

The Pandemic Changed Us. Now Companies Have to Change Too.

Harvard Business Review | Jennifer Moss | July 01, 2022



Angela Weiss/Getty Images

It may sound obvious but facing our collective mortality for the last two years changed us. Of course, many of us had confronted big challenges in our pre-pandemic lives, but this shared experience was uniquely difficult. One area of our lives that was dramatically altered was our collective perspective related to work.

Working under the weight of chronic stress, financial insecurity, and collective grief forced people to work harder and longer to get to the same goals. We became exhausted, self-efficacy decreased, and cynicism grew. It's no wonder that people eventually hit the wall. But it was still shocking when nearly half of the global workforce said, almost simultaneously, "I quit!"

Why People Leave

The Microsoft 2022 Work Trend Index, a study of more than 31,000 people in 31 countries, discusses this extraordinary workforce disruption. The report found that 43% of the workforce is considering leaving their jobs in the coming year. One of the biggest reasons why people are leaving? It's not pay, the study claims. It's unsustainable workloads.

The most compelling data was the increase in time spent "collaborating." For example, between February 2020 and February 2022:

- Weekly Teams meetings increased by a whopping 252%!
- 6 billion more emails were sent (2021 Trends Report);
- We were chatting 32% more frequently;
- And the average after-hours work increased by 28%.

During the pandemic, and especially during times of quarantine, our priority structures were ruthlessly simplified. Some days, our only focus was to stay alive and keep our loved ones safe. This rise in uncertainty caused an increase in mental illness. Last year, 4 in 10 adults in the U.S. reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, up from 1 in 10 adults who reported these symptoms from January to June 2019.

Many organizations kept marching ahead. Stretch goals remained, despite employees being unable to meet the demand. According to a recent study by Ernst & Young (EY), 54% of workers left a previous job because their boss wasn't empathetic to their struggles at work, and 49% said employers were unsympathetic to their personal lives. This "business as usual" mentality caused a ripple effect that some experts believe may have contributed to the Great Resignation.

A Pew Research study found similar trends. Fifty-seven-percent of workers who quit a job in 2021 said feeling disrespected at work was the reason they left, and 45% said lack of flexibility to choose when they put in their hours were reasons why they quit. Nearly half said child care issues were a reason they left a job (48% among those with a child younger than 18 in the household).

Today, employees are renegotiating their social contracts with work. What was once mostly transactional has changed. We've gone from demanding that work stay out of our personal lives to quitting if it won't.

What Employees Want

Too many employees were pushed past their breaking points during the pandemic. Anja Bojić, communication author and researcher at software company COING, shared with me that she left her previous job because "settling for less than the bare minimum just to get paid is anyone's death sentence, especially when there's an ocean of opportunities to choose from."

As more people hit their breaking points, what can leaders do? They can start by listening to what employees really want.

"I expect the psychological safety to have open discussions about mental health," says Kate Toth, Director of Learning and Development at YMCA Workwell. "I expect empathy and support in recognizing that I am a whole person, and need authentic care as a human being. A manageable workload would be where I would start."

Nathan Vatcher, employed at Queen's University, echoes empathy as his number one need, with a four-day workweek being a close second.

David Ehrenthal, certified leadership coach, says that demonstrating change through action and behaviors, not just words, will be fundamental.

Data backs up these perspectives. Gallup recently asked 13,085 U.S. employees what was most important to them when deciding whether to accept a new job offered by a new employer. Sixty-one percent cited greater work-life balance and better personal well-being, and 58% cited the ability to do what they do best. And with the shifting power dynamic that has resulted from this giant global resignation, employees can demand more.

In a recent HBR article, *Don't Force People to Come Back to the Office Full Time*, authors Barrero, Bloom, and Davis found that 40% of U.S. employees would start looking for another job or quit immediately if ordered to return to the office full time. A 2021 McKinsey report of 5,770 employees surveyed also found that 40% of respondents who quit their jobs in the last six months left without having a new job.

