

# Why record numbers of hospitality workers are quitting the industry for good

February 1 2022, by Andrew Moreo, Imran Rahman, Lisa Cain, Trishna G. Mistry

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About 3.5 million people have [at least temporarily left the U.S. workforce](#) since March 2020. [Over one-third of them](#)—1.2 million—are

in the leisure and hospitality industry.

This has created huge problems for restaurants, hotels and other leisure and hospitality businesses that have struggled to find workers for [record numbers of job openings in 2021](#).

A big part of this decline seems to be explained by the "great resignation." Leisure and hospitality workers are quitting at the [highest rates of any industry](#). About 1 million quit in November 2021 alone. And the data suggests many of them are not simply swapping one hospitality job for another but leaving the industry entirely.

Why are these workers quitting, where are they going and what can be done to bring them back?

We recently commissioned a survey aimed at tracking down some of these workers and answering these questions. The research is ongoing, but our early qualitative results offer some clues to answering these questions.

## **Reasons for attrition**

Before we get to our early data, there are several characteristics of leisure and hospitality work that help explain why the industry [has unusually high turnover rates](#).

For one thing, the wages are very low. Leisure and hospitality workers [were earning an average of \\$515 a week](#)—including tips—as of December 2021, making them the worst-paid of all sectors, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. That's less than half of the average for all private workers and translates into annual income of under \$27,000—based on 52 weeks of pay.

This puts financial stress on these employees, often forcing them to work [multiple jobs to get by](#).

The [working hours](#) are also challenging, [often involving nights, weekends](#) and [holidays](#), which means hospitality workers routinely miss out on time with friends and family, limiting opportunities to recharge their emotional batteries.

Moreover, the jobs in this sector are particularly stressful and emotionally draining. In fact, [sociologists](#) and economists have a phrase for this: [emotional labor](#). This concept refers to the suppression of whatever emotions an employee may be experiencing to provide good service to a customer—and often "[with a smile](#)."

In hospitality, employees must regulate the outward expression of their emotions to the benefit of the customer and their employer, regardless of what they are feeling. Sometimes this puts little or no burden on the employee, but at other times it takes a [great emotional toll](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic [has amped up the emotional labor](#) of service work considerably.

The new stressors include massive furloughs and layoffs since March 2020, significant risks to personal health by having little choice but to work at a physical location where workers regularly are in close proximity to colleagues and customers, as well as fights with patrons over [enforcing mask bans and vaccine mandates](#). The [news media](#) regularly report on angry and even violent confrontations between [customers and service workers](#), whether on [planes](#), in [restaurants](#) or in other types of [establishments](#).

## **Finding the 'quitters'**

While there's been a ton of coverage of the sector's [record quit rate](#) of 6.4% in November—the latest data available—there's less hard data on why [hospitality workers](#) are leaving their jobs now and where they are going.

So as part of an ongoing project studying employee attrition, we asked Qualtrics—an employee and customer experience data-gathering company—to find people who worked in the hospitality sector before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and have since left the industry—a process that was exceedingly difficult.

We completed a qualitative unpublished pilot study in December 2021 to help inform a larger quantitative survey we're working on right now. Our initial results, which include open-ended responses from 31 people, aren't necessarily representative of all or even most workers who have quit their jobs but allow us to paint a more complete picture of what's driving the decisions of these specific individuals. We asked them why they left, where they went and what could lure them back to a hospitality job.

We used their answers to construct questions that are appropriate for in-depth statistical analysis, which will then be administered to 350 people who agree to take part in the quantitative survey. Results of that survey will be available in a couple months.

## **Why people are leaving**

Our first question focused on what drove people to not only quit their jobs but leave the hospitality sector. The most common responses related to health and safety concerns, burnout and issues involving managers or co-workers.

One of our respondents was a 35-year-old single mother who said she

had been working in the food service industry for about five years before the pandemic hit. She quit her job four months later.

"My safety and my family's safety were on the line and I was being overworked," she said.

A 20-year-old man said he left the hotel industry during the pandemic after five years "because I truly wasn't happy" and "didn't have the will to keep going on."

Another 35-year-old woman said she quit her job on a cruise ship because she cares for her elderly parents, who would be more at risk were they exposed to COVID-19.

"They didn't care about our well-being," she said. "I have family at home that can die if exposed to COVID."

## **Where did they go**

As for what the people in our survey decided to do after leaving the industry, the most common answer was to get more education. But others emphasized a desire to go into business for themselves or to a different type of service job, such as in retail.

A 21-year-old man who had been working at nightclubs for over three years said he quit to go to college.

Both the 35-year-old single mother and 20-year-old man said they decided to become self-employed.

Another 23-year-old single mother who had worked in food service before and during the pandemic left for retail, stating: "I got another job as a cashier and it was the only thing I could find at that moment."

## Would they go back

Most of our participants told us nothing would bring them back to these types of [jobs](#)—they were done with the industry. The 35-year-old single mother, for example, said there was nothing that could be done to bring her back now that she had moved on with her own business.

But others said better money or hours would help lure them back, as well as stronger managerial support.

A 42-year-old woman who spent nearly a decade in the food service industry said she would return for "better pay and more respect," a sentiment echoed by others.

An 18-year-old woman said she quit a food service job because of a manager with a "really bad temper" who would "cuss at customers and employees." She said that the only way she would go back to hospitality work is if a company showed her "that managers are actually there to help employees."

"I would also like customers to be more patient and humble," she added.

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