

Building Workplace Resiliency

Encouraging
Employee
Engagement



Igniting the bio-economy's brainpower

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BioTalent Canada

BioTalent Canada supports the people behind life-changing science. Trusted as the go-to source for labour market intelligence, we guide bio-economy stakeholders with evidence-based data and industry-driven standards. We are focused on igniting the industry's brainpower, bridging the gap between job-ready talent and employers, and ensuring the long-term agility, resiliency and sustainability of one of Canada's most vital sectors.

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The information in this resource is based on best practices and should be adapted to your own situation. Required or strongly recommended items are noted explicitly.

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1 How does employee engagement contribute to resiliency?

1.1 What is employee engagement?

Employee engagement is an important contributing factor to your company's bottom line, but it is often challenging to quantify because there are multiple types of employee engagement. For the bio-economy, it may be useful to consider three main categories¹:

1. Emotional engagement – Employees are connected emotionally to their work and the organization
2. Cognitive engagement – Employees are committed to and focused on their jobs
3. Physical engagement – Employees' attitudes and actions show they are aligned with the organization and invested in their work

Emotional engagement is a high-quality interaction that includes trust, active listening, inclusivity and belonging, and it is vital for employees. Employees are usually more engaged when they feel they can trust their leaders and peers, they feel like they belong, and they feel valued and heard.

Talent is the driving force behind bio-economy companies' research, product development and manufacturing efforts. That makes employee engagement and retention incredibly important for the sector, which is faced with constant change in growth, downsizing, mergers and acquisitions — all of which can themselves be significant obstacles to employee engagement.

¹ William Kahn's Theory on Employee Engagement, referenced in Business Leadership Today article by Matt Tenne.

1.2 What is resiliency?

Resiliency is the capacity to “bounce back”—to absorb, react, adapt. Recent definitions of organizational resiliency emphasize less the “fortress” approach to addressing challenges and disruption—that is, attempting to rigidly protect the company from external factors that could cause uncertainty—and instead focus on flexibility, adaptability and risk management.² For a company, resiliency is the ability to effectively anticipate and address disruptions and their impacts at the organizational level. In this sense, resiliency is characterized as *a set of specific organizational capabilities, routines, practices and processes by which a firm conceptually orients itself, acts to move forward and creates a setting of diversity and adjustable integration.*³ Its goal is to support organizational sustainability in the face of disruption and enable organizations to absorb, react and adapt to it now and in the future.

Leaders from Canadian bio-economy companies that successfully responded to disruptions created by the COVID-19 pandemic described resiliency in similar terms, including being adaptable, agile, flexible, financially sound, responsive to change, transparent and open.⁴

1.3 How does employee engagement relate to resiliency?

Of the numerous factors that contribute to making an organization more resilient, the individuals who work in an organization are a key one. Certain types of knowledge, skills and experience individuals bring to an organization can help contribute to resiliency.⁵ Organizations can more consistently leverage these skills when they prioritize employee engagement at all stages of employment.

The COVID-19 pandemic tested organizational resiliency in a way not seen before by many organizations. For some bio-economy companies (38%), the pandemic had a **negative financial impact**, while even more (50%) found that the pandemic had a **negative impact on**

² Denyer, D. (2017). Organizational Resilience: A summary of academic evidence, business insights and new thinking. *British Standards Institution and Cranfield School of Management*, 9.

³ Lengnick-Hall, C. A., and Lengnick-Hall, B. (2011). Developing a capacity for organizational resilience through strategic human resource management. *Human Resource Management Review*, 21 (3), 2.

⁴ From the BioTalent Canada survey for the “[Building resiliency and sustainability for the bio-economy to withstand disruption](#)” research project, which gathered feedback from 344 Canadian bio-economy employers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁵ Hartmann, Weiss, Newman & Hoegl (2020). Resilience in the workplace: a multilevel review and synthesis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 69 (3), pp. 913-959.

their operations.⁶ No matter how organized or prepared companies were to cope with challenges and adversity, the pandemic was a monumental disruption that affected employers and employees around the world.

