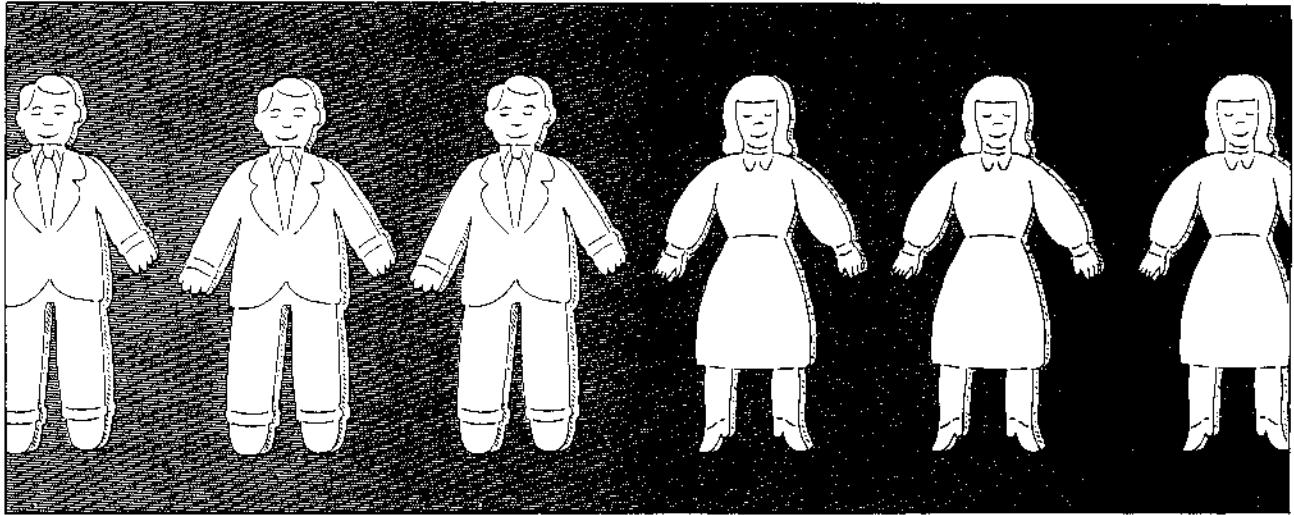


To Clone the Contented

You can spend time analyzing why employees leave. But it might be more productive to find out why the others stay.

BY GEORGE KORZENIOWSKI



In 1987, employee turnover at Richfood Inc. was well over 100 percent. A.G. Mason Dirickson, the company's vice president for human resources, says that while that might have been typical for a similar-sized operation in the company's field, it wasn't acceptable to Richfood.

No wonder. With a work force of almost 1,500, the Richmond, Va.-based company is one of the country's largest wholesale grocers. And since Richfood employs over half that number in the warehouse, that rate of turnover could translate into the constant replacing and training of almost 900 people per year.

Dirickson says Richfood also recognized the growing scarcity of unskilled and semiskilled labor, what Dirickson calls "touch labor." And because of the baby bust of the late '60s, it wasn't about to turn around. So company officials decided to try to reduce the exodus.

After investigating different approaches for more than a year, they decided to "clone" the ideal Richfood warehouse person.

The idea is a comparatively new one. In the past, through exit interviews,

human resource professionals tried to determine why people left companies and tried to correct the problems, if there were any.

Now the emphasis is on learning why people stay at their companies and what kinds of people are best suited for a particular firm. These people are the ideal employees, the ones who are good at their jobs and are happy doing them.

The program Richfood used, developed by Heaney and Burns Inc., has two steps. First, the characteristics of

the ideal worker are catalogued, and a profile is developed. Second, recruiting is focused on people with that profile. Companies that have used the program say it works. Turnover at Richfood, for example, has plunged to around 28 percent.

The entire process of profiling the ideal employee starts with management interviews. Executives are asked to identify employees who are excellent and explain why they chose them.

