How to's

How to avoid employees 'rage quitting'

By Kimberley Bezuidenhout

12 October, 2021

With many experts predicting that we're heading into 'The Great Resignation', the last thing employers need is for their people to be rage quitting. Here's how HR can prevent it.

Many employees have been pushed to their limits following unfavourable or sometimes toxic workplace cultures before, leading them to storm out of work or simply never show up again.

While the idea of calling it quits on a whim is nothing new, employers should be concerned about employees 'rage quitting', considering that around 40 per cent of employees have signalled they'll be looking for a new job in the near future and there's currently a lack of international talent arriving on our shores. Employees and jobseekers have never had more power than they do right now.

In an article on this topic for the *BBC*, an expert suggests that it's the critical, highly-skilled talent that's most prone to rage quitting as they "think their skills are highly transferable".

So this is a trend that should ring alarm bells for employers.

Rage quitting in action

Lois Wagner quit her job at a manufacturing company after an argument with an ex-colleague who had returned to the company as her boss.

In his absence, Wagner says she built the company's marketing team into a "cohesive, creative function". She felt like she'd done a great job and was disappointed and angry that he had come back as her boss.

"I really believed I was better suited for the job [than he was]," she says.

Her colleague-turned-boss's leadership style lacked communication, she felt, and their first team meeting was "a disaster".

"He also had clear favourites in the team, those less independent and outspoken as myself."

The final straw was an argument over the colour of a display unit, something that might seem inconsequential under normal circumstances, but pushed Wagner to her limits. She resigned on the spot and stormed out of work.

These pent up feelings of disappointment, or an employer's failure to meet expectations, create the perfect environment for rage quitting, says Karen Gately, Founder of HR consultancy Corporate Dojo.

"Presumably, if I'm quitting in rage, I don't necessarily have another job to go to, nor do I have a job that I love and am excited about," says Gately. If people are willing to move on without a safety net, the situation must have been at breaking point, she says.

Although rage quitting appears to come out of nowhere, the warning signs are often identifiable long before it happens. Here's what HR professionals should be looking out for.

The breeding ground of distrust

Those who rage quit might feel like there is a fundamental lack of respect, or that their voice isn't heard, says Gately.

"They feel helpless and like they have no other choice."

A continued risk to employees' health and wellbeing, or an inability to get ahead, may cause people to abandon their work if there are no benefits to make up for it, says Gately.

This is what's known as Social exchange theory, a phenomenon, coined by American sociologist George Homans in 1958, which suggests that our expectations regarding the rewards or punishments we will face when interacting with others will determine our own behaviour. This can work in a positive or negative manner. If we're rewarded for our attention to detail, for instance, we're likely to repeat that behaviour.

But if someone's manager is setting unrealistic expectations or shifting the goalposts at the last minute, employees are more likely to respond in an unenthused manner and potentially become disengaged, or quit.

Establishing positive connections at work is essential, even more so when you factor in months of lockdowns, the uncertainty of the pandemic and the changing nature of work.

"People prioritise culture and their work/life experiences," says Gately. If those expectations aren't being met, they'll likely go searching for a company that aligns with their needs.

Tips to avoiding employees rage quitting

Keeping your finger on the pulse in terms of employees' sentiment towards their jobs, bosses and colleagues was far easier in a face-to-face environment. Now that many of us are separated by screens and not-so-spontaneous video calls, it might feel difficult to connect with employees in meaningful ways.

The biggest difference between checking in when you're in the office versus at home is "doing things deliberately," says Gately.

"If we are engaging in regular conversation with people, we're more likely to understand the cultural drivers of how people are feeling."

What else should you be doing to keep employees on side? Gately suggests the following:

1. Implement stay interviews

The 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' mindset could be preventing employers from getting valuable insights into how their people are truly feeling.

If you're only checking in with employees during the depths of their anger – or worse, during an exit interview – then you're robbing yourself of the opportunity to intervene and provide support earlier.

That's why it's a good idea to introduce stay interviews as part of your regular employee check ins.

Stay interviews are about gaining insights into "the root causes of people's emotions before it's too late to do something about it," says Gately.

The key to an effective stay interview is cutting through the noise, she says. By asking the right questions, you can get a better sense of what's causing emotions to simmer and step in before they boil over.

Gately suggests asking questions such as:

- If you had a magic wand, what would you change about this organisation?
- What do you love most about this organisation?
- What is the biggest threat to your ongoing engagement, motivation and satisfaction?
- If you could give your manager one enhanced skill, what would it be?
- What has been the highlight of your last three months, and what has been the lowlight?
- What kind of feedback are you seeking but not receiving?
- Do you feel that you have any skills that are currently underutilised?
- When was the last time you thought about quitting?

You should avoid asking ambiguous questions, such as "Are you happy here?", as this will most likely generate unhelpful information – it takes a really brave person to say 'no' to that question. Try not to talk about salaries either (these should be separate conversations) as you're trying to get to the root cause of an employee's experience at work, and research shows that the effects of a pay rise are short-lived.

> "Presumably, if I'm quitting in rage, I don't necessarily have another job to go to, nor do I have a job that I love and am excited about." – Karen Gately, Founder, Corporate Dojo.

A person's bugbears usually boil down to one of two things, Gately says: culture and leadership ability. An employee might be feeling angry or disappointed by something that is a direct result of a leader's poor management skills or a lack of emotional intelligence.

"If HR professionals can get a measured, honest and accurate measure of how people are feeling and why they're feeling like that, then we're in a position to actually do something proactively," says Gately.

Employee surveys and pulse checks can also be effective ways to check in, but be wary of inducing survey fatigue.

Also, if management is open to it, skip level meetings – where an employee meets with their boss's boss – can create a culture where leadership has direct insight to what's going on below them and can develop direct lines of communication as a result.

2. Cross-organisational communication

When it comes to checking in, it can't just be up to HR, says Gately.

"You just need to inspire and influence [communication] across the organisation."

Other than traditional one-on-one meetings between teams and their managers, you can also encourage employees to get to know their peers on a deeper level by matching them up with others in the business for informal chats on a rotating basis. There are some great apps available to facilitate this process.

Allocating time for casual conversations can prevent employees' frustrations from piling up, says Gately. And it also gives them further context about their peers.

For example, rather than getting frustrated that "Rob is *always* late to meetings", they might be able to draw on something they've recently learnt about Rob – that he's a new dad, for instance – and therefore have a little more compassion for his tardiness.

3. Establish a disciplined approach

We all forget things from time to time. The combination of a stressful day, paired with a busy schedule, could lead to a request falling to the wayside, turning an honest mistake into anger and disappointment.

Taking time to make sure all employee requests are tended to – big and small – goes a long way in ensuring your people feel valued, heard and looked after.

"By having a good system for following up on complaints or checking in with people, you lower the risk of something falling out of consciousness," she says.

It's important for an organisation to have emotional intelligence, says Gately. If you're talking to employees with "a desire to deeply understand", you will be in a much better position to take their feedback and do something proactive about it.