



Remain or Resign? Workplace attitudes 2020-2023

Danielle Kearns-Sixsmith, M.S., M.S., Ed. D

Center for Educational and Instructional Technology Research

College of Doctoral Studies

University of Phoenix

Executive summary

With three out of four employers concerned over employee turnover, workplace attitudes and behaviors have never been more important to interpret. Billions of dollars are being invested in retention strategies while employees struggle with the decision to remain or resign. For three years, the Career Optimism Index[®] has captured the trends and shifts in workplace attitudes and behaviors. This review provides indicators of what is working and what is not. Insight gained by this broad-reaching survey is connected to implications for employers and their workers.

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Introduction

What we know about the workplace is becoming increasingly more complex. Changes in employee attitudes and behaviors, including whether to remain or resign, are occurring across all occupations, organizations, industries, labor markets, and countries (Sullivan & Ariss, 2021).

Three out of four employers are concerned about the turnover rate of their employees. Over half are more concerned this year than they were last year, according to the Career Optimism Index[®] 2023, conducted by the University of Phoenix. The Career Optimism Index is a comprehensive measure of workplace perspectives gleaned from employers and employees through the administration and analysis of a 20-minute online questionnaire. Since 2021, this survey is conducted annually across 20 different U.S. market areas. Last year, 500 employers involved in hiring and training of personnel as well as 5000 employees were surveyed.

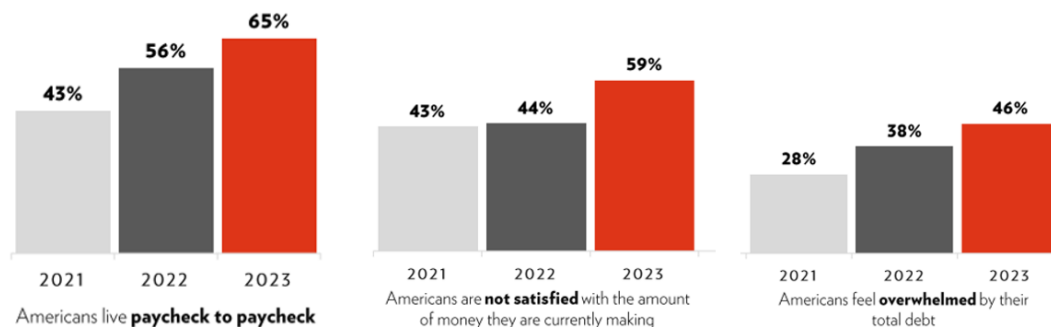
While workplace attitudes and behaviors have been attributed to the pandemic, globalization, technology, markets, and inflation, personal perspectives including self-efficacy, work-life balance, job satisfaction, empowerment, working conditions, and career trajectory contribute. These factors are found in the literature and further explained by theories and models surrounding turnover, chance events, stress, internal organizational change, job realism (as opposed to job preview), social networking, mentorships, and feeling stuck (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022). Complex and situational, employees make and carry out decisions to remain (embeddedness), resign, and/or return to the employer (boomerang). For employers and those tasked with personnel, this can be predictable and preventable. For example, millennials now make up 50% of the global workforce and are more likely to change jobs and careers while older generations are more likely to stay, even post-retirement, as 30% of U.S. men and women are doing (Sullivan & Ariss, 2021).

Resigning

The main claim as to why employees are leaving their job, taking on a second job, or want to leave their job, is because of pay. The claim is that pay does not allow for rising costs and that they have had to cut back due to a rise in basic costs of living. From the annual Career Optimism Index reports 2021 through 2023, there have been substantial increases in the percentage of respondents that claim they are living paycheck-to-paycheck, dissatisfied with their level of pay, and feel overwhelmed by debt (figure 1). Demographic differences are evident when comparing older generations with younger generations, the latter of which is more dissatisfied with current pay rates. Differences can be observed across income, as employees with higher incomes (<\$100K) feel more overwhelmed by debt than those with lower incomes.

Figure 1

U.S. survey participants' (n=5000) responses on living paycheck-to-paycheck, their lack of satisfaction with their pay, and perceptions on debt from the 2021, 2022 and 2023 reports.



