takes a proactive approach to retention by putting resources behind it, Richard understands why other companies don't.

“Why people leave a company is such a complex issue,” says Richard. “I’ve been in HR for around 16 years, predominantly in Customer Services. I’ve done a lot of research and reading which shows that reasons for leaving are very individual. This makes it difficult to boil down.

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Understand the reasons people leave

Virgin Mobile has three distinct areas, Customer Care, Retail Staff and Business Support.

Each of these three areas will have different reasons for people staying or leaving. A common mistake, according to Richard, is that people often generalise too much and latch on to one reason to explain their attrition rates:

“You have to look at the factors aligned to each particular sector. Take our Customer Centre for example: it has a very young age profile. Around September time our attrition figures rise because many of the staff go off to college. The same happens in May because they go off travelling. We tackled this by introducing a sabbatical programme.

Right people, right role

Having described people's different reasons for leaving as complex, he admits to one overriding factor that affects retention: the manager. Virgin Mobile tackles this potential hazard head-on with measures



that ensure managers are well trained, understand how to manage and, importantly, develop their staff. He concedes that, in most companies, the relationship between HR and line managers could be improved.

“The manager has such a big influence: their style can make or break someone’s career. We all remember people who have managed us well and equally those who have been complete nightmare.”

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An integral approach to retention

Virgin Mobile runs a variety of programmes geared towards retaining staff, for example, succession planning and career development.

“We have an approach to retention rather than a strategy,” says Richard. *“We have looked at the employee lifecycle from day one: from seeing the advertisement through to recruitment, induction, career development and finally, to leaving the organisation.”*

“One of the problems we face is that people have wild ideas of what it will be like to work for Virgin,” he continues. *“Yes, it’s a*

great, fun place to be but we still have our day to day job to do. This is particularly true for the customer service department. The hard reality is that their job is to take calls from customers.”

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The exit process

Richard agrees that exit interview data gives a picture of people’s reasons for leaving, enabling them to be addressed.

Richard acknowledges that a lengthy interview is necessary to get any depth, followed by considerable time for analysis afterwards. That is why he looked for a more automated method.

“It’s hard to know how much of the truth you actually get in a face to face situation. We will direct leavers to the online questionnaire and the really great thing is that TalentDrain will do the analysis for us. Apart from anything else, it will be good to have a third party to do this.”

Virgin Mobile uses TalentDrain’s online exit questionnaire to analyse the reasons people leave the organisation and how they differ from department to department.