

The Retention Riddle: What Does It Take to Keep Your People?

BY NATALIE ROONEY

How can the accounting profession encourage its best and brightest talent to stay when so many other options exist today?

Since April 2021, more than 19 million U.S. workers have quit their jobs – a record pace. According to a September 2021 global study by McKinsey & Company, 53 percent of employers say they’re experiencing greater voluntary turnover than in previous years, and 64 percent expect the problem to continue or worsen over the next six months. In fact, 40 percent of employees say they’re at least somewhat likely to quit in the next three to six months. Why should you care about employee retention instead of just letting them go? First and foremost, it’s expensive. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), it costs an average of six to nine months’ salary to replace a worker.

COCPA Chair Angela Roberts, CPA, managing director of Activity, sees firsthand how much money employee departures cost employers. First, there’s the time it takes for a new hire to get up to speed and produce at the same level as current employees. Additionally, employers also likely are overworking their other people during a job search. Clients may not have anyone to contact. “That burden costs reputation, time, and money,” she says. “There is an additional risk when the other people start to think about leaving.”

WHAT DO THEY REALLY WANT?

It’s not always about the money. “Money is enticing, but when you ask young professionals why they’re leaving, it’s about their time,” Roberts says. “This newest generation is plugged in all day, and they don’t want to work overtime or around the clock because they don’t see the benefit or value in it. They have hobbies. They have side hustles. They don’t believe their career is the only way to make money. They are smart and can do different things.”

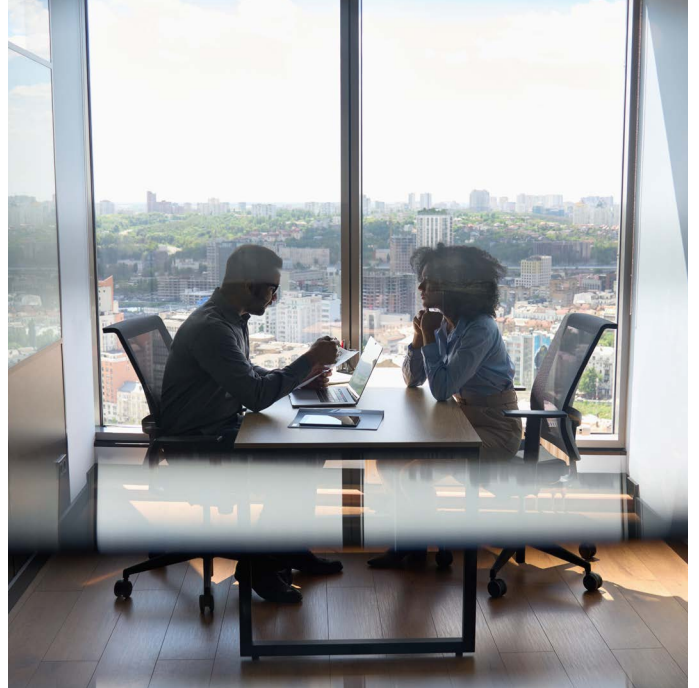
So, beyond money, what do today’s young professionals want? A remote work option. “No one wants to work 10 to 15 hour days; they don’t even want to come into the office two days a week,” Roberts says. “They want the flexibility to live in different cities or even countries. People want to enjoy their jobs and their hobbies.”

According to Upwork’s *Future Workforce Report 2021*, nearly 28 percent of respondents are expected to be fully remote in the next five years. That increased from 22.9 percent in November 2020.

Roberts says she still hears that people want to believe in a company’s mission. “They want to know what you are doing, how you are doing it, and that yours is a company they can stand behind,” she emphasizes.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS ARE FLEXING

To address employees’ interest in working in a flexible workstyle, BDO introduced BDO Flex more than a decade ago. Partner Erin Breit, CPA, says the program has formally evolved through discus-



sions from the national level down through the local offices. “The workstyle and strategy encompass everything,” she explains.

