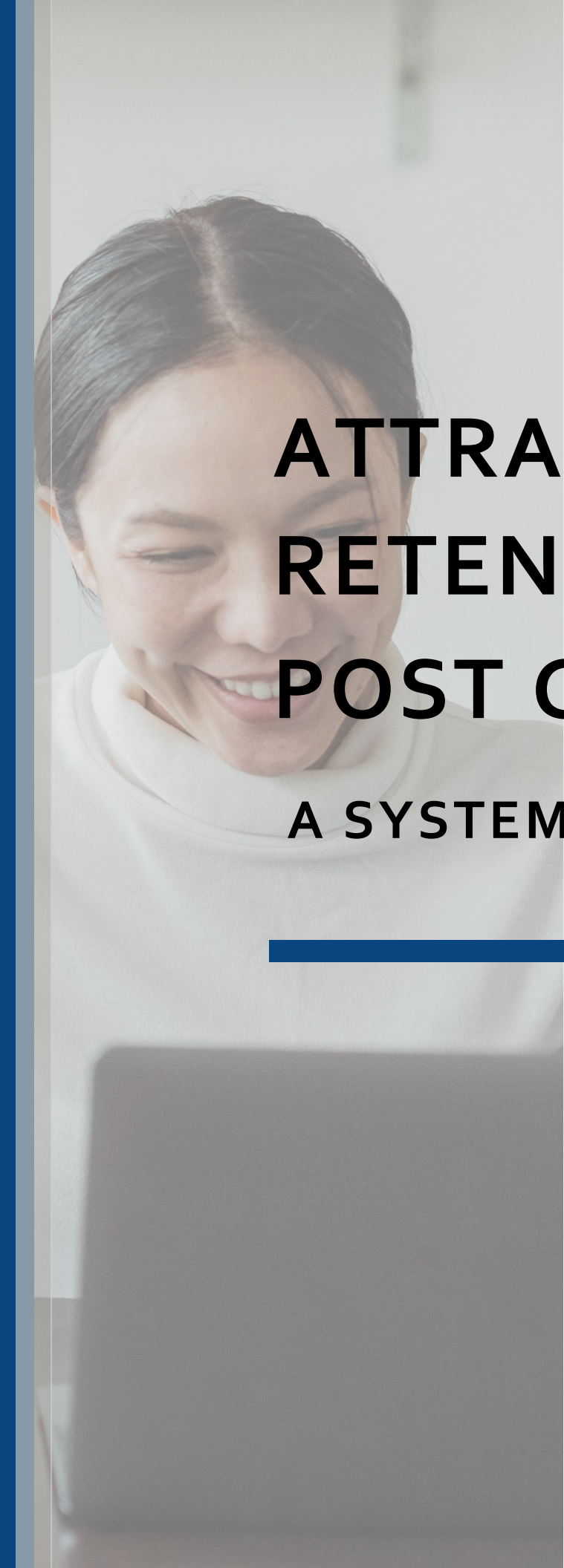




INTEGRATED
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INSTITUTE

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ATTRACTION AND RETENTION IN A POST COVID-19 ERA

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

July 2023

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the dynamics of employee attraction and retention have undergone significant transformations. The global health crisis has not only disrupted the way organizations operate but has also fundamentally altered the expectations and priorities of employees. As the world gradually recovers and adapts to the new normal, companies must recognize the evolving needs of their workforce and develop effective strategies to attract and retain talented individuals, while simultaneously dealing with inflation, workforce shortages and increased focus on internal business goals.

IBI conducted a systematic review of the literature regarding employee attraction and retention in the post-COVID-19 era, focusing on how organizations are adapting to the changing landscape and prioritizing employee well-being and satisfaction. The study examines the research that has been done to investigate those changes, recommendations, and measurements of success.

