

Are You Prepared for the 'Great Detachment'? The New Trend Harming Your Business

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Employees' dissatisfaction with work and their desire to leave their jobs are at their highest levels in a decade, according to a recent Gallup survey of 22,000 U.S. employees.

Company leaders will have a difficult time retaining and attracting employees through this Great Detachment — as Gallup calls it — if they don't do a better job of setting clear expectations and inspiring employees with a mission they can get behind, says Ben Wigert, Gallup's director of research and strategy for workplace management in Omaha, Nebraska.

"It's important that communication rallies people around why we're doing the work we do, how we do it to best serve our customers and how we ourselves can better develop into our job, into a career that's meaningful to us," Wigert says.

The percentage of employees who are watching for or actively seeking a new job reached 51% in Gallup's final surveys of 2024 — in May, August and November — which matched a peak last seen in 2014 and 2015, Gallup reported. Meanwhile, only 18% of the employees in the

November survey were extremely satisfied, a low point for the decade, matching levels of dissatisfaction in February 2024 and in 2022.

"We have this pent-up frustration, or this feeling of feeling stuck in your job or your organization," Wigert says. "That's going to hurt your performance today; it's going to hurt your culture today; it's going to be a threat to retention tomorrow."

Whether the frustration and desire to leave translates to increased turnover rates in 2025 will depend on the economy and job market, he says. For now, slower hiring and quit rates are keeping many discontented people stuck in place and disengaged.

"Usually when overall satisfaction drops and people are looking to leave a job, they actually do leave," he says. The last time turnover intentions were this high, in 2014 and 2015 in the wake of the Great Recession, "people were actually making good on that desire to leave."

Wigert says he sees an opportunity for company leaders to turn around the stagnant employee engagement indicators, first by resetting expectations and priorities for employees. The percentage of employees who know what's expected of them at work dropped to 45% at the end of 2024, continuing a trend of sub-50% marks since 2021 for all but one of Gallup's surveys in that period.

Leaders need to get back to the basics, he says: Have two-way conversations with their team members to set expectations, especially with young, newly hired, or hybrid- or remote-work employees. Leaders should set expectations collaboratively with employees, align the expectations with team goals, discuss expectations regularly and factor them in along with attention to employee workload and well-being issues.

"We're also seeing some concerning indications employees don't feel like their employer cares about them," Wigert says. "Employee well-being needs to become a priority. Employee life evaluations hit a record low this year, negative daily emotions are high, and mental health is of continually increasing concern."

Another top goal of company leaders should be to connect their employees' individual contributions at work to a mission and purpose, Wigert says. Only 30% of employees in the latest survey strongly believe that the mission of their company makes their job important, a record low for Gallup surveys dating back to 2007.

Employees need to know that their work matters and that their organization makes a difference in the world, Wigert says, and building a sense of common purpose can encourage employees to be highly engaged.

Leaders need to communicate an inspiring organizational vision that the employees can support, and managers then need to connect their teams to the vision, Wigert says.

Gallup's analysis of its employee surveys shows that improving clarity of expectations for employees can increase profitability by 9% and work quality by 11%. Improving the employee

connection to the mission of their organization can reduce turnover by 32% and improve productivity by 15%.

The Gallup surveys take a representative sample of the U.S. workforce based on race, gender, age, industry and job type, and the Great Detachment trends have affected workers across all classifications, Wigert says. "It's almost shocking how universal a problem this is."

However, hybrid and remote workers have shown greater declines in knowing what's expected of them and in believing in the mission of their organization. That doesn't mean employers can simply solve the problem with full-time office work, but targeted in-office teamwork can help, Wigert says.

"Just forcing them in and taking away their autonomy would probably work against you because people have new expectations for what they want from their careers and their employers," he says. "Make sure they're coming together to connect as a team and doing some of the more difficult collaboration. Build relationships; maybe create some time for that impromptu creativity."