

Want to Slow the Great Resignation? Try Empathy



With record numbers of workers leaving their jobs over the past several months, employers are feeling the impact of The Great Resignation.



In November, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics announced that nearly three percent of the entire American workforce left their roles in August 2021.¹ September showed similar numbers,² heightening corporate worries around how to recruit and retain the best people.

Although leisure, hospitality and retail saw the largest losses,³ resignations are occurring across industries. As a result, companies are reassessing how they treat employees and working to mitigate burnout and other inherent struggles of modern employment. To keep their best employees, companies should view the present situation as an opportunity to attract great talent through collaborative, employee-focused work environments driven by leaders who prioritize empathy and openness.

¹Source: [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 2022.](#)

²Source: [U.S. News & World Report, 2021.](#)

³Source: [Marketplace, 2021.](#)

Facing the Empathy Gap

In a recent study from EY, a staggering 90% of workers in the United States said empathetic leadership—the kind that emphasizes transparency, fairness and follow-through—led to higher job satisfaction; 79% said it decreased turnover.⁴

The current imbalance between labor supply and demand has given job seekers leverage and employers are adapting as a result, exploring opportunities to tackle the root causes of attrition by making operational changes based on employee needs.⁵ In office environments, the pandemic accelerated demand for workplace flexibility. Through the implementation of hybrid work, forward-looking organizations are now retooling their offices to be spaces for collaboration that also provide equitable workplace experiences for both in-person and remote employees.

“It’s crucially important to support the workday for both in-person collaboration and distributed contributors, regardless of their location,” said Patrick Cheeseman, CBRE’s Head of EFM Product Management. **“Most employees find value in collaborating in a central space, but they also like the flexibility of remote work, controlling their own environments and eliminating perceived distractions. It will be fascinating to see how these cultural and practical choices impact productivity and success across sectors.”**

Hybrid work is driving a more consumer-oriented approach to the office, meaning employers must rethink both the traditional boundaries of where work is done and how employees are managed to meet the recent uptick in demand for flexibility. Empathy—the ability to imagine yourself in the situation of another person—is a skill that hasn’t been a key performance indicator for managers historically. However, given the rise of distributed

employees with varying locations, backgrounds, and needs, leaders must emphasize people-focused leadership more than ever to be effective in their roles.

According to research from the Center for Creative Leadership,⁶ “Leaders now need to lead people, collaborate with others...and create shared direction, alignment and commitment between social groups with very different histories, perspectives, values and cultures.” To that end, empathy is necessary for leaders to communicate and work with their teams successfully, as self-awareness and empathy—the two most important components of emotional-social intelligence—are key to effective leadership. The active practice of empathy from managers leads to higher employee performance and increased profits, meaning that leaders who lack empathy are costing companies both money and talent.⁷ Emotional-social intelligence also drives individuals to achieve goals and self-actualize much more than cognitive intelligence.

Fortunately for employers, these skills can be enhanced through professional development—studies from the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence show that business leaders who began their workshops with the lowest levels of emotional self-awareness and empathy made the most progress.⁸ Through the right training, coupled with earnest efforts by managers to practice empathy day to day, organizations can make consequential cultural changes that lead to a better overall workplace experience.

⁴Source: [EY, 2021](#).

⁵Source: [New York Times, September 2021](#).

⁶Source: [Center for Creative Leadership, 2020](#).

⁷Source: [Van Bommel, T. The power of empathy in times of crisis and beyond. Catalyst, 2021](#).

⁸Source: [Consortium of Research on Emotional Intelligence, 2006](#).

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The Impact of Experience

Employers focused on building an empathetic and collaborative culture tend to also see value in emphasizing work/life balance and individual autonomy, as these traits help people feel empowered, valued, and understood. Throughout life, our experiences shape how we interpret and understand the world, impacting our choices and assessments of risk. Personal economic experiences—from wide-ranging crises like pandemics to individual job losses—also inform the economic decisions we make in the long term, affecting our choices on everything from where we live to how we spend our money.⁹ In this context, it's easy to understand how the daily experience of working a job can influence an individual's mental health and sense of wellbeing, especially within a difficult workplace culture.



⁹ Source: [National Bureau of Economic Research, 2021](#).

Embracing the Challenge

While making cultural changes to teams can be difficult, these efforts certainly aren't impossible. As part of a more empathetic and caring leadership style, managers may face some novel challenges and growing pains as they seek to encourage, inspire, motivate and understand their employees; leaders must help their people empathize with each other and their clients by example. As noted in the above study on caring leadership, **"The commitment of leaders to the growth of employees could be measured by the improvements in the lives of their employees."** By providing growth opportunities, facilitating open communication and maximizing human potential through empathetic and compassionate leadership, organizations can positively influence the way we approach work going forward and create better outcomes for businesses and individual employees alike.

A version of this article originally appeared on the [CBRE Host blog](#).





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