Key Findings

Changes and adaptations made by organizations in attraction and retention strategies during and since the pandemic include:

- Increased remote work options and flexible work arrangements
- Greater emphasis on employee well-being
- The implementation of new technologies
- Revised recruitment and onboarding processes

Some of the most effective changes to these strategies were identified as:

- Greater flexibility
- Focusing on culture and diversity
- Increased communication with employees
- A focus on employee development and growth

Success was measured in various ways including:

- Increased employee engagement
- Improved retention rates
- Increased productivity

Recommendations included:

- Prioritize employee well-being and work-life balance
- Communicate and educate often and effectively

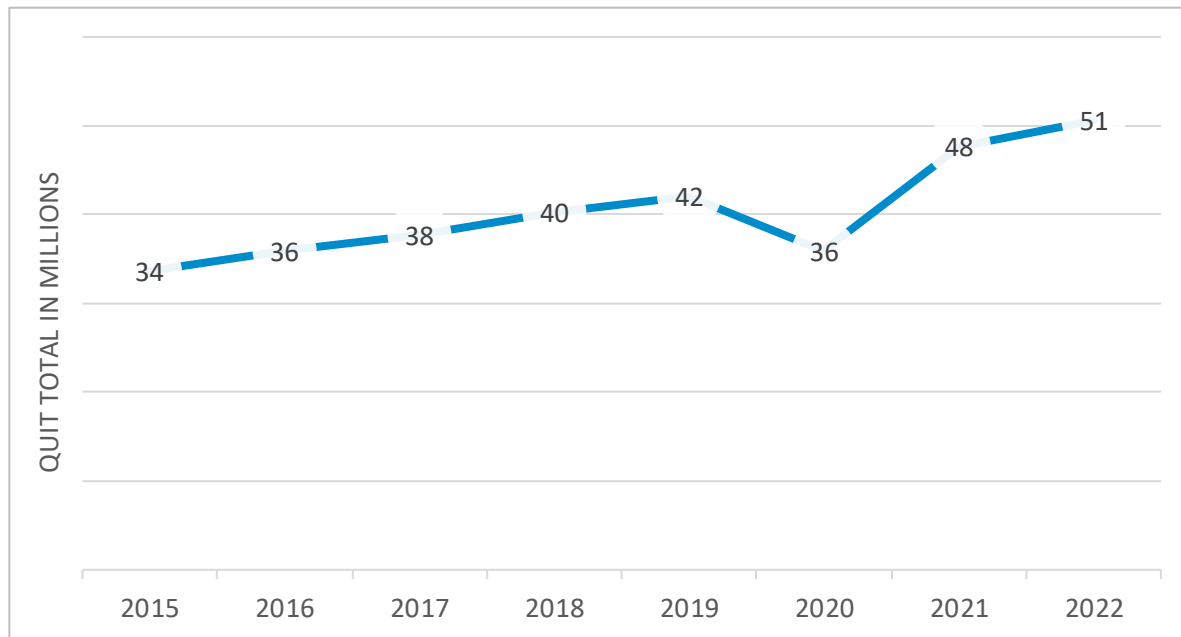
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BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the global economy and the way people work. With millions of people losing their jobs or transitioning to remote work, employee retention and attraction have become more critical than ever for businesses of all sizes. There has been a significant decline in economic activity^{1,2} which led to layoffs and furloughs³ and subsequently, an increase in the unemployment rate in various countries. The G7 now has a wide range of unemployment rates, ranging from 1.76 million in Japan to 30 million in the United States.⁴

Figure 1. Quit Totals in the US Since 2015



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quits: Total Nonfarm [JTSQUL], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/JTSQUL>, April 18, 2023.

Prior to the pandemic, many organizations were already grappling with talent shortages and the need to retain top talent in a highly competitive job market. However, the pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, as many employees are now seeking greater job security, flexibility, and work-life balance. This has led to a more complex and challenging environment for managers and human resource management (HRM) practitioners, who have had to devise innovative ways to keep their business going and help their personnel cope with the challenges of this unprecedented circumstance. Between 2021 and 2022, the voluntary quit rate was almost 30% higher than pre-pandemic levels with 51 million adults leaving their jobs in 2022 as seen in Figure 1.⁵ Industries that were hit the hardest during 2021 and 2022

