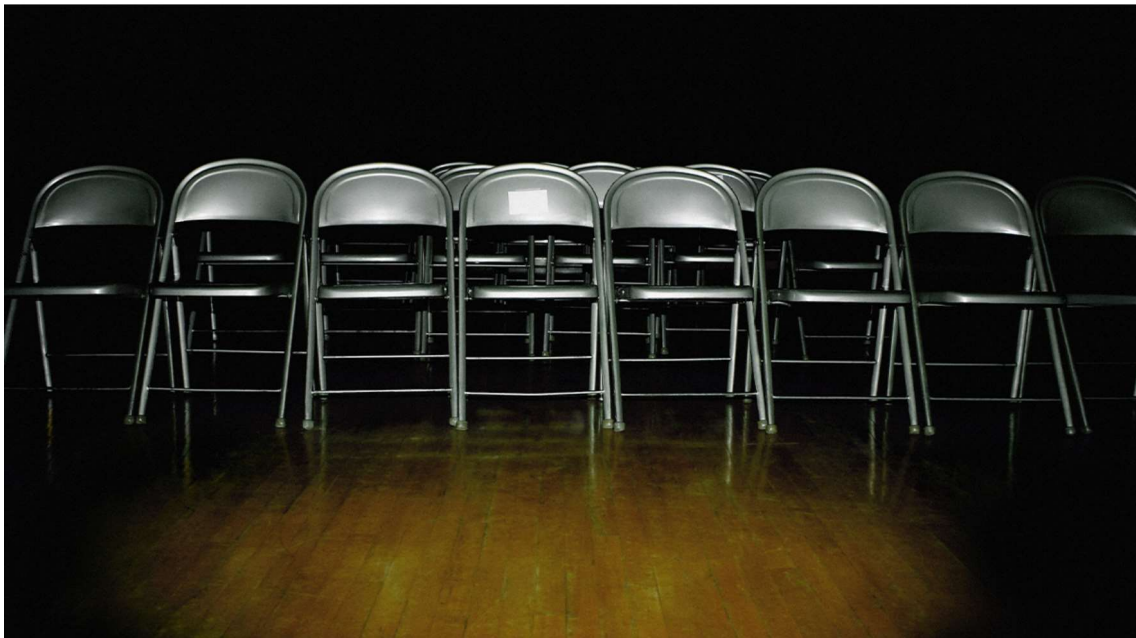


Employee Retention

It's Time to Reimagine Employee Retention

by Helen Tupper and Sarah Ellis

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Summary. According to Gartner, the pace of employee turnover is forecast to be 50–75% higher than companies have experienced previously, and the issue is compounded by it taking 18% longer to fill roles than pre-pandemic. Increasingly squeezed managers are spending time they don't have searching for new recruits in an expensive and competitive market. Unless efforts are refocused on retention, managers will be unable to drive performance and affect change. Leaders need to take action to enable their managers to keep their talent while still being able to deliver on results. Managers need help with three things. First, they need help shifting the focus of career conversations from promotion to progression and developing in different directions. Second, they need help creating a culture and

structure that supports career experiments. Finally, managers need to be rewarded not for retaining people on their teams but retaining people (and their potential) across the entire organization. [close](#)

This is a challenging time for managers. Alongside their day-to-day roles, many are facing a never-ending cycle of reskilling and recruiting on their teams. The need to reskill isn't new, with the OECD estimating that 1.1 billion jobs are liable to be radically transformed by technology in the next decade. However, managers are now being asked to close the skills gap at the same time as they're responding to pandemic-prompted resignations.

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From Constrained Careers to Retention Reimagined

Although managers are undoubtedly navigating dynamic market conditions, one of the primary reasons why people look to leave remains the same: a lack of career progression. That same Gartner report found that 65% of employees are now reconsidering the role of work in their lives; however, only one-third are open to internal opportunities providing part of the solution.

Limited awareness of roles and a perceived lack of support from managers means that for many, it has become easier to leave and grow than squiggle — that is, change roles and develop in different directions — and stay.

Even the most supportive managers face a tough choice in response to this challenge. Investing time and effort in their employees' career development is often at odds with the metrics they're measured against. Research from Mercer finds that eight out of 10 companies focus on individual goals whereas just five out of 10 work toward the goals of the broader business unit. Managers who optimize for individual performance are likely to become more territorial about their talent. By keeping the "best" people on their team, they achieve the best outcomes. However, this is often to the detriment of individuals' career development and the organization's ability to access its own talent. The unfortunate outcome is that the people managers most want to retain feel constrained and become more likely to leave, risking the performance metrics they were so keen to protect in the first place.

The solution to the career development conflict this creates lies in taking a fresh look at how retention is managed. Managers need help with three things. First, they need help shifting the focus of career conversations from promotion to progression and developing in different directions. Second, they need help creating a culture and structure that supports career experiments. Finally, managers need to be rewarded not for retaining people on their teams but retaining people (and their potential) across the entire organization.

The following three solutions enable managers to support people in growing beyond their teams and increase the chance that top talent will choose to stick around.

Solution 1: Focus career conversations on progression, not promotion.

Career conversations today are often rushed, low quality, or even skipped in favor of day-to-day responsibilities. However, career conversations are one of what Gartner refers to as the "moments that matter" if managers want to retain people. The purpose of a

high-quality career conversation should be two-fold: to give employees the permission to be curious about where their career could take them and the practical support to make progress.

