

RETENTION INTERVENTION

Nine Strategies That Get Young People To WANT to Stay in Your Program



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Getting young people to show up and stay involved can be the major bugaboo of workforce development programs. Competing responsibilities, a tendency toward short-term thinking, and susceptibility to peer pressure lead some teenagers to dismiss education and job preparation as less important aspects of their lives. Participant dropout is common in most youth organizations, especially for programs that require months of commitment. Frequently changing addresses and phone numbers make keeping in touch challenging once graduates start working, as young people may not feel a pressing need to bring in paystubs or attend alumni events.

As every practitioner knows, retention plays a crucial role in overall program and student success. Unless young people actively participate in the classroom, maintain good attendance during internships, stay engaged during the job search process and then continue to come back for support once working, it becomes very difficult to prepare them for a world in which employers have little tolerance for inconsistency and absenteeism.

While the importance of retention is beyond doubt, the causes of poor retention are often less clear. Practitioners are too quick to blame young people for attendance issues—“they’re immature,” “they’re lazy,” “they want instant gratification,” “they don’t appreciate that we’re a program, not a staffing agency”—without recognizing that, in many cases, the program’s lackluster offerings and marketing actually drive them away. Although young people may not always voice discontent, widespread voting with their feet should strongly suggest that the program is not delivering what they need and want.

Workforce practitioners often fall into a trap of complacency around retention. New York City’s young people have many choices of programs available to them, and in fact may have attended several before yours before yours. From their perspective, most workforce programs seem alike, offering the same basic set of workshops, internships and supportive services. If they’ve already been through resume writing and interview prep at other programs and still don’t have a job, how will your program be any different?

The nine strategies described below can alleviate some of the challenges of retention by leveraging the basic impulses of young people to cultivate a desire to join and stay involved.

Supercharge your retention through these 9 strategies:

- Understand the Retention Problem
- Foster Emotional Connections
- Set High Expectations
- Make Sure You’re Selling What Youth Want to Buy
- Think Like a Business to Market Retention
- Create an Attractive Physical Space
- Choose Your Words Carefully
- Establish Cycle Charters and Classroom Teams
- Develop a Retention Toolbox

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STRATEGY 1: UNDERSTAND THE RETENTION PROBLEM

Many workforce programs have only vague notions of their retention challenge. In looking through its attendance numbers, one organization was surprised to find a 30% drop off starting on the fourth day after orientation. After reaching out to young people who had left the program, it discovered that after three days the initial excitement wore off and the first week's workshops, heavy on assessment and goal setting, did not appeal to many of the youth. From this feedback, it revamped the schedule to move up a visit to a local television studio, which always generated great excitement, to the first Thursday and subsequently cut its dropout rate in half. Where do your retention challenges occur? Track attendance carefully and analyze the data to identify common risk points.

STRATEGY 2: CREATE EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS

Workforce practitioners are often surprised to discover that financial incentives like stipends or MetroCards are not necessarily enough to keep young people around. While tangible rewards are always welcome, research shows that money is actually a poor long-term motivator as it quickly becomes seen as an entitlement rather than a perk. Emotional connection to the staff and the program is far more likely to influence whether participants stay or go. If young people feel that the staff truly cares about their achievement and that the program is a place that supports success, they will continue to attend. Build that connection through consistent praise and the cultivation of mentor relationships (maintaining appropriate boundaries, of course) where possible. The most meaningful rewards are the thanks and compliments we receive from people we truly admire. Young people may not be inclined to visit a program they don't really like to exchange a paystub for a \$10 gift certificate, but they will brave a storm at the request of a mentor.

STRATEGY 3: SET HIGH EXPECTATIONS

All too often, organizations loosen standards in a vain attempt to keep participants from leaving. They overlook tardiness, allow inappropriate clothing and language, and excuse negative behaviors. Paradoxical as it may seem, such laxness actually exacerbates retention issues by undermining the image of the program as a place of success, discouraging those who are striving to do well, and ultimately doing little to hang onto those who are not yet ready for the program. Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (OBT, www.obtjobs.org), a Brooklyn organization that works with young people who have left school, provides a 20 week intensive GED / work readiness program with a heavy emphasis on developing soft skills, professional behavior, attire, attitude, and communication. Students punch in and out on a time clock each day and are given work assignments with timelines for completion, with excessive infractions of the rules leading to termination from the program. The "tough love" approach proves challenging for many young people, but those who dedicate themselves to the program typically see good results. OBT places nearly 90% of participants into college or employment, mostly white collar jobs in legal, financial and medical firms.¹

STRATEGY 4: MAKE SURE YOU'RE SELLING WHAT YOUTH WANT TO BUY

Workshops designed years ago may not meet current needs. Program structures may be too slow and restrictive for some participants, too fast and confusing for others. Ensure that you are offering the right mix of services through ongoing market research. Current and former participants provide the best insights into what works or does not work about your program. Convene a focus group every few months to solicit direct feedback. Contact those who stopped attending to find out what could have kept them in the program. As part of the orientation process, ask every new participant to fill out a "Success Survey" that sheds light on what they want from the program.

