

# Labor churn is highest on record

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## FULL TEXT

4.5 million quit or changed jobs in November, agency says

The labor market's record churn reached new heights in November, with 4.5 million workers quitting or changing their jobs, the highest number in the survey's history, according the Labor Department's monthly report on job openings.

It was the fourth time in 2021 that the number of workers quitting reached a record, with previous highs in April, August and September. Workers took advantage of a hot jobs market, with employers reporting some 10.6 million job openings in the survey - down from recent records but still well above pre-pandemic averages.

The data provides yet another illustration of how profoundly the pandemic has transformed the dynamics of the labor market. Nearly two years after some 20 million workers lost their jobs in the wave of shutdowns in spring 2020, the imbalance between available workers and job openings has given many workers more leverage than they've had in recent memory.

"This is the tightest labor market ever," said Julia Pollak, economist at the jobs site ZipRecruiter. "These are not quits from the labor force but quits from lower-paying jobs to higher-paying jobs, from less prestigious jobs to better, more prestigious jobs, from less flexible jobs to more flexible jobs."

The changes began last year, as retail and restaurant employers reported trouble filling positions amid the country's reopening after vaccines became available. Companies soon began to compete against each other to raise wages and offer generous cash bonuses to entice workers to fields including hospitality, restaurants, transportation and health care. Workers, too, have become more selective, putting new restrictions on the types of jobs they want to consider. The pandemic has reshaped the cost-benefit trade-off for in-person work for many workers, complicating the lives of parents and caregivers nationwide.

Overall, the numbers of people quitting or leaving to start new jobs represents 3 percent of the workforce, the new government data said.

The 10.6 million job openings dwarf the numbers of people currently listed as unemployed, at 6.9 million. The sheer size of the imbalance - there are about 1.5 jobs for every unemployed worker - has helped give workers more leverage.

In the months before the pandemic, there were often about 2.4 unemployed people for every job, said Pollak. When the economy shrinks in a recession, that figure can rise even higher, as unemployment increases. But the pandemic has upended these old patterns.

Still, inflation throughout the economy, especially for food, housing and energy, has negated the wage increases for many workers, at least so far, and the ever-present threat of the coronavirus, particularly for in-person work, continues to complicate employment options for others.

The number of workers quitting in November was up from the 4.2 million who left or changed jobs in October and surpassed the previous record of 4.4 million in September.

The numbers of resignations and job changes were highest among restaurant and bar workers, and those in retail, arts and recreation - all sectors that have been among the most severely affected by the pandemic. Additionally, professional and business services also see high numbers of quits.

Nearly 7 percent of restaurant and bar workers changed or quit jobs in November, as did 4.4 percent of retail

workers.

In general, the industries that saw larger quit rates were also those that have seen larger wage growth over the past year, as businesses have raced to compete for available workers. Wages for leisure and hospitality workers, for example, rose more than 12 percent in the past year, according to the most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

On surveys ZipRecruiter has done, many job seekers report they are looking for new types of work and particularly for remote work, due to family, child care or safety concerns.

Alexis Farris, 41, is one of the millions of workers who quit jobs for new positions in November. She had worked on a horse farm near her home in Vancouver, Wash., for four years but had tired of the low wages and lack of benefits such as health care and sick time. The pay was barely enough to sustain her and her 8-year-old daughter, she said. So she decided to look for a new job.

"I thought there were a fair amount of opportunities," she said.

She targeted her search toward positions that would have better pay and allow her to work from home. Within a few weeks, she was able to find a new position, doing customer service remotely for a national gardening company. Her new job also came with a \$5-an-hour increase to her wages and more generous benefits. She's now able to pick her daughter up from school on her lunch break.

Ian Cohen, a marketing manager in his 40s near Chattanooga, Tenn., has changed jobs twice during the pandemic. The number of open jobs that pop up on his LinkedIn profile, the contacts that have reached out to him and the regular ping-pong from recruiters has convinced him that this is the hottest labor market he's ever experienced. He quit his job at a start-up the first week of December after working for less than a year and feeling like it wasn't the right position for him.

He starts a new job, as a program manager for another tech company, next week.

"There's just no shortage of opportunities in my space," he said. He's worked remotely for five years, and said he was considering only remote positions because he doesn't want to jeopardize his family's safety or deal with a commute. He says the volume of remote-job offerings has grown exponentially in the last two years, giving him even more options.

Overall, the labor market recovery was strong in 2021, as the country added some 550,000 jobs a month through the first 11 months of the year. But the country is still below the level of employment it had in February 2020, as some workers have yet to return to work, while others have been prompted to retire early or leave the labor force for other reasons.

Policymakers and economists have been concerned about a job market slowdown after November's employment figures came in below expectations. And the effects of the latest coronavirus surge may not yet be clear for weeks.

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Andrew Van Dam contributed to this report.

## DETAILS

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