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Quittin' time

As confidence rises, workers will start looking for new jobs. Only top employers will be able to stop the rush.

by [Jason Kirby](#) on Thursday, October 28, 2010 9:00am - [3 Comments](#)



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW TOLSON

Back in August, former JetBlue flight attendant Steven Slater scolded an obnoxious passenger, grabbed a cold beer, and slid down an emergency chute into folk-hero status for disgruntled workers everywhere. Given that the stunt landed Slater in court last week, where he pled guilty to criminal mischief and was fined US\$10,000, there are clearly better ways to go about changing jobs. Regardless, 2011 is shaping up to be the year of the Big Quit. And mounting employee restlessness will put all but the best employers in a tough spot as they try to hang on to top talent.



When the recession hit, the job market went into a deep freeze. In Canada, employers that had just months earlier grappled with labour shortages suddenly found themselves with too many workers and not enough for them to do. Aside from outright layoffs, those who kept their jobs faced salary freezes, extended shutdowns and calls for voluntary pay cuts and job-sharing. “There was an understanding between management and staff that this was an emergency and we all had to bear these measures, but someday, when things get better, there would be some redress,” says Greg Leach, a senior vice-president with Ipsos Reid. “Now a lot of people are reading that things are better, yet the emergency measures seem to have become the new norm.”



An Ipsos Reid poll released earlier this month showed just how disgruntled many workers are. It found more than one-quarter of employees are likely to look for a new job in the next six months. Among those who faced wage freezes during the downturn, that figure jumped to 34 per cent. More worrisome still, says Leach, is that one-third of middle managers—those individuals caught between cost-cutting senior executives and angry rank-and-file workers—also plan to leave. If they do, it could lead to chain reactions that cripple organizations.

There’s no question the labour market has staged a stunning rebound. Unlike the U.S., Canada has already recovered all the job losses suffered in the recession. Fears still linger for many, of course. Canada shed 6,600 jobs in September, a month when economists had expected a gain of 10,000. But with the Conference Board of Canada’s help-wanted index, a measure of the number of online job ads, rising at the fastest rate in three years, the market is shifting back in employees’ favour. One Montreal company, JobWings Careers, which operates a number of niche online job boards, recently launched Resignation.ca, a compendium of advice for those thinking of walking out the door. “We want to catch those people who are about to make a move and start the search for a new job,” says Manuel Francisci, JobWings’ president.

The thing is, for all the positive economic news out there, many companies still face tough times. They simply may not be in a position to offer lavish retention perks. But that doesn’t mean they can’t be proactive. Cissy Pau, a principle at Vancouver’s Clear HR Consulting, says managers should start by simply asking employees what changes would keep them in their jobs. “You don’t have to promise anything, but if you ask, you’ll find commonalities in areas where you can make changes,” says Pau. She says that in the case of organizations with a young workforce, it’s also crucial to let employees know there are opportunities for advancement if they stay put.

While budgets may still be tight, it’s worth considering bonuses for those highly valued performers that organizations can’t afford to lose. If that’s not possible, then a lot is going to come down to whether leaders can inspire employees with a sense of mission and adventure that doesn’t necessarily entail immediate financial reward.

We’re not about to return to the days when coffee slingers in the oil patch could demand signing bonuses. Experts say the war for talent this time will be much more focused. “There will be a cherry-picking situation where organizations that are in a position to innovate, grow and experiment will be able to attract talented people who want to do their magic stuff,” says Leach. Those that can’t should be prepared to see their best and brightest jump ship.

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