



The New 21st Century Employee Reality

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As the world, however slowly, turns the page on COVID-19, both organizations and employees are left with many tough questions about the new workplace... and there are no quick, one-size-fits-all answers.

Take it from someone who took a new Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) job during a pandemic: organizations will have to tackle employee and culture questions differently than before this event. That means shifting your focus to a new, post-COVID state of mind. It's a big challenge, but after studying employee wellbeing and culture throughout this pandemic, I have identified some areas that will be helpful in knowing how your brand can adapt to the changing employee reality.

A CULTURE OF CONNECTIVITY

Office closures, school closures, and mandated (or recommended) lockdowns have created forced work-from-home environments. Employees had to juggle homeschooling children while also learning how to effectively deliver their work product. They found themselves isolated from their teammates and spending hours a day on video conference calls in an attempt to stay connected.

Connectivity has been a challenge throughout the past year, and many brands have seen their employees battle with the loss of a sense of belonging. Suddenly, many of them had to work from home, and the normal opportunities they had to build and maintain relationships were lost. This is especially true for newer employees, many of whom still haven't had the chance to be in the same room as their teammates and have had to acclimate to a new culture from afar. All of these factors have made it more difficult for organizations to create a sense of belonging for employees both new and established.

In addition, there are clear regional differences in pandemic-era policies and norms. If your organization has international offices, that means you've had to be more cognizant of the virus challenges not just in your home country, but also abroad. Creating culture and connectivity for one group of employees is challenging enough, but taking the scope of that challenge worldwide can make it exponentially more difficult.

THE DEATH OF THE TRADITIONAL WORKPLACE

The truth is that, as difficult as remote work, lockdowns, and the like may have been for employees to initially adjust to, the work-from-home environment has become the norm around which their lives have revolved for the last year. This shift has been more fundamental than most brands realize, creating an entirely new paradigm for employee time and resource management.

The other reality that brands have had to accept is that, in this digital day and age, it's much more possible to work well remotely than anyone thought. True, plenty of people were working remotely before COVID, but the idea that entire teams could be productive from home seemed improbable not that long ago. We've since learned, at least in broad strokes, that employees can be just as productive at home as in the office.

Knowing this is the new environment, how can organizations like yours not just adapt, but turn these new circumstances to your advantage? The challenge is not small, but brands should recognize that the current landscape presents a tremendous opportunity to connect employees like never before, resulting in greater customer connectivity too. So, let's crack the code of current employee connectivity and culture.

HOME, OFFICE OR SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

It's because of these new norms and productivity revelations that I firmly believe the "new reality" for many brands will either lead to a full work-from-home workforce or a hybrid approach, i.e., employees may periodically return to the office but otherwise retain their home as their workplace center of gravity. The split on this hybrid approach will vary from brand to brand (Google, for example, plans to make vast swaths of its workforce permanently remote from now on), but all indicators and our own research tell me that office footprints will get smaller and organizations will plan in-office time when they feel teams must gather in person.

Creating this new approach for your own organization may seem daunting, but think of it this way: now is the time for your brand to try new things and strategies for your employees. Slack, for example, says that it wants to take this





time to question long-held assumptions about nearly every facet of the workplace. I think that's a great way to look at it; acknowledging how hard this time has been for a lot of brands while also recognizing the opportunity to learn whether what we thought we knew before really holds true in a workplace sense.

THE ENDLESS TECHNOLOGY OPPORTUNITY

The overarching theme with hybrid schedules and creating employee connectivity in this brave new world is to emphasize the human side of workplace culture. Creating events like Zoom happy hours, virtual book chats, and the like are one thing, but companies need to take these events a step further by connecting people who wouldn't normally interact. Putting different teams in the same room or Zoom chat isn't just good for

creating a shared understanding of your brand mission and customer—going forward, this sort of thing is going to be vital for creating a wider organizational culture between teams that will likely be physically distant.

Of course, connectivity also stems from supporting employees on a personal level, which a lot of brands addressed during the pandemic by stepping up mental health and general wellness resources. Because employees have come to expect these resources as a matter of course, and because they've come to rely on them to help maintain both their health and a redefined work/life balance, brands must continue evolving these offerings alongside changing workforce needs and trends. Prospective employees are also considering offerings like these much more now than before the pandemic, which shouldn't come as a surprise.

All of this serves as a reminder not just that adaptable workplace cultures are the ones that thrive, but also that making employees feel engaged and cared for will hinge even more on effective leadership. A capable leader cares about their employees as people (both personally and professionally), sets a clear vision for the team, creates expectations for individual team members, encourages two-way feedback, and ensures time and space for meaningful career development conversations. Those elements were always key to great leadership but are doubly so now because of the new challenges we've been discussing. They're also important for ensuring retention at a time when massive numbers of employees, for a variety of reasons, are seeking new jobs.

The common theme here is that your brand needs to be human, to listen to employees, and to evolve alongside your workforce.

That adaptability is going to be key going forward, because it signals that you care about your employees, which informs how invested they are in everything from their own work to customer interactions. To recap, focus on mental health and wellness, create connection opportunities to promote inclusivity, and strengthen relationships with your employees by enabling leaders to effectively manage remote workforces.

THE EMPLOYEE-CENTRIC 21ST CENTURY BRAND

None of what I've talked about is easy to execute on. But the brands that can pull it off will have demonstrated that they listened to their employees during these unparalleled times and that they care deeply about them on both a personal and professional level. This emboldens employees to instill greater passion into their work and self-care, while also allowing brands to retain top talent and the flexibility to search for the best of the best no matter where those individuals might reside (which is an interesting byproduct of the pandemic). In essence,

the brands that do this work will improve employee and brand relationships, which will ultimately lead to tangible community gain and Experience Improvement (XI) for both customers and employees.

In all, organizations can meet the challenges of the current employee landscape by adapting to the new employee reality, applying a nimble mix of technology and human expertise, and being empathetic to both your employees' lives and the community at large. The world, not 'just' the workplace, has changed forever, and the brands that can get wise to that will succeed for their employees, their customers, and their bottom line.

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