



The Impact of the Pandemic and The Great Resignation on Workplace Bound Psychology Graduates

Paul Hettich, PhD
DePaul University (IL)

Why would 11.5 million American workers quit their jobs during the second quarter of 2021, during the pandemic, when so many businesses were closing and leaving millions of people unemployed? (Gardner, 2021).

But it happened, and the effects of the pandemic and “The Great Resignation,” as it is known, still ripple across the economy as this article goes to press. Why?

In an interview with Phil Gloude-mans of the *Boston College News*, Psychologist and Professor David Blustein shared his views:

The Great Resignation is clearly a fast-moving and powerful trend, one that has surprised many experts, including myself. Like most macrolevel phenomenon, the Great Resignation is likely due to a confluence of factors that has coalesced to create a transformation in how people engage in work (2021, p. 2).

What led to The Great Resignation? Dr Blustein explains.

- The pandemic exposed workers to a deadly virus, a game-changer, which threatened their lives while often working in unhealthy environmental conditions.
- Wages increased for many workers, especially those employed in low paying jobs.
- Some people who quit their jobs because of the pandemic

retired, leaving openings to be filled.

- During the pandemic, people saved money from reduced travel expenses, dining out, avoiding luxuries, and other cost-saving measures that built a financial cushion for them.
- Competition had increased across several fields that strengthened the confidence of workers to leave their current job and find a better one.

Blustein does not believe, as certain commentators contend, that government stimulus checks encouraged workers to quit their jobs because labor shortages continued in states that refused additional federal benefits. Research by Blustein and his students reveal that people have experienced a sense of existential threat to their security that may be evoking a “Great Rethinking” about the nature of work. “For many people in the U.S. and across the globe, work has often resulted in stress, tedium, health risks, interpersonal conflict, and disempowerment, particularly for people who have been marginalized” (Gloude-mans, 2021, p. 2). We must rethink how society engages in work, survival, and sustainability, as the country rebuilds from the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Blustein also believes that the Great Resignation can lead to higher wages and improved working conditions as employees in some companies gain or take back power that had been diminishing for decades.

A Corporate Perspective

From a university research laboratory, we move to a corporate training setting. “What’s Next After the Great Resignation” was the title of an online seminar led by Ben Brooks, founder and CEO of PILOT Inc, a software-based employee coaching firm. The online seminar was sponsored by *HRE Executive* (an online magazine that covers various labor issues addressed by human resources departments) and Calm Business (a software company creator of meditation and sleep-related products). Brooks identifies three major problems/challenges related to the pandemic. First, he believes that everyone (e.g., employees, managers, customers, vendors) is collectively burned out, isolated, and disengaged from work because of COVID. Well-being and mental health are at an all-time low in most organizations, and many people do not have good coping skills.

Second, when organizations shifted to hybrid and remote modes of operating, employee experiences became degraded. People were working two hours longer each day to maintain productivity. They experienced less connectivity, less fun, and less humor as screen time became their primary experience (Readers, can you relate to that situation?). Diversity, equity, and inclusiveness (DEI) efforts were diminished.

The third problem is that people are unprepared for the “now” of work. That is, they seem unaware of the significant changes that remote and hybrid modes of work will require for workers to be successful in their current and future roles because the bar for success is higher when employees are not working in an office. Human resources departments must help employees navigate their transition to new modes of operating. In addition, they need to expand mental health and well-being programs in systematic and holistic ways by creating events that promote socialization, employee growth, and empathy, such as recognizing employee work anniversaries, birthdays, and giving workers time to grieve.