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7703221/>

² <https://www.brookings.edu/research/social-and-economic-impact-of-covid-19/>

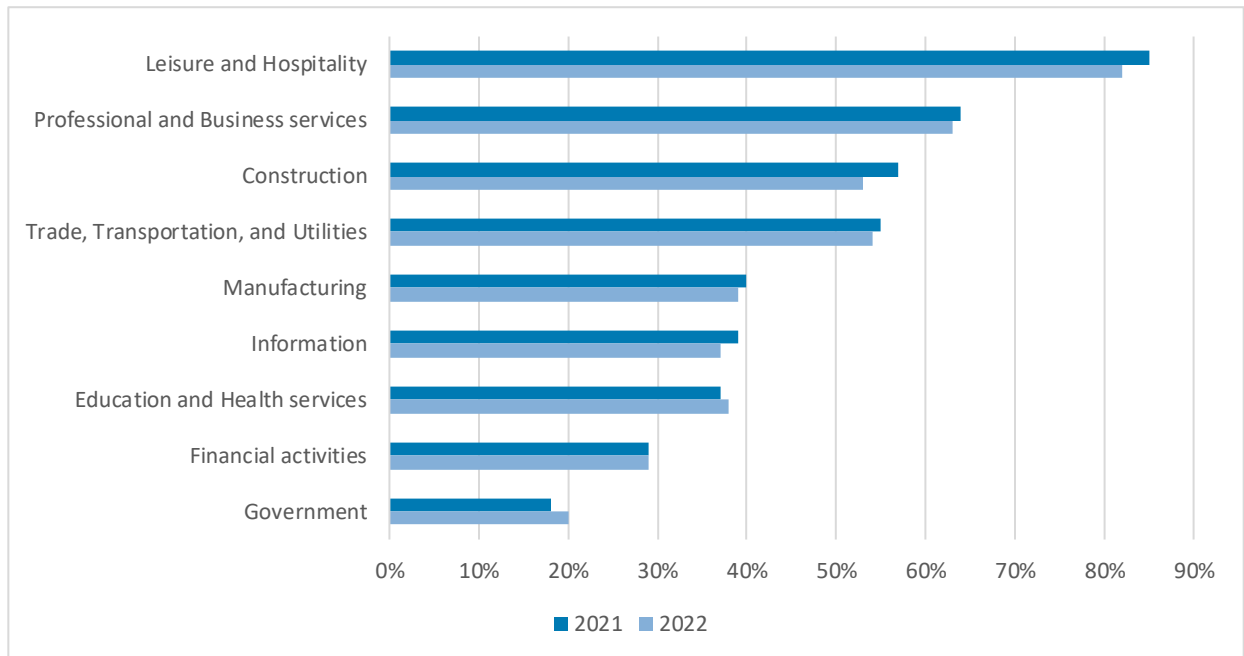
³ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid19-furlough-employers-workers-support-global/>

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/coronavirus-unemployment-jobs-work-impact-g7-pandemic/>

⁵ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/jolts.t04.htm>

included leisure and hospitality, professional and business services, and construction (Figure 2). Lost productivity due to turnover, reduced morale and engagement among employees, quiet quitting, decreased customer satisfaction, and increased training and development costs for new hires can all increase the bottom line.

Figure 2. Turnover rates by Industry in the US



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Annual total separations rates by industry.

The pandemic has brought employee well-being to the forefront, with many workers prioritizing their health and well-being above all else. According to various surveys and research in the last two years, employees are seeking more from their employers:

- 89% feel burnt out and unsupported⁶
- 87% want better workplace wellness⁷
- 80% prioritize mental health benefits⁸
- 43% report insufficient benefits⁹

Employee attraction and retention post-COVID require a more holistic and personalized approach to talent management. Over the last two years, organizations have tried and tested various attraction and retention strategies and have been the subject of many surveys and polls within the human resource

⁶ <https://cengage.widen.net/s/78hrkqgfj7/cg-great-resigners-research-report-final-2022>

⁷ <https://www.wtwco.com/en-US/News/2022/04/employers-to-tackle-employee-healthcare-affordability-amid-rising-costs-2022>

⁸ <https://www.modernhealth.com/post/organizational-resilience-the-great-resignation-2021>

⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/> - 2021

and benefits sectors. Previous research has shown that employers are struggling with attraction and retention strategies, and that has become a number one priority for many.



Organizations are looking to each other for guidance and consistency in what works and what fails when it comes to planning and implementing practices for successful attraction and retention in the post COVID-19 world.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to review the literature and research on attraction and retention presented between 2021 and early 2023. Specifically, this systematic review aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the key changes and adaptations in attraction and retention strategies that organizations have made during and since the pandemic?
2. Which changes to these strategies were most effective, and how is success measured?
3. What are shared recommendations and insights for organizations on retention and employee satisfaction after onboarding?
4. How are employers staying in touch with employee needs/preferences?
5. With cost considerations as a priority, how will employers balance business need with employee preferences?

