A reflection on the Great Resignation in the hospitality and tourism industry

Bingjie Liu-Lastres
Department of Tourism, Event and Sport Management,
Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis,
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Han Wen
Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of North Texas,
Denton, Texas, USA, and

Wei-Jue Huang
School of Hotel and Tourism Management,
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide a critical reflection on the Great Resignation in the hospitality and tourism industry in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this paper reviews the causes and effects of the Great Resignation, addresses the labor shortage in this industry and proposes strategies that can help manage the challenges.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on a critical analysis of emerging phenomena, related literature and researchers’ experiences and insights.

Findings – The Great Resignation has presented unprecedented challenges for the hospitality and tourism industry. A closer examination reveals that the pandemic has served as a catalyst rather than a leading cause of this trend. Workforce issues are becoming increasingly complex under contemporary influences, including internal elements such as new explications at work and external factors like the gig economy and technology implementation.

Practical implications – This study provides practical implications on how Hospitality and Tourism practitioners can respond to the Great Resignation on micro, meso and macro levels. The practical implications revolve around employees’ changing needs and preferences in the wave of Great Resignation, as well as the necessity for employers’ reflection and improvement.

Originality/value – This study marks an initial attempt to provide a critical assessment of a contemporary issue involving the Great Resignation. This paper extends its discussion through an advanced analysis of the issue, offers suggestions to manage current obstacles related to labor issues in hospitality and tourism, and illuminates future research directions.

Keywords Great Resignation, COVID-19, Workforce management, Resilience, Employee-centered approaches, Turnover

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

The Great Resignation, also known as the Big Quit or the Great Attrition, captures the higher-than-normal quit rate among American workers since 2021 (Cook, 2021). This trend was first noticed in the spring of 2021 and continued to grow in the second half of the year, shortly after the economy moved toward recovery from COVID-19 and a climbing number
of jobs were made available. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that nearly 33 million people had left their jobs since April 2021 – equal to more than one-fifth of the national workforce (Zagorsky, 2022).

The Great Resignation has not touched all sectors equally; the hospitality industry remains the hardest hit. A recent Bureau of Labor Statistics report (US Bureau of Labor, 2022a) revealed that the accommodation and food services sector weathered the highest quit rate – 6.0% – in January 2022. This rate was followed by 4.6% in retail trade and 3.4% in arts, entertainment and recreation, all of which belong to the hospitality and tourism industry. By contrast, most other sectors’ quit rates were below the national average of 2.8%. Hospitality and tourism work is relatively labor-intensive and low-wage. Staffing shortages have thus presented a problem, with attrition rates higher than 5% on many occasions since 2000 (Zagorsky, 2022). Yet, compared with prepandemic data, the quit rate in accommodation and food services jumped from 4.1% in February 2020 to a record high of 6.4% in November 2021, reflecting the steepest increase across all service sectors (US Bureau of Labor, 2022b).

Research on the Great Resignation has also shown that resignation rates differ by generation and gender. Generation Z has spearheaded this movement (Gerber, 2021): in a global survey, 59% of Gen Z respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their current jobs, and more than 50% indicated that they planned to switch jobs within the next year. ADP Research Institute’s Workforce Vitality Report also identified a high turnover rate of 10% in the 16–24 age group in contrast to the national average of 5.1% (Zagorsky, 2022). Mid-career employees are another major force behind the Great Resignation (Cook, 2021). Through an analysis of more than 9 million employee records from more than 4,000 companies, Cook (2021) discovered that the resignation rate of employees between 30 and 45 years of age soared by more than 20% from 2020 to 2021. Finally, a record-wide gender gap in quit rates was observed in August 2021 since the pandemic had begun, such that female workers were resigning at a faster rate than their male counterparts (Pardue, 2021) (Figure 1).

Similar trends have been noted in the hospitality and tourism industry. Millennials, Gen Z and female workers are leaving in droves in the wake of COVID-19, either by abandoning

![Quit Rates by Service Sector (Seasonally Adjusted)](image)

**Data source:** US Bureau of Labor (2022b) Statistics
their jobs or switching careers (Croes et al., 2021; Fins, 2020). These trends highlight an unusual job market in the hospitality industry amid the Great Resignation. The number of unfilled positions is growing; as such, it is essential to understand why people are leaving their jobs in hospitality and what can be done to curtail this phenomenon. Furthermore, as the hospitality industry is eager to recover and take advantage of the anticipated upswing in travel, it becomes imperative for the industry to address staffing concerns strategically.