Of all the issues Brooks articulated, mental health is the most salient. According to Jan Bruce, CEO and cofounder of meQuilibrium (a Boston-based well-being and resilience training platform), “The biggest challenge facing employers in 2022 is to be able to predict and prevent employee mental health problems early—before they have a negative impact—and create a culture of well-being” (Buscaglia, 2022). To that end, the Society for Human Resource Management’s Center for Workplace Mental Health has identified approaches that employers can use. They include (a) creating employee assistance programs that facilitate access to mental health support, including easy access to screening tools; (b) proactively articulating information regarding mental health benefits; (c) providing coverage for treatment and medications; (d) creating a comprehensive wellness program that addresses mental health and stress management; and (e) training managers in conflict resolution and management skills to reduce excessive stress (Buscaglia, 2022).

Workplace Issues

One major function of an organization’s human resources department is hiring new personnel. Each year the Michigan State University Collegiate Employment Research Institute (CERI) publishes *Recruiting Trends*. This report is compiled by CERI from detailed data collected from employers regarding

their hiring plans. In addition, information about organizational size, sector, location, salaries, academic disciplines sought, internships, and published sources is presented. Below are a few “snapshots” (some are disturbing) of the economy and workplace as highlighted by psychologist and author Phil Gardner in the 2021–2022 report.

1. Eighty-seven percent of employees prefer to work remotely, but some managers do not trust about a third of their employees to be productive while working remotely. Most employers support a hybrid workplace that consists of three days per week in the office and remote the other days.
2. “During the pandemic, 30% of the workers younger than 40 considered changing occupations or field of work compared to 20% of the overall workforce” (Gardner, 2021, p. 2).
3. Although occupational groups, such as healthcare and service workers, might have survived during the pandemic, women experienced severe disruption to their careers. At the time of this report, about 4.2 million women who had left their jobs during the pandemic to care for children had not returned to the workplace; some day care centers remained closed or understaffed. In addition, because some managers believe that individuals working in the office outperform those working at home, these displaced women face “damaging long-term prospects,” especially those working in research positions, compared to men (Gardner, 2021). Rice University Professor Eden King maintains that women are not opting out of the workforce as sources claim. Given that work and its income is necessary for family support, he believes that women are being *pushed* out (Clay, 2022).
4. College debt aside, 35% of millennials *incurred* debt to attend a bachelor/bachelorette party and 20% of them to attend a wedding.
5. “Eighty-four percent of Black households carry student debt with individual loans averages = \$23,000 (median = \$44,000), compared to Whites’ \$17,000. Black households carry more than twice the college debt as Whites” (Gardner, 2021, p. 2). In addition, the “median income of Black households with college degrees in their 30’s plummeted in inflation adjusted numbers from \$50,500 in 1990 to \$8,200 today. White household of the same demographic grew 17% to \$138,000” (Gardner, 2021, p. 2).
6. Job options are “awful” for women without a college degree.
7. Although the gap between men and women attending college widens (more men choose not to attend), men continue to dominate the engineering, technology, and finance fields. However, some experts question if the United States can sustain a strong labor market if men’s identity is at odds with the pursuit of higher education.
8. “July 2021 was the hottest in 150 years of record keeping with a global average = 62.07 degrees). The last seven days of the month were the hottest ever recorded” (Gardner, 2021, p. 3).

There is much to ponder regarding these eight points. Yet, there is some good news for workplace bound college graduates. Employers from all organizational sectors and sizes plan to increase hiring across all majors, but with an emphasis on

business and engineering candidates. Graduates who seek full time positions or internships/co-ops can expect opportunities to be plentiful this year. However, they should expect virtual recruiting sessions in some hybrid form with digital and AI assisted technologies. Applicants must be well-prepared for the interviews, very aware of their Zoom background environment, arrive on time, demonstrate interest in the opportunities an organization offers, and take responsibility for managing their job search. Most employers expect new hires to remain three to five years in their organization, before seeking new opportunities (Gardner, 2021).

Skills Employers Seek

To learn what employers look for when they interview applicants, we turn to the NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers) annual survey of employers, *Job Outlook 2022* (NACE, 2021). Table 1 lists the attributes (skills) that employers look for on the resumés of job applicants in 2022, and those they sought in 2021 for the same question (Gray, 2021).

