

Dismantling the Employee-Employer Disconnect



Many workplace experts initially credited the Great Resignation to the pandemic—but was this blame misplaced? The narrative goes that the massive disruption of COVID to all facets of life sparked many people to ask what they really wanted out of their lives and careers—the answers drove them to look for new opportunities and, often, higher compensation. While there is truth in these observations, they only reveal part of the story.

At a deeper level, many workplaces are experiencing an employee-employer disconnect. The expectations and preferences of workers are often misaligned with those of business leaders. Only by addressing this dichotomy can employers successfully overcome attrition.

Where's the Employee-Employer Disconnect?

A [McKinsey](#) study looks at the employer perspective of why people are leaving jobs. Overwhelmingly, many business leaders believe these people are leaving because of inadequate compensation, remote work, development opportunities, or simply better job prospects. As it turns out, workers rate these reasons lower on the scale of importance. While employers also recognize an employee's need for engagement, work-life balance, manageable workloads, and family responsibilities, the fact is that they're falling short of meeting the strongest employee motivations.

What employees truly want is to feel valued by their managers, to have a sense of belonging in their workplace, and to have caring and trusting teammates—as well as potential for advancement and a flexible work schedule. These are all desires that *employers* ranked as “less important” motivators. Instead, it turns out that “relational” factors are a much higher priority for workers than employers have typically accounted for. Thus, a disconnect.

Research from [MIT](#) suggests the pandemic was not the catalyst of this disconnect that some experts were proposing. Instead, COVID served to amplify existing issues. For example, the leading predictor of turnover in 2021 was actually toxic culture, which was 10.4 times more likely to lead to attrition than compensation and even burnout. It's unlikely that toxic cultures popped up *because* of the pandemic, but it is feasible that existing toxic cultures were made worse as a result.

The root cause of toxic culture is often this employee-employer disconnect—made worse when events like the pandemic further rock the boat. But misunderstood priorities also create a subtle erosion of employee trust and engagement, even in the absence of a toxic culture.

The Role of Connection in Worker Satisfaction

The disconnect is about more than mismatched priorities. It's also about literal connection—relationship or feeling of *belonging*—between an employer and their mission, vision, goals, and overall workforce. Tap back into the Psych 101 class you once took to remember that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs identifies “belonging” as the third tier after physiological needs and safety needs. This neatly explains why a recent [study](#) revealed that 77% of employees want to work for an employer where they feel connected to the purpose and people. In fact, three in five people would consider leaving a job if that connection was missing.

The necessity of remote work and quarantines during the pandemic vastly complicated the concept of connection. With the rise of virtual meetings, leaders have been forced to reinvent and redefine connection within their organizations. Unfortunately, in the remote environment, more than half of all employees don't feel seen or appreciated. They don't have insight into how their work connects to the company's objectives or even their own goals. And, of course, they struggle to socially connect with colleagues, especially if they were hired during the pandemic. With these challenges stacked up against employers, the Great Resignation seems like the inevitable result.

How to Restore the Connection

One of the biggest challenges in addressing this disconnect—both the mismatch of priorities *and* the growing lack of relationships—is that the idea of “connection” is often intangible and immeasurable. We can look at the data the Great Resignation provided, but it's harder to pinpoint direct causes.

When companies don't have the data or resources to dig into these more subjective underlying causes, many end up turning to bonuses, pay raises, and other perks. As appreciated as these may be for many employees, these quick fixes often communicate a transactional relationship and fail to address their workers' need for a sense of belonging and well-being. Restoring the employee-employer connection requires more meaningful solutions.

The best starting place is to survey employees for their company feedback, using that data to help assess the current state of company management, work environment, benefits packages, employee development, and team dynamic. Do you have the right managers in place? Is there effective training for those managers, especially as it relates to hybrid or remote management? Are the culture, work environment, and team dynamic supportive of all employees, even in a hybrid or remote work model? Understanding the current state of these elements and how it impacts your unique employee base opens the door to tangible solutions to the employee-employer disconnect.

Employee recognition is a good example of a tangible, effective way to foster workplace connection. One [study](#) suggests that companies are twice as effective at addressing connection when they implement a recognition program. Furthermore, tying recognition to company values and tailoring it to your employees will cement recognition into the culture, anchoring a stronger sense of belonging for employees.

However, tactics like these must be tied into a cultural mindset—one that fosters resilience, gratitude, optimism, and flexibility. This is the only way to create a work environment—remote, hybrid, or fully in-person—where employees feel

connected and safe. It's an extraordinary task to create or shift the cultural mindset. It can be reinforced with tactical solutions like recognition, tech solutions, and benefits, and measured through employee feedback and engagement. But at the end of the day, it comes down to effective and compassionate leadership who work to connect with their employees.