These are HR's priorities for 2021

A recent Gartner survey found that the pandemic has dramatically impacted what HR leaders will be focused on in the coming months.

By: Tom Starner | 11-23-2020 | Human Resource Executive

With the COVID-19 pandemic showing no signs of abating any time soon, new research finds that HR professionals are most concerned about ensuring their workforce has the skills to succeed in the new world of work.

In its *HR Priorities Survey,* Gartner, the Stamford, Conn., research and advisory company, found that 68% of respondents reported that employees' critical skills and competencies need serious tending during the coming year.

According to the survey of 750 HR professionals, conducted from June through August, other HR priorities for 2021 include: organizational design and change management (46%), developing the current and future leadership bench (44%), the future of work (32%) and employee experience (28%).

"The COVID-19 pandemic has inspired a dramatic shift across nearly every level of the organization," says Mark Whittle, vice president of advisory in the Gartner HR practice. "Enterprises are rapidly shifting business models and accelerating digital transformation initiatives, adding to the already widespread demand for digital skills."

At the same time, Whittle says, HR leaders are challenged with lack of visibility and understanding of current skill gaps, and how to best integrate learning these new skills into employee workflows. In order to overcome this, he says, HR leaders need to adopt a dynamic approach to reskilling and redeploying talent, by which all impacted stakeholders work together to sense shifting skill needs and find ways to develop skills as those new needs arise.

"We found that this approach helps employees to apply 75% of the new skills they learn, as well as learn sooner, as needs are more quickly identified," Whittle says.

The pandemic has "forced organizations to quickly pivot" when it comes to enterprise business goals and cost optimization—a prime reason why close to half of HR leaders consider organizational design and change management another main priority in 2021—in order to effectively adapt to today's fast-changing conditions.

"But the issue is that employees today—many working remotely—are feeling overwhelmed with work and are tired of change," he notes, adding that, in fact, Gartner research finds that the amount of change that the average employee can absorb without becoming fatigued in 2020 has been cut in half compared to 2019.

Whittle says Gartner finds what it calls "work friction" elements are root causes of employee frustration, including misaligned work design, overwhelmed teams, rigid processes and trapped resources.

"The pandemic has highlighted these frictions like never before," he says. "These are what the best organizations are solving for today."

Finally, Whittle notes that the pandemic has changed employee expectations regarding their employers.

"It's a new employment deal, and many organizations are planning to continue—even increase—investments in 2021 in employee experience and employment value proposition strategies," he says.