

Employee resignation study in Fairfax County

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SUMMARY

The Great Resignation is an economic trend in which employees have voluntarily resigned from their jobs *en masse*. Increasing resignations have created hardships for companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article examines the presence of the Great Resignation in Fairfax County, Virginia, the consequences of this phenomenon, and possible solutions that local businesses can adopt to minimize the impact of resignations. We hypothesized that by adding benefits such as hybrid work options and healthcare, local companies can fight increasing resignation rates. We collected and analyzed two types of data to verify the hypothesis. The first type was statistical data published by US federal and local governments. The second type was survey data. We created a ten-question survey (the Fairfax Resignation Survey) and sent it to 2,000 employees in Fairfax County. The questions covered the demography of survey respondents, employee turnover status, impact of increasing resignations, and potential solutions to improve the situation. Based on the survey responses and a comprehensive analysis of statistical data and related studies, we concluded that adding additional benefits is critical for companies to retain talent and restrain the growing resignation rate.

INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the United States, so did an emerging trend of quitting unsatisfactory jobs. A time coined the “Great Resignation” by While Klotz, a record number of Americans have quit their jobs voluntarily since the spring of 2021 (1). This loss of workers has placed an immense strain on employers and companies nationwide, altering the job market and economy (1). Many past studies have pinpointed the causes of the pandemic triggering increased job quit rates: Employees now have more time to think about their careers, a fear of being infected by COVID-19, and heightened stress (2).

Despite this evidence, many have doubted such a trend is present in the US, much less as a direct result of the pandemic. Data collected by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) monthly job openings and labor turnover survey diminishes these doubts (3). The Great Resignation is very much present. Among all metrics the survey collects, the quit rate is most relevant to the analysis of number of resignations, as it represents the percentage of employees who left their jobs voluntarily, excluding retirement or transfers to other locations.

People work for financial security, personal growth, and value creation (4). Offering higher compensation helps retain employees, but it may not be feasible for employers who have suffered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Business News Daily* indicates that the top way local businesses can dampen the detriments of rising resignations is to “prioritize work-life balance” (5).

Whereas economists and researchers alike have studied the Great Resignation’s causes and effects on the US economy, no profound research has been performed on the Great Resignation’s presence or effect specifically on Fairfax County, Virginia and what local companies can do to mitigate the impacts. The purpose of this study was to determine if the Great Resignation is present in Fairfax County, Virginia, to understand the consequences of this phenomenon, and to examine possible solutions to minimize the negative impacts on local businesses.

We hypothesized that adding additional benefits such as hybrid work options and healthcare benefits may help companies fight increasing resignation rates in Fairfax County because it aids in achieving a better work-life balance. To verify our hypothesis, we first determined whether the resignation rate is indeed increasing in Fairfax County. Second, we investigated the impacts and causes of this trend. Finally, we demonstrated that adding additional benefits is an effective approach to combatting this trend. In this study, we analyzed both public data and individual survey results to address our hypothesis. We found that when faced with difficulty hiring and retaining talent, smaller businesses could implement “cost-free” practices such as providing flexible work options and a welcoming company culture. These results are crucial to preventing local businesses from losing vital resources that grow their company.

RESULTS

We reviewed public data from the US government and Fairfax County, along with 106 survey responses collected through SurveyMonkey, to identify the possible presence of the Great Resignation in Fairfax County, its consequences, and innovative employee retention strategies.

The Great Resignation is present in Fairfax County but not as high as the overall level in the US

The US BLS supplied explicit information on the country’s job quit rate, highlighting the presence of the Great Resignation in the US (3). Job quit rates from March 2021 to March 2022 were higher compared to average rates in historical years (Figure 1). More precisely, 2021 quit rates rose from 2.4% to 3.0% while past years’ quit rates maintained within the 1.4% to 2.4% boundary. This suggested a definite rise in resignations since the start of the pandemic.

