

# The heightened challenges of talent management

How higher education can  
adapt to swirling change



Shifts in the talent landscape have rendered traditional talent attraction, engagement and retention strategies outdated in isolation.

The COVID-19 pandemic with its new flexibility demands, “The Great Resignation” and a renewed emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are just some of the **significant shifts** altering workforce expectations today. In this austere environment, many organizations are **struggling to effectively adapt their recruitment,**

**engagement and retention strategies** to match new workforce expectations. However, by properly tailoring a talent management strategy to today’s workforce needs and combining it with **enabling tools and tactics**, higher education institutions can survive – even thrive – in a post-pandemic environment.



Colleges and universities are often considered timeless and unchanging. In reality, the higher education sector is experiencing change more rapidly than ever before.

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## Which talent disruptors have revolutionized the landscape?

### Higher education talent joining “The Great Resignation”

With COVID-19 leading millions of people to meaningfully reassess their personal and professional path, we have entered a period that many are calling “The Great Resignation.” According to a Personal Capital, in collaboration with The Harris Poll, poll from August 2021, two-thirds of Americans are currently “interested” in changing jobs, with that number only increasing for younger generations.<sup>1</sup>

These historic labor shortages are impacting all industries, including higher education. In fact, the top drivers of resignations in higher education include workplace safety, inadequate compensation packages, and burnout and under-appreciation, especially for individuals in staff-level positions.<sup>1</sup>

### Increased demand for flexibility placing pressure on universities to adopt a hybrid model

For many organizations, the pandemic necessitated a shift to remote work. Though initially hesitant, many faculty and administrative staff have come to appreciate remote working and even expect some form of it in the future. In fact, 35% of higher education employees in the EY Work Reimagined Survey said they would consider leaving their job if not given flexibility in working hours and location post-pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

This has created an imperative for institutions to offer flexibility or risk losing top talent. While universities are beginning to respond to these new expectations – a recent EY study of higher education chief business officers (CBOs) reported that, broadly, universities expect to have about 25% of their faculty and staff working remotely in the future – the question remains whether they are offering enough of it, and fast enough, to satisfy demand.<sup>3</sup>

### University DEI practices under greater scrutiny

DEI has been at the forefront of talent conversations, with organizations placing greater emphasis on DEI initiatives in 2020. However, focus on DEI has seen some decline in the past year.<sup>4</sup>

According to a study by BetterUp, a people-experience company, employees who don’t feel a sense of belonging within their organizations are 50% more likely to leave their organization than employees who feel represented and included.<sup>5</sup> Institutions that do not continue to prioritize DEI initiatives will risk losing top talent among both their employee and student populations.

**35%** of higher education employees said they would consider leaving their job if not given flexibility in hours and location<sup>2</sup>

**40%** of higher education employees feel their organizational culture has become worse since the start of COVID-19<sup>2</sup>

**66%** of the US workforce is interested in leaving their current job<sup>1</sup>

**79%** of higher education employees would like to see moderate to extensive changes in their benefits packages post-pandemic<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shahar Erez, Rebecca Ryan and Bayard Winthrop, “What’s Driving Millions Of Americans To Quit Their Jobs?” *National Public Radio*, 12 July 2021, ©2021 npr.

<sup>2</sup> *EY Work Reimagined Survey, March 2021*.

<sup>3</sup> *EY Higher Education Chief Business Officer (CBO) Study, March-April 2021*.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Heisler, “How DEI Efforts Lead to Better Employee Retention,” *American Marketing Association*, 12 October 2020, ©2021 American Marketing Association.

<sup>5</sup> “The value of belonging at work: New frontiers for inclusion,” *BetterUp website*, [https://f.hubspotusercontent40.net/hubfs/9253440/Asset%20PDFs/Promotions\\_Assets\\_Reports/BetterUp\\_BelongingReport\\_121720.pdf](https://f.hubspotusercontent40.net/hubfs/9253440/Asset%20PDFs/Promotions_Assets_Reports/BetterUp_BelongingReport_121720.pdf), accessed 15 December 2021.

