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Employee Retention

13 Signs That Someone Is About to Quit, According to Research

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Despite a century of speculation by managers and scholars, we know very little about whether certain cues or signs exhibited by employees can predict whether they're about to quit.

To help managers and companies identify employees at risk of quitting, we investigated this very question and uncovered a set of behavioral changes exhibited by employees—what we dub pre-quitting behaviors—that are strong predictors of voluntary quits in the 12 months after they are observed by managers. Our inquiry was inspired by a study by evolutionary psychologists David Buss and Todd Shackelford showing that romantic partners give off cues that indicate whether they are committing infidelity. A series of classic studies by psychologist John Gottman supports this, identifying how certain verbal and nonverbal cues expressed by married couples during brief videotaped interactions can forecast their eventual divorce.

But the romantic realm isn't the only place where cues can take place. Poker players give off "tells" that reveal the strength of their hands, while American football players read their rivals' behaviors to decide how they will act after the ball is snapped. And research shows that criminals have become savvy at identifying informants or undercover officers in their midst.

To understand how tells might play out in the workplace, we first sought to identify a large set of behavioral changes employees exhibit that signal their future turnover. We asked nearly 100 managers to answer the following question: *Think for a moment of the peers and subordinates who have voluntarily quit your organization in the last two years. How was their behavior different in the months prior quitting that might have told you they were on their way out?* We also asked 100 employees to

describe their own changes in behavior before leaving a previous job. These inquiries yielded over 900 different pre-quitting behaviors. The survey respondents reported relatively odd behavioral changes (e.g., “stopped caring about their personal appearance;” “became aggressive toward other employees”) as well as many common ones (e.g., “less willingness to volunteer for special projects;” “decreased attendance at staff meetings”).

For the next phase of the research, we edited and pruned the list of 900+ behaviors into a structured 116-item questionnaire. We administered this provisional survey to three additional samples of managers. The first set of managers rated how often previous leavers enacted these behaviors before quitting. Half of the 116 behaviors were eliminated because they occurred infrequently (e.g., “They asked co-workers for contacts at other companies;” “They exhibited sudden and frequent changes in their mood”). We then circulated this reduced survey to *another* group of managers who rated how often their current subordinates exhibit these actions. We next analyzed these ratings and isolated a cluster of 13 highly correlated behaviors that best represent employees’ proclivity toward near-future voluntary turnover. Finally, we double-checked this finding by asking one more group of managers to describe their employees’ behaviors with the final 13-item survey.

The pre-quitting behaviors that made the cut are below:

1. Their work productivity has decreased more than usual.
2. They have acted less like a team player than usual.
3. They have been doing the minimum amount of work more frequently than usual.
4. They have been less interested in pleasing their manager than usual.
5. They have been less willing to commit to long-term timelines than usual.
6. They have exhibited a negative change in attitude.

7. They have exhibited less effort and work motivation than usual.
8. They have exhibited less focus on job related matters than usual.
9. They have expressed dissatisfaction with their current job more frequently than usual.
10. They have expressed dissatisfaction with their supervisor more frequently than usual.
11. They have left early from work more frequently than usual.
12. They have lost enthusiasm for the mission of the organization.
13. They have shown less interest in working with customers than usual.

The most interesting take-away from this second phase of our research were the behaviors that did not survive our screening process. Note that the 13 key behaviors do not include “wearing dressier clothes to work,” “leaving a resume on the printer,” or “missing work for doctors’ appointments more frequently than usual.” These and many similar behaviors, which have entered into managers’ folklore of key signs of impending departure, were rarely observed or did not statistically hang together with the core behaviors representing a general predilection to quit. Such behaviors *may* predict future turnover, but not as consistently as the 13 core pre-quitting behaviors across a wide range of jobs, industries, and geographies.

In our final study, we investigated how accurately the 13 core pre-quitting behaviors predicted future voluntary turnover. In January and February of 2014, we asked a large sample of managers, all employed with different companies, to use the 13-item survey to describe recent behavioral changes by a randomly selected subordinate. Then, 12 months later we contacted the managers again to see if these employees were still employed or had voluntarily quit. After statistically controlling for various employee attributes that might predict future turnover (age, tenure, education, etc.), as well as managers’ personal expectations of whether or not the employee would quit in the next 12 months, our scale still predicted an employee’s voluntary turnover. The more an employee

exhibited the 13 pre-quitting behaviors, the more likely the employee was to quit.

More specifically, when they rated an employee based on each behavior (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree), those with an average score of 4.2 or higher had an expected probability of turnover two times the typical employee. Other factors can affect whether someone leaves an organization, of course, but a score this high suggests the risk of turnover is high enough to warrant attention.

The next logical question is what you should do when someone you manage is exhibiting these behaviors—or how you should think about them if you yourself are looking for another job.

For managers, our advice is to focus on retaining star employees in the short-term. Typically, organizations handle a turnover problem with large scale interventions to improve departmental or firm-level commitment, job satisfaction, and job engagement. These strategies may work, but they take time to design and implement. Thinking in terms of the turnover risk of specific employees allows you to invest your time and resources into those employees who create the most value and are actually at risk of leaving.

There are many ways to invest in employees you fear may be looking: pay increases, promotions, special projects, etc. One technique is to use what are called “stay interviews.” Instead of conducting only exit interviews to learn what caused good employees to quit, hold regular one-on-one interviews with current high-performing employees to learn what keeps them working in your organization and what could be changed to keep them from straying.

It’s also worth noting that employees in the midst of leaving often take customers or proprietary product information with them. And as most of

us know, a quick departure can leave a hole in company operations that creates long term harm. While it's important to realize that there is no guarantee that employees exhibiting pre-quitting behaviors will definitely leave, those identified as flight risks should be monitored for unsavory behavior. Succession planning for their departure may prevent damages arising from unexpected quits.

And if you're in the market for a new job? Hiding your own pre-quitting behaviors may prove difficult. Given the negative consequences of turnover, know that your managers and peers are likely watching for obvious and subtle changes in behavior—and that no single action is a dead giveaway. Instead, patterns of behavior over time that may seem subtle to you might tip off your boss. We suggest that you stay engaged with your work, continue to show enthusiasm for the mission of the organization, and project a consistent level of relational energy to the members of your work team.

The basic tenet of managing turnover is that everyone eventually leaves. But the “when” can feel like a mystery. While our research shouldn't be considered the only way to identify an employee on the verge of quitting, it does point to a set of behaviors that, taken together, can provide a clue—and it discounts behaviors that have mistakenly been seen as tells. So the next time you have an inkling about whether someone is about to leave, know that you may be onto something when you take the right indicators into account. As Dolly Parton sang, “Though you haven't left me yet, I know you're just as good as gone.”

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