

43rd Essay Contest Winning Essay - FIRST PLACE

The Future is Flexible: How Workplace Culture Will Change to Retain and Recruit Talent in a Post-Pandemic World

A few Saturdays ago, my mom and I set out to buy me a new suit for my upcoming forensics season. Last year, during the state finals, I suffered a nose bleed of epic proportions. My suit was the victim. Our first stop was Men’s Wearhouse. But when we reached the doors, we were met with an employee who informed us that they were facing severe staffing issues, that the store was at capacity, and that we would be placed on a waitlist. I have never had to make a reservation for a clothing store, and I was disappointed in a store that promised, “You’ll like the way you look; we guarantee it.” Men’s Wearhouse has fallen on hard times. The chain has plans to close 100 locations, and one store in Lexington, Kentucky has been reduced to a single employee named Brendon Dolan (Finerman). In an interview with WKYT, a local news agency, Dolan said that “I think working conditions got harder for employees. Plus, we’re lower staffed anyways after COVID; it just started weighing on people so, slowly, they just started finding other jobs.”

Unfortunately, Men’s Warehouse is not alone in this struggle. The pandemic has seen an enormous number of American workers quit their jobs. An article published in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* reported that in 6 months alone, 24 million people left their jobs voluntarily—a record for all of U.S. history (Sull, Sull, and Zweig). Additionally, the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), a consulting firm for employee/employer relations, recently found that over 4.5 million people quit last September alone, another new record. They also reported that 55% of the American workforce has plans to join them (Maurer). The sheer magnitude of this shift can be seen in its name, which was coined by Anthony Klotz, a professor of management in Texas: “The Great Resignation” (Miller). This historic phenomenon poses a major threat to employers who need to keep their staff full in the midst of this crisis. Put simply, employers need to retain their talent.

But why are workers leaving? The same *MIT Sloan Review* article scored various factors based on their importance to workers leaving. COVID, surprisingly, only ranked a 1.8, meaning that the pandemic itself was not very important. Job insecurity received a similarly insignificant 3.5. Toxic

workplace culture, on the other hand, received a whopping 10.4, correlating with resignation more than any other factor. A *Fortune* article concurs, finding that the true force behind this “Great Resignation” is the very nature of the workplace itself. People are leaving because of workplace culture—the traditions, hierarchies, power structures, expected behavior, and character of the workplace. It is these things that will change to retain employees, not pay or compensation. In order to retain and recruit talent, workplace culture will become more accommodating for virtual work, rejecting the “Google Model,” and becoming more flexible.

First and foremost, in order to retain employees, workplace culture will continue to support virtual work even after the pandemic. Despite pervasive feelings of “Zoom burnout,” studies have found that many workers actually prefer virtual work. When recounting her days at the office, CEO Jammie Von Sossan recounts that she would often cry at work. Reflecting positively on remote work, she says “We’ve never been more creative, more productive. Deadlines are met. Everything’s getting done. Honestly, operationally there are no challenge” (Yoder). Apparently most employees share similar feelings, as a *Forbes* survey found that 65% of workers want to continue full time virtual work even after the pandemic, and 58% “would absolutely look for a new job if they weren’t allowed to continue working remotely in their current position” (Robinson).

Few employers can afford to lose 58% of their talented employees over a virtual work issue—especially now—so we’ll see a shift towards virtual employment in workplace culture driven by the need to retain this 58 percent. This can already be seen in a BBC article, “How Companies around the World Are Shifting the Way They Work.” The article includes a section about the map-production company TomTom. Because of its industry, TomTom is inherently tied to physical locations. Yet the company decided to drastically refocus its operations to a virtual workplace: it let employees decide whether they wanted to work virtually at the beginning of the pandemic, becoming one of the first companies to shift towards virtual employment in workplace culture. TomTom is not alone, however. In a statistic that shows the magnitude of this occasion, Build Remote, a company that helps build virtual workplaces,

found that 72 organizations are permanently shifting at least part of their operations online (Henry et al.). This list includes titans such as Amazon, Microsoft, and even the U.S Navy and Air Force.

But this trend isn't limited to the big leagues. After realizing that her company was performing better with virtual work, the previously mentioned CEO Jammie Von Sossan shifted her smaller company, called 3Fold, to focus on virtual work. She sold their larger office space in favor of a smaller, more virtually oriented one, hired staff for long term virtual performance, and even arranged an outing to a sports game to retain cohesion among workers (Yoder). The changes taking place in 3Fold and major workplaces show how workplace culture will shift towards virtual work in the near future in an effort to retain and recruit talent.

