Winning the Talent Battle: Recruiting and Retention Actions for Printing Companies

Key findings and practical recommendations drawn from multiple "Printing Industry Performance & Insights" studies.

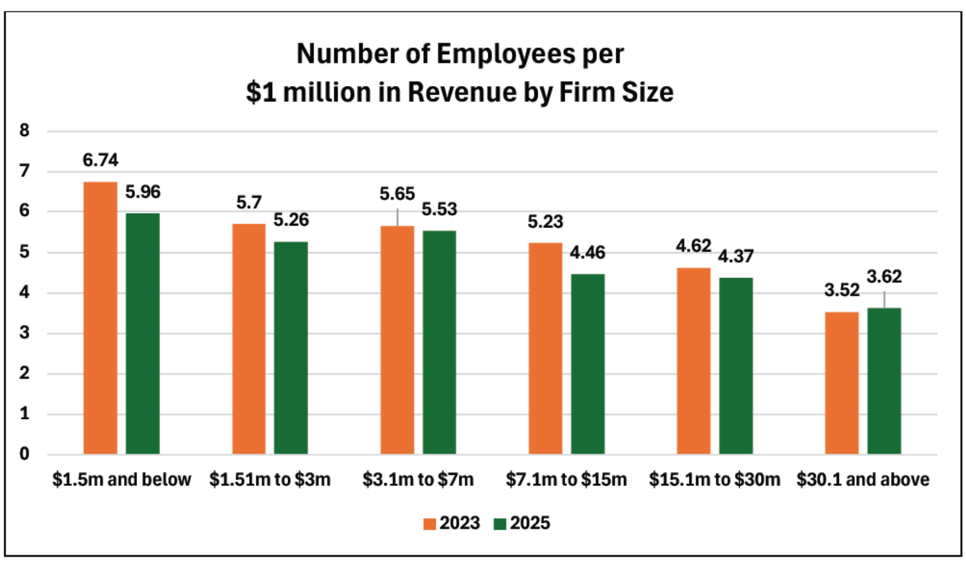
Printing company leaders, most, if not all of you, are facing employee recruiting and retention challenges. A regional printing association leader said, “It's an issue every one of our associations is hearing about from members…” Are key employees stepping away from your firm? Do you have open spots you can’t fill? Are shortages in your workplace causing decreased motivation or burnout? Given your workforce's age, are you concerned about staffing your future team?

Given the recruiting and retention challenges in our industry and in most industries, over the past few years, we have explored these topics in multiple “Printing Industry Performance & Insights” studies. At an “Americas Printing Association Network (APAN)” meeting, association leaders suggested that I provide an overview of our related reports. I hope you find this helpful! Here we go…

Number of Employees.

Below is a chart from our recent study showing the number of employees per $1 million in revenue by firm size. The chart shows our findings for 2023 and 2025. The numbers suggest that the number of employees per $1 million in revenue declines as companies grow. If your firm is growing, make sure you are seeing some "economies of scale," for example, more revenue with the same number of staff members.

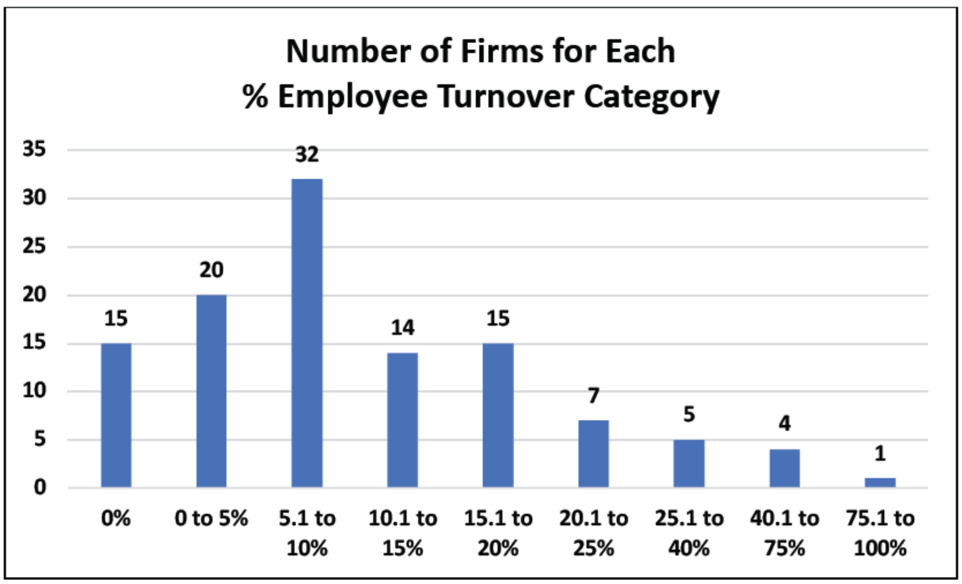
And we generally saw a decline in the number of employees per $1 million in revenue from 2023 to 2025. Except during some COVID-related irregularities, we saw this trend across multiple studies. Printing companies are producing more with fewer employees. You might calculate those numbers for your company over the past few years. If your number of employees per $1 million in revenue isn't declining, you might review your staffing needs per department. This might not point you to parting ways with any employees. But it may help you adjust if an employee steps away from your firm.



