



Remote Realities

Navigating the Virtual Workplace

By Peggy McManus, Ph.D.

Assistant Vice President, Talent Solutions Research and Predictive Analytics, LIMRA

The COVID-19 crisis has changed so much across all corners of the world, seemingly turning every aspect of human life upside down. While many of these shifts felt like they happened overnight, the pandemic also has accelerated some trends that were building for years. In the world of employment, one such trend has affected countless companies and employees: a dramatic increase in remote work.

Over the last several years, in fact, human resource predictions have referenced remote work as a growing trend. For instance, as of 2018, at least 40 percent more U.S. companies have allowed it in some form — when compared to the 5 years before.¹

A New Context

This was the backdrop when the pandemic shook the globe last year. The drastic set of circumstances, however, created an entirely different context around remote work. Doing a job virtually during the COVID-19 crisis has played out in many ways, depending on an employee's specific situation.

With schools and childcare facilities closed or with limited attendance, working parents have been forced to juggle both their job responsibilities and their children's schooling. Other employees — who sometimes also are working parents — are concerned about elderly or otherwise vulnerable family members, often serving as their

care coordinators or direct caregivers. This has added another level of stress to their everyday life.

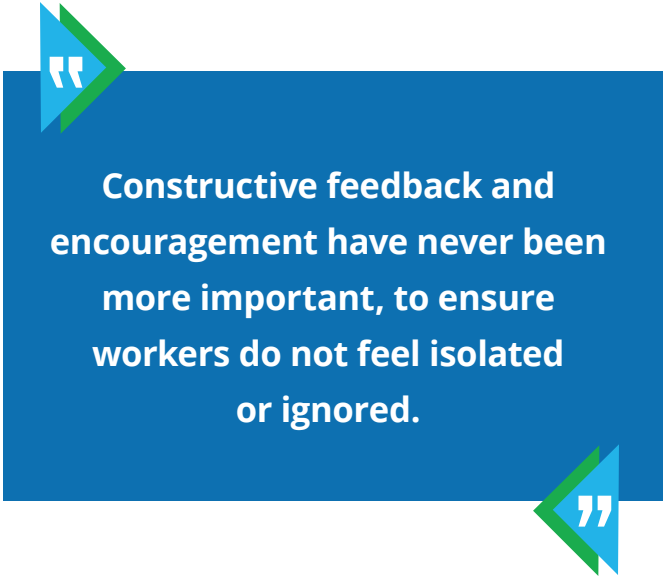
Of course, there is optimism that the world will reach a point where the extreme and acute difficulty created by the pandemic will subside. What it will leave behind, however, is a changed view — a much more widespread acceptance and understanding that remote arrangements are possible. This trend is likely to endure across many industries, with current and potential employees expecting remote work to be at least a partial option. There is recent evidence that a vast majority of American employees who currently work remotely would like to continue doing so “in some way for the rest of their career.”²

Benefits and Challenges

It is critical to keep this evolving context in mind when considering all aspects of remote work moving forward. There are both positive and cautionary sides that can have an impact on organizations, in areas ranging from recruiting to employee experience.

LinkedIn, for example, cited a dramatic increase in remote job postings last year.³ While companies worldwide were essentially forced to adopt work-from-home operations, many were “pleasantly surprised by the results.” Those contemplating continuing at least some remote plans on a more permanent basis believe they will benefit from a number of factors. They would have access to a broader pool of talent, leading to greater diversity and potentially stronger skillsets in employees. Companies also may save money on office space and other expenses.

However, as the pandemic dragged on, questions and concerns began to arise about the sustainability of remote work — at least in its current state and pace. Organizations recognize that they must address some challenges for remote work to succeed long-term. These include operational issues, such as heightened cyber risk, data security concerns, and implications for compensation structures and performance evaluations. For instance, a recent survey



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of North American employers suggests they are “prompted to rethink their approach to pay and rewards” due to the increase in flexible work arrangements.⁴

Arguably more important, there is also notable impact on the very human factors that determine how employees experience their company culture and perform their job. They may face real struggles in terms of their personal well-being (think makeshift workspaces and little time away from their computer) and work/life balance (since the lines are now incredibly blurred). They are burned out and fatigued. They may feel less connected to the meaning and purpose of their work and feel less like they belong or engage with their organization.⁵

And, while productivity may be higher for some workers with certain individual tasks, opportunities for collaboration that foster creativity no longer exist in the same form. In a remote setting, employees are not able to observe and interact with one another as they do when sharing office space. There is an absence of “unconscious learning that occurs in a natural, organic, sometimes indirect way.”⁶



Making It Work

It is clear that organizations need to be extremely thoughtful and transparent when considering approaches and procedures to overcome these challenges. Recent research finds that, to date, less than half of organizations with remote employees have instituted companywide remote work policies.⁷ Ideally, organizations will work to develop a broad strategic view of how remote work has an impact on their employees and organizational productivity, culture, and efficiency.

For companies and their workforces to thrive in the future, it is imperative that foundations are in place to offer resources and help people manage new ways of working.

Beyond providing the required technology and holding meetings and social activities via video — which, at this point, may cause more fatigue — it is important that company leaders demonstrate genuine care for and commitment to their teams. More personal check-ins via phone can go a long way to providing employees the individualized support they may need. Communication should be frequent, and expectations should be clearly outlined. Constructive feedback and encouragement have never been more important, to ensure workers do not feel isolated or ignored.

It is also helpful to continue existing mentoring programs, facilitate team building, and create online peer groups where workers can share with one another. Korn Ferry suggests that organizations remind employees of resources they may have available as part of their benefits, such as mental health counseling.⁸

At the end of the day, success lies in the ability of companies and leaders to offer sufficient support and prioritize relationships. Those who commit to resilience, empathy, and employee well-being in today's new context will be well-positioned to harness the advantages of a remote workforce. 🌐

¹ Zuckerman, Arthur, "20 New Recruiting Trends: 2020/2021 Hiring Data, Statistics & Predictions," CompareCamp, May 25, 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Erer, Murat, "Global Data Shows Surge in Remote Work," LinkedIn, June 30, 2020.

⁴ "Uptick in Flexible Work Arrangements Leads Companies to Consider New Pay Models," Willis Towers Watson press release, November 19, 2020.

⁵ Rawal, Praveen, "Top 7 Reasons Employees Are Tired of WFH," Entrepreneur India, September 16, 2020.

⁶ Golden, Ryan, "How HR Can Encourage Peer-to-Peer Learning in an Era of Remote Work," *HR Dive*, November 10, 2020.

⁷ "Companies With a Digitally Fluent Workforce Lead Their Peers in Revenue Growth and Better Worker Satisfaction," Accenture press release, December 2, 2020.

⁸ "Burnout: The Second Wave," Korn Ferry, September 17, 2020.



Peggy McManus, Ph.D. — assistant vice president of Talent Solutions Research and Predictive Analytics with LIMRA's Talent Solutions team — is an industrial/organizational psychologist with extensive experience in the financial services industry conducting research related to recruiting, selection, and performance development. She can be reached at pmcmanus@limra.com.