The need to retain talent is indirectly bringing about another change in workplace culture: companies are beginning to rethink the Silicon Valley model of employment. In pre-pandemic times, one of the hallmarks of working at Silicon Valley was the lavish campuses with foosball, cafes, massage lounges, food, and even “nap pods” according to an article by the *Economic Times* (“Microsoft's Tree House, Google's Nap Pods”). These amenities allow employees to be fundamentally tied to their workplaces—essentially, to live there. That is, or was, the Silicon Valley model of workplace culture. However, these billion-dollar campuses in Silicon Valley are practically useless in a world where remote work is increasingly the norm. This rethinking can already be seen in the actions of REI Coop, a sports equipment company. In 2016, they spent a fortune building a corporate campus in the style of Silicon Valley. It was bad timing. Now, when the shift towards virtual work is becoming more and more clear with each passing day, an article by CNBC reports that REI Coop put the behemoth on the market—all without using it for a single day (Thomas). Similarly, a *Business Insider* article records that many CEOs are reconsidering the Silicon Valley model. According to the article by Julie Bort titled “Tech CEOs are Rethinking their Need for Offices and Real Estate,” CEO Seth Ravin of Rimini Street wondered: “If everyone can really work at home, why do we have all these big offices around the world?” Additionally, CEO Todd McKinnon of Okta, a Japanese company, recently described how his company is moving towards having less square footage, the opposite of what they expected pre-pandemic (Bort). The musings

of these CEOs, along with the sale of corporate campuses, capture the way that the need to retain employees is indirectly causing the end of the Silicon Valley model and causing companies to reconsider expensive, lavish campuses.

Additionally, workplace culture will become more flexible and adaptive in order to retain talented employees. In addition to remote work, the pandemic introduced a slew of flexibility-oriented adjustments: adaptive hours, nimble office spaces, non-permanent offices and desks, and the reduction of meetings in favor of emails. Polls show that workers savored these tastes of flexibility: a survey by *Wired*, found that a whole 93% agreed that “they want flexibility when they work” (Kobie). Employees are acting on these opinions, too. Another SHRM poll found that a full third of leaving workers were doing so “because their... workplace didn’t offer flexible work opportunities” (Maurer).

Employees will continue to pressure workplace culture to change, this time in the direction of flexibility. Early signs of this can be seen in the policy of two tech giants: Google and Microsoft. According to *The New York Times*, Google has introduced a policy letting their employees work on location for 3 days a week—days they can choose (Wakabayashi). This means that Google employees will have the flexibility to drastically shape their schedule. Microsoft has made clear that they are moving in the same direction with a post on the company’s official blog: Kathleen Hogan, Microsoft’s Executive Vice President and Chief People Officer, writes: “Moving forward, it is our goal to offer as much flexibility as possible to support individual workstyles...” This post clearly indicates how Microsoft and its thousands of employees are moving towards flexibility. It says it right there. This clearly illustrates that major companies are moving towards workplace flexibility, and that it will be much more prevalent in post-pandemic workplace culture.

Although it might be too late for Men’s Wearhouse’s workplace culture, another giant clothes retailer, Target, has weathered the storm by adopting many of the strategies I suggest above. *TheRealDeal*, a business newspaper, reports on Target’s initiative to move much of its workforce remote (“Target Moves to Remote Model, Sends Minneapolis Workers Home”). The retailer has also moved away from the Google model, selling over one-third of its office space in Minneapolis. Finally, Target has

introduced an app called myTime, which allows employees to flexibility adjust their working hours on demand (Kumar). Although less prevalent now, workplace culture will take up these reforms in order to retain and recruit talent in a post pandemic world.

When I went to that Men's Wearhouse and found it understaffed, it turns out that there was a Target not too far. And that Target was selling suits. Yet, Target hasn't instituted any waiting lists, and who knows, perhaps it will be companies like Target, those with adaptive workplace cultures, that finally fulfill Men's Wearhouse's promise: "You'll like how you look; I guarantee it."