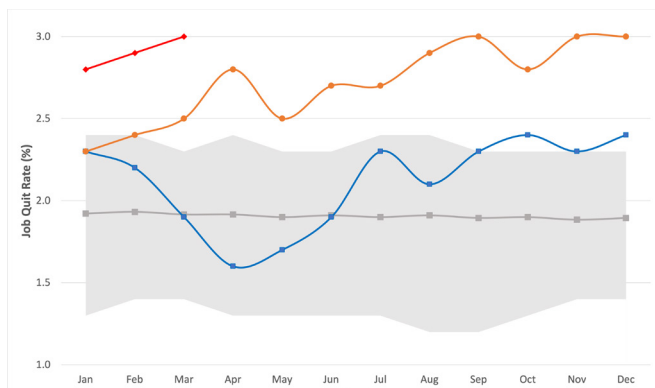


Figure 1: Seasonally adjusted job quit rate in the US. Line graph showing US job quit rate for each month in 2020 (blue), 2021 (orange), and 2022 (red). The average US job quit rate in the same month across 2001–2019 is also shown (grey). Area graph showing a range of job quit rates from January 2001 to December 2019 (gray shading). The numbers are sourced from the BLS’s Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey in the Total Nonfarm category (3). The data was seasonally adjusted by BLS to eliminate the effect of seasonal and calendar influences.

Fairfax County had no public data available on its job quit rate. The only relevant statistic available in Fairfax County was its unemployment rate. However, there was a strong negative correlation between the job quit rate and unemployment rate in the US. A regression analysis produced an R^2 value of 83.3% (Figure 2A). Using the regression formula in Figure 2A, we generated an estimated Fairfax County job quit rate curve (Figure 2B). From the curve, we concluded that the job quit rate in Fairfax County had also increased dramatically since April 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic started. However, unlike the US overall curve, in which the job quit rate reached a number far higher than that of the previous 20 years, the job quit rate of Fairfax County did not exceed the peak before the pandemic.

The trend of rising resignations is also supported by the results from the Fairfax Resignation Survey, a survey we created to analyze Fairfax County businesses and employee trends. We found that 58% of respondents said their company’s voluntary turnover rate increased during the pandemic, while only 6% reported a decrease (Figure 3A). In the near future, 39% of respondents believed that the situation would get worse, 49% anticipated no change, and only 12% expected turnover rates to improve (Figure 3B).

Growing resignations in Fairfax County have increased the burden on remaining employees and decreased business efficiency

The impacts of COVID-19 on companies of different sizes varies. The US’s overall job quit rate by company size over the past 20 years showed smaller businesses facing higher quit rates (Figure 4). The job quit rate by company size in Fairfax County, on the other hand, showed perceived higher quit rates across multiple company sizes (Figure 5A). Fairfax companies experiencing the highest increased turnover rates were those with 250–999 employees (Figure 5A). This reflects the overall situation in the US: companies with 250–999 employees had a more perceivable increase of voluntary quit rates since April 2020 than companies with 1–9 employees and companies with more than 1000 employees (Figure 4).

We observed that most large businesses whose survey responses indicated increased turnover are in the Financial Activities sector (Table 1). Although most survey respondents were not sure which gender has had the higher turnover rate in the past two years, 23% of respondents reported that females have higher turnover rates while 14% reported that males do (Figure 5B).

Outflow of employees is one side of the story. Hiring employees is another. Among the 106 survey responses, 56% reported difficulties in hiring new employees with only 23% of businesses disagreeing with that statement (Figure 6A).

