

The Impact of Workers not Returning to the job Market

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Abstract: The objective of this study is to understand the paradigm shift that unfolded during the “Great Resignation\Reshuffling” (2020-2022) within the minds of workers with respect to not re-engaging in the job market after the pandemic. In early 2022, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), there were approximately 11 million job openings and 6 million unemployed individuals. The convergence of these two data points indicates five million jobs with vacant seats. Therefore, we aim to answer this research question: What obstacles have workers encountered that have prohibited them from re-engaging in the job market after the pandemic within the framework of Maslow Hierarchy of Needs Theory? To investigate this question and the associated unprecedented phenomenon, an inductive qualitative research analysis was conducted to review and code archival data from three sources: Reddit posts, the U.S. government (BLS, White House, Federal Reserve) documents, and press articles. The content from more than 1,000 pages (31 posts and 45 articles) was systematically analysed through first and second cycle coding to extract themes that identify the factors being considered by individuals who have chosen to remain on the job market side lines. This article attempts to magnify the American worker’s voice in an environment where it could feel like “nobody is listening” (Shaw, 2000) The findings indicate that salary, stumbling blocks, steward of care, sense of worth and stress are the leading factors that may prohibit individuals from returning to work. To triangulate these findings, additional press articles, government documents and Reddit posts will be coded to increase the data set (second study). The research limitations include a review of only three document sources, a focus on one country alone (the United States) and only one social media platform. Therefore, it cannot be stated that this list is exhaustive. More research is needed to include other platforms and sources. Nonetheless, the findings could help organizations understand this paradigm shift and formulate recruitment and retention programs that address the factors and needs of employees in a post -pandemic work environment that remains full of uncertainty and disruptions.

Keywords: Labor Shortage, Sense of Worth, Salary, Paradigm Shift, Return to Work

1. Introduction/Background:

On March 11, 2020, the “World Health Organization (WHO) declares COVID-19 a pandemic” (CDC, 2022) and within 96 hours, the entire United States of America was thrown into a whirlwind shutting down borders, schools, and organizations to contain the transmission of the infectious disease known as the Coronavirus (COVID-19). In the first quarter of 2020, Americans clung to their television screens as the number of Covid-19 cases crept across the globe. As more cases developed, organizations had to reassess the human capital cost in light of dwindling revenue. The decision by U.S organizations to furlough and/or lay off workers lead to an unprecedented 14.7 percent unemployment rate. “This is the highest rate and the largest over-the-month increase in the history of the data (available back to January 1948). The number of unemployed persons rose by 15.9 million to 23.1 million in April.” (Unemployment Rate Rises to Record High 14.7 Percent in April 2020, 2020.) The United States drew a clear line in the sand, nonessential employees had to cease working in physical buildings or be able to work remotely. In addition, the economy slowed which forced companies to “decide who they can still afford to pay” (Jensen, 2020).

2. Research Question:

For years, the idea of work/life balance has been a topic of discussion among human resource professionals and this topic could be instrumental in understanding the paradigm shift that has occurred in the mindset of workers post pandemic. Over the last year, the data has demonstrated there are more jobs open then available individuals to work and there appears to be a gap. To investigate why there is a delta of five (5) million between job openings and unemployed individuals, this research looked at what obstacles workers encountered that prohibited them from re-engaging in the job market after the pandemic within the framework of Maslow Hierarchy of Needs Theory? In the third quarter of 2020, the CDC released guidelines and tools to reopen the United States schools and corporations. As the post-pandemic fog cleared, organizations found themselves in an unexpected and unprecedented crisis. Henny (2021) states, “The [U.S. economy](#) is poised to take off in coming months as it rebounds from the coronavirus pandemic, but the recovery faces a new challenge in an apparent labor market shortage. Employers are reporting difficulty in onboarding new workers, even though the nation's unemployment rate is at 6% and some 9.7 million Americans say they are actively looking for a job, according to Labor Department data. “Henney goes on to emphasize people who had either been terminated,

