What Does Work Look Like in 2021? Workplace Experts Share Their Predictions
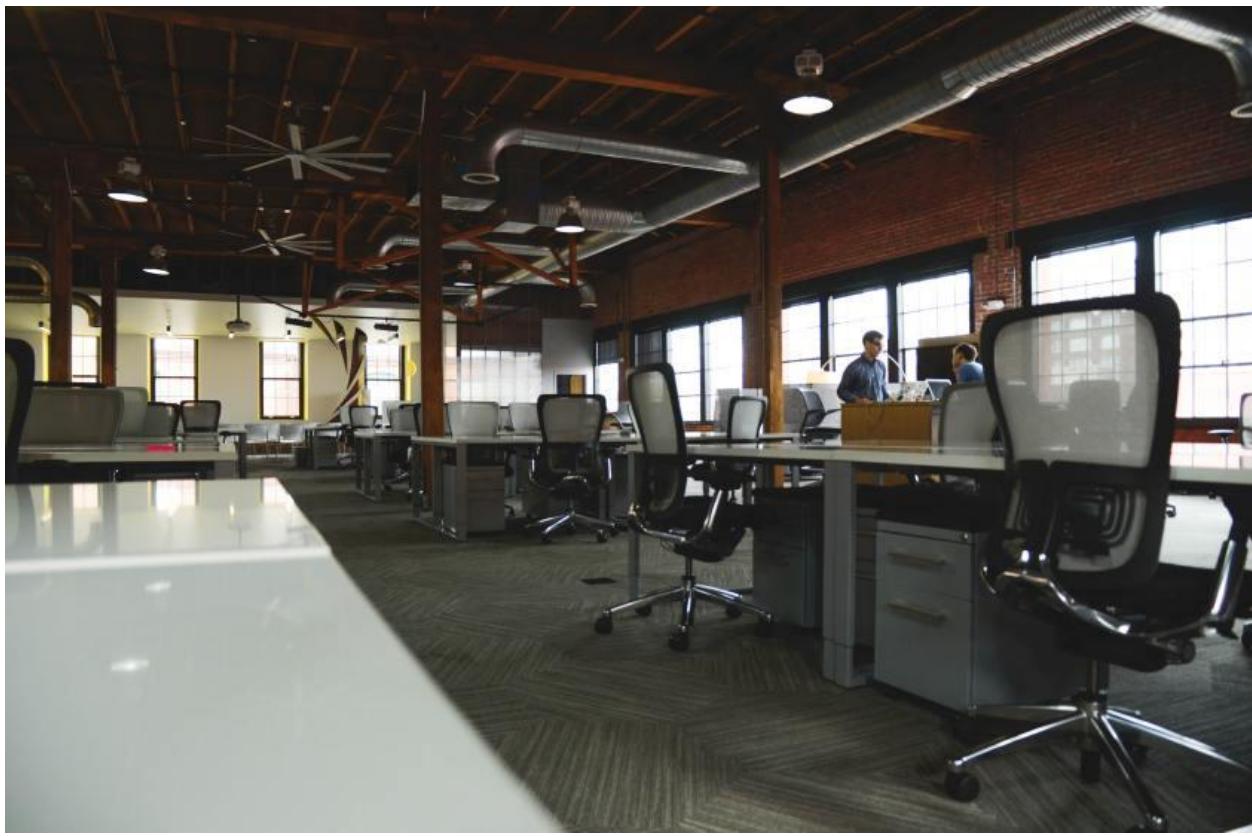
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No one could have anticipated the total upheaval to the workplace in 2020 — the transition to remote work, a new reliance on technology, persistent pressures on employee mental health and well-being, child care concerns — the year was a roller coaster of crisis management for organizations and HR leaders.

With the one-year mark since coronavirus engulfed the U.S. now here, employers and employees are starting 2021 with one question: What will work be like this year?

"We are starting to see light at the end of the tunnel for the pandemic. Companies are better able to plan and make decisions about what is going to happen in the next six to twelve months," says Brie Reynolds, career development manager at FlexJobs, a remote job searching platform.

Change Management During the Pandemic: How to Maintain Employee Well-being

Economic insecurity, changes to work and life patterns and isolation are taking a toll on employees. How can employers help?

While the transition to remote work seemed challenging at the start of the pandemic, employers are feeling more confident about their business success in 2021. Forty-four percent of executives believe the economy will improve this year, according to a survey by the Employer Associations of America. That confidence is leading employers to make important business decisions regarding pay raises and hiring: 64% of employers plan to implement salary increases, and 26% plan to boost their recruiting efforts.

"The pandemic has forced companies to be agile and innovative during these uncertain times," says Mark Adams, director of compliance for EAA, an advocacy group that helps employers stay compliant with labor laws. "While expenditures are being scrutinized now more than ever before, the need to invest strategically remains important as businesses seek to rebound in 2021 and make up for lost ground."

Remote work is here to stay

At the start of the pandemic, employees struggled to meet the demands of the digital workplace without many of the resources and benefits of the in-person office. Almost one year later, there's little doubt that remote work has changed the way we work forever.

