Job Hugging Sounds Like a Good Thing — But It's Actually a Pervasive Problem. Here's Why.

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Key Takeaways

The job market that created the Great Resignation looks much different today. With sky-high economic uncertainty, AI taking over jobs and layoffs hitting once solid-seeming industries like tech and finance, employees are scared for their jobs.

Job stability and employee engagement are two different things — your employees might not be quitting in droves, but they may not be engaged, either.

Now, employees are job hugging, a.k.a. hanging onto their jobs out of fear rather than actual desire to be there.

First came the Great Resignation, when employees shrugged off their underwhelming jobs in the wake of the pandemic. A distaste for returning to the office, a desire to slow down the daily grind and optimism that something better was on the horizon drove the surge, and for a while, workers held all the cards.

Then the tides turned, and we entered the era of Quiet Quitting — employees remained in their roles, at least on paper, but put out the bare minimum effort. Hustle culture had officially worn out its welcome, and workers were done pretending otherwise.

Now, we've entered yet another phase: job hugging, where employees are gripping their positions so tightly they're at risk of throttling them.

For leaders, that might sound like good news. Turnover is down, desks are populated and the chaos of the past few years seems, finally, to be settling. But stability is not the same thing as engagement, and it's important for leaders to be clear on the difference. Here's why.

Why workers are holding on for dear life

The job market that emboldened the Great Resignation looks very different today. In the past, job hopping had a payoff. Younger workers in particular embraced regularly switching roles to achieve plumper paychecks and more impressive job titles. And at the time, it worked. According to a report from H&R Block, nearly one-third of Gen Z changed jobs, with 35% saying they did so with the express purpose of increasing their earnings.

But times have changed. With sky-high economic uncertainty and layoffs hitting once solid-seeming industries like tech and finance, workers are feeling nervous. The incentives that drove them a few years ago to seek new roles have disappeared as hiring has plunged and perks have vanished off the map. AI is also taking its toll, automating away thousands of jobs, with more expected to come.

In short, it's not necessarily that workers are thrilled with their jobs. It's more that now doesn't seem like the time to rock the boat. As of January, job turnover is at a nine-year low.

For leaders, a team member staying out of fear and one staying out of commitment may look the same. After all, they're both at their desks, in front of their computers, ostensibly doing their jobs. The problem is that the difference will eventually become apparent.

What leaders may miss about job hugging

The tricky thing about job hugging is that it doesn't look like an issue — at least not at first. But an employee hanging on out of fear doesn't function the same as someone who is genuinely invested in their job.

For leaders accustomed to measuring engagement through retention numbers, the distinction can be difficult to detect. But there are a few telltale signs I've noticed, both among my own employees and through what I've heard from other executives in my network.

Here's an example: Recently, one of our marketing leads came to me with a problem. A member of her team wasn't underperforming, exactly. She was doing her job, but her ideas lacked a lot of the creative spark they used to have. This employee was a top performer because she took risks; her ideas had a unique spin that it's unlikely anyone else would have come up with.

But in the last six months, that light seemed to have gone out. She had stopped volunteering bold ideas and stopped pushing back when she disagreed on the direction a project was taking.

When my marketing lead finally sat down with her, the reason became clear. She was terrified. Layoff headlines had been following her home every night, and she had convinced herself that the safest thing she could do was shrink. If she didn't make too much noise, she figured, no one would have a reason to look too closely at her role.

That, right there, is job hugging. It probably wasn't even a conscious choice on her part — but that doesn't make it any less real. If you notice someone on your team is more anxious or stressed than they used to be, less vocal, or seemingly content in roles they've probably outgrown, you may have a job hugger on your hands.

What leaders can do

Leaders would be wise to address this issue proactively. It's not, however, a matter of issuing warnings or punishments. It's actually the opposite — doubling down on mentorship and creating development opportunities to stave off stagnation.

In such uncertain times, checking in with employees can go a long way toward understanding their concerns and mindset toward their roles. It's also a time to double down on mentorship. AI is posing a genuine threat to entry-level jobs, with potentially disastrous results: Younger workers are at risk of failing to develop the skills they need to step into more advanced roles further in their careers. Good leaders will dedicate real resources toward creating an atmosphere of growth and stability, ensuring that employees feel valued.

Ultimately, the goal is for employees to embrace their roles with confidence, not cling to them out of terror. An engaged, enthusiastic workforce will always perform better than one that's too nervous and on edge to let their creativity shine through.