

‘Breadcrumbing’: How This Trend Hurts the Workplace and 6 Ways to Fix It

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People inside your organization are likely breadcrumbing employees and job candidates.

And it’s hurting everything from your reputation to [employee engagement](#).

What Is Breadcrumbing?

The term breadcrumbing originated in the dating world — one person using manipulative behaviors that include just enough attention and affection to keep the other person hanging on, but never committing.

In the workplace, it’s similar: “It’s the process of making empty, or false, promises with vague timelines that raise someone’s hope of a favorable outcome. It’s about stringing someone along,” says [Hanna Hasl-Kelchner](#), author of [Seeking Fairness at Work – Workplace Fairness – Cracking the New Code of Greater Employee Engagement, Retention & Satisfaction](#).

What does that look like? “Dangling something of value, such as a plum assignment, a promotion, hiring help, or professional development in exchange for continued commitment and high performance,” Hasl-Kelchner explains.

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In recruiting, breadcrumbing examples include posting [ghost jobs](#) to get candidates interested in the organization, but with no existing job to offer. Or

keeping candidates warm with communication and even interviews without a real intent to hire.

What Breadcrumbing Does to Employees and Candidates

This stringing along impacts almost all employees and job candidates negatively.

“Dash their hopes once, and they’re disappointed,” says Hasl-Kelchner. “Do it continuously and the innate unfairness of it all leads to anger, can escalate into cynicism, and in the worst-case scenario, explode into workplace violence because no one likes feeling taken advantage of. Absolutely. No. One.”

For job candidates, it’s a more limited experience, but it’s frustrating. If your hiring process — that involves a job that you wouldn’t hire for — involves a drawn-out interview process with brainstorming, sample work or written proposals, it worsens.

“The sense of unfairness they experience in doing work without pay, or otherwise having their time wasted, can be similarly debilitating,” says Hasl-Kelchner.

What Breadcrumbing Does to Your Organization

Breadcrumbing is a huge drain on the organization in many ways. The lack of transparency and honesty creates a culture of untrustworthiness.

“The inherent unfairness baked into breadcrumbing contributes to reduced employee engagement and retention,” says Hasl-Kelchner.

Whether employees recognize they’re being strung along or not, they’ll feel taken for granted and will retreat from going the extra mile. Eventually, they won’t even go the mile. That results in lower productivity and quality of work.

From there, people talk within your organization and outside of it. Job candidates who experience breadcrumbing will likely [share that on Reddit](#). Employees who feel unappreciated for long enough will leave and tell others why.

How to Prevent or End Breadcrumbing

For obvious reasons, you want to prevent or end breadcrumbing in your workplace.

HR pros can't always see breadcrumbing in action. So you want to be proactive about eliminating it. These tactics can help:

- **Identify it.** Through employee engagement and satisfaction surveys, roundtable discussions or even [exit interviews](#), ask questions that can identify issues. “A series of indirect questions can be more revealing than direct ones that employees suspect have a ‘correct’ answer,” says Hasl-Kelchner. For instance, ask:
 - “If you were promoted to head the department, what changes would you immediately want to make?” (It reveals more than “Are you happy with your workload or professional development?”)
 - From there, use open-ended follow-up responses such as “Tell me more” or “How would you make that happen?”
- **Dig for the root.** “Instead of telling managers, ‘Say this, don’t say that,’ a better approach is to find the root cause of what compels them to engage in breadcrumbing in the first place,” says Hasl-Kelchner. Some possibilities you can uncover with open-ended questions:
 - Bureaucratic red tape
 - Hiring freezes
 - Budget constraints
 - Rigid HR policies
 - Unfair or irrelevant processes or policies
 - Poor conflict management skills that lead to avoidance, and/or
 - Lack of empathy for employees.

- **Train managers to coach, not just supervise.** They need [a mechanism or process for proactive coaching](#). If not, they often revert to making vague, ad hoc promises.
- **Set firm, short timelines for hiring decisions.** It goes (almost) without saying that no one should post ghost jobs. From there, audit your time to hire to ensure that no one involved in your hiring process is stringing candidates along.
- **Cap the number of interviews.** [Google's Rule of Four](#) is a gold standard these days. No more than four interviews with a max of four people on the panel. When the tech giant, consistently [considered a top employer](#), implemented the rule, it cut the average time to hire by two weeks and saved hundreds of thousands of work hours.
- **Make intentional breadcrumbing a disciplinary issue.** Managers who intentionally offer false, tangible hopes with no intention to follow through should face reprimand and potential discipline.

Beating the Breadcrumb

Hasl-Kelchner gave this thorough example of what happens with breadcrumbing and how it can be resolved:

Let's say a team is stretched thin and desperately needs to hire more help, but budget constraints or a hiring freeze are what's really standing in the way. Why not say so? Afraid employees will lash out?

HR can play a valuable role in helping managers put themselves in their employees' shoes for a moment, and by providing leaders with more conflict management tools.

The team in this illustration is stressed. Some employees could already be experiencing negative [health consequences associated with burnout](#). They need meaningful action, not smoke and mirrors, and so the question for managers becomes, not "What can I say to make them go away?" But rather, "What relief can I reasonably provide now?"

Could deadlines be changed? Could underutilized resources in the organization be reallocated? Could some work be outsourced and deferred to a future budget cycle that's not as tight? And why is the budget so limited? Lost a major customer or client?

Be honest about why management's hands are tied and what can be done in the meantime to bridge the gap. It's not necessary to overshare. But it is necessary to be real and to be creative. And to rinse and repeat as circumstances change.

Employees will respect management's honesty and willingness to jointly solve the problem, even if the result is not what they want to hear. Working through the process together helps everyone understand why things are the way they are. It's an exercise in collaboration that builds trust and unites and beats breadcrumbing that deceives and divides every time.