Because this question is asked annually in the survey, the percentages and rankings will vary from year to year, but the inclusion of these attributes is relatively consistent; all of them are important.

I have followed the NACE Job Outlook report for over a decade and never have I seen year to year differences on key attributes so marked as they are represented on Table 1. The data for the 2022 survey was gathered between August 18, 2021, and October 1, 2021, at a time when there were high expectations in the United States that the pandemic was diminishing. Data for the 2021 survey was collected during the same period during 2020 when the pandemic was intense throughout the United States. Spend a few minutes and speculate about why particular attributes showed a positive or negative change of four percentage points or more (arbitrarily chosen by me) between the two years.

TABLE 1			
Attributes That Employers Seek on Resumés for 2021 and 2022			
Attributes	% Respondents		Change (2022–2021)
	2022	2021	
Problem-solving skills	85.5	79.0	+ 6.5
Analytical/quantitative skills	78.6	76.1	+ 2.5
Ability to work in a team	76.3	81.0	– 4.7
Communication skills (written)	73.3	72.7	+ 0.6
Initiative	72.5	67.8	+ 4.7
Strong work ethic	71.0	65.4	+ 5.6
Technical skills	64.9	67.8	– 2.9
Flexibility/adaptability	63.4	65.9	– 2.5
Detail-oriented	62.6	56.1	+ 6.5
Leadership	60.3	67.8	– 7.5
Communication skills (verbal)	58.8	73.2	–14.4
Interpersonal skills (relates well to others)	56.5	57.6	– 1.1
Computer skills	52.7	65.4	–12.7

Note. Adapted from Job Outlook 2022, Figure 36, with the permission of the National Association of Colleges and Employers, copyright holder.

With most work shifting to Zoom or hybrid, it seems logical for supervisors to expect better problem solving, greater initiative, stronger work ethic, and greater attention to detail. But is teamwork, leadership, computer skills, and especially verbal communication less important in a remote or hybrid environment in 2022 than in the previous year? Chances are that multiple explanations are feasible.

Survey respondents were also asked to identify the most important *career readiness competencies* that graduates should possess from a list of eight items. Rated from highest to lowest, the competencies include *critical thinking, communication, teamwork, equity and inclusion, professionalism, technology, career and self-development, and leadership*. Unfortunately, in terms of the actual proficiency displayed by recent graduates, only *technology* merited “very proficient” by employers. That message should warn students that employers expect a higher level of competence from graduates than most graduates believe they possess and can demonstrate.

Table 1 identifies the skills in general terms, but hiring managers will expect applicants to be more specific, i.e., to operationally define their skills. Interviewers will seek evidence (examples) of applicants’ achievements. Not coincidentally, each of the attributes, which employers seek in this survey, correspond directly or indirectly to the five domains of 17 skills that comprise the Skillful Psychology Student list (APA, 2018). Log on to <https://www.apa.org/careers/resources/guides/transferable-skills.pdf> and compare the Skillful Psychology Student list to Table 1. Show these two lists to those individuals who doubt the value of a bachelor’s degree in psychology. Your undergraduate psychology major *does* prepare you with skills required in the workplace, especially when your teachers discuss the skills, and *if* you work at it.

Skill Identification Exercise

As an exercise for applying this information, create three columns on a sheet of paper: coursework, job, and nonclassroom college experiences. In each column, identify specific examples or situations in which you have practiced the skills described in Table 1 or The Skillful Psychology Student. What evidence can you produce for acquiring each skill at a high, moderate, or low level? As an alternative to, or in addition to, this exercise, work with your college career services to identify *and* assess your skills, perhaps by creating a skills portfolio. Be sure to perform this assessment periodically, because when you prepare for a job interview, the hiring manager will likely ask you more questions about your skill-driven experiences than your coursework and grades. I call this situation “The Great Graduate Dilemma.” Namely, teachers emphasize the *content* of psychology (i.e., its concepts, theories, research), but your interviewers will emphasize the *skills* you must bring to a job. This dilemma, if not addressed before job interviews, could become the “Catch 22” in 2022 for psychology graduates joining the workforce. That is, to get a decent job you need a college degree, but now that you possess a college degree, you might not get that job because you cannot articulate your skills and skill-based experiences. **So, know the skills you possess and the evidence that supports them.**

