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Training New Employees during the Great Resignation

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Workforce Development During the Great Resignation

Abstract

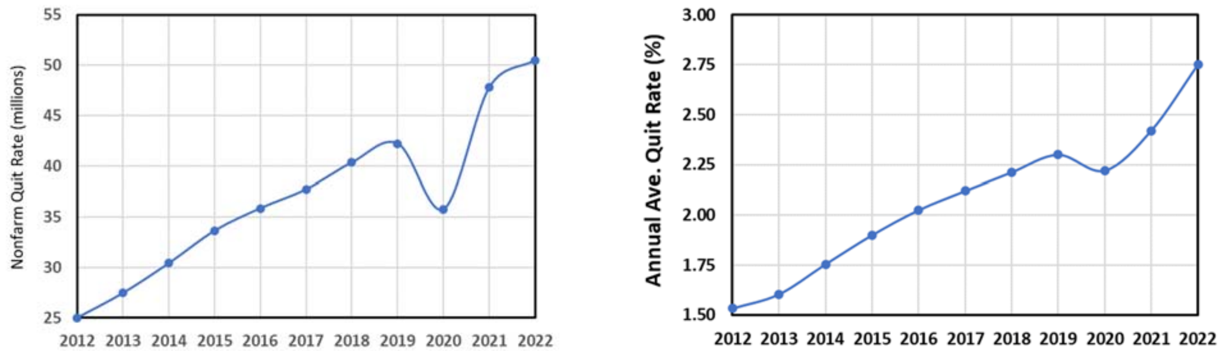
Anthony Klotz coined the term "The Great Resignation." It is the informal name for the widespread trend of a significant number of workers leaving their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers are leaving for a variety of reasons, such as retirement or higher wages. This is actually a trend that has been going on for over a decade and continues even after COVID-19 has been largely mitigated. Many potential causes have been proposed for the Great Resignation and many believe this trend is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. This phenomenon has important ramifications for continuing professional development for three important reasons. The first is that more rapid employee turnover means organizations need to do more training. The second is that many of the replacement employees have less knowledge and experience than the workers they are replacing. This is one of the effects of a tight labor market where organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to find qualified workers and are often forced to hire less qualified workers. A third factor is that most organizations do not do a good job of capturing the knowledge of employees who are leaving. This is particularly important when replacing engineering positions which are often highly technical and generally take longer to bring new hires up to full productivity. These three factors mean trainers often need to train less qualified new employees faster than ever, sometimes without all of the needed job information. Some potential solutions for this situation including improved training for leaders, more inclusivity for training employees, more automation, extended reality simulations, and automated self-service virtual training programs. This paper will discuss the causes and effects of the Great Resignation, training challenges associated with it, and some possible solutions to this training challenge.

Introduction

This section will attempt to answer three questions: What is the Great Resignation?, What is Causing It?, and What are the Effects?

<u>What is the Great Resignation?</u>

The Great Resignation is a term coined by Anthony Klotz, who is an Associate Professor of Management at the May Business School at Texas A&M University [1].Wikipedia defines it as the "ongoing economic trend in which employees have voluntarily resigned *en masse*, beginning in early 2021. Possible causes include wage stagnation amid rising cost of living, long-lasting job dissatisfaction, safety concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the desire to work for companies with better remote-working policies" [2]. Dictionary.com defines it as the "informal name for the widespread trend of a significant number of workers leaving their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic" [3]. Investopedia.com defines it as the "elevated rate at which U.S. workers have quit their jobs starting in the spring of 2021, amid strong labor demand and low unemployment as vaccinations eased the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic" [4]. Most believe the Great Resignation started near the "end" of the COVID 19 pandemic in April 2021 [5]. Currently, there is no end date which begs the question, "Is this the new norm?" [1]. Other names for this phenomenon include: The Great/Big Quit, The Great Discontent, The Great Reshuffle, and Quiet Quitting.



(a) (b)

Figure 1 The nonfarm quit rate (a) in millions and (b) in percent [6].

Figure 1 shows how many non-farm employees quit between 2012 and 2022. It doubled in that time period. There was a dip in the curves during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic because workers were concerned about their jobs and held onto them [7]. This made it appear worse than it actually was when the pandemic lockdowns were lifted because of the large spike in the quit rate in 2021. However, the trend started before the pandemic and continued on the same path after the pandemic. Many, particularly in the service industries, lost their jobs during the pandemic. Because of that trend, many were reluctant to leave their jobs voluntarily during that time. When most restrictions due to COVID-19 were lifted, the quit rate jumped back up again in 2021.

