

# Improving Employee Retention through Strategic Employee Engagement

Keeping high-performing employees has been challenging in the wake of the pandemic, earning the nickname “the Great Resignation” and the federal government is no exception. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the federal government experienced an annual total separation rate of 18% in 2021, compared to 14.4% in 2018.<sup>1</sup> Among experts, 10% annual turnover is acknowledged as a healthy turnover rate.<sup>2</sup> To combat this growing issue, we recommend four cost-effective strategies the federal government can use to retain employees in increasingly competitive recruiting environments:

**1**

**Fun at Work:** Building creativity, teamwork, and workplace culture through the incorporation of “fun” into the workplace.

**2**

**Meaning through Mission:** Developing a deeper sense of purpose and meaning through ties to the organization mission.

**3**

**Building Flexibility:** Allowing employees some flexibility in choosing how they work, when they work, and where they work.

**4**

**Job Customization:** Permitting employees the ability to share, rotate, or sculpt their jobs to better suit their professional development goals.

<sup>1</sup>Bureau of Labor Statistics, [“Annual Total Separation Rates by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted,”](#) 2022.

<sup>2</sup>Gallup, [“The truth about turnover,”](#) 2002.

## 1



## Fun at Work

*Building creativity, teamwork, and workplace culture through the incorporation of “fun” into the workplace.*

The hybrid work environment has brought a change in how we approach work and an increased emphasis on the employee experience. Having fun boosts motivation, creativity, and team building when integrated into an organization’s culture. Sixty percent of recent graduates reported looking for positions with employers incorporating a fun and social culture within the workplace, even if they were paid less.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, brief breaks boost employee happiness and increase productivity, decrease absenteeism, and enhance positive perceptions of work culture.

Some fun strategies to boost engagement include celebrating employee milestones, encouraging public recognition, using icebreakers and teambuilders, facilitating team trivia, and hosting wellness activities like yoga or meditation. Some workplaces have found unique approaches to incorporate fun, such as a workplace Olympics, allowing staff to name their title, or personalize their email signature line. Leaders must welcome “fun” for employees to become a part of company culture.

Leaders can introduce appropriate humor at work and model what it looks like. Leaders with a good sense of humor are 27% more motivating and foster team creativity.<sup>4</sup> Like fun, humor leads to similar impacts, including increased job satisfaction, happier employees, and more team cohesion. Self-effacing humor increases respect for leadership and bonding between teammates.<sup>5</sup> When employees feel more comfortable in the workplace, they share more novel, innovative ideas. By increasing opportunities to engage in

fun and humor in the workplace, federal agencies will better attract and retain talent, increase morale and engagement, build rapport between leadership and employees, and enhance productivity. If you can laugh together, you can work together. When employees trust their leaders, they are more likely to have pride in their work. Camaraderie in a business environment refers to the relationship of friendship, community, understanding, loyalty, and trust between colleagues at work. According to the Great Place to Work® model, key indicators of effective leadership in today’s organizations include elements of camaraderie: relationships between employees and their leaders, between employees and their jobs, and between employees and each other.<sup>6</sup> With work taking up a large part of our lives, leaders should inject much-needed fun into the workplace and cultivate a culture of camaraderie.

<sup>3</sup>Forbes, [“The Benefit of Fun in the Workplace,”](#) 2017.

<sup>4</sup>TEDMonterey, [“Why great Leaders take humor seriously,”](#) 2021.

<sup>5</sup>Berkeley Greater Good Magazine, [“How a little humor can improve your work life,”](#) 2019.

<sup>6</sup>LinkedIn, [“Foster Camaraderie to Build a Great Place to Work,”](#) 2020.



## 2



## Meaning through Mission

*Developing a deeper sense of purpose and meaning through ties to the organization mission.*

Missions are meant to drive purpose behind an organization but can fall short when employees don't understand the mission or how it connects to their work. When work is meaningful, it gives purpose to an employees' daily duties, drives marketing, and provides a narrative of who the organization is and how each person contributes to the agency's mission.<sup>7</sup>

Consistently, employees who are motivated by the mission have shown higher levels of engagement, more organizational loyalty, and better work performance. A survey of LinkedIn employees found that mission-driven employees were 54% more likely to report organizational loyalty and planned to stay at the company for five or more years.<sup>8</sup> These employees are also 30% more likely to be high-performing, as they're motivated by the success of the organization rather than a paycheck.<sup>9</sup> Meaning also builds higher levels of trust in leadership and the management of the organization. The federal government might not have the ability to compete with the private sector in terms of employee pay, but the important missions government agencies are carrying out can be

the key to keeping employees engaged and strengthening morale. Making the mission matter and helping to explain the connection each job has on delivering the mission can lead to increased employee, customer, and stakeholder engagement.

The mission should be tied to every part of the employee life cycle, from recruitment to retention. We recommend regular team activities and conversations between managers and employees about how an employee's work connects to the mission, especially during onboarding.<sup>10</sup> Every meeting should be aligned to the mission, and the mission should guide decision-making. In the hybrid or remote environment, explaining how employees contribute to the mission helps build connection.



<sup>7</sup>Forbes, "[The meaning behind mission](#)," 2021.

<sup>8</sup>Imperative, "[Purpose trumps cash + other new research](#)," 2016.

<sup>9</sup>LinkedIn, "[5 reasons why mission-driven leaders are the most successful](#)," 2015.

