

Employees Quit: How to Make the Difficult Situation Better

HR Morning | Michele McGovern | February 22, 2022



Employees quit at an alarming rate nowadays. But turnover doesn't have to be all gloom and doom in the HR world.

The hard fact: The national quit rate is at about 3%, which is in line with an all-time high, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

The easier truth: You – and your front-line managers – can turn a difficult quitting situation into a force for good.

In today's labor market – whether you consider it a Great Resignation, Great Reshuffle or Great Opportunity – you'll want to handle employee quits differently than you have in the past.

Naturally, the best way to handle turnover is to avoid it: Keep employees engaged and happy through proactive efforts, plus offer attractive benefits and compensation. Still, some employees will be lured away by more appealing work situations. Others will decide to leave the workforce. And some will relocate.

So, in the absence of zero turnover, you'll want to make the best of any turnover.

Here are six strategies to best handle employee quits.

Make it a graduation, not a funeral

"An organization's 'duty of care' can't end the moment an employee hands in their resignation because safeguarding the well-being of your workforce begins with caring about them as people, not just as employees," says Sarah Wittman, assistant professor of management at George Mason University's School of Business.

Wittman suggests you "treat an employee's departure as a joyous event – a graduation rather than a funeral."

That could mean managers and colleagues will need to put aside potential hard feelings about the parting. Once they do, though, it can make "the rituals of transition" optimistic, Wittman says.

For instance, you might want to have a goodbye cake or drinks after work to celebrate the lasting contributions the employee has made. Rather than dwell on what might have to change, focus on the positive changes the employee made in his or her tenure.

Interview with the right intent

Many exit interviews tend to focus on “the end” – the end of employment, relationships, paperwork, contact, etc.

But if you pivot the focus toward new beginnings, you can probably get more out of an exit interview.

“The exit interview should be more about keeping the departing employee engaged rather than a postmortem,” Wittman says.

You can still have the normal conversation to better understand why employees quit (more on that in the next section, too).

To that, add an element on creating an online “alumni network.” Unless you have non-compete protocols, talk about staying connected through professional social sites, such as LinkedIn, and ways you might be able to network in the future.

Find out what’s important

You’ve likely heard (or will hear) that many employees who quit do so because the job isn’t flexible enough.

“Nowadays, people want jobs that fit in better with their lifestyles, offering a flexible working culture, a good work-life balance, or benefits such as childcare support or enhanced annual leave,” says Lily Valentin, Head of Operations for North America at Adzuna.

Do you know the kind of flexibility employees want? If not, you won’t retain them. That’s where employee quits can be helpful.

Talk in depth with departing employees to find out:

- what stressed them most in their role
- where they craved more flexibility
- which benefits meant the most to them, and
- how they felt about their compensation.

The answers probably won’t change their decision to leave, but they can help you explore and possibly establish more flexibility.

Look for opportunities to change

Companies can turn quits into an operational advantage.

CEOs in the U.S. consider labor shortages and turnover issues the top threat to their operations, according to The Conference Board's study C-Suite "Outlook 2022: Reset and Reimagine."

Employee quits and lack of new job candidates won't likely get better this year. So now's the time to review procedures, protocols and overall operations to find and eliminate the outdated and unnecessary.

When you loosen the restraints on employees who stay, you give them more autonomy. Employees who are in control of how the work gets done won't become overwhelmed. Even better, they almost always find better, more efficient ways to do the work.

"Ask for their help in building the future, encourage a 'speak up' culture, and develop empathetic managers who ensure that all employees, regardless of where or how they work, have opportunities for growth and impact," says Rebecca Ray, Ph.D., Executive VP of Human Capital at The Conference Board. "Companies can also offer, where possible, greater flexibility."

Plan together

When an employee quits, many people in your organization are affected – from fellow team members to the payroll administrator. And they'll need to know about the departure and how it'll affect them.

To make the transition easier, you might want to collaborate with the employees who quit on how to present their departure, suggest Harvard Business School researchers.

Some things to decide:

- Who will tell others about the departure – the employee, their boss, HR?
- How will you tell others – in one-on-one meetings, in an email, at a group meeting?
- What will be the next steps as far as filling the role and the transition?
- What will be the changes in daily responsibilities, chains of command or processes?

Plan the knowledge share

When employees quit, the organization will almost always be short staffed, at least for a while. That can be disarming to the people on the job.

You'll want to make the transition in and out of the turnover situation as easy as possible. That way, it shouldn't snowball into more employee quits.

Front-line managers will want to meet with their teams once everyone knows about the departure. They can acknowledge the “workload problem.” But it won’t have to feel like – or actually be – an overburden.

One employee’s departure can be an opportunity for other employees and teams to grow. Ask employees who are impacted by the quit, “What could this mean for you? Are there things that your colleague does that you have an interest in learning?”

If some or one employee is interested in learning or trying, you might be able to set up shadowing or training before the quitting employee leaves.

Even better, you might be able to maintain continued communication with departing employees. If they’re willing and able, they can share more tips and knowledge for a longer time until other employees absorb their institutional knowledge.