

Undervalued women are leaving workplaces to start their own businesses – Here's how you can improve retention

In a successful organisation, the right people are in the right place at the right time. They are energised by their work, recognised for their efforts, and support their colleagues to be at their very best. But in reality, this is rare.

Temps de lecture : minute

18 December 2023

In 2021, 'The Great Resignation' became a term synonymous with the global trend of employees, particularly those from under-recognised groups, leaving their jobs. Common reasons included:

- Hostile work environments due to poor workplace behaviours
- Poor recognition of technical skillset and performance, and
- Lack of leadership development and opportunities for career advancement.

A lack of inclusive workplace culture can impact the careers of employees, and women are likely to be more impacted than men. If organisations fail to engage and enable women, they will fail to retain them. This leads to attrition, negatively impacting innovation and the bottom line. In many cases, women are not leaving the workforce entirely. Instead, they are leaving to find a better organisation to meet their needs or starting their own business to follow their passions. For organisations to reduce this trend and improve retention, changes must be made to improve workplace cultures.

Poor workplace behaviours

“You only got the job because you’re a woman” is heard too frequently by women in the workplace. But there are other more subtle behaviours and microaggressions that impact a woman’s satisfaction at work – for example, speaking up in a meeting only to be met with silence, and then ignored altogether. Another example is the double standard for behaviours where a man can do something and be referred to as ‘the boss’ but when a woman does the same, she is labelled ‘bossy’. This kind of bias is rampant, but often not well understood.

To improve the situation, leaders must first acknowledge the behaviours within their organisation by gathering data from those involved to understand their experiences. They can do this by creating or joining an employee resource group. In these safe spaces employees can share experiences without fear of retaliation nor fear of their experiences being shared outside of the group but provide leaders with the right information. Leaders can then explore with the group on what changes are needed to improve the culture and can circle back regularly to measure success. Open discussions about the impact of bias on team members are essential for creating a culture of transparency.

Another issue impacting workplace behaviours is inauthenticity. For true inclusion, people need to be accepted as their authentic selves, but often people try to imitate others to be seen in the same light. This is an issue especially when the imitator is in a leadership position. Frequently those are the leaders that always provide positive reports to their management to ensure they are thought of positively, regardless of the reality of the situation that their team are facing without support. This can demotivate the team and cause a ripple effect where members of the team start adopting similar behaviours masking real problems.

To solve this issue, another way needs to be presented to them.

Identifying and showcasing authentic role-models at all levels based on performance, behaviours, and recognitions is essential. Those individuals will feel seen and can help build relationships throughout the organisation. To get the visibility and recognition, they need to be authentic.

Poor recognition of technical skillset and performance

Recognising existing talent within an organisation is essential for employees to feel valued and engaged. However, women frequently feel they must prove themselves before being trusted to deliver work autonomously. This can become tiresome especially when they have worked in an organisation for some time. Often highly competent and confident individuals are stuck in unchallenging roles and asked to share their screen during meetings when not presenting, book meeting rooms, organise away days etc. Continually assigning these tasks that are outside of their job description to the same person is another reason that leads to attrition.

If this occurs within an organisation, leaders can intervene. Employees should be asked regularly if their work is meaningful and conducive to their career development, and if not, actions should be taken to provide them with more challenging work.

But when they are given challenging work, is constructive feedback provided? In a lot of cases, the feedback is disingenuous and sometimes non-existent. Without timely and actionable feedback, it is impossible to know how you are performing or how to make improvements if needed. Above all else, it stifles growth and development, which can lead to imposter syndrome and negative feelings.

Leaders should ask their employees regularly about the last time they

received feedback and to rate its quality and impact on their development. This practice helps identify areas where improvements are needed in providing feedback.

Poor leadership development

Many employees want career growth and development into future leaders of their organisation, but when this doesn't happen it can be a reason for attrition. Women can be overlooked in favour of a more traditional male when it comes to identification and selection of future leaders. While inauthenticity in leadership is an issue, unethical leadership can also cause problems by encouraging poor decisions for short-term gains. Women are typically more empathetic and can read a situation differently but may be hindered by their organisation for going against the norm.

To rectify this, role-models who speak up without any negative impacts on their careers or reputations should be showcased. This will encourage employees to act ethically without fear of retaliation.

Another hinderance that women typically face is a lack of sponsorship for leadership development. Women typically are not short of mentors, but sponsorship and advocacy is what makes the difference. Too often, organisations focus on mentoring women by holding initiatives on banishing imposter syndrome or building confidence, but the most confident and competent women will leave an organisation if they are not included.

Recognition of great work and advocating for women is essential. This advocacy helps set them up for success when transitioning into new roles when a leader publicly recognises their skills and capabilities. Leadership is evolving, and today's leaders must cultivate the next generation of leaders to ensure the business remains competitive and all employees feel recognised and valued.

Conclusion

Organisations perform better with diverse teams, but diversity requires inclusion. Too often, women feel invisible, frustrated, and undervalued in the workplace. Organisational leaders have an opportunity to change this. Great leaders invest time to get to know employees at different levels and learn about their experiences, needs, and expectations at work. While some attrition is inevitable, the goal is to keep it within acceptable levels and be consistent across all demographics.

Lauren Neal is the author of *Valued at Work: Shining a Light on Bias to Engage, Enable, and Retain Women in STEM* (£14.99, Practical Inspiration)

Article by Lauren Neal