How to Retain Employees During the Great Resignation

By Brian O’Connell
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What is the Great Resignation really about?

"The Great Resignation has been fueled by workers taking a step back to consider their worth and demand more from their work," said Matt Homan, head of talent at M13, a technology venture capital firm in New York City. "Talent is not resigning from the workforce itself; people are just reconsidering what's most important to them when presented with multiple compelling opportunities."

The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, caused legions of career professionals to seek opportunities to bring more meaning to their lives, which included finding more challenging and rewarding work.

"Employees want to be part of high-performing teams with healthy cultures," Homan noted. "So for companies, trying to drive retention through compensation is not enough. But in a world where there is so much information out there and so many options, it will be incumbent upon employers to step up their transparency, fairness and equity to survive."

According to the U.S. Labor Department, the quits rate—the percentage of employees leaving their jobs voluntarily—stood at 4.5 percent in November 2021 (https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/business/economy/job-openings-coronavirus.html).

In addition to losing employees to departures, companies are having trouble attracting replacements.

A study by WTW (formerly Willis Towers Watson) shows that 73 percent of 380 employers surveyed in 2021 were having difficulty attracting employees. Additionally, 70 percent of companies say the problem will persist in 2022.

The Way Forward for Management

How can companies keep valued and talented workers on board? Management professionals offer these tips:

Connect with staffers on a regular basis. North 6th Agency, a brand communications company based in New York City, offers an array of programs designed to recruit, retain and develop talent for the agency.

In what executive vice president of talent development Nina Velasquez describes as a "high-turnover industry," North 6th emphasizes people-first practices. These include an employee rewards system (think spot bonuses, paid time off or donations to a staffer's favorite charity, for example) and team performance rewards like agency-wide sabbaticals for meeting revenue goals. That's helped the company to retain many workers.
"Now more than ever, it's important to keep team members engaged, healthy and connected," Velasquez said. "With some planning, executives can keep meaningful employee interactions constant, even when most are working remotely."

One way to keep workers engaged and connected, she said, is by taking their ideas seriously.

"A collaborative work environment where everyone has a voice can lead to strategic recommendations that help move the company forward," Velasquez said. "A team advisory board is one example of bringing together diverse perspectives inside the company. An efficient board can set up checkpoints and meetings throughout the year to vote on pressing issues across the company, advise on the company vision, and provide input on company policies and procedures."

Velasquez also advises company managers to engage team members in other ways.

"It could be quarterly surveys, monthly suggestion boxes, or it could be revisiting the day-to-day structure of an individual's workday," she said. "If an employee feels connected to their company, it's likely due to managers' efforts to motivate, inspire and be an advocate for their career path."

**Listen to employees.** One key for managers looking to retain top talent is to listen better.

"Get direct input from employees in terms of what is working and what is not," said Gia Ganesh, vice president of people and culture at Florence Health Care, an Atlanta-based health care software company. "Address concerns with a plan of action based on the input, share the plan, and start acting on it."


"Recognition plays a huge part in building a delightful culture," Ganesh said. "Yet recognition does not always have to be monetary or tangible. Verbal appreciation can be equally effective."

Ganesh said recognition can come from peers, managers or an entire team. "Simple public Slack channels where managers can share public appreciation are easy strategies to implement," she said.

**Offer growth and opportunity.** Career professionals want to see a clear path for growth at their companies, so employers should clear that path as much as possible.

"What we've done is make it clear that our company is a place for you to start, explore and grow a career, no matter who you are," said Claudia Ivanova, head of HR at FISPAN, a financial technology firm in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. "We've put in place programs for interns and new graduates who can start their careers at FISPAN. We've put in place learning and development programs for existing employees to ensure they are continually being challenged and developing their own professional paths."

When companies ensure that an employee feels valued and sees growth possibilities at an organization, there's little incentive for them to look elsewhere. "When they find everything they want and need at Company X, they won't have time or the need to look or entertain other opportunities," Ivanova said.

**Encourage a "corporate explorer" mindset.** Managers should create opportunities for employees to realize their entrepreneurial ambitions inside the company.

"At the same time as we are facing the Great Resignation, we have new business starts surging to four times the pre-pandemic level, according to the U.S. Census Bureau," said Andy Binns, a management director at Change Logic, a Boston-based strategic advisory firm.

"This reflects the lack of freedom [that employees feel] to innovate in corporate America."
By unleashing a worker's entrepreneurial spirit, companies can not only retain the best staff, but also help generate new sources of growth. "Think of these [employees] as 'corporate explorers' and equip them to pursue innovative business ideas inside, not outside, the corporation," Binns said.

**Provide Inspiration.** Karen Cho, HR leader at Columbus, Ohio-based Designer Brands, the parent company for DSW Stores.

"It's critical that executives inspire and communicate with top talent around three things: the future of the company, their value in the organization, and opportunities and development for growth," Cho said. "What executives often fail to do is simply ask their top talent probing questions like, 'What would make you consider an opportunity outside our company?'

"The answer might surprise you, and then you know what you need to do to retain each individual."


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