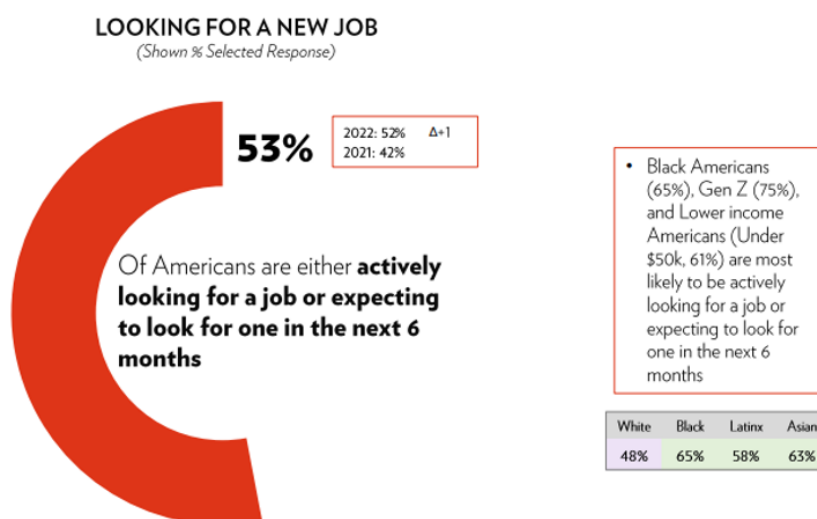
Associated with these financial concerns is burnout. Burnout and mental health struggles that coincide with one's job have been linked to stress, anxiety, frustration, loss of hope in self, and loss of hope in job opportunities. Of the 5000 survey participants, 47% stated they experienced burnout at work and 50% stated that burnout has gotten worse year-over-year from 2022 to 2023. Zhang et. Al. (2022) examined burnout on career-related stress, using frameworks

that associated career competencies (reflective, communicative, and behavioral career competencies) with career sustainability. They found all three competencies positively impacted career sustainability and that burnout negatively impacted two of the three competencies: communication and behavior. Workplace communication and employee behavior have been proven to be impacted by working conditions. Changing work conditions and environments, during the pandemic for example, introduced new work-related stress (Johnson, 2023).

Employees experiencing burnout are more likely to leave their job even if they do not have another job opportunity waiting (30% survey participants, higher than the 2022 report). Of these, those with lower incomes are more likely to leave without another job lined up. Similarly, 43% of survey participants stated they would accept a severance package of 3 months if one was offered. And for those willing to leave their employer, 53% of study participants claimed to be actively seeking another job or expected to in the near future (figure 2). This is an increase from 42% in the 2021 report.

Figure 2

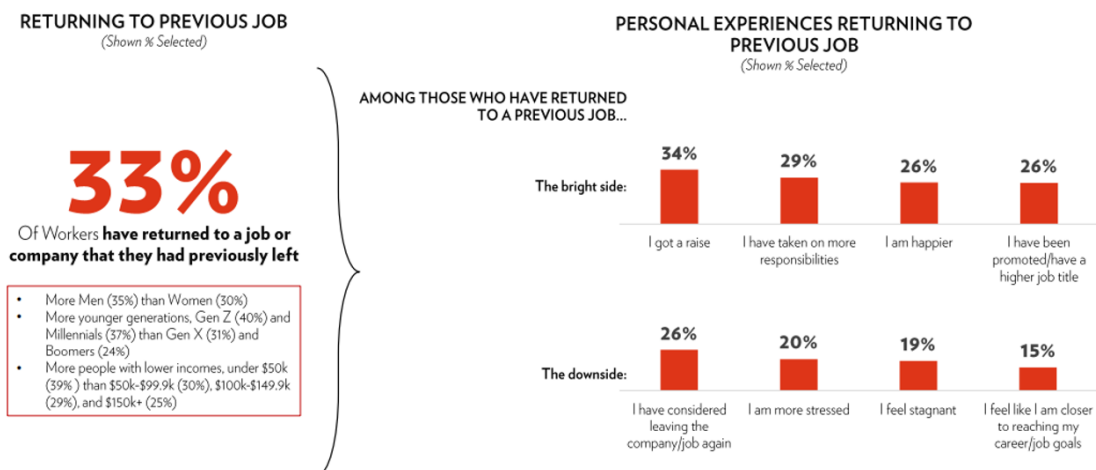
U.S. survey participants' (n=5000) on pursuing a new job in the next six months.