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43 Essay Contest Winning Essay - SECOND PLACE

Effects of the Pandemic on Workplace Culture

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic spread throughout the country, reframing the everyday life of each American. Many individuals re-evaluated how content they were with their lives, and the pandemic opened their eyes to what they deserve, such as flexible schedules, benefits and stability, opportunities to succeed, and improved communication. People were forced to adapt their lives to the “new normal”. The pandemic brought about an unfamiliar batch of struggles for members of the workforce, with calls to businesses to reevaluate how they operate. Post-pandemic, new trends emerged such as asynchronous engagement, reduced connectedness to one’s workplace, and new employee expectations for businesses. These changes are putting a necessary focus on recruiting and retaining, requiring companies to offer a healthy environment, flexibility, and growth in the workplace.

Creating a healthy environment where workers feel safe to be honest about their struggles, and how they want to work, is vital to retaining employees. Sarah McElroy, a chief marketing officer living in Atlanta tells a story of how she experienced “stress-related health problems” and was overworked. She worried that asking for help would be considered weak. She said she “didn’t want to let anyone down”, but she was feeling “depleted” like she “wasn’t meeting the mark on pretty much anything [she] was doing.” Sarah decided to quit and start a new job at a “slower pace”(Chen and Smith). *Gallup*, an American analytics and advisory company, says it is important to “create a culture where friendships can naturally develop and thrive” because it increases the sense of belonging and drives employees to “take positive actions that benefit the business”(Mann). Unfortunately, the pandemic has amplified the lack of communication in every aspect of work-life, leading to many members of the workforce feeling as though they are unnoticed and/or disconnected from their place of work. To develop a better

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connection between employees and management, there must be a focus on trust. Following the shift into increasingly independent work, employees now want to form individualized schedules, therefore, managers and fellow employees must trust each other to complete tasks and perform well on their own terms. In an article about working from home, it is mentioned that “Sarah Forbes, co-director of the Equal Parenting Project, says that “against managers’ expectations, the majority of employees can be trusted to work flexibly, and employees are more productive.” By stepping back, she says, “managers were getting better results.” (Samuel)

As mentioned in an article from the Wall Street Journal, "Ben Wigert, who directs workplace-management research for Gallup, said his research suggests the greatest determinant of worker burnout isn't the number of hours worked, but factors such as unmanageable workloads, unclear communication, and lack of manager support."(Chen and Smith). Wigert also says: “If you take a vacation and come back to the same work circumstances, it doesn't solve the problem. It might upset you more.” He says, “the next time, you might not come back.” The article also mentions the point of view of David Heath, the CEO of the sock brand Bombas. “Teams can start to exhibit signs of stress long before most people speak up about it, said Mr. Heath. He said he has one-on-one meetings to check in on each new hire. The company also trains its managers to regularly ask employees if they feel overworked." Other companies have held town halls, leading to enthusiasm and commitment to the workplace. Improvements like this are examples of how the employee is being heard, creating a better work-life fusion.

Additionally, managers should encourage employees to be vulnerable and truthful about their mental and physical health, so they can communicate how much rest and restoration they may need. In the same article published by the Wall Street Journal, it states that “before the pandemic, 60% of employees said they thought mental health was something they should handle

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without employer assistance, according to surveys from insurer MetLife Inc.” By June 2021, “that figure had flipped, with 62% saying they believed their employer had a responsibility for their mental well-being”(Chen and Smith). Companies have begun to urge employees to take authentic breaks or vacations, rather than receiving just monetary rewards. For example, establishments such as the Grand Rapids Opportunities for Women (GROW), set minimum requirements for vacation time (Ysasi).

The pandemic has led to fewer social connections and increased burnout. An article written by Stanford Medicine quotes, “People low in social connection are more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, antisocial behavior, and even suicidal behaviors which tend to further increase their isolation”(Seppala). Fortunately, these things can be remedied. “Companies have been more understanding, flexible and empathetic” during the pandemic, said Gallup’s Mr. Wigert. Gallup’s research, he said, suggests that such efforts help cushion against higher rates of burnout” (Chen and Smith). Milinda Ysasi, the CEO of GROW, a business development service in Grand Rapids, shared her experience with a burnout in a previous occupation. She explains how she began to struggle with overworking herself and finally decided to quit when she was ultimately unhappy in her job. However, if her boss had noticed and put a greater effort into improving her mental health, she would have talked to them about it and found a solution that did not involve quitting as a first resort. Gallup also says they have “discovered that there are people whose likelihood of experiencing burnout is essentially zero. These employees share three things in common: They are engaged at work, they have high wellbeing, and their organization has a strengths-based culture.”(Pendell) If managers truly show they care for their employee’s well-being and success, these aspects of leadership will build a mutual understanding that both the employer and employee are investing themselves into their work.

