

# Employee Retention and Engagement in the Civilian Labor Force

Response to DACOWITS RFI 4



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# Introduction

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The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) requested a literature review on retention and engagement in civilian industries. The Committee was particularly interested in (1) how industry tracks employee retention and engagement; (2) strategies for improving employee retention and engagement; (3) the intersection of caregiver leave or caregiver sabbatical programs and retention; and (4) lessons learned for the military.

Chapter 1 begins with an overview of employee retention trends in the United States and strategies civilian industry organizations use to measure and better understand factors that influence retention. Chapter 2 provides an overview of employee engagement trends and tools organizations use to measure employee engagement. Chapter 3 presents an overview of best practices used by civilian industry organizations to improve retention, including a special focus on caregiver leave and sabbaticals. Chapter 4 concludes with a synthesis of lessons learned and implications for the military.

# Chapter 1. Employee Retention

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## Bottom Line Up Front

- Employee retention is critical to the success of an organization, and employee turnover produces both direct and indirect costs to employers.
- The average American employee has worked for their current employer for 4.2 years.
- Employee retention varies by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and industry.
- Interviews and surveys are common tools used to track and understand employee retention.
- Best practices for retention include professional development opportunities, flexible hours, supportive employee-supervisor relationships, and work autonomy.

Employee retention is defined as the process by which employees are encouraged to remain with an organization for as long as possible.<sup>1</sup> The long-term success of any organization is heavily influenced by its ability to retain its employees. Organizations experience direct and indirect costs as a result of losing an employee. Indirectly, organizations may experience decreased productivity and morale while also losing institutional knowledge. Directly, organizations may be responsible for separation costs (e.g., exit processing and vacation pay); replacement costs (e.g., background checks and relocation expenses); and training costs (e.g., orientation, on-the-job training, equipment, and materials).<sup>2</sup> Direct costs associated with staff turnover have been estimated in the range of \$4,000 per employee to 1.5 times the exiting employee's salary.<sup>3,4</sup> Voluntary turnover in the United States is estimated to have cost organizations about \$536 billion in 2016.<sup>5</sup> Given the huge costs associated with hiring and training new employees, companies unable to retain key staff must fight an uphill battle to remain competitive.<sup>6</sup>

## A. How long is the average employee retained? Does this vary by age, gender, or race/ethnicity of the employee?

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The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics measures trends in employee retention by the median<sup>i</sup> number of years workers have been with their current employers. The average American employee (aged 16 or over) has worked for their current employer for 4.2 years.<sup>7</sup> However, employee retention patterns have changed over time and continue to differ significantly by age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

