The importance of employee motivation when the going gets tough

Introduction

In an era of non-stop flux, the workplace has become a mirror of our wider world, where every twist and turn feels amplified.

Topics and trends that might have once stayed in the background now buzz right into our pockets, shaping the way teams connect and communicate. It sometimes feels like every hard-hitting headline is an open tab in our minds, changing how we approach our working lives.

As Daniel Zhao, Glassdoor's lead economist, explains, **"It does feel like employees haven't had time to catch their breath over the past few years, as we've just jumped from crisis to crisis."** Many of us can relate to that.

So what's the cost of low workplace motivation and engagement in real terms? By some estimates, disengaged teams cost the global economy an estimated $8.8 trillion in lost productivity—that's nine percent of global GDP.

At first glance, that might seem like a lofty figure, but compare a day where you're fully committed to the job to one where you're disengaged, coasting, or twiddling your thumbs—then scale the impact up globally.

For HR leaders, this creates a puzzle: How do you keep motivation flowing when change is the only constant, and without pushing your team too hard and risking burnout?

It begins with a fundamental understanding of what drives disengagement in the first place, which is certainly not as simple as it seems. Disengagement can hide in some strange places.

In the sections ahead, we'll draw on cutting-edge insights and research to break down the most pressing challenges impacting motivation in today's turbulent times.

We've also included valuable HR resources to help you address these challenges and drive lasting engagement—information that will help you build a more connected, resilient workforce for the long term.

HR's role in creating a culture of motivation

Company culture has come a long way in a relatively short space of time.

Think back to the early days of the Industrial Revolution, when workplace culture was still in its infancy—a basic structure to help people get through grueling factory shifts. It wasn't about connection or motivation. It was about endurance.

Today, culture is something entirely different. It's no longer just a layer of protection—it's a foundation that gives people a sense of belonging and purpose, something that's become all the more critical in a world that feels chaotic.

Workplace culture isn't all about ethics and abstract benefits though. When people feel grounded in their roles and connected to their teams, they bring their best selves to work, making a measurable difference for the organization as a whole.

This is strongly supported by the data. Gallup data shows that companies with strong, positive cultures see 23 percent higher profitability and retain their people 43 percent better than their peers.

When culture clicks, people are also more likely to show up to work as absenteeism drops by 81 percent, and productivity also jumps by 18 percent. The impact on satisfaction is clear too. Those people who experience exceptional onboarding—a key part of a company's culture—are 2.6 times more likely to say they're "extremely satisfied" in their jobs.

Beyond corporate surveys and reports (fascinating and useful as they are), scientists have long been intrigued about exactly what makes some workplaces thrive.

One 2023 study published in Frontiers in Psychology surveyed 489 people across industries to assess how workplace culture impacts resilience during times of uncertainty. They found that organizations with strong, supportive cultures driven by HR see 50 percent higher resilience during challenging events.

Similarly, in a recent six-week study of 620 young professionals, Columbia Business School researchers discovered that organizations openly championing inclusive cultures didn't just attract more inclusive people—they created better-performing teams overall.

These insights highlight the incredible impact a strong culture can have, and the responsibility of making it universal and ingrained throughout the organization falls squarely on HR.

HR has the unique role of not only defining the culture but also ensuring that it becomes an integral part of everyday operations.

So, what—practically—is preventing HR from making excellent company culture ubiquitous and universal?

Team burnout:
The hidden cost
of modern work

Burnout is hitting people hard. According to a 2024 US-based survey from MyPerfectResume, **88 percent of team members** feel burned out, with one in five having weekly thoughts of quitting.

This isn't just draining morale but impacting people's wellbeing. A third of people report ongoing anxiety and stress, 30 percent say headaches are now a regular part of their week, and nearly a quarter struggle with getting a good night's sleep.

