

# When good employees stop caring — why employees disengage

These days, there's a lot of talk about quiet quitting where employees hunt for a new gig incognito so they can land something better (even if that means no job at all). Why would they do this? Don't they need money? Shouldn't they talk to their boss first?

Here's why: unfulfilling jobs are awful. Period. The Great Resignation happened because workers were unwilling to give up hours of their lives being underpaid in dead-end jobs. Employees who were vocal about problems at work weren't being heard, so they began looking for something better without telling anyone.

How can businesses avoid being blindsided by quiet quitting? Simple: know what it looks like when good employees stop caring. Let's talk about a few warning signs to watch out for.

## The beginnings of burnout

Even the best employees have their limits. When they are overworked, they won't have the same capacity to perform. Companies must be realistic when budgeting for workloads and labor costs. Setting goals is good, but demanding unrealistic expectations creates a poor employee experience that will cause burnout and hurt retention.

Burnout is like a sleeping pill. The world gets fuzzy, work matters less and less, and focus is harder to come by as the "why" for doing things disappears.

### According to SHRM, some signs of burnout include:

- Cynicism
- Absenteeism
- Decrease in quality of work
- Increased irritability
- Isolation

The main contributors to burnout are stressful work environments and excessive workloads. If the pressure is too high for too long, even great employees start to crack. Creating a cohesive, respectful team environment where people tackle problems together is the best way to increase job satisfaction and prevent burnout.

## Culturing disengagement

Along with stressful work environments comes micromanaging bosses. Most of us have worked in places where the wrong people held management positions, and the consequences can leave scars.

Employees who feel mistreated by their boss tend to become tardy, unresponsive, and enter the danger zone of looking for another job. While one possible solution might be manager training, the reality is that managers may themselves be suffering some of these job decline symptoms.

More often, bad management represents a company culture problem. Cultures that no longer care, support, or align with their employees' values cause job dissatisfaction. This both triggers and necessitates micromanaging from managers as their teams stop producing good work.

Honest feedback from anonymous employee surveys can help in these situations. Don't be afraid to try it out, plot a course, and take steps needed to reach a better workplace. However, don't ask employees for input if you don't plan to act on it. Otherwise, you're likely just to breed more cynicism.

## **People work late all the time**

Next time you're at work after the sun goes down, take a look at how many people are still around. Is the office mostly full? If so, that's a problem.

Finite working hours are easy to take for granted, especially in industries like software where launches often creep into the late hours of the night. However, employees who regularly stay late suffer burnout more quickly than those who leave when it's time to go.

Not only that, but they're less productive. When staying late becomes a habit, there's less urgency for hard work when the rest of the team is around to help out. As a management policy, workers should be encouraged to be productive at work and then leave. Go home and recharge.

If an employee is constantly staying late, there's a good chance they aren't engaging very much during regular work hours.

## **No one's taking vacations**

Work-life balance is a crucial part of a healthy workplace. When employees feel like they can take a break from work without everything falling apart, they are more likely to find their fit at their job and thrive. Everybody needs a vacation periodically.

Of course, this is at odds with employers' interests in maximum productivity. To remedy this, some companies offer "unlimited vacation" policies where employees are required to get work done in advance before they can leave. These can be bad policies. They defeat the purpose of vacationing and they foster resentment from people who desperately want to mentally detach from work.

On the other hand, some people just don't take vacations. Companies can handle this by recommending low-business volume months during which workers are encouraged to take vacations. Ask those individuals if they have vacation plans, or where they would go if they haven't picked a destination yet.

Whatever it takes, make sure people take occasional extended breaks from work.

## **Promotions aren't happening**

Career mobility is a good indicator of a healthy workplace. When people feel like there's a future at work, they stick around and keep at it. A lack of career mobility, on the other hand, usually results in high turnover and wasted training costs.

Top performers deserve a chance to prove themselves in more senior roles. When companies withhold a promotion because an employee hasn't worked there long enough, those employees disengage and seek greener pastures. This has a ripple effect, too—along with losing a potential candidate for promotion, managers are stressed as they take on the work of a person they relied on for support.

