

# Employee Attrition in a Post-Pandemic Economy: HR Strategies for Retention

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## Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a fundamental change in the global economic and social landscape, creating an era of exceptional challenges and transformations. One of the more notable changes in the labor market noted globally is the mass event that many refer to as the Great Resignation, which is characterized by a huge number of employees voluntarily leaving their positions across a variety of industries. This sudden leave of talent has drastically altered the realities of the labor market and presented organizations with serious issues centered around employee loyalty, engagement, and retention during an ever-shifting economy transitioning from the pandemic. The consequences of mass employee attrition can be profound and include the cost of hiring, loss of institutional knowledge, productivity deceleration, and decreased morale for the remaining workforce. With these new variables at play, organizations want to gain a clear understanding of employee attrition to strategize best practices for retention of their human capital during a time of significant change.

This paper seeks to identify the complex factors that are at play in an employee's leaving their place of work in this post-pandemic reality. This paper intends to locate the pandemic as the thing that expedited pre-existing conditions, as well as new conditions for the post-pandemic employee to examine their career pathways and priorities. Furthermore, this study will analyze many facets of the "Great Resignation," including major causes such as insufficient pay, lack of opportunities for advancement, and a lack of respect in the work setting. After establishing a comprehensive context of the situation overall, the paper will establish a set of HR activities aimed at employee retention practices based on research. These practices will take a holistic approach to retention by considering not only a financial aspect but also the employee's mental health, career growth, work-life balance, and quality organizational culture. The research aims to develop HR practitioners and organizational leaders with ideas to build resilient and engaged employees capable of thriving in the evolving post-pandemic economic landscape.

## Literature Review: Understanding the Post-Pandemic Shift:

Before the seismic transformation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, employee retention was a constant challenge for organizations, but one

that was typically developed within a more manageable framework of prediction; a slowly increasing rate of voluntary turnover attributed to pronged factors related to shifting generational values toward work, the gig economy, and interest

in life-work balance, accelerated somewhat by the pandemic<sup>1</sup>. The pandemic acted as an unprecedented spark to change the overlay of work, who works, and where work occurs. The changing climate resulted in a remarkable acceleration of employee exit, which gave birth to what is now referred to in the news as the "Great Resignation."

The psychological and emotional safety of being at work played a major role in the shift. Employees across all sectors experienced elevated levels of burnout and stress triggered by heavier workloads, blurred borders between work and home, and anxiety related to health and economic instability<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, in one survey completed during the pandemic, 52% of employees reported experiences of burnout, signaling a depressing condition that was felt before the pandemic but became worse during it<sup>3</sup>.

Many people during this extended period of stress have begun a significant re-examination of priorities. Increasingly, people began to focus on a better work-life balance, a preference for more meaningful work, and most importantly, more emphasis on flexibility, often superseding traditional motivations such as job security or a slight pay increase<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, the economy contributed to re-evaluation with a dynamic labor market offering more opportunities to those willing to seek them. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics even reported 8.3 million hires in May

2020, indicating a rapid rebound and fluidity in the labor market<sup>5</sup>.

The "Great Resignation" is characterized by several factors resulting in reason for employees seeking new opportunities. For example, the Pew Research Center found in a study conducted in 2021 that 63% of workers often cited low pay as the reason for leaving their jobs, 63% cited limited opportunities for advancement, and 57% cited disrespectful treatment at work<sup>6</sup>.

The results indicate a critical disconnect between what employees want and what institutions provide. In addition to core problems, we also have pandemic burnout, a wish for more autonomy, and a rethink of personal values<sup>7</sup>. The effects of the Great Resignation are not identical for every population subgroup in every industry. For instance, the literature has addressed the post-pandemic attrition of millennial employees in Higher Education, and generational-based differences in retention motivators<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, we have seen big implications in the hospitality sector in pandemic recovery with HR practices that account for employee well-being in order to minimize turnover<sup>9</sup>. The gig economy, which has likely been reinforced by the pandemic, provides a structural shift motivating workers to take more flexibility or temporary work than traditional

<sup>1</sup> Gallup. "The Post-Pandemic Workplace: The Experiment Continues." Gallup.com, 11 Mar. 2025, <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/657629/post-pandemic-workplaceexperiment-continues.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Visier. "What's Really Causing the Great Resignation?" Visier.com, <https://www.visier.com/blog/great-resignation-cause/>.

<sup>3</sup> Insurica. "Preventing Turnover Post-Pandemic." Insurica.com, <https://insurica.com/blog/post-pandemic-employee-turnover/>.

<sup>4</sup> Simpplr. "What Is the Great Resignation? Definition & Causes." Simpplr.com, <https://www.simpplr.com/glossary/great-resignation/>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "As the COVID-19 pandemic affects the nation, hires and turnover reach record highs in 2020." BLS.gov, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2021/article/as-the-covid-19-pandemic-affects-the-nation-hires-and-turnover-reach-record-highs-in-2020.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center. "Majority of workers who quit a job in 2021 cite low pay, no opportunities for advancement, feeling disrespected." Pewresearch.org,

<sup>7</sup> Simpplr. "What Is the Great Resignation? Definition & Causes." Simpplr.com, <https://www.simpplr.com/glossary/great-resignation/>.