BDO Flex addresses not only part-time employees who have different hours but also where employees want to work. “We trust our employees to get all our work finished. We prioritize outcomes rather than where or when they’re working,” Breit says. “We train our teams to communicate to let everybody do what they need to do to have a good work + life fit.”

Local offices can make changes as needed, as can individual teams like audit and tax. “They just have to communicate their needs, when and where they’ll be working, and put a plan together,” Breit says. “We encourage robust, open communication. It allows team members to prioritize their work outcomes over the hours they’re putting in and where they’re working. It leads to a less stressful work environment. Being able to do everything in your life that you enjoy outside of work while still having a career is important.”

CREATING A SUSTAINABLE EXPERIENCE

Doug Slaybaugh, CPA, CGMA, PCC, CPCC, founder of The CPA Coach, says evening out what he calls the pendulum of public accounting is key to attracting and retaining good people. “Firms swing hard in the direction of the moment,” he explains. “You have an opportunity to create sustainability in the middle. What can you proactively do for the good of your people to create a place that lands the pendulum in a viable and intentional state?”

Last September, Slaybaugh wrote a LinkedIn blog post: *A public accounting experience to stay for*. It was actually written for a mentor and public accounting firm partner to offer ideas to help create a better experience for firms and their people.

One idea came from the automotive industry: Toyota is famously known for asking “why” five times to uncover the cause and effect of a concern. Slaybaugh recommends asking your team five “what” questions to better understand their circumstances and the roots of their concerns. He provided some examples: What is on your mind? What would be better? What more can you tell me? What else?

“Why’ creates a position of defensiveness,” Slaybaugh explains. “Why did you do that? Why did you think that? So much more is possible with ‘what.’ It doesn’t imply judgment and allows your team to do the thinking. It leaves a wide berth to be curious. By asking those ‘what’ questions and really digging in, you can move from general and conversational to specific and impactful.”

JOB CRAFTING FOR RETENTION

Slaybaugh says people often leave jobs without ever asking for what they really want or knowing what they could have had from the current employer. Job crafting can help prevent that from happening. It involves three components:

Task Crafting: Changing up responsibilities. Changing the nature of certain responsibilities or dedicating different amounts of time to what you currently do.

Relationship Crafting: Changing up interactions. Changing up who we work with on different tasks, who we communicate and engage with regularly.

Cognitive Crafting: Changing up your mindset. By changing perspective on what we’re doing, we can find or create more meaning about what might otherwise be seen as ‘busy work.’ Sweeping floors at a hospital might sound like it isn’t fun and is just dirty work, but someone sweeping the floors might also love the job because it helps save lives by keeping a clean room and environment for patients to recover.

“You can job craft a better reason to be doing what you’re doing,” Slaybaugh says. “It’s a process to go through these retention steps, and it’s usually skipped. You find out in an exit interview when you hear things like: ‘If only you’d given me more challenging tasks, a different team, or a different manager, or if I understood the impact of my work.’ But by then, it’s too late.”

Slaybaugh recommends conducting stay interviews with your team. A stay interview is an exit interview designed to happen before someone quits. “Ask the tough questions. Ask what would make the job better? What would make you leave? Have you thought about leaving? What can we do to improve? Find out what’s going on and then use job crafting to better align with the employee’s expectations.”

Roberts says stay interviews also can be helpful to determine if a potential move is simply about money. “If it is about money, pay it,” she asserts. “If you don’t, you’ll just end up paying a recruiter a percentage of the new base salary to find someone else. If you think someone is at risk of looking for a new position, have the conversation and make the investment.”

THE THREE BIGGEST THINGS

Slaybaugh says firms are reacting to these circumstances in three major ways:

- **Cash remains king.** Whether it’s end of season bonuses, bigger raises or spot bonuses, money usually talks.
- **More time off.** This could be PTO, an extra day off, or just more time off in general.
- **Some form of hybrid flexible working arrangement** in some or all circumstances.

