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In a hot market, companies need proper strategy to retain employees.

How do I hold on to my guy? It's not the lament of a lovesick 16-year-old, but the distress call being heard in human resource suites across corporate corridors – specially in sizzling economies like China, India, Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates, where demand and supply are on two separate planets altogether. At a time when starting a new dotcom or software company has become the ultimate goal of every infotech professional, and with the attrition rate in some IT companies at a glorious 100 per cent, it is no wonder that HR managers are losing sleep and hair over the \$64-m question. What will make an employee happy? Happy enough to actually stay for a while?

As is usual in our one-second-soundbite-driven universe, new words are sprouting up in the jargon of the hassled HR managers to describe the cradle to grave process of getting in, retaining and (sob, sob) losing the employee. One word in currency is 'OnBoarding', a new term for the old practice of employee orientation – now, it goes beyond merely welcoming the new guy and settling him into his new office, and works towards

retaining him. It is a comprehensive approach with two high-level goals: Making employees feel welcome and comfortable in their new surroundings, and minimising the time before they become productive assets in their new workgroup.

For the post-baby-boom gen-Xers, it is important to get the feeling that they have made mates or buddies at work. These onboarding programmes also address company and department objectives, job expectations, policies and procedures including admin issues. The onboarding processes are getting so sophisticated and systematised these days, that there are even new software solutions that promise to take the sweat and toil out for the HR manager!

CRUCIAL SIX MONTHS

How serious is the problem of retaining employees in the red-hot Asian markets? Most HR managers agree that the first six months are crucial in the relentless battle to retain employees. But around 60 per cent of companies surveyed recently either do not have a formal onboarding programme, or end it after the first month. Meanwhile, the pressure to retain talent and improve productivity has never

been greater in countries like India and China.

The buzz in China is for highly qualified "locals", with so many job openings for them that retention is an ongoing struggle for Western companies with Chinese operations. Apart from compensation, the other big factor in China is treatment. No one likes to be embarrassed or "lose face" in this society so it is vital to create an ambience where harsh messages are conveyed in a private and respectful manner and not the usual Western style of being blunt and "professional" about it. Having a good relationship with the boss is also vital as they must feel the boss "cares" for them personally and professionally.

In India's melting-pot IT world, companies have made the art of retention into a new branch of science! One company categorises new employees from Day One as red, amber, green types, with red being the ones most likely to leave. Their concerns are then sought to be addressed on a pre-emptive basis. With money, stock options and perks a given, intangible issues like career roadmaps and bonding with the organisation get priority in many Indian companies. Some companies offer accelerated career growth as a reward for good performance; some have a tuition reimbursement policy for employees who pursue skill enhancement programmes; others provide personal and career counselling, allow flexi-careers and entrepreneurial sabbaticals.

Most companies agree that their effective onboarding is an investment resulting in employee retention, morale and productivity. Attrition rates fall dramatically in companies with well managed programmes. Also, as more people leave their managers rather than their jobs, reorienting supervisor's thinking is also vital. At the end of the day, if you are a boss and you are losing people, you know where the problem is. The culprit's face is in the mirror! **is**

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