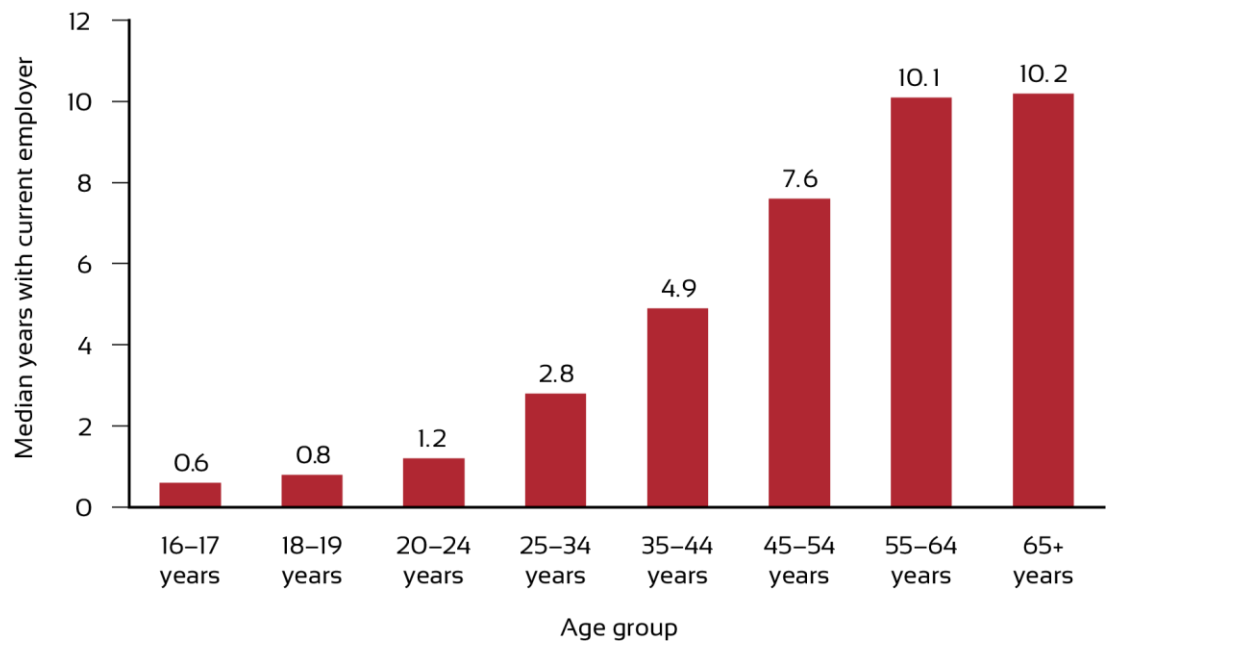
### 1. Employee retention by age

Older employees tend to have longer tenures with their employers (see Figure 1).

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<sup>i</sup> Median refers to the midpoint of a distribution of values (i.e., half of the observed values fall above it, and half fall below it).

**Figure 1. Median Years of Tenure With Current Employer by Age, 2018**

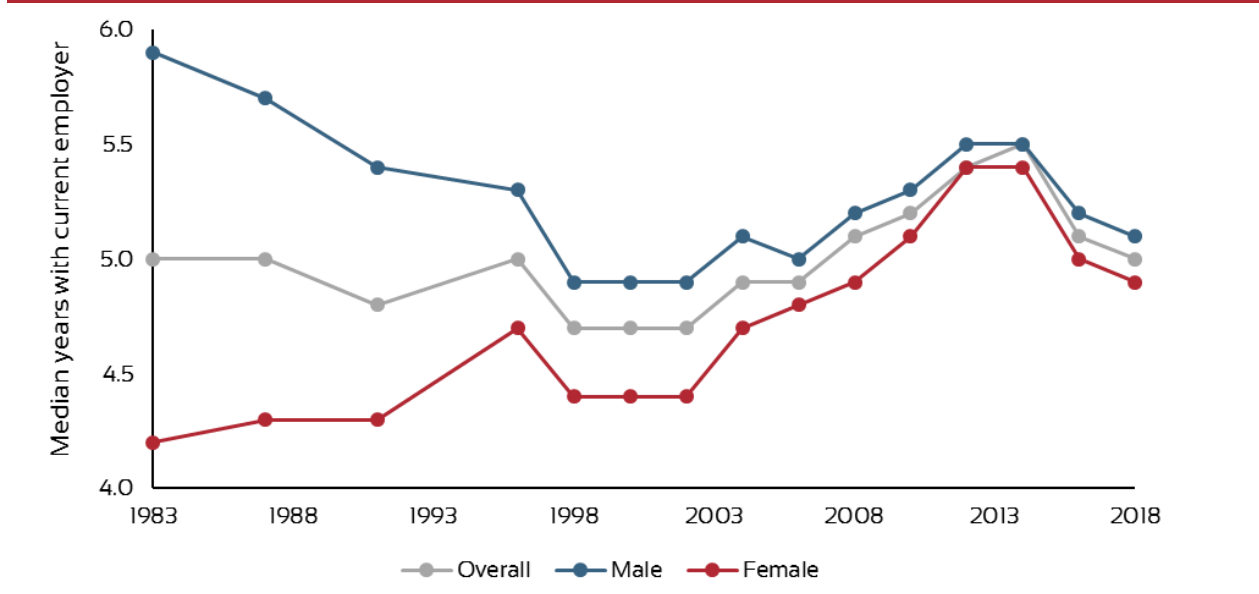


Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2018). *Employee tenure summary* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm>

## 2. Employee retention by gender

Men tend to have slightly longer tenures (4.3 years) than women (4.0 years),<sup>8</sup> though gender differences in employee retention have decreased over time (see Figure 2).<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 2. Median Years of Tenure for Wage and Salary Workers Aged 25 or Older by Gender, 1983–2018**