furloughed, or voluntarily left the job market are slow to return for fear of catching COVID-19 or walking away from unemployment benefits that provide greater stability than working a forty-hour week. Many legislators and media hosts suggested individuals are not returning to the job market due to the increased stimulus checks, extended unemployment benefits and eviction bans being in place. The financial windfall of money was one potential reason for individuals not participating in closing the labor shortage, however, we suspect this could be an attributing factor but not the root cause. The purpose of this research is to explore what obstacles have prohibited workers from returning to the job market after the pandemic. Their lack of labor participation has led to a deficiency of economic pollination throughout the United States causing shortages, delays, and stock outs.

3. Literature review

Maslow discusses the basic needs that every individual faces as they progress through life. According to McLeod (2018), Maslow hierarchy of needs states there are five (5) tiers of human needs that can be further broken down into three (3) categorical needs listed lowest to highest: base needs (physiological and safety needs), psychological needs (belongingness/love and esteem needs) and lastly self-actualization (self-fulfilment needs). (Reference Figure 1) Maslow goes on to state individual must fulfil or satisfy the lower-level need prior to transitioning to the next level and thus we set out to demonstrate this has been observed over the last two years with respect to the Covid-19 pandemic and the slow return to the workforce. During the government shutdown individuals were able to fulfil the basic needs through the accumulating savings from minimal commute, lack of vacation spending and/or federal stimulus package which provided \$300 a week, child tax credits and instated eviction bans. In addition, individuals were able to develop meaningful relationships with immediate family as the distractions of commutes, activities and social meetings were halted. Once the restrictions were lifted connections with extended family and close friends became more heartfelt and cherished. Individuals were able to reflect on work-life balance and their own self-worth which leads to the top of the pyramid, doing something that is fulfilling and not just a job but the thing we were created to achieve.

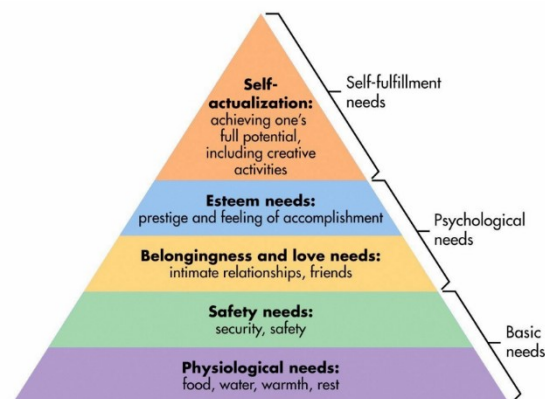


Figure 1: Maslow Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2018)

According to Maslow (1943), the five (5) levels of Maslow's hierarchy are as followed: 1) Physiological needs are at the base of the pyramid as these are biological needs such as food, water, warmth, and shelter 2) Safety needs are centered around safety, security, and order 3) Belongingness and love needs are where individuals seek personal connections through meaningful relationships with others 4) Esteem needs hinge on establishing respect and achievement for oneself and in the eyes of others and lastly 5) Self-Actualization needs are described by Maslow as "self-fulfillment...the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming".

4. Conceptual model and propositions

This study utilizes an inductive qualitative methodology to understand what elements are being considered while re-engaging in the labor force by workers. Corporate America has been thriving for years whereas workers have been struggling to manage the stress of making ends meet with through the current living wage. According to Maurer (2022); Richter (2022) and Rosenberg, E. (2022), the Job Opening and Labor Turnover (JOLT) reported that approximately 4.5 million Americans quit their job in November of 2021 (Figure 2) and some noted attributing factors were pay, flexibility, commute, family safety and improved working conditions.



Figure 2: Graph Demonstrating the Number of People Quitting Their Job Over Two Decades

According to Richter (2022), the pandemic created a space for individuals to reconsider “their work and their priorities and what they want to do”. The pandemic changed everyone’s perspective on working conditions, salaries, standards, and overall work/life balance. In addition to the perspective shift, K through 12 educations morphed into virtual learning from homes. Dining room tables and kitchen islands became the new classroom and parents became pseudo teachers.