RETENTION

Retention cannot be an afterthought for workforce programs. An emphasis on retention must begin on Day One and infuse every aspect of the program, from initial recruitment through post-employment services.



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STRATEGY 5: THINK LIKE A BUSINESS TO MARKET RETENTION

The corporate world pours billions of dollars each year into elaborate marketing campaigns to attract new customers and keep them coming back again and again. Workforce programs, by contrast, generally treat marketing as an afterthought, relying on underwhelming homemade flyers and text-heavy websites to (ineffectually) get their message out. While non-profit promotional budgets are limited, the basic principles refined by the corporate world can be utilized at little or no cost.

The advertising world operates on a fundamental premise: *People don't buy goods and services, they buy good feelings or solutions to problems.* In other words, simply describing what you do is not enough. Successful marketing focused on establishing positive associations with the organization's "brand" or mission, and/or identifying actual or potential problems that your offerings can solve for their customers.

Consider the banking industry, which sells services that are largely indistinguishable across companies. In the mid-1990s, Umpqua Bank, a west coast financial institution, needed to find ways to attract new customers. It recognized that people rarely enjoyed going to a bank and so devised an innovative solution to redefine itself as a "community hub," stocking its hotel-lobby like waiting areas with free Umpqua-brand coffee, WiFi access and flat screen televisions, and offering non-financial services like sewing groups, yoga classes, movie nights, and local music. All of Umpqua's employees now receive high level customer training through the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain, and managers are empowered to adjust rules for the benefit of customers. The bank even markets business services through its "lemonaire" campaign, offering children a kit and \$75 in start-up capital to create a lemonade stand, "the original small business." Very little of its marketing focuses on checking and savings accounts, but the solutions it offers and the good feelings generated by its creative branding have increased member deposits from \$150 million to over \$7 billion in a little over a decade.²

From a marketing perspective, the problems faced by those who come to youth programs can be boiled down to one basic desire: to achieve sustainable self-sufficiency. Disconnected youth, especially, lack the educational or vocational markers required to pursue decent jobs or post-secondary opportunities. Workforce organizations can tap into this desire by explicitly and continuously reinforcing a message of success.

STRATEGY 6: CREATE AN ATTRACTIVE PHYSICAL SPACE

As the old adage goes, perception is reality. A program's interior space plays a significant role in whether the program is viewed as successful or not. Imagine visiting two doctor's offices. One is too small for the number of patients, with flickering lights, peeling paint and worn out furniture. The other is open, airy, and bright, filled with plants, a small fountain bubbling in the corner, while patients relax on the soft leather couches sipping free gourmet coffee. Which doctor would you rather see?

The right atmosphere will entice young people to spend time at your program. Use the ideas below to infuse your physical space with a look of success:

- **PUT A HUMAN FACE ON SUCCESS.** Create a "Wall of Fame" in a prominent place with photographs and brief descriptions of participants who have secured employment or post-secondary opportunities (military, college, etc.) because of the program. Make full-size posters showcasing the achievements of "superstar" graduates that you want to highlight.
- **USE NUMBERS TO GENERATE CREDIBILITY.** Publicly display a "Program Overview" board that details the cumulative number of job seekers served, placed into employment, average wage, average wage growth over time, and other outcomes information. Numbers and a visual model grab the imagination in ways that words cannot.

TRY THIS: Sample Success Survey

PART I UNDERSTANDING YOU BETTER

1. What are the top three things you want to achieve here?
2. What motivates you to do great work?
3. Where would you like to be in your career / life in three years?
4. Why did you leave previous jobs or employment programs?
5. What are three things that frustrate you on a job or in a program?

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- **PROVIDE POSITIVE IMAGES.** Fill waiting areas and classrooms with pictures and literature focused on success. Freebizmag.com offers free business magazine subscriptions, including titles like *Black Enterprise* and *Hispanic Business* that may resonate with minority participants, while websites like Print-a-poster.com provide downloadable workplace and motivational posters.