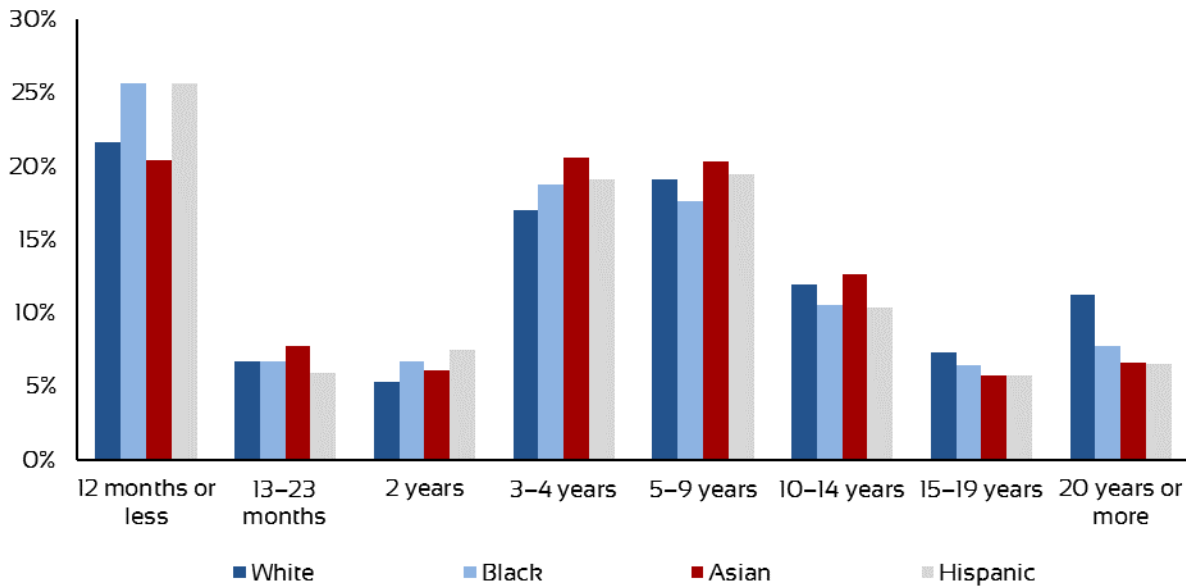


Source: Copeland, C. (2019). *Trends in employee tenure, 1983–2018*. EBRI Issue Brief, 474, 4–16.

### 3. Employee retention by race/ethnicity

Racial and ethnic minorities have similar tenures as white employees, although some differences emerge. Employees who have worked for their current employers for 15 or more years are disproportionately White. Hispanic and Black employees are overrepresented among those who have worked at their current jobs for less than a year (see Figure 3).<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 3. Distribution of Wage and Salary Workers by Tenure With Current Employer by Race/Ethnicity, 2018**



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2018). *Employee tenure summary* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm>

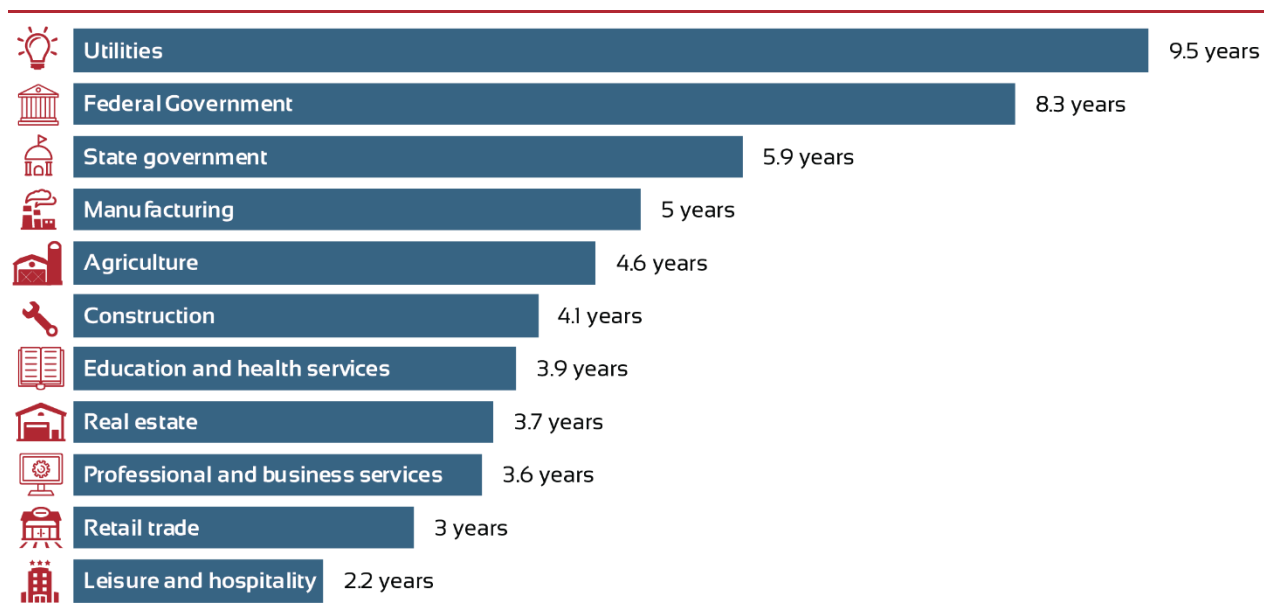
### 4. Factors affecting demographic differences in employee retention

