



How to Add More Human Connection to Your Teams, Your Culture, and Your Business

By Brent Pearson

How many human resources and business leaders are thinking seriously about how they're going to navigate the looming talent shortage? I would argue there are not nearly enough.

Let's review the numbers. U.S. employers added more than 517,000 jobs in January 2023 (more than three times what was expected), with the unemployment rate at 3.4%, a 50-year low. On top of that, Baby Boomers are retiring, and the growth rate of the working age population is essentially flat.

Additionally, we're navigating the engagement and retention challenges that come with an increasingly remote and hybrid workforce. Gallup data shows across all ways of working.

While there's not much you can do about these macroeconomic and demographic trends, there are strategies you can deploy to create a work environment where people are less likely to leave.

Connection as Your North Star

Human connection is one of the most effective yet undervalued retention strategies at your disposal. Think about all the ways companies throw money at the retention

problem in the form of spot bonuses, compensations adjustments, and extravagant perks. None of these costly “strategies” actually increase engagement or long-term loyalty.

What people crave is genuine connection with their peers and their manager. McKinsey found 46% of workers cite an unmet desire to work with people who trust and care for each other as a reason to quit. Our recent report with RedThread Research confirms how critical connection is to your business; organizations with more connection are 5.4 times more likely to be agile, 3.2 times more likely to have satisfied customers, and 2.3 times more likely to have engaged employees.

What Connection Is ... and Isn't

Connection is about finding commonality and having a shared experience. In an increasingly digital workplace, you might think you have a lot of connection in your company from just looking at your messaging and communication tech stack. But that's a false approach. Messaging tools are good for collaboration, but they're not connection tools. They make it easier to get a discussion started, but to build genuine human connection, you need to be more systemic in your approach.

Here are some tips to get you started.

Get Personal

Despite the importance companies once placed on free snacks and foosball tables, office perks aren't what employees truly miss when they're working remotely. Sixty percent say spontaneous interactions with coworkers were the number one benefit of being in the office. Almost two-thirds say their coworkers and peers have the biggest impact on helping them feel connected.

If you want to build human connection, you need to embrace the personal so people can find commonalities and have shared experiences. At our most recent company off-site, we brought all employees together in person for the first time in three years. Because many of us had only ever interacted on screen, we wanted to be highly intentional about building connection. We created a networking competition using our new People Cards, with everyone sharing a little-known fact about themselves. We ended up creating more than 6,000 connections in 24 hours.

But you don't have to be in person to get personal. Make sure you acknowledge moments big and small—celebrate marriages, birthdays, and other personal milestones and achievements. No matter where an employee sits in the organization, make sure they get the same experience and level of connection by using automated workflows and prompts they can act on.

Those small touches pay off. Employees with strong work friendships are seven times more likely to be engaged in their jobs, are better at engaging customers, and produce higher-quality work, Gallup notes.

Wow Your New Hires

But you need to ensure that connection starts even before day one. And in this regard, the status quo clearly isn't working. Up to 20% of new hires leave within 45 days.

To buck that trend, your organization can send automated communications to new hires so their introduction to your company is hyperpersonalized. Learn as much as you can about your new hires, and show them you're listening. Ask each what their 3 p.m. munchie is, and make sure that snack is sitting on their desk on their first day. Imagine sharing how you like your coffee in a preboarding questionnaire and then having your manager make it just how you like it on your first day.

These gestures show you care, but they aren't merely polite. When you onboard employees properly, you can reduce first-year turnover by 50%. This rate of retention pays dividends; an employee who's experienced a stellar onboarding experience becomes a brand ambassador who helps attract better applicants, leading to lower recruitment costs and lower employee turnover.

Build Cross-Functional Connection

A lot of teams have developed effective strategies for connecting with each other. Where we often see silos is between different teams and functional groups in the same company.

One way to build those cross-functional connections is through mentoring. These programs can have a huge impact on your learning initiatives; 71% of employees say that to learn something new or change their thinking, they need to talk about it with someone.

For maximum effect, pair mentors and mentees of different ages and levels of experience. Then make sure they stick to the plan by using tech to send reminders and prompts about potential topics of discussion.

Empower Your Managers

You can't deny the ripple effect—both positive and negative—a manager has on company culture. Gallup research indicates direct managers account for up to 70% of variance in employee engagement. And that puts pressure on managers who are already feeling overwhelmed, with 50% saying they are struggling to foster human connections among increasingly remote workforces.

Help your managers look like rock stars with nudges that provide them with just-in-time reminders about having regular check-ins, giving feedback, and sharing praise. For some leaders, people management is intuitive; they might not need the coaching. But for a majority of managers, it either doesn't come naturally, or they're so busy they forget the basics—or worse, they forget about their remote employees.

This principle really comes to life through learning. Rather than have employees sit through learning management system videos on 2x speed in isolation, you can make learning a connected experience. Managers can set employees up with buddies so they can apply learning together in real time. Learning can be more of a team sport, and that helps build even more threads of connection in your organization.

These are just a few ways you can make human connection a competitive advantage in your organization. You can't control external factors like the labor market and demographic trends, but you can choose to create a culture of engagement and belonging. And with the help of technology, you can help your people form the connections they crave. Together, you'll thrive.

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