

# HR NEWS



## Employee Engagement and Retention

# 5 Ways to Reduce Toxicity in the Workplace and Boost Employee Engagement

By Jared Pope

The COVID-19 pandemic drove employees to reevaluate their careers. One result has been record numbers of Americans leaving their current jobs. In October 2021 alone, 4.2 million people voluntarily quit.

The Great Resignation shows no signs of slowing, and it coincides with a national labor shortage. Listings for open positions far exceed the pool of people looking for work.

With the job market shifted in favor of workers, employers are struggling to recruit new talent and scrambling to retain their current team members. Both efforts have prompted fresh looks at workplace policies, processes and overall culture with an eye to identifying problems that deter applicants and drive off employees.

Organizational leaders who investigate workplace culture and employee engagement issues almost always find toxicity. That toxicity can take many forms, including interpersonal conflicts and professional misconduct.

Once toxicity exists, it can expand into much larger and more costly issues, such as discrimination and harassment. Toxicity can also lead to low productivity and high turnover.

Organizations that want to thrive, rather than simply survive, during the Great Resignation must remove all toxicity. Five important tactics to eliminate toxicity and, thereby, retain and further engage current employees are outlined here.

## Provide Employees With Easy Access to Third-Party Reporting Tools

Employees are more likely to be engaged when they feel safe to report inappropriate behavior and misconduct in the workplace. But, according to the EEOC, 75 percent of employees who are harassed or discriminated against do not report the issue because they don't trust managers and supervisors to take appropriate actions. Employees also often, and justifiably, fear retaliation. The lack of trust increases stress, lowers productivity and drives high turnover.

The longer toxicity is allowed to linger in the workplace unreported, the greater the risk of toxicity increasing and eroding organizational culture. Which, inevitably, leads to lawsuits.

Hiscox, a leading provider of business insurance, has estimated that the average cost of defending and settling an employment lawsuit is \$160,000. Added to the expense, resolving an employment claim takes 318 days on average.

Empowering employees to report discrimination, harassment, retaliation and other forms of misconduct to an unbiased third party rather than the organization's human resources department or a manager will increase employees' comfort and confidence. Leaders must also ensure employees know they can report any and all types toxicity they witness or personally experience.

## Strive to Resolve Problems Quickly

Make it clear through quick and decisive action that no toxicity will not be tolerated. The days when executives or HR could take a month or longer to investigate and resolve a report of misconduct in the workplace are long past. Today's employees want to know their reports are being taken seriously and handled efficiently. If employees believe otherwise, they will leave the organization or pursue litigation—sometimes both.

Delays in resolving possible toxic behavior can be catastrophic. Consequently, an employer should aim to reach resolutions within five business days of receiving an employee's report. Investigations that take longer can cause an employee to feel as if their concern was not heard or taken seriously.

## Implement Employee Well-Being Initiatives

Mental health issues skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the American Psychological Association surveyed American adults in August 2020, the group found 8 in 10 respondents felt the pandemic had become a major stressor in their lives. Additionally, 7 in 10 U.S. adults indicated they were experiencing increased stress since the pandemic began.

It is important for employers to implement programs that promote employees' physical and mental well-being. Offering mental health days to focus on reducing stress and focusing on creating a more-





inclusive workplace environment are just two ways organizations can show employees their well-being is a priority. Such programs can also bolster the organization's bottom line. The CDC in 2015 summarized data showing that investing in employee health lowers sick days, insurance claims and health care costs.

## Develop Employee Incentive Programs

The International Society of Performance Improvement reviewed nearly 100 years of research on the impact of incentives on employee performance and found well-designed and properly administered incentive programs can increase employee performance by as much as 44 percent. The meta-analysis of published research also showed that incentive programs can attract and retain higher-quality workers, keeping employees engaged to achieve better results and, therefore, receive more rewards.

A summary of the findings prepared by the Incentive Research Foundation does note, however, "Programs that reward performance based on meeting or exceeding goals generate the most positive results. Piece-rate programs, for doing more of something, also provide positive results, according to the research. Least effective (yet commonly used) are tournament-based programs; i.e., closed-ended programs that reward a preselected number of winners."

As organizations review their offerings to current and future employees, incentive programs should be a key consideration. With the ability to customize both programs and rewards, the options for reinforcing positive behaviors and increasing employee performance are endless.


## Gain Visibility Into the Health of Workplace Cultural

Employers cannot eliminate toxicity unless leaders know which problems exist. Utilizing tools that capture real-time data on workplace incidents such as discrimination and harassment, as well as where the incidents occur and which departments or specific team members are involved, enables leaders to identify trends and formulate effective solutions. The ultimate goal should be preventing incidents before they occur and cause harm to employees or degrade organizational culture.

The Great Resignation is proof employees have learned they should no longer feel compelled to stand by in the face of toxicity in their workplaces. Increasingly fewer workers are willing to wait to see how reports of harassment, discrimination and misconduct will be handled. These realities reinforce each employer's responsibility for creating and maintaining a healthy culture in which all employees and the organization thrive.

To meet that responsibility and ensure retention of top talent, organizations must invest in tools and programs that protect and support employees. Such investments in people double as investments in the future success of the organization.

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*Jared Pope is a human resources attorney and founder of [Work Shield](#), a platform that addresses harassment and discrimination in the workplace by providing safe reporting, impartial investigations and concrete resolutions all in one place. —*