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How to re-energize your weary workforce

After weathering layoffs or pay cuts, your IT staffers may need some help getting motivated. Try these strategies for employee renewal.

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November 17, 2009 ([Computerworld](#)) In his many years in IT, Robert Rosen has had to lay off employees, implement hiring and pay freezes and oversee other budget-cutting measures that impact staff.

And, like other executives in similar positions, Rosen, the CIO at the [National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases](#) (NIAMS) in Bethesda, Md., knows the toll it can take on workers. Morale can sink, he says, and with it, productivity.

At first, most workers in companies that have weathered layoffs and pay cuts are relieved to have a job at all, says Bob Nelson, Ph.D., author of [Keeping Up in a Down Economy: What the Best Companies Do To Get Results in Tough Times](#).

But then reality sets in. Employees realize they're doing more and working longer hours without the hope of a raise or sometimes even the opportunity to use earned vacation time. "Initially people will suck it up," says Nelson, who is also president of [Nelson Motivation Inc.](#) in San Diego, "but they do that only for so long."

When that happens, weariness can set in, and productivity can suffer. [Quantum Workplace](#), an Omaha-based workplace analytics firm, found that the domestic workforce is already showing signs of fatigue. The firm reported in January 2009 that 66% of 210 U.S. firms surveyed reported a [decrease in employee engagement](#) in fall 2008 as compared to fall 2007.

"In its purest form, 'employee engagement' refers to the eagerness employees have for achieving company goals," explains Quantum Workplace president Greg Harris. The survey found that, in general, employees were exerting less discretionary effort, felt less loyalty to their firm, and were less likely to speak highly of their employer.



Productivity Don't

"Do as I say, not as I do"

NIAMS CIO Robert Rosen remembers working for a boss that cut all conference travel during a recession but then jetted off to a conference in Acapulco. Not the best way to rally employees to the corporate cause.

Specifically, employee perceptions of manager effectiveness, trust in senior leadership and employee recognition were all lower on average in late 2008. The depth and breadth of the decline -- affecting all company-size categories, industries, and position levels within organizations -- led Quantum Workplace to conclude that "external economic factors impacted engagement scores."

In other words, the recession is dragging employees down. Problem is, for many IT shops, now is a bad time to experience a slowdown in productivity. Demands on IT are accelerating as companies gear up for a recovery but don't yet have the resources to spend on overtime or new hires.

In short, as an IT manager, you need your employees to be firing on all cylinders, yet they and you are likely feeling both cash-strapped and overworked. What to do?

Rosen and other seasoned IT leaders and consultants have learned how to counteract such slumps with

policies and practices that can boost productivity in weary workers without breaking the budget. Here are their top strategies.

Create and communicate a vision for the future

IT leaders should focus their teams on the future, not on layoffs and other past cost-cutting measures, says management consultant Jon Gordon, author of [The Shark and the Goldfish: Positive Ways to Thrive During Waves of Change](#).

One good way to do that is to craft a "unifying vision."

"Talk about where you're going," Gordon says. "Start with your North Star. Rally everyone to that vision: Here's our goal, and here's where we're going as a team and a company. And then invite everyone to partake in that. Meet individually with people to ask how they can contribute to that vision and how, as a manager, you can help them contribute to that vision."

Such actions empower individual workers, Gordon says. And that kind of empowerment translates into a feeling of purpose, which he says can jumpstart productivity.

Help workers prioritize

Employees wrestling with increased workloads due to layoffs and hiring freezes often have a hard time focusing. "Workers are flailing around. They just feel so inundated that they're bouncing from task to task," Rosen says. To counteract that condition, Rosen advises, managers should meet with employees individually to help them prioritize what needs to be done.

Before that can happen, managers themselves need to clarify their own priorities and demands on their resources. For example, if you're staffed only to take on projects A, B and C, but your boss wants projects D and E done, too, you need to think about ways to accomplish it all, Rosen says, by asking for temporary help, extending deadlines or instructing workers to focus on the elements of a given project that will deliver the biggest bang.

Promote fun

Remember the perks offered by tech start-ups and dot-com companies during the boom years a decade ago? Those employers knew that technology workers were attracted to companies that liked to have fun. That's still true today, Nelson says. "If I were advising an IT group on this, the first thing I'd say is, you've got to have fun," he says.

Productivity Don't

Bad-mouth other managers and execs

"People just don't think about the message they're sending when they do this. It says, 'I don't have confidence in my boss,' and that just sinks the rest of the organization," says Mike Gorsage, managing partner of business operations and technology at Tatum LLC in Atlanta.

He points to strategies successfully used by his wife, a computer software manager who oversees 15 people at a company that underwent layoffs. She uses low-cost events, such as dressing up for Halloween and having a chili bake-off, to give workers on-the-job stress relief.

"IT people are sometimes the nerds in the group. And their sense of humor might be a little sophomoric. But you should run with it, because they'd rather do a fun prank than go out and golf, I guarantee that," Nelson says.

Office-based fun, even just during a short break, can provide a respite from stress, refreshing and re-energizing workers, which in turn makes them better able to tackle the multiple projects in front of them.

Dole out small incentives

Big bonuses -- or any bonuses -- might not be practical or even possible today, but IT executives and management consultants alike say that small incentives given in recognition for outstanding performance can provide incentive to workers across the board.

It could be a \$50 gift card given to a worker who stayed late to fix a problem, or a catered lunch for a team that went all out to finish a project on deadline, says Rosen, who is past president of the IBM user group [SHARE](#).