Study overview
Accordingly, this paper aims to offer an immediate response to this timely topic through critical lenses. By analyzing the underlying causes and effects of the Great Resignation, this study provides insight to guide theory-, research- and data-driven solutions to this problem. As explicated by Kwok (2022), a critical reflection paper does not always assume a standard methodology but rather, it synthesizes selected literature and industry/market reports to present personal reflections on a contemporary issue and inform managerial thoughts and actions. In the same vein, this paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge by identifying the factors related to the Great Resignation in hospitality and tourism. Finally, the practical implications of this paper lie in its establishment of a micro–meso–macro model offering suggestions on how to approach the labor market during the postpandemic times.

Has COVID-19 triggered the Great Resignation in hospitality and tourism?
While the drivers behind this mass exodus are manifold, the leading causes are thought to be associated with the pandemic: job insecurity; employee burnout; mistreatment by employers and customers; work-life epiphanies and desires for remote work, better compensation and a more stable profession (Fontinelle, 2022). A survey by the job-search site Joblist recently showed that job satisfaction in the hospitality industry had declined drastically due to the pandemic (Joblist, 2021) – 45% of current hospitality workers stated they were more dissatisfied with their jobs at present versus prior to the pandemic, and 58% of respondents were planning to quit their jobs before the end of 2021.

A deeper analysis of what is steering the Great Resignation unveils multiple explanations. For younger Gen Z workers, a lack of opportunities to socialize after work due to social distancing has reduced their sense of belonging and loyalty to their organizations. This pause in networking has also slowed or stalled their career paths and compelled some to seek jobs with greater career potential (Zagorsky, 2022). A heavy workload and high stress during the pandemic have led mid-career employees to reconsider their work-life priorities. The shift toward remote work has also elevated the demand for experienced staff, affording these employees a chance to move into more attractive positions (Cook, 2021). In terms of female workers, especially ethnic minorities and women with young children, the ongoing changes in childcare and school systems during the pandemic have rendered it difficult to ensure their children’s safety while at work (Jolly et al., 2022). Women shoulder a disproportionate amount of caretaking responsibilities; one recent report on women in the workplace revealed that nearly one-third of female employees were planning to cut their work hours, change jobs or even leave the workforce (Croes et al., 2021). An overconcentration of low-wage, low-hour positions in hospitality has only exacerbated women’s struggle to make ends meet (Fins, 2020).

Controversially, Baum et al. (2020) maintained that the pandemic has acted as an amplifier rather than the leading cause of the labor shortage in hospitality and tourism. The fact that the staffing problem is not unique to COVID-19 times substantiates this argument. Indeed, workforce issues existed long before the pandemic. This public health crisis has sparked safety concerns in the workplace. Even so, the large volume of unclaimed work in
hospitality and tourism is closely tied to pre-pandemic problems, including low wages, burnout and subpar working conditions (Cook, 2021; Sull et al., 2022). Upon re-entering the market after lockdown, most hospitality businesses sought to craft a secure environment for incoming customers to the neglect of employees’ evolving needs. This relative ignorance can compromise workers’ performance, organizational commitment and turnover intentions (Croes et al., 2021).

Baum et al.’s (2020) assertion is plausible because not all companies in the hospitality sector face the same challenges in losing talent. In a detailed analysis of major companies’ corporate culture and attrition rates, Sull et al. (2022) pointed out that businesses with a positive reputation and healthy workplace culture experienced lower-than-average attrition during the Great Resignation. Some of these companies, such as Southwest Airlines and Enterprise Rent-A-Car, belong to the hospitality industry. For instance, workers at JetBlue were found to be twice as likely to quit as employees of Southwest Airlines (Sull et al., 2022). This notion aligns with hospitality management research suggesting that multiple organizational factors besides compensation affect employees’ loyalty and commitment; examples include the hospitality workplace culture, organizational support and at-work experiences (Baum et al., 2020).