METHODS

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy included electronic databases, such as EBSCO Business Source Premier, Wiley Online Library, Google scholar and Google for articles between 2021 to April 2023. In addition to the databases mentioned, literature searches were supplemented by checking the reference lists of relevant reviews and included papers citations for potentially relevant papers. Firstly, the titles and abstracts were screened out according to inclusion/exclusion criteria outlined below, and studies not fulfilling the criteria were excluded. If it was uncertain that either study met the inclusion/exclusion criteria, they were retained for the next stage. In the second stage, full-text articles were screened out based on inclusion-exclusion criteria.

The search strategy used the following keywords: "employee attraction", "employee retention", "COVID-19", "post-pandemic", "workplace", "organizational culture", "onboarding", "employee engagement", "human resources", "workforce management", "remote work", "flexible work", "talent management", "employee satisfaction", "employee needs", and "employee preferences". The search strategy will be tailored for each electronic database, using the appropriate syntax and search terms.

Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- The study reports on changes and adaptations made to attraction and retention strategies during and since the pandemic.
- The study has a sample of US employers/employees only.
- The study was published between 2021 and April 2023.
- The study was in English.

Exclusion Criteria:

- The study population includes only specific groups of employees (e.g., healthcare workers, essential workers, etc.).
- The study focuses solely on the impact of COVID-19 on the organization, rather than on attraction and retention strategies.

Risk of Bias

Evaluating the risk of bias is important in assessing the quality and reliability of the evidence presented. Out of the 20 articles chosen for this review, 14 can be reviewed as they are structured as either cross-sectional survey designs, qualitative research designs, or mixed methods research. A breakdown of study type and a summary of each article can be found in the link in Appendix A. The remaining articles are considered industry publications that refer to other literature and policies.

The articles with the specific research designs mentioned above detailed their methodologies and provided information regarding their sample sizes, sampling criteria, and demographics (age, gender, industry, occupation). While some sample sizes were smaller than others, they were representative of working adults in the US, including both employers and employees. Nevertheless, it is important to be mindful that these studies are drawing correlations, comparisons, and contrasts and are not defining causes for specific behaviors or outcomes.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