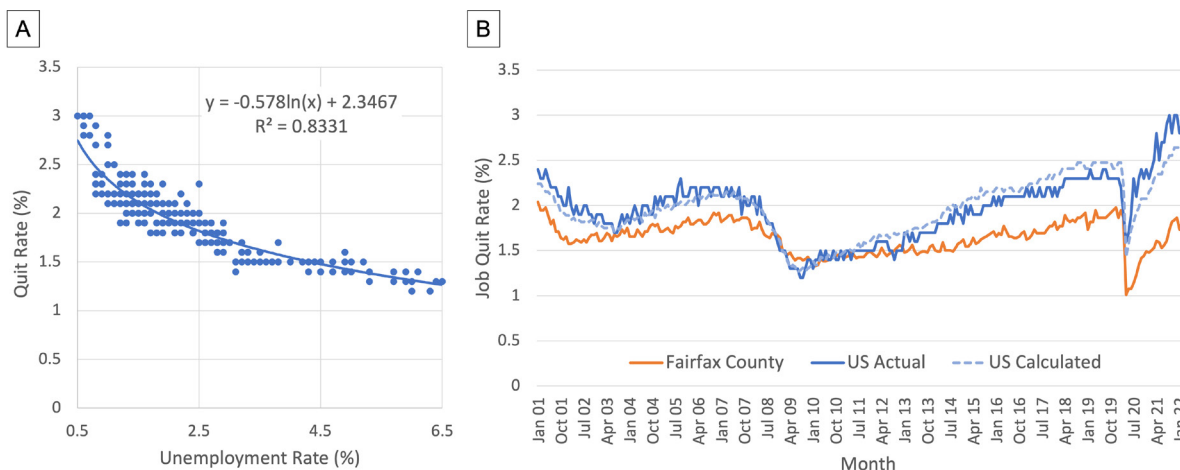


Figure 2: Correlation between job quit rate and unemployment rate and job quit rate in the US and in Fairfax County. (A) Scatter chart with a trend line and a regression formula showing correlation between US job quit rate versus unemployment rate. Monthly unemployment rate in the US from January 2001 to March 2022 and monthly job quit rate in the same period are regressed in Excel to generate the logarithmic regression formula and the trend line. (B) Line graph showing calculated monthly job quit rate in Fairfax County (orange), actual job quit rate in the US (blue), and calculated job quit rate in the US based on actual unemployment rate (light blue dashed). Monthly actual job quit rate from January 2001 to March 2022 in the US is from the BLS’s Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey while the job quit rate in Fairfax County and US calculated job quit rate are generated with the regression formula in Figure 2A. The monthly unemployment rate from January 2001 to March 2022 in Fairfax County is from the Federal Reserve Economics Data provided by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

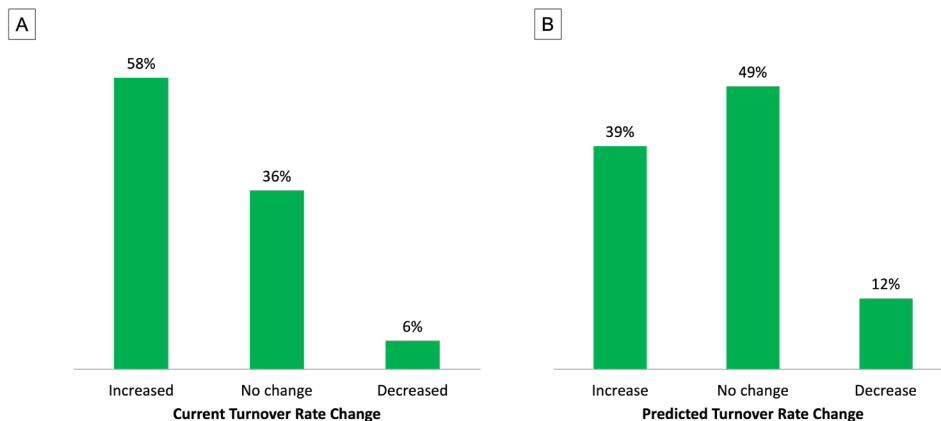


Figure 3: Perceived turnover from The Fairfax Resignation Survey. Bar graphs showing the percentage of survey responses regarding (A) current voluntary turnover rate compared with that of before the pandemic and (B) predicted turnover change over the next few months. Survey results were collected with SurveyMonkey and inserted into an Excel spreadsheet to create the bar charts. n=106.