What are the causes of the Great Resignation?

Many causes have been suggested for the Great Resignation. A commonly suggested one is COVID-19 [8]. Many workers left the workforce due to fear of getting infected by working in close proximity to many others. Many workers preferred to work remotely and if their employer did not support that, they left to go to companies that did. In some cases, employers required COVID-19 vaccinations. Employees that resisted the vaccinations left to go to other employers that did not require vaccinations or they left the workforce altogether. A related suggested cause is the pent-up demand for resignations which were temporarily suspended during the pandemic when job security was reduced due to massive layoffs [1].

An important likely cause is a strong labor market [9]. The very high demand for employees drove up wages. Employees left jobs *en masse* to go to employers willing to significantly increase their wages, when their own employers failed to keep pace with wage increases. Related to that is low unemployment, which engenders job security. Low unemployment encourages employees to take risks in moving to new and higher paying jobs even when their existing jobs are very secure. If for some reason their new job does not work out, employees feel confident they can relatively easily find another one. Basic supply and demand dictates rising wages, so employees want to take advantage of increased compensation. There are more job openings and fewer applicants [10].

A related suggested cause is price inflation [11]. When costs increase, employees look for increased wages to keep pace with inflation. They are willing to switch jobs for significant pay increases. In some cases, employees have accumulated large pensions that may be payable in lump sums. Employees can simultaneously retire from one employer, take a large lump sum payout, and then go to work for another employer, often at an increased pay rate.

Another suggested cause is a desire for a better work-life balance. This includes burnout and safety concerns regarding the pandemic for some professions like the medical [12] and education fields [13]. Unsurprisingly, Ahmed et al. (2022) empirically found that job satisfaction was statistically significantly inversely related to job burnout [14]. Employees feeling burned out were less satisfied with their jobs. A related possible cause is a desire for a change of life such as changing careers [15]. Gen Y (born 1980 – 1996) and Gen Z (born 1997 – 2010s) workers are mostly leaving for non-financial reasons (ethical, cultural, relational and personal factors) [16].

Some of the suggested reasons are related to employers and work cultures. For example, some are leaving because of toxic corporate cultures [17]. While this is not a new phenomenon, low employment makes it much easier to leave toxic workplaces. Some are leaving because of the lack of opportunities at their previous employers [18]. With low unemployment and remote working, many more opportunities are available that may not have previously been an option.

Some other reasons that have been suggested include:

- Those who got COVID are much more likely to quit [19],
- New skills obtained during the pandemic can be applied to a new job [20],
- Some want to relocate closer to family and friends which is made easier by the ability to work remotely [21], and
- Women are more likely to resign than men, especially mothers who had increased responsibilities during the pandemic [22].

One study looked at the predictors of employee turnover during the Great Resignation [17]. As seen in Figure 2, toxic corporate culture was by far the most dominant predictor. One interesting predictor is working for a company that is highly innovative. Employee feedback indicated some of those companies work their employees very hard with long hours in order to generate new innovations. From personal experience, this can be done for short periods of time but extended periods of long hours leads to burnout. Ironically, it also can lead to reduced innovation when employees are exhausted from working so many hours.

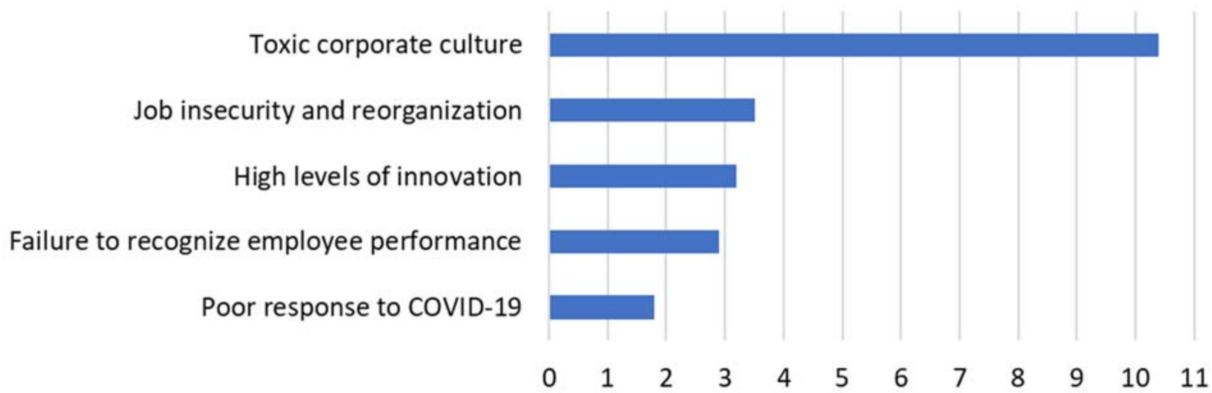


Figure 2 Predictors of employee turnover during the Great Resignation [17].