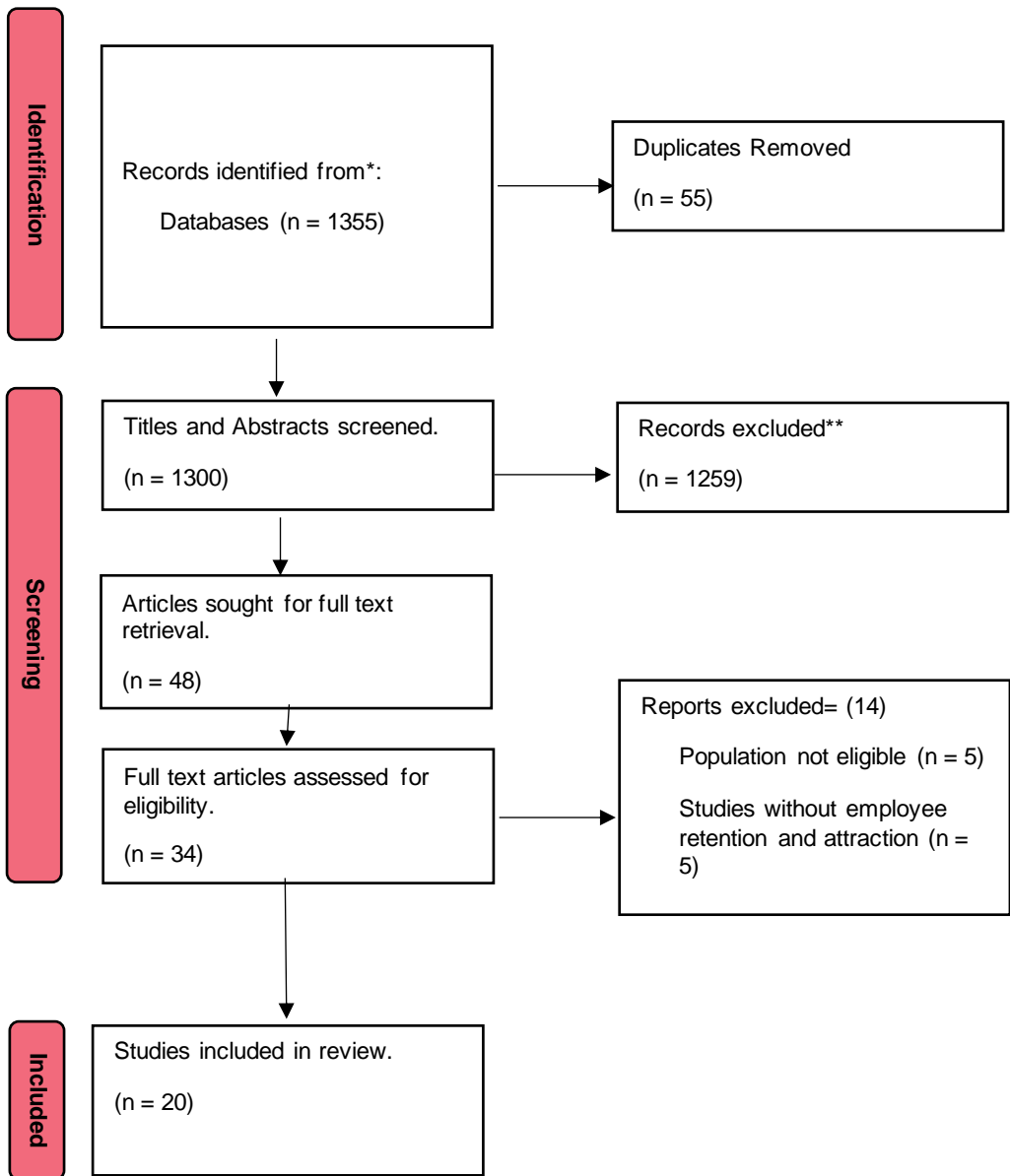
Qualitative data were extracted using a data extraction spreadsheet. Extracted information included study characteristics, study design, sample characteristics, and results. The data was synthesized as a narrative review, which presents the primary and secondary outcomes of the studies comparatively, both in the text and tables for the following:

- Patterns and trends in the literature
- Provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge on attraction and retention strategies in the post-COVID era
- Challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Human resource managers' strategies management
- Explore the effectiveness of strategies

RESULTS

1,355 records were identified using the databases outlined above, from which 55 duplicates were removed. After duplicate removal 1,300 titles and abstracts were screened using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. After the title and abstract screening were completed, 48 full-text articles were screened, and 20 articles were included in the review as shown in Figure 3.

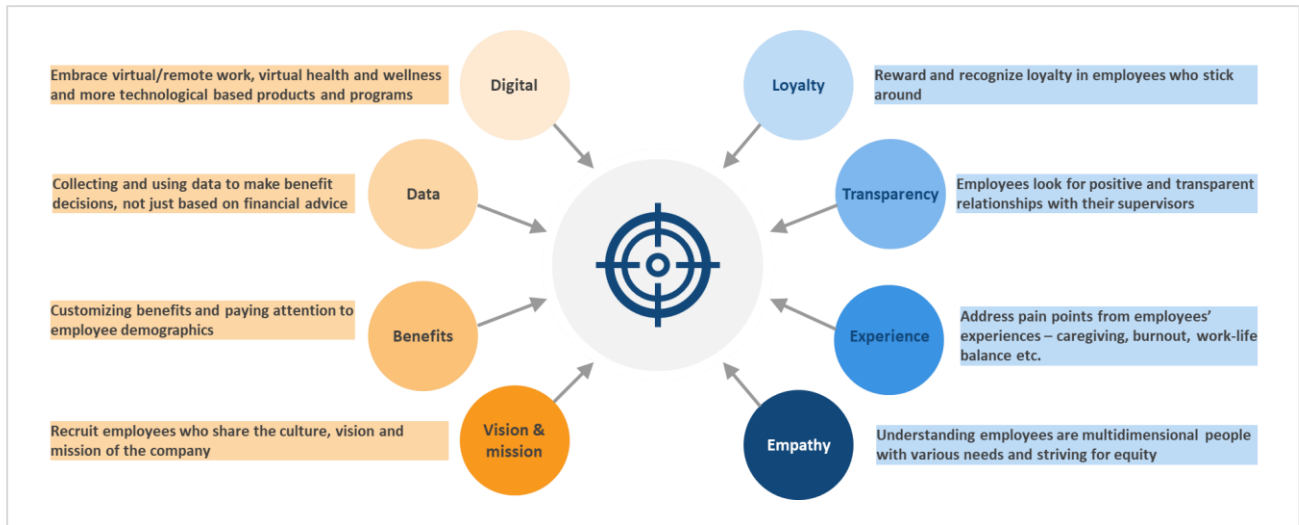
Figure 3. PRISMA diagram of studies screening and inclusion



