

THE NEED TO REDUCE TEAM MEMBER TURNOVER ¹

Harold Kerzner, Ph.D. and Al Zeitoun, Ph.D.

BACKGROUND TO TEAM MEMBER TURNOVER

All companies, regardless of their size and the number of projects they manage, are susceptible to worker turnover, including companies held in high esteem in project management circles. The more projects a company works on, and the greater the need to overcome project management challenges such as creativity and innovation, the greater the employee turnover risks.

Employee turnover can be involuntary or voluntary. With involuntary turnover, the employee may be removed from the organization if the company must downsize or if the employee's performance is below the organization's expectations regarding the worker's performance. However, another significant and common involuntary turnover on a project occurs when an employee possesses superior skills that may be needed on a higher priority project or one that may be struggling. Workers may then be reassigned to other projects, and the reassignment can be permanent rather than temporary.

Voluntary turnover occurs when the employee is unhappy in the company, possibly with the people he/she must work with on projects or believes that more opportunities exist elsewhere. Workers on projects also dislike being treated simply as cost charging numbers, billing their time against a project, and then to be removed from the project as quickly as possible after task completion. In both involuntary and voluntary turnover there can be significant disruptions to on-going projects, including morale, budgets, schedules and stakeholder relations. Turnover is a way of life in project management and can be destructive due to ineffective project management leadership.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REDUCING TURNOVER

In the early years of project management, very little was written about the importance of controlling or reducing worker turnover on projects. Project managers relied heavily upon functional managers and sponsors to provide support for project staffing throughout the life of the project and believed that workers could be replaced, if necessary, with little

¹ How to cite this article: Kerzner, H., Zeitoun, A. (2026). The Need to Reduce Team Member Turnover, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XV, Issue IX, September.

difficulty. If disagreements existed between the project managers and team members, most project managers believed that worker replacement would not be a critical issue.

Today, there are two factors why worker turnover has become an important issue for all project managers. First, companies are working on significantly more projects than in the past, and there is no longer an abundance of available and possibly qualified resources in many companies. Project workforce planning has become a critical issue.

Second, project managers are expected to now make business as well as technical decisions. Part of this responsibility is to make business decisions that are in the best interest of the entire company, and this includes recognizing the impact your decision may have upon other projects rather than just the project you are managing. The retention of the workforce and the education provided to team members can produce benefits that workers may use on many projects. Worker turnover possibilities must consider the impact on all projects rather than just one project.

CAUSES OF EMPLOYEE TURNOVER

Executives would like the project management environment to be composed of a stable workforce. Unfortunately, the project management environment provides a significant number of challenges, especially when you are expected to work closely with other team members you may have never worked with before and possibly be subjected to unexpected team dynamics. Even though projects, by definition, come to an end, the pain that some workers must endure in an assignment may make them believe that leaving the company is the best alternative.

There are numerous situations in many projects that can lead to increased stress, potential burnout, unhappiness, and a desire to leave the firm. For most of these situations, there are early warning signs that can be identified and provide opportunities for taking corrective action.

Worker Overload

Most workers are assigned to projects by their functional managers who make the decision that the worker is qualified to perform the tasks needed. The worker may not have any say about the assignment. The worker may not know all of the details about the task, including complexity and deadlines, until after the assignment. When all of the information is finally available, the worker may feel overloaded with work and prefer disengagement.

Excessive Challenging Workload

Most team members are willing to accept work overload, at least temporarily, if they feel competent in fulfilling the assignment and the expected time duration is reasonable. The problem occurs with projects requiring innovation and creativity. On these projects that are often difficult to schedule and budget, the direction of the work can change several times as the work progresses, and the employee may go from acceptance of the new workload initially to possible rejection. Not all workers are comfortable in an environment needing creativity and innovation.

Problem Solving and Decision-Making

All projects require some degree of problem solving and decision-making, sometimes on a continuous basis, especially if the roles and responsibilities of the workers are unclear. Workload changes as well as changes in the direction of a project require decisions to be made. With worker overload, and especially if the workload has challenges, workers expect to be involved in problem solving and decision-making that affects their workload and accompanying roles and responsibilities.

Not all employees willingly prefer to work in an environment on projects that may be unstable because of continuous changes which they have no control over. Problem solving and decision-making must accompany and hopefully overcome the challenges and disagreements that may exist. The result can be potentially unacceptable changes in an employee's workload. Frequent changes to workloads and lack of worker involvement in any workload changes can lead to significant dissatisfaction, resulting in voluntary turnover.

Career Growth Opportunity

All workers want assignments that provide the opportunity for career growth. The challenges of being assigned new work come with risks if the employee is unable to perform as expected because of lack of experience or education.

Career growth opportunities can come in multiple ways. Educational opportunities are common in most companies and can be provided by internal or external personnel. However, there is also mentorship by experienced personnel. On some projects, there is always the risk that a team member in a critical position may leave the company due to health concerns or other reasons. It is common practice for another worker on the project to assume the role of backup and be mentored by the person being backed up. This practice has been used frequently for backing up assistant project managers that were overloaded with work.

