

1ST QUARTER 2022

HR Edge

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Finding Workers in 2022

Last year, employers across the country faced a difficult problem: too many open positions and not enough workers. Unfortunately, experts anticipate recruiting and hiring challenges to continue in 2022, even as employment numbers trend toward pre-pandemic levels. Today, there are roughly 6 million currently unemployed workers, but many employers still struggle to fill positions. So, what's causing the current labor challenges for employers?

Contributing Factors

Although the unemployment rate has slowly declined, there are several contributing factors to today's employment challenges, many stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are some examples of what employers are up against:

- Workers have COVID-19-related safety concerns about entering the workplace.
- Workers have reprioritized their job desires, such as scheduling flexibility, telework options, competitive employee benefits, greater compensation and job fulfillment.
- Workers have access to more employment opportunities in a competitive labor market.
- Workers face continued caregiving duties, requiring them to remain at home.

Among other factors, these challenges impact workers' employment decisions — whether they reenter the workforce or leave their current job to find an opportunity that better addresses their concerns.



There were **6.3 million unemployed** Americans as of December 2021 — a 483,000 decrease from November 2021.

As such, the December **unemployment rate sits at 3.9%**, down 0.3% from the previous month.

Source: The Bureau of Labor Statistics

Employee Attraction and Retention Solutions

With various factors contributing to current labor challenges, employers need to do what they can to make their open positions and workplaces attractive. That means considering what perks employees are looking for, including:

- **Scheduling and work location flexibility** — During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many workplaces that could stay operational went remote. As more workplaces switch back to on-site arrangements, many employees

don't wish to return to in-person work. This leaves employers with a couple of options: allow telework for some positions or introduce a hybrid schedule (i.e., require some in-person days, allowing telework the rest of the week). These options can help address employees' desires for flexibility.

- **Benefits access** — Employee benefits are coveted assets in any workplace. While comprehensive benefits can provide a competitive edge, even narrow packages that include health care can be valuable among employees versus no offerings at all. Such packages are valued even more by workers who often don't have access to them, such as part-time or service sector employees. Employers can consider how employee benefits packages might appeal to the kinds of workers they need.
- **Greater compensation** — Pay increases aren't feasible in every situation, but competitive compensation matters to workers and influences employment decisions. If an employer has the budget, they can consider upping salaries to attract or retain top performers. Alternatively, employers can think about other means of compensation—basically, perks or value-adds that increase the worth of

a position. Examples of such perks include generous time off and bonuses for meeting productivity goals.

- **Job fulfillment** — Essentially, employers need to help employees answer the question, “Why is this job important?” Employers can directly address this in job descriptions by explaining how the position supports customers or a larger goal. This effort can also help employers connect with prospective employees who have values similar to those of the organization.

Today’s talent challenges are due to several overlapping factors stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. As employers learn more about what workers need and want as the pandemic continues to impact lives, health and personal responsibilities, they can offer such perks and benefits to appeal to top workers.

Understanding the Value of a Learning Culture

As many employers today are finding ways to combat attraction and retention challenges, learning and development (L&D) efforts are one way for organizations to find and keep employees. Not only do industry trends and protocols change, but many employees have taken on new or changing roles during the pandemic. Therefore, many workers want to broaden their skill sets to keep up with industry and role evolution.

Such opportunities exist and are encouraged in workplaces with a culture of learning. An authentic learning culture supports a growth mindset, an independent pursuit for knowledge and collective understanding related to organizational missions and goals. Not only do employees want to learn and apply new skills in their job and company, but they’re also open to sharing that knowledge with others. When employees don’t have career advancement opportunities, they may feel unchallenged or unmotivated in their roles. Employers can cultivate a workplace culture that offers opportunities to help support employees on their learning journeys.

In addition to being a powerful recruitment and retention tool for organizations, a learning company culture has the potential to impact workplaces by:

- Closing skill gaps
- Keeping up with workplace demands
- Increasing employee innovation and creativity
- Boosting employee productivity

Creating a Culture of Learning

Developing a learning and positive company culture takes time and dedication. Consider the following ways to build or reinforce a workplace culture of learning:

- **Personalize learning.** Employers can offer personalized learning plans to help guide employees on their learning journeys to make learning efforts relevant. Instead of focusing on course completion, employers can support employees’ long-term learning to reach their career goals.
- **Support risk-taking.** Employers can tolerate and perhaps even encourage mistakes—as long as they support learning and growth and are managed appropriately. When employees feel safe taking risks, significant growth can occur at the individual and team levels. The feasibility of this strategy will vary based on industry and organization.
- **Reward and recognize learning.** Employers need to show their appreciation and value of learning regularly. Focus on how employees apply their newfound knowledge versus simply what was accomplished.

