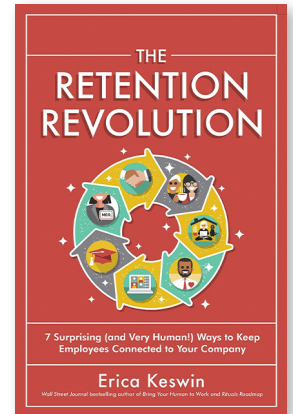


The Retention Revolution

7 Surprising (and Very Human!) Ways to Keep Employees Connected to Your Company

by **Erica Keswin**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

During the pandemic, people quit their jobs in droves, inspiring panic and despair in leaders across industries. Most companies thought they could solve the problem of retention if they could find the perfect cocktail of benefits and perks. But the workplace would never be the same and we're *way* beyond any superficial solutions. We have to reframe everything we thought we knew about how work *works*. The very concept of retention is changing.

In *The Retention Revolution: 7 Surprising (and Very Human!) Ways to Keep Employees Connected to Your Company* author Erica Keswin explains how it's not really about retention anymore, though it's not *not* about retention either. It's all about meeting people where they are, as they are, for as long as they choose to stay connected—which will hopefully be long after they leave. This is a new, very human, very real world, and there's no going back. Keswin dismantles seven old ideas about work and then rebuilds them in new beginnings that reconsider why linear thinking is being replaced by the more human reality of cycles, revolving doors, and dynamic change.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The three P's of onboarding.
- How to be flex for all.
- Why you should invest in your most valuable employees.
- The boomerang way to offboard.

Onboarding

This is a new, very human, very real world, and there's no going back. We will dismantle seven old ideas about work and then rebuild them in new beginnings that reconsider why linear thinking is being replaced by the more human reality of cycles, revolving doors, and dynamic change.

Old Idea #1: Onboarding is that thing you do before the “real” work begins.

New Beginning #1: Onboarding sets the tone for what can hopefully be a long, possibly winding, but mutually beneficial relationship.

Remember when impersonal and transactional tasks like getting your parking spot, assigned seat, computer passwords, and benefits packages passed for onboarding? When flipping through unreadable, corporate-speak handbooks was the stuff that would inspire a long-term, personal commitment to the company? Onboarding was the stuff that needed to happen before *real* work could begin. A box check.

Today at smart companies, onboarding is being rebranded, thankfully, as the beginning of that long and winding, mutually beneficial relationship. Onboarding is actually a way of welcoming someone for what founder of LinkedIn Reid Hoffman calls a “tour of duty.”

After all, in the Retention Revolution, employees are building their own careers as they pass through your company, coming and going—and perhaps returning—all the while adding value, developing themselves and others, and sharing their wisdom.

When it comes to onboarding new employees, the first step is to know where you're headed by having your values and culture goals firmly in place. Everything you do will arise out of that foundation. From there, you'll have to decide exactly what you need to cover to get someone up to speed. And then, you'll have to figure out how you're going to deliver all the info in a way that aligns with your values.

The Three P's of Onboarding

There are three simple ways to create a human onboarding experience that supports the Retention Revolution. Make sure your onboarding is: Professional, Purposeful, and Personal. And yes, this goes for welcoming new employees whether you're in person, remote, in a cohort, one-on-one, or a mix of all the above.

Onboarding is an essential part of any business that should

not be treated as an add-on or after-thought. That's why the first step in onboarding, well, is to professionalize it. Depending on the size of your company, either hire someone whose sole job it is to oversee onboarding or officially give it to someone in the organization to own and cultivate.

Employees are willing to make real sacrifices to work at purpose-driven organizations. Onboarding is the perfect time to create that important meeting of the minds and make the connection between a new hire's roles and the purpose of the organization.

Connections made between the new hire and others in the company should be curated and never left up to chance. In other words, make onboarding personal. Simple, one-to-one introductions are the human factor that is the most important touch in making a new hire feel welcome.

Personal, values-aligned, and high touch are hallmarks of an onboarding process that contributes to the virtuous cycle of the Retention Revolution. Great work begets more great work. This is onboarding as you mean to go on, and on.

Flex for All

Old Idea #2: Employees are only working when you can see them.

New Beginning #2: It's official. Autonomy and flexibility are good for business and great for people.

Before 2020, flexibility, like most benefits and perks, was something you earned over time. Today, remote or hybrid work is often the norm for many people. The reality is, the genie is out of the bottle on this one. Too many people have tasted the benefits of working from anywhere, and they're just not buying into the notion of coming back to the office. Nor should they.

Success in the Retention Revolution requires less reactivity and more strategy. Less control and more trust. Less obsessing over hours logged and more focusing on results and outcomes. The best way to make work really work for all, is to be flexible about flexibility. You can ACE flexibility by offering people what we know they want: Autonomy, Connection, and Equity.