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Flexibility and willingness to adapt to current workplace norms will be the only way to keep moving forward and improving. The original system of labor has expired and there is no longer an assumption that the employer delivers all of the rules and the employee follows them. An article from the Wall Street Journal, written by Alexandra Samuel, quotes, “There is a good chance that those who have been working from home have come to appreciate the autonomy they have gained,” says David Pauleen, a professor in technology management at the School of Management at Massey University in New Zealand, “...Some employees might bristle if this management trust in employee capabilities to work more autonomously suddenly ceased.” There are new standards that employees have set for businesses, and “probably the biggest change for managers is that many of their direct reports will have acquired a taste for independence, and a lot less managerial oversight. It isn’t easy to go from a year of freedom to being under the boss’s thumb” (Samuel). An example of this asynchronous work in theory “means morning people and night owls can work when they feel most productive. Mr. Simpson, the design executive [of Dropbox], said that on Mondays and Fridays, he stops working at 3 p.m. to spend time with his children, then logs back in after 7 p.m. Employees convene at the office, but only for events or when in-person collaboration is required” (Chen and Smith). Employers have also adapted by changing the benefits they offer and experimenting with shorter weeks, hybrid schedules, and mental health support options. Businesses will have to accept that technology is always changing and it is currently a building block for many new forms of work. In an article from *Harvard Business Review*, a “newly released ManpowerGroup global analysis shows, 8 in 10 workers want *more* remote work to attain a healthier work-life fusion” (Frankiewicz and Chamorro-Premuzic). These needs must be met, allowing a shift in the workplace to support employees and every aspect of their lives.

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Harvard Business School asked some of their faculty members to share their thoughts on how to adapt to the new way of working. Rosabeth Moss Kanther says that “business leaders are increasingly called upon to demonstrate that well-being joins wealth as a fundamental purpose of business”(Gerdeman). People’s lives have dramatically changed, and now many workers leave jobs because their priorities do not align with the crucial responsibilities brought about by the pandemic that has been placed on employees. For example, many citizens, especially women, have fallen out of the workforce due to complicated home lives because they are forced to care for children, elderly, or disabled individuals. “1 in 10 moms with young children have quit their jobs with half of them saying it was because of school or daycare closures” (Zakin and Weisberg). However, employers have been working to increase the participation of women in the workforce. In an article published in the *Wall Street Journal*, it was stated that 63% of employers are “planning to increase child-care benefits, and 41% planning to expand senior-care offerings”, according to a survey conducted by Care.com (Bhattacharyya, 2021).

The new generation of workers has realized that they don’t want to feel as though they are stuck anywhere. Employers must know that they “don’t own the talent”, they are simply “renting” it (Ysasi). An article from *Time* magazine states, “When a current employer is unable or unwilling to make a job more attractive, numbers on job openings suggest that burned-out workers in many sectors can easily find new ones”(Vesoulis). Businesses should embrace and plan for the time when they have to let an employee go. If an employer makes a lasting connection with this employee, it could lead to referrals of friends, which spreads the branch of recruitment even further. Giving employees opportunities to learn, grow, and be inspired within the company is the best way to appreciate and utilize talent. Although, in order to make more investments in staff members, employers must see their occupations as stepping stones to greater

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accomplishments for their people. Many businesses spend far too much money on new personnel rather than developing their current ones. An example of a better strategy is demonstrated by the Mercy Health Hospital of Grand Rapids. They have assistance for employees in paying for tuition, as well as a Certified Health Environmental Services Technicians (CHEST) training program, and Medical Assistant (MA) apprenticeships. One of the most beneficial programs are the recently formulated evidence-based hiring practices, which help specialize the jobs candidates are given so that they match their specific interests and the employer can further develop their personal skills of the employee. This process requires more detail when hiring, but it pays off in the future with lower rates of turnover

The pandemic introduced unfamiliar struggles to the workforce and everyone involved. People were forced to adapt, along with the companies that support them. There is no expectation of returning the workforce to what it once was, but there's hope that this newly reformed labor culture will be increasingly successful because people have finally had a chance to realize and demand their specific worker needs. There is still a great amount of progress to be made to create a balanced and productive work environment, but businesses are setting their goals and are prepared to adjust. Despite the negative impacts of the pandemic on the whole of society, it has provided numerous development opportunities and positive change for the workplace, in the current era.

