



UNDERSTANDING INTENT TO STAY

A STRATEGIC PREDICTOR OF EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Employee retention is more critical than ever as organizations work to build resilient, high-performing teams amid disruption. With turnover costing 50% to 200% of an employee's salary, losing talent can hit hard financially. Beyond the monetary loss, they also lose expertise, strain customer relationships, and overburden remaining teams. To protect their talent pipeline, companies need to prioritize strategies that keep top performers and reduce disruptions caused by departures.

But how can organizations spot risk before it turns into loss?

One proven approach? Tracking “intent to stay” (ITS).

INTENT TO STAY: A PREDICTIVE SIGNAL

Since the 1970s, researchers have linked employees' intentions with actual departures. A 2017 meta-analysis confirmed a strong correlation ($\rho = .56$) between plans to leave and voluntary turnover. Korn Ferry's extensive Engaged Performance data reinforces this finding, showing that self-reported intent to stay reliably predicts turnover behavior.

At Korn Ferry, we define Engaged Performance™ as the outcome of employees feeling energized by their work, loyal to their employer, and committed to the collective success of the business. ITS is a critical indicator within this framework.

Our broader engagement model centers on four core Listening Levers—key aspects of the work environment that shape employee experiences and drive Engaged Performance. This framework helps organizations identify the factors that influence engagement, enablement, well-being, and retention.

In today's digital world, the walls of organizations have become windows—exposing talent to external opportunities and scrutiny. Social media allows skilled employees to showcase their knowledge and achievements, while online platforms make it easy to compare compensation, learning and development, and work environments. That means commitment must be continually re-earned. By tracking intent to stay and its underlying drivers, organizations can get ahead of turnover risks and build smarter, more effective retention strategies.

LEVERAGING EMPLOYEE SURVEYS TO STRENGTHEN RETENTION

Surveys translate employee feedback into early indicators of turnover risks. They offer actionable data that helps organizations focus their retention efforts where it matters most. At Korn Ferry, we analyze post-survey turnover data to identify patterns that separate employees who stay from those who leave. Our research focuses on three core areas:

1. Tracking Intent to Stay

While not infallible, ITS consistently emerges as a leading indicator. Across clients and benchmarking data, our research shows that employees' stated intentions often align closely with actual turnover patterns. This allows organizations to identify high-risk segments and tailor retention strategies accordingly.

2. Engagement and Enablement

Engagement represents employees' commitment and motivation ("want to"), while enablement reflects their capacity to succeed ("can do"). Employees who are both highly engaged and feel enabled are significantly less likely to leave, confirming the critical role these dimensions play in retention.

3. Workplace Drivers of Turnover

By comparing survey responses from those who stay and those who leave, organizations can isolate those workplace factors influencing commitment. These insights can help shape work environments that reduce turnover and support high performance.

A TIME-BASED VIEW OF INTENT TO STAY

Korn Ferry's approach to measuring ITS offers more precision than traditional sentiment-based items (e.g., "I rarely think about leaving this organization"). By anchoring responses to specific timeframes, organizations gain foresight into when departures are most likely.

Typical response options include:

- 1. Less than 1 year:** Often indicative of imminent departures or "quick quits," particularly among recent hires.
- 2. 1 to 2 years:** Suggests the early stages of disengagement and growing openness to external opportunities.
- 3. 3 to 5 years:** Indicates moderate commitment from employees not planning to leave soon, but they may lack confidence in their career progression within the organization.
- 4. More than 5 years or until retirement:** Reflects long-term commitment and intent to stay.

In one Korn Ferry case study, 56% of employees who left within two years had previously indicated plans to leave. Only 13% of those who stayed expressed the same. This shows that ITS reflects both sentiment and behavior, giving leaders a measurable lead time to address turnover risks.

But motivation alone doesn't explain turnover—opportunity matters as much. Employees who believe they could land a better job are more likely to plan their exit. High-performing and high-potential talent often attracts more opportunities, making these "flight risks" particularly costly to lose.