The measures listed above were put in place as a strategy to reduce the spread of Covid-19. Nevertheless, the closures of daycares/schools, buildings and the implementation of healthcare screens made returning to work more challenging. Over time, social distancing and immunization strategies were implemented which slowed the spread of COVID-19 and therefore, corporations were able to resume supplying goods and services. However, corporations found themselves without individuals to conduct tasks which would produce saleable goods and services. Workers seemed to have found a way to embrace life without work. At the same time, there seemed to be a shift in how workers viewed the meaning of work. Could the dismissal of their services have triggered an awakening in their sense of self-worth? As Corporate America struggles to entice workers to trade in quality family time for eight (8) hours days on a production line, there appears to be resistance. The call for workers is being made on social media, television, billboards, and radio stations. Nonetheless, there is still a labor shortage. The way of work is on the brink of collapse and understanding the mindset of workers could be the key to entice individuals back to the job market. To identify what is unfolding, we have performed a document analysis to set the framework.

4.1 Propositions:

P1: The pandemic changed the workers sense of self-worth/self-actualization as individuals leave jobs in pursuit of more fulfilling purpose.

P2: The time away from work during the pandemic has led to individuals value fulfilling belongingness and love needs above having a job.

P3: The labor shortage provided an environment that allowed workers to negotiate compensation packages as esteem needs were met.

5. Research method

The research methodology was structured to identify what obstacles have prohibited workers from returning to the job market after the pandemic. According to the BLS, there are approximately 11 million job openings and six (6) million unemployed individuals. In other words, if every person was placed in a job vacancy there would still have a deficit of five (5) million individuals. In addition, the labor force participation rate (LFPR) is down two (2) percent hovering around 61.5%. The LFPR “shows the number of people seeking work or working, expressed as a percentage of the total population.” and is calculated by taking “the total labor force (employed plus unemployed) and divide it by the total civilian noninstitutionalized population.” (Amadeo, 2022) Baker (2018) states the LFPR aides in understanding the landscape of the labor market as it indicates the number of individuals who are unable or unwilling to work at the current wage. To understand the phenomenon that is unfolding, a document analysis was conducted to identify various document sources that provided a firsthand account of the job market landscape and the working individuals perspective.

Bowen (2009) and Morgan (2021) state the use of document analysis as an unobtrusive and non-reactive methodology which allows for avoidance of social desirability bias, is representative across spans of time and the method is more efficient in cost and time when compared to other qualitative research methods. According to Cardno (2019), the approach and management of the content is straightforward and rarely requires Internal Review Board approval to analyze the data. This research study and the methodology was vetted through the Temple Internal Review Board (IRB) and determined to be exempt.

In the words of Mitch Kapor “getting information off the internet is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant” (Kapor, n.d.) and therefore, it was crucial to select the most appropriate sources that both represented the labor market and the individual being sought after for employment. To ensure a holistic viewpoint was presented, 76 documents across three types (U.S. government, press and social media) were analyzed to investigate the paradigm shift occurring in workers across the United States.

5.1 Data Collection

In selecting where to obtain data, we searched the internet from April through June of 2022 using the key phrase of “why people aren’t going back to work, why are people not returning to work, the great resignation, and the great reshuffling”. The title and opening paragraph of each article was read prior to importing the article into the Qualitative Analysis System (Nvivo). A total of 45 articles were identified and imported into a data file within Nvivo using NCapture.