Autonomy

It's only human to want to check in with your employees. It's your job, in fact, to observe and assess your team's

Forget about the elephant in the room; let's take a minute to name the human in the room. Or should we say—on the Zoom?!

performance. Which is why it can feel difficult to trust that employees are working when you can't see them. And yet, the time has come.

But how do you offer autonomy when we're so conditioned to feel like we have to watch over people? One option taken by some companies is to go all out and track employees' every move. This productivity paranoia is the latest major time and attention drain for many workers and it's bad for business.

When productivity is understood as time spent instead of results delivered, you miss the point entirely. What we measure becomes what we create. If you measure hours, you'll get hours. If you measure results, you'll get results. In the Retention Revolution, deciding what to measure, and giving people choice about when and how they meet those metrics, is critical in any work environment.

Connection

These days, when left to our own devices, we're not connecting as well as we could...whether virtually or in person, even in the office. It's great we can get so much work done remotely, but unfortunately, digital contact doesn't mirror the neurological benefits of in-person relating.

We have to be more intentional about connecting with one another. Our work lives must be planned with face-to-face connection top of mind. Simply bringing people back to the office isn't enough to create connections. We have to plan, reflect, and integrate in a strategic way. Design days in the office that are worth the commute. Make them engaging, purposeful, and focused on being together as a team.

Equity

In the Retention Revolution, nothing is black and white. In order to ACE flexibility, there is no such thing as absolute equity. Instead, it's always relative. Nothing will be perfectly equitable for everyone, but your job as a leader is to know how to consider the elements and how they all work together. And all eyes are on you.

Leaders need to walk the walk, and work from home if the company's flexibility policy calls for it. If leaders regularly

go into the office when the policy is only a couple days each week, employees will feel pressured to go in, regardless of what they want or what really works for them—a serious recipe for resentment.

Flexibility is here to stay and it is not just for senior-level desk workers. It is for everyone. But to make flexible work *work* for your teams, you'll need to design it through the lens of autonomy, connection, and equity.

The Case for Human Professionalism

Old Idea #3: “Human professionalism” is an oxymoron.

New Beginning #3: Professionalism infused with authenticity is the hallmark of today's workplace.

It's not news that remote work has completely blurred the lines between work and home. Or that because of this shift, the nature of our work may seem to be more *casual*, shall we say, but—by some measures—even more productive and engaged.

The fact that over the course of the pandemic we ran reports, teams, whole companies—in fact the biggest economies of the world—from our closets, kitchens, and home offices in our jammies has called into question everything we thought we knew about what it means to be professional.

There's no curtain; the emperor has no clothes; the jig is up. After spending much of 2020 and 2021 with our kids, spouses, roommates, and messes awkwardly on display, it's time to stop hiding. Forget about the elephant in the room; let's take a minute to name the *human* in the room. Or should we say—on the Zoom?!

We exist, and we're complicated. And we're not totally “professional” in the way we dress or the way we express ourselves. And that's good news. For us as people, and for our businesses. There's never been a better time to unpack the very concept of professionalism.

Now is our opportunity to preserve everything that supports innovation, creativity, and life-affirming productivity, while

letting go of outdated, unrealistic, and unattuned notions of the sacrifices we have to make in order to succeed—as companies and individuals.

In the Retention Revolution, judging by appearances is being replaced by an appreciation of character. The truly human way is to take off the pressure and add in some personality. Creating psychological safety and belonging in the workplace, where people can authentically dress and express themselves, is good for people and business.

The Three P's of Meetings

Old Idea #4: Meetings are just...what you do.

New Idea #4: Meetings are a critical ingredient in the recipe for retention.

Another great gift from the pandemic is that we now have a lot of options. When it comes to meetings, this is both a blessing and a curse. Sometimes meeting in person is just better, or even necessary. Other times, remote meetings are perfect. Hybrid meetings are necessary at times, even if they aren't everyone's favorite. In fact, they can often be the worst of both worlds.

But as with everything else in the Retention Revolution, what matters most is being intentional—and knowing why you're doing what you're doing. And maybe you'll find that you don't have to meet at all. The only way to stay ahead is to accept that how you hold meetings has to change.

Most of us will continue the ritualized, if not always necessary, practice of meeting. So, it's important that we know how to meet well. Every good meeting—whether it's in person or remote—is good in the same three ways. The Three P's of good meetings? Purpose, Presence, and Protocols.

Purpose

You have to figure out the purpose of your meeting. While it may feel counterintuitive to create a very narrow focus of your meetings, the fact is that the more niche you are, the more meaningful experience participants will have.