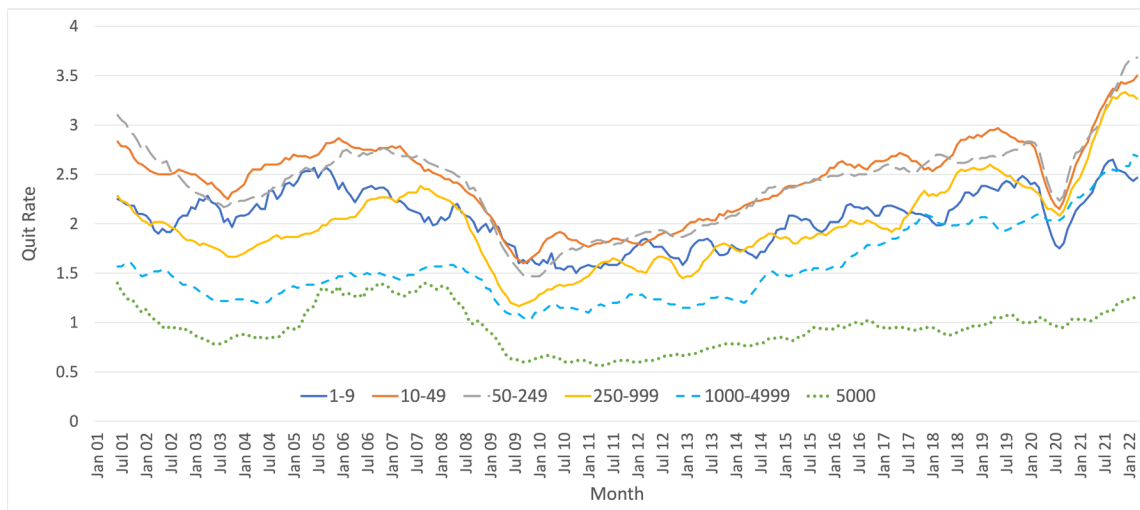


Figure 4: US job quit rate by company size (number of employees). Line chart showing a revolving 6-month average job quit rate by company size: companies with 1–9 employees (blue solid), 10–49 employees (orange solid), 50–249 employees (grey long dashed), 250–999 employees (yellow solid), 1000–4999 employees (light blue dashed), and 5000 or more employees (green dotted). Monthly job quit rate from January 2001 to March 2022 in the US is from the BLS’s Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (3).

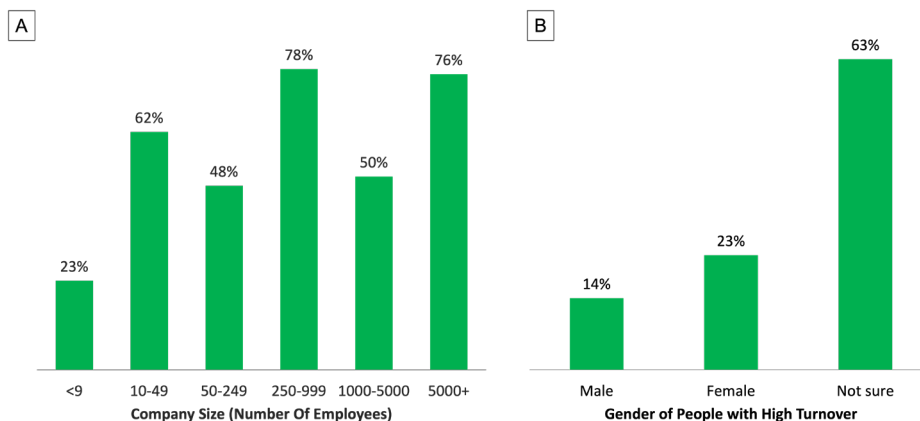


Figure 5: The Fairfax Resignation Survey results based on company size and gender of people with high turnovers. (A) Bar graph showing the percentage of survey responses regarding people reporting increased turnover by company size. (B) Bar graph displaying higher turnover rate by gender. Survey results were collected with SurveyMonkey and inserted into an Excel spreadsheet to create the bar charts. n=106.