What are the effects of the Great Resignation?

Worker shortages have led to some businesses reducing their hours of operation and/or services because they cannot find enough workers to replace those who have left. It has not been unusual for example, to find restaurants with either shorter hours or closed completely on certain days. In some cases, fast food restaurants may have only drive-through service during certain times when there are not enough employees to handle both drive-through and dine-in customers.

There is a stronger impact on: younger workers (under 45) who leave for other organizations, older workers (over 55) who retire, and frontline workers (e.g., medical, police, educators). There is approximately an equal impact on blue- and white-collar workers [17]. This is somewhat surprising since blue-collar workers cannot usually work remotely. However, the ease of changing jobs may encourage blue-collar workers to leave for better opportunities and working conditions. Cook (2021) determined from reviewing millions of employee records from over 4,000 companies that resignations have been the highest in the tech and health care industries [23].

The effects vary by region within the U.S. where the quit rate is considerably higher in the South and lower in the Northeast as seen in Figure 3.

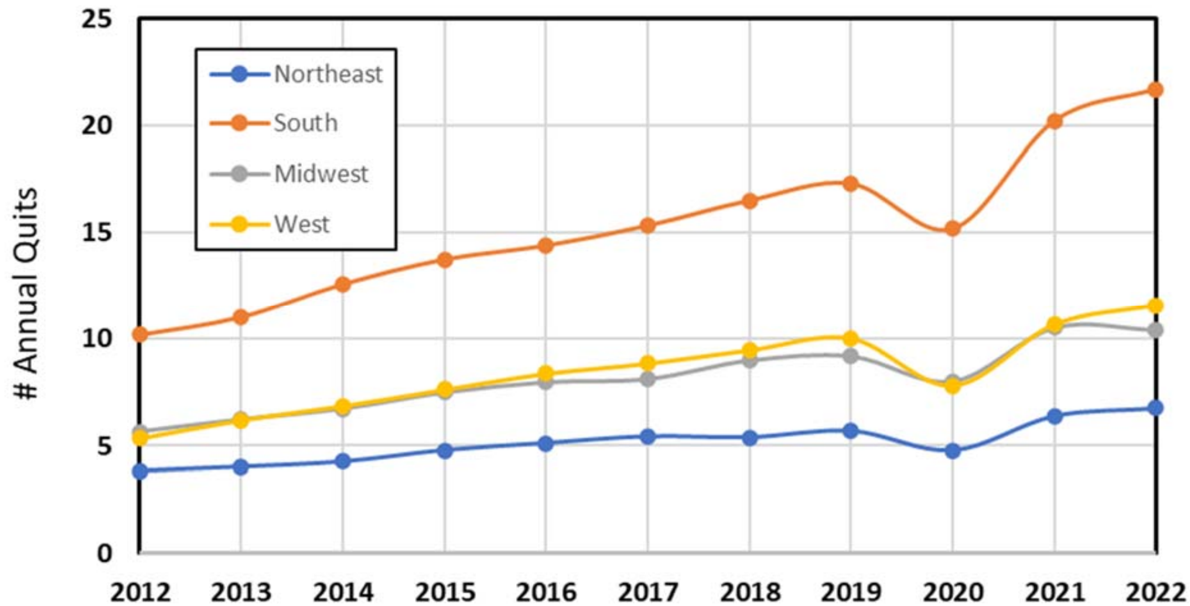


Figure 3 The nonfarm quit rate (millions) by region (data for December 2022 is projected) [6].

Low unemployment leads to rising wages. High turnover often means training less knowledgeable and less experienced workers at a faster pace in order to replace workers leaving at a faster rate. There can be a negative impact on workers remaining with their employers who may perceive they are being left behind or being underpaid [21]. High turnover can also have a negative effect on a company's image, which can make it even harder for them to hire replacement workers.