There are several factors that contribute to these demographic differences in employee retention. A greater percentage of women and minorities hold low-tenure positions, which partially explains the higher turnover. Some factors that contribute to women’s lower retention rate are working in male-majority settings and feeling like less of an “in-group” member, a higher level of domestic responsibilities not well accommodated by companies, lower pay, fewer developmental opportunities, and more career obstacles.<sup>11</sup> Racial and ethnic minorities experience barriers to advancement, particularly in companies with fewer executives and senior leaders of color. This may motivate racial and ethnic minorities to seek opportunities elsewhere, even if a company is aiming to recruit more minorities into the organization.<sup>12</sup>

### B. How does retention vary by industry?

Employee retention also differs dramatically by industry. Industries that stand out with particularly high retention rates include utilities (9.5 years) and the Federal Government (6.8 years), while industries with exceptionally low retention rates include retail trade (3.0 years) and the leisure and hospitality industry (2.2 years).<sup>13</sup> Figure 4 compares retention statistics among selected industries in the United States.

**Figure 4. Median Years of Tenure With Current Employer by Industry, 2018**



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2018). *Employee tenure summary* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm>

## C. How do employers track retention and the reasons employees stay or leave?

To mitigate high employee turnover and the associated costs, organizations leverage tools such as exit interviews and stay interviews to better understand why employees leave or remain. Exit interviews are conducted when an employee leaves an organization, and stay interviews are conducted to better understand why an employee continues to stay with an employer. Data collected from exit and stay interviews are used to inform interventions aimed at reducing attrition and promoting factors that influence employees to stay with an organization. A discussion of the value and challenges associated with exit interviews and stay interviews follows.

### 1. Exit interviews

Organizations conduct interviews with exiting employees to help them understand factors that influence attrition and inform interventions aimed at mitigating the influence of these factors.<sup>14</sup> Research conducted by a leading market research firm showed 91 percent of Fortune 500 companies and 87 percent of mid-size companies conducted exit interviews, but fewer than 50 percent of exiting employees reported positive experiences with the process.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. Office of Personnel Management estimated approximately 70 percent of staff leave an organization without providing honest reasons for their attrition, which can limit the effectiveness of interventions informed by inaccurate data.<sup>16</sup>

In response to this challenge, recent literature has focused on identifying strategies for extracting honest interview responses from exiting employees. Identified strategies included using third-party vendors to conduct initial or secondary exit interviews,<sup>17, 18</sup> establishing clear communication to the exiting employee about the importance and purpose of exit interviews,<sup>19</sup> and developing a standardized

interview procedure to ensure fairness to exiting employees and collect valid data to improve the development of attrition mitigation interventions.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. Stay interviews

Stay interviews are formal interviews conducted with current employees to identify factors that have influenced their decisions to remain with an organization. In short, stay interviews are “designed to prevent [organizations] from needing exit interviews.”<sup>21</sup> Stay interviews have also been used to assess the potential for attrition in subgroups of employees who historically have been at higher risk of turnover in an organization, and to determine whether top-performing or high-potential employees intend to remain with an organization.<sup>22</sup>

Like exit interviews, recent literature on stay interviews has focused on identifying strategies for overcoming inaccurate data. Stay interviews conducted internally by an employee’s direct supervisor can help to promote engagement and trust between the manager and the employee. However, concerns have been raised about the validity of data gathered from internal stay interviews because of employees’ reluctance to share their true professional intentions. To address this challenge, external stay interviews can also be conducted by third-party vendors to collect more reliable data on factors that might contribute to at-risk employees leaving an organization and to inform potential interventions to prevent turnover.<sup>23</sup>

## D. What are best practices for improving employee retention?

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The literature indicates employee commitment and retention are complex issues. An employee’s decision to leave or stay with an organization is influenced by many concerns, including job satisfaction, family life, compensation, and other available opportunities.<sup>24</sup> Researchers have identified several factors closely linked to employee retention and strategies to better appeal to employees’ needs.