Burnout's impacts are multi-layered, as it's shifting how people behave at work. In the first half of 2024, 87 percent of professionals reported experiencing "work-related outbursts," ranging from cutting the day short to storming out of meetings. This creates what career expert Keith Spencer describes as **"a tense environment, which would likely lead to a decrease in collaboration."**

Glassdoor's Employee Confidence Index adds context to how burnout is playing out right now. In 2024, its data suggests that mentions of burnout in reviews are at their highest since Glassdoor started tracking, **a spike of 44 percent** compared to pre-pandemic levels.

As for the "why," many people point to management decisions—resource cuts, high targets, and thin staffing—as primary causes.

The message? Burnout doesn't just wear down team members—it erodes their faith in leadership and future direction while impacting workplace dynamics.

Reduced workforce engagement: From quiet quitting to rage applying

Team member disengagement has reached a nine-year high, with only **32 percent** of people actively engaged at work.

Social media has become a barometer for workplace sentiment, with terms like "quiet quitting," "bare minimum Mondays," and "grumpy stayers" reflecting deeper changes in how people view their relationship with work.

Another informative trend is the rise of "rage applying", with 90 percent of professionals having impulsively applied to new positions in the last six months. Essentially, a cry for more meaningful work.

These issues ripple outward, impacting the organization by slowing innovation, affecting customer service, and weakening resilience.

Forward-thinking companies understand that tackling these engagement challenges goes beyond quick fixes—it calls for a deeper reimagining of how to create environments where people genuinely want to contribute their best.

Lack of recognition and feedback: Breaking the motivation cycle

The connection between recognition and performance is clear, yet meaningful feedback often falls by the wayside during challenging times. When teams are stretched thin and managers are focused on deliverables, the act of acknowledging quality work is easily lost.

Studies show people who feel recognized are four times more likely to be engaged at work, with 67 percent reporting increased productivity. Team engagement, productivity, and performance are 14 percent higher in organizations with recognition programs than those without.

When recognition is woven into company culture, it creates a continuous loop of improved performance, where people who feel valued consistently demonstrate higher productivity and engagement.

Consistent feedback also helps people understand their progress and potential within the organization. Without it, even high performers can feel directionless, unsure if their efforts align with company goals or contribute to their professional growth.

Inconsistent communication: The trust gap

In times of uncertainty, clear communication becomes more critical than ever—and its absence more acutely felt.

Over 40 percent of people report that poor communication erodes their trust in leadership and their team. For remote team members, the effect is even stronger: 54 percent say it impacts their trust in leadership, and 52 percent say it weakens trust within their team.

On-site team members feel the impact too, though slightly less intensely, with 43 percent reporting reduced trust in leadership and 38 percent noting a drop in trust within their team.

Trends like "glossing"—where leaders downplay or ignore real challenges—only intensify the issue.

As Glassdoor's lead economist, Daniel Zhao, points out in an article by INC, **"If they feel like their leaders aren't giving them the resources to succeed, then they're going to blame that burnout on their leaders."**

When leaders do succeed in embracing transparency and starting open conversations, they don't just rebuild trust—they shift the narrative from uncertainty to collective problem-solving. This restores trust and energizes teams to face obstacles together.

# Difficulty personalizing support: One size fits none

Today's workforce is a blend of generations, life stages, and personal commitments, all shaping how people participate in work.

Each person brings a different set of challenges and needs, whether it's raising young children, caring for aging family members, managing mental health, or balancing work with personal passions.

It's a huge opportunity for businesses to benefit from diverse experiences if they can deliver the level of personalized workplace support that people are now prioritizing.

For instance, NFP's 2024 Annual US Benefits Trend Report reveals that nearly 60 percent of team members want access to nutrition and fitness programs, 58 percent are looking for mental wellness resources like meditation and stress management, 46 percent seek women's health services, and 44 percent need support with caregiving.