Brie Reynolds, career development manager at FlexJobs

"Companies made it through almost a full year of remote work with relatively few problems," Reynolds says. "Most companies are reporting that remote work was successful, and employees want it to continue. Companies are ready to make the switch now that they've really had a chance to test it out."

Seventy percent of employees would like to continue to work remotely part of the time post-COVID, according to Glassdoor. Not only has remote work boosted productivity for some groups, the trend has offered employees an opportunity for better work-life balance and the freedom to live and work away from expensive corporate hubs, like Silicon Valley and cities such as New York and Los Angeles.

"If you're able to open yourself up to remote work, you can get more diversity in your workforce in terms of people's experience and their backgrounds," Reynolds says. "That's becoming increasingly important for employers to pay attention to."

While organizations like Facebook and Slack have announced their employees can work remotely indefinitely, they've also suggested they'd make potential pay cuts for employees living in areas with a lower cost of living. Twenty-six percent of employers plan to base compensation on location, according to Willis Towers Watson. But 62% percent of employees would be willing to take a paycut if it allowed them to work from home, according to a survey from software companies GoTo and LogMeIn.

Thirty-five percent of workplaces do not have a firm plan for fully reopening their office, while 16% hope to reopen during Q1, according to a survey by The Conference Board. Hanging in the balance is the ability to have protective policies in place so that the workplace population feels safe, says Gary Pearce, chief risk architect at Aclaimant, a workplace safety and risk management platform.

"Protection is a must, not a nice to have," Pearce says. "If you can't demonstrate that you're protecting your own people, you're not going to be able to keep employees."

Workplace safety and vaccination protocol

With two vaccines currently on the market, a return to pre-COVID life is becoming easier to imagine. But ensuring that employees get the vaccine before returning to the workplace is the newest workplace debate confronting employers.

Just half of employees believe their employer should require a COVID-19 vaccine before allowing employees to return to work, according to Eagle Hill Consulting. Gen Z employees were the most on-board with a vaccine mandate, with 62% supporting a requirement, compared with 50% of Millennials and 46% of Generation X and baby boomer employees.

"If you're going to have that requirement, you have to have all the administrative processes in place. How do you verify as an employer that somebody went and got it? What documentation will suffice?" Pearce says. "I think the best case is when it doesn't have to come down to a mandate, but rather people are persuaded by having been given the best information, that this is the right thing to do to protect their family and to protect their fellow workers."

Other safety precautions like frequent testing, social distancing and mask wearing will become a new way of life back at the office. The Conference Board found that 82% of employers plan to purchase safety equipment like masks, cleaning supplies and contactless entry devices, and 80% will enforce policies like limiting the number of employees allowed in the workplace at a time.
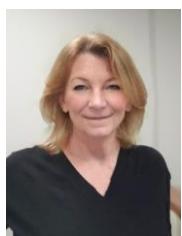
Judi Korzec, CEO and founder of VaxAtlas

"You can't lose those safety protocols," says Judi Korzec, CEO and founder of VaxAtlas, a vaccine management company. "It's going to take time to get to that point where you say, 'Enough [employees] are vaccinated.' If you're vaccinated, you don't need the test, but you need one or the other to keep your population safe."

Implementing programs that incorporate consistent COVID testing and other safety precautions will be critical to establishing trust with employees after a year of mixed messages and ever-changing protocols, Korzec says.

"Employers are trying to do the very best they can and get their businesses back and follow the rules, but those change very quickly. It was so hard to keep up with and there probably was a little bit of lost trust there," Korzec says. "The more tools and communication and orderly processes employers bring to the table, they'll regain [employee] trust, because everyone wants their life back."

Continued reliance on technology

Despite the challenges of COVID, employees have an overall positive attitude toward their employers and the way they've been supported during the pandemic. Seventy-eight percent of employees say their employer has handled the challenges of the pandemic appropriately, according to McKinsey. More than a quarter of employers have boosted employee benefits since the start of the pandemic, research by Fidelity Investments found.

Employers have looked seriously at ways to better support their workplace population, often turning to technology to fill in the gaps. Virtual nutrition programs, online access to therapy and holistic mental health care, virtual parental support groups and other programs will continue to be a critical component to help employees balance the demands of their work and home lives.

"When organizations systematically show that they care for their employees, they get better results," says Laura Hamill, an organization psychologist at Limeade, an employee experience software company. "I think that something that is front and center to everybody in HR right now is the well-being of our employees and there have been a lot of impressive ways that organizations are emphasizing that."

Employers must be empathetic to the challenges their employees have continued to face during this crisis, Hamill says. An ability to share openly can be key to building a more loyal and resilient workforce during COVID and beyond.

"It's time to have a radical change in how we think about work. In order for real change to happen, you have to be able to envision it first. You have to be able to say, 'I could see how caring for people and being more human at work could happen in my company,'" Hamill says. "This global pandemic has forced us to see that when you treat people like human beings, when you care about them, it's just better for the employees — and it's better for your business."