Key Changes and Adaptations to Strategies

Based on the literature reviewed, the attraction and retention strategies that have been adopted since the COVID-19 pandemic can be categorized into two types – tangible strategies and emotional intelligence strategies.

Figure 4. Tangible and Emotional Strategies



Tangible Strategies

Digital: Ten articles reported that to stay ahead of the competition, organizations realized they had to embrace virtual and remote work, virtual health and wellness, and more tech-based products and programs. ^(1,2,3,6, 9,11,12,14,16,19) This meant creating an environment that facilitates a seamless transition from in-person to remote work, investing in technology that supports collaboration, and encouraging employees to adopt a “digital first” mindset.

Data: Furthermore, organizations refocused decision-making by collecting and using data to make benefit decisions, rather than just financial advice. Nine articles discussed the importance of analyzing data on employee behavior and collecting feedback from employees on their needs and preferences. ^(1,2,5,10,12,17,18,19,20) Companies tailored their benefits offerings to meet the unique needs of their workforce. ⁽⁴⁾ This included everything from health and wellness benefits to flexible work arrangements and parental leave policies.

Benefits: In focusing on employee feedback and data, organizations are now customizing benefits and paying attention to employees’ demographics and unique needs. Organizations quickly realized that a one-size-fits-all approach to benefits was no longer effective during, or post-pandemic. For example, younger employees have been more interested in career development opportunities, while older employees are prioritizing retirement benefits. ⁽¹⁴⁾ By understanding the demographics of the workforce, organizations are creating benefits packages that are personalized and resonate with their employees.

Vision and Mission: Finally, recruiting employees who share the culture, vision, and mission of the company was a major theme seen in the literature. Hiring employees who are aligned with the company's values and goals is associated with increased engagement, productivity, and retention. ⁽⁸⁾

Companies are focusing on attracting candidates who are enthusiastic about the company's mission and are excited about the opportunity to contribute to its success.

Emotional Intelligence

Loyalty: Almost all the articles reviewed discussed the importance of emotional intelligence as an essential skill for companies to cultivate in their leaders and managers, particularly following the experiences of the pandemic. One effective strategy is to reward and recognize loyalty in employees who productively remain with the company for a substantial period of time. When employees feel valued and appreciated, they will more likely remain with the company and remain engaged in their work. ^(2,10) This can be achieved through recognition programs, promotions, or other incentives that reward longevity and dedication.

Transparency: Another important aspect of emotional intelligence that was frequently found in the literature is the relationship between employees and their supervisors. More and more, employees are looking for positive and transparent relationships with their supervisors, where they feel comfortable expressing their opinions and concerns. ^(2,6,7,11,18,20) The research suggests that fostering open communication and actively seeking feedback can build trust and strengthen the relationship between supervisors and employees. Employees want to feel valued, supported, and heard in their work environment. Leaders who are empathetic, approachable, and open to feedback can create a workplace culture that encourages collaboration, communication, and mutual respect.

Experience: In addition, companies are taking a more personal approach to attraction and retention practices. Organizations are addressing pain points from employees' lived experiences, such as caregiving, burnout, and work-life balance. Employers are putting more emphasis on recognizing and responding to these challenges and demonstrating their commitment to their employees' well-being. ^(1,2,7,8,10,14,17,18,19) Basic benefits are no longer sufficient, and organizations are increasing the ways they provide a holistic approach to support their employees.

Empathy: Finally, it has been critical to recognize that employees are multidimensional people and are seeking equity in their professional lives. Organizations have been working on diversity and inclusion initiatives and creating or maintaining a culture that values and celebrates differences. Particularly, companies focused on equity in many areas including hiring, promotion, and compensation to ensure that all employees have equal opportunities to succeed. ^(1,12,13,15)

Recommendations and Insights for Organizations

The research suggests that organizations that prioritize their employees' well-being can achieve success and gain a competitive advantage, especially in the post-pandemic era. There are valuable recommendations and insights found in the literature that companies should consider when thinking about attraction and retention strategies and benefit design.