Industry	Responses From Large Companies	Responses of Increased Turnover from Large Companies	Total Responses	Responses of Increased Turnover
Accommodation	0	0	1	1
Education	2	1	12	6
Professional services	6	4	18	9
Health services	1	1	10	5
Other services	1	0	11	7
Government	8	4	16	9
Financial Activities	11	11	14	12
Information	4	4	12	7
Entertainment	0	0	2	1
Manufacturing	0	0	5	2
Wholesale	0	0	1	0
Construction	0	0	1	0
Retail	0	0	2	2
Transportation and utilities	1	1	1	1
Total	34	26	106	62

Table 1: Number of responses to the Fairfax Resignation Survey in different industries. The Industry information is from survey respondents' answer to the first question of the Survey. The company size information is from survey respondents' answer to the second question. The number of responses with increased turnover is from survey respondents' answer to the fourth question. n=106.

The Fairfax Resignation Survey also investigated how rising job quit rates have altered Fairfax County businesses. “More burden on employees left” was found to be the number one impact as perceived by remaining employees. That being said, employees see a few benefits of the resignations, including “increased pay” (45%), “remote work options” (37%), and “increased flexibility” (22%) (Figure 6B).

Another positive uncovered by the Fairfax Resignation Survey was that while the worst impact on a company was “closure of business or reduction of business hours,” only 7% of respondents selected that option, indicating that this is not a top issue in Fairfax County (Figure 6B). However, two respondents did note that customer services have deteriorated, creating new challenges for businesses to meet customer requests.

Local companies can combat high turnover rates by providing additional benefits and improving company culture and work schedules

After confirming the presence and impact of escalating job quit rates in Fairfax County, we next sought to determine if adding job benefits, such as flexible work options or healthcare benefits, would help businesses through these unprecedented times. In order to locate the most promising solutions, we needed to understand why more people are resigning in Fairfax County.

Analyzing the Fairfax Resignation Survey and a Glassdoor article on the top ten reasons why employees resign uncovered a comparison between pre-pandemic and post-pandemic times (6). Compared to common reasons people resigned before COVID-19 summarized by the Glassdoor team, such as “feel underappreciated,” “lack of proper compensation and communication,” and “insufficient work-life balance,” the Fairfax Resignation Survey disclosed several unique reasons caused directly by the pandemic (Table 2). These included

“family pressure/childcare issues”, “fear of contracting COVID-19”, and “no incentive to work because of government benefits”. Yet those reasons were not at the top of the list, insinuating that the pandemic was not the primary reason for climbing quit rates or that there could be secondary results of the pandemic that resulted in resignations. However, it could still be the trigger. To prevent the spread of the virus, many companies changed their working policy and moved 42% of the US labor force home; 33% were not working at all in May 2020 (7). Rather than pandemic-related reasons causing recent turnovers, the Fairfax Resignation Survey indicated that the most common reason was “seeking better compensation/benefits”.

While recognizing the root causes of worker resignations shed light on ways to mitigate rising job quit rates, the Fairfax Resignation Survey responses also clarified possible solutions. The survey verified three solutions: increasing pay (80%), offering flexible work options (60%), and expanding other benefits (24%) (Figure 6C). Finally, the Fairfax Resignation Survey respondents listed an expectation for a change in office culture and leadership, suggesting that bosses should care more about their workers.

Overall, our study indicates that pandemic-related issues—such as family pressure or fear of contracting COVID-19—contributed to increased resignations, and increasing pay or expanding other benefits, offering flexible work options, and improving company culture are solutions to retaining employees.

DISCUSSION

To determine if the Great Resignation was present in Fairfax County, we first examined Fairfax County's statistical data. Fairfax County published statistical data of its unemployment rate but not its job quit rate. The US unemployment rate is a great predictor to estimate the job quit rate as 83.3% of the

