



**Resignation: Understanding Why Workers
Choose Non-Employment**

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Overview

Approximately 170,000 people in the Pittsburgh region leave their jobs every quarter. About 51% of them leave for another job opportunity, while the rest transition into non-employment¹. Often enough, people – especially those in low-paying occupations – simply quit, without having another opportunity lined up.

From an employer’s perspective, turnover is costly. The average time to fill jobs in the Pittsburgh region is 41 days. Besides disrupting productivity, turnover forces employers to invest additional resources in advertising, screening, interviewing, hiring and onboarding new employees.

Quitting a job without another lined up may seem illogical on the surface, and be construed by potential employers as a sign of a low work ethic or lack of motivation. However, from an individual’s perspective, the choice may be logical for their situation. This report digs deeper, examining the reasons people quit jobs, drawing from 30 focus groups with almost 400 job seekers, providing employers with a greater understanding of these job seekers’ choices.

Encountering Physical Limits

Shift jobs are prevalent in many of the region’s sectors with the most employees, such as retail, food, hospitality and health care. Often, these jobs are physically demanding and low paying. Many job seekers who participated in the focus groups acknowledge that shift work, especially jobs involving unpredictable or unbalanced schedules, coupled with low pay creates a stressful, unsustainable employment situation. As one job seeker, who worked at a hotel with widely varying shifts within the same week, explained:

“They’d give me one day off here and one day off there, but my body wasn’t recuperating to go back to work, so I just quit. I wouldn’t have minded if they would have given me the 2 days off in a row. I went to the supervisors and told them. I went to Human Resources and told them. I went to the union and told them, but they still kept doing it, so I just quit.”

Escaping High Stress Environments

Shift work is just one factor that drives people to resign. Many job seekers cited stressful workplaces. For some, the fast-paced nature of jobs and production schedules caused troublesome stress, while others cited the nature of relationships with their supervisors. One job seeker explained the stressful environment of a former workplace:

“The modern call center is a crucible of pressure. You can inhale or exhale in-between calls, but you can’t do both. That’s how they have the metrics figured out. It’s a constant flow. They pair that with very strict work rules. You weren’t allowed to get up outside of a scheduled break at all. Not to warm up a cup of coffee, not to hit the restroom, anything. It just wasn’t done unless you really had to.”

Another job seeker described similar stress in a different environment:

“I worked at a bakery for almost two years. It was probably one of the most stressful jobs I ever worked. They want you to know everything just like that. They only gave us

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Program, 2017

maybe 25-minute breaks. That was pretty much lunch. For the kind of work, it makes it hard, because they're not paying us enough either."

For others, stress emanates from other sources. One job seeker recounted their supervisor's response after volunteering to take on more projects: "Well, you might not want to say that you're bored because that's how positions get eliminated." A couple of months later that employee quit, after spending 12 years with the company.

Another focus group participant shared a similar situation:

"If you don't voice your opinion to your company, they'll say 'she's not voicing her opinion.' But, if I'm voicing my opinion, then you start to feel like you're walking around on eggshells. I can't really give you my opinion, because you'll frown upon it and my hours will go down to basically where I want to quit."

Seeking Work-Life Balance

Many job seekers who shared their experiences cited long hours as a reason for quitting. Long hours disrupted their personal lives and interfered with family time, so quitting was the most reasonable thing to do. One job seeker related working 58 hours per week, which interfered with their home life:

"At that point, I had to weigh the options. Family is only once in a lifetime; a job comes a dime a dozen. With that being that said, I had to actually sit down with my employer and let them know [I would no longer work] six days a week. They started doing... small things like putting pressure on me. I was just finding myself really as a zombie. I would leave Saturday at 3:00 in the afternoon; Monday morning I'm back at work. It just seemed like Sunday just skipped...away."

While working longer hours increases paychecks for hourly workers, employees must determine whether the extra pay justifies additional time away from home. As one focus group participant explained:

"I started off at \$10/hour and six months later they bumped me to \$12... and then six months later they bumped me to \$14. Then, I got to the point where it was crazy hours...and it was affecting what was going on at home with my children and things like that, so I got away from that."

He eventually found another position with better hours, but with a lower wage in a different industry.

Attending to Health Issues

Personal injury or illness, or caring for a family member, are other reasons people quit their job, without having another one in place. The job seekers acknowledged that health and related issues often come unexpectedly, interfering with their professional responsibilities. One job seeker, injured on the job, shared their experience:

"My insurance benefits covered my surgery and everything like that. But, it wasn't paid time off, and I just didn't go back to work after that."

For others, the situation involves caring for a relative. One job seeker quit to take care of their father suffering from Parkinson's disease. Another conveyed a similar situation:

“So, I was there at [my company] for 17-and-a-half years...I had to quit, because my father had fallen ill, and he died. And, I needed some time off to take care of his executive will and get everything set.”

Limited Transportation, Limited Options

For some job seekers, their ability to stay employed hinges on transportation. Driving is not a viable option for everyone, and relying on public transportation restricts the locations where they can work. Both the duration and distance of people’s commute can create a challenge to employment sustainability.

One job seeker reported being unable to buy a vehicle, while another has a vehicle, but choose not to endure a long commute:

“I used to work downtown, and they relocated my whole department to Armstrong County. From where I lived, it would have been 70 to 80 miles roundtrip. So, I was thinking in the terms of tires, wear and tear on your car, winter being the major thing going out on Route 28. I had put in for another job.”

Child care responsibilities are a factor for other job seekers:

“I have a timeframe as to when I have to be done with work, and what time I get home. To pick up my daughter’s two children from day care, I [need to be] home before 6 o’clock. Past that time, it costs us a \$1/minute [in late fees]. So, it would cost me \$30 to be 15 minutes late.”

Challenging Assumptions

The stories of these local job seekers provide important insights into why people leave jobs without having another opportunity in place. Partner4Work is sharing these experiences to challenge the assumptions these job seekers face from prospective employers who flag gaps on their resumes. What on the surface could be construed as a lack of ambition or questionable career choice, appears logical when examined more closely. Whether it involves exhaustion, stress, limited transportation options, health matters or work-life balance, these job seekers thought critically about their situations and concluded that the most reasonable choice involved resigning.

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