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Employee retention: 4 effective strategies for employers

According to the [US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), in July of last year, four million Americans quit their jobs. Employee retention and engagement rates were at a historic low, not seen since 2000. Resignations peaked in April and remained abnormally high for several months, with a record-breaking 10 million open jobs at the end of July.

The event was described as "The Great Resignation", brought on by pandemic-related frustrations. The mass employee exit triggered many organizations to rethink their retention strategies as part of a counter-effort dubbed "The Great Retention". Thankfully for Canadian employers, a November 2021 report by CIBC Capital Markets, [reported by BNN Bloomberg](#), shows that the resignation trend was not echoed on our soil.

However, this does not mean that Canadian organizations can't benefit from updating their employee retention strategies to improve employee engagement to retain top talent. Some routes to consider include making time for conversations with staff about growth and development, improving rapport with employees, offering additional time off for mental health, and a competitive mental health benefits package.

Make time for conversations about growth opportunities

The most successful leaders will make the effort to invest in their staff's personal and professional growth.

In an interview for the [Transform Your Workplace](#) podcast, Clint Pulver a.k.a The Undercover Millennial, retention and generational workforce expert, and author of the people management best-seller, I Love It Here, said, "passion, purpose, and the ability to provide are critical contributors to whether an employee loves their job."

Creating an environment where an employee can realize their full potential with what he calls a mentor manager is a key factor in retaining staff, says Pulver. "Great mentor managers are able to communicate the worth of an employee. Managers should not just say 'I see you', but should be able to say 'I see you becoming.'"

According to Pulver, a [mentor manager](#) is someone who strives to be with their people, by asking questions and making "deposits of trust". The more investments of connection, leadership, and inspiration a manager makes in their staff, the more they can ask in return.

The mentor manager's role is less about connecting with the employee, and more about being someone employees want to connect with, while helping them establish their paths, values, and purposes within the organization. At the end of the day, if employees determine they can't grow in their organization, they will go and grow somewhere else.

In a segment with [Bloomberg News](#), Teuila Hanson, LinkedIn's Chief People Officer explained that the workforce social media platform prioritizes recruitment, retention, and ensuring that employees are refining their skills. She urges companies to create a culture of internal mobility and normalize conversations about shifting roles.

"Let employees drive their careers in a way that makes sense to them, as long as the organization is providing tools and infrastructure. Having the time to talk about careers and skills isn't something to shy away from, and leads to a more energizing work environment."

Building rapport in a remote work environment

[Research from Gallup](#) indicates that the pandemic has incited the most significant drop in employee engagement since 2000, with 54% of staff psychologically unattached to their work and company. As a result, these employees tend to do the minimum required and will quickly exit their company for a slightly better offer — leaving colleagues to deal with the increased workloads, stress, frustration, and job dissatisfaction.

Building [emotionally resilient relationships](#) with employees is an important factor in retention. With the lack of face-to-face communications brought on by the pandemic, our jobs are becoming more and more task-oriented.

But if people are an organization's most important asset, then it can be helpful to look at the quality of the relationships developed within its teams. Without meaningful relationships, there's little ability for managers and employees to build rapport. Without rapport, employees are less connected to their roles.

There's a strong business case for using rapport to proactively manage employee morale, but in a remote work environment, making connections isn't always easy. To quote the [Dropbox Work in Progress](#) blog, "sometimes you see the person, but sometimes you just see the screen."

When meeting in person, we tend to focus on eyes and facial expressions. This doesn't transfer well to video, but you can still get a sense of someone's mood by paying attention to their subtle body language and gestures. These can be taken as opportunities to ask how someone is doing, and finding out whether they're stressed or feeling tense. Once you've learned people's mannerisms, researchers say mirroring, or subtly copying behaviour and posture, can facilitate rapport.

Making time for casual conversations is another aspect that can easily be forgotten when working with deadlines and busy schedules. Finding common ground outside of work, like discovering shared interests or hobbies, can go a very long way in humanizing a coworker's experience, especially when onboarding new staff.

Mental health and wellness perks

Though offering a variety of perks has always been a popular employee retention strategy, the pandemic has forced companies to reevaluate what employee perks look like, as team-building retreats, catered lunch-and-learns, and snack-stocked office fridges just haven't been possible in remote work environments.

Instead, some organizations have begun offering wellness stipends and benefits at work as a substitute. According to the [Kaiser Family Foundation's 2021 Employer Health Benefits Survey](#), [nearly 40% of employers](#) expanded their mental health benefits during the pandemic.

Still, some things don't change, as one of the most requested perks continues to be additional paid time off. During the pandemic, many organizations have implemented the practice of mental health days, or mental health day initiatives, which many employees view positively.

SAP, CISCO, and Thomson Reuters are among companies that implemented mental health day initiatives in 2021. "I think it's important to note that this is not an issue that will be solved with a single initiative," said [Dan Healey, head of HR at SAP](#). "To prioritize mental health means to support employees for the long-term and continue to adopt benefits and initiatives that reflect their needs."

In spring and summer of 2021, LinkedIn (15,900 staff) and Bumble (700 staff) both gave their teams a surprise week of vacations, or Global Week of Rest, to recharge. Mozilla replaced their summer off-site employee conference with a similar initiative. HubSpot launched a mental health initiative called HubSpot Unplugged that also included the prescribed Global Week of Rest.

"We need to ensure those people are well-rested and able to support our customer and partner needs for the long haul. As leaders, it's our job to show our employees that taking time off isn't just encouraged, it's critical," said HubSpot's [Chief of People Officer, Katie Burke](#).

A full week off is understandably not realistic for every organization, but a strategic day off to raise awareness of mental health issues and improve employee retention and engagement could be.

Mental health benefits awareness

There's no shortage of data to illustrate how the pandemic has had a negative impact on employee mental health. For this reason, talents are actively seeking employers that embrace and support their need to be seen as a whole person. [According to Robert Half](#), 45% of managers polled in Canada said their company has started offering mental health resources and 39% say they now have general wellness programs in response to COVID-19.

Our [Mind by Maple](#) virtual care platform is a comprehensive mental health benefits service that includes features like access to a wide roster of Canadian-licensed counsellors, with same-day bookings. Like any company benefit, awareness is key, so a communications plan to encourage employee usage will make an impact.

Conclusion

Employee retention rates have long remained an important KPI for employers and HR departments, and now especially with the remote-working environments imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. But employee retention strategies like making time for conversations about growth and development, improving rapport, offering additional time-off for mental health, and a competitive mental health benefits package have been proven to be effective at keeping high-performing talent in their seats and maintaining optimal levels of employee engagement.

If you'd like to speak to one of our experts on how to bring your employee benefits to the next level, [please reach out](#). We'd be happy to share our insights with you as Canada's leading provider of virtual care.

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