

Santa Clara County Social Services Agency: SSA Voice - An Approach to Employee Engagement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented effect on the workforce with unintended consequences, including a record number of worker resignations from their places of employment across the nation. Bay Area public agencies are not immune from experiencing high vacancies due to this trend. As agencies work to decrease their vacancy rates, swift action is needed to reduce further staff churn and job abandonment. One way to improve employee retention is through

transformative and innovative employee engagement. Santa Clara County's Social Services Agency (SSA) has taken a unique approach to advance and enhance employee engagement, through a department-wide live videocast (SSA Voice). Implementation of Santa Clara SSA Voice, or a similar platform, could provide Solano County and other Bay Area public organizations with valuable insight and direct connection with staff to measure and positively influence employee engagement and job retention.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many workers to reevaluate what they most desire from both an employer and from life in general, which has created record churn in the U.S. labor market. Widespread job losses and resignations in the early months of the pandemic led to a smaller job market in 2021. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 47.8 million Americans voluntarily quit their jobs. The nation's resignation or "quit rate" reached record highs in 2021, and that trend continues well into 2022. Researchers have determined that many of the contributing factors fueling the current "Great Resignation" fall under the umbrella of employee engagement. As counties throughout the San Francisco Bay Area experience unusually high vacancy rates, this study aims to demonstrate how proactive organizational changes strategically embedded into county structure and technological business processes can intentionally improve the employee experience through engagement.

Who's Resigning?

Resignation is typically defined as a voluntary separation from an employer, which has been initiated by the employee. According to the Labor Department, resignations serve as a measure of the workforce's willingness or ability to leave jobs. Between 2020 and 2021, resignation rates fell for those in the 60-70 age group. Employees aged 25-30 and 45+

have experienced higher resignation rates while employees between the ages of 30-45 maintain the greatest rise in resignation rates (increasing by more than 20%). Although these numbers reflect the entire workforce, different generational age groups show different trends. One survey by The Harris Poll on behalf of Personal Capital found that 91% of Generation Z (born between 1997-2012) and 78% of Millennials (born between 1981-1996) are open to changing employers. This information is significant given these two groups make up the majority of current employees and will remain the majority for a critical period to come. These numbers disrupt the traditional approach that Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964) and Generation X (born between 1965-1980) have had to employment, which yielded more dedicated time and longevity to employers.

Why Resign?

Rising Costs (e.g., housing, gas, entertainment) have become a top contending factor for workers seeking increased wages to keep up with surging prices due to inflation. However, research also points to other vital reasons why various groups are resigning. Studies suggest similar trends exist for both Gen Z and Millennials, who typically search for employment that aligns with their values, beliefs, and vision. They are more likely to leave "traditional" employers for higher "quality" employers. In this case, "quality" is defined as organizations that promote increased employer flexibility, engaged

working environments, and greater employee recognition to name a few of the more common descriptors. These areas all align with the employee experience and can be addressed through employee engagement. It is in an employer's best interest to reduce resignations and worker abandonment since replacing an experienced employee can cost an organization up to twice the employee's annual salary through recruitment, hiring, and training of someone new.

What Can Be Done?

According to Gallup, a leader in research and management consulting, providing clear and frequent communication from leadership is a primary way organizations can boost employee engagement. Since employer flexibility, engaged environments, and employee recognition are areas of greatest interest, employers must determine what the ideal version of these concepts looks like through the employee's eyes. Foretelling or guessing what employees from varied generational groups want and desire without engaging with them is no longer a viable option. So, how can an organization efficiently and effectively implement frequent leadership communication while simultaneously gauging and learning their employee's perspectives? Santa Clara County's SSA may have the right approach to this question through its SSA Voice Videocast.

Santa Clara's SSA assembled a cross-county multi-disciplinary team to co-create, invest, collaborate, and support ideas from all relevant stakeholders and classifications.

The result of this approach and the barriers of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the creation of the SSA Voice; a videocast or stream by which information is shared within the departments in SSA to all employees. This videocast is run by varying levels of employees including line workers, supervisors, management, and executive classifications. Although different classifications may partake in the presentation, the SSA Executive Leadership utilizes the SSA Voice as an instrument to communicate important information frequently and consistently. Robert Menicocci, Director of the County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency, consistently participates in the SSA Voice, showcasing a commitment to improving the employee engagement experience.

The SSA Voice consists of five engagement opportunities: pre-submitted questions, live questions, post surveys, polling questions, and a word cloud interaction provided through the Menti software application. It is through these avenues that the participant audience can engage and share their experiences, perspectives, and ideas. This information can then be used by the employer to make improvements to the employee experience, such as SSA's revamp of its mentoring program. Through feedback, SSA was able to pilot and improve its mentoring program, adding two elements that were identified by participants as essential for the success of mentees participating in the program.

The most instrumental piece in the success and creation of the SSA Voice is the

dedicated staff. This team consists of repurposed positions that were re-dedicated for employee engagement and well-being. This dedication of staff showcased SSA's commitment to its employee's experience and allowed for designated staff to adequately address concerns and needs, and provide resources as necessary.

The SSA Voice videocast has a live audience average of 350 participants and 125 recorded views out of a total of about 2600 staff, yielding 18.3% staff interaction. According to Santa Clara's Employee Engagement and Well-being Survey, 96% of staff are aware of SSA Voice and 69% of staff have participated. These numbers are indicative of the staff's awareness of this opportunity and its emergence as a major change agent for employee engagement. SSA Voice is a platform created especially for them, allowing them to participate and have their voices heard, and thereby reducing their desire for participation in the Great Resignation.

Conclusion

To support and promote employee retention, and more importantly, to gain a genuine understanding of what employees think, feel, and want in real-time, it is my strong recommendation that Solano County and surrounding Bay area counties actively commit to improving overall employee engagement. I would suggest one proven way to achieve this is by following the trail which has been blazed by Santa Clara County's SSA; implementation of staff positions that are dedicated to employee

engagement and well-being, in conjunction with a live videocast or streaming platform to be used to deliver clear and frequent communication from leadership and provide engagement opportunities for staff. Yes, additional staffing is costly and may be difficult to support in times of budget challenges, however, this can be a cost-effective remedy for both employee recruitment and retention efforts. County agencies are specifically designed to work on behalf of the federal and state governments to oversee the needs of those who are disenfranchised. It takes a special kind of individual to desire the type of work county employees provide. As we implore our employees to meet the needs of our customers (our community), as leaders we must do the same. When it comes to meeting our employees where they are, how can we change what we don't acknowledge? How can we acknowledge what we don't know? How can we know if we don't ask? And how can we ask if we don't engage?

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