

## HOLD ON TO THE GOOD ONES

**S**ome years ago I came across a book that claimed the author had learnt everything she needed to know about life from her cat. Work/life balance, certainly; clean habits, too. But I'd venture that we need a somewhat different role model if we are to reach the very peak of our performance.

Role models – of the human variety – are incredibly important in the fight to recruit and retain talented staff. In organisational terms, workers look up through the hierarchy to sort out what works, how the senior people behave and what keeps them at the top of their game.

They can't always do that, though. And if you think we've got it bad in the UK, spare a thought for those in some other countries. Foreign firms operating in China are suffering from an acute lack of business role models at the moment. As so often happens in developing economies, there's a tremendous shortage of talent. Take L'Oreal China, for instance, which has a staff turnover of nearly 15% in its Marketing Department – people join, get trained and go very quickly. Meanwhile, the nationwide churn rate, across all industry sectors and occupations, is 11.3%.

Chinese political history, education and social policy have combined to produce people who don't expect to



In the current business climate it's getting harder to hang on to talented staff. But, says **Lyn Bicker**, companies have to do just that if they want to survive and be successful

have to use their initiative. Their role models are people who have worked in state-owned organisations, and so don't expect to take risks but to make decisions in a collective.

Some ten years or so ago, I worked in Poland, just at the time when the country was moving from communism to capitalism – I guess very similar to the challenges now facing China, but on a smaller scale. I would go to a meeting thinking I was going to see only two people to find there were 12 in the room. Not only was any decision made collective, but if things went wrong as a result, each person was culpable.

Where collectivism once reigned supreme, 'localisation' is now the name of the game. On a recent trip to Dubai, I found the banking sector working hard to move away from only employing expensive ex-pats, and towards recruiting local managers and leaders. But of course, the lack of knowledge, skills and experience in this country means this will necessarily be a slow business change.

Think global, act local, is becoming an ever more important business mantra. The challenge, wherever localisation is happening in the world, is to manage the clash between national history and culture and business expectations.

What, you might be wondering, has this got to do with your management style and skills? Isn't the UK impervious to all this? Well, no.

Because whether you're operating in the UK, China, or Brussels, the need to find and retain good people is and always will be crucial.

### AGE OLD PROBLEM

With the UK population now boasting more people over 60 than under 16, it's no secret that, if we want even a passable pension, many of us will have to work past our anticipated retirement age. And if businesses want to survive in the future they are going to need to persuade their staff to stay on for longer. According to *Redefining Work*, a research report produced by the Royal Society, the rapidly ageing population means the UK needs better quality management that is 'ready to manage change rather than to pretend it is not there'.

There is a very real chance that the 'baby boomers' could find themselves working into their 70s and leading teams of ever more youthful, and probably inexperienced, members. The HR function here in the UK is already beginning to see an age gap emerging: senior people are heading for the hills in their 40s and 50s, but their younger colleagues still don't have quite enough experience to fill the widening gap. Hanging on to good people is going to rise even further up the executive agenda.

So what makes people stay or go? A recent study from Henley Management College identified the top three points for retention: self-fulfilment, a sense of accomplishment, and a sense of fun. Organisations had better find ways of offering their staff interesting and fulfilling work where they can actually demonstrate progress and achievement. And while no one expects managers to be comedians – although plainly they sometimes (often unintentionally) are – if you want to attract and retain top quality staff, you need to make work enjoyable for your staff. Who knows, you may even find you've become a good role model in the process. ■

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Keeping hold of older, more experienced role models will help businesses hang on to talented staff