<sup>8</sup> ProQuest. "An Exploration of Millennial Employee Retention and Attrition in Post-Pandemic Higher Education." Proquest.com,

<sup>9</sup> Academia.edu. "Employee Retention Strategies in the Hospitality Industry: A Post-COVID Analysis." Academia.edu, [https://www.academia.edu/download/124189064/IJIRT175927\\_formatted.pdf](https://www.academia.edu/download/124189064/IJIRT175927_formatted.pdf).

employment<sup>10</sup>. Organizations need to understand the drivers of turnover in more nuanced detail to develop purposeful and appropriate retention strategies.

### **HR Strategies for a New Era of Retention:**

In light of the significant changes in employee expectations and increased rates of attrition in the post-pandemic economy, Human Resources is under pressure to reimagine their retention programs. Success will require a holistic approach that expands incredible incentives to support employees' complex realities and needs. Strategies will be developed based on relationships that seek to understand why employees are leaving and feel confident in creating the conditions for belonging, support, and confidence in fellow employees and leaders.

#### **A. Foundational Strategies: Competitive Compensation and Benefits:**

Even though the post-COVID world has focused attention on alternate forms of compensation, competitive pay still represents the foundation of any retention plan. Employees are becoming more informed regarding their market value, and organizations not paying equitable and competitive salaries risk losing them to another company or agency. The focus should move beyond salary and toward total compensation through a variety of benefit programs. Such programs might include comprehensive health and wellness programs, retirement plans, or any benefits that help support an employee's overall financial and life stability. Lastly, formality in pay grade structure, as well as pay-equity procedures, is becoming increasingly important. Many studies indicate that low salary is a significant driver of turnover and paying attention to long-term and inequitable pay can help build trust that the organization is committed to pay equity. Some

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<sup>10</sup> Elgaronline.com. "The post-pandemic workplace: Issues and insights for future research and action." Elgaronline.com, <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781802202250/book-part-9781802202250-8.xml>.

organizations have even turned to off-cycle increases to retain staff and reduce turnover, highlighting the immediacy of competitive pay as a retention strategy.<sup>11</sup>.

#### **B. Fostering a Positive and Supportive Work Environment:**

A positive and supportive work environment is key to employee wellness, which impacts retention. We learned from the pandemic that mental health support is essential, including employees' worries of burnout. Therefore, HR plans and priorities must include employee wellness initiatives, which may include providing mental health resources to employees, implementing stress management programs, and creating a culture that fosters a sense of work-life balance. In addition to wellness and job satisfaction, employees need to feel recognition and appreciation for their contributions. It doesn't have to be extravagant; simple, thoughtful, and consistent recognition makes employees feel valued and improves morale and belonging. Lastly, a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace (DEI) is the best practice and a retention strategy - employees will stay at places that genuinely value their contributions, respect them, and allow them space for advancement regardless of their identity factors.

#### **C. Opportunities for Growth and Development:**

One of the main reasons employees may look for new jobs is a lack of advancement in their current positions. To combat this trend, organizations need to commit to robust career pathing and opportunities for continued development and professional growth through ongoing training, mentorship, and internal promotion opportunities. Investing in employee upskilling and reskilling initiatives develops skills but also sends a message to the employee that the organization takes a long-term view of their career path. Investing in

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<sup>11</sup> ScienceDirect. "Human resource management in times of crisis: Strategies for a post COVID-19 workplace." ScienceDirect.com, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0090261624000330>.

upskilling and reskilling develops loyalty within the organization and will reduce the likelihood that employees will turn to the external market for career growth. Specific retention strategies around employee development are especially important for younger generations such as Gen-Z.<sup>12</sup>

#### **D. The Flexibility Imperative:**

The pandemic established flexible work arrangements as the norm, and employees now, for the most part, expect them. Companies that resist the change run the risk of being perceived as old-fashioned and inflexible, which will compound issues of high turnover. Hybrid and remote work formats, where possible, create a level of employee control that compliant workers prefer, as well as a work-life balance advantage for them. In addition to the flexibility of location, flexible scheduling combined with asynchronous work approaches allows employees more flexibility for their own time management and reduces overall stress, which leads to increased job satisfaction<sup>13</sup>. Flexibility is no longer just a perk; it has become an overall value proposition and a baseline expectation for many in the post-pandemic workforce.

#### **The Evolving Role of Human Resources:**

The unique challenges of the post-pandemic era have significantly changed the role of Human Resources, evolving it into a strategic partner whose purpose is to advance the success of the organization. HR professionals are now leading the design and implementation of policies that influence employee well-being, engagement and retention. With higher status comes a more active, data-driven approach to talent management.