### 1. Training and professional development opportunities

The potential for personal and professional growth has a powerful impact on employee retention; opportunities for professional development increase employees’ commitment to a company.<sup>25</sup> Career growth opportunities linked to employee retention include advancement plans, internal promotion opportunities, and accurate career previews.<sup>26</sup> A survey of more than 30,000 employees in the United States showed the presence of advancement opportunities within an organization was a particularly important factor among high-performing employees and salaried/professional workers.<sup>27</sup>

One of the best practices for facilitating professional development is quality job training. The literature shows the organizational benefits and cost savings of training programs far outweigh the initial cost to employers.<sup>28</sup> Making training programs available to all employees has been associated with a 70-percent increase in employee retention. Providing training that engages employees with career challenges, advancement opportunities, work incentives, and supportive work environments is an effective retention strategy for employees of all ages.<sup>29</sup>

### 2. Implementing flexible hours to improve work-life balance

In recent years, work-life balance has become an increasingly important consideration for employees. Allowing employees to work flexible hours is a best practice for increasing their commitment and



retention because it limits the impact of work on family life and reduces stress. Previous research has also found practices such as childcare assistance and parental leave increase organizational commitment.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to increasing employee retention, practices designed to improve employees' work-life balance tend to increase their focus and motivation at work.<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting flexible work arrangements appear to play a larger role in retention for hourly employees than managerial or salaried employees,<sup>32</sup> though all employees report job flexibility is compelling.<sup>33</sup>

### **3. Supportive employee-supervisor relationships increase employee motivation**

The literature suggests a company's leadership and management style directly influence employee retention. The way employees perceive a company's management style largely depends on their relationships with their supervisors.<sup>34</sup> One study of retention practices indicated supervisor support significantly reduced turnover intention.<sup>35</sup> A 2018 study showed employees who believed their organizations were supportive had lower rates of absenteeism and higher rates of retention.<sup>36</sup>

Supervisor support also influences training and career development opportunities. Effective training programs cannot exist without strong support from those in senior management positions, who should serve as coaches to support career development among junior staff.<sup>37</sup> A supportive work environment plays a major role in employee motivation, which is reflected in retention rates.

### **4. Autonomy is a predictor of job satisfaction**

Autonomy is defined as the sense of independence and freedom of initiative present in a job. There is evidence autonomy plays a large role in job satisfaction, which is one of the most important retention factors.<sup>38</sup> Employees appreciate the ability to choose how to do their work and to have flexibility in decisions about workload. When employees feel job strain or a lack of control over their work, this leads to job dissatisfaction and negatively influences retention.<sup>39</sup>

### **5. Compensation alone does not increase retention**

Though it seems intuitive that higher pay would increase employee retention, the literature suggests the relationship between compensation and retention is more complicated. Some studies have found pay has a direct influence on retention, while others have found the relationship is less direct. There is some evidence extrinsic rewards such as compensation can increase short-term retention, but it must be coupled with other retention factors to decrease turnover in the long run.<sup>40</sup> While low compensation increases turnover within an organization, increased compensation by itself might not make up for a poor work environment or other factors that reduce employee retention.<sup>41</sup>

In organizations where money is used as an extrinsic motivator, intrinsic motivation tends to drop. Factors related to intrinsic motivation such as job security, task significance, and task variety have a stronger relationship with retention than compensation.<sup>42</sup> Compensation appears to play a larger role in retention among low performers and hourly employees. This finding suggests it might be beneficial to focus on other retention factors in addition to high compensation to retain high performers.<sup>43</sup>

## Chapter 2. Employee Engagement

### Bottom Line Up Front

- Employee engagement can increase productivity and company profitability.
- Surveys are a common tool used to measure employee engagement.
- The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), and Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Survey (Q12) are examples of widely used employee engagement surveys.