This increase may be the result of feeling there is a *better job fit* for them (66% employee survey respondents) and ample job opportunities outside of their current employer (71%). Others are leaving only to return. Coined *boomerang* employees, 33% of participants claimed to have returned to prior employers (figure 3). For those that returned, some reported feeling stagnant, more stressed, and consider leaving again. Some, however, reported pay raises, titles changes or promotions, more responsibilities and being happier (figure 3).

Figure 3

U.S. survey participants' (n=5000) on returning (boomerang) to an employer.



Remaining

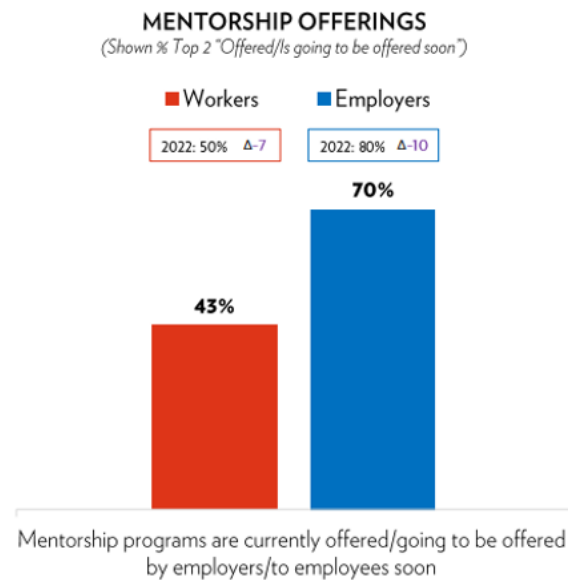
While employees reported feeling year-over-year less engaged at work (40%), unable to advance (38%), more dissatisfied, (29%), and lacking access to the resources that would make them more successful, other employees are choosing to remain. Employers that have been investing in retention are reporting increasing salaries, providing greater flexibility, focusing on team morale, extending leaves, and hosting more employee events. There are mixed results and disparities in what employers and employees perceive. This can be seen when one examines the perceptions of mentorship, enhancing skillset, and career trajectory programs.

Mentorship

Survey participants reported a desire for mentorship. This 54% response rate has remained constant for the past three years. In year-over-year responses, however, increasing more employees claim that they have no access to a mentorship program. Year-over-year, more employers claim that there are fewer programs or plans for mentorship programs for their employees.

Figure 4

Decreasing evidence of mentorship programs as reported by employees and employers, 2022-2023.



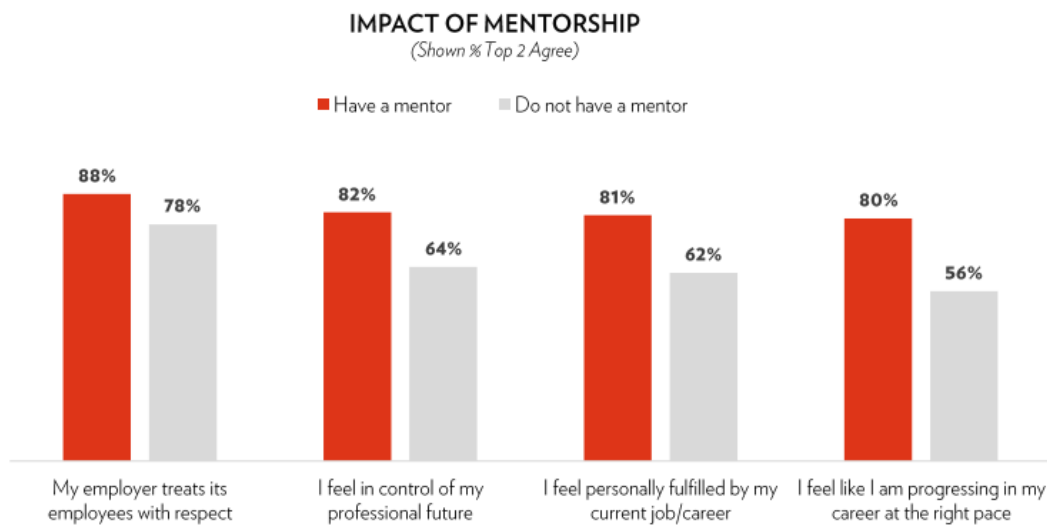
The disparity between what the employees and employers perceive as available internal mentorship opportunities may be a revelation. The intent of employers towards these provisions is unfortunately not the reality nor perception of their employees. And, if programs shrink or disappear from underutilization, it will contradict what the evidence shows about the impact of such program. Mentors are believed to help employees create valuable connections, establish

