

Managing Turnover In Indoor Climbing Gyms

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in [CWA Blog](#)



As of January 2024, [wage and salary workers stayed for their current employers for just under four years](#), according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The median tenure of workers ages 25 to 34 was 2.7 years, workers ages 20 to 24 was 1.4 years, and workers under 20 didn't even average a full year.

The nature of employment has changed dramatically in the past three decades. The concept of a company "lifer" is one of distant memories.

The Cost of Turnover

Turnover is expensive, regardless of full or part-time employment status. The exact cost of turnover is a tough number to crunch—trust me, I've tried. There are so many factors to consider, and all of them cost something.

There's the time and labor to create job postings and signage, interviews, onboarding, and training. In some circumstances, there are overtime costs involved, especially if you cannot replace the employee before they exit.

And of course, there are the unknown and immeasurable costs regarding company culture, the customer experience, and overall morale of staff. The higher the turnover rate, the more stress on the existing staff, resulting in lower morale. The lower the morale, the higher the likelihood of more turnover. It's a cyclical, depressing pattern.

Most experts agree that the cost of replacing an employee is much greater than the cost of retaining one. But sometimes retention isn't an option, sometimes it is out of our control. Students will eventually graduate. Some employees may leave to start families; others might relocate because of family. Others leave for financial reasons and higher-paying jobs.

This article will focus on managing turnover, not retention. Spoiler alert: you can expect a separate article from me focusing on retention. Let's move on...

Planning for Turnover

When retention isn't an option, managers need a plan that minimizes the cost of turnover. Identifying the types of part-time employees and understanding the reasons these employees leave/quit can help managers better prepare for their eventual exit.

Planning for turnover starts during hiring. Asking the right questions and verbalizing clear expectations during the interview process can go a long way. During the interview process, hiring managers need to determine approximately how long this potential employee will stay with the company. Anything less than a year, in my opinion, is less than ideal for non-seasonal employees. Depending on my immediate needs and the quality of the applicant, I might consider a six-month commitment; anything less is not worth the time or resources.

Communication is Key

Communication is paramount with all employees, especially part-time employees. This means being present and being accessible. My staff knows that they can communicate with me through a multitude of platforms: phone, text, email, Slack messages, and Instagram DMs. And they can contact me at any time of day or night. Granted, boundaries are important. Just because they can contact me does not guarantee them an immediate response.

In-person is the most important type of communication. Being an approachable leader requires a lot of patience, practice, and, most importantly, presence.

This type of leadership involves actively listening, showing empathy, and demonstrating a willingness to engage authentically. Fostering a safe and comfortable environment for staff to express concerns and receive feedback is critical to creating and maintaining a healthy company culture.

I want my staff to tell me everything, even if some things are unpleasant to hear. Please tell me that you are actively looking for other jobs. Please tell me that you are looking to go back to school or actively applying for a trade school program. Please tell me that you feel overwhelmed or burnt out at work. **I won't stop you from pursuing your dreams. I want you to succeed in life! I will gladly write recommendation letters, even if you are still actively employed with me.**

Fostering a safe and comfortable environment for open and honest communication allows managers to better anticipate and plan for eventual turnover. Maintaining open channels of communication can prevent managers from being blindsided.

Anticipating Turnover

At any given moment, a smart manager is prepared for and has a plan for turnover.

Student turnover is relatively predictable, but it still needs to be managed effectively and efficiently. Schools typically start mid-to-late August through early September. Managers should start contacting their student staff by mid-July.

Who is leaving? What is their last date of employment? Who is staying, but cutting hours or changing availability? When does this new availability go into effect? The more concrete details you can get, the better you can plan.

I have many high school and college students on my team. The first week of July, I sent them all an availability form to fill out for the fall semester. The first week of August, I started writing mock schedules for September.

This allowed me to identify potential holes in my schedule as well as my hiring needs for the fall.

Not all turnover is predictable, which is why open communication and overall accessibility is truly so important.

I had a part-time (3-day/week) employee put in his notice while I was in the process of writing this article. The irony is not lost on me. Fate wanted to test me, to see if I could put my money where my mouth is. Let's talk about what happened.

I listened to his concerns; I listened to his reasons for leaving. I agreed with his concerns, and I accepted his reasons for leaving. Naturally, I anticipated his departure because I hired him. I knew about his other job (a business he owns). I knew about his side projects and hobbies. We communicated regularly. We worked together on a schedule that benefited us both. I approved all his time off so he could pursue his side projects.

Despite being part-time, he was a valued member of the team. I invested time and energy into growing his skills as an instructor—he was ultimately trained to teach lead lessons. There was a certain level of mutual respect developed between us. And that is why I was able to negotiate his exit. I asked for 3-4 weeks to hire and train a replacement, and he agreed.

Relationships go a long way in this world. If you show people that you care about them, they often return the sentiment in kind.

Always Be Hiring (ABH)

ABH and ABR (always be recruiting) are big mantras in the corporate world. Even small, independently owned businesses can learn from this mentality. "Always be hiring" is literally what it sounds like—a proactive approach to hiring that involves continuous recruitment and

engagement with potential candidates.

When it comes to part-time employees, managers should always anticipate and plan for turnover. A huge part of planning for turnover involves proactive recruitment. Even if a position isn't available, managers should still accept applications. This way, when someone unexpectedly quits, they don't have to start from scratch. By proactively building a pipeline, managers can avoid being reactive, which can lead to rushed hiring decisions.

In addition to accepting and reviewing applications year-round, I also lean on my front desk managers to "scout" (and sometimes vet) new talent. A lot of employment inquiries come through the front desk. If I'm not around, I expect my managers to handle the interaction appropriately—and then report back.

When it is time to hire, I always ask my front desk managers if they know of people interested in working at the indoor climbing gym. After all, they are the front line of the company, the ones with their ears to the ground.

Turnover with part-time employees is inevitable, especially in today's job market. Effective and genuine communication is crucial when it comes to anticipating, planning, and preparing for turnover. Knowing that turnover among part-time employees is inevitable, **managers should always be hiring.**

Looking for More Retention Strategies?

Our next Member Education Series is about Sustaining and Retaining Great Staff in indoor climbing gyms. Presented by the experts at Weigh My Rack, they presented on this topic as a Community Hub Session and it was so popular, we had to move them into a full room!

September 25, 2025 | 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM MT | Free for Members

About the Author



Ashley Routson is the General Manager of Planet Rock Climbing Gyms in Madison Heights, MI. She is a proud graduate of THE Ohio State University, where she was a member of both the varsity swimming team and varsity rowing team. Ashley came to the indoor climbing industry after nearly two decades of working in the restaurant and craft beer industries. She is also the author of *The Beer Wench's Guide to Beer*--a comprehensive book detailing all things craft beer. When she isn't pulling on plastic rocks in the gym,

Ashley loves moderate trad and sport climbing in the great

outdoors.

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