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**'Career Path' Programs Help Retain Employees**

By **Jaclyne Badal**

From [The Wall Street Journal Online](#)

Two years ago, Jessica Nicolo went to work for EchoStar Communications Corp., answering phone calls from users of its Dish Network satellite-TV service. Within eight months, she was promoted three times. Since then, she has been promoted a fourth time, to help other agents with difficult calls. All told, her hourly wage has climbed 27%.

Her rapid advancement has given the 36-year-old Oklahoma mother of two a sense of relief that she isn't trapped in another dead-end job. Her previous call-center job lasted only 10 months. She has been with EchoStar more than twice as long and doesn't expect to leave soon. "The possibilities are endless," she says.

That's what her bosses want to hear. Ms. Nicolo was an early participant in EchoStar's "career path" program, designed to persuade call-center workers to stick around longer and cut the costs of hiring and training new workers. Agents can win rapid promotions within call centers, or to other jobs at the company, by meeting skills and training requirements, with company help. EchoStar executives say the program is working: The average call-center agent now stays for 19 months, up from nine months two years ago.

Employers have long worried about the career paths of white-collar and salaried workers. Now, with unemployment dropping, a growing number of employers are taking interest in the progress of rank-and-file workers as well.

Servers at OSI Restaurant Partners Inc.'s Outback Steakhouse restaurants are taking ownership stakes in the company or snagging white-collar corporate jobs. Call-center workers at Huntington Bancshares Inc., of Columbus, Ohio, are becoming personal bankers.

Florida-based human-resource consultant Marilyn Durant says she sees more companies creating career-path programs for hourly workers, especially in high-turnover industries such as retail and health care. Ten years ago, she says, such efforts were rare.

Workplace experts say such programs can reduce attrition by boosting morale and increasing employee commitment. "It plays on people's needs for the trappings of advancement," says Peter Cappelli, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. But he and others warn

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that the programs can be used cynically by managers handing out what he calls "fake promotions." If so, Dr. Cappelli says, over time these programs lose effectiveness as employees realize they're unlikely to achieve career goals.

Most career-path programs outline promotion possibilities and offer training in required skills. Some employers also offer career-planning sessions. Leigh Branham, a human-resource consultant and author of "The Seven Hidden Reasons Employees Leave," says training is particularly appealing to younger workers, who are more likely to jump ship.

Joe Taylor, 40, quit a supervisor job at a small industrial-saw sharpening business in 2002, after 13 years, because he wanted more. "Not necessarily more pay," he says. "Just more: more responsibility."

To reach that goal, he first took a step backward to a factory-line job with Flowers Foods Inc., a Thomasville, Ga., commercial baker. Mr. Taylor started there four years ago as a scaler, measuring ingredients into a plastic tub. Since then, he's been promoted twice, to line supervisor, with the help of company training programs. Now, he's being groomed to run a complex factory line that can produce 40 types of bread. The job gives him a chance to use his analytical skills, manage people and explore new ideas.

Flowers Foods executives say Mr. Taylor proves the value of the career program, formalized in 2003 and refined since. Of the company's supervisors, 90% started in hourly, entry-level jobs. Other hourly workers have moved into human resources, sales and upper management.

Reducing attrition is particularly important at call centers. Roughly six million Americans now work at these centers, earning an average of \$11.83 an hour, according to researchers at Purdue University. The jobs can be stressful: Workers are routinely monitored by bosses and sometimes mistreated by clients.

"When you're calling an 800 number, all civility disappears," says P.V. Kannan, chief executive of 24/7 Customer, an international call-center operator that handles about seven million calls per month.

Each new hire requires 158 hours of training, at a cost of roughly \$7,000, according to Purdue. So keeping workers even a little longer can mean big savings. At Huntington Bancshares, 75% of the call-center agents who leave their post stay with the company, up from 40% before the program started two years ago.

EchoStar has nine U.S. call centers employing 7,500. Agents such as Ms. Nicolo are offered incremental promotions carrying small raises and, ultimately, a shot at higher-paying, higher-status jobs in areas such as technical service or quality assurance. Some go on to manage call centers. Agents identify career goals, and supervisors help create plans to achieve them.

Ms. Nicolo hopes one day to work in an uplink center, where television signals are beamed to satellites. The transfer is several years away, she says. In the meantime, she's working her way through the call center with help from supervisors. "Opportunities are not kept secret," she says.

Agents can track their own performance, using the same software that managers use. Agents say it gives them more control over their careers. "You feel like you're a part of something," says Joshua Yount, 23, who started on the phones at the Tulsa, Okla., call center in January 2005 and now supervises other agents. After completing his undergraduate degree in management, he wants a job at the corporate office in Englewood, Colo.

Abdullah Khan, a 25-year-old with an engineering degree, spurned higher-paying programming jobs to answer phones in EchoStar's Pine Brook, N.J., call center in 2004 because he thought it was a fast track to management. He now coaches 15 agents. "There hasn't been a single day when I looked outside," Mr. Khan says.

Email your comments to [cjeditor@dowjones.com](mailto:cjeditor@dowjones.com).

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