Strength spotting

Individuals often struggle to see their strengths, which makes it even more challenging to figure out how those strengths could be applied across different roles and parts of an organization. Career conversations give managers the chance to not only share strengths-based feedback (“I see you at your best when...”) but also to discuss how those strengths might be useful in other teams. They can help employees spot the value in not only *what* they’re delivering but *how* they make work happen. For example, there are few teams that wouldn’t benefit from a brilliant problem solver or creative collaborator. Helping employees go beyond being aware of their strengths to understanding how those strengths could be applied in different situations is often the first step in increasing an individual’s confidence to start exploring career possibilities within an organization.

3 questions for managers to ask in career conversations

Ask your team members these questions to help them discover their strengths and think through how they might ...



Creating connections

Managers play an important role in prompting employees to have curious career conversations. These conversations are not about applying for a job but instead getting a window into someone else’s world. It can be a daunting task for individuals to approach people for informal chats, especially those senior to them. Managers typically have a wider range of relationships across an

organization and are therefore in a good position to make connections and direct introductions to new people. When individuals are actively encouraged to explore internal opportunities outside their direct team, it reduces the concern that looking elsewhere for future possibilities will impact the outcome of their annual performance review.

Solution 2: Make career experiments easy.

Applying for new internal roles can feel like a formal and drawn-out process. An alternative approach is for managers to work together to create career experiments across an organization. These experiments encourage employees to try out new experiences and opportunities in a way that feels safe, and even fun. Though some experiments inevitably work better than others, even the commitment to experimentation signals to employees that the company is invested in finding ways to support people to “squiggle and stay.”

Borrowed brilliance

Moving to a new team and department creates a lot of uncertainty and unknowns for employees. Managers can reduce this risk for individuals by finding ways to share talent that involves dipping a toe in the water rather than jumping straight into the deep end. This might look like two people doing a job swap one day a week for six months. Or it could be managers identifying “borrowed brilliance” roles where people are temporarily borrowed for a set amount of time for a specific project. It might even be as simple as a two-week “squiggly safari,” where an employee has a two-week “holiday” from their day job to learn more about different parts of the organization. Everyone wins with these types of experiments: Employees find their way out of siloes and expand their networks and managers benefit from a broader range of talent.

3 examples of career experiments

Try these experiments to make it easy for individuals to share their skills and strengths with other teams in the organization: ...



Skills marketplace

Many organizations are reconsidering how they structure for skill sharing. Rather than being identified through their job titles, employees are instead profiled by their talents. These talents form part of a “skills marketplace” that allows managers to profile projects based on the expertise they require and match it with the experience available within the business. This approach also enables organizations to more accurately and proactively assess where they might have skills gaps. Beyond just projects, this approach could lead to whole roles being deconstructed into a set of skills that could be divided out between a group of people, rather than expecting one person to excel in all areas a role may require.

Solution 3: Measure managers on people potential, not team performance.

Where the question was once “how do I keep this person on my team?,” the question now needs to be “how do I keep this person in my organization?” A manager’s role in supporting someone’s career must expand to support people to explore opportunities beyond the boundaries of their existing team. Metrics matter in driving behavior changes, and managers need to be recognized and rewarded for enabling internal mobility.

Mobility metrics

Managers need to be measured against a new set of metrics that reflect their focus on the development of organization-wide people potential. These metrics could include the number of career experiments they've sponsored within their team and supported for people to explore outside of their team. Metrics might also cover the diversity and development of skills within the team, ideally linked back to data from the skills marketplace, and also the percentage of vacant roles filled internally. These metrics reinforce the need for talent to flow within the organization, to support people's aspirations for career growth, and to enable the organization to benefit from a more fluid and flexible workforce.

3 mobility metrics for managers

Instead of holding managers accountable just for their own teams, measure how well they enable their team members to ...



Empower employees

Individuals need avenues to share whether they're able to demonstrate and develop their transferable talents, have frequent conversations about their career, and feel they have permission to explore possibilities. Encouraging and empowering employees to share feedback on their managers' attitudes and actions on career progression is a vital part of the process. Organizations need to provide the structure and support for this information to flow. This could take the form of feedback training for employees and developing systems that prompt employees to share their perspectives on a manager's commitment to career growth. Providing the opportunity for employees to nominate managers for recognition and reward could also create visible signals of what success looks like. Managers that are seen to embrace the

“squiggle and stay” mindset become magnets for top talent and are showcased as role models to learn from across the organization.

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Reimagining retention is not a quick-fix solution to the challenge many organizations and managers are currently facing, but the sooner they start, the sooner their people will see the opportunities to squiggle and stay instead of looking to leave in order to grow.

Helen Tupper is the cofounder and CEO of Amazing If, a company with an ambition to make careers better for everyone. Together with her business partner Sarah Ellis, she is the author of *The Sunday Times* number-one bestseller *The Squiggly Career, You Coach You*, and host of the Squiggly Careers podcast. Their TEDx talk, “The best career path isn’t always a straight line,” has over one million views. Prior to Amazing If, she held leadership roles at Microsoft, Virgin, and BP and was awarded the FT & 30% Club’s Women in Leadership MBA Scholarship.

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