Amy Bonsall, the CEO of Collective, a company devoted to helping remote teams thrive, writes in *Harvard Business Review* that there are three types of meetings. They are:

- Transactional gatherings, which move work forward
- Relational gatherings, which strengthen connections

- Adaptive gatherings, which help us address complex or sensitive topics

This can help you decide what kind of meeting you should have and whether it should be virtual or in person as well as provide focus as any given meeting should only be one type.

Presence

If the purpose is clear, your next step will be to ensure that people show up. Literally and figuratively. These days, because it is so incredibly easy for people to slip through the virtual meeting cracks, you might want to consider designating a person whose job it is to cruise direct, if you will.

One big question: Who's in charge of managing the ungainly schedules of hybrid work with the added responsibility of planning events or activities for people to connect, both in real life and virtually?

The role is called many things: connection curator, workplace manager, head of workplace experiences, and community manager to name a few. Whatever you call it, it's a dedicated role to meet this unique, pandemic-induced shift in the way we work and connect.

This person's job is to design for connection, own it, iterate and adapt, and—critically—look at it through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Which is to say, this connection curator role needs to be an explicit part of someone's current job or even a new job entirely because left to its own devices, it won't happen. And that's bad for business. Have someone *own* connection.

Protocols

Whether your company is in person, remote, or somewhere in between, meetings play a critical role in how people feel about work. How can your meetings maximize all of these different variables? It's not easy, and the rules keep changing in this Wild West of work today. So, what do we need in the Wild West? We need a sheriff to keep some order. And guess what? You're it!

You are hereby charged with keeping meetings on track. As you consider ways to hold your meetings, keep in mind that you're also looking for approaches to capture and maintain people's attention as long as you need it. Here are seven basic rules.

1. Establish a meeting strategy and cadence.
2. Assign a host to curate connection.

If you love them, let them learn. Because that's what people really, really want.

3. Start as you mean to go on, keeping people engaged from the beginning.
4. Create a pledge around meeting rules, such as time limits.
5. Mind your manners by starting and ending on time and sticking to the agenda.
6. Find the sweet spot between tech and connect, leveraging tools for everyone's benefit.
7. Experiment, iterate, assess, and change course as needed.

With the rising tide in time we all spend on our screens, it's critical to be judicious whenever we ask people to step away from their thinking work to attend a meeting, even if it's in person. Once you learn how to pick and choose wisely—with purpose, presence, and protocols—you'll learn how to meet as you'd like to go on, and on, and on.

Learning and Development

Old Idea #5: Professional development should be job-related.

New Beginning #5: Taking professional development personally is fuel for the ecosystem of opportunity.

In the Retention Revolution, employees are the new customers. And while these new customers may not always be right, one of the biggest requests of employees today is actually very good for business. And that's professional development—lots of it, right off the bat, with no strings attached.

Of course, there's still room and a need for traditional professional development, but the big difference in today's workplace is that it's not led solely by the employer's needs, but by the employees'—the *customers*'—interests as well. So much so that it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with their day job. Even so, it should happen during the workday.

Professional development in the Retention Revolution is

not the quid pro quo of before times, the old “I pay you to learn something and you apply your skills to my enterprise” arrangement. Today, it's more like “let's work together to make sure everyone grows.”

If you love them, let them learn. Because that's what people really, really want. Your job as a leader is to constellate your business goals and values around serving your market and all of your customers, including your employees. And there is a remarkably clear business case for doing so.

If you create awareness, access, and support for internal mobility and career progression, you can retain and grow your top talent.

Investing in Your Most Valuable Employees

Old Idea #6: Managers are in the messy middle of their career and your organization—and are easily overlooked.

New Beginning #7: Managers should be elevated and celebrated.

You've probably heard the oft-quoted 2015 Gallop gospel, “people don't leave companies, they leave managers.” But today, this is not just an important idea to keep in mind, it's a make-or-break truth. Managers are always important, but in the Retention Revolution, they're your MVP.

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of difficulty with this important role so some talented people want to skip right over this step on the corporate ladder. Middle managers are feeling pressure from all directions in the organization—and who isn't these days?!—so it's no wonder so many managers are feeling burned out and stressed out.

These days managers are being relied upon even more by direct reports, with many saying their manager has a direct impact on their own mental health. This is one of the reasons why your managers' well-being is central to the health and well-being of your organization.

The impact of a manager is broad but it is also a laser-focused solution for the problem of retention. There is a huge percentage of voluntarily exiting employees that could have been retained had there been regular, ongoing conversations about their employee experience.

Training your managers has an exponential effect. As individual contributors, managers have an outsized impact on the state of your workforce, so you'd be wise to focus on their training and feedback in order to keep your company healthy.

Also, to state the obvious, managers are employees, too. In other words, in the Retention Revolution, managers are having a real moment, and you should do everything you can to help them lead others and themselves well. Your company's success depends on it.