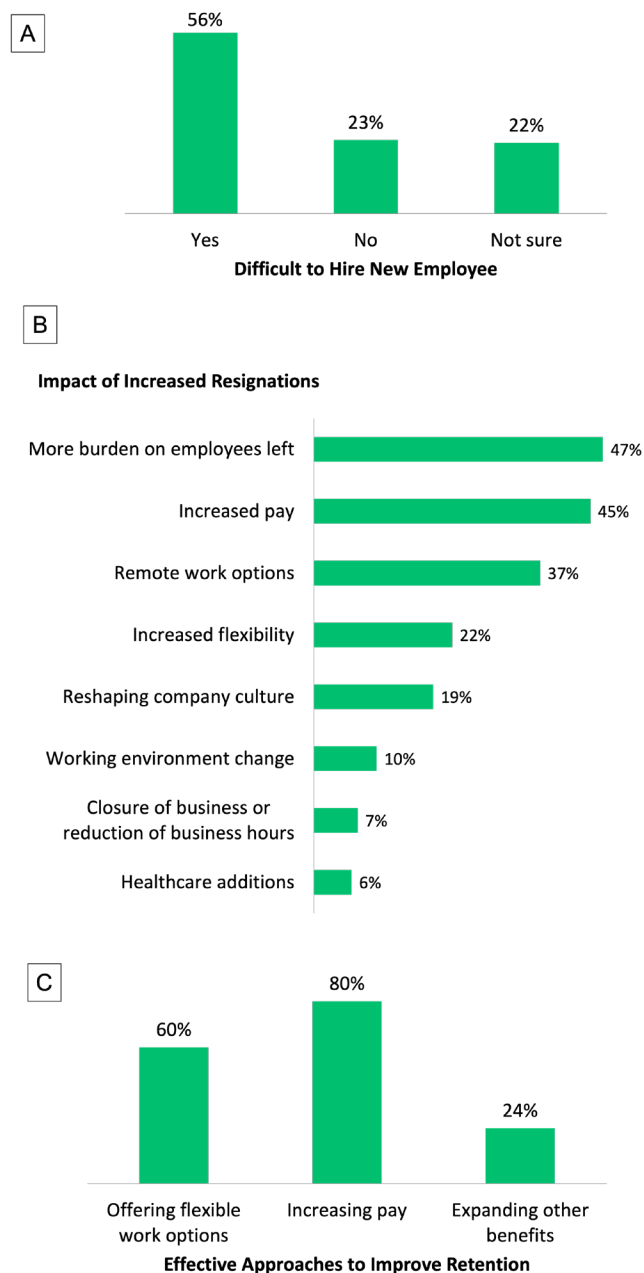


Figure 6: The Fairfax Resignation Survey results on hiring difficulty, impact of resignations, and retention strategies. Bar graphs showing the percentage of survey responses regarding (A) difficulty of hiring new employees, (B) impacts of the resignations, and (C) effective approaches to improving retention rates. Survey results were collected with SurveyMonkey and inserted into an Excel spreadsheet to generate the bar charts. Survey respondents could select multiple answers in (B) and (C). n=106.

variation (R^2) can be explained by the unemployment rate. Therefore, we can conclude that the higher the unemployment rate, the lower the job quit rate.

There was a sharp drop in the job quit rate before it increased in March 2020. During the sharp drop period in March, right as COVID-19 began spreading, very few people at first dared to quit their jobs because they were fearful of their financial security. Many industries such as transportation,

restaurant, and entertainment were hit dramatically (8). Many businesses in those industries had to lay off or furlough employees (8).

When directing attention to larger companies with 5000 or more employees, we spotted a difference between Fairfax County and the US. The US job quit rate for companies with 5000 or more employees is relatively stable. On the other hand, the Fairfax Resignation Survey result named companies of this size as the second highest to experience an increased turnover rate during the pandemic (Figure 5A). This is likely caused by Fairfax County's concentration in specific industries.

Turning to specific industry sectors, we observed that most survey responses for increased turnover from large businesses were in the Financial Activities sector (Table 1). The anonymity of the Fairfax Resignation Survey questions prevented examination of the specific businesses who reported increased turnover rates, but additional research spotlighted Freddie Mac, Capital One, and KPMG as large financial companies in Fairfax County. For this study's purposes, these companies served as a representation of Fairfax County's overall turnover trend. Freddie Mac's 2021 annual report disclosed a higher turnover rate than historical rates (9). Capital One has recognized the impact of large turnover on its company and conducted a study with Morning Consult (10). KPMG's chair and CEO, Paul Knopp, said in October 2021 that KPMG's voluntary turnover since the start of the pandemic was up 10.2% compared to pre-pandemic times (11). We therefore concluded that from the data available, the Financial Activities sector in Fairfax is experiencing a high turnover rate.

