

Hybrid Work: Expectations vs. Reality

Survey results summary of 1,000 adults ages 18–64 in the United States who work full-time in an office or desk job setting, who are currently working remotely or have since March of 2020, and whose company offices have reopened in some capacity in the last year.

OCTOBER 2021

Sometime back in March 2020,

we all walked out of our offices and told our coworkers, “See you in about two weeks.” Then those two weeks of working from home turned into a month, a month into a year, and for some, remote work has turned into a permanent setup.

At first, many languished in a remote work environment, longing for “normal life.” But over the past year, habits and routines have changed. Now that many employees have dealt with a return to the office, they’re asking themselves, “Is this really what I want?” **Almost half (43%) of office workers reported that the reality of returning to the office is not what they expected.**

We surveyed 1,000 adults between the ages of 18 and 64 to better understand the expectations U.S. workers brought with them on their return to the office or into new hybrid work models, as well as the reality of these models. All of our respondents are currently working remotely or have since March 2020, and their company offices have reopened in some capacity in the last year. Read on to see how their expectations failed to match up with the reality of the rapidly changing business environment.

Employees aren't eager to be back in the office full-time.

Employees are making their way back to the office, but things certainly aren't back to the way they were pre-COVID-19.

46 percent of workers whose offices have reopened in some capacity in the last year say that their companies have organized a partial return, requiring only one to four days in-office a week. Only **16 percent** said that returning is **fully optional**.



After a year of upheaval, the taste for a daily routine of commuting to and from work is somewhat waning. Among the workers whose offices have reopened, **only a third (32%) have fully returned to the office**.

Many assume that younger generations are the ones pushing for a change in the way we work, but in fact, Millennials and Gen Z are less interested in working fully remote.

Interested in working fully remote



Why do some workers want to be in the office?

Feel more productive in the office:



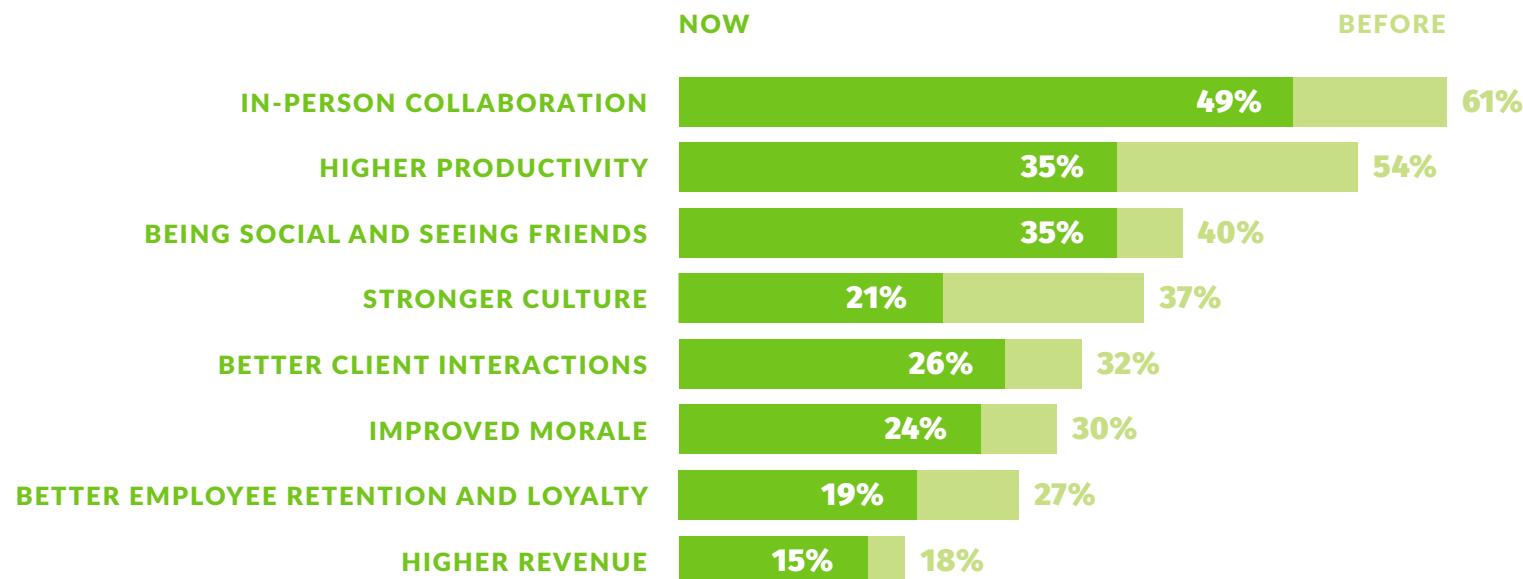
Want to see colleagues and be social:



Whatever the root cause—and there are myriad possibilities, from feeling isolated or distracted at home to feeling less pressure from kids and spouses to remain close by—it seems the younger generation prefers the office environment more than their older colleagues do.

Across the board, the actualized benefits of returning to the office aren't as great as workers expected them to be.

Workers' expectations of being back in the office aren't matching up with the reality of returning to work. We asked respondents what their expectations of the office were before they actually went back and what the reality is now that workspaces are open, and clearly the expectations and reality didn't match up.



One in three (37%) office workers actually said they feel worse being in the office than they did *at their lowest point* during remote work—and we can all remember some pretty low lows from the past year.

Plus, the cost of going to the office isn't just emotional. The typical worker reported that they spend 32 percent more working from the office than they do working remotely.

Executives and employees aren't on the same page when it comes to remote work.

While **43 percent of individual contributors** think most people in the world are most interested in working fully remotely, only **32 percent of people at the management level** and **22 percent of people at the VP level and above** think the same.

Here's the kicker, though:



of respondents said that executives at their company were allowed to work from home, but no one else was.

In other words, some leaders have trouble extending the same trust they put in themselves to their own employees.

Trust in employees, or lack thereof, seems to be the biggest factor for this discrepancy between leadership and employees. Managers feel that they can't see who's working and who's slacking off when employees aren't in the office. Accordingly, **66 percent of people at the VP level and above** and **58 percent of people at the management level** say that management wants employees to return to the office so they can control and monitor employees.

Office benefits are disappearing.

On-site perks used to be a draw to the office. You go to the office, grab a free cup of coffee, treat yourself to some free snacks, or even get a free lunch sometimes. But **61 percent of employees tell us in-office perks are down following the pandemic.**

In-office food and beverage took the biggest hit due to the pandemic, with office workers saying **free coffee and drinks (30%)**, **free snacks (23%)**, **a cafeteria (23%)**, and **catered meals (18%)** used to exist but aren't offered anymore.

used to exist but aren't offered anymore



The pandemic is still a major factor for employees who want to work from home.

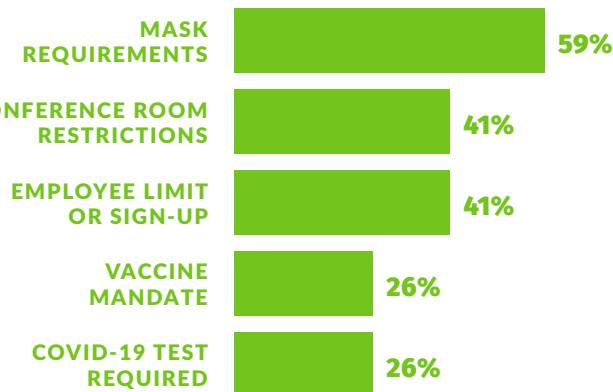
The pandemic isn't over, and many employees are still nervous about being in the office. **Not feeling comfortable due to COVID-19 (44%) was the primary reason respondents gave for not wanting to work in the office**, which is unsurprising given the rise in cases and hospitalizations due to the Delta variant.