The early days of the pandemic provide an excellent example of how employee engagement efforts helped make organizations more resilient when they were abruptly forced to move to a complete or partial remote working environment. After solving the technical aspects of these new remote working environments, companies soon started to see “people issues” beginning to emerge. Mental health problems, stress and higher turnover are just some of the issues that affected global productivity. Approximately one-fifth (22%) of Canadian bio-economy employers reported HR issues as their top challenge during the pandemic.⁷ This has had an extensive ripple effect, forcing some employers to make difficult decisions such as reducing working hours, discontinuing services or closing due to employee shortages. These issues have contributed to employee engagement’s move to the top of many company agendas, as reflected by many Canadian bio-economy employers, who reported that employee engagement resources were the most useful in building resiliency for their organizations.⁸

Resilient organizations experienced many of the same challenges as other organizations but, with some effort and flexibility, were more successful in transitioning to new ways of working while keeping employees engaged. As they transitioned to remote working, they quickly realized that they had to find new and creative ways to keep employees connected and engaged. Some of their strategies included moving celebrations onto Zoom or Teams and having virtual social events such as games nights or wellness classes.

Employers also recognized that helping employees cope with the uniquely stressful circumstances of the pandemic would help with engagement and make employees more resilient. Actions such as setting up regular check-ins to understand the unique challenges each employee was experiencing helped employees feel valued, heard and cared for as individuals. They also allowed these organizations to identify other tools and resources needed to keep these employees engaged and focused on work, while managing their unique challenges and circumstances. These included offering additional sick leave or paid time off and greater flexibility in how it could be used, and augmenting mental health- and fitness-related benefits. By focusing on employee engagement, these companies helped build individual resiliency—which is what truly strengthens companies over the long term.

⁶ From the BioTalent Canada survey of Canadian bio-economy employers for the “[Building resiliency and sustainability for the bio-economy to withstand disruption](#)” research project.

⁷ From the BioTalent Canada survey of Canadian bio-economy employers for the “[Building resiliency and sustainability for the bio-economy to withstand disruption](#)” research project.

⁸ From the BioTalent Canada survey of Canadian bio-economy employers for the “[Building resiliency and sustainability for the bio-economy to withstand disruption](#)” research project.

1.3.1. Five key pillars to support employee engagement, retention and resiliency

Retaining top talent in a highly competitive landscape is a challenge many employers face today. Keeping employees engaged can significantly improve an organization's ability to retain that talent, making the organization as a whole more resilient. Engagement initiatives can look different in every company, but focusing on the following five key pillars will help achieve success.

1. Consistent employee experience

- Ensure your practices are clear, accessible, inclusive, equitable and consistent from the interview process and onboarding right through to offboarding.
- Have clear policies and procedures, explicit goals and expectations, equitable promotion and compensation practices, and inclusive and equitable opportunities for professional growth and development.
- Create onboarding programs where employees receive the training, tools and resources they need to do their jobs well.
- Ensure the company's values are embedded in your policies and programs for alignment across the organization.

2. Inclusive leadership

Front-line leaders have the greatest impact on an organization. Their skills, commitment, communication style, behaviour and decision-making capabilities are key to managing successful teams and retaining employees long term. Remember that employees usually leave their managers (or other high-level leaders), not the company. To improve retention, employees need to be able to trust their leaders.

- Hire leaders who, in addition to focusing on the business and delivering results, can also effectively motivate, engage and lead diverse teams.
- When considering employees for promotion into leadership roles, ensure they have some of the leadership capabilities needed, and invest in ongoing training to help them fill in any gaps and continuously develop their leadership skills. Remember that successful leadership is about more than high performance.

3. Healthy workplace culture

In an inclusive culture, employees can work together, feel safe to openly share their thoughts and ideas, and have opportunities to socialize in a way that is respectful and understanding of their personal commitments and beliefs.

- Strive to foster a healthy workplace culture where employees feel psychological and physical safety, respected and valued.
- Improve retention by encouraging employees to build strong connections with their colleagues and leaders, which promotes a sense of belonging in the organization that can make employees less likely to leave.
- Ensure all leaders are aligned with the company's values and lead by example. Address any toxic behaviour right away to set the tone for all employees.

4. Open communication

Open communication helps build and maintain trust and connection between employees and their leaders, creating a more inclusive and engaging work environment.

- Actively prioritize open communication—this requires commitment and intentional effort.
- Be sure to maintain open communication during times of prosperity as well as during times of disruption and challenge.
- Communicate regularly with employees, providing business updates and sharing new or changing organizational objectives, future partnership, upcoming opportunities, and the company's vision and mission. This keeps the channels open and supports engagement and retention.
- Avoid rumours and low morale by being open and honest when something unusual is happening. Employees can often sense when something is amiss, and if you don't keep them informed, they may form their own theories about what is happening. This can erode their trust in leaders and leave them feeling insecure, which can decrease engagement and increase retention risks.

