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Hire People Built to Stay

Why most turnover is decided before day one, and how to fix the front end of hiring

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The short version

A lot of turnover is hired in. If the job you described is not the job they get, or the person was never a fit, no retention program will save the hire.

Your best long-tenured people already hold the answer. They share 3 to 5 traits. Most companies have never written them down.

Speed matters as much as fit. When we cut our hiring process from two weeks to one and onboarding paperwork from 30 days to 15, more of the people we wanted actually started.

The result was real. In one seasonal hiring program, the share of hires lost before their first day on the job fell from 42% to 15%.

Buying a car from the brochure

Hiring off a resume is like buying a car based on the brochure. It looks great on paper. You do not know how it drives until you are already behind the wheel.

Most hiring processes are built to answer one question: can this person do the job? That question matters on day one. It says almost nothing about whether they will still be doing it in year three.

Leadership IQ's widely cited study of more than 5,000 hiring managers found that 46% of new hires failed within 18 months, and that 89% of those failures came down to attitude, motivation and fit, not technical skill. The study is from 2005. Most hiring processes have not changed much since.

Posting a job without knowing what good looks like is like casting a movie without a script. You will get people who can act. You will have no idea if they are right for this part.

Your four kinds of employee

Every workforce sorts into four groups by two questions: do they perform, and do they stay?

	Leaves early	Stays long
High performer	Avoidable loss. The people you most regret losing.	The profile to hire for.
Low performer	Acceptable churn.	An accountability gap. Managed around, not managed.

Most companies hire for the top row, high performers, and hope they stay. The real target is one box: people who perform and stay. Your best long-tenured people are not there by accident. They came in with something. Most companies have never found out what it was.

Find the 3 to 5 traits your best people share

Your long-tenured high performers share a handful of traits. Not skills. Traits. How they handle a bad day. Whether they find meaning in repetitive work or need constant change. What they do when something breaks and nobody is around to ask.

These traits are specific to your company and your work. A distribution center will not share them with a hospital. You have to find your own.

- 1. Pull the right list.** Everyone with three or more years of tenure who is also rated in your top performance tier. You need both filters. Long tenure alone is not the target.
- 2. Talk to them.** Not a survey. Ask what they knew about this kind of work before they started, why they said yes, what their first 90 days were like when something went wrong, and what almost made them leave in year one.
- 3. Look for what repeats.** You will usually find 3 to 5 traits that show up in nearly every conversation and are missing in the people who left early. They are almost never what the job posting asks for.
- 4. Rebuild the front end around them.** Where you recruit, what the posting says, the interview questions and how answers are scored.
- 5. Measure it.** Track how many new hires are still there at 90 days and at one year, for people hired the new way against people hired the old way.

You can start this without any software. Ten conversations with your ten longest-tenured high performers will give you a first draft.

What we did: a hiring redesign that went company-wide

Before I founded EIP, I spent 20 years in operations at a Fortune 10 company. My region was one of the pilots for a redesign of how we interviewed and hired.

For years we interviewed the way most companies still do. Tell me about your strengths. Tell me about your weaknesses. Where do you see yourself in five years? Those questions had probably been passed down since the company was founded. None of them told us whether someone would succeed in the job.

So we looked at the people who did succeed and stay, and wrote down what they had in common.

What we hired for

Pharmacy: Handles change well. Handles upset customers with empathy. Has a flexible schedule that includes nights and weekends. Gets along with others, because the work is side by side all day. And actually enjoys the medical side of the job, like medications and medical terms.

Front store: Dependable. Honest. Wants to take care of customers.

Then we stopped asking people to describe themselves. We never asked, "Are you dependable?" Everyone says yes. We asked behavioral questions instead. Tell me about a time when. What would you do if.

For the medical side, we simply talked through medications and medical terms with candidates to see whether it interested them. If someone did not enjoy that part, they were not going to enjoy the job.

We also sped everything up. Getting hired went from about two weeks to one. Onboarding paperwork, background checks and drug tests went from about 30 days to 15. Time from applying to starting went from roughly six weeks to three.

It worked well enough that it rolled out to more than 1,200 stores, and then across the company. It was Hire Smart before it had a name.

6 to 3

weeks from applying to starting

1,200+

stores after the pilot

42% to 15%

seasonal hires lost before their
first day on the job

The same thinking changed our seasonal hiring in another part of the company. Every year we hired about 2,000 people for our busiest season, and 42% of them were gone before January 1, the day they were supposed to start taking calls. After we redesigned how we hired, that fell to 15%. That was about 540 more trained people in a seat on day one.