Education

Other than salary, educational opportunities may very well be the biggest benefit to most workers. It is not uncommon during an employment interview for the interviewee to ask what educational opportunities are provided for the workers.

When project management began to evolve, many of the project managers were engineers and were told they were now expected to make business as well as technical decisions on their projects. Many companies then highly recommended that project managers obtain MBA Degrees and companies often paid for all or part of the education. In one company, management believed that the company had enough MBAs but not enough project managers that fully understood the issues and decisions that had to be made when the projects were eventually turned over to manufacturing personnel. The company stopped reimbursing workers for MBA Degrees but paid for all or part of the education for Engineering Management Degrees. For both degrees, workers had to sign a statement agreeing to reimburse the company the college funding the company paid if they voluntarily left the company within three years after obtaining the degree.

When PMI began offering PMP® Certification, many companies decided that the benefits of PMP® Certification were just as important or even more important to the project management community than many college degrees. Today, many companies are providing financial assistance to workers by funding various certification programs related to project management because of the significant benefits to project management practices.

There are many different certification programs available that provide valuable knowledge on project management frameworks, tools, and practices. Many companies that were reimbursing workers the cost of certification training in the past have established certification boards in the company to recommend which certification programs would provide the greatest benefit to the company, and these are often the programs the company will pay for.

Toxic Work Environment

Workers on project teams often have no choice about the people they must work with while assigned to a project. If teammates demonstrate offensive or unacceptable behavior, the workers may not recognize the behavior initially as being toxic but learn quickly that they may have to accept it and do the best they can or request removal from the project if it interferes with their performance.

Peter Drucker highlighted: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." There are always factors on projects and the surrounding organizational culture that can generate team friction

between workers and create a toxic environment. Some of the factors that can force a team member to consider voluntary withdrawal from a team include:

- **Laziness:** Working with lazy teammates may require that you take on extra work that they would normally be doing. If the extra work is criticized you, rather than the lazy workers, may be blamed.
- **Burnout:** Project burnout is a state of physical and mental exhaustion resulting from the requirements and constraints imposed on the projects. The impact of burnout is usually a decrease in performance due to low levels of energy, persistent fatigue, and a lack of motivation. The project may then suffer from missed deadlines, incomplete or poor-quality workmanship, unhappy stakeholders, and a loss of business. Allowing burnout to continue indefinitely could significantly impact on the workers' performance reviews and career path opportunities.
- **Dealing with Egos:** The people you work with may have ego-driven behaviors that can impact project performance. Ego issues can impact on how team members work together, how decisions are made, and how successful the outcome of the project will be. There are several types of unhealthy egos including arrogance, selfishness, insecurity, wanting to please everyone regardless of the consequences, acting rebellious, and wanting to be a manipulator by having everything accomplished a certain way. Working with these people can significantly prevent you from doing your job correctly.
- **Dealing with Biases:** Many of the people you must work with on projects have biases that are not quickly noticeable. Some people have highly optimistic biases and try to force workers to accept unrealistic budgets and schedules. Other people may have cognitive biases and may make decisions and judgments without having all of the necessary information or facts. Team members must live with the results of managers and coworkers that have their own sense of reality.
- **Project Leadership:** When a worker hires into a company, the worker expects to report to a functional manager and sit beside the same people for months or possibly even years. This usually allows the worker sufficient time to develop a working relationship with fellow colleagues. But when assigned to a project that may have a short life span, the leadership style the worker experiences may be perceived as abusive and encourages voluntary turnover.

Despite what we read in texts and articles, some project managers use an inappropriate leadership style that may demonstrate micromanagement, creation of a poor culture where ideas are subject to personal rather than constructive criticism, and workers must follow the project manager's mindset. This can easily

create a hostile work environment. Workers may not be allowed to think outside-of-the-box and the leader may take personal credit for all good ideas as well as project success. Ineffective leadership may demand that workers accept accountability for the work they must perform but may not have any authority needed to support accountability and responsibility. Mistrust in project leadership is an invitation for employee turnover.

WAYS TO REDUCE EMPLOYEE TURNOVER

There are several strategies that project managers can adopt to help reduce the adverse effects that could lead to employee turnover. Most of the strategies include effective team member engagement practices.

- As soon as the workers are assigned to the project, the project manager should engage the workers to understand their qualifications for the assignment, expectations during and possibly after the assignment is completed, authority they might wish to possess especially regarding problem-solving, educational opportunities they might expect, and any risks or fears they may have. This is often best accomplished in one-on-one sessions with the team members. Building trust helps identify and possibly resolve issues in a timely manner.
- After project go-ahead, periodically collaborate with each team members to understand their feelings and any new concerns they may have. A critical follow up issue is to identify any work-life imbalances creating worker stress that could lead to burnout or turnover.
- Encourage workers to bring forth issues that they may have, especially regarding work overload, team dynamics and organizational cultural factors.
- Identify any education the team members would like or need.
- Identify how each of the team members would like to be recognized for their accomplishments.

