

Supported? Satisfied? Keeping staff from moving on

Valerie Neff Newitt

May 2023—When hiring is difficult, how to improve retention becomes what it's all about.

Linking sign-on bonuses with performance metrics rather than time in the job is one way to try to retain employees in an industry in which demand for staff far outweighs the supply.

Maggie Morrissey, director of recruiting and staffing at Lighthouse Lab Services, Charlotte, NC, is accustomed to filling long-vacant laboratory positions. Her clients generally seek Lighthouse's help when a position has proved hard to fill. As she and so many others know, it's better to retain than it is to have to replace. Reducing turnover is what she spoke to CAP TODAY about.



Morrissey

Morrissey and her colleagues at Lighthouse have long advised their clients to offer sign-on bonuses, and they're typically tied to tenure. An article published in *Harvard Business Review* on Feb. 8 this year reported on retention bonuses, which companies offer as an incentive to stay on the job through a specified date or until a specified milestone is reached. Though the article says there's no evidence that retention bonuses increase engagement or long-term loyalty, an end-of-year bonus tied to metrics might prove useful in laboratories, Morrissey says.

"You lay it out nice and clear," she says: "We'll give you a sign-on bonus of, say, \$2,000. You have an opportunity to earn [another] bonus every year by hitting these metrics." The laboratory then has to track the metrics, and that's the difficulty many small businesses run up against, she says.

"However, broadly speaking, nearly every laboratory is holding its team, in some way, shape, or form, to metrics."

Avoiding a bonus with an end date is the point, she says. An example would be a \$10,000 sign-on bonus paid out in thirds over three years. "As soon as they get paid that final check, an employee might feel, okay, I've done my part. I'm going to move on to the next employer that will pay a sign-on bonus." They're looking for some kind of consistent bonus, she says.

Morrissey recommends that laboratories offer a bonus that is smaller than what is now typically offered—\$10,000 to \$20,000—and then "publicize their bonus plan," she says. "People will see their potential earnings on an annual basis versus a one-time bonus."

Lighthouse runs a Facebook group and what Morrissey hears from technologists is a general lack of appreciation. "Laboratory technologists and other staff feel overlooked in favor of the nursing and other staff who work with patients directly."

She suggests starting at the top to show more appreciation. Have the hospital's C-suite—whether the COO, CMO, or chief of nursing—visit the laboratory more often. And inside the laboratory, a manager's praise of a person or particular group in the presence of others "goes a long way with people."

Review retention policies to see what's being done after someone is hired. "Do they have a good manager who's providing them with great feedback? Who's meeting with them one-on-one to help them understand the

equipment and processes?” For all staff, she says, “are they feeling supported by both the manager and the senior management, whatever that support might look like?”

Lighthouse surveyed laboratory staff in 2022 and found morale to be “fairly low,” Morrissey says, especially among those with fewer than five years in the lab, which “ties in with COVID” and the overtime hours it required. “A couple of hours a week is fine,” she notes, but 10 to 15 is another matter.

For some small to midsize laboratories and particularly startups, insufficient benefits hurt morale in addition to making hiring harder. In some of those same laboratories there is no hierarchy for promotions. For labs that can afford it, paying for ASCP certification and continuing education, too, goes a long way, as does a profit-sharing bonus where that’s a possibility.

Then there’s the laboratory’s culture. “You want a lab that’s positive, upbeat. You don’t want people whose best part of the day is leaving that lab,” Morrissey says. How do laboratories achieve it? An appreciative boss who goes to bat for the staff, coworkers they can bond with, and senior managers who show appreciation and say, ““You guys are doing a great job. We see you.””

For recruitment, while sign-on bonuses work, offering to relocate someone, particularly to a small town or more remote area, usually doesn’t. “People with kids who are set where they live don’t want to relocate. You can offer them all the money in the world and they probably still will not want to relocate,” Morrissey says, adding, “It takes a certain type of person to relocate for a position.” And the person who is willing to relocate is more likely to relocate again, she observes. In her experience, the relocation package doesn’t convince people to move. “It convinces people who are already willing to move.”

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