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43rd Essay Contest Winning Essay - THIRD PLACE

The colorful, ebullient posters hung on store windows no longer advertise excessive electronics, delectable dishes, or fanciful fashion for consumers. Instead of trying to fish for the public's money, businesses are now looking for the people themselves. They offer ever-growing wages for those who will take up their shifts. But the fish aren't biting. Spurred by a sickness, workers left their jobs and were forced to leave in waves. Despite wages rising faster than they have in the last 20 years (Rugaber), the unemployment rate is still higher than it was before the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 ("The Employment Situation"). In order for businesses to attract and maintain workers, they must offer more than wages; they need to build a more supportive environment for workers, offering opportunities for mental support, growth, and flexibility.

To understand how to retain workers, it is necessary to understand why workers leave. Betsey Stevenson, a former member of Barack Obama's Council of Economic Advisors, "the characteristics of jobs have changed [... and] have maybe made the job more dangerous, less pleasant. That means people might not want to do that job anymore, or they might be demanding higher pay in order to do that job" (qtd in. Chang). The most apparent characteristic that has changed about many jobs during the pandemic is the fear of illness. Many jobs require employees to directly interact with many customers a day, all from different backgrounds, increasing the likelihood of contracting diseases. To prevent workers from leaving their positions, businesses must mitigate this risk and make them feel safer in their occupations.

Many of these changes are clear and apparent - mask requirements for employees, plastic dividers around cashier stands, and increased disinfecting on all surfaces. Another clear

change is the transition to virtual working environments - many workers can almost completely avoid the threat of the virus by completing everything digitally. In 2020, the percentage of college graduates over 25 working from home rose 28 percentage points from 2019 to 65% (DiPierro). While these changes can help retain workers who would otherwise leave due to health concerns, they isolate them more from others - whether with physical boundaries or virtual ones. Consequently, many of them feel lonelier, deteriorating their emotional and psychological mental states. Over the first ten months of the pandemic, the percent of US adults reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression rose 11 percent (“Pandemic and Mental Health”). While this change may not be caused completely by workplace environments, it certainly is a factor. If people aren’t at their jobs, they are at home, distancing from others or in quarantine - still in isolation. The workplace can be the only place for human interaction for some. According to “[a 2019 study showed that] 50% of Millennials and 75% of Gen-Zers quit a job due to issues related to mental health” (Kelly). Failing to support workers’ mental health, especially providing interactions with others, can lead to more quits.

The pandemic has thrust an unavoidable mental health issue for businesses - an issue that has steadily risen before is now fully apparent. Moving forward, it is clear that workplaces should build a culture in which mental health is more centrally addressed. Over the pandemic, people on average spent less of their free time socializing and communicating in person than in 2019 (DiPierro). Coupled with the increased isolation found in the workplace, workers are spending far less time with others. Employers can then most easily target the issue of mental health by directly encouraging more social interaction, whether it be through more informal team-bonding activities or increased collaborative work. Additionally, businesses can directly

support employees by providing them with more mental health resources. For example, Zendesk, a software company, partnered with mental health provider Modern Health and saw 25% global usage in the first week (Liu). This high engagement shows that mental health resources are not only good for keeping employees, but something that employees themselves want. The easy access to mental health resources also may make workers more likely to stay.

Another large aspect of why laborers quit their jobs lies in their future. As the pandemic has given people more time to think and reflect about their lives, many are reconsidering their current or previous work position. This is most clearly seen in the millions working low wage jobs. It is typical that in these jobs, employees are frozen into their profession and can't easily move up to higher positions. And if these jobs aren't rewarding in their own right, employees find no reason to keep working them, especially after being relieved of their duties due to the pandemic. As Robert Reich, the former U.S. Secretary of Labor, puts it: "[Employees] don't want to return to backbreaking or boring, low wage, sh-t jobs" (qtd. in Vesoulis). Thus, many are now looking for jobs where they can find growth in their skills and positions. According to research from Randstad US, 58% of workers say that their companies "don't have enough growth opportunities for them to stay longer term," and 57% say they "need to leave their current companies to take their careers to the next level" ("Your Best Employees"). A major theme that blossomed in the pandemic is self-growth. If the jobs workers are returning to don't support and offer this opportunity, then workers are less likely to take them.

