Why Play Is An Essential Element of Employee Retention

How You Can Improve Team Connection, Success, and Morale to Retain Top Performers

Abstract

It's no secret that employee retention is a serious concern for today's organizations.

With the tight labor market, the aftermath Covid-19, the Great Resignation, and the advent of "quiet quitting," it's more important than ever that employers deliberately cultivate retention plans that focus on key factors like workplace culture, team cohesion, and individual learning and development.

This white paper explores the current employee retention environment, the role that effective teams play in retaining top performers, and how to develop team connection, success, and morale through the power of organized play.

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Chapter 1: The State of Employee Retention

The Great Resignation. Quiet quitting. Covid-19.

Individually, these words can strike fear into the hearts of managers bent on retaining their best talent. But all three factors together, combined with an extraordinarily tight labor market, have created an urgent need for companies to focus strategically on employee retention - while, according to the World Economic Forum, worker interest in remaining at their current jobs is at a significant low.

The World Economic Forum reports that more than a quarter of workers surveyed do not see themselves with their current employer in two years' time, and almost half of workers surveyed were actively investigating other opportunities. Similarly, Gallup reports that worldwide, 53% of workers surveyed said that this was a good time to find a new job, and 51% were actively looking for one.

As inflation and labor shortages combine with post-pandemic effects (the U.S. Chamber of Commerce reports that while there are 9.9 million job openings in the U.S., there are only 5.8 million unemployed workers), recruiting numbers are feeling the pinch. The National Federation in Independent Business (NFIB) reported in their monthly jobs report for May 2023:

> *46% of owners reported job openings that were hard to fill, unchanged from September. Of those hiring or trying to hire, 90% of owners reported few or no qualified applicants for the positions they were trying to fill. --* **NFIB**

Quiet Quitting - What is it?

The term "quiet quitting" exploded onto the employment scene in March of 2022, when it first appeared on Youtube and TikTok. According to the Transdisciplinary Journal of Management, quiet quitting is a form of disengagement at work where someone does just enough to not get fired.

> *Quiet quitting does not mean failing to comply with the requirements of one's job. It means doing the least one can get by with to keep one's job. "Work-to-rule," of which quiet quitting is a special case, means doing what is specified in one's job description, no more, no less. -- **The Transdisciplinary Journal of Management**

Gallup's State of the Workplace: 2023 Report offers a similar definition:

> *Quiet quitting: These employees are filling a seat and watching the clock. They put in the minimum effort required, and they are psychologically disconnected from their employer. Although they are minimally productive, they are more likely to be stressed and burnt out than engaged workers because they feel lost and disconnected from their workplace. -- **Gallup**

The Gallup report also paints a grim picture of the breadth of employee disengagement and the "quiet quitting" phenomenon. It estimates that low engagement costs the global economy approximately 8.8 trillion dollars (around 9% of global GDP).

Further, globally, 59% of those surveyed listed themselves as "Disengaged / Quiet Quitting," which is almost three out of every five people in the workforce.

However, Gallup also notes that the disengaged and "quietly quitting" employees "would likely become engaged with a few changes to their workplace."

One of the changes that can increase employee engagement (and thus, retention) is putting effort into building stronger and more cohesive teams.

Chapter 2: The Importance of Teams

It should be no surprise that employee engagement is one of the key drivers of employee retention. According to Gallup, engaged employees are less likely to leave a company, and are more likely to be part of the 54% of employees who would not accept a different offer.

But what is employee engagement? A good definition by Workday refers to employee engagement as "the degree to which an employee feels connected to their work, their colleagues, and the wider business."

> *The connection to colleagues is particularly important because of the changing nature of work environments.*

The Covid-19 pandemic ushered in an era of remote work that shows little sign of stopping, with 74% of U.S. companies planning to make remote or hybrid work a permanent option. This has fundamentally changed the way that workers interact and form connections to both their employer and their colleagues.

While historically workers have been able to form in-person connections with a wide range of colleagues (goofing off around the watercooler, anyone?), remote work means that most people will only be able to engage and form connections with the colleagues they work most closely with - in other words, their team.

The Society for Human Resource Management emphasizes the importance of interpersonal connection for engagement and retention, noting that the more connections and relationships that employees develop as they participate in their job the less likely they are to leave, because leaving the job "would require severing or rearranging those social and value networks."

Community at work, in these hybrid/remote days, is usually focused on the individual team rather than the organization as a whole. And a survey showed that a strong sense of community at work means that workers are "58% more likely to thrive at work, 55% more engaged, and 66% more likely to stay with their organization."

> *The strength of a team, therefore, is a significant driver of both engagement and retention in the workplace.*

Chapter 3: Strengthening Teams for Success

If the strength of a team is one of the most powerful drivers of employee engagement and retention, how can you go about strengthening a team?

Relational Coordination, a theory of performance developed by Dr. Jody Hoffer Gittell of Brandeis, provides some insight into how teams can be strengthened both internally and to support their products and deliverables.

Relational Coordination proposes that the way teams interact has a profound impact on the effectiveness of the team. The theory presents three attributes of team relationships that result in the highest level of team coordination and performance. They are:

- S**hared goals that transcend participants' specific functional goals**

- **Shared knowledge that enables participants to see how their specific tasks interrelate with the whole process, and**

- **Mutual respect that enables participants to overcome the status barriers that might otherwise prevent them from seeing and taking account of the work of others**

(An overview of relational coordination, Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship)

These three attributes aren't based on interpersonal levels of liking or disliking each other. Instead, developing shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect in the team develops strong work-related ties, giving each team member insight into how their own and each other's tasks are essential to the whole, a common goal to unite them, and respect based on their appreciation of how everyone's role is important to the whole.