5. Investment in people

- Dedicate some budget to continuous training and development of your employees and leaders. This ensures they have the skills to do their job well today and have the opportunity to build the skills they will need to ensure your organization's future success. It also helps engage and retain your team and grow your business.
- Take the time to better understand what is important to your employees so you can more effectively invest in areas that are meaningful to them. Some examples include more inclusive benefit plans, more competitive salaries, professional development opportunities, and volunteering or corporate giving opportunities.



2 How do we encourage employee engagement that builds resiliency?

2.1 Engaging employees at different stages

In 2021, companies across North America began experiencing historic attrition,⁹ often labeled “*the Great Resignation*.” Canada experienced this phenomenon as well, but with some slightly different trends compared to other countries.¹⁰

During this period of considerable change and flux within the labour market, keeping a close eye on employee engagement is essential for organizations to build strong, resilient companies, supported by engaged employees. Focusing on HR issues and employee engagement were among the top five facilitators to developing an effective organizational response to the COVID-19 pandemic reported by Canadian bio-economy companies.¹¹

A first step is to understand the various types of employee engagement in your organization as they occur at different stages of the employee lifecycle. This will help you develop effective strategies to improve the employee experience with different groups of employees.

Organizations that invest in ensuring the employee experience is engaging throughout all stages of employment see measurable increases in engagement and productivity. Much like how marketing agencies try to connect to consumers’ emotions to convince them to buy a product, employers need to invest time in connecting with employees on an emotional level—from the time they interview with the company, through onboarding and development, and throughout the entire employee lifecycle.

The employee lifecycle has four main stages, whether for an intentional short period of time (e.g., an internship) or a longer, multi-year experience. These stages are:

⁹ PwC (2022). Global Workforce: Hopes and Fears Survey – 2022

¹⁰ Paglinawan (Sept. 2022). Help Wanted: In Canada, the Great Resignation never actually happened. *The Financial Post*.

¹¹ From the BioTalent Canada survey of Canadian bio-economy employers for the “[Building resiliency and sustainability for the bio-economy to withstand disruption](#)” research project.

1. recruitment
2. onboarding
3. development
4. retention



2.2 Stage 1: Recruitment – Encouraging engagement that builds resiliency

Employee engagement begins during the recruitment process, well before an employee begins their first day with your organization or even has their first interview, as candidates often research an organization and its leaders as part of their own “due diligence” when deciding whether to apply. They may review your company website to learn more about your “Employee Value Proposition” (EVP), read reviews of your organization on various recruitment sites, and even speak with current or former employees. This research will inform candidates’ first impressions before they ever officially meet anyone in your organization. The way hiring managers, recruiters and leaders engage with candidates throughout the recruitment process can influence their decision to join, which ultimately affects your company’s capacity to build resiliency by attracting top talent.

2.2.1. Putting it into practice: Developing the Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

Your organization’s EVP is the set of monetary and non-monetary benefits (the value) provided to your employees in return for the skills, capabilities and experience they bring. It tells potential talent why they should apply for or accept a job with your company. A strong EVP has become increasingly important to attract and retain talent.

Your EVP can be used in a variety of ways. It will come across in employer feedback online. It can be stated explicitly on your company's careers page. Your leaders and recruiters can discuss it in interviews. It will become part of your employer brand and what sets you apart from the competition.

To create your EVP, start with research:

- List all the benefits (monetary and non-monetary) you offer now. These could include:
 - Competitive salary and benefits
 - Gym facilities or memberships
 - Hybrid working options
 - Work culture and social events
 - Wellness programs
 - Subsidized food delivery
 - Game rooms
 - Collaborative workspaces
 - Innovative/interesting projects
 - Mentorship from industry experts
 - Childcare support
 - Paid volunteer days
 - Fundraising events
 - Commitment to IDEA, demonstrated through actions such as IDEA programming and initiatives, career path programs, and leadership programs
- Research industry and workforce trends for innovative ideas
- Learn about what your competitors are offering
- Survey your current employees to find out what they like about working for your organization, and for suggestions on what else they might like

Then move on to development and sharing:

- Add new affordable and inclusive benefits to the list you made earlier that will help you attract top industry talent
- Create taglines, slogans and/or company introduction copy that incorporates your EVP
- Dedicate some space on your website's career page to outline your EVP
- Ensure all employees and other audiences know about your EVP so they can share it with their networks and refer candidates to your organization
- Ensure your organization's social media presence and posts reflect your EVP
- Have hiring managers include EVP details in job postings and be prepared to discuss benefits and programs with candidates and new hires

2.2.2. Putting it into practice: Tips for engaging candidates during the interview process

Don't forget that an interview isn't just about assessing a candidate. It's also an opportunity for a candidate to get to know your organization and decide if you're what they're looking for. So make sure you put your best foot forward with these tips.

