BLOG

The Pros and Cons of the Boomerang Hire

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Staff churn, employee burnout, and other issues have contributed to a nonprofit staffing crisis. The organizations that have avoided the worst parts of this crisis did so by exploring new and unconventional ways to hire new staff. One of the most popular strategies is tapping into their pool of former employees, a practice known as "boomerang hiring".

Using this strategy is more than just cold-emailing past employees and asking if they want to return. Successfully rehiring employees is a process that starts before they leave and requires organizations to evaluate their offboarding strategy and their reputation among current and former staff members. Even if it is an effective way to backfill roles or bolster your team, this approach is not without risks that can, for some organizations, outweigh the benefits of being fully staffed.

Even if you never rehire a former employee, exploring the benefits of boomerang hiring can serve as a helpful way to evaluate your reputation and consider the reasons why past employees have left. Below are some of the key benefits and risks of boomerang employees:

WHY ARE ORGANIZATIONS TURNING TO FORMER EMPLOYEES?

Although labor instability over the past few years has eased somewhat, the costs of employee turnover, recruitment, and training remain high. Even if your organization has maintained acceptable staff churn levels, the cost of recruiting and training a brand-new hire can divert resources away from your mission. This is especially true when replacing an employee who left, which can cost up to half of that employee's salary.

These challenges have made boomerang employees appealing even in a loose labor market, as they typically do not require the same recruiting and training investments. This is particularly the case for nonprofits, which often prioritize hiring individuals who are aligned with the organization's mission and goals—further narrowing the hiring pool. The prospect of a truncated hiring, onboarding, and training process makes the potential benefits easier to recognize.

In addition to the reduced costs, bringing back former employees can enhance team cohesion and collaboration. It demonstrates that your organization and mission remain attractive and inspire long-term investment, even from those who have previously moved on. Your team may also benefit from working with someone familiar, as trust and productivity may be easier to reestablish with someone, they had a positive working relationship within the past.

While it would be inaccurate to claim that every employee who returns is coming back to their employer because of the organization's boomerang hiring strategy, the prevalence of rehiring speaks to its value and effectiveness. Recent studies show that more than a third of new hires are returning employees. This number has recently increased, suggesting that this approach is gaining popularity in response to labor market uncertainty, including mass layoffs in the public and tech sectors.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF RECRUITING AND HIRING FORMER EMPLOYEES?

The prevalence of this process in modern hiring is not only because of the significant benefits, but also some of the broader challenges in hiring and recruitment. The widespread adoption of automation has made it more difficult for organizations to find a good match as they are inundated with automatically generated applications.

In addition, there are some significant risks to hiring former employees, the kind that can be difficult to build a predictable procedure around, as they may need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Here are some of the most common reasons a boomerang employee might not be a good fit:

- Even for employees who seemed to be well-liked and productive, there may be perceptions about them you or your hiring team isn't aware of. This can be especially true in mission-driven organizations, where someone leaving can feel personally related to the mission, and other team members may believe that the boomerang employee "gave up".
- Depending on how long it has been since they last worked at your organization, former employees may bring a certain amount of "baggage", often in the form of expectations or ideas about processes that no longer reflect the way the organization currently functions. This can create challenges, as ingrained habits may prove harder to retrain.
- Some organizations hire a former employee based on their success on a particular project, the general positive impressions the team had of them, or the idea that someone with organizational experience can fit more easily into any role. However, their past performance may not be a guarantee that they will function well in a new role, on a new project, or with new team members.

SHOULD YOU HIRE A FORMER EMPLOYEE?

If you are struggling to hire productive team members or want to try a different approach, exploring a boomerang hiring strategy could be worthwhile. However, because former employees can leave for many different reasons and with varying reputations, it is important that your hiring team has the space and resources to do a well-rounded and -resourced assessment of any returning employees. This process could include reviewing their original reason for departing, as someone who left for personal reasons and someone who left for a role with a larger salary represent different levels of risk.

This also presents an opportunity to review your offboarding practices. Even when team members part on good terms, the offboarding process can be challenging. Soliciting feedback from employees who have moved on to other roles or organizations may offer insights that help you improve both retention and rehiring outcomes.

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