More females quit during the pandemic wave than males (12). This may be attributed to the changes caused by the pandemic in families and households. The high infection rate of COVID-19 closed schools, forcing many parents to stay home to look after their children. Additionally, the overall measures taken by the federal government potentially made it easier for parents to quit their jobs if their employers required them to assume in-person work (13). According to a study by the job platform FlexJobs, 68% of women prefer remote work after the pandemic compared with 57% of men (14). Additionally, 80% of women prioritize remote work as a top job benefit compared with 69% of men (14).

Hiring new employees became another challenge during the pandemic. This builds on an already dire situation for employers. With the onslaught of increased resignations, employers not only had to deal with higher turnover rates, driving them to devise new ways to retain talent, but they also had more difficulty hiring replacements (2). In general terms, this increased costs for local businesses as time and resources were placed into rebuilding a team, rather than executing the company's business goals (2).

The Fairfax Resignation Survey shows that "more burden on employees left" is the number one impact of increased resignation. Explanations were given for this choice. For instance, one survey respondent said that although his company at the start of the pandemic wanted to ease stress, they ultimately were forced to undergo a digital transformation and transitioned into the agile methodology—a way to break up a project into various pieces for more efficient completion. These new changes likely amplified the stress placed on the employees as they had to adapt from their normal routine.

Ranking	Why are workers resigning now?	Percent of Responses
1	Seeking better compensation/benefits (pay, healthcare, etc.)	59%
2	Hot job market	40%
3	Desire for a career change	24%
4	Feeling stressed or burnt out	24%
5	Remote working not allowed/available	22%
6	Family pressure/childcare issues	18%
7	Fear of contracting COVID-19 or other health issue	18%
8	No incentive to work because of government benefits	13%
9	Relocation	8%
10	Feeling a lack of belonging in work environment	6%
11	Retirement	2%

Table 2: Reasons why people are resigning now in Fairfax County. Answers to question 8 of the Fairfax Resignation Survey (n=106).

Additionally, when working at home, the working hours were increased substantially because of the technological convenience of digital work (15). Further, we inferred that “more burden on employees left” was the biggest impact because the pandemic gave workers the opportunity to reflect on their personal values and priorities—including job satisfaction (2). During this time, many workers reevaluated the fulfillment they received from their jobs. Quit rates accelerated as more and more employees realized the number of avenues their career exploration could lead them down (1).

Approaches for local companies to combat high turnover rates include “increasing pay” as pay is a motivator for people to work. It is important to distinguish that despite per capita personal income in Fairfax County being higher than the US average, local businesses may still want to consider increasing salaries.

If increasing pay is not feasible, employers should consider providing flexible work arrangements, including but not limited to remote work options, hybrid work options, and flexible hours. In fact, a Northern Virginia Workforce study finds that “telework/remote work options” and “flexible scheduling for salaried workers” are two of the most successful ways to retain talented employees (16). Prior research has also indicated that employees are less likely to resign when they are given flexible work schedules (17).

For businesses that cannot support remote work, additional benefits could be provided to retain workers. The Fairfax Resignation Survey respondents commented on benefits including better PTO policy, wellness programs, 401K plans, etc. Other options to retain talented employees, as disclosed by The Northern Virginia Workforce study, include “generous healthcare benefits” and “generous vacation and sick time benefits” (16). However, these benefits would also cost the company money, so these options are likely subject to similar limitations as increasing compensation.

Similar research on the reasons for recent turnovers have been done in this area. Their conclusions correlate with the Fairfax Resignation Survey results, promoting the idea that proposed solutions to address the greater numbers of resignations in Fairfax should aim to alleviate the overlapping causes for quitting. For example, the Pew Research Center conducted an analysis on 6,627 people in the US, including

965 people who quit their job last year, to better understand the experiences of Americans who quit a job in 2021 (18). They found that low pay, a lack of opportunities for advancement, and feeling disrespected at work were the top reasons why Americans quit their jobs in the past year (18). In a similar vein, FlexJobs surveyed 2,202 people between February 23, 2022, and March 7, 2022, and found that the two main reasons people quit their jobs were low salary (59%) and poor management (56%) (19).

