

## Is the war of staff attrition worth fighting, let alone winning?

Skills shortages within the IT support space in mainland Europe are increasing with an ever reducing pool of suitably skilled resources being sought by an increasing number of internal and vendor support organisations. Off shoring initiatives of recent years have reduced the number of people entering the IT support arena at the lower levels and consequently a knock on shortage of experienced and skilled resources is becoming apparent. It is anticipated that this skills shortage will intensify in the short term and that over time natural market forces will remedy the situation by pushing pay rates up to attract more local candidates into the marketplace.

It should be noted that the incestuous nature of the IT support industry and the cross-vendor applicability of core technology skills and experiences means that many of the skills an individual acquires at organisation X will be immediately applicable to organisation Y. The almost universal adoption of Wintel platforms, MS Exchange for email and the rise in popularity of back office technologies such as J2EE and .NET platforms for enterprise application stacks as well as the continuing drive towards web based delivery mechanisms mean that support agents are able to leverage their knowledge and skills in these areas across multiple vendors and multiple organisations. For these reasons, it is reasonable to expect an increase in the level of labour movement within the support sector.

Commonly accepted wisdom states that any staff turnover is a bad thing. Attrition should be avoided wherever possible. Or should it? Given that the potential for an extended IT skills shortage is real, does this mean that an attrition time bomb is ticking at the hearts of the IT function? Perhaps it is time for a new employment model for the support function is required...

### Commonly accepted wisdom can be wrong!

Attrition is often cited as a terrible phenomenon that support executives must constantly strive to fight and eliminate. The rationale behind such assertions is questionable in the extreme. Below are some of the most commonly repeated arguments against attrition and the reasons why they are flawed:

- Attrition related costs are inflated as new starters require significant training to get up to speed – Skills are readily transferable between similar organisations for the reasons outlined above. Also, specialist disciplines within the IT function such as networks, security and database administration are typically common between organisations irrespective of the market sector involved.
- End users prefer long term relationships with their support personnel – End users rarely call the service desk for a chat. They have a problem and they want their issues to be resolved in a timely and courteous manner, they don't want a friend...
- Long time employees hold invaluable business experience that benefits the organisation – Given the common lack of communication between IT and the business and the fact that IT to business alignment has been a primary driver for the IT function for the best part of a decade it is bizarre that this is still claimed by some as a reason to avoid staff attrition. If we suspend disbelief for a moment and accept that the business experience of some support personnel is valuable one must still take in account the fact that X years of experience is often little more than 1 year of experience repeated X times.
- Employees with extended tenures have useful technical experience – Technology refresh rates and advances in IT capabilities make much of the knowledge acquired from 3-4 years ago redundant.

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## Attrition doesn't have to be a bad thing

The realities of the labour market cannot be ignored and forward thinking organisations recognise that they must work within the boundaries of their local employment environment rather than trying to continually fight against the tide. Attrition can bring as many benefits as problems, some of which are described below:

- New starters bring external influences and ideas into the organisation – Organisations can learn from the experiences of others and potentially avoid costly mistakes
- Team dynamics constantly change as newbies become old hands etc invigorating the wider team and making it more flexible and open to change
- Regular recruitment allows an organisation to take advantage of the skills investments of others - Avoiding training costs by using the opportunity provided by regular staff turnover to recruit candidates with the skills needed to plug internal gaps and extend team capabilities
- Provides an opportunity to reduce the cost base of the support team – More experienced employees are significantly more expensive than inexperienced new comers, by adjusting the proportion of experienced staff and trainees within the team, support executives can alter their cost structures

## Stop fighting attrition and embrace it as a necessary and good thing

Staff attrition has been a major concern within the IT support industry since its inception. Support executives need to determine whether complete staff retention is either achievable or desirable. Indeed, it can be argued that a certain level of planned staff turnover is beneficial to an organization as it revitalizes and brings new ideas and approaches to the table. Rather than fight attrition, support managers should begin to embrace it, and perhaps even depend upon it as in the accounting and legal professions where a large influx of raw recruits is required every year to feed the ongoing staffing needs of the corporate sausage machine, providing low cost but highly motivated cannon fodder to perform the repetitive and menial tasks that are necessary to deliver even the most prestigious and value added of services. Where a level of staff turnover is predicted and planned for, it can be satisfied by a variety of methods and employment models and support functions will begin to utilize alternative sources of personnel such as students, stay at home parents and the ever increasing retired population. These demographics represent a rich and diverse opportunity for IT recruiters as this largely untapped resource pool will be increasingly accessible due to distributed telephony technologies and cloud based service desks. Such workers will be able to work as and when it suits them, fitting in shifts (although the term 'shift' may become somewhat meaningless as the work performed will begin to be measured in terms of the value added rather than the duration for which one is available to perform) around their home life commitments.

*Rob Addy is a Research Director with Gartner covering IT Infrastructure Support Services across EMEA where he advises organisations on a variety of Support and Outsourcing related areas. He is also the author of "Effective IT Service Management: To ITIL and beyond!" which was published in September 2007 by Springer. See [www.gartner.com](http://www.gartner.com) and [www.effectiveitsm.com](http://www.effectiveitsm.com) for details.*