The Great Resignation

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As restrictions are lifted around the world, we are all eagerly awaiting a return to our "new normal." We've seen various predictions for what that new normal will look like: remote work becoming more commonplace, the shift to e-commerce enduring, and international travel restricted (at least temporarily) to those who have been fully vaccinated.

While remote and/or hybrid work is a large part of the conversation around the new normal for business, there's another disruption that employers should be planning for: the "Great Resignation."

Coined by Anthony Kotz, an Associate Professor of Management at Mays Business School, Texas A&M University, the Great Resignation refers to the massive number of employees around the world who will likely leave their current positions post pandemic. Microsoft reports that, "41 percent of the global workforce is likely to consider leaving their current employer within the next year, with 46 percent planning to make a major pivot or career transition."

As businesses consider their takeaways from the pandemic and start to reimagine the post-pandemic workspace, the Great Resignation should hold considerable weight in planning. Your post-pandemic vision will determine which employees stay, which ones leave, and which ones you can attract to work for you.

A Closer Look At The Great Resignation

The number is startling: 41% of the global workforce will likely consider leaving their current employer. Why is this happening?

There isn't one universal root cause, other than the havoc caused by the pandemic. That havoc manifested in different ways.

First, employees who may have already been thinking about leaving prior to the pandemic likely held on due to uncertainty and fewer job opportunities. Statistics support this theory. Using information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey, Anthony Kotz shows that there were about 6 million fewer job resignations in 2020 than there were in 2019. And, as could be expected by this theory, 2021 is already seeing a surge in resignations. March 2021 saw the highest resignation rate for any March in the past 20 years.

For those employees who had no thoughts of resigning in March 2020, the pandemic may have caused a shift in how they perceived their jobs. For example, during the pandemic, employees may have:

- Learned to appreciate the flexibility of remote work;

- Reevaluated their role with their present company;

- Experienced exhaustion or burnout from digital overload; and/or

- Lost out on networking opportunities that could have led to career advancement with their current employers.

They may have also thought more deeply about their personal priorities. During the pandemic, many of us pondered questions like:

- Where do we want to live?

- What's important to our mental health and wellbeing?

- What kinds of contributions do we want to make to the world?

- What makes us truly happy?

As employees sifted through their experiences and thoughts, many realized that they don't want to go back to their old way of living once the pandemic ends.

Additionally, Kotz argues that the pandemic allowed many workers to "reduce expenses, pay off debt and save money." This financial security makes it easier for employees to handle the transition to another place of employment.

Finally, many people are leery about returning to their workplaces without guarantees that safety measures will be enforced and that all their coworkers have been fully vaccinated.

For all these reasons, employees are leaving their jobs and a massive transition is happening within the talent landscape.

Transitioning to a Hybrid Work Environment

Statistics show that employees have mixed feelings about remote work. Microsoft reports that "over 70 percent of workers want flexible remote work options to continue, while over 65 percent are craving more in-person time with their teams."

To address these concerns and to mitigate the effects of the Great Resignation, a transition to a hybrid model – which blends remote and in-person work – is likely the best solution. In fact, Microsoft reports that, as of January 2021, 66% of business decision makers were considering a redesign of their workspaces, in anticipation of a hybrid work environment.

Creating a successful hybrid model isn't just about allowing employees to work from home when and if they choose to do so. There are a number of key issues that need to be thoughtfully considered and developed.

Creating Individualized Work Plans

Some employees flourished in the remote work environment; others floundered. Likewise, a hybrid model isn't necessarily the best option for all employees. In order to retain and attract top talent during the Great Resignation, it's going to be important for employers to design a model in which each individual employee can feel valued and happy. To do that, Kotz argues that employers will need to have "one-on-one conversations with employees about their well-being and about how their jobs can be re-crafted to support their pursuit of happiness and purpose."

Providing Appropriate Space And Technology

After 18 months of remote work, many employees are still reporting that they lack the necessary technology to effectively work at home, according to Microsoft:

It goes without saying that employees are unlikely to stay at a job if their performance is hindered by a lack of tools. Therefore, the immediate challenge for employers is to equip their employees with all the tools they need to be productive and happy, regardless of where they are working.

The next step will be to create on-site office spaces that are enticing to employees. Those spaces will need to be designed in a way that encourages collaboration and ensures that all voices will be heard.

Reducing Digital Exhaustion

"Zoom fatigue" is real but it's not the only thing contributing to the digital exhaustion of remote workers. As Microsoft states, "The digital intensity of

workers' days has increased substantially, with the average number of meetings and chats [and emails] steadily increasing since last year." Fifty-four percent of employees feel overworked while 39% feel exhausted. This is simply unsustainable.

In order to retain and attract top talent, employers who find ways to reduce digital exhaustion will have an edge during the Great Resignation. Simple solutions are encouraging employees to move around, even while videoconferencing, and respecting employees' break times.

Encouraging Connection And Culture

Creating real connection with others always takes effort. But, it's tougher to do in an online environment. While connecting one-on-one with colleagues and managers during the pandemic was difficult for many remote workers, teams also became more siloed.

Connection with other colleagues and managers is crucial for support, growth, cross-team collaboration, and idea generation. Company loyalty is engendered through both connection and a vibrant company culture that encourages social support. As employers look for ways to retain and attract talent during the Great Resignation, one key will be to reframe connection and network building from being passive endeavours to being proactive ones to make sure that all employees make the connections that they need to thrive.

Bolstering Inclusion

Remote work is inherently inclusive because everyone is in the same virtual room. There is space provided for employees to contribute their thoughts and ideas in their own ways and in their own time (e.g. Slack, chat, email, videoconferencing).

Maintaining that inclusive environment post pandemic can take some effort. It is well worth the payoff, both in terms of mitigating the effects of the Great

Resignation and in creating a better workplace. As Diana Ellsworth points out, policy alone can't make a workplace more inclusive; managers need to model inclusive behaviour on a daily basis. As they do so, they become more effective as managers. And effective managers improve connection, enhance the productivity of employees, and increase the effectiveness of teams. Since all of these factors contribute to retaining and attracting top talent, bolstering inclusion should be key for every organization post pandemic.

Proactively Planning For Talent Acquisition

The Great Resignation signals a dramatic shift in employment trends and in the way that the workplace is structured. It's in the best interest of employers to proactively plan for this shift rather than grappling with it once it's in full motion.

But even with the creation of a more supportive and flexible work environment, some employees are still going to resign. Be proactive in creating a talent pipeline. The best way to do so is to connect with a talent partner who can start considering their own talent pool in response to your anticipated needs.

Filling The Gaps With Freelance Talent

As workers redefine and reprioritize their needs post pandemic, many will choose to embrace the Great Resignation. One way to do that is to embark on a freelance career as a way to hang onto the flexibility that they've come to appreciate. As a piece in Fast Company points out, employers need to understand this shift and be prepared to attract and contract freelance talent.

Start thinking now about creating a workforce that relies on both full-time employees and freelancers. As you demonstrate your flexibility in this regard,

you may show your existing employees that independent contracting is an option for them to continue working for you if they've been thinking about jumping ship.

The Great Resignation is already underway. In order to keep top talent attracted to and employed by your company, it's important to understand the impetus behind this shift and how best to manage it.