- Take the time to properly prepare for the interview. Assemble information on the role, the team, company benefits and workplace culture, and make sure to have a statement of your EVP available.
- Prepare an interview guide. Draw up your questions ahead of time. You can use resources like the National Occupational Standards to develop questions about specific competencies you are looking for with the position and ensure your questions align with IDEA principles. ([Learn more about IDEA principles in the workplace.](#))
- Provide your recruiters, HR and hiring managers with IDEA recruitment training to avoid bias and micro-aggressions. ([Learn more about IDEA principles in the workplace.](#))

- Tour the facility. If the candidate will be working on site, give them a tour of your facility to provide them a sense of the work environment.
- Be responsive. Respond to candidates' questions and other communications in a timely manner.

2.3 Stage 2: Onboarding – Encouraging engagement that builds resiliency

Employers who underestimate the importance of onboarding in the employee lifecycle risk missing out on its potential to cultivate employee engagement. On the other hand, companies that take the time to get onboarding right can significantly and positively affect how new hires integrate into the company, how they perform and how loyal they will be to the company. A strong onboarding program can increase employee retention by 82% and productivity by 70%, according to research by Brandon Hall Group.¹²

A good onboarding process includes a structured plan that helps employees develop a sense of belonging early on, and may also feature a well-defined role, training, resources, a new-employee buddy, tools and introductions to key team members.

2.3.1. Putting it into practice: Four ingredients for successful onboarding

A well-designed onboarding process can help make new hires feel welcome and engaged during the crucial first few weeks when you set expectations and help new hires integrate into the company. Creating an exceptional onboarding experience will help them transition from excited new recruits to engaged employees. Engaged employees develop greater levels of individual resiliency and contribute significantly to the overall organizational resiliency of your company.

To optimize your onboarding process, make sure it includes these elements:

¹² Joshua Fredenburg (Ed.D.) - LinkedIn, Red Leadership - Your Onboarding Program Could Be The Cause Of High Turnover, Low Engagement, and Ineffective Leadership!

1. An onboarding guidebook

Although this will take some time upfront, it will become a resource you can use for each new hire. Your guidebook should include detailed information on what new hires will learn and when, where to find information, and other important information specific to your organization, such as:

- Company mission, purpose, values, EVP and policies
- Company overview (structure/team, location(s) and leadership team)
- Key customers
- Workplace culture
- IDEA program details
- Social events
- What success looks like for the company
- Where to go with questions
- Policy and process documents
- Recordings of recent corporate presentations if available to provide a sense of team meetings and recent important topics
- Key pieces of software or systems your organization uses
- Where to find and save files
- A clearly defined role overview for the new employee
- Training schedule for role-specific tasks
- Performance measurement process
- Reward and recognition programs
- Potential challenges or roadblocks they may encounter

2. A 90-day plan

Set expectations by letting new hires know what their first 90 days with your company will look like. The plan should include:

- An overview of onboarding tasks and meetings

- Expectations at 30, 60 and 90 days
- A schedule for regular meetings to review and discuss
- Support, resources and training

3. One-on-one time

Establish regular meetings to check in on new hires, make sure they have what they need and answer any questions.

4. Feedback surveys

Survey your new employee on their experience in their first 90 days, then use this feedback to continually improve your program. Some key questions include:

- Before your first day, did you feel you had all the information you needed to start? If not, what was missing?
- Was your equipment ready on your first day?
- Was the training helpful? Is there any other training that would have been helpful?
- What else could have been helpful to get you started?
- Was the information presented during onboarding helpful and accurate? Were there topics that needed more detail?
- How useful was the new hire onboarding program overall?