- **ENHANCE THE MOOD OF THE SPACE WITH SMALL TOUCHES.** A fresh coat of paint in the right shade can transform the feel of a room. Blues and greens promote calmness, beneficial in waiting rooms; yellow and orange foster the energy and concentration necessary in classrooms and workspaces; red provokes conversation and enhances appetites. Plants soften a room and provide fresh oxygen, and decorative fountains and soft music promote relaxation.³

STRATEGY 7: CHOOSE YOUR WORDS CAREFULLY

Labels matter. The language commonly used in workforce programs turns off many young people and makes them less inclined to stick around. Social service terms like “client” or “consumer” carry a stigma of need, while titles like “job seeker,” “member,” or “program associate” connote active engagement. Empowering terminology becomes even more important once a participant starts working and the dynamic between participant and program changes. Program and workshop names also influence perceptions. Consider how different the following names sound, even if the content is the same:

- **GoodTemps Staffing vs. Goodwill Industries job training program**
- **Five Secrets to Success vs. Overcoming Barriers workshop**
- **Show Me the Money! Club vs. Quarterly Retention Group**

STRATEGY 8: DEVELOP CYCLE CHARTERS AND TEAMS TO ALIGN PROGRAM STRUCTURES WITH YOUTH MOTIVATORS

To change behavior, tap into the forces that influence how young people act. Four factors in particular drive many young people: a desire for autonomy, peer pressure, competition, and a need for recognition. These can be incorporated into the basic structure of your program to promote engagement and retention.

Start by building in as much autonomy, or participant choice, as possible. Young people accustomed to being told what to do will respond positively to having a say in shaping their participation in the program. Take, for example, program rules and regulations. Typically, these are developed and imposed by staff on participants, practically assuring defiance and power struggles down the road. Instead, have the young people themselves develop the goals and rules through a **Cycle Charter**. In a group setting early in the program, lead participants through a process of identifying what everyone should achieve by the end of the program. Let them debate until all agree on a list of specific goals toward which everyone will strive. Once they have a common set of goals, ask them to identify what everyone is willing to do in order to make those goals a reality, prompting them to define attendance, dress, classroom behavior and other factors that lead to success. It’s okay for the facilitator to list the non-negotiable rules, but much of the time the participants will generate the same (or even stricter) rules themselves. Once the group has agreed on all of the goals and all of the rules, print them neatly on a piece of flip-chart paper, have everyone sign it, and hang in the classroom for the entire cycle. This collaborative process will provide the sense of autonomy young people crave, create group cohesion, and leverage peer pressure to follow a set of behaviors collectively agreed upon.

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TRY THIS: Sample Success Survey

PART II WORKING TOGETHER

1. What did your best supervisors / teachers do that really motivated you to work hard?
2. How did your best supervisors / teachers recognize your achievements or contributions?
3. What did you not like about previous supervisors / teachers?
4. Even though you have joined us, what concerns about this program do you have?

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SAMPLE CYCLE CHARTER

By the end of this program, everyone will have:	In order to accomplish these goals, everyone agrees to:
EDUCATION: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Earned a GED or moved up at least two full points on the TABE test• Identified at least three colleges or post-secondary vocational training programs of interest CAREER EXPLORATION: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discovered at least one profession that excites them, and created a written roadmap of the steps it takes to get there. EMPLOYMENT PREPARATION: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developed a resume that appeals to an employer• Obtained all the documents and interview clothing needed in order to get a job• Mastered the skills necessary to ace an interview JOB SEARCH: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Registered with at least three online job search sites• Applied for at least twenty jobs that pay at least \$9/hr.	ATTENDANCE: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Be present in at least 30 of the 32 sessions2. Provide documentation for any missed sessions PUNCTUALITY: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Show up for each session on time2. Call the instructor and teammates at least 30 minutes in advance if unable to attend GENERAL BEHAVIOR: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Turn off cell phones during program hours2. Respect other participants by not interrupting when they have the floor, and expect the same in return3. Maintain the confidentiality of what is said inside the room.4. Support each other's success SUBSTANCE USE: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Not come to the program if under the influence of alcohol or any illegal drug, or be sent home with an unexcused absence.