One of the well-documented effects of the Great Resignation is an increase in remote working [24]. This provides more opportunities for workers to switch employers without needing to move. It also allows workers to relocate away from costly regions of the country to less costly regions without having to switch employers. It can significantly reduce or eliminate commuting time, particularly in major cities. An added benefit is reduced commuting time for those who are not working remotely because of the significant number of cars no longer commuting by those who are working remotely.

Training Challenges During the Great Resignation

This section will consider the challenges related to the Great Resignation which have been categorized here as the power of knowledge, an example from the energy industry, and general training challenges.

<u>Power of Knowledge</u>

Effective training increases knowledge. Santoro et al. (2021) write "knowledge is considered more valuable than the traditional sources of economic power, and an organizational knowledge base and its knowledge capabilities become an ultimate source of competitive advantage" [25]. Serenko writes, "while explicit knowledge (documents, manuals, procedures, videos) may be easily transferred among employees, tacit knowledge (know-how, skills, contextual knowledge) is extremely difficult and costly to transfer, if, at all possible" [21].

In today's economy, knowledge is a powerful commodity. There are generally relatively few barriers to entry for competitors related to equipment which can usually be purchased. However, there can be large barriers related to knowledge. This is why competitors hire employees away from each other to gain knowledge that is much harder to get compared to buying equipment. Additionally, new employees without prior knowledge in a particular industry need to be trained, often by more experienced employees. This has become more difficult during the Great Resignation because of the accelerating rate of experienced employees leaving and of hiring less experienced employees who need more training than ever. Serenko (2023) writes, "The Great Resignation has created a need for the Great Knowledge Revolution which may become the only way to ensure economic sustainability" [26].

Energy Sector Example

The energy industry has been chosen as an example because of the author's specific knowledge and experience. This is because some specifics can be given to illustrate training challenges. However, it should be representative of other industries which have their own particular challenges.

The energy industry is rapidly changing. There is a move away from fossil fuels, especially coal, and towards renewable fuels (e.g., biomass, ethanol) and towards renewable energy (e.g., wind, solar, hydroelectric). There are also new developments in the nuclear power industry such as modularized reactors which have the potential to make a significant impact on power generation. Coal power plants are being shut down, while many new wind and solar plants are being built. There are also new technologies which significantly impact the industry. Because of the rise in electric vehicles (EVs), battery production continues to accelerate to meet the demand in EVs.

As with many industries, there is a large retirement movement. A great deal of knowledge and experience is leaving the industry as baby-boomers retire. This experience is becoming more and more difficult to replace. In general, it is very challenging for companies to capture knowledge related to processes and procedures which is either not written down or only in a cursory way with many of the important details left out.

Sull et al. collected data on attrition rates by industry [17]. Figure 4 shows a sample of the results. Retail in general has been hardest hit while in the energy sector, oil and gas has been impacted to a lesser degree. One possible explanation is that retail generally pays less while the energy sector pays much more, so there is less incentive to leave when the pay is higher.

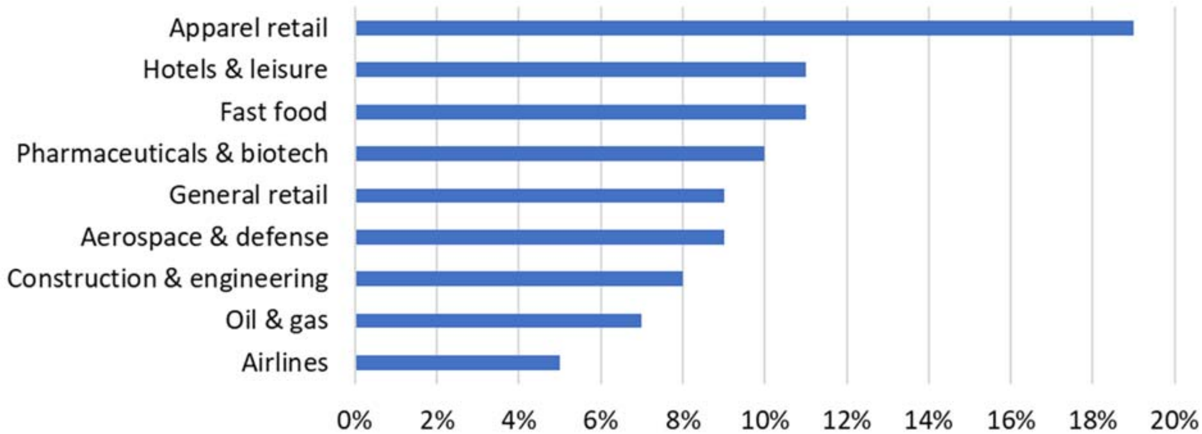
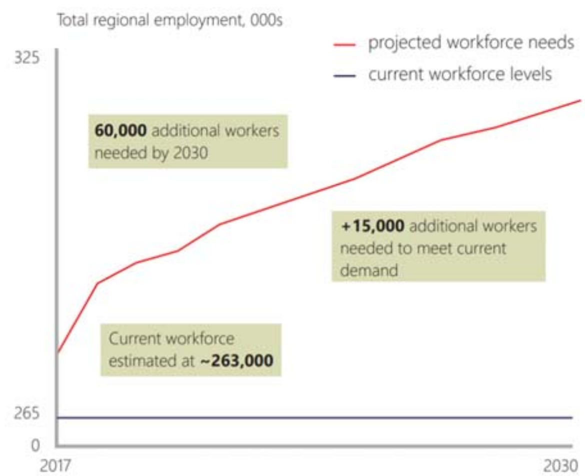