# Getting ahead

## Talent management strategies to set your university up for success in a revolutionized talent marketplace

### Expand your talent pool to increase access to high-quality talent and innovation

New ways of working provide universities with exceptional opportunities to expand their talent pools. Whereas in the past most faculty and staff have had to reside in the local area, universities are increasingly able to recruit and attract talent from diverse geographic markets without forcing relocation, due in part to expanded online course offerings and new remote technologies.

Organizations re-assessing their talent management strategy must consider how they can leverage new and non-traditional talent pools to recruit diverse talent, increase engagement and innovation and reduce recruiting costs.

### Double down on a connected, inclusive culture in a hybrid workforce model

Culture is essential to employee engagement and retention. However, having a mix of remote and in-person colleagues can create a disconnect. In the recent EY Work Reimagined Study, 40% of respondents in the higher education sector said they believe their workplace culture has become worse since the start of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Organizations must double down on their culture and take a “humans at center” approach to their post-pandemic operating model to help safeguard that they remain employers of choice.<sup>6</sup> For instance, by allowing regular employee feedback to shape culture transformation efforts, institutions can enable their employees to feel more engaged, valued and committed to the university.

Universities can also strengthen their culture through DEI efforts. In addition to hiring diverse talent, institutions must develop initiatives that drive inclusion – an imperative that is even more critical in a virtual or hybrid environment. As higher education develops diversity frameworks and processes in tandem, they will help promote the longevity and adoption of their DEI efforts.

### Shape benefits packages to align with new ways of working

According to the recent EY Work Reimagined Study, 79% of employees would like to see “moderate to extensive” changes to their benefits packages in a post-COVID-19 era.<sup>2</sup> Benefits can be both financial and non-financial (e.g., flexible schedules or work locations) in nature.

Colleges and universities can reimagine benefits packages for the changing world and adopt leading practices to increase retention.<sup>7</sup> For instance, institutions can increase benefits that enhance employee wellness and productivity, which can take the form of health and fitness reimbursements, free mental health counseling sessions, expanded paid time off (PTO), increased hazard pay and flexible work arrangements.<sup>8</sup> While some benefits will require greater short-term cost, the long-term return on investment (ROI) can be worth the cost.

### Reimagine your performance management to keep pace with new ways of working

In the shift to a virtual world, many employees feel pressure to always be online, immediately reply to emails and maintain an appearance of productivity, which has led to increased rates of burnout, exhaustion and even turnover. The introduction of hybrid models presents an opportunity to extend greater trust to employees by reevaluating how we define “performance” and what the organization values from its employees’ contributions, leading to greater productivity.

Organizations must redefine their performance metrics and key performance indicators (KPIs) to align with the new ways of working. Specifically, organizations can consider placing more emphasis on work impact rather than time spent working.

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The disruption has been slow, making it too easy for many in higher education to argue that it wasn’t happening. Now, COVID-19 is accelerating the change at breathtaking speed ... we will need to adapt to these mega trends in ways that serve students well, continue to offer high-quality jobs to our faculty and staff and contribute to the communities that depend on us.<sup>9</sup>

**Adam Weinberg, Denison University President**

<sup>6</sup> EY Humans at Center approach.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Schlossberg, “This is why your hourly workers aren’t coming back,” *Fast Company*, 1 September 2021, ©2021 Mansueto Ventures, LLC.

<sup>8</sup> “2021 Future of Benefits Study: Employee Benefits Trends and Silver Linings of the Pandemic,” *The Hartford website*, www.thehartford.com/employee-benefits/employers/insights/future-of-benefits-2021, accessed 15 December 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Weinberg, “5 ways COVID-19 will change higher education forever, and how colleges can adapt,” *USA Today*, 4 August 2020, ©USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Satellite Information Network, LLC.

# Questions to consider

- ▶ How do I better understand workforce expectations so my strategy aligns?
- ▶ Which factors have led to increased attrition in my organization?
- ▶ How can we offer our employees better flexibility and career progression?
- ▶ Which initiatives should my institution establish to champion and embed DEI?
- ▶ How can we expand our talent pools?
- ▶ How do we retain or improve our culture despite a hybrid model scenario?
- ▶ How can workforce benefits (i.e., financial and non-financial) match current demands?
- ▶ How do we differentiate ourselves from talent competitors?

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