

How HR Can Lead in a Moment of Great Workforce Transformation



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The post-pandemic economic reopening is a pivotal moment for HR.

The COVID-19 global health crisis triggered an era of workforce transformation that has required organizations to rethink their definitions of working environments. That’s because employees who are returning to the office are pushing their employers to create a world of work that works for everyone.

HR is perfectly positioned to be the driver of this change. By helping their companies redefine work and recreating their talent acquisition processes and policies accordingly, HR teams ensure the workforce needs of their organizations are met in this time of upheaval and uncertainty.

Put simply, HR has an instrumental role to play in creating the workplace of the future.





The Return to the Workforce: Employees Have Different Expectations for Getting Back to Work

As the economy continues to find its footing amid a pandemic, millions of people are preparing to return to work.

But it won't be business as usual for many of them. Some don't want to return to the same careers or even the same industries they left. Many also have very different expectations of their jobs and employers than they did pre-pandemic.

Extended time away from work has given people the opportunity to reimagine their lives. They have had time to reevaluate their career choices, their priorities both at home and at work, and how the two intertwine.

As a result, many people are returning with different perceptions of what it means to work, new ideas about their relationships to their jobs, and greater awareness of the value of their contributions at work.

Essentially, people are discovering what meaningful employment is to them. As a result, the definition of work is changing, and companies are being compelled to evolve accordingly.

Meaningful Work

Increasingly, people view work as more than just a source of income.

Those who are feeling enriched after spending more time at home aren't looking to give that up, especially for a job that is unfulfilling. People are seeking meaningful work that enriches their lives and inspires them each day.

For some people, this could mean working a job where they are challenged to be their best and respected for their contributions. Some may want a position that is autonomous, whereas others may prefer to be surrounded by coworkers in a team environment. Some people may need to work in a job that positively impacts their local communities. Others simply want a job that gives them greater flexibility in their days.

This is the engine that is driving new definitions of work.

Employee Expectations

With eyes on a better balance between work life and home life, as well as finding fulfilling employment, people are setting new expectations for themselves – shorter commutes, more time working from home, flexible work schedules, supportive company cultures.

Employees know now that being in the office isn't a prerequisite for productivity. This sets the stage for the beginning of the end of the traditional work week.

Another area of work that is experiencing significant change is company culture. It has become more important to employees that their companies support them not only as workers but as people. People expect their employers to be concerned about their physical and mental well-being, not just their output on the job. Thus ends the era of business-first culture and begins the era of people-first culture in business.

Organizational Changes

While the potential return of nearly 8.7 million workers to the labor force should be a good thing for organizations that are ready to get back to full speed, filling open roles has turned out to be more complicated than many anticipated¹. Why? Because of these new workplace expectations of employees.

Companies that want to successfully staff up are being forced to make organizational changes that address the new demands of talent. And HR is driving that evolution.

Human resources departments are tasked with getting to know and understand exactly what employee expectations are. Beyond looking at data for high-level trends, HR teams must ask their employees how the company can do more to support them both at work and at home.

Through employee surveys and interviews, HR can collect feedback to inform these changes. Some questions that will help solicit vital information regarding employee expectations include:

- > What can the company do to help you be more successful in your job?
- > Do you have the support you need to perform your job to the best of your ability?
- > Are you satisfied with your work-life balance?
- > How do you envision your future with the company? In your career?
- > What tools do you need to reach your goals?
- > Are you happy in your work or with the company? If not, what do you need to be happy?

Armed with this data, companies can implement changes that make them a more attractive employer.

HR teams also need to work with company leaders to assess the different aspects of work within their organizations. Pay, benefits, vacation policies, health and safety protocols, staff camaraderie, and training are just a few issues that employers need to address as people return to the office.

¹ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>



The Return to the Office: Many Employees Want to Continue Working Remotely

Returning to the office all day, every day simply doesn't appeal to people who have been working remotely throughout the pandemic.

