

As the world stumbles toward a Covid-19 recovery, experts warn of a surge of voluntary employee departures, dubbed the "Great Resignation." For instance, one study estimates that 55% of people in the workforce in August 2021 intend to look for a new job in the next 12 months. To counteract the incoming wave of employee turnover, organizations -- more than ever -- need to focus on cultivating employee engagement. The evidence is clear. Engaged employees perform better, experience less burnout, and stay in organizations longer. Given engagement's critical importance, we've created the Employee Engagement Checklist: a distilled, research-based resource that practitioners can execute on during this critical period of renewed uncertainty. To develop the checklist, we reviewed the academic literature, compiled a list of the 20 most important drivers of engagement, collected original data about what makes employees engaged in the post-Covid era, compared that to what managers predicted would boost their employees' engagement, and formulated a series of evidence-based recommendations to promote it. Our findings highlight that the three most important levers managers have at their disposal right now to boost their employees' engagement are to (a) help employees connect what they do to what they care about, (b) make the work itself less stressful and more enjoyable, and (c) reward employees with additional time off, in addition to financial incentives. However, as we found in a follow-up study involving 302 managers, leaders are often not aware of what is most important for driving employee engagement. The levers leaders think are most important do not correspond to what is actually most important. The mismatch between what leaders think their employees need versus what they actually need is further evidence that practitioners require guidance on what will work most effectively to engage their employees.

Translating Science into Practice

In the academic literature, employee engagement includes four elements and can be thought of as the degree to which an employee:

- Feels committed to an organization
- Identifies with an organization
- Feels satisfied with their job
- Feels energized at work

These tend to be measured by asking employees to complete a self-report scale (e.g., "How committed are you to your organization?"). If your organization's mission is to become the industry leader and nothing more, then it will be difficult for employees' goals and values -- which are likely about the individual's aspirations, not the organization's -- to fit in. On the other hand, if your organization's mission is to have some societal impact (such as Airbnb's "create a world where you can belong anywhere"), then it's easier for employees to align their goals and values with the organization's mission and thus feel that they fit in. Show how an employee's work is related to the organization's purpose. A purposeful mission is not sufficient to establish feelings of value alignment. Employees have to see a connection between their day-to-day work and the organization's greater purpose. Job crafting, which entails using imagination to redesign one's job without the involvement of management, is one technique that connects an employee's everyday work activities with the organization's purpose. For instance, a hospital cleaner may reframe their work as helping sick people instead of simply cleaning. Or an insurance agent might reframe their work as getting people back on track after an accident rather than processing paperwork. To deliver job crafting at scale, consider revamping job descriptions to connect an employee's work directly to the organization's mission, generating meaning and purpose. Research by McKinsey also suggests that town hall meetings and immersive, small-group sessions are effective at helping employees align their day-to-day work with the organization's broader mission. Encourage and

fund employee resource groups (ERGs) that represent diverse interests and goals. ERGs are voluntary communities that bring together individuals with similar backgrounds or interests. ERGs could center on diversity and inclusion, special interests, or even wellness (outdoors, exercise, etc.). For example, at KPMG, nearly half of partners and employees are members of at least one ERG, ranging from an African American Network to pride@kpmg. ERGs allow employees to connect with peers who share their values and goals, promoting feelings of value alignment.

2. Make the work itself less stressful and more enjoyable. Consider the following three actions: Offer employees the flexibility to try new work tasks so they can discover their intrinsic interests. Whether activities are intrinsically interesting likely depends on the individual employee -- in other words, the same activity might spark intrinsic motivation for one employee but not for another. To provide employees the opportunity to determine what sparks their intrinsic interest, consider a job rotation program in which employees move through several positions within a company in a relatively short period of time. For instance, Dutch beer brewer Heineken has a job rotation program in which college graduates rotate through various departments including packaging, product development, brewing, quality assurance, and packaging development. After completing the program, employees can select and join the department that offers the most promise in igniting their intrinsic interest. Grant employees more autonomy. Autonomy is critical to fostering intrinsic motivation. As an example of autonomy in action, Netflix employees operate in an environment of "no rules," characterized by a high degree of employee freedom and responsibility. In terms of freedom, employees make strategic decisions "in Netflix's best interests" without managerial oversight, do not need to seek pre-approvals for reimbursements, and can take unlimited vacation, which is not tracked. The culture of no rules is sustained through high levels of responsibility, in which all employees are charged with "question[ing] actions [of others] inconsistent with our values." In 2020 alone, more than 1,500 academic articles were published on the topic of engagement.