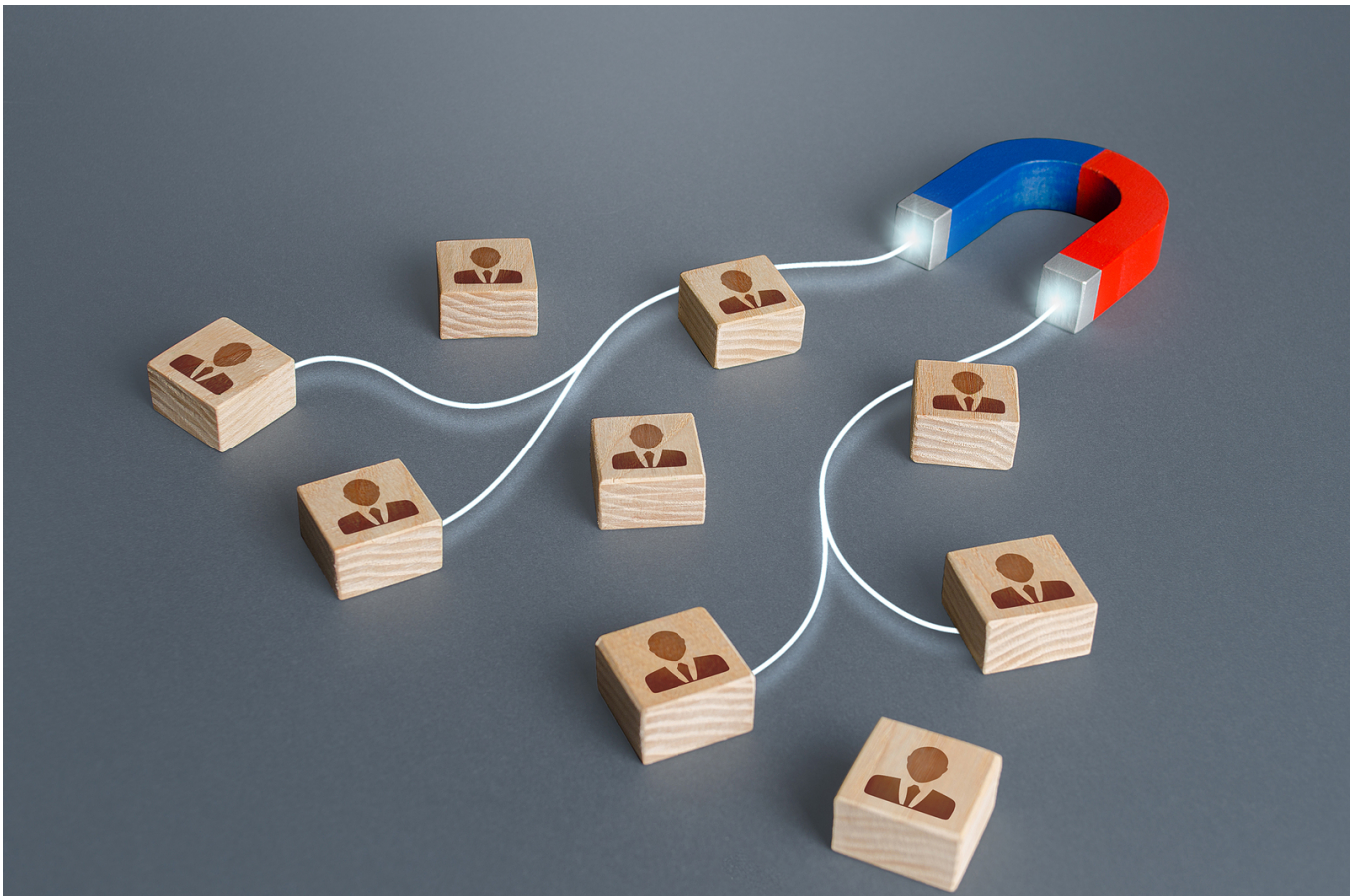


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From Defense to Offense: HR Leaders Face a Post-Pandemic Hiring Boom

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There's no other way to say it: HR leaders have been forced to "play defense" for the past 18 months in challenging workplace conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many companies to slow hiring and delay internal promotions, and for the most part, employees stayed put in a professional bunker of their own making out of sheer necessity.

Now that the pandemic has begun to ease, with states reopening for business and high percentages of people already vaccinated, employee turnover rates have naturally increased. As such, a significant hiring boom has already begun and is only expected to gain momentum. How well HR leaders can pivot to "playing offense" will determine the success of attracting and retaining key talent to their respective organizations.

Looming in the pandemic's wake are a number of priorities HR leaders will need to tackle in their efforts to "play offense." These include but are not limited to:

- Dealing with an organization's growth agenda
- Reexamining internal succession processes
- Addressing flexible or hybrid work arrangements
- Tailoring compensation benefits programs and practices
- Evaluating new organizational design and effectiveness models to augment full-time workers and embrace the growing gig workforce

Addressing these issues will no doubt be a tall order. Successfully navigating them will require perspective, vision, and a comprehensive understanding of how we got here to begin with.

The Hiring Boom at a Glance

Experts have long talked about the economic recovery that could potentially occur after the pandemic, with the "New Normal" of COVID-19 restrictions slowly giving way to the "Next Normal" of reopening businesses. But recently, as reported by [The New York Times](#), economists began describing the rebound in more bombastic terms—as a "...supercharged rebound that brings down unemployment, drives up wages and may foster years of stronger growth." Businesses that experienced a baptism by fire during the pandemic have worked hard to stay afloat, and their efforts could soon be rewarded with opportunities provided by an unprecedented hiring boom.