Employee Turnover

In 2025, we explored employee turnover percentages. This reflects the percentage of employees who have left the company, voluntarily or involuntarily. One hundred and thirteen companies provided the needed data. The average employee turnover was 12.8%. However, 15 companies (13.3% of responses) had no employee turnover. Take note, over 10% of the firms in our data experienced NO employee turnover. NO turnover is achievable!

The graph below shows the number of firms in each turnover percentage category. Anecdotally, the graph shows 5% turnover or less as a reasonable goal. And BTW, higher-performing firms tend to have lower employee turnover… Dah!



Here are some points that might help you reduce employee turnover:

- You might look at previous employee turnovers and try to find trends. Are employees departing for a common reason? If so, how can you address that?
- Consider candid interviews with departing employees – ask questions and listen.
- For employees who parted ways with your firm, what could you do to reduce the chances of that happening again?

- Benchmarking your compensation and benefits against industry averages might help reduce employee turnover. APAN provides compensation reports through the regional printing associations.
- Helping employees develop skills and build knowledge through training might also help. APAN associations offer more than 50 online training courses on the fundamentals of print and graphic communications. Investing in your employees' training shows that you value them.
- Providing performance bonuses might also help. It did in the three printing companies I led. We discussed our performance goals with our entire team quarterly, sometimes monthly. After our year-end, I walked around the building and handed out bonus checks to everyone. (That was one of the best days of my year!) Our employees knew those profit bonuses were connected to our firm’s performance. This helps commit employees to our firm, and we experienced low employee turnover.

Company Culture

We found a positive relationship between diversification into Non-Printing Products and Services (NPPS), higher firm performance, and four cultural aspects (risk-taking, innovation, proactivity, and competitiveness). Although the study was not directly related to recruitment and retention, multiple academic studies have found a relationship between these cultural aspects and employee retention, which makes sense. You might get our “How Company Culture Drives Success with Non-Printing Products and Services” report from your association to learn more about those cultural aspects.

You might assess your firm’s current culture and consider where it needs to go. This relates to the third printing company I led. We took over a failing company with a toxic culture. Conflicts filled the building. We pushed an egalitarian culture – treating everyone the same, whether you loaded trucks or were a manager, with respect. Addressing that cultural issue helped us build a highly committed team with low turnover.

Effective Recruiting Approaches

In our studies, we found four recruiting methods that printing company leaders find effective, including employee referrals, job search websites, social media, and a company's website. When leaders seek input from employees about potential job candidates, employees may feel like they are part of the game, an ambassador for the firm. In addition, when an employee suggests a potential candidate, they have a stake in the game. Employees are less likely to recommend a weak candidate, and employees may help the new hire they suggested perform well. Of course, one must acknowledge the potential "ill will" that may result if a company does not consider the suggested candidate.

Survey respondents generally ranked job search websites as effective. Those might include Indeed, ZipRecruiter, Monster, LinkedIn, and others.

If someone is looking for employment in our industry, they'll probably check firms' websites, so it's important that you post any available positions and items to draw in candidates. One of my HR professor colleagues suggested including videos of current employees on your website, maybe a testimonial of what your firm means to them. And I see multiple social media posts from printing companies announcing open positions or "branding" themselves as a good place to work. I discuss "employer branding" in the next subsection.

Three recruiting methods that weren't rated as effective, but I think are worth mentioning, included temporary employment agencies and partnering with high schools or colleges. In the last printing business I led, we used a temporary employment agency to hire entry-level production employees. We shared with our temp agency that we were looking for candidates who would transition into permanent jobs. If we saw a temp employee as a good fit, we would pay the temp agency through the contract's expiration, then add the employee to our full-time roster. If we did not see the temp employee as a solid full-time addition, we would send them back to the temp agency, and they would quickly provide another candidate. We had a great relationship with that temp agency. That approach produced multiple employees who progressed into skilled positions. Some of those stories make me smile, like the one who came to load trucks, then became a press helper, and, in a couple of years, advanced to pressman!