Definitions of employee engagement have varied widely in recent academic and business literature,<sup>44, 45, 46</sup> but most constructs of the term include the consideration of an employee's cognitive, emotional, or behavioral components and his or her relationship with a job or organization.<sup>47</sup> Definitions of employee engagement also vary as to whether they consider engagement at the job level, such as an employee's engagement with their specific job,<sup>48</sup> or at the organizational level, such as an employee's attitude toward their organization.<sup>49</sup>

Employee engagement can affect organizational productivity and profitability. Disengaged employees in the United States have been estimated to cost organizations between \$250 and \$300 billion per year,<sup>50</sup> while organizations with high employee engagement may experience a boost in productivity and profitability of up to 20 percent versus those with low employee engagement.<sup>51</sup> Research also suggests engaged public sector employees in particular are twice as likely to remain in their current jobs, two-and-a-half times more likely to believe they can make a difference in their organizations, and three times more likely to be satisfied with their jobs than their disengaged public sector counterparts. However, recent data suggests only about 30 percent of American workers are engaged in their jobs.<sup>52</sup>

### 1. Measuring employee engagement

The influence of employee engagement on productivity and profitability highlights the importance of measuring this factor in civilian industry. Employee engagement surveys are the primary tools used in civilian industry to monitor and measure how connected employees are with their jobs and organizations. The sections that follow outline the most popular employee surveys being used to measure engagement in the civilian industry and Federal agency environments, including the domains addressed by each survey, types of employee engagement each survey attempts to assess, and examples of questions from each survey.

#### a. Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)

The UWES was developed by Schaufeli and colleagues<sup>53</sup> and is currently the most widely used tool for measuring employee engagement in civilian industry.<sup>54</sup> The UWES aims to assess employee engagement by asking employees to rate statements about their vigor and energy levels while at work, dedication to their jobs, and absorption in their jobs.<sup>55</sup> The UWES was initially developed as a 17-question survey<sup>56</sup> but has since been shortened to a 9-question survey that has received greater validation in the academic literature.<sup>57, 58</sup> See Table 1 for example questions from the UWES.

### b. Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS)

The FEVS is administered by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management annually to all permanent full-time and part-time Federal employees from large and participating small Federal agencies.<sup>59</sup> The 2019 FEVS consisted of 101 items and aimed to assess engagement as defined as an employee’s “sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission.”<sup>60</sup> The FEVS measures engagement by asking employees to rate their agreement with statements about various aspects of their jobs and agencies—such as their work units, supervisors, or leadership—unlike the UWES, which asks about items relating to an employee’s state of mind while at work.<sup>61</sup> See Table 1 for example statements used in the FEVS.

### c. Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Survey (Q12)

The Q12 was developed in 2013 and is similar to the FEVS in that it aims to assess engagement by asking employees to rate their agreement with statements about aspects of their jobs or organizations rather than statements about their state of mind while at work. The Q12 is composed of 1 question about overall satisfaction with one’s job and 12 statements for respondents to declare their level of agreement with statements on a variety of topics, such as materials and equipment, understanding of expectations, and opportunities for development. The Q12 has been recently validated in the academic literature.<sup>62</sup> See Table 1 for example statements used in the Q12.

**Table 1. Domains and Example Statements From Popular Employee Engagement Surveys**

Employee Engagement Survey	Domains Measured	Example Statements
UWES (9 items total) <sup>63</sup>	Vigor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At my work, I feel bursting with energy</li> <li>I am enthusiastic about my job</li> </ul>
	Dedication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work</li> <li>I feel happy when I am working intensely</li> </ul>
	Absorption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I am immersed in my work</li> <li>I get carried away when I am working</li> </ul>
FEVS (101 items total) <sup>64</sup>	My work experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I have enough information to do my job well</li> <li>My workload is reasonable</li> </ul>
	My work unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The people I work with cooperate to get the job done</li> <li>Awards in my work unit depend on how well employees perform their jobs</li> </ul>
	My agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employees are recognized for providing high quality products and services</li> <li>Creativity and innovation are rewarded</li> </ul>
	My supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>My supervisor provides me with constructive suggestions to improve my job performance</li> <li>My supervisor treats me with respect</li> </ul>
	My leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managers communicate the goals of the organization</li> <li>In my organization, senior leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce</li> </ul>
	My satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job?</li> <li>Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?</li> </ul>

Employee Engagement Survey	Domains Measured	Example Statements
FEVS (101 items total) <sup>65</sup> (continued)	Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Currently in my work unit poor performers usually leave the work unit—quit</li> <li>• Currently in my work unit poor performers usually remain in the work unit and improve their performance over time</li> </ul>
Q12 (13 items total) <sup>66</sup>	Overall satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How satisfied are you with [Company Name] as a place to work?</li> </ul>
	Know what's expected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know what is expected of me at work</li> </ul>
	Materials and equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right</li> </ul>
	Opportunity to do best	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day</li> </ul>
	Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the last 7 days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work</li> </ul>
	Cares about me	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person</li> </ul>
	Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is someone at work who encourages my development</li> </ul>
	Opinions count	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At work, my opinions seem to count</li> </ul>
	Mission/Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel any job is important</li> </ul>
	Committed to quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work</li> </ul>
	Best friend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have a best friend at work</li> </ul>
	Progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the last 6 months, someone at work has talked to me about progress</li> </ul>
Learn and grow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow</li> </ul>	