There are limitations of this study and potential future experiments. All the measures listed to prevent resignations could also result in a higher cost to the employer and/or less work being done. Thus, further consideration on a case-by-case basis is important. Moreover, the conclusions of this study are based on a survey of local working people and statistical data collected in the county and nationwide. A limitation of the study is the sample size. Although 106 valid responses were sufficient for general questions, not enough sample points were available when the topic was broken down by industry sector or company size. Larger scale samples can improve the accuracy of the study and lead to more specific findings by industry sector or company size. Another limitation of the study is that the survey cannot disclose many details about root causes and remedies of a high number of resignations due to the anonymous nature of the study. Therefore, future experiments could investigate the causes, consequences, and solutions of the rising job quit rates further by interviewing employers and employees about their experiences and opinions.

Our study revealed that though the resignation in Fairfax County is not as great as that of other places of the US, the pandemic has caused increased quit rates in Fairfax County. Our study presents solutions specific to improving resignation rates in this area, including increasing pay and altering company work structure.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We first collected and analyzed statistical data available for the US including the unemployment rate and US BLS’s monthly job openings and labor turnover survey, which divulges the employee voluntary resignation trend. For Fairfax County, we examined the unemployment rate. A regression

analysis was conducted in Excel to establish a relationship between the job quit rate and the unemployment rate. The job quit rate was selected as the dependent variable (“y”) and the unemployment rate was selected as the independent variable (“x”). Excel generated a Scatter chart with a trend line and displayed the equation of y versus x, as well as an R2 value (Figure 2A). The logarithmic relationship was chosen because it had a higher R2 value than all other relationships. Based on that relationship and available unemployment data in Fairfax, we derived monthly job quit rates in the county.

To further verify that conclusion and our hypothesis, a ten-question survey was designed and sent to 2,000 working people in Fairfax County via the online application SurveyMonkey (Appendix). Employment within a Fairfax County business was the only selection criteria.

The survey covered questions on the respondents’ demographic information, turnover rates for the respondents’ business or place of employment, future expectations for turnover rates, the impacts of resignations, difficulty of hiring new employees during the pandemic, their beliefs as to what caused higher job quit rates, and possible practices for retaining employees. All questions required a single choice answer or multiple-choice answers. Question 3 (Role in Company), Question 8 (why are workers resigning now?), question 9 (what are the impacts of these resignations?), and question 10 (how can retention rates be improved?) also had an “other” option to allow survey respondents to specify other answers not in the provided multiple choice answers.

The ten-question survey was emailed to local businesses found in Fairfax County business directories. Respondents were asked to reflect on their businesses’ experience in the employment sector during the pandemic and their future expectations. Respondents answered through SurveyMonkey and data was compiled in the form of bar graphs and figures to assess overarching trends using Microsoft Excel.

The majority of the findings in the Result section were generated from each isolated survey question. However, the observation of the industries that experience an increasing resignation took answers from both the respondents’ industry selection and their input on the resignation trend. In this case, two survey questions were necessary to generate a finding.

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Appendix: The Fairfax Resignation Survey questions

No.	Question and Answer Choices	Answer Type
1	Company Industry: Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas Construction Manufacturing Wholesale Retail Transportation and utilities Information Financial Activities Professional and business services Education Health services Accommodation Entertainment Other services Government	Single Choice
2	Company Size: <9 10-49 50-249 250-999 1000-5000 5000+	Single Choice
3	Role in Company: Owner Manager Individual Contributor Other (please specify)	Multiple Choices with an Open Answer
4	How does the current voluntary turnover rate of your company compare with that before the pandemic? Increased No change Decreased	Single Choice
5	How do you expect the rate of turnover to change over the next few months? Increased No change Decreased	Single Choice
6	Which gender has had a higher turnover rate in the past 2 years? Male Female Not sure	Single Choice
7	During the last 2 years, have you found it difficult to hire new employees? Yes No	Single Choice

