

How to Spot and Support Underutilized Talent Before It Walks Out the Door

By Marty Craig – May 12, 2025



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You don't need to lose good people to feel the sting of turnover. Sometimes the pain is quieter. It lurks in empty enthusiasm, in the sluggishness of someone who used to buzz with ideas, in that unspoken "why bother" that curls around a meeting room like invisible smoke. The underutilized employee is rarely loud about their state. They do the job. They stay polite. But that potential? It rusts. For company leaders and managers, the challenge isn't just keeping employees, it's recognizing when someone is drifting into neutral and giving them the tools, motivation, and freedom to shift gears again. The key is learning to read the silence and act before the light fully dims.

Spotting the Quiet Contributors

Start by watching—not in a creepy clipboard kind of way, but in the noticing, curious kind of way. Disengagement doesn't always mean missed deadlines or outright complaints.

Sometimes it's in the half-hearted yes during brainstorming, or the decision to stop volunteering for stretch projects. These are signs that indicate [they may not be fully engaged](#). When enthusiasm wanes, don't assume they're lazy. Look deeper. Maybe they don't feel seen, or they're overqualified and bored stiff. Maybe nobody's asked them what they want to do in a long, long while.

The Power of One-on-Ones

Here's where it gets personal, in a good way. Your time is stretched, but you cannot afford to treat one-on-one meetings like calendar clutter. Done right, they're gold. [Regular interactions help managers](#) identify underutilized talents, sometimes before the employee even knows it themselves. Use the time to ask real questions, not just about tasks, but about ambitions, annoyances, and ideas that keep getting shoved to the bottom of their inbox. Listen. Reassure. Be nosy in a professional way. That's how you find out the guy in accounting also codes apps at night, or the front desk admin used to manage a nonprofit team of 12.

Career Pathing as a Compass

If you're not talking about growth, people will assume there isn't any. Career pathing isn't just for new hires or junior staff, it's for everyone who hasn't been challenged lately. Even your seasoned folks. If someone's outgrown their current role, don't expect them to say it out loud. Not everyone knows what to ask for or how to phrase it. Offer roadmaps, check-ins, and lateral moves that still feel like progress. [Helping someone imagine their future inside your company](#) is often the first step in convincing them to stay.

Rotating Roles, Reviving Spirits

Not everyone wants a promotion, but a change of pace? That's a different story. [Implementing a job rotation strategy](#) can open new doors for someone who's been boxed in too long. It might be temporary, and it might feel risky, but the potential payoff is massive. You learn who adapts quickly, who shines under pressure, and who surprises you with a skill you never knew they had. Cross-training also builds resilience in your team; suddenly, you're not dependent on one person to hold a fragile corner of your workflow. And for the employee? It's like a breath of fresh, unprocessed air.

Learning as a Launchpad

This part's simple: invest in them, and they might invest back. Continuing education doesn't have to mean night classes and high tuition bills. Plenty of companies now cover online programs, certification prep, and workshops that let people sharpen existing skills or try something new. For example, if you have a tech team, offering support for [IT certifications](#) is a fast, flexible way to level up. It's good business too: Training someone internally to fill a role costs less than hiring someone new to do it. And when employees feel like the company cares about their future, loyalty grows in places money can't touch.

Data-Driven Decisions

Trust your instincts, sure, but [don't ignore the numbers](#). Look at project loads, response times, productivity tools, and even feedback loops. Are people stuck in the same kinds of tasks day in and day out? Are promotions coming from one corner of the building and nowhere else? This isn't about surveillance, it's about clarity. You need to understand where bottlenecks and burnout are forming, and who might be ready for a challenge but isn't being noticed. Sometimes the data says what people won't: who's coasting, who's stuck, and who's quietly outgrowing their job.

Encouraging Internal Mobility

If your best people only see a way forward by leaving, that's on you. Make promotions transparent. Post openings before you hire externally. Talk about mobility as a mindset, not a reward. Some of your most capable employees are waiting for permission to aim higher, even if they don't say it. [Providing growth opportunities](#) doesn't have to be grandiose—it can be a new project, a stretch assignment, or shadowing someone in a different department. And when someone does leap? Celebrate it loudly, so others know it's possible too.

Maximizing employee potential isn't a buzzword game, it's the messy, real work of noticing. You can't program your way to better people's decisions. You need conversations, you need curiosity, and you need a culture that sees beyond job descriptions. Underutilized employees aren't broken, they're just waiting for someone to ask the right question. Or offer the right challenge. And in a world where retention is harder and hiring is pricier, rediscovering the talent already in your building might be the smartest move you make all year.

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