Although the Great Resignation occurred shortly after the pandemic began, a causational relationship appears unfounded. Fundamental flaws embedded in most hospitality business models and an absence of remedial measures are instead responsible for the Great Resignation in hospitality and tourism. Meanwhile, the pandemic and its far-reaching impacts have intensified persistent employer-employee dilemmas in hospitality and tourism, including the industry’s over-reliance on temporary, part-time workers; limited workforce resources and support; poor working conditions; toxic workplace culture and increasing career mobility (Baum et al., 2020; Croes et al., 2021; Demitrivia, 2021; Huang et al., 2021; Tolkach and Tung, 2019).

**Has the Great Resignation caused labor shortages in hospitality and tourism?**

At a glance, it is easy to attribute the hospitality and tourism industry’s labor shortage to the Great Resignation. In reality, however, the Great Resignation is simply the tip of the iceberg. A closer examination reveals more complexities. The pandemic disrupted the industry’s routine operations. Various COVID-19 containment measures implemented over the past two years, coupled with capacity restrictions, have suppressed economic activities at the regional, national and international levels. Shrinking revenues have resulted in business closures and unprecedented job losses across various hospitality and tourism sectors. The industry-wide layoff in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a need to quickly fill all vacancies as businesses reopened. Although the hospitality and tourism workforce appears to be recovering more slowly than other industries, the number of job postings climbed throughout 2020 and 2021 (Huang et al., 2021).

Organizations have leveraged two principal strategies to satisfy mounting demand in the hospitality and tourism workforce – recruiting former hospitality workers and searching for new talent. Surprisingly, many former hospitality and tourism staff remains hesitant to return. Market reports have shown that between roughly 25% and 33% of former employees do not wish to re-enter the industry. Their main reasons include low pay and benefits, the desire for a new career path, difficult customers, inflexible scheduling and long hours, physically demanding work, COVID-19 fears and vaccination concerns (Chen and Rui, 2022; Croes et al., 2021; Joblist, 2021).

Moreover, most of these newly posted jobs are hourly, entry-level positions requiring minimal specialized skills and offering compensation similar to pre-pandemic levels (Huang et al., 2021).
Previously, individuals qualified for these positions were primarily frontline workers – and the first to be released when the pandemic hit (Croes et al., 2021). These employees also tended to prioritize the financial benefits of their jobs. Being mobile is another significant feature of the hospitality and tourism workforce (Tolkach and Tung, 2019). To pursue career growth and personal benefits, hospitality and tourism employees are prone to moving between positions within or between organizations, even switching their occupations and locations (Baum et al., 2016).

Most of these staff, therefore, turned to open positions in other industries, such as agriculture and supermarket retail (Cook, 2021), as the pandemic eased. Such positions also relied heavily on female workers before the pandemic. Nevertheless, a recently published report on hospitality employment trends indicated that this segment of labor personnel remains reluctant to continue working in hospitality and tourism after the pandemic due to family obligations, poor working conditions and inadequate income (Croes et al., 2021). For instance, some hotel housekeeping staff have transitioned to sectors such as public school districts or office buildings to take jobs with similar duties, higher pay and fixed schedules that provide them with weekends off.

Some former hospitality workers have opted to pursue educational opportunities, with this choice being quite prominent among mid-career employees (Cook, 2021; Croes et al., 2021). Apparently, temporary job loss shook their confidence in this profession as well as in long-term job security (Croes et al., 2021). They were particularly worried about facing a similar crisis or another wave of COVID-19. To better prepare for their future careers, they lived on unemployment benefits while seeking additional degrees, certifications and other education opportunities. Workers may see this as a turning point to plan the next step of their career transition. On most occasions, temporary lay-offs became permanent decisions to leave the hospitality and tourism profession (Demitrivia, 2021). Meanwhile, the pandemic has adversely affected current hospitality management students’ occupation-related attitudes, arousing hesitation to launch a career in the industry (Birtch et al., 2021).