Data from the Pew Research Center tells the story of this shift in employee preferences. Only 20 percent of employed adults were working remotely before the pandemic. That number skyrocketed to 71 percent during the pandemic. After the experience of working from home, 54 percent of respondents said they would want to continue working remotely all or most of the time after the pandemic ends²

And if they aren't offered the option to do so, one-third of employees are prepared to switch jobs to one that gives them the opportunity to work remotely, according to McKinsey & Company's Reimagine Work: Employee Survey³

Employees Have Learned the Value of Flexibility in Working Arrangements

Employees have benefitted in a variety of ways from the switch to remote work. Some of the most commonly cited benefits include:

- > **More time for career development.** People working remotely have been able to invest more time and energy into advancing their careers. While working remotely, they are better able to make time to participate in learning and development activities to sharpen their skills, or develop new ones.
- > **Better work-life balance.** Working remotely can in some cases allow people to create their own schedules. They can arrange their days to make time to participate in everyday activities that make them happy, such as bringing kids to school or going to the gym.
- > **More free time.** The flexibility in scheduling also gives remote workers more free time to spend enjoying hobbies, hanging out with family and friends, or simply doing nothing.
- > **Reduced stress and anxiety.** Employees working remotely tend to be less stressed than those who have to report to the office everyday. They spend less time commuting and more time relaxing at home when work is done.

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/12/09/how-the-coronavirus-outbreak-has-and-hasnt-changed-the-way-americans-work/>

³ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/what-employees-are-saying-about-the-future-of-remote-work>

These benefits are becoming non-negotiable for a lot of employees. They are going to seek out employers that champion flexible work arrangements for their employees.

The Business Case for Remote Work Policies

Working remotely isn't just good for employees. It's also good for companies. Organizations stand to benefit from flexible working arrangements because flexibility promotes greater job satisfaction, which in turn drives productivity.

One study by PricewaterhouseCoopers⁴ shows that both employers and employees report more productivity level improvements when working from home. The key lesson: Employees can be trusted to put in the time needed to get their work done when working from home.

Beyond raw productivity numbers, businesses report that implementing flexible work policies create further benefits, which include:

- > **Reduced expenses.** Companies save money by closing up unused offices and eliminating travel expense reimbursements.
 - > **Better emergency preparedness.** When disaster strikes, businesses that already have remote work policies in place are more likely to stay operational than those that have to formulate contingency plans on the fly.
 - > **Higher employee retention rates.** Happy employees are more likely to stay with the company, and remote work arrangements lead to more job satisfaction.
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Organizations That Aren't Flexible Put Themselves at Risk

Candidates will choose employers that have remote work policies already in place. That's why it's in the best interest of companies to implement hybrid work arrangements.

To do this successfully requires thoughtful planning and the meticulous execution of a hybrid remote work strategy. That strategy must address these key issues:

- > **Technology.** Companies will have to ensure employees have all of the hardware and software they need as well as internet access. Organizations must also address data security when workers are connecting from multiple locations.
- > **Teamwork.** When employees are dispersed, it can be difficult for them to build team chemistry. Organizations must solve for collaboration challenges that innately arise when team members aren't in the same physical space at the same time. Virtual meeting rooms and office chat tools can help team workers stay connected.
- > **Culture.** It's hard for remote workers to feel part of a company's culture because they are physically distant from the workplace. Extra efforts must be made to ensure remote workers have the opportunities to connect with coworkers and company leaders. This could mean hosting virtual social events or playing virtual games. Facilitating face-to-face conversations through video chats is also key to building community and fostering a culture that is inclusive of remote workers.

By investing the time and resources into strategically building remote work policies, organizations put themselves in a better position to attract workers who are getting back to work.

⁴ <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/us-remote-work-survey.html>



Women Need More Support From Their Employers

Schools and daycares across the nation closed their doors during the pandemic, which meant millions of children were sent home with nowhere to go during the day. For working parents, this became an overnight crisis in child care that saw more than 5.4 million net job losses for women in 2020.

And while working fathers were certainly impacted by the crisis, the burden of caring for children and maintaining the home fell more to working moms. Because working moms were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, they must be the focus of companies' talent acquisition efforts now. This is an opportunity for organizations to attract and retain the top talent they need right now to rebuild their workforces.

But working moms aren't going to let themselves be put back into a position where they will be forced to put their careers on hold in times of crisis. Organizations must recognize this and create supportive working environments that make it easier for working moms to balance work and home life.

The priority for companies needs to be creating policies and procedures that ensure women don't have to choose between their careers and their families. With the right approach, HR teams can build working environments that encourage and enable these workers to balance child-care responsibilities with meeting their career goals.

It all starts with learning what working moms expect from their employers.

Initiate Conversations With Working Moms

Working women with children may not be comfortable initiating such conversations for fear of their needs being used against them later on, such as when they seek a promotion. So, it falls to HR to start those conversations.

When leaders proactively engage with working parents and ask them how they are doing and what their needs are at the office, it helps to normalize the conversation. Employees then become more comfortable talking about those needs.

This is the engine that is driving new definitions of work.