To effectively observe the tone, sentiment and voice of the worker, the Reddit social media platform was selected. Thus, the “r/antiwork” subreddit community was selected to observe content that “is curated and promoted by site members through voting” (Stafford, n.d.). To obtain a more representative sample from the working individual, 31 “r/antiwork” subreddit posts were analyzed over a month. The subreddit “r/antiwork” is a community “for those who want to end work, are curious about ending work, want to get the most out of a work-free life, want more information on anti-work ideas and want personal help with their own jobs/work-related struggles.” (Reddit, 2021) The Reddit posts were unfiltered and first-hand accounts from individuals who were or had worked. The posts contained emotional language, imagery and stories that opened the door into their life and shared actual situations pertaining to work and why they were or had left the job market. The Reddit platform was selected as it provides a forum for the people to share content from their point of view and in through their own voice. According to the Reddit site, “Reddit is a growing family of millions of diverse people sharing the things they are care about most” and with over 100,000 active communities and 13 billion post and comments this platform is a representative sample of individuals at the center of this research (Reddit, 2021).

5.2 Data Analysis

All documents were compiled through the search criteria listed above. In accordance with Proferes et. al. (2021) the documents were obtained and imported into the Nvivo system, the records were screened and any duplicates or unretrievable full text articles were removed. The remaining documents were either stored in a data file labelled Website or Reddit. Each document was systematically coded in NVivo, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software. Two (2) rounds of document analysis were performed. The first round contained and coded 60 documents, however, to ensure data saturation was achieved an additional 15 documents were coded as a robustness check. As specified by Miles (2020), the articles, and posts were processed through first and second cycle coding by assigning descriptive labels/meanings and then consolidated into code clusters which in turn condense into themes. The first level coding was utilized to “reduce the qualitative data to allow a more manageable focus”. (Kant, 2007) The second level coding process was used to consolidate the first level codes into more generalizable terms that narrows the focus. Level 3 coding was employed to further refine the content focus and move towards “critical density” better known as themes (Kant, 2007).

6. Data analysis and results/discussion

This study set out to explore what obstacles have prohibited workers from re-engaging in the job market after the pandemic within the framework of Maslow Hierarchy of Need Theory. The document analysis yielded forty-seven first cycle codes which were consolidated into nine (9) second cycles codes and five (5) themes. The five (5) main emerging themes were identified as salary, stumbling block, steward of care, sense of worth, and stress (Reference Table 2).

Table 2: Document Analysis NVivo Coding Results

First Level Coding	Second Level Code	Third Level Code (Theme)
Commute	Pay	Salary
Incentives		
Salary		
Wages		
Government Benefits		
Savings, Support and Assistances	Support	
Barriers to Returning to Work	Obstacles	Stumbling Block
Child Care Cost to More Than Salary		
Immigration Restrictions		
Jobs are not in the Location Where People Reside		
Schools		
Vaccinations		
Care Responsibilities	Responsibilities	Steward of Care
Family		
Power and Respect	Power	Sense of Worth
Power Shift		
Personal Interest	Purpose For Me	
Purpose		
Self-Care		
Self-Reflection		
The Job is My Purpose		
Disregard	Work Conditions	
Double Standards		
Employee and Worker Disregard		
Job Fit		
Lack of Support		
Not Enough Hours		
Overworked	Options	
Poor Management		
Toxic Work Environment		
Unrealistic Expectations		
Work Life Balance		
Workers’ Rights		
Health Concerns	Stress	Stress
Mental Health		
Normal		
Struggle		
Tired		
Uncertainty		

6.1 Results

The codes listed above were systematically categorized into themes with the total number of times the code was linked to a file and/or references. The data indicates that sense of worth was the highest referenced with denoting 498 references, followed by salary at 301, stress at 90, steward of care at 74 and stumbling block at 29. The data suggest that during the pandemic, individuals that were released from their employment experienced a paradigm shift within where a sense of self-worth emerged. According to Krugman (2021), the pandemic “gave employees more time to think about their careers: The pandemic gave American employees time and opportunities to reassess their situations and priorities”. We would claim that surrounding factors caused by the pandemic allowed for the four lower levels known as the deficiency needs to be met thus given rise for individuals to engage in the growth needs. According to McLeod (2022), “growth needs continue to be felt and may even become stronger once they have been engaged” and hence this sense of self-worth to upskill and take one’s time finding the right job that brings about happiness. This newfound realization has led millions to redefine what requirements need to be in place for them to accept an offer. Workers are leveraging unions and strikes to demand better conditions in return for their services. Workers are demanding “a living wage, wages are not the only factor in job quality, with the pandemic likely propelling people to reevaluate what they value and want in a job. Workers also place a high value on—and now have the leverage to demand—benefits such as paid family and medical leave and health insurance; a workplace safe from harassment, illness, and