In addition to the challenges of recruiting former hospitality workers and attracting new ones, the present hospitality and tourism workforce seems unhappy with their hospitality work life. This dissatisfaction has accelerated the Great Resignation and added another layer of uncertainty to the labor issue. Existing hospitality workers are mainly composed of two groups: “survivors,” whose employment was not influenced by the pandemic, and workers who have since returned to work. However, because of the labor shortage, most of the workforce must now cover shifts and responsibilities beyond their original job description. Reduced work performance, increased work stress and amplified job insecurity have been frequently reported, resulting in exhaustion, dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from one’s position and even the profession (Bajrami et al., 2021). Such vicious cycles have pervaded all positions and sectors in hospitality and tourism. In sum, even though the Great Resignation is partly responsible for the staffing problem in this industry, failure to satisfy the workforce’s changing needs appears to be a core determinant.

**Exploring the new normal in the postpandemic workforce**

Undeniably, the pandemic represented a tipping point for many people who were released from their routine job responsibilities and could re-evaluate their work-life balance and general values (Fioretti et al., 2020). This observation applies equally to the hospitality and tourism workforce. Existing studies (Baum et al., 2020; Croes et al., 2021) show that most former, current and future hospitality employees are open to lifestyle changes due to their COVID-19 experiences. It is accordingly necessary to advance our understanding of the changing postpandemic workforce (Bajrami et al., 2021). As such, the following section discusses three
external influences related to the modern hospitality workforce in the wake of the pandemic. These influences include new expectations at work, the rise of the gig economy and the development and implementation of technological innovations in hospitality establishments.

The pandemic has brought renewed focus to workplace changes, such as flexible work arrangements; growing awareness of mental health and wellness; better approaches to diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I). To start, the work-from-home trend followed stay-at-home orders instituted early in the pandemic, where nonessential workers were required to adapt to a new work format grounded in telecommunication. Over the past two years, many employees have become accustomed to remote work, and some have even relocated from expensive cities to lower-cost areas. Remote work allows employees to take control of marginal time on workdays and relieves financial burdens associated with commuting. Workers can also gain the time to participate in healthy habits such as exercise. A recent survey by FlexJobs and Mental Health America specified that work flexibility supports employees’ mental health, a prevalent workplace issue that has been brought to the forefront thanks to the pandemic and its ongoing impacts (Reynolds, 2020). At the same time, to further support remote work, some companies have extended their childcare benefits and are planning a permanent shift to a partly or fully remote work model. These changes also trigger knock-on effects within the hospitality workforce, who may long for a similar working style. However, these new influences stand in stark contrast to the nature of most hospitality jobs, which are labor-intensive, revolve around irregular hours and generally entail close physical proximity.

Besides personal health and wellness, another pertinent issue amid the pandemic concerns DE&I. Diverse groups – including ethnic minorities, women of color, LGBTQ+ employees and working parents – have struggled to strike a sufficient work-life balance during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition to regular organizational support, the essence of creating effective DE&I initiatives at work has been addressed through social phenomena such as the Black Lives Matter protests, the #MeToo movement and a disproportionate rise in anti-Asia hate crimes. Although DE&I are at risk in pandemic times, they are critical to businesses’ recovery and resilience. This notion is supported by several industry reports suggesting that diverse and inclusive companies are more likely to outperform their peers, resulting in better organizational health and performance (Liu-Lastres and Wen, 2021).

The explosive growth of the gig economy has also shaped the contemporary workforce. The gig economy encompasses multiple work forms ranging from ridesharing and food delivery to other freelance, contractual or part-time employment such as freelance writing, online tutoring and Web development. The concept of gig jobs has been well accepted among younger generations over the years. Different from a traditional 9-to-5 work schedule, gig workers enjoy the freedom and power to select projects based on their interests and to organize their own agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic has further strengthened the gig economy’s popularity: a 2021 study by the Pew Research Center (Anderson et al., 2011) indicated that 16% of Americans had gained income through online gig platforms, and nearly 60% of gig workers can make ends meet through gig income. As the gig economy opens the door to an on-demand workforce, it is integral that the hospitality industry cultivates a sustainable, positive and long-term relationship with it.

