

Softening the hard edges of technical staff



Technological hardware keeps many organizations running these days. Unfortunately, hard-mannered technical employees can be bad for business.

Many technical staff members — be they IT support employees, data analysts or equipment maintenance workers — chose their professions because they like to focus on technology, not necessarily people. But some may not have developed supportive attitudes, empathic demeanors or good communication skills. It's in employers' best interests to help these workers soften their hard edges.

Common problems

Historically, HR studies have indicated that the biggest reasons why people stay with an organization are the work environment and agreeable colleagues. Yet among the most common social problems in the workplace are:

- Poor cooperation between departments or units,
- Lack of teamwork, and
- Insensitive remarks or even harassment.

These behaviors are sometimes exhibited by technical employees. They may have a tendency to maintain “knowledge silos” within their departments because of the specialized nature of their work. They may also downplay the importance of teamwork because they work “ticket to ticket” solving problems and not necessarily strategizing for the future. And they might sometimes struggle to communicate in socially acceptable terms why something doesn't work or can't be fixed right away.

3 approaches to consider

Employers can often improve the behavioral performance of their technical workers — and other employees — with these three approaches:

1. Hire better. Get a head start on preventing future tech employee difficulties by exploring job applicants' soft skills during interviews. Ask them to discuss how they've shown teamwork or resolved conflicts in the past. In some cases, you may want to hire a less skilled but more trainable and amicable candidate than someone who has impressive skills but may not mesh well with your existing workforce.

2. Put everything in writing. Technical employees in particular appreciate hard facts. An employee handbook that details both the legal and regulatory requirements of workplace behavior and your organization's specific policies gives staff members a black-and-white reference to look at.

3. Provide diversity, civility and antiharassment training. Some employees have no idea they're being abrasive or offensive. Seminars or classes can teach them how to give effective feedback and resolve conflicts without being aggressive. **After the training,** continue to coach these employees for a while as they start using their new skills.

On a human level

In a technology driven world, having the right people in place to operate and maintain an organization's technical assets is critical. But if these staff members can't relate to other employees on a human level, you're bound to struggle. Contact us for more ideas and information.

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