Retaining Techies in the Great Resignation
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The Union Leader printed my Op-Ed on retaining employees in the great resignation (13 Jan 2022). Many of the concepts raised there are highly relevant to our IEEE members, both as employees and as managers, so it makes sense to look at our professionals in particular. How do you attract, retain and motivate technologists?

Let me start with a demonstrative anecdote set in the French Revolution, with the guillotine set up for the morning events. First up was a priest, and when the blade failed to drop, he declared "it is God's will" and they let him go. Second was a lawyer, and when it failed, he observed "the law only allows you one chance", and they let him go. Next was an engineer, he observed "Oh, I see the problem; the rope is caught on that pulley up there." Technologists solve problems, and do not always have the same motivations as other folks --- and perhaps not the same attention to self preservation either.

Abraham Maslow created a five tier "motivation pyramid" some decades ago which is still relevant. The bottom two tiers, survival and security, are addressed by money. If you have enough, your family is surviving; enough more and you have security. This is called a "living wage." This should not be a problem for technologists, with demand for STEM employees and relatively high salary rates. The cost of housing in NH, and child care are counter pressures that still limit the available workforce, and issues even tech employers should consider addressing in their locale. Our tech work force needs other jobs filled as well, either to get a latte, or to get their plumbing fixed.

The higher Maslow tiers are "love & belonging", "Self Esteem & Esteem of others" and at the top, "Self Actualization". Articles in the Union Leader, Time Magazine, and via CBS 60 Minutes all point to the resignation of dis-satisfied employees, but only allude to contributing factors such as "purpose" or "autonomy". These are key motivators implied by Maslow, and made explicit in Dan Pink's book "Drive". Not every job provides this highest level of motivation, but those that do paired with attentive employers are in the sweet spot. Note that these top three motivators, and most technologists are not driven by money. A congenial workplace that provides regular recognition of employees while developing a credible team spirit is the key. One major company is reported to have 150% turn over every year of their "team members" while claiming to provide a high entry wage level and fighting unionization. Apparently employees are not "feeling the love", or a sense of belonging, or the respect of that employer and are moving on as quickly as possible. In today's social media aware world, the problematic employers become visible fairly quickly.

With work-from-home, employers have recognized employee "autonomy", and many employees have found this works. Eliminating the commute hassle, and being able to balance the work-life tradeoff in real time has been a game changer. Employers have even eliminated office space where possible and embraced a new virtual reality. This can be a real boon for New Hampshire, with our low tax rates. However, we need to assure available broadband and housing in target communities.

The virtual world does not facilitate cross-discipline dialog, you just have your team. The social aspects of the break-room, or lunch table are a foundation for the "love and belonging" and even "esteem of others" motivators. Problems that span multiple areas can be surfaced and solutions brainstormed. Innovation often is triggered when employees from different departments have the opportunity to informally connect. This serendipity cannot be scheduled for a video meeting; it happens over time as the "belonging" and recognized "mastery" of different employees becomes common place. If employers recognize this, encourage it, and take advantage of it; they can advance in productivity and innovation; those that don't spin out start-ups that pursue the emerging opportunities. True innovation implicitly diverges from "the way we always have done things" or "our core business", and sometimes the best corporate action is to literally buy-into their exiting employee's purpose and passion via venture funding.

How can an employer meet the higher level motivational needs identified by Pink and Maslow? One approach is complementing the "on the job" tasks with other types of engagement. Some employers ask employees to spend 20% of their time on "other tasks". Encouraging volunteer involvement outside of the work place can serve as a training ground for new skills, and a recognition for employees that provides purpose and autonomy that can be hard to provide on-the-job.   These are factors that IEEE can address. We provide local, national and global opportunities for continuing education, leading edge conferences, the most cited papers in U.S. Patent applications, and local networking that can develop some of the cross-discipline connections that are at the core of today's solutions. We also support local STEM activities at the school level and via programs like Young Inventors, Tech Fest, and Robotics competitions – Community engagement that can help complement the "work place" with some of the other components of Maslow's pyramid.

The bottom line: employees who receive sufficient remuneration and have an environment that recognizes and supports their higher level motivational needs tend to stay. They also can promote the company, attracting new employees --- perhaps from those companies that don't meet these needs.