He believes what really can have an impact on the profession and its people is better conversations, especially around the public accounting experience and well-being. Slaybaugh says accounting leaders know how to be mentors, but the soft skills needed to get in touch with what’s important to their teams might not be in their playbook. He suggests training to build those skills. “Because of our prob-

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lem-solving reflex as CPAs, we don’t go deep enough,” he observes. “What we really need to do is listen, create situations for people to be heard, and ask the right questions so we can gain a better understanding of what’s going on.”

Ultimately, Slaybaugh suggests opening your mind to all possibilities for retention. “Don’t be so worried about finding the right answer,” he encourages. “Be creative! Seek options that are original, personal, or aren’t typically offered. Do something that grabs the attention of your people or that you hadn’t thought possible.”

THE EMPLOYEE WISH LIST

Every time Roberts works with a candidate, she asks what he or she would like from the next job or employer. These direct quotes from candidates are enlightening:

- Work life balance is very important to me. I would love to work at a company that doesn’t just parrot that it promotes/encourages work life balance. I would like to work where people at all levels of the company live it. I understand that accounting/tax is deadline driven, and there will be weeks throughout the year where I will be required to work more hours than usual. However, I don’t want to work somewhere if this is the case all year. I don’t want to feel I constantly have to put out fires.
- I want an employer who invests resources in employees and wants to see them grow within the company. Ideally, I will be at the next company for years. I am not interested in job hopping. Good/healthy company culture where management/higher ups want to see employees grow with the company and help to facilitate that. I would like my employer to support my efforts to learn and improve by offering in depth training/training opportunities, goal setting, regular feedback, and skill building.
- I see myself working in a mid-size to large company. I am not interested in working in public accounting. Any industry is fine if it is stable and has good long-term potential. I want to work at a company that has a sustainable business and can provide growth for its employees.

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- I am not picky about my job title as long as the company I work for, and the job, meet the other items on my list.
- With the world being so volatile (which I don't anticipate changing anytime soon), I would like to work for a company that is financially healthy/stable and in an industry that has long-term potential. I want to feel confident that the company I work for - and my role - is secure and that I have job security (assuming that I am a dedicated, hard worker and high performer in my role, which I am confident I will be no matter where I work).
- I am open to working in office, hybrid, and/or remotely. I would prefer that if the job requires employees to be in office it will be within walking distance from where I live or conveniently accessible via public transit. I am open to job opportunities that are outside of Denver and Colorado if they are remote and/or if they only require in-office work (i.e., travel to their office/headquarters for big meetings and/or projects) sporadically throughout the entire year.
- A company that has systems, processes in place, and provides to its employees the resources to do the job. I don't want to be putting out fires every day.

"This generation is telling us, 'I'm here, and I'm smart enough,' so let's figure out ways to do things better," Roberts says. "Telling them we've always done something a certain way won't fly. They have ideas for new ways of doing things and can contribute. We gave this generation a seat at the table when they were being reared, so they've always had a voice. Now, they expect it when they go to work. If you don't listen, they feel disrespected and walk away."

WHAT'S AT RISK?

What's at risk if organizations don't change how they think about retention?

"The profession as a whole is at risk," Slaybaugh cautions. He points to an English study that revealed people consider accounting the second most boring profession. The most recent AICPA *Trends* report shows accounting firms continue to hire more non-accounting graduates as work continues to be realigned, outsourced, or replaced by technology. "That's all fine unless we're not creating other opportunities for accountants," he says. "Think of it like a movie. How do we get people in seats? We put out something people want to see. If we're not going to do that, we'll lose them. The experience itself is where it's at - creating the best experience for accountants."

TRUST YOUR PEOPLE

Above all, Breit says trust your employees to do their work. "Most organizations can have some version of a flex work environment where the priority is completing quality work by the deadline," she says. "If you're in management, it boils down to trust. Without it, the flex work arrangements won't go well because you'll always question what people are doing."

Breit says she cannot emphasize enough the importance of communication between team members and establishing clear guidelines and expectations. To that end, several years ago, BDO's Denver office hired an outside consultant to provide communication training. "That served as our foundation," Breit says. "Trusting your employees helps with motivation and achieving the outcomes you want. Management, trust your people!" ▲



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