

**The column**

Each issue, an expert gives BPMS readers a takeaway action plan about a key measurement topic.

To retain top performers, says Angela Sinickas, you need to gear your benefits, compensations and communications to meet their specific needs, even at the expense of the average employee.

## Focus research on your most valuable “capital”

The entire concept of human “capital” seems to have arisen during the last several years of booming economy and scarce availability of skilled employees. When any resource is scarce, it’s valuable. Now with the highest rates of layoffs being announced in the U.S. since 1991, let’s hope the mindset of management is not on the order of getting the most out of the human “liabilities” they’re forced to retain.

Even though many companies are currently intent on shedding surplus staff, one thing that senior leadership always cares about, during good times and bad, is keeping the best and the brightest. These are the individuals who are producing results, who have loyal customers, who have the know-how to do things right the first time, and who can motivate and lead others in the right direction. Losing these people is costly, well beyond the simple expenses of recruiting and orienting their successors. These people impact both the company’s potential for making money and for operating cost-effectively.



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### Research techniques to spotlight superstars

So what are the best practices in measurement strategies for retaining top performers? Simple. Don’t just do research to see what your entire employee population wants or needs in terms of overall satisfaction, communication or benefits and compensation. Find ways to isolate your top performers as a demographic category and make sure your new recommendations are geared to meeting the top performers’ needs and wants wherever they might differ from the average employee.

For example, let’s say your research involves focus groups. In addition to the groups you convene to be representative of your entire population, select a few groups only from the top performers at various job levels, your “superstars,” and a few from the under-achievers category. (Of course, neither group should be told that they have been selected with this hidden criterion!)

For survey research, you might ask “what performance rating the respondent received at his or her latest performance review?” as one of your demographic questions. While this approach has its flaws (some can’t remember their rating, others inflate the rating to what they think it should have been), this technique can help you see any trends that distinguish the top performers from the people who are just occupying space. Samples of what you might discover are in Figure 1, right.

Figure 1: Possible Distinctions Based on Performance

	Top Performers May Want	Under-Achievers May Want
<b>Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible working arrangements</li> <li>• Higher match on savings contributions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More sick days and personal days</li> <li>• Higher benefits under the pension plan</li> </ul>
<b>Compensation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incentive pay, more pay at risk</li> <li>• Pay for performance</li> <li>• Tougher performance reviews to weed out non-performers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No pay at risk; higher base pay increase</li> <li>• Pay based on seniority</li> <li>• No performance reviews</li> </ul>
<b>Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More dialogue opportunities directly with senior management</li> <li>• More information about company strategy, financial results and career development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More opportunities for anonymous upward feedback</li> <li>• More information about birthdays, weddings and service anniversaries</li> </ul>

### Satisfying high achievers

Whatever the findings from your own research, you should focus on solutions that will satisfy your high achievers, even if the majority prefers something else.

Finally, let's remember that employees aren't really "capital" in the true corporate financial sense, in the same category as buildings, heavy machinery or money in the bank. First, senior management doesn't treat them the same way. In times of trouble, they don't consider selling off the headquarters building or auctioning off the widget-making assembly line until they're facing closing the doors entirely. Yet they start cutting employee headcount as a first response to any financial trouble, which is far more like the way they treat operating expenses, rather than capital investments.

Secondly, employees themselves are often offended when they hear themselves referred to as capital. They are living, feeling human beings who don't like being thought of in the same category as the inanimate types of true corporate capital. And the people who least like being treated like cogs in a machine are your top performers. Make sure you help your organization do all it can to keep these people appropriately challenged and rewarded.

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#### Note:

- Have you profiled the attitudes, behavior and competencies of your highest achievers?
- Does your company target its top performers for retention and satisfaction?