THE PATH FORWARD

Project management is no longer recognized as just a part-time or full-time practice to accomplish an objective. It is now seen as a corporate business strategy with people-centered project management practices at the core where project managers have the potential to make workers' employment dreams, achievements and recognition a reality in helping them with career development. This will significantly reduce employee turnover

if performed correctly and make it easier for employees to work together to improve corporate performance.

In addition, with the future of work being highly augmented with Artificial Intelligence, this gives the project teams the opportunity to do more value-driven strategic work. This is a new frontier and effective way for project managers to drive a higher level of team engagement that would mitigate the multiple highlighted causes of employee turnover in the project environment.

Human resource leaders could also be at the center of working closely with Project Management Offices and project managers to redesign the work employees do and utilize that work and roles refresh as an enabler for building organizational cultures that sustain current workforce and attract the innovative future workforce that would lead the ongoing and increasingly complex transformational initiatives.

REFERENCES

Zeitoun, A. (2025). *Creating Experience-Driven Organizational Culture: How to Drive Transformative Change with Project and Portfolio Management*, First Edition, John Wiley & Sons. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Creating+Experience-Driven+Organizational+Culture%3A+How+to+Drive+Transformative+Change+with+Project+and+Portfolio+Management-p-9781394257027>

Zeitoun, A. (2024). *Program Management: Going beyond Project Management to enable Value-Driven Change*, First Edition, John Wiley & Sons. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Program+Management%3A+Going+Beyond+Project+Management+to+Enable+Value+Driven+Change-p-9781119931287>

Kerzner, H., Zeitoun, A., & Vargas, R. (2022). *Project Management Next Generation: The Pillars for Organizational Excellence*. First ed., John Wiley & Sons. https://www.amazon.com/Project-Management-Next-Generation-Organizational/dp/1119832276/ref=sr_1_4?crid=19VAGRR4HTYHH&keywords=project+management+next+generation&qid=1642105176&srefix=project+management+nex%2Caps%2C68&sr=8-4

About the Authors



Harold Kerzner, Ph.D., MS, M.B.A

Senior Executive Director for Project Management
International Institute of Learning
New York & California, USA



Dr. Harold Kerzner is Senior Executive Director for Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has an MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 38 years taught project management at Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers and has had published more than 60 college textbooks/workbooks on project management, including later editions. Some of his books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, (3) Project Management Case Studies, (4) Project Management Best Practices: Achieving Global Excellence, (5) PM 2.0: The Future of Project Management, (6) Using the Project Management Maturity Model, and (7) Innovation Project Management.

He is a charter member of the Northeast Ohio PMI Chapter.

Dr. Kerzner has traveled around the world conducting project management lectures for PMI Chapters and companies in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, Trinidad, Barbados, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Venezuela, Columbia, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, England, and Switzerland. He delivered a keynote speech at a PMI Global Congress on the future of project management.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award in 1981 for his contributions to the field of project management.
- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

- The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. They also give out a second Kerzner Award for project of the year in Northeast Ohio.
- The Project Management Institute (National Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that demonstrated excellence in project management.
- The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.
- Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management.
- The Italian Institute of Project Management presented Dr. Kerzner with the 2019 International ISIPM Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

Dr. Harold Kerzner can be contacted at hkerzner@hotmail.com



Dr. Al Zeitoun, PgMP, PMI Fellow

System Thinker & Transformation Advisor
Maryland USA



Dr. Al Zeitoun is a Future of Work, business optimization, and operational performance excellence thought leader with global experiences in strategy execution. His experiences encompass leading organizations; delivering their Enterprise Digital and Business Transformation; guiding fitting frameworks implementations; and using his empathy, engineering insights, and collaboration strengths to successfully envision new business models and execute complex missions across diverse cultures globally.

In his recent role with Siemens, he was a Senior Director of Strategy responsible for driving the global program management practices, Master Plan governance, and enabling the Strategy Transformation processes and priorities.

In his position, as the Executive Director for Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Abu Dhabi, UAE, he was responsible for creating the strategy execution framework, achieving transformation benefits, governance excellence, and creating the data analytics discipline necessary for delivering on the \$40B complex country energy mission roadmap.

At the McLean, USA HQ of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Zeitoun strategically envisioned and customized digitally enabled EPMO advisory, mapped playbooks, and capability development for clients' Billions of Dollars strategic initiatives. Furthermore, he led the firm's Middle East North Africa Portfolio Management and Agile Governance Solutions.

With the International Institute of Learning, Dr. Zeitoun played a senior leader and global trainer and coach. He was instrumental in driving its global expansions, thought leadership, and operational excellence methodology to sense and shape dynamic ways of working across organizations worldwide. He speaks English, Arabic, and German and enjoys good food, travel, and volunteering. Dr. Al Zeitoun can be contacted at <https://al-zeitoun.org/>