Finally, due to pandemic-imposed sanitation and safety requirements, the hospitality industry has seen a rapid expansion in technology applications. Most restaurants now offer contactless payment and digital menus. In addition, hotels allow guests to check in via apps (mobile keys) and facial scans. Some hotels have incorporated artificial intelligence and robotic devices into routine tasks, such as robot reception, room delivery and concierge services. These technological innovations aim to reduce person-to-person contact, which has
been pivotal in curbing the spread of the virus. However, while contactless technologies can help hospitality businesses survive trying circumstances, these innovations also represent organizational changes, which raise the question of whether hospitality employees’ skillsets require updating – especially for frontline workers. A recent study (Khaliq et al., 2022) also finds that hospitality and tourism organizations’ adoption of new technology often leads to a sense of employment uncertainty and higher turnover intentions.

As shown in Figure 2, this study was inspired by the Great Resignation and reviewed multiple aspects of the labor issue in hospitality. These critical analyses informed actionable implications for hospitality business owners and researchers. Relevant suggestions are detailed in the next section.

Ways to embrace postpandemic workforce challenges in hospitality and tourism

The pandemic has upended people’s lives, including at work. Hospitality leaders and managers thus need to develop an economically and socially viable path to build and maintain a resilient workforce. Organizational learning is a critical yet often overlooked component of crisis management within hospitality and tourism. Drawing on a concept from evolutionary economics, this section uses the micro–meso–macro framework (Baum et al., 2020) to briefly discuss how practitioners and researchers can respond to labor-related obstacles in the hospitality and tourism industry (Figure 3).

On the micro level, an employee-oriented approach should be emphasized with strategies centered on individuals, regardless of their positions and demographics. Hospitality and tourism employees have experienced unprecedented challenges since the onset of the pandemic, which have drastically altered work-related expectations. Recognizing these changing needs marks the first step toward making improvements and re-establishing the employer-employee trust and relationship. Employers should maintain active communications with employees and recognize the importance of listening to their needs and concerns. In addition to being flexible with employees’ career paths, employers should also establish a flexible mindset to embrace the diverse needs of employees and their changing responsibilities both at work and from home.
For example, health-related risks and other concerns about vaccination and mental stress constitute prominent work challenges for many hospitality staff.

As most hospitality and tourism jobs rely on customer interaction, physical contact is a prime facet of hospitality and tourism employees’ job duties. Employers should, hence, be cognizant of workers’ increasing anxiety, especially among at-risk populations who are highly vulnerable to the virus. Hospitality and tourism organizations should expand their efforts to provide resources and initiate programs to assist employees. As the pandemic has magnified mental health challenges associated with hospitality jobs, organizations that display empathy and support for their workers can likely differentiate themselves from peers in the labor market. Useful strategies include offering counseling services or educational sessions and partnering with wellness apps to offer meditation or other stress-relief options.

Strikingly, many hospitality employees have reconsidered their career choices and work-life balance in the wake of the pandemic. Some have decided to shift their priorities from work to family, seeking to spend more time with loved ones. The renewed interest in work-life balance or work-family balance has underscored the need for hospitality organizations to adapt to this shifting landscape. Empirical work has accentuated the importance of offering hospitality employees high-quality work experiences that allow for a reasonable work-life balance (Liu-Lastres and Wen, 2021). Such research substantiates the positive relationships between employees’ well-being, workplace happiness and turnover intentions.

Additionally, hospitality staff must embrace diversity and inclusivity in the workplace. Formulating basic DE&I policies is far from sufficient: organizations should strive to develop strategies, put them into practice and construct an inclusive working environment. Examples of such strategies include conducting equity audits to identify underlying problems and formulating effective solutions, implementing a measurement system for the organization’s compliance agenda and making it tangible, constantly communicating with under-represented employee groups to validate and improve DE&I policies and working with all employees to cultivate a culturally aware organizational climate. The pandemic has brought uncertainties in schools and daycares have intensified childcare challenges for

Figure 3. Strategic responses at micro–meso–macro levels
working mothers in the hospitality industry. These considerations underline the importance of gender equality in the workplace. As working mothers account for a substantial percentage of hospitality staff, organizations should adopt creative strategies to retain this employee group while acknowledging their caregiving concerns.