<sup>12</sup> Emerald. "Employee development and retention of Generation-Z employees in the post-COVID-19 workplace: a conceptual framework." Emerald.com, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/bj-06-2020-0311/full/html>

<sup>13</sup> NavigateWell. "9 Powerful employee retention strategies for 2025 and beyond." NavigateWell.com, 3 Apr. 2025, <https://www.navigatewell.com/resources/blogposts/blog-9-powerful-employee-retention-strategies-for-2025-and-beyond>.

#### **A. From Administrative Function to Strategic Partner:**

In the past, HR departments were viewed primarily as something to keep the company on the right side of legal and regulatory requirements, often simply focused on payroll and compliance. However, the changes caused by COVID, including remote work, mental health challenges, and the Great Resignation, have forced a change in that perception. Now, HR is being asked to strategically advise executives on workforce planning, culture, and talent development. This is making HR professionals focus more on HR skills and competencies, along with strong business acumen, analytics, and organizational psychology. Rather than just keeping the organization on the right side of the law, HR functions need to anticipate workforce trends and develop proactive responses to attract and retain top talent.

#### **B. Leveraging HR Technology and People Analytics:**

In this new strategic role, HR will need to increasingly use technology and people analytics to drive decision-making. Data-based insights can identify trends in employee attrition, determine where employee dissatisfaction exists, and evaluate the success of retention initiatives. For example, advanced analytics can reveal which sub-demographics are at greatest risk of leaving, which factors are most strongly associated with an employee's decision to leave, and how various HR interventions impact employee engagement. The use of task management software to measure and monitor employee productivity is a prime example of technology highlighting new modes of performance management in the post-COVID HRM landscape. Relying on data rather than anecdotal evidence will allow HR to develop sounder, more targeted, efficient, and impactful knowledge and strategies<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> PeopleGoal. "Human Resources Management - HRM Post-COVID." PeopleGoal.com, 22 Jul. 2025, <https://www.peoplegoal.com/blog/human-resourcesmanagement-post-covid/>.

### C. Building a Strong Employer Brand:

In a talent market characterized by competition, an organization's employer brand serves as a major asset in recruitment and retention. A well-defined employer brand expresses the organization's values, culture, and employee value proposition in a way that promotes the organization as a desirable place to work. As human resources professionals, our responsibility in our organizations is to be seen as key thought partners in developing and stewards of this brand, both with the organization's employees and the external environment. This means working to shape and ensure the employee experience is aligned with the brand promise, engaging employees inside your organization, and demonstrating the organization's value for its people. As SHRM indicates, with the increase in focus on the employer brand in a post-COVID world, its importance becomes even more realized when recruitment, retention, and engagement are difficult<sup>15</sup>. In addition to attracting new talent, having a positive employer brand reinforces the decisions of current employees to remain with the organization and where they feel proud and have a sense of belonging.

#### Conclusion:

The economic landscape created by the pandemic has undoubtedly opened a new chapter in employee attrition known as the "Great Resignation". This time of significant voluntary leaving has been in part caused by the myriad of factors that have occurred during the pandemic, employee burnout, and significant reevaluations of personal and professional priorities, personal complaints related to pay, promotions, or respect in the workplace, and much more. The research

we discuss in the current paper indicates that employees no longer want just a job, but rather want purposeful work, a sense of belonging in the workplace, development opportunities, and work/life balance. As a result of these new employee expectations, Human Resources is being called to be more strategic, empathetic, and data-informed in their talent management approach. The proposed HR strategies for retention pay, well-being, and positive work environment, development opportunities, and flexible work arrangements are less about responding to today's challenges, and more about what your employee talent management and organizational philosophy need to embody, moving forward. Developing an employee culture so that employees feel valued, heard, and invested will create engagement and loyalty to decrease turnover.

The long-term implications of the evolving landscape are increasingly evident: Organizations that do not, or cannot, adjust to the new normal will likely experience a significant talent drain and competitive disadvantage for the foreseeable future. The employer-employee relationship is fundamentally different now. Mutual respect and investment are more important than ever. HR leaders, who are seen as important strategic partners more so now than ever, are applying technology and analytics to foster decision-making, while also advocating for the human side of managing talent. Organizations that proactively build a robust employer brand and consistently demonstrate this brand promise not only reduce the challenges organizations face from loss of talent in a post-pandemic workforce environment but also build a strong, engaged, and thriving workforce capable of managing future uncertainty. This is a call-to-action for leaders and practitioners: Honor the change and realize that investing in your people is the best sustainable path to organizational effectiveness in this new economy and workforce today and tomorrow.

<sup>15</sup> SHRM. "COVID RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES." SHRM.org, [https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/executivenetwork/en-insights-forums/July%202022%20EN%20Insights%20Forum%20-%20Post%20COVID%20Recruitment%20and%20Retention.pdf?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/executivenetwork/en-insights-forums/July%202022%20EN%20Insights%20Forum%20-%20Post%20COVID%20Recruitment%20and%20Retention.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

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