With the major increase in free time provided by the virus, many people have found time and a desire to learn more skills and attain better positions. "More than two-thirds of

208,807 workers from 190 countries want to learn skills for new roles that offer more job security and opportunity” (Gurchiek). Coupled with the increase in online learning and development resources, employees are more able than ever to chase higher positions. For employers to keep these workers, they need to offer opportunities for growth inside the company, and spread a culture of professional growth throughout the workplace. This can be done by creating higher positions for workers and giving them access to resources for greater development. In fact, some companies are already pushing to help workers grow:

Merck and other large companies have put up more than \$100 million to burnish the skills of Black workers without a college education and create jobs that they can fill. The reward of such efforts would be a more resilient, more talented, and better-paid workforce—and a more robust and equitable society. (Lund et al.)

Specialized training paths like this can help workers develop only the skills they need for the job, not wasting time or money on superfluous training. Additionally, it may help make workers more loyal to their companies, since their training most clearly applies to the company’s standards, and the training isn’t as easily transferable as something like a college degree.

Workplace culture won’t only change to retain already hired talent; it will also change how new talent is scouted out. As mentioned before, virtual resources and tools have become much more prominent in the last couple years. As more people began working from home during the pandemic, they grew to prefer it. Now, nearly 50% of workers are willing to take a 5% pay cut in order to work remotely post-pandemic (Collins). The opportunity for remote work

entices workers, and can also be beneficial to businesses. Because of the lack of physical contact, businesses can now theoretically hire workers from anywhere with internet access. This means that businesses now can increase diversity in the workplace by hiring talent that would otherwise be unavailable (McKinsey). And diversity is what many workers want too; a 2020 Glassdoor study found that “76% of employees and job seekers report a diverse workforce is an important factor when evaluating companies and job offers” (“40+ Stats”). This diversity can help provide new ideas and perspectives, creating a more creative and accepting work environment - one that workers want to be in. An environment like this can be largely beneficial to companies who can now scout more talent; those stargazers who were previously unable to get their jobs are likely the most passionate in their fields. Coupled with an accepting environment, these workers will likely be the most hard-working at their dream positions.

Similar to the idea of remote work, flexibility is becoming an increasingly important factor in future employees’ minds. More obviously, this refers to the flexibility in work time and scheduling, as people dedicate more of their time to hobbies, passion projects, and learning new skills. But more broadly, this may refer to the flexibility of workplaces as a whole. In the past, toxic work culture has been a major factor in workers leaving and avoiding a company. Specifically, 86% of laborers say they would not apply for or work for a company that has a bad reputation, and 58% say that they have left or are considering leaving their jobs due to negative work politics (“Your Best Employees”). Regardless of the past two years, it’s clear that workers dislike negative workplace culture. However, following the many shutdowns and deaths, this issue was exacerbated. After dealing with tragedies continuously, and having to adapt to new, more isolated and hopeless circumstances, people don’t want another negative influence in

their lives. Instead of inflexible managers and choking environments, “74% of employees want their managers to [emphasize] empathy and a supportive attitude” (“Resetting Normal”) - the human element of work is now more stressed. Additionally, the taste of remote work has influenced employees and employers alike to consider progressive reform of other aspects of work. For instance, 69% of employees believe that contracts should be based on results rather than hours, and 74% of executives believe that the length of the workweek should be reconsidered , possibly suggesting the end of fixed 9-5 schedules (“Resetting Normal”). As Susan Lund, the International Finance Corporation’s Vice President for Economics, states: “Most companies are reimagining themselves right now. They are embracing speed and flexibility and agility, and the flattening of hierarchies in an effort to make decisions faster and better” (“Where the Jobs Are”). These progressive reforms show that the workplaces are now working for the workers, rather than simply using them. Employees now have power in how they can do their jobs, so they can get their work done on their terms, and with coworkers they want. In the coming years, it is likely that more aspects of work may change to satisfy workers, and employees will have more control over their workplaces.

Over the next few years, we will see major changes in how the workplace is run, and how work is even done. Brick and mortar offices are likely to be replaced or shrunk as virtual meetings become more common. Mental health is likely to be valued more among colleagues and managers. The workplace will embolden those eager to learn, and place the underemployed in their best positions. Many of these issues within the workplace were present before the pandemic, and finally unearthed when lockdown inflamed them. And, as the many revolutions in the past have stirred and shifted the social hierarchy, the future after COVID may

see a progressive reform of the workplace hierarchy. With this reset, the workplace may see a new era of supporting and considering workers first.