With Korn Ferry's global benchmarking tools, which capture insights across the entire employee lifecycle, organizations can compare their retention outlook to peers within and beyond their industry to uncover potential risks.

HOW ENGAGEMENT AND ENABLEMENT DRIVE EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Across industries, one pattern emerges: employees who are more engaged are more likely to stay. In fact, engagement and enablement together account for a meaningful portion of the variance in ITS.

Though related, engagement and enablement don't always align. Korn Ferry's Employee Effectiveness Profile outlines four distinct employee groups based on their levels of engagement and enablement:

- **Most Effective:** High levels of both engagement and enablement.
- **Frustrated:** High levels of engagement but low levels of enablement.
- **Detached:** High levels of enablement but low levels of engagement.
- **Least Effective:** Low levels of both engagement and enablement.

According to our Engaged Performance data:

- 72% of short-term leavers fall into the *Least Effective* group (those neither engaged nor enabled).
- 83% of long-term stayers belong to the *Most Effective* group.

Frustrated employees, despite being engaged, are at high risk of leaving due to persistent challenges in their roles or work environments. This group represents a point of instability—if their issues go unresolved, they're likely to exit. Addressing these frustrations—through better tools, streamlined processes, or clearer career pathways—can stabilize this group and reduce turnover.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT WHY PEOPLE LEAVE

Turnover analyses reveal clear differences between employees who intend to stay and those planning to leave. Korn Ferry's Engaged Performance database identifies several key drivers of ITS:

- Confidence in leadership, job security, and a positive outlook on the company's near-term business outlook.
- Opportunities for learning, development, and career growth strongly support employee commitment.
- Feeling valued, being fairly compensated, and having benefits that meet personal needs.

As with engagement and enablement predictors, our recent Engaged Performance validation study uncovered the top-ranked reasons for turnover, which vary by role, remoteness, tenure, and personal circumstances:

- **Executives** often cite personal reasons and career transitions.
- **Mid-level managers** are more concerned with job security and workload.
- **Individual contributors** are influenced by peer support and work-life balance.
- **Fully remote employees** are more likely to stay and report the narrowest primary reasons for leaving of pay, career transitions, and personal reasons compared to other work arrangements and all other demographic breakouts.
- **Women** cite flexibility, career changes, and personal concerns more frequently.
- **Men** are more influenced by job security and confidence in leadership.

Tenure plays a compensatory role in retention, with newer employees more sensitive to engagement levels. This makes targeted early-tenure engagement strategies especially important.

Notably, many of the same factors that drive engagement—feeling valued, growth opportunities, and trust in leadership—also influence retention. This overlap reinforces that a strong engagement strategy is one of the most effective ways to retain top talent.

STRATEGIC APPLICATIONS: TURNING INSIGHTS INTO ACTION

Based on our research, we recommend five effective, evidence-based strategies for organizations to follow:

1. Engage Early-Tenure Employees.

Launch onboarding programs, mentorship systems, and engagement frameworks that strengthen purpose, collaboration, and development. Our validation study shows that the impact of engagement efforts varies by organization size, with smaller firms seeing greater benefit. Develop approaches tailored to your company’s scale to fully leverage its unique strengths.

2. Expand Career Development Opportunities.

Prioritize career growth and internal mobility, sustainable performance, and continuous learning across all employee groups. Design development programs that align with employee goals to encourage long-term commitment. This could be even more important in today’s environment, where employee concerns about AI disruption can cause them to look beyond the organization for future stability.

3. Build Trust Through Leadership.

Communicate transparently and act with integrity to strengthen trust and confidence in senior leadership. Encourage managers to build strong, supportive relationships with employees to improve connection and belonging.

4. Deliver Fair Pay and Benefits.

Keep compensation competitive and equitable, particularly for employees at risk of leaving. Equip managers to explain pay structures clearly, helping employees understand how their contributions are recognized and rewarded.