Hospitality and tourism employers should display empathy, continuously re-evaluate their benefit programs and consider expanding their employee assistance programs to lessen childcare or eldercare responsibilities by allowing more flexible work schedules. Generational differences are also well-recognized in the hospitality workplace, especially given distinctive reactions to the Great Resignation across generations. Thus, attention should be paid to these disparities, and hospitality employers should customize their retention strategies accordingly. For example, for younger Gen Z employees, recruitment and retention strategies can highlight training, career growth and after-work socials. In contrast, for mid-career employees, the focus may turn to stability, work-family balance and continuous education.

Regarding meso level efforts, hospitality and tourism employers need to develop tactics to link individual employees with the organization effectively. Efforts can be devoted to fostering an organizational climate conducive to retaining current employees and attracting new ones. Vital determinants of employee retention include the presence of an inclusive, caring and employee-centered organizational culture; positive employer-employee relationships; and transparent internal crisis communication strategies. An expanding number of large corporations have started to recruit for a position called “Workplace Experience Manager,” who is tasked with improving employees’ experiences at work to maximize productivity and morale while optimizing the values of both organizations and staff. This position is even more critical today as workplaces continue to evolve due to the pandemic.

Additionally, employers should emphasize the career path they are offering rather than merely creating “positions” that address a demand. Recruitment advertisements should highlight the career path and skillsets that potential employees can gain from the role rather than just listing job responsibilities and financial incentives. For example, employers can briefly describe the opportunities and challenges those potential employees can learn from the job (e.g. training, growth opportunities) on recruitment flyers. Besides, including open information sessions in recruitment events and inviting organization leaders to showcase career paths and internal career development programs may be an excellent strategy to attract talents. Hospitality staff members, most notably those who belong to ethnic minority groups, develop loyalty and attachment to their employers through employee well-being. This construct encompasses employees’ workplace experiences, workplace happiness and self-actualization (Liu-Lastres and Wen, 2021).

“Reshuffling” is an emerging phenomenon in the labor market wherein individuals quit one job and either jump to another or switch industries rather than leaving the job market. This is consistent with the mobility feature of the hospitality and tourism workforce. Thus, hospitality and tourism employers are now competing not only with their peers but also with other industry competitors to attract prospective talent. Repackaging job opportunities and finding alternative ways to build worker loyalty have, hence, become fundamental for organization leaders. For example, increasing the number of management trainee positions (rather than simply hiring frontline employees) to showcase an organization’s commitment to helping its staff grow within the firm may appeal to recent hospitality and tourism graduates.

In a similar vein, exhibiting a commitment to helping employees grow long-term (e.g. by offering tuition benefits or partnering with higher education institutions for professional
development and training) may bolster workers’ loyalty and draw talent. This strategy is fairly common in large technology and retail companies such as Amazon, Target and Walmart. From an organizational standpoint, education assistance programs can help employees become qualified for advanced positions and prepare them for future promotions while aligning with an organization’s long-term sustainable development goals. Employees who benefit from these programs also generally appreciate the company’s dedication. Associated gratitude and belonging can strengthen company attachment and reduce turnover intention. Another strategy, mentoring programs, are not new in the hospitality industry but have not come to the fore in shaping the postpandemic workplace. Mentoring programs are underpinned by three key functions: facilitating employee career development, providing emotional support and establishing role models for fellow employees. These programs can alleviate employees’ work-related stress and encourage positive job attitudes in a turbulent environment. Hospitality organizations are therefore recommended to improve their mentoring programs to guide employees’ career development proactively.

Finally, at the macro level, the industry’s structural and operational model needs to be updated to keep pace with ever-changing social, economic and political circumstances. In specific, hospitality and tourism organizations should embrace changes and formulate coping strategies considering the changing labor markets, economic situations and government policies. Several questions are worth pondering in this regard. First, can hospitality and tourism jobs embrace the labor market trend of workplace flexibility and provide “hybrid” or “remote” options? For instance, allowing employees to work from home for one to two days a week can help them maintain a better work-life and work-family balance. Folding frontline and office job responsibilities into one position to facilitate partial remote work may also boost employee morale. Besides, workplace flexibility needs to be embedded in hospitality and tourism jobs. Managers and supervisors should contact participants in training programs to learn how to transition to a flexible workplace, navigate flexible work and manage employee expectations.