But others indicated their attitude toward working in office or remotely will change over the next year, showing that leadership should be prepared to continue adapting their work environment.

*If the pandemic isn't an issue in a year,
percent of workers that will be more interested in:*



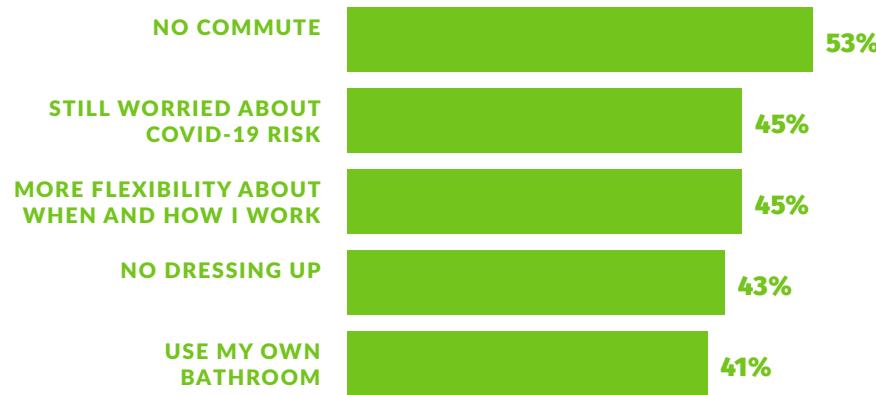
Companies seem to be aware of this and are doing their best to mitigate risk and make employees feel as comfortable as possible coming back into the office.



Working from home has its perks.

Even though lockdowns and shelter-in-place orders were tough on many families, it's hard to return to gridlocked traffic, drafty train platforms, and crowded buses, and **53 percent of workers say that having no commute is the top reason they want to work from home**. An hour behind a steering wheel is time that can much better be spent with family and friends or enjoying a personal hobby.

Top reasons employees prefer working from home:



Unsurprisingly, parents' reasons for wanting to keep the home office are a bit different. **42 percent of parents with children under 18 list their primary reasons for wanting to work from home as the ability to be closer to and have more flexibility with their kids.**

What is the ideal hybrid work model?

Flexibility is the word on every employee's lips. Flexibility to make it to doctors' appointments, spend time with children and loved ones, give attention to pets—whatever flexibility employees can get, they want. And **80 percent of office workers say that they were able to have a more flexible work schedule while working remotely.**

When it comes to returning to the office, **64 percent of workers would choose a flexible arrangement that isn't committed to "the 9-5" as their ideal. Only 28 percent believe that being in-person for a full workday during typical office hours is their ideal situation.**

What should a hybrid work model look like? Here's what respondents think:



What can businesses do to meet employee needs while also meeting business needs?

Now is the time to adapt. Have an open dialogue with your employees to discover how they get their best work done, and make adjustments to better include remote and hybrid employees. Forty-three percent of office workers say that during the pandemic, they really wanted to return to the office, but now they're less interested just because it's not the same as it used to be. A full year of working from home has given employees time to reflect on what matters most to them and experience a way of working that, for many, previously seemed impossible. And now that workers know they can reasonably work from home, it'll be hard to convince them the office is where they want to be.

But don't shut your office down just yet. Only nine percent of millennials and five percent of Gen Z say they never want to work in an office again. While workers from older generations may be more ready to say goodbye to office life, younger generations are still seeking out the benefits that come from an office, like meeting coworkers, the opportunity to move to a new city, and a space away from a shared living situation. So there's still hope for office life, just be prepared for it to look differently than it did a year and a half ago.

Listen to your employees. Listening is the number one thing leaders need to do. Embracing the future of work and the hybrid model will help keep your employees satisfied, but it also opens up exciting business opportunities, such as an expanded candidate pool of remote workers and expense cuts on office space. But what that looks like exactly is going to be different for every company, and as this survey reveals, it'll keep changing as the pandemic continues to affect people's lives and work. So check in with employees, and discover where employee needs and business needs meet so both are satisfied.