The effectiveness of the Cycle Charter can be amplified through the use of a **team-based reward system**. Divide participants into groups of four or five, with each group choosing its own name. Groups earn points based on the positive behaviors of their members, both individually and collectively, with the highest scoring group winning a prize each week. Track the points daily on a chart in the classroom so participants can see their progress. A team-based approach leverages competition and peer pressure by making participants responsible not just for themselves but to their colleagues. For longer programs, shuffle the groups every few weeks to prevent cliques from forming.

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TRY THIS: Sample Success Survey

PART III RECRUITING EFFECTIVENESS

1. How did you learn about this program?
2. What three things led you to choose this program?
3. What had no impact or actually turned you off?
4. What other programs did you seriously consider? What made those programs most attractive?



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SAMPLE REWARDS SYSTEM

Individual Points	Team Based Points
Attends the session = 3	All members attend the session = 5
Calls at least 30 minutes in advance if cannot attend = 1	Most of team attend, others call in advance = 3
Arrives on time = 1	All members arrive on time to a session = 3
Comes dressed appropriately = 3	All members come dressed appropriately = 5
Volunteers to lead the class in a lesson or exercise = 5	Highest # of job applications in one week = 10
Goes on an interview = 15	

SAMPLE POINTS TRACKING SYSTEM

TEAM	Participant	Mon.	Tues.	Weds.	Thurs.	Fri.	Week Total
TEAM 1: The Successful Ones							
	Steve						
	Sam						
	Sally						
	Sue						
Total for TEAM 1							
TEAM 2: Winnerz4Life							
	Florence						
	Mary						
	Diana						
	Betty						
Total for TEAM 2							

THINK LIKE A BUSINESS TO MARKET RETENTION

People don't buy goods and services, they buy good feelings or solutions to problems.

How does your organization generate good feelings about its programs?

What solutions do you provide to the problems young people face?



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Rewards need not be elaborate or costly. Implement “Team of the Week” and “Student of the Week” award ceremonies every Friday afternoon for the highest scorers, complete with certificates of achievement and acceptance speeches. Allow the winning team to choose (appropriate) music to play in the classroom the following week. Solicit donations of movie, museum, sports and concert tickets from local companies to use as incentives. Ultimately, the prize is less important than the public recognition and sense of accomplishment.

STRATEGY 9: DEVELOP A RETENTION TOOLBOX

Not all retention approaches will appeal to everyone. Much like Umpqua Bank had to create a range of offerings that had little to do with banking in order to land and keep new customers, workforce programs must develop an array of tactics to stay connected to young people.

Communication can be the biggest challenge to retention when working with young adults whose address and phone number change on a regular basis. Even email has become less important in the era of social networking. Organizations like OBT, the Brooklyn youth program, and Goodwill Industries have turned to MySpace (www.myspace.com/obtjobs), Facebook (www.facebook.com/OBT.Jobs), and Twitter (www.twitter.com/GoodTemps) to leverage the digital tools that young people use heavily. Encouraging participants to “friend” or “follow” your organization’s social networking pages greatly increases the opportunities to connect with them. Establishing phone trees, in which designated participants are asked to notify groups of other participants of upcoming events, can be more effective than a staff person reaching out to them.

Integrate fun activities into your program, much like companies that host staff appreciation days. Schedule outings to locations that young people might enjoy, such as sporting events or museums. Hold an alumni meeting as a picnic in the park. Offer a movie night at your program once a month. The possibilities are endless.

IN SUM

Retention represents the most significant and complex challenge faced by most youth organizations. By identifying the key drop off points, building emotional connections between the participants and staff, setting high expectations, understanding what young people really want, utilizing marketing strategies from the business world, creating a welcoming environment that emphasizes success, thinking carefully about how to package services, leveraging the forces that influence youth behavior, and assembling a toolbox of retention offerings, workforce programs can minimize drop out and maximize their impact.

¹Tony Marquis, “Building a Better Tomorrow,” *Brooklyn Business Trends* (April 6, 2009): <http://brooklynbiztrends.elauwitmedia.com/2009/04/06/building-a-better-tomorrow/>

²Rob Walker, “Branching Out,” *The New York Times* (September 24, 2006): http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/24/magazine/24wwln_consumed.html; Jane L. Levere, “The Lemonade Stand That Umpqua Bank Built,” *The New York Times* (July 16, 2007): <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/16/business/media/16adnewsletter.html>

³National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, *Color Theory for Classrooms and Schools*, 2010: www.edfacilities.org/rl/color.cfm

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This publication series was
made possible through the
generous support of
The Pinkerton Foundation.

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