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Global Survey Highlights Ways to Strengthen Workplace Culture

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A Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) survey of more than 9,000 workers in 12 different countries shows that a workplace culture with transparent communication that builds trust is one of the best ways to ward off high turnover. Better people management and empathy training can help improve workplace culture.

However, despite working in overwhelmingly positive and safe workplace cultures, almost half of surveyed workers (45 percent) have thought about leaving their current organization and 30 percent have actively searched for a new job in the past six months.

Most employees who have thought about leaving their current organization work in organizations with poor cultures, the survey found. Ninety percent of surveyed workers who rate their culture as poor have thought about quitting, compared with 72 percent of workers who rate their organizational culture as average and 32 percent who rate their culture as good.

The results about work culture and turnover are similar for workers who are actively looking for a new job. More than 1 in 5 employees (22 percent) who rate their culture as good have actively looked for a new job in the past six months, and that number grows to 43 percent of workers who rate their culture as average and 64 percent who rate their workplace culture as poor.

Feedback

Poor Workplace Culture Can Worsen Turnover

Most workers who have thought about leaving their current organization work in organizations with poor cultures. Despite the relatively smaller percentage of workers considering quitting when they work in good organizational cultures, they still comprise almost 1 in 3 workers. The results are similar for workers who are actively looking for a new job.

…of those who rate their company culture as poor.	…of those who rate their company culture as average.	…of those who rate their company culture as good.

Workers who have thought

Poor workplace culture is infectious, according to Jackie VanDerMeulen and Andrew Gould, attorneys with Fasken in Toronto. "In our experience, when employees are unhappy, they are more likely to share that sentiment with their colleagues, be ineffective at work, create a worse environment for their co-workers and thereby continue the cycle," they said in a joint e-mail.

A sample of 9,464 workers were surveyed in September and October 2021. Respondents were from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, India, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Why Do Employees Leave?

Employees leave for a variety of reasons, but a lack of purpose and poor people management are two main factors.

Thirty percent of surveyed workers who are actively searching for a new job say they don't have a meaningful career, compared with 10 percent of workers who are not actively searching.

People management also matters. Strong supervisors make their employees feel inspired and motivated at work, whereas weak supervisors contribute to irritation and dissatisfaction, the survey report noted.

More than half of workers (54 percent) who are looking for a new job believe their supervisor doesn't know how to lead a team. A void in leadership can quickly lead to turnover, the survey report noted.

Uberto Percivalle, an attorney with Andersen in Milan, said that when workplace culture deteriorates, "it is normal for employees to search for better jobs."

He added, "There are many negative patterns that may unfortunately prevent teams from doing their best. Employees who are not free to express themselves will not be able to perform well. Employees who have reasons to be afraid of their bosses and co-workers will likely seek job alternatives and anyway will limit their potential. Lack of clear and consistent objectives will cause the performance of various employees to be unaligned."

Percivalle also said that "employees who are not credited and rewarded for their merit will also search for different jobs and in the meantime grow disgruntled and disenchanted from their companies."

Don Dowling, an attorney with Littler in New York City, added, "Decades ago, there was a stigma against job hopping; we no longer have that. Therefore, these days when unemployment is low and jobs are plentiful, an employer whose work conditions are unappealing struggles with recruitment and retention—and turnover gets high."

How Organizations Can Improve Workplace Culture

One way for organizations to improve their culture is to focus on people management. Due to their daily interactions with employees, people managers have a major impact on workplace culture, so they must be properly trained and feel empowered to lead.

"Improving poor management needs to begin at the top," VanDerMeulen and Gould stated. "Managers, like employees, learn and should lead by example. Training and mentorship are foundational, but the most effective way to improving management is to place well-positioned employees into those positions in the first place."

Nearly 9 in 10 of surveyed workers (87 percent) indicated that their manager contributes to setting their work team environment. Therefore, people managers need to be trained on how to be more effective supervisors, such as building trust, eradicating bad behavior and showing empathy.

Currently, only 69 percent of surveyed workers think their direct supervisor is empathetic, so there is room for improvement, the survey report noted.

There are significant differences between organizations that offer empathy training and those that do not. For example, 93 percent of employees who work at an organization that offers empathy training said they love working for their organization because of the culture, compared with 56 percent of employees who work at an organization that does not offer such training.

"Empathy is an important skill in any manager's set," VanDerMeulen and Gould stated. "Good managers can identify with their employees while still maintaining the necessary boundaries and productivity."

They added that the last two years have resulted "in a monumental shift in the way people approach and prioritize work—supervisors, executives and managers included. It is important for managers to respect the boundaries of employees."

Organizations that fail to offer empathy training leave themselves more vulnerable to turnover, the survey report concluded.

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