Figure 4 Workforce attrition rates by industry [17].

Figure 5 shows the dramatic projected labor shortfall in the Permian Basin which is a very large source of oil and natural gas. The labor demand is expected to increase significantly.

(a)



(b)

Figure 5 (a) Permian Basin and (b) projected labor shortfall in the Permian Basin [27].

<u>Training Challenges</u>

As previously shown, experienced personnel are leaving their employers in record numbers. Schmid and Melkote (2022) write, “maintaining the nation’s manufacturing base means finding replacements for an aging cohort of technically skilled workers and engineers” [28]. New employees have less knowledge and experience, because “employers are forced to look outside traditional boundaries” [21]. New employees have more accidents, likely due to having less knowledge and experience [29]. Rapidly changing technologies mean more training than ever is needed to ensure employees are qualified and competent to safely and effectively do their jobs.

This author has some personal experience with some of these challenges in a previous role providing continuing professional development for operators at refineries. Plants are often unable to find experienced and qualified applicants and have enlarged the pool of potential candidates to include, for example, security guards and mail delivery personnel, to help them meet their workforce needs. While it has been shown that effective workers can be developed from the enlarged pool, the success rate is lower and the process takes longer compared to hiring candidates with previous experience in a given industry. A related challenge is that there is often very little if any overlap between employees leaving and their replacements. Ideally, there would be some overlap so exiting workers can help train incoming workers. However, given today's environment, this is not typically possible, especially since it is becoming more challenging to find replacements.

Potential Solutions to Training Challenges

This section discusses some potential solutions to the training challenges discussed in the previous section.

<u>Flexibility</u>

As previously discussed, many workers value the ability to work remotely. Related to that is more flexibility for working hours. The desire for increased flexibility also extends to training. Gaul (2021) wrote about the findings from a Prudential Financial survey, "Nearly 80 percent of employees said having a flexible schedule would be somewhat or very helpful to their learning and development. They also called out employer-offered training, on-demand courses, assistance paying for external classes, limited meetings, and mentorship programs" [30]. For many companies, much of their training is face-to-face during normal working hours. This needs to change to meet the needs of employees working remotely and outside of normal working hours. Fortunately, more and more online training is being developed to help meet that demand.

<u>Better Leaders</u>

Another potential solution that has been suggested for reducing employee turnover is to have better leaders. Freed (2022) writes of one of the findings from a Microsoft corporate survey, "Leaders are out of touch with employees and need a wake-up call" [31]. Organizations should invest more in training organization leaders, because high-performing leaders are four times more likely to retain employees compared to low-performing managers [32]. Leaders should be more inclusive in all aspects of work including training [33]. This solution relates to improved training of leaders. Better trained leaders can significantly reduce employee turnover.

<u>Automation</u>

Another solution is more automation. In some cases, automation may replace existing workers so fewer workers are needed. For example, more robots are being used in manufacturing as they can handle repetitive tasks 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. As wages rise and the costs of automation decrease, automation becomes economically viable in more and more scenarios. Even when automation does not completely replace employees, it can help existing employees do their jobs. This is particularly important for less-experienced workers. It can also be important for more-experienced employees when they are completing tasks that they rarely do, such as startups and shutdowns. The relationship to training is that automation can reduce training demands, both because employees need to do fewer tasks themselves and because some of their tasks may include built-in job aids due to the automation.

