



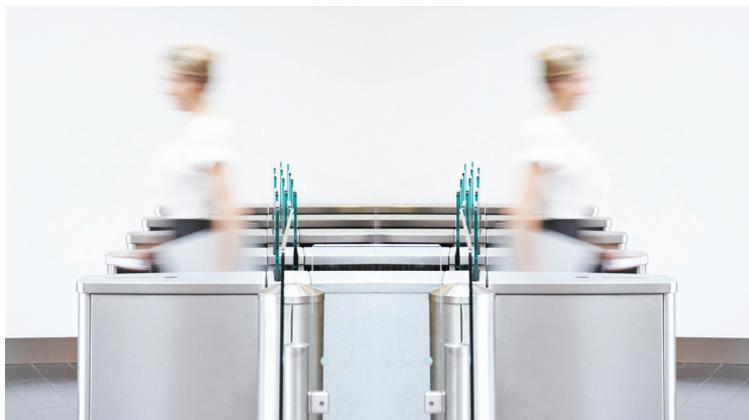
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The Great Comeback

“There is a kind of magicness about going far away and then coming back all changed.” —Kate Douglas Wiggin

I’ll admit it. I’ve never left a job without eventually regretting it, at least at some point. Why did I opt to move into entirely new surroundings when my old ones were so familiar? The new boss—why is he correcting my emails? My colleagues, they seem like strangers to me, aliens really.

I say all this because in those dark moments, I gave some serious thought to calling up my old boss to ask



“2022 may well be the year of the boomerang employees.”

for my job back. Once, I gave in to that weakness and begged my old firm to take me back—when I was all of one week into the new gig. Apparently they didn’t give it much thought, because I never heard from them.

That was back in the day, before the pandemic. You left firms, and before you even got a chance to say goodbye, someone from security had packed up your boxes. Emails were shut off in less time than it took to write

resignation letters. And the thought of taking you back? Forget it. According to some surveys, only 15 percent of people who left jobs in those days ever returned. But mark my words: 2022 may be well the year of the boomerang employees!

It stands to reason. Last year, at the height of the so-called Great Resignation, companies experienced more than 40 million “incidents” of workers quitting their jobs, including those who quit one job and then another. It is, no matter how you look at it, an astounding number, one that has left a lot HR officials and managers dumbfounded. Where did everyone go? Off to hang out their own shingle and start a business? Or maybe to take a long personal sabbatical? Or—most likely—to move to a competitor that paid more?

In some ways, it doesn’t matter. What does matter is that the odds are pretty good that a decent number will want to come back, and may create some opportunities for firms. According to a widely cited study out of Cornell University, companies that went with the “in with the old” strategy enjoyed a lot of success. People who came back knew their company culture cold, so they could navigate informal work procedures and handle nuanced worker relationships. Those who came back, the study says, were great managers who could empathize with their employees. They also worked well with company veterans and their own bosses. In short, they possessed all the skills that most experts believe are critical in today’s post-pandemic business world.

True, many who left recently are earning more—typically, that’s why they left. But boomerangers also can’t help but return wiser from their experience outside the firm, having learned the ways other firms handle things. All of which suggests that smart firms are not only rehiring ghosts from the past but also keeping an eye out for those who may want to come back. And the dance shouldn’t be remotely as awkward as it once was, given the benefits to both sides and the frequency of job switching these days.

Considering how it started, nothing about 2022 is going to be easy. COVID variants remain a serious threat. Labor shortages are bad. And supply chains are so comically behind that you expect to see a sketch about them on *Saturday Night Live*. Organizations need no-brainer moves. In my mind, poking around for people who left is one obvious, if not magical, solution. ▀

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