Then supervisors are asked the same questions. Finally, the workers themselves are asked, "Besides yourself, who is a good worker here in your department?" Then interest is concentrated on those individuals whose names keep coming up.

Interestingly, the ideal worker sometimes turns out to be someone a conventional interview might have failed to pick up on, because the person didn't test well.

Once the profile is established, progressively more detailed tests filter out those who don't match. Richfood's initial step in filling this profile uses a written behavior interpretation profile test with multiple choices to identify certain traits and personality characteristics. This is followed by reading and math tests. Next comes a work

simulation that involves moving boxes from one pallet to another within a certain time. Several other spatial and eye-hand coordination tests follow.

Candidates who pass the tests then see a video that lays out in realistic terms what the job is, and what sort of company Richfood is. If both the company and the candidate are still interested, physical and drug tests follow. Typically, 20 percent of applicants are hired.

Developed Profiles

Jim Heaney and Bill Burns, who have offices in both Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, developed the profiling technique being used at Richfood. The two, who operate under the name Heaney and Burns Inc., have designed the program to work with semiskilled employees such as warehouse and factory workers, truck drivers and sales clerks.

Heaney believes the problem with reducing turnover is that most companies tend to internalize the situation. Like the little Dutch boy, they try to plug the leaks rather than fill the pond behind the dike with the types of people who won't want to leave, he says.

Both he and Burns think the cause

of excessive turnover is rarely in the work itself. More often, they believe, it's the choice of people.

"When a person quits a job, it's not usually a matter of not being able to do the work or the company not being a good place to work," Heaney says. "It's usually that this person has not yet found his or her place. Two people working side by side in the same company could have opinions about the place that are 180 degrees apart."

Sometimes, he points out, the solutions to excessive turnover come in radical packages. Richfood, for example, moved the entire selection process of semiskilled and entry-level personnel from human resources to operations. Explains Dirickson, "We discovered there was an accountability gap. Human resources was responsible for selecting and hiring, but operations was responsible for training.

"If a new employee failed to work out, operations blamed the 'poor quality of the people you send us,' while HR blamed it on operations' 'poor training.' Now operations has responsibility all the way through. We just act as a sort of consultant."

He notes that HR is ultimately in control, since the entire program is under its umbrella, but, once trained,

the operations department has complete day-to-day control over the hiring and firing of profiled semiskilled labor positions such as dock worker or order picker. Management positions, maintenance and other skilled jobs, the various trades, and all supervisors and foremen are still handled through the normal human resource channels.

Dirickson admits giving operations the hiring job could be considered a bold move, and a lot of HR people might see it as giving away some power. But, he says, "Getting that accountability loop in place was critical. There has to be one source of responsibility from start to finish. Our goal in HR is problem solving, not defending our turf. We looked at it as a company problem, not an HR problem. We did what was best for Richfood."

Middle-Class Prejudice?

Dirickson has worked hard at keeping what Heaney calls a "middle-class prejudice" from affecting the way their human resource department looks at semiskilled positions. Heaney says a negative view of nonexecutive, semiskilled workers can dull an HR department's ability to fill these positions with the best qualified people.

"Some middle-class people, because of lack of exposure, see these types of jobs as positions that can be filled by almost any warm body," he says. While that might be true from a strictly physical standpoint, the desire to succeed at a particular job is often ignored.

"Working in a warehouse might not be glamorous to some middle-class people," says Heaney. "But it's a good job. I once talked with a man who was in his 50s and still working in a warehouse. He loved his job. But some people felt he should have moved on to 'better' things. He told me they didn't understand."

The man told Heaney that he had only a sixth-grade education and previously had worked in jobs that paid far less and required him to work outdoors, even in bad weather. "Here," he told Heaney, "I have a roof over my head and, with overtime, I make very good money. I love this job."

As a result of the profiling system, HR at Richfoods is now in a better position to make judgments based on who the candidates are, what they are like, and what they can do, rather than on first impressions. And that, in turn, should mean lower turnover for the organization. □