Second, can technological advancement solve the issues of economic constraints and labor shortages across the hospitality and tourism industry? With the development of service intelligence (e.g. service robots and self-service kiosks), reducing the number of frontline employees may help solve labor shortage issues in the long run. Business owners could consider reallocating cost savings from lower frontline labor expenditure to increase the pay for all positions. Higher pay rates could help some Hospitality and Tourism organizations to compete with better-paying industries. These organizations should aim to shed their reputation for low pay and long working hours.

Third, how can hospitality and tourism organizations offset the appeal of work flexibility while maintaining high-quality work experiences? For example, firms could shorten the workweek from five days to four to reduce employee stress and promote workplace flexibility; doing so would make hospitality jobs more attractive. Additionally, clearly separating work life from personal life can help organizations compete with work-from-home jobs usually associated with blurred work-life boundaries. Fourth, can organizations embrace the gig economy and use it to solve part of the labor problem? The pandemic has spurred the gig economy’s infusion into hospitality and tourism, creating an opportunity for the industry to redistribute market share and labor composition to re-establish a sustainable economic system. The reshuffling of hospitality and tourism workers has indirectly led to a climbing number of small entrepreneurs and gig workers. Some gig work platforms, such as Qwick and Snapchef, expanded swiftly during the pandemic due to labor shortages in Hospitality and Tourism. Gig work affords workers flexibility in scheduling while helping business owners meet labor demand peaks. Further, the increasing number of small
entrepreneurs in hospitality and tourism may lower the number of large corporations and shift their power away. This consequence can diminish the impact of a market monopoly.

Last but not least, can legislative and regulatory efforts release pressure associated with the labor shortage? Pandemic-induced stimulus checks and generous unemployment insurance were blamed as major causes of the shortage early in hospitality businesses’ recovery. Rather than focusing on increasing employment insurance benefits, government policies should strive to enhance protections for a vulnerable workforce and disadvantaged groups (e.g., women with caregiving responsibilities). Advocates (e.g., American Hotel and Lodging Association and National Restaurant Association) should persist in their efforts to propose legislative and regulatory changes that will help hospitality employers thrive in a prosperous business environment while protecting employees’ economic livelihood and safety.

Conclusions
The Great Resignation is not unique to the hospitality industry; it has reached nearly all sectors. This trend is also more than pandemic-evoked turbulence—it is an enduring phenomenon reflecting the economic status of American society. Even though employment in some industries had returned to prepandemic levels by late 2020, labor shortages will remain a prominent concern for Hospitality and Tourism in 2022 and in the years to come (Huang et al., 2021). Accompanying challenges have been well documented across the industry but reflect a double-edged sword: the Great Resignation offers the opportunity for a Great Reflection. The Great Resignation can push hospitality and tourism organizations to resolve longstanding labor issues in the industry and implement innovative measures. It also gives employers a chance to reflect and rethink their career development. The reformation of the gig economy and the rising number of small entrepreneurs may ignite long-term and sustainable industry development.

Theoretical implications
This paper has several theoretical implications. First, this paper extends existing research on the impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality and tourism workforce. Human resource management (HRM) is one of the key research areas in COVID-19-related hospitality and tourism studies (Zopiatis et al., 2021). While earlier empirical research focused more on the psychological effects of COVID-19, such as hospitality employees’ emotions, attitudes and behavior during the pandemic (Bajrami et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021; Zopiatis et al., 2021), this paper turns to the postpandemic recovery stage and discusses the long-term consequences and labor issues triggered by the pandemic. Going beyond individual factors, this study also examines the social trends influencing the hospitality and tourism workforce at the organizational and industry levels.

Second, this paper serves as one of the early attempts to identify the major factors leading to the Great Resignation in the hospitality and tourism industry. The labor shortage has long been a critical issue in hospitality HRM literature (Kwok, 2022). This paper addresses existing hospitality and tourism labor challenges in the context of emerging social changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Great Resignation, including flexible work arrangements, mental health and wellness, the gig economy, DE&I and technology adoption. This study paves the way for more research on the postpandemic social changes which are critical in shaping the future of the hospitality and tourism labor market.

