

The real reason everyone is quitting their jobs right now

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Nearly two-thirds of workers are looking for a job right now. Research might explain why. Getty Images

The [Great Resignation](#) has taken many by surprise: Nearly [two-thirds of U.S. workers are looking for a new job](#). But according to some HR and management studies, we probably could have predicted this would happen. Over decades, researchers have revealed turnover patterns that can explain why so many are quitting in droves right now. Employers looking to stop the exodus should pay attention: Much of the onus is on them to give workers better reasons to stay.

[Research](#) has shown that people tend to quit their jobs after experiencing a “turnover shock”: a life event that precipitates self-reflection about one’s job satisfaction. Shocks can be positive, like grad school acceptance or a new baby, or negative, like a divorce or sick relative. Or they can be global catastrophes like Covid-19 that upend every aspect of daily life.

The universal nature of the pandemic is a major reason so many are quitting at once. “Most people don’t evaluate their job satisfaction every one of 365 days in a year,” said Brooks Holtom, a professor of management and senior associate dean at Georgetown University. “Those shocks usually happen idiosyncratically for people. But with the pandemic, it’s happened en masse.”

So here we have virtually the entire workforce reassessing their feelings about work. To what degree will they quit? Historically, the availability of other jobs predicted the degree to which people follow through, and right now the U.S. has a record number of job openings. Between these, the widespread self-reflection, and increased ability to work from anywhere, it’s a “perfect storm colluding against employers,” said Holtom.

While the pandemic and subsequent shock were out of anyone’s hands, there’s a lot that employers could have done—and still can do—to keep employees from quitting. Job embeddedness, a [widely studied](#) turnover theory [proposed in 2001](#) by Holtom and two colleagues, Terence Mitchell and Thomas Lee, identifies six factors that determine how much a person is “embedded” in their job, and thus how likely they are to leave it.

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Three are related to an employee’s experience of the workplace. “Fit” is their compatibility with the company’s values, culture, and expectations. “Links” are their relationships with other people at work. And “sacrifices” are things they’d give up if they quit, like stock options or good health care packages.

The other three factors address a person’s experience *outside* of work, which makes job embeddedness unique among most ideas about turnover. Job embeddedness also takes into account fit, links, and sacrifices as they relate to the community in which a person lives *because* of their job. An employee might consider whether they “fit” in the neighborhood or city they live in for work. They may have “links” to family or friends in the area. Moving away might mean “sacrificing” access to good schools for their kids.

All six of these factors are important in determining the likelihood a person will quit. But during the pandemic, with many people multitasking from home, community factors took on more prominence than usual, said Holtom. The more people’s lives were disrupted outside of work, the more they needed employers to provide options that allowed them to be in a community that satisfied fit, links, and sacrifices. What the Great Resignation may point to is, at least in part, a failure of employers—some of whom were struggling to keep their businesses afloat—to accommodate those needs of workers during the pandemic.

“It’s more important than ever for employers to understand how powerful the community connections can be, and seek to provide ways to enable people to work from where they would prefer,” said Holtom. “Because to the degree they do, they’ll be able to reduce future turnover.”

Of course, remote work is impossible for people in many industries, like health care, restaurants, and hospitality. But regardless of industry, employers fretting about turnover should be thinking about [how they can allow employees to have more satisfactory lives outside of work](#). If allowing people to relocate isn’t possible, maybe it means letting them stagger their work hours or subsidizing childcare. As diversity consultant Lily Zheng recently wrote in a [viral post](#) addressing employers on LinkedIn, “Do some reflection and remember what you’ve put your workers through.”

According to Holtom’s [research](#), some ways employers can promote embeddedness within an organization are by investing in employee development and skill-building, giving them input into company decision-making, and offering them employment security and flexibility. To improve employees’ experience in their communities outside of work, companies can offer services and benefits that help people care for their families, like babysitting, elder care, and good health care; encourage workers to volunteer and engage with local organizations and businesses; and support employees in building their own professional networks.

It can’t be assumed that everyone will return to work, at least as we once knew it, once the pandemic ends. Unlike previous generations whose jobs were tied to farms and manufacturing plants, the service-oriented jobs that dominate the U.S. economy allow people much more flexibility when it comes to where, when, and how they work. This means people—especially younger generations—are in a position to interrogate what a job is, its purpose, and the terms of employment, said Holtom. Coupled with the fact that turnover is consistently highest among young people and among those in the first three years of a job, it is perhaps no surprise that [Millennials and Gen Z](#), who are calling for more work-life balance and more flexibility, are driving the Great Resignation. These workers are, as *LA Times* columnist LZ Granderson [wrote](#) recently, “resetting their priorities, and maybe forcing policymakers to do so, too.”