Tell the truth in the job posting

A distribution center that supplied my stores had turnover of 97%. One of the causes was the hiring pitch.

Recruiters told candidates: come work for us. It is a big name and a family culture. We will take care of you. Work 40 hours, and pick up overtime if you want it.

Then new hires showed up on day one. Their supervisor was on the line, short-staffed and stressed, with no time to train anyone. The overtime was not optional. It was mandatory, on Saturdays, and refusing it could get you written up and eventually let go.

The pitch described the company people wanted to work for, not the job they were walking into. New hires found out the difference in the first week, and many of them left.

When leaders become recruiters

The center did not have enough people to run interviews, so the head of the warehouse was interviewing frontline candidates himself. Every hour he spent interviewing was an hour he was not leading, training or running the operation. The goal became getting bodies in the door. That is how a hiring problem turns into a turnover cycle.

An honest posting will get you fewer applicants. It will get you the right ones. Describe the hard parts: the schedule, the overtime, the physical demands, the pace. The people who still apply are the people who will stay.

Do not pay new people more to stay than loyal people

Some of our remote stores were among the busiest in the region but sat in the lowest pay tier, so no pharmacist wanted to move there. To fill them, pharmacist sign-on bonuses climbed from \$10,000 to \$20,000 and eventually as high as \$100,000.

It filled some stores. It also taught our loyal people a lesson we did not intend. New hires could out-earn people with years of tenure, and the tenured people were training them. Some realized they could quit, come back and earn more than if they had stayed.

We later added a two-year hold to the bonuses after some early hires quit within a month. The bigger lesson was this: whatever you pay to attract people, check what it tells the people who already stayed.

Onboarding is the last step of hiring

Gallup has found that only 12% of employees strongly agree their organization does a great job onboarding new people.

A generic onboarding packet is like handing someone a map of the wrong city. It is technically a map. It just does not get them anywhere, and now they think it is their fault they are lost.

I lived this one myself. Sixteen years into my career, I moved from our retail business into a different business unit, as an executive director leading client retention and customer experience. It might as well have been a different company.

My new boss did not meet me on my first day, or my second. On day two he called to check in. We talked for 30 minutes about golf and guitars, not about the job. There was no learning plan and no list of who to meet. The message was: figure it out.

So I did. I built my own learning plan and introduced myself to the people I needed to know. Other people who joined that team told me the same story. It was simply how things were done there.

I ended up contributing a lot in that role. But those first weeks made me feel like I was just taking up space. If that happens to someone 16 years into their career, imagine what it does to a 22-year-old in their first real job.

What to do instead

- 1. Find your 3 to 5 traits.** Ten conversations with your longest-tenured high performers.
- 2. Rewrite one job posting.** Your highest-turnover role. Describe the real job, including the hard parts.
- 3. Add one question per trait.** And train interviewers on what a strong and a weak answer sound like.
- 4. Cut the wait.** Every week between yes and day one is a week a better offer can arrive.
- 5. Give every new hire a plan and a person.** Who to meet, what to learn and when the manager will check in.
- 6. Check your bonuses against your loyal people.** If a new hire can out-earn a five-year employee, fix it.

Take action this week

CEO: Pull 90-day retention for your highest-turnover role. If more than one in five new hires is gone by day 90, the problem starts before the offer letter.

Manager: Write down what your two or three best long-tenured people did differently in their first month. Not their skills. Their behavior. That is the start of your profile.

Supervisor: For your next new hire, write a one-page plan for their first two weeks: who they meet, what they learn, when you check in. Hand it to them on day one.

How EIP helps

Hire Smart™ builds your hiring around what your longest-tenured people have in common, so the people you do hire are more likely to stay. We model your four types of employee, find the 3 to 5 traits your best long-tenured people share, and redesign six parts of hiring around them: where you recruit, job postings, interview questions and scoring, who interviews, pay and environment, and performance feedback. Candidates are scored on behavior, not resume keywords.

Our Council of current and former executives reviews the findings before anything is recommended. Then we stay with you through the fix.

Start with a conversation: eip360.com | hello@eip360.com

Sources

Leadership IQ. "Why New Hires Fail." 2005. Study of 5,247 hiring managers. leadershipiq.com

Gallup. Onboarding research. gallup.com/workplace/247172

Stories and results are from the author's own career at a Fortune 10 company. Names, places and identifying details are withheld.