support networks, and access learning and development resources to continuously improve worker performance (Woods, 2023a, p.2).

Evidence supports that American workers with mentors are more likely to feel confident (95% v. 86%), fulfilled (89% v. 75%), and are enthusiastic (90% v 77%) about their job/career compared to those without a mentor. Additionally, having a mentor impacts employee perceptions of respect, control, fulfillment, and career progression (figure 5). These mentors may be internal or external to the organization. Survey respondents claimed to have acquired their mentor from a prior employer (32%), personally sought someone outside of their company (31%), and fewer claimed that they met them through a workplace mentorship program (23%).

Figure 5

Impact of mentorship on employee perceptions of respect, control, fulfillment, and progression.



Enhancing employee skillset

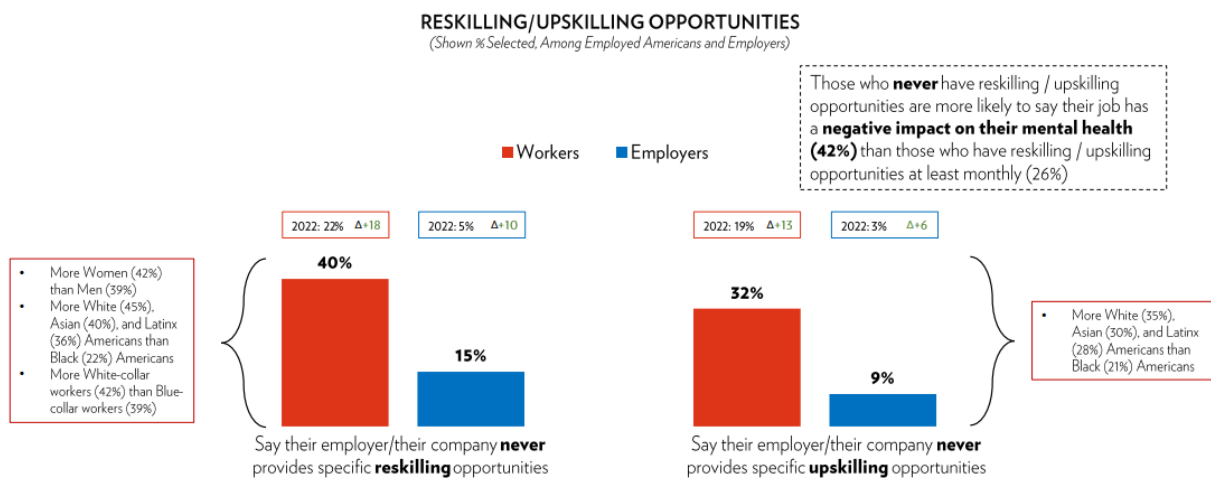
Around 45% of employees fear that their job skills will be outdated because of advancements in technology. Survey participants reported a desire for training so they can reskill, upskill, and

enhance their current skillset. Year-over-year, this 62% response rate has been increasing (58% in the 2022 report). These employees want to learn new skills and want employers to help them enhance their skillset. Yet, employees as well as employers are reporting fewer opportunities for these opportunities (figure 6).