1. Employers must consider employee demographics, equity, and cultural fit. This includes creating a diverse and inclusive work environment that values equity and embraces cultural differences. Leaders who understand their employees' unique needs can create benefits packages and work arrangements that support their workforce and promote employee satisfaction. ^(1,2,7,9,10,14,17,18,19)
2. Organizations need to invest in employees and their families beyond financial compensation. This may include providing benefits such as health and wellness programs to employees and their families and having parental leave policies. Leaders who prioritize their employees' well-

being demonstrate a commitment to their workforce, which can increase loyalty and reduce turnover. ^(1,2,7,8,10,14,17,18,19)

3. Companies should prioritize factors beyond the bottom line, such as professional development and growth opportunities. Offering employees a clear path for advancement and skill development increases their engagement and productivity, and ultimately drives business success. Having a strong onboarding experience sets the stage for a positive and productive employee experience. ^(4,6,9,10,14,17,18)
4. Employers should prioritize flexibility, technology, and virtual tools. Offering employees the flexibility to work remotely or have flexible work arrangements increases job satisfaction and work-life balance. Providing technology and virtual tools supports collaboration and communication, even when employees are not in the same physical location. ^(1,2,3,6,9,11,14,16,19)
5. Companies should prioritize their mission and vision, including social responsibility. By incorporating social responsibility into their mission and vision, companies can create a sense of purpose and meaning for their employees. Internal mobility can also create opportunities for employees to explore new roles and departments within the organization, which can promote career growth and development. ^(9,15)
6. Employers should encourage an inclusive community and employee feedback. Leaders who foster an environment that encourages employee feedback can gain valuable insights and demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement. Creating an inclusive community can increase employee engagement and promote a sense of belonging. ^(1,2,5,6,10,12,18,19,20)

The research suggests that organizations that prioritize their employees' well-being and embrace these recommendations and insights can create a work environment that supports their workforce, promotes employee satisfaction, and drives business success.

Staying in Touch with Employees' Needs and Preferences

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many employers have been taking steps to stay in touch with their employees' needs and preferences. Six articles discussed the importance of staying attuned to employees' opinions and preferences; companies can better understand their challenges and opportunities, develop effective strategies, and create a positive work culture that promotes engagement, productivity, and retention. To achieve this, companies have adopted several strategies to collect feedback from employees.

Surveys: Recommended as an effective way to gauge employee satisfaction, identify areas of improvement, and gather suggestions for change. By conducting surveys regularly, companies can stay informed about their employees' experiences and identify areas that require attention. ⁽⁶⁾

Virtual meetings: As remote work increases, many businesses are arranging virtual meetings with staff to go over their requirements and preferences. These discussions may touch on issues including workload, work-life balance, and professional advancement and foster improved collaboration. ^(4,7,)

Employee resource groups (ERGs): ERGs are an effective way to gather feedback from employees and promote inclusivity and diversity. These groups provide a forum for employees to share their experiences, provide feedback, and offer suggestions for change. Employee resource groups can help companies understand the diverse needs of their employees and develop effective strategies to support them. ⁽⁴⁾

Social media and internal communication platforms: To stay connected with their staff, employers use social media and internal communication tools. These avenues can be utilized to disseminate updates and business news as well as to honor and celebrate employee accomplishments. ^(8,20)

Performance evaluations: Employers can use performance evaluations as a chance to talk about employee wants and needs, as well as to give advice and assistance. ⁽²⁾

EMPLOYER GUIDANCE

IBI consulted with employers to gather practical recommendations and insights on employee engagement and retention in the post COVID era. We heard that many employers are treading into unknown waters as they try to develop strategies and design benefits that fit the needs of employees in a post pandemic world, while paying attention to cost and company performance. The following are highlights of some of the insights shared in this discussion.

Onboarding as Part of the Overall Engagement Strategy

Traditionally, onboarding has been viewed as a mere administrative process of introducing new employees to the organization and its benefits. However, forward-thinking employers recognize the potential of onboarding as an important part of employee engagement. By reimagining the onboarding experience, employers can create a meaningful connection with their employees and foster engagement with their benefits and support programs. This involves going beyond the standard orientation and instead taking a more comprehensive approach.