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43rd Essay Contest Winning Essay - THIRD PLACE

A Working Revolution

“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything” (LaScala). This quote by George Bernard Shaw displays the need for progress from the changes brought on by the pandemic. Countries were locked down with little to no travel around the world, industries changed focus or shut down, businesses were lost and many people were stuck in their homes. Many people began to work online, or from home. Since how people work changed, then the culture should also progress into a new era of employee. If there is no change in the culture of work then there will be no progress. In order to keep up with the changing times, workplaces must put their workers above their profitability.

I - Flexibility:

The pandemic forced workplaces to adapt. This flexibility highlights an important shift in workplace cultures. Workers want an adaptable culture, which comes in many ways.

One way is working remotely, a trend that was already happening was accelerated by the pandemic (Renzulli). For many employees, remote work has been a blessing, in fact 1/3 of employees do not want to work onsite full time (Emmer). Working remotely also does not decrease productivity. In fact Kerri Anne Renzulli states in her article, “The Coronavirus Will Change How We Work Forever” that “a study from Harvard university last year found that people were more productive when given the freedom to work from anywhere as opposed to strict workplace requirements.” If workers have less limitations within their workplace, they are more likely to stay. Flexibility will allow workplaces to recruit and retain talent because their workplace will be caring for their employees.

Another benefit to remote work is a wider talent pool. Gerald Kane, who contributed to the MIT Sloan Article “Redesigning the Post-Pandemic Workplace” pointed out that “Virtual work also allows people to collaborate across geographic, physical, and organizational boundaries in novel ways.” Remote work widens the talent pool for many employers helping alleviate the worker shortage. The flexibility of remote work is especially attractive to some people.

Not everyone can work from home. It depends on the position someone is hired for, but also their level of education. According to Justin Fox, a writer for Bloomberg, “... 51.9% of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher said they could work from home while only 11.1% of those with a high school degree or less could.” Despite not being able to work from home, there are still important shifts toward flexibility. Those who cannot work remotely can also enjoy the benefits of flexible schedules. These arrangements can give employees time to care for their family, and themselves as many of them have young children to care for as well as aging parents (Wright and Van Strien). There are many optional schedules to try, including the four day work week, which is being tested around the world, including Australia, and the UK (Hanns-Terrill et al.). Other schedule options include four ten hour days, or eight nine hour days , one eight hour day and one day off within two weeks (Emmer). Practically any productive schedule can be made between the workplace and the employee, shifting the culture dramatically. This allows those who don’t have as good an education to be cared for by their employers instead of seen solely for their profitability.

Unfortunately for many workers, employers are hesitant to give flexibility to their employees, citing that employees won’t get their work done (Renzulli). In fact the opposite is true. In remote work, employees will often add two and a half additional hours to their work day

(Hanns-Terrill et al). This can be both good and bad because it can lead to overworking (Hanns-Terrill et al.). Either way extra productivity is a potential positive for the employer to let their employees work remotely. However, this is one of the pitfalls of remote work.

A large issue employers have with remote working and flexible scheduling is the decline of workplace culture. Gearld C. Kane in his article “Redesigning the Post-Pandemic Workplace”, as he points out that with remote work it is very hard to establish and maintain a workplace culture because clothing and workspace often inform an employee about the company’s culture. Kane points out that a lack of culture makes it harder to hire new people. That’s why, according to Marc Emmer, who wrote an article titled, “The New Formula for Recruiting and Retaining Talent” points out “... 68 percent of employers believe workers need to be in the office at least three days per week for their culture to survive.” This is one drawback of remote work. How do employers adapt to the new workplace style while keeping a company culture?

One way to encourage the best of both worlds is to create a hybrid schedule of both remote and in-person work. Remote work can provide flexibility, and widen the talent pool, while in-person work can help bolster the culture within the workplace (Kane et al). Many businesses are doing this to ensure their workplace culture and collaboration while giving their employees what they need.

The shift toward hybrid and remote work is highlighted through a change in office furniture. As companies adapt to hybrid work life, their office spaces must change as a result. Steelcase is creating adaptable furniture specifically for hybrid office spaces (Kane et al). Even though hybridization of workplaces is in play, 61% of employees still want their own desk to signal employee ownership (Kane et al). This sense of ownership must be balanced with what the company as a whole needs.

The new workplace culture is a balance between hybrid, remote or a flexible schedule that cares for the employees first. As the work atmosphere shifts, employees will be more productive without worrying about outside work issues. Workplace culture must shift to accommodate this need for flexibility in doing so, they will care for their employee's needs.

