During the pandemic, employers who fostered 'collective engagement' had less employee turnover

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A new study finds that some workplaces did a better job than others at limiting employee turnover during the COVID pandemic. Specifically, researchers found that units that had fostered a sense of "collective engagement" among employees before the pandemic saw less employee turnover than units that were less successful at creating that sense of engagement.

"Sometimes people leave a job due to changes at the workplace that the employer has control over," says Patrick Flynn, co-author of a paper on the study published in the*Journal of Applied Psychology*, and an assistant professor of management in North Carolina State University's Poole College of Management.

"That could be due to changes in management, pay, benefits, and so on. A lot of research has been done on the effect that these internal factors have on employee retention and turnover.

"However, there's less work on what employers can do to mitigate employee turnover related to external events, which an employer has no control over," Flynn says. "These external events can be localized changes, such as a competitor offering an employee better pay.

"But these external events can also be national, or even global, in scale—such as the onset of the COVID pandemic. For this study, we used the pandemic as an opportunity to collect data on the impact that a large external event had on employee turnover."

For the study, researchers partnered with a U.S.-based company that has more than 70,000 employees and stores in all 50 states. Specifically, the researchers were able to collect store-level employee turnover data for all of the company's stores for the first six months of 2020.

The researchers also had data from a detailed employee survey that the company had conducted in December 2019. That survey included information on issues related to employee engagement and satisfaction.

The researchers found that employee turnover dropped pretty much across the board from March to April, as the reality of the pandemic set in.

"However, by May and June, employee turnover—on average—was actually increasing," Flynn says. "But some stores were doing much better than others at retaining their employees. We wanted to see what set those stores apart from their peers."

Stores that did a better job of holding on to their employees had one thing in common, the researchers found—much higher levels of collective engagement.

"In other words, the leadership of those stores had fostered a shared perception among employees of what they were doing and why they were doing it," Flynn says. "You could think of it as a shared sense of mission or community among store employees.

"And while our study doesn't assess the management techniques those stores used to foster that sense of collective engagement, it clearly suggests that collective engagement played an important role in limiting turnover.

"Moving forward, we'd like to see two things," Flynn says. "First, we'd like to see whether collective engagement helps employers limit employee turnover in response to other forms of external activity. In other words, was this finding unique to the pandemic?

"Second, it would be interesting to look at the ways in which management tries to foster collective engagement, to see if any of those techniques are particularly valuable in terms of reducing turnover due to external events."

More information: Patrick J. Flynn et al, How context shapes collective turnover over time: The relative impact of internal versus external factors, *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0001230](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001230)

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