TABLE 2

Influence of Specific Attributes (College Outcomes)

Attribute/Outcome	2022 Average Influence Rating
Completed an internship with your organization	4.4
Has internship experience in your industry	4.3
Major	3.8
Has general work experience	3.7
Has held leadership position	3.6
Has been involved in extracurricular activities (clubs, sports, student government, etc.)	3.5
Has no work experience	3.3
High GPA (3.0 or above)	3.1
School attended	2.6
Is fluent in a foreign language	2.1
Has studied abroad	2.0
Other	3.0

Note. 5-point scale, where 1 = No influence, 2 = Not much influence, 3 = Somewhat of an influence, 4 = Very much influence, and 5 = Extreme influence.
Adapted from Job Outlook 2022, Figure 36, with the permission of the National Association of Colleges and Employers, copyright holder.

A Hierarchy of Important Experiences

Sometimes, employers must choose between two equally qualified candidates. In such instances what factors do they consider? Table 2 presents data about the most important, specific attributes (defined here as college outcomes or experiences) that influence their decision, in the order of their importance. First, note that internships are not only at the top but well ahead of the closest outcomes below them. You should complete *at least* one internship during college in a nonacademic setting that aligns with your career plans. Second, do not diminish the value of your work experiences. Document the time periods of your jobs, the primary tasks you performed, and the skills you developed. Chances are, that the waitstaff position, fast food job, or retail sales job you once held taught you time management, teamwork, customer service, and interpersonal communication skills, as well as knowledge about a particular business. Third, notice further down the table that *lack of work experience* operates against you. In fact, this criterion is more important than your grades and school attended, at least for many employers. Finally, although study abroad and language fluency are at the bottom of this list, these experiences will likely be valued more highly in companies that work closely with international organizations.

Skills That Psychology Baccalaureate Graduates Use

Now you know the attributes that employers seek on a resumé and value most when applicants are equally qualified, but what skills and tasks do bachelor's level psychology graduates *actually* perform in their jobs? Emsi/Burning Glass is a labor market analytics firm with a proprietary database containing 145 million

TABLE 3

Most Frequent Skills Possessed by Baccalaureate Level Psychology Graduates

Skill	%	Skill	%
1. Customer service	57	11. Event planning	24
2. Leadership	49	12. Communications	23
3. Microsoft Office	49	13. Time management	22
4. Management	48	14. Operations	18
5. Sales	41	15. Psychology	18
6. Microsoft Excel	40	16. Teaching	17
7. Research	36	17. Teamwork	16
8. Microsoft Word	36	18. Team building	16
9. Microsoft PowerPoint	35	19. English language	16
10. Public speaking	34	20. Spanish language	14

Note. Source: Conroy, J., Lin, L., & Stamm, K. (2021). Datapoint: A Psychology Major Opens Doors. This chart and text first appeared in the *Monitor on Psychology*, July/August, 2021. Reprinted with permission.

profiles gathered from resumé on job boards, digital profiles from websites, and other sources; 321,007 of its profiles were bachelor's degree holders (James Bond among them? —a touch of humor). Table 3 lists the top 20 of the 92 skills possessed by bachelor's level psychology graduates and used in diverse work environments.