Instead of just plugging people into this incredibly important position because they're so good at their day job, such as the salesperson who is so good at selling that she gets promoted to sales manager, everyone will benefit when you take the role of the manager seriously. You do this by elevating and then celebrating.

First of all, you want your managers' programs to be a *thing*. You're likely already offering *something* for new and existing managers, but it's probably not enough. Take a good look at the process of becoming a manager in your organization and elevate it. Create a cool, branded experience that aligns with the mission of the company, and then shout it from the rooftops. Don't be shy.

The next thing you'll want to do is celebrate the role. One of the main ways to do this is by creating community. There's nothing better than learning with a truly connected cohort that moves together through the elevated experience of becoming amazing managers.

Learning how to elevate and celebrate your managers can take time because it comes from a shift in perspective. So at the end of the day, what really matters is relationships—between managers and their teams, managers and leaders, and managers and themselves.

Offboarding

Old Idea #7: There's the door. Don't let it hit you...

New Beginning #7: Smart companies know how to get a positive return on employee churn.

Imagine being honored with your company's most sacred ritual as you walk out the door, not into retirement, but for a different job. Consider how celebrated you would feel about your ex-employer—as talent, as a consumer, as a potential client, as a human being. Imagine unlocking the golden handcuffs and wishing your top talent well as they mosey into different—if not greener—pastures.

Imagine even planning for their exit as they enter. Imagine actually helping your superstars find new jobs. Imagine offering no strings attached sabbaticals and professional development that's truly personal, an offering that may develop them right out the door. Imagine supporting employees as customers, seeking assignments that align with their ever-shifting goals.

And then, imagine how gratified you'll feel if your top talent recommends their friends and even asks for their old job back.

In 2008, Howard Schultz rejoined Starbucks as CEO for his second tour of duty. In 2022, Disney brought back Bob Iger. And who could forget when Steve Jobs returned to Apple? Not every boomerang CEO works magic, but there is certainly a business case to be made for leaving the door open when successful employees—at all levels—leave your company.

In fact, these days, LinkedIn is filled with videos from major companies touting returning employees, often with elaborate blog posts, pictures, and videos showing happy staff back at their companies.

Quite a contrast to the before times, when offboarding was pretty much onboarding in reverse: Give the keys and your company laptop back, set up a "You can reach me at..." email and, if you are one of the lucky ones, your colleagues might toast to your goodbye at a company happy hour. Oh...and don't let the door hit you on the way out.

Smart companies today are thrilled when ex-employees want to make a comeback. They know the ins and outs. There isn't a lot of change in performance between stints. So, why do employees decide to return? The grass isn't always greener.

All this means that if you offboard well and stay connected to your former employees, there may be a chance in the future to welcome them back with open arms. The best leaders recognize and support when an employee has to leave to continue their career growth. If that person decides to come back to your organization in the future, any experiences they had elsewhere could make them that much more valuable to the team.

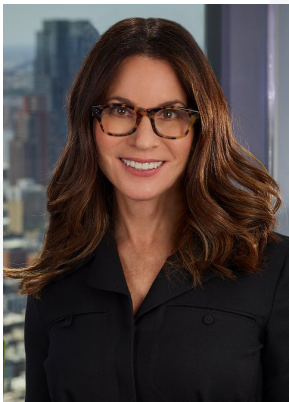
Boomerang employees are actually one of the best-kept secrets of the Retention Revolution—evidence that opening the doors and letting go of expectations is good for business. Give employees “a red carpet in and a red carpet out.” This harnesses the power of human potential *beyond* the traditional terms of employment.

The Retention Revolution is a mindset, not a moment in history. Regardless of which way the pendulum is swinging, creating a human workplace is good for people *and* good for business. People want leaders who value and support them.

They want work that connects them to a purpose, their colleagues, and their organization. They want to learn, develop, and evolve, and stay connected when the time comes for them to move on. It’s only human.

Since Covid, all too many employers, obsessed with retention, have tried to wrest back control and make it a *them* thing. It’s not you; it’s not me. The Retention Revolution makes one thing crystal clear: We’re all in this together.

The Retention Revolution is an *us* thing.



Erica Keswin is a workplace strategist who has worked for the past twenty years with some of the most iconic brands in the world as a consultant, speaker, author, and professional dot-connector. Erica’s work and insights can be seen in various media outlets, including Harvard Business Review, NY Post, Forbes, Huffington Post, O Magazine, Entrepreneur, Business Insider, Mogul, Conscious Company, Quartz, and Fast Company. Erica was named one of Marshall Goldsmith’s Top 100 Coaches in 2020, as well as one of Business Insider’s most innovative coaches of 2020.

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