2.4 Stage 3: Development – Encouraging engagement that builds resiliency

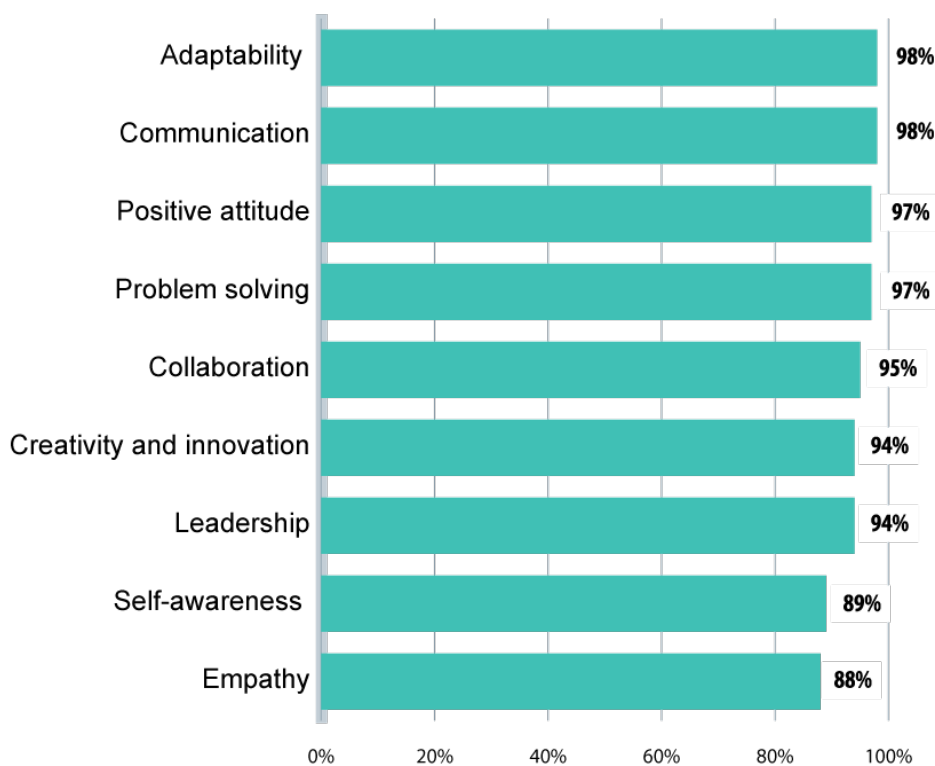
Building a culture of learning is vital to engaging and retaining top talent. Investing in their development demonstrates to your employees that you care about their professional growth and advancement. Employees who are given professional development opportunities are 15% more engaged and have a 34% higher retention rate than those who don't, says a recent study.¹³ Employee development also helps you build the skills and capabilities needed for the

¹³ Keswin, E. (2022). [3 ways to boost retention through professional development](#). *Harvard Business Review*.

future of your organization. Organizations with a strong learning culture are 92% more likely to develop new products, 52% more productive and 17% more profitable than their competitors.¹⁴ That means a focus on learning and development can help you make important strides in employee engagement and career growth and enable you to build teams that strengthen your organization with their resiliency.

Skills development is a key aspect of building organizational resiliency. Canadian bio-economy employers say “soft skill” areas within social-emotional and leadership areas are key to addressing the challenges presented by the pandemic.¹⁵ The specific skills identified as very or somewhat important to building organizational resiliency include adaptability (98%), communication (98%), positive attitude (97%), problem solving (97%), collaboration (95%), creativity and innovation (94%), leadership (94%), self-awareness (89%) and empathy (88%).¹⁶ This is consistent with findings from other literature on the key skills and experiences directly related to building organizational resiliency.

Skills identified as important to building organizational resiliency



¹⁴ Keswin, E. (2022). [3 ways to boost retention through professional development](#). *Harvard Business Review*.

¹⁵ From the BioTalent Canada survey of Canadian bio-economy employers for the “[Building resiliency and sustainability for the bio-economy to withstand disruption](#)” research project.

¹⁶ From the BioTalent Canada survey of Canadian bio-economy employers for the “[Building resiliency and sustainability for the bio-economy to withstand disruption](#)” research project.

2.4.1. Putting it into practice: Tips for a successful development program

To get the most out of your learning and development investments, follow these tips.

- Communicate openly:** Be aware of your employees' career goals and discuss opportunities regularly.
- Promote learning and development:** Provide learning opportunities in employees' technical fields as well as in other areas that will help them develop leadership skills, learn about IDEA and build resiliency.
- Mentor and sponsor top talent:** Mentorship and sponsorship support employee development and are critical to employee retention and satisfaction, especially for people in under-represented groups.¹⁷
- Create an inclusive and equitable succession planning program:** Succession planning can be very engaging for employees as it shows high-potential employees that you want them to evolve with the business into future leaders and that you're prepared to invest in getting them there.
- Develop career pathways:** General career pathways can be developed and communicated to employees to show them the different paths that could be applicable, depending on their role in the company.
- Explore cross-functional learning opportunities:** Consider options for employees to observe another role, take on a temporary assignment with a different team or cross-train to build new skills and learn about the business.
- Talk about visions and goals:** Remind employees of their unique contributions and how they fit into the big picture to help them connect with their roles and find meaning and purpose.
- Support work-life balance:** Give employees the time they need to participate in training and development programs within their existing work schedule.