This data indicates that what may look like a reshuffling is actually something much bigger. And, perhaps more concerning for businesses, it's a bottom-line issue that must be addressed.

Fortunately, bright spots are emerging. Firms are signaling that they are (finally) ready to respond in kind.

Here are some areas where positive change is happening.

Mental Health Support

In a recent Oracle AI@Work study, 88% said the meaning of success has changed for them, and that they're now prioritizing things like work-life balance, mental health, and flexibility.

A 2021 Mercer study of more than 10,000 subjects found that "employees are reporting a high degree of stress, anxiety, burnout, and fear — and employers are listening." In 2021, 76% of survey respondents with 500 or more employees said that addressing employees' mental and emotional health would be a top priority over the next three to five years.

In an interview I conducted with Yvette Cameron, SVP of global product strategy, Oracle Cloud HCM, she noted that leaders are aware that workers want more from their employers. "People have had to shoulder immense amounts of stress, juggling work and personal life priorities, struggling to keep burnout at bay, with many not receiving much support," she explained. "From the business side of things, employers need to recognize that the power has shifted into the hands of workers. Organizations need to work harder to make themselves the kind of place where employees want to work, by building and maintaining a strong culture that nurtures employees instead of burning them out."

Cameron also suggested that businesses need to infuse support and guidance into every interaction to remove friction. To ensure that this happens, she recommends:

- Focusing on more personalized communication when an issue arises, not overloading with information all at once;
- Listening better to what employees have to say;
- Using feedback to make real changes that meet new employee expectations.

Hybrid and Return to Office

Being a great place to work no longer means that place has to be in an office. More firms continue to make hybrid work arrangements part of their long-term strategy.

Global tech firms like Hewlett Packard Enterprise (HPE) are reimagining what the future of the office should look like. And it makes sense why they would. To address this very real issue of attraction, retention, and attrition, HPE conducted an internal survey and found that almost two thirds of its workforce wanted to spend only 20% or less time working at a shared physical site.

“We know that when team members feel that they have balance, they are more productive and more likely to build a career at HPE,” said Alan May, HPE’s Chief People Officer. “The pandemic caused people to re-evaluate what was important to them.”

The data helped senior executives to decide that their entire 60,000-person company will be hybrid going forward. For HPE, that means people can choose when and if they want to come into the office. The environment at the office will also feel different, with more spaces focused on collaborating and socializing. There will be fewer large conference-style gatherings and more smaller hubs and individual desk areas. Additionally, HPE will offer perks like take-away dinner meals and essential groceries, to allow people to cook and eat at home with their families rather than at their desks.

Mental health awareness, a focus on increasing fairness, hybrid offerings and flexible hours, more active listening, real-time feedback, and personalizing communication are all initiatives that are working to solve issues around burnout in a more upstream manner than we’ve seen before. However, the concept of hybrid work has yet to be fine-tuned. When companies allow employees to come into the office when they want to, it often means that people inside the office are still forced to sit on Zoom while meeting with their coworkers at home. To make hybrid more effective, and to improve relationships at work, I suggest that we find time for colleagues to connect in person when possible. With loneliness and a lack of connection being one of the more negative aspects of the pandemic, it will be important to find the right mix of in-person and remote work.

Paid Leave

Another major trend we’re seeing in the reimagined workforce is in paid leave policies — a critical area of need for employees during a pandemic and in any future crisis.

The 2020 KFF Employer Health Benefits Survey found that nearly four in 10 workers are employed at a firm that just started offering, or expanded, paid leave benefits since the pandemic began. Some global firms have set themselves apart by increasing their paid leave policies.

For example, Google has expanded parental leave from 18 to 24 weeks. The company will also double its allowance of paid time off to eight weeks for caregivers who are supporting seriously ill loved ones and is increasing paid vacation days from 15 to 20.