5. Manage Workload and Resources.

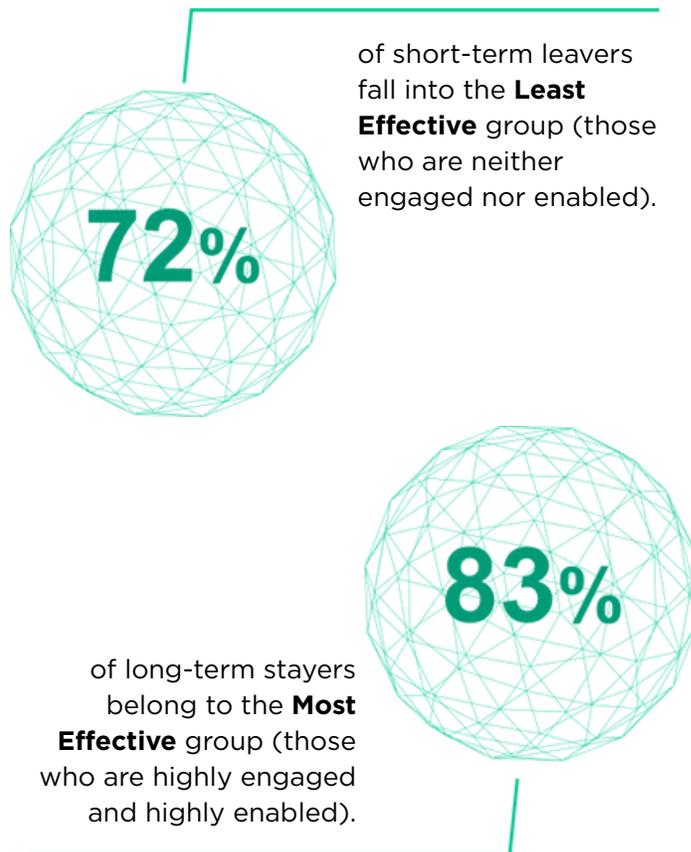
Address workload challenges proactively, especially for in-office teams and mid-level roles. Provide adequate resources and support to succeed. Clarify “must-win battles” and key accountabilities so employees can focus amid workload pressures.

KEEPING TALENT STARTS WITH UNDERSTANDING IT

Intent to stay is more than a survey item. It offers a clear signal about your workforce’s future.

When companies understand what drives turnover—and how those drivers differ by role, tenure, and context—they can take smarter, more targeted actions to retain their people.

Identify who’s at risk, learn what matters to them, and adapt as their needs evolve. Don’t just gather feedback—act on it. Show employees that their voices impact change. Because when people believe in the mission, trust their leaders, and feel supported in their growth, they not only stay, but their performance thrives—and so does the organization.



Measuring What Matters with Korn Ferry Listen

Understanding intent to stay is a powerful starting point, but acting on it is what drives real results. That's where Korn Ferry Listen comes in.

Korn Ferry Listen is our intelligent, integrated employee experience solution that helps organizations not only measure what matters but also connect insights to action. Built on more than 50 years of expertise and one of the world's largest normative databases, Korn Ferry Listen transforms employee feedback into a strategic asset.

Through continuous listening across annual, pulse, lifecycle, and DEI surveys, organizations gain a real-time, 360-degree view of the employee experience. At its core is our Engaged Performance™ framework, which links engagement, enablement, intent to stay, and well-being to key business outcomes like productivity, retention, and customer satisfaction.

With Korn Ferry Listen, you don't just hear employees—you understand what matters, why it matters, and how to respond in ways that build loyalty, reduce risk, and power performance.

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About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global consulting firm that powers performance. We unlock the potential in your people and unleash transformation across your business—synchronizing strategy, operations, and talent to accelerate performance, fuel growth, and inspire a legacy of change. That's why the world's most forward-thinking companies across every major industry turn to us—for a shared commitment to lasting impact and the bold ambition to *Be More Than*.