In addition to Relationship Coordination, Google's Project Aristotle shines a particularly interesting light on what makes a team great.

In 2012, Google launched Project Aristotle to answer the question, "what makes teams successful?" The project name was a reference to a quote from the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who famously said, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

> *The whole is greater than the sum of its parts" --* ***Aristotle***

Project Aristotle found something interesting: the success of a team is less determined by who is on the team, and more by how the team worked together.

According to the researcher's findings, the most essential elements of successful teams are, in order of importance:

1 - Psychological safety: Defined by a 1999 study out of Harvard as "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking."

2 - Dependability: Each team member can depend on each other to complete quality work on time, without shirking their responsibilities.

3 - Structure and clarity: An individual's understanding of their work expectations, how those expectations are expected to be fulfilled, and the consequences and rewards of meeting those expectations. The more clear the team structure and task expectations are, the greater the team's effectiveness (according to this study from the Academy of Management Journal).

4 - Meaning: Google's researchers found that a sense of purpose in either the work or mission is important for team effectiveness (though the purpose itself may vary from person to person).

5 - Impact: The belief that the team's work is positively impacting the organization as a whole or its customers is an important factor in team effectiveness (with reference to a study from the Journal of Applied Psychology that determined individual efforts and team effectiveness increased with the perception of their task's significance).

There is one method of team building that is often overlooked or underestimated, but when used effectively positively impacts all five of these elements.

That method is **organized, constructive play**.

Chapter 4: The Power of Play

Using play to strengthen team cohesion is not new. It is an enjoyable way to build bonds and create shared experiences. However, the potential of play as a tool for learning and team building goes far beyond a weekly trivia night.

Think of a team engagement like investigating an iceberg. There's a piece of ice above the surface that's easily observable, and there are two sections of ice underwater - one just below the surface and one reaching much deeper. This metaphor frames three distinct depths of workplace culture, each building on the previous level to offer increasing rewards for the team in question.

In the context of play, this looks like:

Level 1: Team Bonding

At the highest level, play is a fun shared experience. Team members get to know each other as people, strengthen relationships, and create a memory that helps inspire future play.

- **Results**: Social familiarity and psychological safety

Level 2: Team Building

At the next level down, play is paired with reflection to help acknowledge how team members feel, think, and act in a given situation. These insights make it easier for people to work together.

- **Results**: Elevated trust and awareness of team dynamics

Level 3: Team Development

At the deepest level, play helps teams apply the benefits of team bonding and building to real work contexts. With each additional session, a team strives to become greater than the sum of its parts.

- **Results**: Improved team purpose, process, and performance

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Case Studies

#1 - Team Bonding

An AI-based marketing firm was growing from around 60 employees to 80, spread across 3 different US cities. In order to maintain a sense of shared identity and accountability across teams and locations, the whole staff would meet monthly for virtual game sessions.

The staff was split into Hogwarts-like houses that competed against one another. Every month was a totally different kind of game. The culture of play encouraged new connections outside of geographic locations and functional teams, and helped new employees get to know their colleagues outside of the project context.

Result: Employees felt more comfortable thinking creatively and offering up new ideas and feedback. This kept the company nimble and innovative.

#2 - Team Building

A small counterterrorism and cyber-security organization engaged in a series for four game sessions over a 5-month period. There had been some staffing changes, including new leadership, and they wanted to encourage stronger connections between colleagues and highlight the different areas of expertise across the team.

Each of the sessions included a game followed by reflections about how each person felt, thought, and acted during the game, and a discussion about how the experience of the game mirrored the actual team dynamics in the workplace. These discussions yielded practical ideas about how to better leverage each person's unique skills and perspectives so the teammates could collaborate and support one another.

Result: Everyone had more trust and confidence in the capabilities of their colleagues, as well as a greater commitment to accomplishing their mission.

#3 - Team Development

Following the implementation of a successful initiative to bring the initial COVID vaccines to the community, the director of a county health department wanted to realign the department leadership around a shared vision of promoting health equity. This required bringing together the heads of seven different units across the departments that, prior to the pandemic, operated in siloes with little communication and coordination.

Over a series of five sessions, they played games and participated in facilitated conversations to explore different ideas and practice new forms of interdependence.

Result: By the end, the team had a renewed appreciation for the department's values and mission, as well as a number of concrete changes to enable better sharing of resources and collaboration between the units.

Conclusion: Play Can Help Workplaces Thrive

The state of employee engagement and retention in today's workplace is concerning (if not actively dire). An organization that wants long-term success in the face of economic uncertainty, a tight labor market, and an ever-increasing speed of change needs to have a plan in place to actively re-engage "quiet quitting" employees, retain their top talent, and build a culture that encourages a tight-knit community within the workplace.

The best vehicle for accomplishing these goals is the team, and one of the most effective methods of team cohesion available is organized, focused, constructive play.

As a team experiences different levels of play, each depth addresses and strengthens the elements of successful teams as identified by Project Aristotle.

- **Level 1**: Team Bonding creates the sense of trust and psychological safety that Google's researchers identified as paramount to team success.

- **Level 2**: Team Building addresses dependability, structure, and clarity, as each team member learns how the others function and how they can best work with them to complete their projects and advance their goals.

- **Level 3**: Team Development builds a greater sense of meaning and impact as the team itself functions more effectively, dramatically improving the individual and collective contribution to the organization. As a result, it creates a culture that is more connected, impactful, and difficult to leave.

A true team.

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About Barometer XP

Barometer XP is a company dedicated to harnessing "the science of play at work." Founded in 2020 on the belief that adult learning should have an experiential component to give teams a chance to practice, experiment, and grow together, Barometer XP has found a niche between traditional professional development and team-building activities to modernize teams for 21st century challenges.

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