One would think connecting with high schools might provide a source for production trainee candidates. However, building relationships with high schools may require an ongoing investment, maybe years. But it's possibly worth the time and effort. When connecting with high schools, one might use the term "apprentice opportunities" rather than "internships." Internships apply more to college students. Also, an internship implies a temporary engagement, whereas an apprenticeship implies a long-term engagement.

Connecting with colleges might also lead to possible employees. Yet, as with high schools, it may take a while to build a relationship with a college. So, is it worth the investment of time and effort? That depends on your potential future administrative, sales, or marketing employee needs.

Employer Branding and Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

As mentioned above, we see printing companies branding themselves as good places to work on their websites and social media. That might include employee stories, celebrating employee anniversaries, or "employees of the month." Here are other items companies might include in their employer branding:

- Good compensation
- Continuous training
- Advancement opportunities
- Work-life balance
- Company accomplishments
- Company philanthropy and community service
- Employee accomplishments/stories
- Diversity
- Interesting products and services
- Culture/values
- Mission/vision
- The firm's unique attributes
- New technology acquired and applied
- Company awards, such as regional printing association competitions

- Company events, such as lunch meetings or picnics
- Company reputation
- What employees love about a company
- And, of course, employer branding may share the EVP, which is discussed next.

However, we found that unless company leaders have an Employee Value Proposition (EVP), their recruiting and retention will not improve. A company's mission states its target customer market and the value it provides them. Consider an EVP as a mission statement of the value your company provides for its team members. You are competing in a market for employees, so that mission (an EVP) is vital.

In a previous regional printing associations article, I shared the examples of possible EVP statements below. I drew these ideas from AI, and my HR professor team revised those ideas and presented some more. Here they are.

- We compensate team members for their contribution to our firm, which may include craftsmanship, productivity, or continuous improvement.
    - We annually adjust our pay rates and review each teammate's compensation.
    - We continuously evaluate and improve our benefits because financial security and peace of mind matter to our people.
    - We benchmark our compensation to industry averages regularly to ensure we remain competitive and fair.
- We provide teammates with an annual bonus based on our firm's profitability.
    - Success is a team effort.
    - When the company does better, we all benefit, not just the owners.
    - We provide annual bonuses tied to company performance because success is a collective effort.
    - We want our team members to understand how their work connects to our results and to feel pride in what we accomplish together.
- Quarterly, we update our team on goals, previous goal achievement, and firm performance.
    - We keep our team informed.

    - We note wins and give recognition and thanks.
    - We provide quarterly updates on company goals, performance, and progress.
    - We recognize contributions and express appreciation for effort, results, and teamwork.
- We strive for the well-being of our team members and their families.
    - Although time requirements differ among the positions in our firm, we strive to accommodate family needs as best we can.
    - Community is not just a word – it is a way of life here.
    - We celebrate the successes of our team members' families as part of our extended family.
    - We care about our team members and their families. Work should support their lives, not compete with them.
    - We celebrate work and family milestones and successes as part of our extended community.
    - We respect personal time and strive for sustainable workloads, recognizing that while busy periods occur, chronic overwork is not part of our culture.
- We listen to our teammates' thoughts.
    - We want to hear teammates' ideas and suggestions about their position, department, or our firm.
    - We reward new ideas that add value to our firm.
    - We create an environment where team members can ask questions, raise concerns, and disagree without fear.
    - We take employee engagement surveys seriously and communicate what we learn/what we will do differently.
- We seek career development for our teammates.
    - We meet with individual teammates annually to assess their performance and discuss potential career paths.
    - We recognize that everyone has different ambitions. We want to hear those and help you achieve them. We love to promote from within!
    - We connect teammates with external educational opportunities through association resources.
    - We prioritize internal growth and promotion whenever possible.
    - We invest in team members' growth, not just output.
- We strive to build a culture that is innovative, proactive, and competitive.

- Listening, as mentioned above, is a key to building our culture.
- We strive to beat our competition.
- We publicly celebrate teammates' actions that align with our desired culture.
- We recognize performance that reflects our values, not just outcomes.
- We are committed to fair, consistent treatment across all roles and levels, with equal expectations, opportunities, and accountability for everyone. That's part of our culture!

We use "teammates" instead of "employees" in the EVPs above. You might want to say "employees" in your EVPs.

Are the EVPs above THE ones you should apply… NO! They are merely examples. As a leadership team, consider what EVP items are important to you and your firm. What other EVP items should you consider adding to convey what employees value most about being part of your team? Decide your EVPs! Commit to your EVPs. Don't state EVPs that your firm is not committed to.

I hope you find this overview of our previous studies helpful. I welcome any suggestions, comments, or questions at ralph.williams@mtsu.edu

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