

CAHRS
Virtual
Working
Group Series:

Managing
Employee
Turnover and
Worker Mobility

Session 2: Managing Employee Turnover and Worker Mobility

September 21, 2021

As we emerge from the Covid-19 Pandemic, companies are eager to define and transition to a post-pandemic normal. Yet, with new hybrid work models and continued uncertainty about the lasting impacts of the pandemic on the employment relationship, companies face a host of talent challenges as they also witness a steady rise in employee turnover. Indeed, the United State Bureau of Labor Statistics data shows that 2021 turnover rates are at all-time highs since data collection began in 2000, and similar trends are observed in other regions, including Europe, Asia, and Latin America. In this CAHRS working group, discussants shared some of the current challenges associated with rising worker mobility.

DISCUSSION

TAKEAWAYS

1. Causes of Employee Turnover During the Pandemic

Throughout the working group session, discussants identified four reasons why they were facing increased attrition rates during the Pandemic: employee distrust and uncertainty, siloed work environment, conflicting employee preferences toward work-at-home and return-to-work, and work intensification.

1.1 Employee Distrust and Uncertainty

It was reported that employee distrust has increased since the Pandemic. With persistent uncertainties, it has been challenging for organizations to make industry forecasts and develop concrete plans to share with their employees. Consequently, information sharing with employees has significantly decreased. Some participants mentioned that workers have perceived the decline in information sharing as only adding to their uncertainty, which has led to an increase in the likelihood of leaving.

1.2. Siloed Work Environment

Given the pandemic-induced changes to many organizations' work-from-home policies, employees have been working for a substantial amount of time without interacting with colleagues. As such, work relationships have become more siloed and employees feel more distant from their team and organization. Many employees are experiencing feelings of isolation that contribute to heightened emotional exhaustion, depression, and lower identification with the workplace, all of which has increased employee turnover.

Several participants noted that new hires have been particularly vulnerable to these issues, as siloed work environments have adversely affected their onboarding experience. For instance, absent interpersonal interactions, some new hires have struggled to feel connected with the organization and understand their role. Furthermore, important onboarding information that had been formerly delivered through informal, in-person interactions (e.g., water cooler talk) was sometimes missed when onboarding new hires virtually. As such, new hires have lacked a sense of community and organizational attachment, and some have even resigned soon after being employed.

16
participants
from
15
CA H R S Companies:

Accenture
Bloomberg
Boeing
Boston Scientific
Cigna
CNH Industrial
Colgate Palmolive
CUBIC
Estée Lauder
Manulife
Microsoft
Otis
Samsung Electronics America
Terex
Verizon

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1.3. Conflicting Employee Preferences Toward Work-at-Home and Return-to-Work

Due to the Pandemic, the life and work boundaries of many individuals have blurred or even collapsed. As such, participants noted that many employees are finding remote-only jobs extremely attractive in balancing their work-life responsibilities. Some are willing to switch to a different remote-only job should they be required to come back to the office. On the other hand, work-from-home has caused some employees to experience exhaustion and burnout, and feel disconnected from other workers. These employees are longing for return-to-work to re-socialize with their peers and build a sense of being part of the organization. Organizations have been challenged to reconcile the conflicting preferences of their employees, and some are losing employees as they resolve their policies.

1.4. Work Intensification

Some discussants indicated that a considerable proportion of employees left the company due to increased workload. In particular, some mentioned that HR practitioners were especially susceptible to this trend due to “change fatigue” where employees burn out from constantly adjusting their company’s policies and guidelines in response to the pandemic. Due to change fatigue, employees are quitting in search of other positions that may be less demanding.

2. Interventions Used to Address Employee Turnover

The discussants also shared the practices they used for managing rising turnover during the Pandemic. Overall, many endeavored to attract and identify key talent to cushion against labor shortages, acknowledge and recognize their employees, and help employees feel connected as much as possible.

2.1 General Talent Acquisition and Retention Efforts

The discussants mentioned various practices related to acquiring and retaining talent. In terms of talent acquisition, one participant mentioned relying on employee resource groups for helping attract top talent. For example, former employees were contacted and rehired through these resource groups. In addition, they changed recruitment messages to highlight the value and meaningfulness of the open jobs rather than simply listing their tasks and responsibilities. They also interacted with potential applicants via social media to promote positive recruitment experiences. In terms of talent retention, they conducted talent reviews and held frequent career conversations with employees. During the process, they identified employees who showed risks of leaving and proactively conducted stay interviews. Moreover, they invested in leadership skills training to help supervisors better guide their subordinates throughout the Pandemic. Further, some discussants said they offered above-market-average salaries.

As a caveat to these retention efforts, one participant shared that some employees have been leveraging the company’s retention efforts for their own interests. In this example, the company provided compensation-based retention benefits to high performers, hoping to increase their intent to stay. Unexpectedly, these employees quit their jobs once they received the

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This Summary Report was prepared by John Hausknecht and Note Taker David Chung for participants of the "Managing Employee Turnover and Worker Mobility" Virtual Working Group.

The Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) is an international center serving corporate human resources leaders and their companies by providing critical tools for building and leading high performing HR organizations. CAHRS' mission is to bring together Partners and the ILR School's world-renowned HR Studies faculty to investigate, translate and apply the latest HR research into practice excellence.

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the benefits and used them as a negotiation tool to increase their compensation at a different organization. The discussant's experience implies that retention efforts need to be carefully designed, or may conversely contribute to additional turnover.

2.2. Alleviating Employee Distrust and Uncertainty

To overcome employee distrust and uncertainty, one discussant suggested engaging in ongoing informal conversations with employees about what is next, even if the situation is too uncertain to develop concrete long-term plans. The discussant said that such informal communication allows employees to perceive that the organization is consistently trying to resolve employee concerns and can spark helpful ideas for addressing challenges.

2.3. Helping Employees Feel Connected at Work

Several organizations adopted practices aimed at relieving employees' feelings of disconnectedness. For example, one company created an online recognition platform to help employees feel valued by the organization. Similarly, another company launched a learning hub where employees can make informal connections while attending online training. In some cases, change management training was also offered. Additionally, one company representative said they identified exemplar teams in successfully making consistent connections with each other during the Pandemic and shared their routines with other teams.

Some organizations also shared their effort in improving the onboarding experiences of new hires. For instance, online training about the company culture and routines has been offered. In some cases, companies are encouraging managers to have one-on-one or team lunches to develop connections with onboarding employees. Welcome merchandise was sent to new hires to make them feel connected and cared for by the organization. Lastly, one company also surveyed its newly employed workers. The company used the results to understand its new hires' needs and induced a sense of community among the newcomers by fulfilling those needs.

2.4. Giving Employees Discretion in Deciding Where to Work

To reconcile conflicting employee preferences toward work-at-home and return-to-work, many companies provided three options to employees: working fully remote, working full-time in the office, and working only several days in the office (i.e., hybrid). While the approach was helpful in accommodating contrasting employee demands, it has incurred various administrative costs. For instance, to allow employees to work in the office, companies had to ensure the workers worked in the office with enough spacing and had to monitor compliance with COVID-19 regulations. Meanwhile, they also witnessed productivity losses when fully remote workers experienced exhaustion and burnout. The discussants indicated that they are still experimenting with various solutions to these issues.

2.5. Acknowledging Employees' Increased Workload

Knowing that employees — and HR staff in particular — have dedicated themselves to making constant adjustments to help employees work safely yet efficiently, the discussants said they tried to acknowledge employee contributions much as possible. Some mentioned "thank you" days for employees and provided time off and other benefits as a sign of gratitude.