Employers should guide new employees through the entire range of benefits and support services, ensuring they understand not only their health benefits but also other aspects such as financial assistance, family planning, and disability support. This transformation of the onboarding conversation from pages of documents and forms to a personalized guidance process can significantly improve engagement and retention, especially in the post-pandemic era which typically involves less in-person contact and spontaneous interactions. Employers should also recognize that the employee may not be the benefit decision maker in the household. Communication strategies must include sharing resources with spouses and partners.

The Importance of the First Year

The initial year of an employee's journey with an organization is pivotal in shaping their long-term engagement and retention. Employers should recognize this critical period and capitalize on it to establish a strong connection between employees and the organization. By proactively facilitating a smooth onboarding process, offering comprehensive support, and nurturing a sense of belonging, employers create a positive experience that sets the foundation for long-term engagement. This includes initiatives such as assigning mentors or buddies to new employees, providing regular check-ins, and organizing team-building activities. Investing in the first-year experience not only ensures employees feel supported and valued but also cultivates loyalty and commitment to the organization.

Educating Frontline Supervisors and Managers

To effectively support employees in navigating their benefits and support programs, employers should prioritize the education and training of frontline supervisors and managers. These leaders play a crucial role in understanding and communicating the available benefit packages to their teams. By equipping supervisors and managers with comprehensive knowledge, they become better positioned to recognize employees' needs and direct them to the appropriate resources.

This education can include in-depth training on the various benefits offered, how to access them, and how to address common employee concerns or questions. When frontline leaders are well-informed, they can serve as a valuable resource for employees, guiding them towards the programs and services that align with their needs. By investing in the education of frontline supervisors and managers, employers can enhance the overall employee experience and create a supportive environment that fosters engagement and well-being.

Understanding Engagement and its Components

Engagement goes beyond employees simply understanding their benefits; it encompasses a broader sense of connection, purpose, and influence. Employers should strive to create an environment where employees not only comprehend their benefits but also feel that they have a voice in determining what is offered to them. Additionally, it is vital for employees to understand how their individual roles contribute to the overall purpose and goals of the organization. By clearly communicating the link between individual contributions and organizational success, employers can empower employees to see their impact and foster a sense of pride and ownership.

Furthermore, engagement involves creating a culture where employees feel they can influence and drive change within the organization. This can be facilitated through open communication channels, encouraging employee feedback and suggestions, and providing opportunities for growth and development. By addressing these components of engagement, employers can enhance overall job satisfaction, productivity, and retention.

The Significance of Connection

Building connections is fundamental for fostering engagement, retention, and employee well-being. Employers should recognize the challenges posed by remote work and the potential impact of social isolation. It is crucial to facilitate genuine connections between employees, their colleagues, and the organization. While virtual communication is essential, employers should also explore opportunities for incidental connections that naturally occur in a physical workspace. This may involve organizing in-person meetings, team-building events, or collaborative projects. Employers should also prioritize creating a supportive and inclusive virtual environment where employees can connect and collaborate effectively. By acknowledging the importance of connection and taking steps to nurture this component, employers can ensure they are cultivating a people first culture.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the pandemic, the landscape of attraction and retention in the workplace has undergone significant changes. Employers are grappling with the evolving expectations and priorities of employees. Factors such as remote work flexibility, work-life balance, and employee well-being have become paramount considerations for attracting and retaining talent. Organizations are reevaluating their recruitment strategies to adapt to the new reality and appealing to candidates by highlighting their

commitment to employee safety, flexible work arrangements, and robust support programs. Retention efforts are focused on creating a sense of connection, equity and belonging, promoting professional growth opportunities, and addressing employee concerns and challenges arising from the pandemic.

Additionally, employers are recognizing the critical role of effective communication, transparent leadership, and strong organizational culture in ensuring employee satisfaction and loyalty. As the workforce continues to navigate the post-pandemic era, employers must be agile, responsive, and proactive in their approaches to attraction and retention to thrive in this new paradigm. By incorporating these insights into their employer guidance strategies, organizations can create a more engaging, supportive, and connected work environment.

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APPENDIX A

[Click here for the list of articles with summaries and research design.](#)