II - Communication and Empathy:

The pandemic has heightened stress and anxiety in the workforce, more than ever before. New viruses and the lockdowns that come with them, create a lot of emotional baggage. This stress, anxiety and emotional baggage in the workforce has to be discussed. As a result the workplace culture should shift to a place where employees feel cared for and supported by their job.

One key to supporting employees is an increase in communication. This is especially true in regards to the health regulations, and policies within the pandemic (Wright and Van Strien). People want to know what is going on, because it is scary at this time, so an organization being transparent and clear in their policies will alleviate the confusion and tension (Wright and Van Strien and Hanns-Terrill et al). Communication is key in a mix of virtual and in-person work.

Communication makes people in the office or who work remotely feel included. Employees need to be seen and heard by those around them, especially their bosses. This is why it is important to have tools such as virtual office hours, and include remote workers in meetings, and make sure they are engaged in the company (Hanns-Terrill et al). Leaders can check in with workers and set attainable goals for them to achieve (Wright and Van Strien). Employees have a

clear direction and can clear up any confusion with their managers. The need for communication only increases when it comes to hybrid or remote work.

Leaders need to empathize and work with their employees on matters outside of work. Many of the employees are struggling under the weight of the mental health issues as a result of the pandemic, such as an increase “in stress, isolation, anxiety, and depression” (Hanns-Terrill et al.). This is an important thing to be addressed in most workplaces, and for most workers whether they are remote, hybrid or in-person. Katja Hanns -Terrill, one of the contributing authors for AESC’s article, “The Hybrid Workforce Post-COVID” states, “Particularly for younger talent, well-being and mental health have come to the forefront—with urgency. This cohort is looking to employers to provide robust services and destigmatize mental health issues....” If workplaces want to recruit younger talent, then they need to shift their culture to be more inclusive and accepting of mental health services and solutions. Within this, a flexible schedule can alleviate the pressures of work as well.

Despite remote work being more productive, it also can lead to overworking and ultimately burn out (Hanns -Terrill et al. and Gerdemen). Burnout and overworking can lead to employees leaving workplaces, so if the workplace adapts to helping their employees work through burnout and stay healthy, then they will keep people over the long haul.

One option to emphasize mental health and avoid burnout is mental health days. These are specific days off to allow people to rest and take a break from the chaos of the workplace. Workplaces should incentivize employees to take time off while employers model taking care of themselves (Hanns-Terrill et al.) This will allow employees to feel less pressure taking days off to preserve self-care. Employees need to make sure they care for themselves as they care for others around them.

III - Other Incentives:

In order to care for themselves or their loved ones, employees must make money. Competitive pay can help employers keep their employees, and recruit new ones. One example of this is checking and making sure that employees that do the same job receive the same pay, regardless if they are a woman or part of a minority or ethnic group (Richmond). Jason Richmond, who wrote, “Six Ways To Build Employee Loyalty Post-Pandemic” also pointed out how “equitable pay” was important for a company’s reputation both “internally and externally.” Reputation establishes a credible company and attracts workers. Competitive pay can also attract workers in a labor shortage. In order to retain more employees, many fast food restaurants have increased their minimum wage to encourage people to work at their restaurants. Some companies are paying as high as sixteen dollars per hour as the new minimum wage. This not only encourages employees to work, but also cares for them by providing them more money to make ends meet.

The next incentive that is helpful is training. When employers train their workers, it shows that they care. It helps a new employee meet their coworkers, and get a sense of the workplace culture during training. In the workplace of flexible scheduling and remote work, training is that more vital. Train employees on digital tools (Hanns-Terrill et al). This will speed up their learning on the digital programs a particular company uses. This training will be invaluable because it will be an incentive for employees who want to learn more skills. Even in a transformed work world, training is still vital to the workplace culture.

As a result of the pandemic, the work world is changing fast. Employees want flexible schedules and hybrid and remote work. They also crave to be cared for by their employers through communication and empathy with how heavy this pandemic has become. Consequently, the workplace culture must shift to become more inclusive and caring. Marc Emmers ends his SHRM Article with this statement, “We should be thinking less about what yields the optimum productivity and more about how we can provide an environment for our employees to be the best version of themselves.” When employees become the best version of themselves, the whole workplace thrives that much more. People are more than the productivity they bring. If workplaces do not recognize that, then there will be no progress.

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