<sup>10</sup>Inc., "[Here's how Google knows in less than 5 minutes if a new employee will get off to the perfect start](#)," n.d.

## 3



## Building Flexibility

*Allowing employees some flexibility in choosing how they work, when they work, and where they work.*

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many organizations to re-think how they do business. As government agencies scrambled to adjust to the new COVID environment, most were unprepared to perform daily operations outside of a government facility. As government agencies pivoted to remote work, employees quickly adjusted. A study conducted on data released by the Office of Personnel Management found that agencies that supported teleworking have lower voluntary turnover compared to other government agencies.<sup>11</sup> In a recent Institute for Business Value survey of more than 14,000 people globally, one in four employees said they planned to change companies in 2021, citing the need for a more flexible work schedule or location as a top reason.<sup>12</sup>



Remote work has a profound impact on commuters in terms of time and cost savings, as well as the impact on the environment. Allowing employees to work virtually also expands the talent market for federal organizations. Opening a more geographically diverse talent pool to people outside the region helps leaders overcome the diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges within the national security sector.

Many agencies have embraced a hybrid model where employees can perform unclassified work at home and access classified work in the office.<sup>13</sup> LinkedIn research shows more than half of workers prefer a hybrid work model.<sup>14</sup> While classified mobile technologies are often reserved for high-ranking officials who need to be on-the-go, expanding their use could further open the job market.<sup>15</sup> This trend would allow intelligence agencies to increase telework opportunities, and remain competitive in a tight job market.

<sup>11</sup> Public Personnel Management, [“Flexible work arrangements and employee retention: A longitudinal analysis of the federal workforces,”](#) 2019.

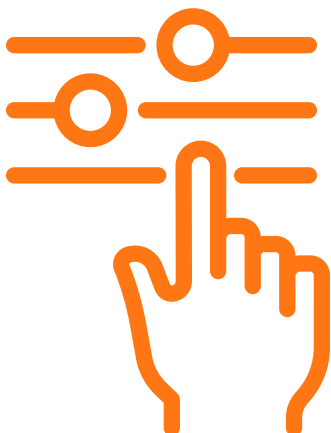
<sup>12</sup> Business Insider, [“4 ways to prepare for success in a hybrid work environment,”](#) 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Federal News Network, [“Top intel official touts telework, increasing workplace flexibilities,”](#) 2022.

<sup>14</sup> LinkedIn, [“Attracting and Keeping Talent as Hybrid Working Becomes the Norm,”](#) 2022.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 14.

## 4



## Job Customization

*Permitting employees the ability to share, rotate, or sculpt their jobs to better suit their professional development goals*

Job crafting, also called job sculpting, allows employees some ability to focus their work on their strengths, skills, and interests. While the core job remains the same, the employee is given control to make small shifts and adjustments to fit their desired career path better, which increases employee engagement. Research shows that engaged employees are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and more likely to stay with their current employer.<sup>16</sup>

Job sharing is another type of customization employers can offer employees who might otherwise choose to leave the workforce when post-pandemic responsibilities, such as caretaking of kids or parents, increase. Having two employees share a role can be a boon to productivity and offers inherent collaboration opportunities. Through adjustments, employees are more likely to experience “job-fit” and perform well.<sup>17</sup> When employees have more autonomy over their job and the way they approach work, they are more likely to be engaged and innovative.<sup>18</sup>

Job rotations are another avenue to pursue. High-potential employees are likely to leave their positions if they are no longer learning or developing. Job rotations allow employers to retain high-potential employees by demonstrating an investment in their professional development and exposing them to different career paths and opportunities within the organization.<sup>19</sup>

There are ongoing efforts within the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Defense, Department of State, and Intelligence Community to implement rotations or “details,” which allow employees to build cross-organizational collaboration and understanding.<sup>20</sup> These types of job rotations boost organizational knowledge and encourage engagement through expanded and novel experiences. The White House released a report in 2021 detailing its goals for the future of federal work, which call for an increase of job rotations within its goals for the upcoming years.<sup>21</sup> These strategies help modernize professional development for the federal workforce, and give employees the opportunity to build the knowledge, skills, and abilities to compete for promotion to supervisor and other opportunities.

<sup>16</sup> Career Development International, [“Reverse mentoring, job crafting and work-out comes: The mediating role of work engagement,”](#) 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Academy to Innovate HR, [“Job crafting: What HR professionals need to know,”](#) n.d.

<sup>18</sup> Human Factors and Ergonomics in Manufacturing & Service Industries, [“Not all autonomy is the same. Different dimensions of job autonomy and their relation to work engagement & innovative work behavior,”](#) 2016.

<sup>19</sup> LinkedIn, [“Attracting and Keeping Talent as Hybrid Working Becomes the Norm,”](#) 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Homeland Security Affairs, [“If you love them, let them go: A comparative analysis of rotational programs and recommendations for the Homeland Security Enterprise,”](#) 2021.

<sup>21</sup> The White House, [“Strengthening the Federal Workforce,”](#) 2022.





## Conclusion

In the wake of the pandemic and the “new normal” following the Great Resignation, retention has plagued nearly every industry, including the federal government. The pandemic demanded remote work and highlighted how work can be performed differently. As a result, employees are rethinking what they want to do for work and now place a premium on the ability to determine when, where, and how they work best. As the nation’s largest employer, the federal government has an opportunity to capitalize on pandemic related shifts in work style and expectations, and continue to evolve the future of work to improve recruitment and retention and serve as a model employer for all.