If you're not sure if your department or division can afford it, ask. Most companies have some money set aside that managers can tap into for programs like this. If not, Rosen says he has even known managers who spend their own money for such rewards because the ROI is so good. "The payoff is well beyond what the cost is," he says.

Either way, don't worry if you're not passing out gift cards in lavish amounts. Like Rosen, author Bob Nelson says these programs work well not because workers are getting extra cash or a material prize but because they're being recognized. "You build performers by calling people out," he says.

It doesn't much matter what you do to recognize employees, so long as you do something. The process can be free, or nearly free, and often takes little time. The only drawback? "It's not always something that comes naturally to IT people," Nelson observes.

Create opportunities to learn

Many companies have slashed training budgets, but Mike Gorsage, managing partner of business operations and technology at [Tatum LLC](#) in Atlanta and a former CIO, says IT managers can still use learning opportunities to inspire staffers.

He points to one client, a CIO at a Florida hospital, who had to lay off staff and implement other cost-saving measures during the past year. In the aftermath, she assigned her remaining staff to functional areas so they could learn more about various business operations. She plans to rotate them every 18 months or so. This CIO made a point to communicate the reasons behind her decisions, letting her workers know that the reorganization was meant to give them new technical and business skills.

"She painted a picture that I thought was terrific, saying we're going to continue to invest in you and expand your skills and make you more valuable to us and to the marketplace if you ever leave," Gorsage explains. "The IT folks saw it as a very positive thing, very motivating."

Boost team spirit

Michael P. Ashworth, director of the information security division at the [U.S. Department of Interior's Office of Inspector General](#) in Reston, Va., has had to oversee layoffs at various points in his career in both public and private organizations. He says that although workers left behind can feel betrayed and demoralized, they often become more motivated when brought together.

Productivity Don't

Reinforce fear, uncertainty and doubt

Leaders who are unclear about the company's strategy or future vision risk messing with employees' psyches, Gorsage says. Even if your company is in turmoil and has no vision, make an effort to frame the unknown in the best light. Gorsage suggests pointing out that superior work can attract positive attention in times of upheaval, whereas mediocre work is always a liability.

"They might have their own feelings about how the company could have handled [layoffs or pay cuts] better, but if you put it in the perspective of working hard for the team and not [just] the company's benefit, that can be a motivator," he says. "I try hard to focus on our team and our efforts. I tell them that we all need to keep our jobs and manage our careers, and the best chance we have of that is working together."

Gorsage agrees, saying, "You have to bring them together and keep them together as a unit."

He worked with one CIO who wanted to find a way to motivate his remaining 400 workers after a round of layoffs. The manager organized events -- a family movie night, a bowling outing -- that successfully fostered team spirit. Such events not only help employees feel valued by the company, they give workers a chance to socialize informally with one other, which can cement personal bonds and create stronger teams, Gorsage says.

Offer flexible work arrangements

Employees and their families are feeling the economic strain just as much as corporate America, Rosen says. That's why programs such as flex time and telework, which give workers greater control over their work days and scheduling needs, can help boost productivity without requiring much, if any, up-front investment.

Rosen acknowledges that [telecommuting](#) and flexible hours might not work for every employee -- there are, after all, some IT workers who must be in the office to do their jobs. But even those who can't or don't participate in flexible arrangements tend to think more highly of companies that have these programs.

"It can really change morale," he says. "It makes them think, 'the company really does care and doesn't want me to burn out.' You have this psychological effect, because if you have a more positive view of the company, you're going to work harder."

Foster competition

You don't want to pit workers against each other, but some lighthearted competition can actually spur on employees, says Thuy Sindell, vice president of client services and a leadership development coach at [Mariposa Leadership Inc.](#), a San Francisco-based leadership coaching service.

Sindell, co-author of [Job Spa: Two Weeks To Refresh, Refocus, and Recommit to Your Career](#), is working with employees at a California tech company that's developing a new internal-facing system. Three teams of engineers are competing against each other to see who can develop the best solution.

Although the company had gone through a painful round of layoffs and has a hiring freeze in place, Sindell says the competition has re-energized workers and brought them together to work on common goals. "It's shifted the focus off of loss and shifted it to the future, what's the potential out there, what's the goal we're after," she says.

Productivity Don't

Rely upon a single motivation strategy

"Every person is motivated by something different. You've got to find out what's important to [individuals] and try to work toward that," says Michael P. Ashworth, director of the information security division at the U.S. Department of Interior's Office of Inspector General.

She cautions, though, that managers should take care when fostering competition. While challenging teams to compete against one another works with this particular company's culture, other, less direct forms of competition might work better in other corporate environments.

Value employees as individuals

Nelson says he worked with one financial company that implemented an initiative across the corporation, including in IT, to have managers change the way they delegate tasks to workers. The change was simple: Now they explain to workers the reasons *why* they were tapped for assignments.

Have your say

[How have you managed to re-energize weary workers?](#)

"When you have something that needs to be done, and you [choose] the person who can do it best, tell him that. Or you might say, 'I know you want to get into management and a key skill is interacting with customers, and this project will let you work on that,' so employees will know why you're picking them," he explains. "Or it could be because it's the hot new system or because this is our key customer."

Whatever the reason, Nelson sums up, the goal is the same: "Give them incentives and opportunities." And in this economy, those can be truly special commodities.

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