Third, previous research on the hospitality and tourism workforce has focused on the conditions of specific socio-demographic groups, such as women, older/younger workers
and migrant workers (Baum et al., 2016; Baum et al., 2020). While this study also highlights the challenges faced by disadvantaged groups during the pandemic and the importance of DE&I initiatives, this study presents an alternative perspective to categorize the labor market: “survivors” whose employment was not influenced by the pandemic, laid-off employees who later returned to the same job/industry, former staff who were unwilling to return and fresh graduates and new talents. Each group experienced different career trajectories during the pandemic. Hence, this study offers a unique angle to analyze the challenges in the recruitment, retention and career development of the postpandemic hospitality workforce.

**Practical implications**

Built upon the analysis, this paper provided practical insights into solutions related to the Great Resignation at micro, meso and macro levels, as described in Figure 3. At a micro level, hospitality and tourism organizations should explore employees’ needs related to DE&I, work-life and work-family balance, gender equality, generational differences, accommodations for vulnerable employees and mental health issues. On the meso level, organizations should feature the organizational learning aspects, reflecting on their organizational culture, policies and programs and prioritizing creating positive employee outcomes. Finally, regarding the macro level, the hospitality and tourism industry needs to pay attention to revising their current business models and establishing innovative solutions to embrace emerging influences such as the gig economy. Efforts can be devoted to evaluating the effectiveness of incorporating new strategies (e.g. robotic services, collaboration with third-party staffing platforms) in existing business models in the hospitality and tourism industry. Undoubtedly, the Great Resignation will refine work concepts within the hospitality industry and reshape the future of work. Performance analyses can advance our understanding of how to navigate in uncertainties and unsettling times.

**Limitations and future research**

This study is not without its limitations. First, this paper is based on the researchers’ reflections and may be impacted by personal experiences and bias. Therefore, future studies should consider this as a starting point and conduct empirical studies. Second, this paper is mainly based on the US context. Nevertheless, this paper is still valuable for other countries, such as Australia, Europe, Asia and Africa, considering that the global hospitality and tourism industry is facing various labor-related challenges. Future studies can consider incorporating a global, cross-cultural scope in their research design. Third, this paper explores various topics related to the pandemic and the Great Resignation. Talent management is an important issue in human resource management in Hospitality and Tourism, which has not been extensively discussed in this paper. Future studies can extend this line of research and identify the related best practices.

Finally, this study presents a future research agenda covering causes and solutions related to the Great Resignation at micro–meso–macro levels, as described in Figure 2. Focusing on individuals, researchers can inspect the effects of different DE&I strategies on employee retention or turnover during the wave of Great Resignation. Practiced-based theories and applied research are both applicable to this context. Regarding topics related to employee well-being and career development, theories such as self-determination theory, career construction theory and social exchange theory can all lay the conceptual foundation for this line of research inquiry. In addition,
longitudinal studies comparing hospitality and tourism employees’ changing needs before and after the pandemic are equally appropriate. On the *meso level*, future studies can concentrate on organizational behavior, learning and renewal. For example, scholars can contemplate the impact of workplace experience management in hospitality firms and measure its effects on employee retention and turnover. Case studies identifying the best practices and strategies are in strong need. Similarly, cross-cultural and global comparisons will also offer valuable implications for hospitality and tourism organizations to stay proactive and develop strategies.

Finally, on the *macro level*, research into the potential of alternative business models is particularly beneficial. Given today’s competitive labor market, studies can also center on hospitality employees’ migration and detect effective retention strategies that both large and small organizations can wield.

References


About the authors
Bingjie Liu-Lastres, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Tourism, Event, and Sport Management at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. The goal of Liu-Lastres’s research agenda is to promote safe travel and to ensure the health and well-being of
tourists, organizations and other key stakeholders within the tourism and hospitality industry.

Bingjie Liu-Lastres is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: bliulas@iu.edu

Dr Han Wen is an Associate Professor in the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management at the University of North Texas. Dr Wen’s research interests include foodservice management, food safety and food allergy in restaurants, food safety risk communication and hospitality education.

Wei-Jue Huang is an Associate Professor in the School of Hotel and Tourism Management at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her research interests include cultural and heritage tourism, urban tourism and destination image.