The skills on this list can be acquired and applied in various settings. The skill of *research* is ranked seventh, which indicates that it is a critically important and widely used, in-demand foundational skill for several occupations. On the other hand, it must be disappointing to see *psychology* ranked fifteenth. Keep in mind, however, that liberal arts disciplines, like psychology, are designed to provide both a general exposure to the field at the bachelor's level, as well as a specific preparation for graduate and professional programs that require an extensive curriculum. You might not apply most concepts or theories mastered in your undergraduate coursework to your career, but they do contribute to your overall perspective for approaching the challenges and rewards of life and work. The first-year student who wants to major in psychology to “help people” can feel affirmed that the most frequently used skill is customer (client) service, that is, helping people. The 20 skills on this list should also serve as skill-enhancing opportunities to be achieved through jobs and other nonacademic opportunities during college. Finally, note the importance of the four Microsoft programs in the top ten skills. Why not make it your goal to master this software before your graduation, if you haven't by now?

Concluding Comments

The Great Resignation has its roots in the pandemic—although some conditions were operating before its appearance. Change and adaptation are the only constants that we can expect now as the world tries to emerge from an ever-evolving virus while constructing a new normal. Consequently, as the virus recedes, the economy recovers, and work environments morph into new structures and processes, students should reach beyond the often-cloistered culture of the college campus and pay close attention to diverse and reliable news sources regarding the

economy, the labor market, and specific jobs and career. To assist in this process, I have provided data about the skills employers expect to see reflected on your resumé, the criteria/attributes they consider when qualified applicants are tied, and the proficiencies they expect of college graduates. Furthermore, you are now acquainted with the skills and practices that bachelor's level psychology graduates perform on their jobs. Your task (and responsibility) is to transform this information into action plans by working with your advisors and career services professionals. Follow the progress of the Great Resignation, observe its effects on the labor market, as well as on your personal and professional goals, and adjust accordingly.

I close with a quotation attributed to several individuals including Church of the Latter-Day Saints president Thomas S. Monson, singer Dolly Parton, and businessman/entertainer Jimmy Dean, among others. Because of these individuals and the diverse experiences they represent, this brief, timely, and insightful quotation should merit your thoughtful consideration. Tape it to your computer.

*We cannot **direct** the wind
but we can **adjust** our sails.*

References

- Brooks, B. (2022, January 13). *What's next after the Great Resignation?* [Webinar]. <https://hrxexecutive.com/whats-next-after-the-great-resignation/>
- Buscaglia, M. (2022, January 2). *Minds matter: Mental health taking center stage in new year*. Chicago Tribune, Section 2, p. 10. <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/chicago-tribune-sunday/20220102/282067690273385>
- Clay, R. (2022, January–February). Women's workforce losses. *Monitor on Psychology*, 53(1), 66–67. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/2022-01-monitor.pdf>
- Conroy, J., Lin L., & Stamm, K. (2021, July/August). Data point: A psychology major opens doors. *Monitor on Psychology*, 52(5), 21. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/datapoint-psychology-major>
- Gardner, P. (2021, Fall). *Recruiting trends: 2021–2022*. Michigan State University Collegiate Employment Research Institute. <https://ceri.msu.edu/recruiting-trends/index.html>
- Gloudeans, P. (2021, November 18). The great resignation. *Boston College Chronicle*, 29(6), 12. <https://issuu.com/bcchronicle/docs/bcchronicle11182021>
- Gray, K. (2021). *Problem-solving skills top attributes employers seek on resumes*. National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), Bethlehem, PA. <https://www.naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/problem-solving-skills-top-attributes-employers-seeking-on-resumes/>
- National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). (2021). *Job Outlook 2022*. Bethlehem, PA.
- Quote Investigator: Tracing quotations. (2022). *We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails*. <https://www.quoteinvestigator.com/2017/06/25/adjust-sails/>



Paul Hettich, PhD, Professor Emeritus at DePaul University (IL), was an Army personnel psychologist, program evaluator in an education R&D lab, and a corporate applied scientist—positions that created a “real world” foundation for his career in college teaching and administration. He was inspired to write about college-to-workplace readiness issues by graduates and employers who revealed a major disconnect between university and workplace expectations, cultures, and practices. You can contact Paul at phettich@depaul.edu