physical injuries; flexible scheduling; a better work-life balance; and a career path with clear upward mobility". (It's a Good Jobs Shortage: The Real Reason So Many Workers Are Quitting. n.d.). The days of saying you are valued and are "essential" to the organization are over if the companies support and actions are not mirroring the sentiment. "Essential workers are tired of being thanked one day and then treated as expendable the next day, ...The headline isn't that there's a shortage of people willing to return to work. Instead, it's a scarcity story. We have a shortage of safe, good-paying, sustainable jobs." (U.S. Labor Unions Are Having a Moment., n.d.) Therefore, the results support P1: *The pandemic changed the workers sense of self-worth/self-actualization as individuals leave jobs in pursuit of more fulfilling purpose* and P2: *The time away from work during the pandemic has led to individuals valuing fulfilling belongingness and love needs above having a job*. As the study progress the initial code of work-life balance moved into focused coding as work conditions and finally into axial/thematic coding of Sense of Worth. Thus, leading to the workers awakening of their sense of self-worth after the pandemic.

The changing dynamic has led to a power shift that has given workers a negotiation platform that did not exist pre-pandemic. In this current environment, individuals are negotiating for a sustainable salary, flexibility, better working conditions which will lead to less stress. For example, one reddit post referred to the current salary at a specific job as "Poverty Wages" and made a declaration to "reclaim your life." This one post focuses on the obstacles created by working for low wages and highlighted that it deprives individuals of their times with hobbies, friends, and family. If the salary cannot sustain the lowest level of need such as water, food and shelter why should one allow it to strip away the benefits obtained in the next three levels (safety of working conditions, love and belonging of family/friend and esteem for oneself and by others). Ergo, workers are leveraging the labor shortage to demand an improved working experience inclusive of salary, stress reduced conditions and acknowledgement of the workers sense of worth/esteem value. Hence, supporting proposition P3: *The labor shortage provided an environment that allowed workers to negotiate compensation packages as esteem needs were met*.

Furthermore, the pandemic has created an environment that has demonstrated that remote working can be equally as effective. During the pandemic, several organizations quickly reconfigured operations to enable employees to work from home (flexible working arrangement). After more than 365 days with productive results, individuals are associating hybrid work environments as normal. One survey demonstrating that 68% of workers prefer the option to work from home. In the same article, "The Prudential Survey showed that 1 in 3 Americans would not want to work for an employer that doesn't offer at least partial remote working." (10 Surprising Return to Work Statistics, 2021). The hybrid working arrangement plays another key role in whether worker can and/or are willing to return to work. Many working individuals are stewards of care for children or elderly relatives that has caused them not to be able to return to work. According to the Biden Administration, "Between February 2020 and March 2021, 520,000 mothers and 170,000 fathers between ages 20 and 54 left the labor force and have not returned. Many needs or want to work but cannot because of childcare disruptions." (FACT SHEET: President Biden Announces Additional Steps to Help Americans Return to Work. (2021, May 10) Moreover, individuals have been able to engage in loving meaning relationship with family that has fulfilled the sense of connection that has been traded for years of work.