Personalized support isn't simply a "perk" though. When leaders actively engage with the complexities of their team's personal lives, they create an ecosystem where people feel valued as individuals, not just cogs in a machine.
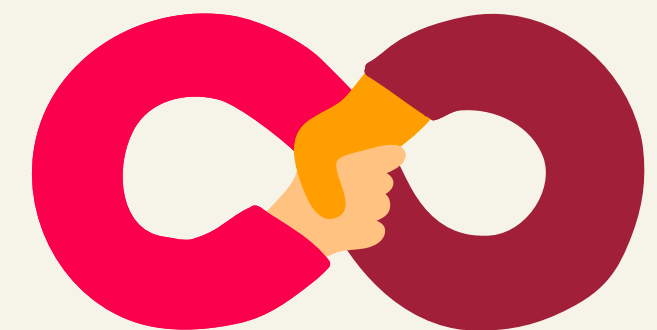
Managing remote and hybrid teams: The connection challenge

The shift to remote and hybrid work has changed how teams connect. Flexibility is a plus, but it can also leave people feeling adrift.

According to SHRM data, 70 percent of remote team members report feeling less connected to their company's goals—an issue that can drain motivation across distributed teams.

And despite popular belief, even Gen Z isn't fully remote-minded. HiBob's YGIT report found that 41 percent of Gen Z professionals feel more engaged in the office, and 37 percent worry about missing those real-time connections with colleagues.

The challenge runs deeper in global organizations, where teams span time zones and cultures. Without spontaneous chats or after-work socials, building meaningful connections requires deliberate effort.

This sense of distance affects everything from career visibility to professional development, making it essential for HR to ensure both remote and in-office teams feel equally valued and connected to the organization's mission.

Remote and hybrid teams can develop unique bonds that transcend physical distance by shifting focus toward personalized engagement, embracing creative communication methods, and finding new ways to celebrate achievements and encourage collaboration.

There's no doubt that with the right mindset and tools, HR can create an atmosphere where every team member feels equally invested in the company's success, as our customer case studies demonstrate time and time again.

Resources for building a resilient HR strategy

While the pressures on today's HR teams will forever evolve, the essentials behind building motivation stay the same: understanding what drives people, building trust, and creating work environments where meaning isn't just an afterthought.

The path you're on is a well-trodden one, so, luckily, there's no shortage of resources to help along the way.

From books that explore the psychology of engagement to podcasts that tackle HR's toughest questions, here's a list of top HR resources to help you better understand the challenges and build motivated, engaged, and productive teams:

Books

Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us by Daniel H. Pink

Daniel Pink breaks down what truly motivates team members beyond traditional incentives. His three pillars—autonomy, mastery, and purpose—highlight the motivational shifts necessary in today's workplaces. Through a mix of psychology and economic research, this book offers practical strategies for HR leaders to create environments where their teams feel empowered and valued.

The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups by Daniel Coyle

Drawing insights from Navy SEALs to the San Antonio Spurs, Daniel Coyle dissects what makes exceptional teams thrive. The Culture Code is a deep dive into the three critical elements of team success: safety, vulnerability, and purpose. HR leaders will find real-life examples and actionable advice—especially valuable for those working to foster an inclusive, cohesive culture.

Leaders Eat Last by Simon Sinek

Simon Sinek's exploration of leadership is essential for HR professionals aiming to build loyalty and resilience within teams. Packed with plenty of HR tips for motivating teams in tough times, Sinek calls on HR to cultivate safer environments that promote productivity and wellbeing, showing how doing so strengthens the whole organization.

Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity by Kim Scott

Kim Scott's Radical Candor offers a balanced approach to leadership that combines empathy with honest feedback. Scott's framework encourages leaders to "care personally" while "challenging directly"—a philosophy particularly relevant to HR leaders handling modern workplace challenges.

Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action by Simon Sinek

In this influential work, Sinek examines how leaders can drive change by focusing on their "Why"—the purpose, cause, or belief that fuels their efforts. This book invites HR professionals to help organizations clarify and communicate their core mission to inspire a sense of purpose and engagement across teams.

Podcasts

WorkLife with Adam Grant

Organizational psychologist Adam Grant walks listeners through the practices of some unconventional workplaces where they've figured out "how to make work not suck." Grant touches on topics like resilience, creativity, and team dynamics with industry experts, providing HR leaders with practical insights for building better work environments.