## 2. Limitations of measuring employee engagement

The comparative effectiveness of different employee engagement surveys has been widely discussed and analyzed in recent business and academic literature, but researchers have reported two primary limitations to these efforts:

- ▶ **Lack of standardized definitions.** The lack of a standardized definition of employee engagement in the academic and business literature has made it difficult for researchers to evaluate and compare the effectiveness of employee engagement surveys. This difficulty arises because different employee engagement surveys are designed to assess different aspects of employee engagement. As an example, the FEVS assesses engagement by primarily asking employees to respond to statements about aspects of their jobs or organizations likely to produce high engagement, such as relationships with supervisors (e.g., my supervisor treats me with respect), while the UWES asks employees to respond to statements about the emotions they associate with their jobs (e.g., I find the work I do full of meaning and purpose).<sup>67</sup>
- ▶ **Assessing work as a unified experience.** Another limitation is employee engagement surveys are generally designed to assess work as a unified experience rather than as a set of tasks the employee completes as part of the job. This design aspect limits how effective engagement

surveys can be in determining levels of engagement with different tasks or projects associated with a job.<sup>68</sup>

Although there are challenges associated with comparing the effectiveness of employee engagement surveys and how they address different aspects of an employee's job, they are still the most popular tools for understanding engagement in the workplace.

## Chapter 3. Caregiver Leave and Retention

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### Bottom Line Up Front

- The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) federally mandates employers to provide eligible employees 12 weeks of unpaid leave for family caregiving situations.
- 16 percent of employees have access to paid family leave through their employers.
- Some States offer family leave insurance programs, which provide additional cash benefits to certain employees on leave for caregiving.
- Employers who provide paid family leave benefits to employees report significantly lower turnover rates.

Caregiver leave refers to a leave of absence from an organization by an employee to care for a sick family member or for new parents to care for and bond with a newly birthed, adopted, or fostered child.<sup>69</sup> There are various types of caregiver leave available to private sector employees, including unpaid caregiver leave, paid caregiver leave, and State programs to financially support employees taking paid or unpaid caregiver leave. Descriptions of these types of caregiver leave follow.

### 1. Unpaid caregiver leave

In the United States the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) federally mandates employers to provide eligible employees (employees working for at least a year at an organization with more than 50 staff members) the opportunity to take 12 weeks of job-protected unpaid leave to address certain family caregiving situations.<sup>70</sup> These caregiving situations consist of the birth of a child; placement of an adopted or foster care child with an employee; care of an employee's spouse, child, or parent with a serious health condition; or self-care for a serious health condition that limits an employee's ability to work.<sup>71</sup> However, some surveys have estimated about 33 percent of employees eligible for unpaid leave under the FMLA do not take it because of concerns about the loss of income,<sup>72</sup> while other studies have indicated this number could be closer to 75 percent.<sup>73</sup> Research by a District of Columbia-based think tank suggests taking unpaid or partially paid family leave for less than an employee's full income could result in employees being more likely to access public assistance programs to supplement their loss of income.<sup>74</sup>

### 2. Paid caregiver leave

No Federal law requires organizations to provide paid leave for employees with caregiving needs.<sup>75</sup> As of March 2018 approximately 16 percent of civilian employees had access to paid family leave through their employers. Paid family leave benefits are more frequently provided to employees who work full time, in high-paying occupations, and in companies with at least 100 staff members.<sup>76</sup> A 2017 Pew Research Center study indicated 27 percent of people employed between November 2014 and November 2016 took either paid or unpaid leave to address family caregiving concerns or to care for their own serious health conditions. Of those employees, 47 percent received full pay, 36 percent received no pay, and 16 percent received partial pay.<sup>77</sup>

A 2016 survey sponsored by a large human resources consulting firm showed out of about 400 U.S.-based organizations that offered their employees paid leave, 58 percent offered the same length of leave to all qualifying new-parent employees, which included fathers, while 25 percent of organizations

provided longer paid parental leave for birth mothers. Of the organizations surveyed, 80 percent provided full pay to employees on parental leave for an average of 4 weeks.<sup>78</sup>