¹⁷ Tu, M. & Li, M. (2021). [What great mentorship looks like in a hybrid workplace](#). *Harvard Business Review*.

- **Understand that everyone learns differently:** Offer a variety of accessible programs, opportunities and mediums to include and engage all types of learners.

2.5 Stage 4: Retention – Encouraging engagement that builds resiliency

Bio-economy companies employ individuals with very specific sets of skills and knowledge. It is imperative for bio-economy companies to retain those employees to ensure organizational memory is preserved and they are able to keep innovating and being productive and profitable. This is even more vital in the face of recent labour market intelligence predicting the need for 65,000 new bio-economy hires by 2029.¹⁸ The ability to retain top talent will equip bio-economy companies with the resources to mentor and develop new hires, attract capital and grants, network with other companies to build partnerships, and contribute to the overall growth of the sector.

Changes in the way people work combined with the competition for top talent in almost every industry has shifted the way organizations prioritize the people agenda. Recruiting top talent has become more challenging and costly, bringing employee engagement initiatives to the forefront of every executive's mind: 90% of bio-economy companies say tools and resources for recruiting talent would be useful.¹⁹

2.5.1. Putting it into practice: Tips for a successful development program

Being proactive and implementing strategies to retain employees before they decide to leave your organization should be a priority for any company. The following three steps will help you create an effective employee retention strategy:

1. Solicit feedback: Start by identifying your company's unique employee retention problems. Some ways you can get this feedback include:

- Exit interviews with employees who are leaving the company
- Focus groups to discuss key themes related to retention

¹⁸ BioTalent Canada. (2021). [Close up on the bio-economy: Demand and supply outlook](#).

¹⁹ From the BioTalent Canada survey of Canadian bio-economy employers for the "[Building resiliency and sustainability for the bio-economy to withstand disruption](#)" research project.

- Surveys, which may include regular pulse surveys, quick polls or full engagement surveys (less frequent)

2. Analyze your turnover data and metrics: Identify key metrics that pinpoint causes for turnover within your organization over a set period (e.g., one year), and then:

- Analyze overall retention rate – Take the number of employees at the beginning of the period and divide it by the number of employees at the end of the period.
- Analyze voluntary attrition – How many employees left by choice?
- Analyze involuntary attrition rates – How many employees have you let go?
- Analyze new employee satisfaction – This information will only be available if you have been conducting new hire surveys.
- Retention per manager/department – It's important to look at retention by department, as unusually high numbers may suggest a leadership issue.
- Average employment length – How long do employees stay with your company, on average?
- Cost of turnover – Add up the cost of hiring, including the employee's salary during onboarding and training, and the manager's salary during recruitment and onboarding.

3. Take actions to reduce turnover:




- Address issues within the organization or leadership team that are causing turnover. For example, if transparent communication is an issue, look for opportunities to communicate more openly with your employees.
- Ensure career development discussions are happening regularly to be certain employees are aware of career paths and potential opportunities within the company.
- Be transparent with your employees by clearly communicating that your organization recognizes there is a retention issue, and share your commitment to make improvements.
- Adjust compensation packages as needed to ensure your offerings are competitive and equitable.
- Meet with top talent in critical roles to better understand what they need to be engaged, and provide additional opportunities accordingly. These could include additional development opportunities, exposure to leaders, financial incentives or, if applicable, company shares or stock options.

- Help disengaged employees feel more connected to your organization and its leaders by working to build personal connections and by demonstrating how they are valued and have an important role to play in the organization.

Building workplace resiliency in Canada's bio-economy

Employee engagement is just one factor that contributes to workplace resiliency. Strengthening inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility (IDEA); hiring and retaining internationally educated professionals (IEPs); and fostering an equitable workforce free of discrimination are among other vital steps.

BioTalent Canada has published a series of resources offering tips, plans and other tools to further support your workplace resiliency efforts. Explore them at biotalent.ca/resiliency.

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