L&D efforts are investments in employees — and the organization. Consider these ClearCompany statistics:

94%

The majority of employees (**94%**) said they would stay at a company longer if it invests in their careers.

15%

Employees who have access to professional development opportunities are **15%** more engaged.

24%

Companies that spend **\$1,500** or more on employee development per year report **24%** higher annual profits than organizations that spend less.

- **Leverage technology.** Employers incorporate e-learning, online coaching and learning management systems (LMSs) to train and develop their workforce. The right technology learning environment can facilitate and support continuous learning, ultimately making it accessible for all employees.
- **(LMSs) to train and develop their workforce.** The right technology learning environment can facilitate and support continuous learning, ultimately making it accessible for all employees.
- **Hire lifelong learners.** Recruiting and hiring managers could leverage assessments and behavioral interviews to gauge if candidates are a good fit or add to company culture. For example, such an assessment could help reveal if a prospective employee is driven, curious or has a learner mindset.

A culture of learning requires ongoing attention and effort from organizational leaders and managers. Employees want to feel like they're part of something bigger than just their role, and career development and advancement opportunities can be part of that.

Creating a Psychologically Safe Work Environment for Employees

Several work dynamics play a role in a successful team. One of the most crucial is psychological safety. Being psychologically safe means employees feel secure in taking risks and being vulnerable in front of others. Organizations benefit when employees feel comfortable asking for help, sharing ideas or challenging the status quo without fear of negative consequences.

Why it Matters

While there are many personal benefits for employees who work in a psychologically safe environment, organizations can reap the following benefits for promoting such a workplace:

- Better employee engagement and retention
- Increased resilience and adaptability in the workplace
- Greater collaboration and knowledge sharing
- Boosted team problem-solving and performance
- Stronger workplace inclusion and empathy

How to Foster Psychological Safety

Leaders play an essential role in nurturing psychological safety in the workplace. Recent research from McKinsey & Company found a strong correlation between leadership style and psychological safety. This security goes hand-in-hand with a positive team culture. Based on research, an authoritative leadership style can be detrimental to psychological safety. However, psychological safety can thrive when leaders demonstrate consultative and supportive behaviors instead.

Employers can foster a psychologically safe work environment through the following actions:

- **Encouraging open communication** — Reinforce that any feedback is welcomed and encouraged. When feedback is given, publicly share how the organization responds to it. That can help demonstrate that leadership wants to receive input, making it a safe space. This type of transparent behavior should also be encouraged between employees and departments.
- **Giving employees a voice** — The only way to know how the workforce feels is to check in and keep a pulse on employee satisfaction and engagement. Surveys are



The Stages of Psychological Safety

After processing through these four sequential stages, employees are likely comfortable speaking up in the workplace.

1. **Inclusion Safety** — Employees feel safe and accepted to be who they are in the work environment.
2. **Learner Safety** — Employees feel safe to learn, ask questions and experiment. They're also open to giving and receiving feedback.
3. **Contributor Safety** — Employees feel safe to make a valuable contribution using their skills and gifts.
4. **Challenger Safety** — Employees feel safe to challenge the status quo when they see room for change or improvement.

a great way to track feelings and thoughts over time, but it's also vital to receive informal feedback from managers and employees. Formalizing companywide one-on-one meetings can help facilitate candid conversations.

- **Reflecting on leadership styles** — It's vital for senior leadership to assess how they think, behave and react in certain circumstances with employees, as their behaviors often set the tone for an organization's culture. Self-assessment exercises and open discussions can help management and leadership consider how to positively influence the work environment.
- **Demonstrating concern for employees** — Especially amid the pandemic, leadership and managers need to ask employees how they're doing and if there's anything they need help with. Taking the time to get to know employees on a personal level can help make employees feel more comfortable speaking up and sharing their authentic selves.
- **Accommodating dispersed employees** — If supporting a remote or hybrid work environment, organizations will have to be even more intentional with showing appreciation for employees and accepting their ideas, contributions and discussions.

Psychological safety is a key work dynamic that takes time to build but just moments to destroy. It comes down to employers creating opportunities for open feedback and dialogue so employees can be themselves in the work environment.

Contact Brady, Chapman, Holland & Associates for more human resources trends, industry insights and proactive strategies to maintain a competitive edge in today's workplace.