Extended Reality

Another potential solution for training new employees is virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), which are collectively referred to as extended reality (XR) [34]. The hardware is relatively inexpensive and continues to decline in cost. This option is of particular interest to younger generations, who are often most in need of training because of their lack of training and experience. XR can be used any time and any place. XR is much less expensive than using real equipment and it does not interrupt production. Users do not need manuals, drawings, instructions, etc. although those can even be built into the simulations.

XR can simulate very small equipment and very large equipment to make them easier to study and learn for inexperienced employees. The simulations allow users to virtually go inside equipment which would be impossible to do with real operating equipment. They can also be used to simulate dangerous conditions that cannot be replicated with actual equipment because of the potential for equipment damage and personnel injury.

Figure 6 Business leaders viewing a VR training simulation.

In VR, users wear special headsets that cannot be seen through (see Figure 6). Users travel virtually through scenes which are playing in all directions as the user moves their head left and right and up and down. There are also hand controls for the user to interact with the simulation. These are very powerful for training because they can simulate rare conditions such as those that could lead to an accident [35]. For example, airline pilots frequently train in simulators, similar to VR, so they will be prepared for situations that hopefully never actually happen. Users get immersed in the simulations and feel a sense of presence because they are so realistic [36]. VR can be used to prepare employees for live training. They can virtually go through processes and procedures prior to actually doing them. This saves time and usually money since less time is spent using actual equipment. In a plant environment, new employees are unlikely to be permitted to try things out or see what happens if they make adjustments that could jeopardize production. With VR, they can make mistakes without the consequences associated with the real equipment. Currently, the costs of generating VR simulations can be expensive but the costs continue to decline. The payback can be fast for training that needs to be offered frequently.

In augmented reality, users wear special headsets where the user can see through them but where a simulation can also be seen. These can be even more powerful than VR for training purposes because the headset can direct users where to go and what to do. With minimal instruction, trainees can learn processes and procedures by actually doing them with the help of AR. For example, the headset can show virtual arrows with verbal instructions that can take someone through a complicated plant and tell them what to do when they get to their destination. AR simulations are becoming less expensive to create as they can be made by someone experienced completing a task and recording the process. These simulations also reduce re-training needs for experienced workers doing rare tasks (e.g., startups and shutdowns) because the AR can take them through a procedure they have previously trained for but may not have done in some time.

Currently, XR software development can be expensive and time-consuming. It requires developers to work with subject matter experts as the two skills are not usually existing in the same person. Another problem is that some persons have issues using headsets, so they may not be able to use XR for training which means that traditional training methods may need to be an option. XR is not cost-justified for all training scenarios at this time but as costs continue to decrease, it will become increasingly more cost-effective.

Automated Self-Service Virtual Training

One of the challenges of a global organization is that workers worldwide need training. With the increase in remote working arrangements, employees are more scattered which makes it more challenging and expensive to bring them together for training. Differences in time zones further complicate training. To the extent possible, training needs to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Online training continues to expand to meet this demand. Ideally, workers should be able to get the training they need at any time and any place, without the need for a live instructor. Increasing bandwidth makes online training with streaming video a viable option.

Training should also be as modular as possible so workers can select very specific topics, rather than having to go through hours of training when they only need 15 minutes for example. This is particularly important for workers who have already been through a particular training program and only need a refresher on one element. Too often, new employees spend much of their initial time working for a new employer going through training that they will not be able to apply for some time. By the time they do apply the new skills and knowledge, they may have forgotten much of what they learned. Modular on-demand training can help close those gaps.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There does not appear to be any end in sight for the Great Resignation. While resignations may increase or decrease somewhat in a given time window depending on economic conditions, the trend for the past decade is upward and is expected to continue, although there may be blips in the curve such as caused by COVID-19. There are many training challenges caused by this phenomenon including training scattered workers any time and any place. Hiring and training replacements is a big problem across all industries because much of the tacit knowledge of exiting employees has not been retained and transferred to their replacements. Increased flexibility, better training of leaders, increased automation and extended reality, and automated self-service virtual training are some possible solutions to this training dilemma. No single solution will work for a particular industry or even a specific company within a given industry. Innovation is recommended to find which solutions work best under which conditions and to find other possible training solutions.

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