Julia Pollak, labor economist for ZipRecruiter, was asked by [NBC News](#) about the mechanisms behind this extreme surge. She called it "the vaccination job boom" and remarked that, in response to it, employers were proactively taking steps to plan for a permanent reopening.

Companies are attempting to coax a dormant workforce off the sidelines by increasing wages, allowing for more remote work, and taking a hard look at skills as opposed to just experience. That's a marked contrast to the rehiring after the recession of 2008, when employers held the power and could layer on "nice to have" skills on top of basic "need to haves" with impunity. The pandemic started with historic layoffs, but American workers may come out of it with more bargaining power than they've had in quite some time. The leverage, according to Pollak, will remain on the job seekers' side.

Naturally, the Society for Human Resource Management has their finger on the pulse of this employment explosion. Their proprietary publication, [HR Magazine](#), spoke with Melissa Jezior, president and CEO of Eagle Hill Consulting, a management consultancy in Washington, D.C. She likens the vaccination job boom to a "turnover tsunami," spurred by pent-up demand for new jobs that will come crashing down on organizations of all sizes. Employees will have their pick of better compensation and benefits or better work-life balance, according to an Achievers report cited in the same article.

Recent statistics back up these strong statements, with varying urgency depending on where you look. According to [TechRepublic](#), the percentage of employees looking to change jobs can range from 26% to 40%. The [Microsoft Work Trend Index found that 40%](#) of people want a change of scenery. A survey of workers in the U.K. and Ireland [put the number at 38%](#) and a [similar U.S. survey found 26% of workers](#) are planning to leave their current job over the next few months.

The market hasn't been flooded with [this many jobs](#) in almost 25 years—in other words, conditions are ideal for a "Great Resignation." Companies are paying more for hard-to-fill jobs, and some employers are counterbidding for workers with the right skills. It's a candidate-friendly market the likes of which we've never seen, which means HR leaders will have to deploy the right offensive schemes to keep up.

What Candidates Expect from Post-Pandemic HR

According to [Harvard Business Review](#), candidates in this brave new post-COVID world have inflated expectations for work that will require organizations to rethink how they're branding jobs, and how they sell them in the labor market. Candidates increasingly expect companies to offer them not only competitive compensation and benefits, but also a compelling employee experience. This need predates the pandemic, of course, as we've long known about the shared desire of millennials and Gen Z for a [more authentic work environment](#). But now the conditions are right for these workers to make their work dreams a reality. As people

have gotten used to designing their own work experiences, fitting their jobs seamlessly into their lives, candidates are simply less likely to give up autonomy, even if they do return to an in-person work environment.

We hear increasingly from organizations that in order to attract top candidates today, they need to offer a more humanized approach that focuses on candidates as people, not just workers. The new imperative is to talk to them about how working for a given organization can improve not just their employee experience, but their lives as a whole. The reality today is, as companies want to emerge as employers of choice for top talent irrespective of industry, they really need to make sure that they're positioning jobs to be attractive moving forward.

How HR Leaders Can Forge Ahead

Returning to the [turnover tsunami](#) cited earlier by Melissa Jezior, we can now take a look at concrete strategies for staving it off. Jezior advises companies to embrace the idea that business strategy and workforce planning will look different post-pandemic and to get started on identifying the talent, skills and roles that will be necessary to prosper once the health crisis is fully behind us. To use her words: "There is a knee-jerk reaction that often happens when managing turnover. Companies default to backfilling roles with the same skills. But bouncing forward means identifying and cultivating new skills through upskilling, reskilling and in hiring practices."

HR leaders looking to thrive in a post-COVID landscape have one solid, simple adage to fall back on. To put it plainly, talent is key. Companies will need to make sure they have the right talent on board to drive the rebound and growth in a way that will set the business up for long-term success. One stumbling block to consider is that a larger talent pool won't necessarily make recruiting easier as logic might dictate. HR pros should remember that just because there are a lot of available candidates doesn't mean that filling positions with the right talent will be easier. This is especially true in comparison to recent years when unemployment was low and job seekers could be much choosier. But when your organization is ready to ramp up in recovery, bringing the top talent aboard won't be completely straightforward.

As stated rather boldly in an article by [McKinsey & Company](#), Chief Human Resources Officers and other HR leaders can help usher in a new corporate era by "reimagining the basic tenets of organization." They need to consider emerging talent and work models that are creative, adaptable, and resilient. In this new paradigm for work, corporate purpose fuels bold business moves, and "labor" is instead seen as "talent." Hierarchies become networks of teams. Competitors become ecosystem collaborators. And companies become more human:

inspiring, collaborative, and bent on creating an employee experience that is meaningful and enjoyable.

Organizations that can reallocate talent in step with their strategic plans are more than twice as likely to outperform their peers. To link talent to value, the best talent should be shifted into critical value-driving roles. That means moving away from a traditional approach, in which critical roles and talent are interchangeable and based on hierarchy.

As HR thought leader Josh Bersin put it, the global pandemic is causing a big reset—a worldwide ripple effect that most likely has decades-long implications. We're all reconsidering approaches to life, business and working during this time. And the ways we recruit will likewise be different after the pandemic—forward-thinking organizations will take this opportunity to reassess their talent acquisition strategy and processes.