Careers that grow stagnant become hotbeds for cynical attitudes that can spread around the office. While it's

tempting to simply get rid of employees with a bad attitude, the better solution is to channel that energy and provide career development opportunities.

## **The employer is monitoring everything**

Is workplace surveillance a necessary evil? The jury's out, but there's no doubt that employee surveillance can quickly become excessive. Keystroke monitors, screen mirrors, and messaging surveillance tools are used only in the harshest workplace environments.

Work quality suffers when people know they're being watched. Normal conversations between coworkers become illicit meetings held in secret. Energy is spent looking busy rather than being productive. People stop feeling comfortable at work, and it's just generally a bad vibe.

Companies that aggressively monitor employees actually have a firsthand account of what employee disengagement looks like—it's happening right before their eyes.

Tools to track productivity and behavior should only be used for planning purposes. Once they are used for discipline, work is sapped of joy.

## **What about Social Media?**

There is a correlation between social media use and disengagement (though it seems spurious given how many people have social media accounts). To complicate things, most modern companies have social media accounts that require employees to manage them. What is the answer here?

Blocking these sites is one option, though proxy browsers like TOR and Opera can easily get around it. Plus, people typically browse social media on their phones, making company workstation restrictions ineffective.

The fact is social media is here to stay. Rather than try to control what employees do, the best policy is to build a workplace culture where employees interact with and encourage each other. Otherwise, it's just micromanagement.

## **Teams aren't working together**

When people come together, amazing things happen. New ideas are born and collaborations discover better ways to get things done. This is why team-building exercises and outings are so important—something happens when coworkers learn to like and respect each other which makes work better for everyone.

Unfortunately, not all workplaces value this important step, and the results are stark. Where team cohesion isn't valued, communication is inconsistent, roles are misunderstood, and employees fail to buy into their companies.

Some companies justify this kind of atomized culture because it neutralizes the threat of collective employee action, such as forming a union. However, it comes at a cost in the form of high turnover and lost productivity.

Companies that invest in their teams can grow faster and more sustainably than companies devoted to policies focused on individual contributions.

## **Management only—keep out!**

Former Lehman Brothers chairman Dick Fuld famously used a private elevator that only made two stops: his reserved parking spot in the garage and his top-floor suite. He wanted no interaction with the staff at his company. Too often, execs run companies like Dick Fuld.

There is an unavoidable barrier between management and staff. While it's not a bad thing, it can cause discord if not regularly approached and dealt with.

Communication is the foundation of a peaceful, constructive work environment. Familiarity creates buy-in among employees, meanwhile distant management leads to uninformed opinions about what's happening behind closed doors. Sometimes, employees even take sides about what they think is happening. And who can blame them?

In an era where surprise layoffs are the norm, bosses who keep themselves absconded do so at their peril. Regular newsletters, monthly meetings, and team-building exercises are important for building healthy pathways of communication and interaction.

## **The office looks depressing**

Premises are important for workplace morale. While cleaning services are mandatory, that's only the beginning. Good furniture, functional hardware, decent break rooms, and a modest selection of snacks make work a place to get things done instead of a place workers dread going. "Being professional" doesn't mean having an ugly, drab workplace.

Workers need a place where they can plug in and create value. Poorly kept workplaces, while not an automatic dealbreaker, contribute to less effective work.

Need ideas? Just take a look at some premier workplace campuses like Google or Apple. No, there's no need for a fancy gym or a room of nap pods, but investing in some rugs, armchairs, and a working coffee station can make work a more pleasant place to be.

For business owners, this investment in people also creates goodwill and trust between management and staff. In more ways than one, it's a great way to keep workers engaged.

## **You reap what you sow**

Like so many other things in business management, results appear when and where effort is made. Businesses that want results without investing in workers have a lot to learn about what makes people tick. They're likely to keep running into brick walls until they can part with a little more cash to make their people happy.