There depicts another disparity between what employers and employees perceive as available in the workplace. Again, this disparity may reveal that the intent by employers to offer programs, in this case enhancing skillset, is not being realized by their employees or is failing to be effective. Yet, forsaking upskilling programs is not an option when recruitment is not yielding capable applicants to fill vacancies. According to Woods (2023b), “Nearly half of employers (46%) cite a lack of well-qualified applicants as the greatest challenge their organizations face” (p.1).

Figure 6

Perceptions of reskilling/upskilling opportunities by employees and employers (2022 & 2023 reporting).



Career trajectory

Employees desire self-efficacy, empowerment, and direction for the future of their career.

Hovering around 40%, for the past three years, employees reported not being able to a clear path for advancing. For this reason, they claim they are unable to move forward. One in three employees stated they are unfulfilled in their current job or career (up from one in four a year ago). One in three employees felt they lacked empowerment to advance (up from one in five a year ago). Such frustration and indecisiveness of one's future greatly impacts one's career adaptability (Tang et. Al., 2022) and is increasing.

According to the University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index 2023, the hope for one's future job or career is influenced by one's beliefs, "sense of personal efficacy, [and] not on the belief that employers are doing what it takes to support their career growth" (p.7). The Career Construction Theory (CCT), defined and developed over the past twenty years, states that organizational measures of success pale in comparison to an individual's internal measures of success, when it comes to career sustainability by workers (Mello et. Al, 2023). According to Zhang et. Al. (2022), passionate employees are motivated by their own career vision and are not easily distracted by even challenging work conditions.

Personal values, goals, and fulfillment drive the perception of career success. Acquiring new skills, making transitions, and being involved with managing one's own personal growth leads to job satisfaction (Jackson et. Al., 2023). Therefore, employers are advised to, "address the need to engage with both the individual and contextual influences on career opportunities and experiences" (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022).

And indicators show this would work. The majority of survey respondents claimed they would stay if things at their current job changed (68% in 2023, 70% in 2022). With an increasing

Free Agent market mentality for employees, employers should support current employees by focusing on authentic mentorship, high-quality upskilling programs and applications, and ongoing support of career development and trajectory. Woods (2023) recommends 1:1 communication aimed at guiding employees with career mapping, goal setting, leadership communication, and “ensuring workers are seen and heard” (p.2). His belief is that internal mobility (as opposed to stagnation) will lead to greater job satisfaction which will lead to greater retention and benefit the overall organization. With high-quality individualized programs for all workers, retention investments would be better spent and are likely to address both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators of workers.

Conclusion

While employers continue to worry about employee turnover, some workplace attitudes and behaviors have remained unchanged over the past three years and others are trending up or downward. Captured by The Career Optimism Index 2021, 2022, and 2023 reports, we now know that increasing numbers of employees are not satisfied with pay, feel overwhelmed with debt, burnt out, dissatisfied with their current job, and are living paycheck-to-paycheck. For the first time, over half of the employee respondents indicated that they would be resigning or looking for another job or career soon. This was the case with or without having that next job lined up.

While the request for mentorship programs has been constant for the past three years, decreasing year-over-year are the perceived opportunities for mentorship, perceived by both employees and employers, and disparities exist in just how much is offered. While the trend for wanting clear pathways and career trajectory has been constant, increasing year-over-year is lack of opportunities to advance, lacking empowerment, and feelings of unfulfillment. While the majority of workers said they would stay if things changed, these numbers are beginning to

decrease as is the belief that there are ample job opportunities. Year-over-year, these are small decreases in despair, but future results will show whether these attitudes are truly trending downward and efforts are making a difference.

The Career Optimism Index has captured these shifts from 2021 through 2023 and has recommended improvement of employee workplace attitudes and behaviors from within. This research indicates that subpar programs are subpar promises as evidenced by the disparities between employers and employees on the internal retention strategies employers are investing in. These include mentorship programs, enhancing worker skillsets, and career pathway opportunities. By providing high-quality as opposed to low-quality programs, employee attitudes and behaviors about leaving will change. Feeling capable, empowered and fulfilled, employees will not only remain, but thrive.

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