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Incentivizing Smart People

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I manage smart, highly technical professionals in a hot job market. The Tampa Bay Area has an effective unemployment rate of 0% in our IT sector (and our weather is a lot better than you find in another "Bay Area" that has a hot IT sector...I'm just sayin'). I worry a lot about how to get my best employees to keep coming back to work each day. There are several incentive points to think about when preventing a valued employee from straying to another employer. To make their job feel like The Great Job takes a lot more effort than simply pointing out that you get to work with Andy Seely. Here are some "incentive vectors" explained, with points to consider from the sysadmin's point of view and then from the manager's perspective.

Money

Salary is the primary motivator for most people to go to work. Even if you love your job, do you do it for free? Few people do, and when they do it's because they already have plenty of money. The rest of us have bills to pay. You need to know how much salary you can earn, given the simultaneous equation of your skills, the business's need for those skills, the available budget, and the surrounding job market. Be prepared to discover that you may be worth more than the job can pay.

Vacation

Vacation time, sick leave, holidays: the amount of paid time off is a major motivator for people considering a job offer. Who doesn't love making money while doing what they love instead of having to go to work? This one has a hidden Easter egg to it. The people who are the top performers, who love what they do and throw themselves into it, are also the people who don't take their vacation days. If you earned three months' vacation in a year, would you take it? How much time off would you really take if you worked under one of the new "unlimited time off" corporate policies that are starting to show up in our industry [1]? Every top performer I know already runs up against the maximum accrual limit for paid time off. That's how they got to be top performers [2].

Benefits

Are you a single sysadmin? Biggest health problem you have is where's your pizza? Maybe this isn't a big driver for you. Are you a middle-aged sysadmin with a spouse and kids and maybe your blood pressure isn't where it should be? And while you're writing an article for *;login:* your wife is trying to give your seven-year-old some eye drops, and then she starts screaming because his eye just turned into a weird, swollen meatball, and then he starts screaming and the dog starts howling, and she's packing the car to rush to the emergency room and you walk over and...flip his eyelid back right-side out, thus saving the family a $500 ER trip? Health care can be a major hit against your bottom line. You need this benefit.

Opportunity for Promotion

Especially early in a career, few people ever say, no, thank you, but this is high enough for me. We're bred to grow, to achieve, to climb. Even sysadmins who don't want a management job, never-ever, cross my heart and hope to die, will still admit that they'd like a "senior engineer" or "technical director" title or some advancement along a technical track. As a sysadmin in a job in a company in a market, you need to not just know what you can do, but where you can do it and what your growth path is. You wouldn't try to drive from the Tampa Bay Area to California by stopping at every town and waiting for someone to tell you where to go, would you? No, you'd look at a map and start driving to your destination. So why would you try to get to the top of your career by stopping at your current job and wait for someone to tell you where to go?

Training and Conferences

Every good sysadmin knows how to do self-study. And every good sysadmin who does self-study to get ahead appreciates paid training. But it's rarely just about the training; it's also about the company's acknowledging the employee's contribution and its willingness to cut into the bottom line to invest in an individual. That sends a message to the employee that they're worth keeping. The employee gets new skills, a little bit of a break from the daily toil, and also earns a mark of confidence from the employer. I don't think it's uncommon for employers to resist allowing training as much for the cost as for fear that the employee will take the new skills and go find a better-paying job somewhere else. You should attempt to understand the financial system like you would any computing system: when there's budget, make your pitch and demonstrate not just how it helps you to help the company, but how you're going to stay on the job longer because they're not just buying training, they're also buying a happy employee.

Interesting Work

If you're a sysadmin and you read *;login:*, then I'm confident in saying that interesting work is your top motivator, right behind salary, which is probably also a top motivator. Let us rank them both as priority one: one-alpha and one-bravo.

There's a trick about interesting work. It has to be interesting enough to keep the attention and allow the best skills a sysadmin has to flow out. But it also has to be focused on the actual problems facing the business. It doesn't help the business to spend salary and capital expense to fund development of a new custom monitoring tool for a legacy system that supports the punch-card reader that gets used twice a year, even though that would probably be a really interesting project. It's important to work in a place that can give you the right kind of interesting work. Too little interesting work and a sysadmin starts to lose skills and may

accidentally become a manager. Too much interesting work may really be a lack of focused direction on the part of the employer; if you can just do anything you want, anytime, how do you know it matters? And how can you be sure that your employer who allows it really knows what matters to their business? To engender job satisfaction, work has to be interesting, but it also needs to be meaningful, or you might be on a sinking ship.

Autonomy

All the sysadmins I've known have liked to be left alone to make their own decisions and follow their own insights. If a sysadmin asks for help, it's because help is really needed. Getting this dynamic right in a team setting isn't a problem, provided everyone knows what's expected of them. As an employee, you will never know if you'll have autonomy in a job until you're in it. Position descriptions all say, "must be a self-starter," but that just means that your manager doesn't want to have to always chase you down to get the TPS Report. It doesn't mean you get to call your own shots.

I'm the Manager. What Can I Do for You?

I can give you a raise, but it will be small enough that you won't really feel it, and only in rare circumstances will it be outside of an annual cycle. This may sound cynical, but think about what percentage raise it would take for you to change your standard of living or make a major life purchase, then think about the percentages of raises you've had in your career. Don't focus on the prospect of a single big raise as a big motivator.

I can't do a thing about vacation accrual or benefits. Maybe smaller companies have more leeway, although I imagine they have a lot less revenue to absorb the expense. Large companies get lost in policies and don't have a lot of flexibility for changing benefits packages for individual contributors.

I might be able to promote you, but consider how many senior jobs there are compared to junior and mid-level jobs. Opportunities are limited from the start, and there are others who want the same thing. If you have a PhD in Everything and you're working on the help desk, you're getting paid what the help desk pays, not what the PhD is worth. Show you're the right stuff for promotion, every day. A good way to show this is to help solve problems your manager has rather than focusing on problems you have.

Training and conferences are funny. When there's budget, it's easier. When there's not, it's impossible. Complaining about it, no matter how justified, is incredibly counterproductive and, over time, will turn an otherwise benign manager squarely against you.

Interesting work and some autonomy to get it done? Now we're talking. These things I can influence. I like motivated people who have good ideas and want to get things done.

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There are many reasons why people keep coming to work. Taking the time to break them out, articulate them, and find ways to explain them is a useful tool when trying to retain top people. Helping smart sysadmins understand their real value to themselves and to the organization is something a manager can do. I'm the manager, and that's my job.

References

[1] "To Recruit Techies, Companies Offer Unlimited Vacation": http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2012-07-19/to-recruit-techies-companies-offer-unlimited-vacation.

[2] "Companies Offer 'Unlimited' Vacation Time Because They Know Perfectly Well People Won't Use It": http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2013/08/27/unlimited_vacation_time_it_s_no_accident_people_don_t_take_it.html.