

Instant Insights / Reopening the Workplace in 2021: What to Consider

Be Ready for These Permanent Changes in the Workplace

As we plan for a post-pandemic reality, now is a good opportunity to assess what worked and what didn't. Here are some considerations to keep in mind.

A little more than a year after the World Health Organization (WHO) first discovered the COVID-19 virus, it feels almost quaint now to come back across articles from early in the pandemic when the expectation was that maybe employees would have to work from home for a few months. Fast forward a full year later and it is only now that companies are announcing, and beginning to implement, plans to bring employees back into their physical offices. As the pandemic defied people's hopes and predictions, and as timelines initially conceived of as weeks were extended to months, and from months to years, it became increasingly evident that not only

would we be seeing long-term changes and effects in the business world, some of these changes would likely be permanent.

Since part of the challenge in 2020 was not knowing what to expect, having a realistic sense of what employees might want, need, and demand will help organizations, their HR teams, and benefits professionals navigate the future more confidently.

Options, options, and more options

The main theme going forward will be employees' expectation of, and demand for, more options across the board in terms of schedules, flexibility, and benefits. If the adjustments made at the onset of the pandemic had been adopted for just a few weeks, or even a few months, this wouldn't have necessarily changed people's routines and outlooks permanently. For many people, it took a few months just to get acclimated. Had the pandemic ended right then and had we all returned to our physical workplaces, the changes may not have been lasting.

But after a full year of working in an entirely different way, many employees who have been working from home are now accustomed to it. Some of them, for various possible reasons, may now even rely on remote and/or flexible work arrangements.

This is why trying to make the workplace what it used to be before the pandemic will not only be impractical and untenable for many reasons, it will be just as (if not more) disruptive than the initial work-from-home transition.

Many organizations already realize this, which is remarkable given that pre-pandemic very few would have even entertained the idea of pandemic-era changes becoming permanent on a national scale.

At the forefront of everyone's minds is, of course, scheduling. While not every organization may say to all their employees, "Continue to permanently work from home every day," they will likely make it an option even after they have reopened their physical offices.

Companies who have already announced such plans include Microsoft, Uber, Dropbox, and Spotify. Some companies have even opted to get rid of their physical offices entirely. Since more than half of those currently working from home would prefer to continue doing so, companies that wish to retain talented employees and attract new ones would certainly benefit from embracing the idea of a hybrid workforce rather than resisting it.

While there are also plenty of employees who do wish to return to the physical workplace, the ongoing need to observe pandemic safety measures

will require that office occupancy be kept to safe minimums. For this reason, along with others, organizations are also exploring other options such as compressed workweeks and staggered schedules which would allow them to rotate the employees who are coming in.

Flextime, or the ability for employees to work at times that work best for them, is another option that will likely be made widely available and be in high demand as physical workplaces reopen. Just as with remote work, many companies came to realize over the course of the past year that not only can work still get done when people are working remotely and/or at flexible times, there are numerous advantages to it such as improved retention, increased productivity, and higher employee engagement.

Challenges facing organizations

Part of the challenge for organizations will be how to continue providing flexible work options for their employees and still run their businesses in a profitable way. Not every company will be able to let every employee work from home every day, for instance, but they will also want to accommodate their employees' needs as much as possible.

As such, we will be seeing some shifts occur in IT and Human Resources.

Virtual conferencing tools such as Zoom are definitely here to stay, but we

should also be seeing newer tools emerge to meet the unique needs of hybrid workforces and to make their communication more seamless and less potentially frustrating or exhausting.

Companies will also actively seek managers and staff who have the skill sets to manage and work with teams that are distributed across both time and space.

A potential pitfall that companies will need to be wary of is over-reliance on any of the aforementioned solutions. There may be understandable reasons for this, such as a very real need to lower expenses by getting rid of office space, or the wish to minimize the complexities of managing a hybrid workforce with diverse working arrangements.

But just because many employees prefer to continue working from home doesn't mean that remote work should become the new default standard.

Another thing we learned during the pandemic was just how important the social dimensions of our jobs have always been. Just as there are those who wish to continue working remotely, there are also many who yearn to be around their colleagues and customers and to interact with them in-person again, at least for some of the time.

The key for options, therefore, is that they should be just that: options, not requirements.

Whatever companies end up doing, however, they will need to be deliberate about it. For the past year, it was all that most could do but to stumble along and keep the gears turning amidst all the disruptions—with the notable exceptions, of course, of companies that were already fully remote pre-pandemic.

Now that people have acclimated and are beginning to look forward towards the future, it is a good opportunity to take stock of what worked well, what didn't, and carefully plan for a post-pandemic reality. Because while it may have been possible to improvise when everyone was working from home, a hybrid workforce with so many people working in different ways will require careful planning.

As part of the planning process, managers should first and foremost collect as much information as possible from their employees. Depending on the organization, that could mean one-on-one conversations, small group discussions, company-wide surveys, or some combination thereof.

Whatever the method, managers need to figure out the full range of what their employees want and then determine what they will and won't be able to offer.

There may be a delicate balancing act involved since it's quite possible that no one, not the employer nor the employees and their diverse preferences, will get everything they want.

Adding to this complexity may be situations in which some employees won't be able to enjoy any of the flexibility that their colleagues do. Ford recently told 86,000 employees, for example, that they have the option to work from home permanently, but this doesn't apply to its 100,000 factory workers. Will the latter begin to resent the former?

Companies will need to consider such potential scenarios since the costs of workforce in-fighting can be significant. To prevent conflict, organizations may want to consider other benefits they could offer to those employees who, due to their role, can't be offered any flexible work options. This way, they can feel that they are being valued as well.

Another strategy could be to manage perceptions. For instance, while the pandemic has eliminated the stigma of working from home, conversely not everyone understands that doing so can have its own set of significant challenges.

Finally, organizations should be cautious about too much change too fast. The priority for those who are reopening their offices should be to get the

employees who want to return set up and running, as well as to let those who want to continue working from home do so at least some of the time. Allow a semblance of normalcy to return before making any major, company-wide changes. For now, reopening will be a big enough change on its own.

Being mindful of all these considerations is undoubtedly a lot, and for some companies, particularly small businesses, it may seem a bit overwhelming. Decision makers should try to remember that as long as they are making sincere efforts to balance the company's needs with those of their employees, they don't have to do everything for everyone.

It will simply be impossible to make everyone happy, and while that may sometimes lead to a shuffling of the workforce, this has already been happening as a result of the pandemic anyway.

People have been forced to reevaluate their needs and priorities and, in some cases, look for those needs to be met elsewhere. And like so much else that's been disrupted during the pandemic, while this can cause some temporary distress, it may ultimately be better for everyone involved.

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