Some research suggests leave policies may be used disproportionately more by mothers than fathers. Working mothers have a higher probability than fathers of taking unpaid or paid leave,<sup>79</sup> even though employed mothers have significantly less access to paid leave benefits and flexible working hours in the workforce.<sup>80</sup> In situations when a new mother and father both have access to paid leave benefits, the mother is more likely than the father to access this benefit.<sup>81</sup>

Family leave insurance programs are an alternative approach to traditional paid family leave. California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Washington, and the District of Columbia have either implemented or plan to implement these programs to provide cash benefits to certain employees on leave because of caregiving responsibilities.<sup>82</sup> Among these programs, the maximum time limit for benefits available to employees ranges from 4 weeks in Rhode Island to 12 weeks in Washington, with New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts planning to expand to 12 weeks in either 2020 or 2021.<sup>83</sup> Data from the paid family leave programs in California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island have indicated the majority of paid leave claims are requested by women to care for newborn babies. Employees with lower incomes are less likely than those with higher incomes to file a paid leave claim. Data has shown the employees of large companies in this sample of States are more likely to file a paid leave claim than employees in smaller organizations.<sup>84</sup>

### 3. Impact of paid family leave benefits on employee retention

Paid family leave policies are beneficial to employees in that they allow them to address family caregiving situations without having to worry about losing substantial amounts of income, but such policies can also benefit employers in ways that are less readily apparent. Research shows paid family leave policies can positively influence retention and productivity rates in organizations, and some managers have even reported implementing paid family leave policies to address issues related to employee turnover and recruitment.<sup>85</sup> Additional findings on how paid family leave policies positively affect employers follow:

- ▶ **Lower turnover.** Employers who provide paid family leave benefits to employees report significantly lower turnover rates.<sup>86</sup>
- ▶ **Higher rate of return after taking leave.** Employees offered certain paid family leave benefits are significantly more likely to return to their jobs after taking leave.<sup>87</sup> Paid parental leave is especially influential on women's decisions to return to their jobs after having children.<sup>88, 89</sup>
- ▶ **Improved ability to balance work and family commitments.** Paid family leave policies have been found to improve employees' ability to manage work and family obligations as well as their commitment and dedication to their organizations.<sup>90, 91</sup>
- ▶ **Increase in the number of mothers entering the labor market.** Paid parental leave benefits may increase the likelihood of mothers entering the labor market.<sup>92</sup>

## Chapter 4. Lessons Learned for a Military Context

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This literature review provides an overview of how civilian industries and workplaces track and improve retention and employee engagement, including the impact of caregiver leave on retention. Retaining the most highly qualified employees is a challenge facing all companies and organizations. Employers in the civilian labor force use research tools such as surveys and interviews to understand employee retention and track levels of engagement.

Currently it is challenging to compare civilian employee retention rates with Service member retention rates because of substantial differences between civilian employers and the military institution. The military's size and strength are dictated by national security needs; the physically demanding nature of service requires strict health- and age-related regulations; and the institution exerts great control over the lives of Service members, even outside of working hours. Civilian employees, however, generally have fewer restrictions conditioning their ability to remain in their jobs and have greater freedom and flexibility to stay with or leave their current employers. It remains unclear how the military defines "successful" retention of Service members and whether retention expectations vary by Service branch, occupational specialty, rank, or sociodemographic characteristics. Definitions of successful retention may become even more important as more Service members enter the military under the blended retirement system, which provides more evenly distributed retirement benefits throughout service, aligning with civilian workplaces.

Best practices for employee engagement and retention in civilian workplaces indicate a host of factors that motivate employees to stay. Long-term employee satisfaction goes beyond compensation and includes opportunities for professional development, supportive employee-supervisor relationships, autonomy, and work-life flexibility. While most U.S. employees do not have access to paid caregiver leave, it has been shown to reduce employee turnover and positively affect mothers in the workplace. The military offers benefits many civilian employees do not have, including paid parental leave and opportunities for increasing responsibility and professional development. However, civilian employers are increasingly able to provide greater work flexibility, including teleworking and alternative schedules, and autonomy for employees. While the nature of military service may not be able to accommodate greater flexibility in work or other innovative practices, the military could continue to examine how it can strengthen the factors that cause Service members choose to stay while mitigating challenges or barriers to service.



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