A&T initially rolled out a policy that offered 10 days of 100% paid sick leave, but as the pandemic developed, the company doubled the policy to 20 days. Verizon’s new Covid-19-

specific leave of absence policy offers 100% paid time off for 40 days, and those who are medically diagnosed with Covid-19 can qualify for 100% paid sick leave for up to 26 weeks.

This is a necessary step forward, say several physicians that I spoke with during the pandemic. When employees don't have proper sick leave, they bring illness to work, and it spreads like wildfire, creating overwhelm in the healthcare system.

Notably, Google's new paid leave provisions also included more robust bereavement leave for those employees who've dealt with stillbirth and miscarriages. This is on top of their standard bereavement leave for loss of a loved one. They also have an initiative called Ramp Back Time, which allows employees to work a minimum of 50% of their normal weekly working hours, while still being paid 100% of their normal weekly salary, during the first two weeks back after maternity leave.

Improving Fairness

The Gartner 2021 ReimagineHR Employee Survey analyzed responses from 3,500 employees and found that they are demanding more fairness. "Creating a fairer employee experience will be the most important initiative for HR executives in 2022," said Brian Kropp, chief of research in the Gartner HR practice. "To do this, organizations need to go beyond policies and develop philosophies."

To address the disproportionate impact of lack of fairness for women, the Canadian government has stepped up with a new policy to increase female labor force participation. Understanding that women, and even more disproportionately women of color, are most commonly impacted by lack of childcare, the federal and provincial governments are subsidizing the costs. As of April 1, 2022, parents will only pay \$10 per day per child for care.

James Nicholas Kinney, Global Chief Diversity Officer at Media.Monks, a global marketing and technology services company, says the firm is adopting inclusive language across all policies to ensure access. "Language matters. We're a work in progress, which means constantly evolving the language we use to reflect our team of diverse individuals," says Kinney.

The company rethought their language to be inclusive of same-sex couples and non-binary employees, as well as employees having a child by adoption, surrogacy, or foster placement. Kinney emphasizes that, "In the past, many of these employees didn't see themselves represented in these policies." Now the company offers 16 weeks of parental leave for all employees to access.

Advancing policies that support equitable paid leave also reduces the downstream effect of women taking the bulk of unpaid labor hours. This lack of fairness issue had devastating impacts on the female labor force during the pandemic. From February 2020 to January 2022, male workers regained all jobs they had lost due to the public health crisis. And yet, more than 12.2 million jobs, held by women were lost between February and April 2020, reversing an entire decade of job gains since the end of the Great Recession.

Although we are making important steps towards creating a fairer future, leaders need to be relentless in their pursuit of equity. The reimagined workplace must be inclusive.

Looking Forward

The World Bank estimates that more than 120 countries have introduced or expanded worker protection policies in response to the pandemic. However, most of these policies prioritize physical safety guidelines over psychosocial safety guidelines. The good news is that there are some countries like Australia and Canada that are leading the way to change. For example, the Canadian province of Ontario enacted the Working for Workers Act — legislation to help workers disconnect from their employment responsibilities after work hours. The right-to-disconnect provision takes effect June 2, 2022. The law defines disconnecting from work as “not engaging in work-related communications, including emails, telephone calls, video calls or the sending or reviewing of other messages.”

These are the kinds of standards, policies and laws that I predict will become more common in the future of work. Although I believe it to be better when leaders protect the well-being of their people without fear of legislation, there is value in laws that safeguard employee safety. It also helps workplaces justify the expense of a more robust mental health strategy. It would also give leaders a clear understanding that these policies are not just “nice to haves,” but a necessity.

It may seem daunting, but I see this new era of work bearing enormous potential for positive change.

For better or for worse, the pandemic forced us to sink or swim. Somehow, we swam. We learned new skills, increased our emotional flexibility, and learned optimism and the capacity to rebound. If we take all that into context, it sounds like we’re learning to build a future rich with possibility.