The last two themes that emerged were stumbling block and stress. Many individuals had to contemplate whether they could or should return to work due to obstacles that existed. Individuals were faced with wanting to accept an offer, but the following had to be considered: cost of childcare versus salary, school scheduling, vaccination policies and jobs availability/location. The stumbling blocks that could impact one's ability to return without interruption has led to declining and delaying acceptance of offers. In line with, Hossain et. al., (2020), the global pandemic has had an impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals. Parks et.al., (1998) states, "Previous studies suggest that depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, increased suicidal tendencies, and PTSD commonly follow major economic crises or natural disasters" and this crisis is no different. Stress has seeped into everyday life as individuals continued to navigate through school closures, unintentionally contracting disease and/or infecting others, financial instability, food insecurity, disruption to routine and having to be everything to everyone in one space. These stressors, in combination with the "trauma of job loss...might be keeping some workers from returning to the workforce. This trauma can erode confidence and self-esteem, which surfaces doubt in skills and abilities." (Employees Aren't Returning to the Job Market: Here are Some of the Reasons Why, n.d.) The power of stress could be hampering one's esteem needs and ultimately surpassing the desire or ability for individuals to return. Employers need to convince their employees that they are taking measures to alleviate stress inducing factors from the workplace.

Based on this study organizations need to develop a comprehensive package that acknowledges and appeals to the five levels of Maslow's hierarchy need theory. Individuals have had time to assess and meet levels of need within their life. As these individuals have satisfied the lower need levels, they are moving up the Maslow Hierarchy pyramid and thus requiring more than the pre-pandemic workplace baseline.

6.2 Discussion

As the job market is changing and the expectation of an acceptable employment offer is being redefined, there are various elements the tangential that should be considered. What happens if most workers never return to work and/or continue to shuffle between companies? Will this labor shortage and the response to the potential and existing workers become a lynch pin to the success of organization culture and retention and if it goes unaddressed how will the economy respond? Dotsey et.al, (2017) mentions the absence of the workers will be felt in "government programs such as Social Security and Medicare, or through family assistance... As a result, a society with a lower participation rate is also burdened with higher tax rates because the government has a narrower tax base from which to draw revenue." In other words, the economy could reach a breaking point that will be felt by all-in-one way or another.

7. Research Contribution

The purpose of this study was to explore: What obstacles have workers encountered that has prohibited them from re-engaging in the job market after the pandemic within the framework of Maslow Hierarchy of Need Theory. During the height of the global pandemic, educational institutions, restaurants, hotels, and various corporations closed their doors in alignment with government mandates and this led to millions of individuals being laid off or furloughed. Nonetheless, once corporations were ready to return to normal productions level, the workers did not answer the call. Organizations quickly found themselves in a precarious business state where the demand had returned but inventory and/or services could not be met as staffing shortages were felt across the country. This labor shortage quickly became known as "The Great Resignation" where individuals were and are continuously saying no to job offers entirely.

Based on the document analysis, five (5) emerging themes were identified. These emerging themes salary, stumbling block, steward of care, sense of worth and stress. Workers appeared to have an awakening in which the pre-pandemic work conditions and salaries are no longer acceptable. The practical implications of this information could help organizations understand the worker in this current work environment. Organization can no longer just think about filling a seat as there are just too many to fill at this time. The current five (5) million-person gap between unemployed individuals and job openings means organizations are left in a perilous state. If the labor shortage continues, the economy will continue to experience supply shortages, delays to schedules and climbing inflation. The findings from this study suggest workers are facing five (5) obstacles that are prohibiting them from returning to the job market. Hiring managers and human resource representatives should be aware of these obstacles or consider asking question in the interview process to understand 1) what the biggest obstacles are and 2) are there ways to mitigate them in a way that both parties can be move towards agreement. There is a potential for these findings to be incorporated into Human Resources strategies to engage, attract, and maintain workplace loyalty and commitment in a time when workers have the negotiating power.

7.1 Limitation

In accordance with Bowen, (2009) this study has unveiled several discussion points, however, there are limitations that require acknowledgement. The research was conducted on 76 documents and posts which is not an extensive data set. In addition, document analysis is primarily generated for a purpose outside of research and therefore may not obtain insufficient details, obtain biased selectivity which can skew the format or tone of document and content can have low retrievability as some documentation can be blocked or deleted. Boslaugh (2007) mentioned, secondary data was not collected with this specific research question in mind. The literature also suggests document analysis should be triangulated to add validity. Lastly, Reddit is one social media forum with a specific subset of individuals which may not represent the larger population.

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