HR Happy Hour

One of the longest-running HR podcasts, HR Happy Hour covers recruitment, talent management, and wellbeing. Hosts interview industry experts on everything from remote work to diversity strategies. This podcast is a valuable source of timely insights for HR professionals—perfect for commute or coffee break listening.

Additional online resources

- **SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management)**: A go-to source for practical tools and insights, SHRM covers everything from templates for managing change and supporting team wellbeing to resources for building resilience in today's workplace.

- **Gallup Workplace**: If you're looking for data-driven insights on engagement, Gallup is a powerhouse. Reports like State of the Global Workplace shed light on what truly drives job satisfaction and productivity worldwide, offering HR leaders clear, actionable ideas.

- **MIT Sloan Management Review**: MIT Sloan Management Review brings research and insights from top minds in business. It's packed with information for HR professionals looking to enhance their management skills or innovate around culture and team engagement.

- **Journal of Organizational Behavior**: For those interested in the science behind motivation and engagement, this journal provides research-backed insights into what helps teams thrive and how leaders can cultivate stronger connections and performance.

- **Frontiers in Psychology: Organizational Psychology**: This leading journal offers accessible, research-backed insights into the cutting edge of workplace psychology, with regular publications from top business research institutions around the world.

- **Workforce Insights by PwC**: PwC's Workforce Insights explore the latest workplace trends, remote team management, and strategies for sustaining engagement, with reference to real-life case studies.

The path to team motivation starts now

HR leaders today are facing some of the toughest challenges in recent memory. When motivation wanes, the impacts reach every corner of the business—from performance and retention to customer satisfaction.

And let's face the facts—it doesn't look like the world is going to slow down or become less unpredictable anytime soon, which is why there's no better time to address these issues than the here and now.

As the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius once described, "The obstacle is the way." It's most constructive to view the challenges HR faces today not just as obstacles to simply move out of the way, but as opportunities to move onwards.

These moments force us to rethink how we engage with our teams and build a culture of resilience that acknowledges each individual's human and professional qualities.

The right systems, support, and strategies harness motivation as a force for growth and stability, empowering us to create workplaces that benefit everyone.

Ready to get started with some impactful HR strategies for employee engagement and motivation?

Check out our guide on how to keep your people motivated. It's full of practical, actionable strategies to help you build a more engaged, motivated workforce that is prepared to meet any challenge ahead.

Meet Bob

The right technology is essential.

Bob is designed and developed for the new world of work. On-site, hybrid work, and remote HR leaders can drive culture, two-way communication, engagement, performance, and compensation—all while streamlining and automating their own processes. All leaders and individual contributors in the organization can benefit from Bob by using it as a data source and report generation tool for planning and tracking.

Bob's innovative UI, automated processes, and integrations with leading third-party tools ease administrative tasks for everyone across the organization and make even the most mundane work tasks pleasant, intuitive, and engaging—and not just for HR admins. Bob puts people first with culture tools that connect co-located and remote employees to their fast-growing, global companies.
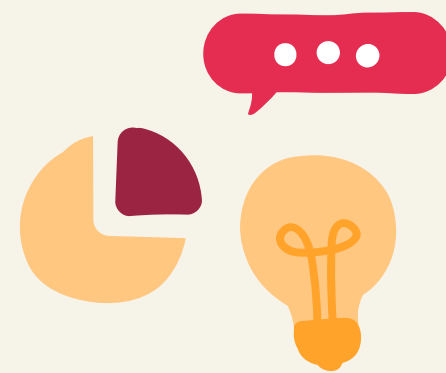
For managers

It provides access to data and insights to help them lead more effectively and streamline processes.

For HR

It automates many common processes, allows greater oversight and visibility of the business, and centralizes all people data in a secure, user-friendly environment.

For employees

It's the tools and information they need to connect, develop, and grow throughout their journey.

Now is the time to make smarter decisions when it comes to your people and organization

To learn more about HiBob and our data-driven tools, get in touch with us at contact@hibob.com

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