

Reframing The Great Resignation As The 'Great Exploration' Leverages It For Everyone's Benefit

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The concept of the "Great Resignation" came into focus as companies noticed that employees were leaving at rates never seen before. For instance, a report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that over 20 million people quit their jobs in the second half of 2021. For many companies, the rush to fill those positions has led to a war for talent.

I believe a more measured response is appropriate for this situation. Of those who quit, the two largest segments were emerging adults who recently entered the workforce and older adults, likely thinking of retirement. If we think of the Great Resignation as more of an exploration of life options, company leaders can adopt a more empowering mindset.

In a recent Marketplace interview, Keith Ferrazzi acknowledged that by referring to the massive exodus as the Great Resignation, people are adopting a victimized way of interpreting the massive transformation. Mike Clemeti, Unilever's Head of HR, adopts a more positive mindset by calling this the "Great Exploration," given the existence of other options.

New Outlooks

When the pandemic started in 2020, I focused on helping CEOs adapt quickly and showed them inspirational reports of other companies' actions in response to Covid-19. Some companies managed to accelerate strategies that normally would have taken months to execute within a matter of weeks or even days. For instance, one McKinsey article reports on a car-rental company whose revenues fell 95% in February 2020. While a new program normally takes three weeks to launch, they did so in three days. Within seven weeks, the company recovered 90% of its business.

At the same time, I work with individuals who recognize the gift of longevity and want to lead long, fulfilling lives to 100-plus years. Covid exposed the frailty of life and forced many to challenge their views on work and location. They started asking themselves if the lives they led were consistent with their long-term values and priorities.

Did it really make sense to spend many hours commuting to work and/or flying cross-country for meetings when technologies like Zoom and file-sharing eliminate the need for the increased stress and lost family time? Was working full-time in an office really necessary, especially with its distractions? Would the career path they had really going to lead to a lifestyle that would enable them to lead a life consistent with their life's values and goals?

Asking people to work from home made us realize that there's more to the traditional outlook on work-life balance. Life is the integration of essential components: health, finance, relationships, passion, purpose and time mastery. Learning isn't limited to our youth; it's a life-long process. And being productive isn't limited to a pre-retirement phase. The goal is to optimize life's essentials to meet our definition of fulfillment throughout our potential 100-plus-year journey.

Prior to the pandemic, leaders realized the potential for advances in areas like automation and bots to help eliminate mundane, routine activities and free workers to use their uniquely human powers of creativity, collaboration and ingenuity. One immediate impact of the pandemic was to drive a more holistic view of a worker's life; happy, engaged and productive workers want a lifestyle where they can meet career demands as well as their needs for self-care, relationships, financial security and nourishment of passions.

The Great Elevation

Today, business leaders need to develop work cultures that allow employees to make meaningful contributions to the business while also fulfilling their own needs. We must allow them to address career, financial, learning and lifestyle conditions. This means utilizing company culture, talent development and team-focused processes to enable workers to lead intentionally in a way that leads to long, fulfilling lives. As I see it, the Great Exploration is creating the Great Elevation.

A Great Elevation culture promotes everyone's growth, professionally and personally. Workers go beyond doing a job to envisioning a longer career with future positions that help companies achieve their long-term goals. As managers, we need to learn to understand what drives our employees. For instance, as workers want to increase their contributions to the company, some may graduate into management positions while others take on new technical challenges. Depending on the path, different learning programs are required.

Mentorship And Development Programs

Imagine your company has a culture committed to learning development. Workers can explore future careers with managers who are empowered to incorporate learning experiences into workers' job descriptions. High-potential workers could join an emerging leader development program that lets them develop leadership competencies like accountability, communication, strategy, execution and team management.

Since learning is a process and not a day- or week-long event, such a program could use a multi-channel learning system over a period of years and include classroom content, mentoring by managers from other relevant departments and peer-advisor pods. Benefits would be higher retention for workers within elevated positions and a person-centric culture for all.

Realizing this potential is within our reach. I've provided mentoring internships to hundreds of students and older workers who want to make better career decisions through workplace experiences. I've also worked with companies offering career-development mentoring for new workers. By incorporating mentees into the workflow and dedicating a little extra time to explain the why, what and how of projects, they develop soft and hard skills for career advancement. Mentors are rewarded by paying it forward, and companies retain growth-focused workers and enhance their internal and external reputations.

Thriving Together

In sum, leverage the advance of automation and digital transformation to create new careers that empower human potential for creative and productive enterprise. Harness talented workers' drive to grow by committing to a Great Elevation culture. Today's five generations workplace, with its greater diversity, offers more opportunities than ever. Especially reach out to emerging adults who need to see what's truly possible and to older adults who want to keep learning and contributing rather than retiring. Enable workers to lead long, fulfilling lives while helping your business adapt to changing world conditions. Let's thrive together.

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