Adopt Flexible Working Arrangements

Flexible working arrangements are going to be non-negotiable for many working moms as they reenter the workforce.

The pandemic highlighted just how unrealistic it is for employers to expect working parents with kids at home to work 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day. Companies that want to attract workers from this very large pool of candidates should embrace flexible working arrangements so working parents can create room in their schedules to maximize productivity at work and care for their children. Organizations that don't adopt such policies risk alienating these valuable workers.

There are a number of different approaches companies can take to build flexible work policies:

- > Create a standard hybrid work schedule that allows employees to work from home a few days a week. According to a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, most workers think the optimal balance is at least three days of remote work per five-day workweek⁵.
- > Allow employees to set adjustable working hours, which means they can work whatever hours they want each day as long as they meet their requirement of hours each day. This allows workers to set different times for work on different days based on their home-life responsibilities.
- > Offer variable work days where employees can work a different number of hours each day as long as they fulfill their required hours for the week.

Each of these arrangements gives workers flexibility in scheduling.

Extend Child Care Benefits

Child-care benefits are also going to be instrumental in attracting women to rejoin the workplace.

The pandemic highlighted how many workers that need it don't have access to affordable, quality child care. Lack of access to child care is the key reason so many working moms dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic. Finding quality daycares for young children who aren't in school or locating a last-minute sitter, especially during a pandemic, is a challenge for a lot of working parents.

To address the issue of accessibility, employers can offer on-site child care services for employees. Companies can also prepare a directory of backup child care providers and options to employees who may find themselves in a bind for child care.

An important point: Most families cannot afford child care. According to Care.com's 2021 Cost of Care Survey, 85 percent of parents report spending 10 percent or more of their household income on child care⁶. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services considers 7 percent the upper limit for affordable child care. Offering a child-care benefit would help working parents pay for quality child care.

Implement Paid Family and Medical Leave Policies

One of the greatest labor market failures in the U.S. has been the lack of a federal paid family and medical leave policy. The pandemic amplified just how strongly the lack of such a policy is felt by working parents and how crucial such a policy would be for workers (and employers who want to hire them) in the future.

While there are conversations happening about creating such a policy at the federal level, companies can't afford to wait. Now that schools are open, women are returning to work. So, businesses must be proactive in adopting paid family leave policies to attract these workers.

⁵ <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/hybrid-work-model-likely-to-be-new-norm-in-2021.aspx>

⁶ <https://www.care.com/c/how-much-does-child-care-cost>



Address the Well-Being of Working Women

Women have struggled mentally and emotionally throughout the pandemic.

Trying to balance increased child care and household responsibilities with work obligations has led to higher levels of stress and anxiety for women during the pandemic. Employers play a key role in helping these workers address these struggles.

Support groups can be extremely helpful for employees who often think of themselves as the only ones struggling with such problems. Organizations can help organize working parent support groups via online chat platforms, videoconferences, or in-person meetings hosted in the workplace. Bringing in speakers to talk about balancing work and home life can encourage people to open up about their struggles.

As working women return to work, they are looking for companies that show empathy and offer solutions to help them better balance their work obligations with their child care and household responsibilities.



Talent Will Actively Seek Out Better Career Opportunities

Another challenge that companies are facing is a phenomenon that's been labeled "the great resignation."

According to Prudential Financial's May 2021 Pulse of the American Worker survey, nearly one-quarter of working adults plan to seek new job opportunities after the pandemic⁷. In a labor market that is already tight, holding on to these valuable employees is going to be critical to the ability of companies to bounce back from the pandemic. But it won't be easy.

Essentially, Workers Are Unhappy

Millions of workers stayed in their jobs during the pandemic largely because it was too risky to leave. During the downturn, millions of jobs were lost, shrinking the job market to a point where people clung to what they had, even if they were miserable. Their unhappiness can be attributed to two key issues that are now motivating them to change jobs: burnout and stagnation.

Worker burnout was a problem before the pandemic started. It was merely amplified by the added workplace stresses created by the crisis — job insecurity, increased workloads, longer workdays, job dissatisfaction.

The important thing for employers to understand is that burnout is not linked inextricably to workload. In fact, it has more to do with unhealthy work environments. Left unchecked by employers, burnout will lead to lower productivity, greater absenteeism, and higher turnover as workers look for jobs with companies who will appreciate their efforts.

Further, professional development was put on the backburner during the pandemic. Financial uncertainty forced companies to prioritize staffing needs over employee professional development. At the same time, employees were more focused on job security than career advancement, so they didn't push for advancement opportunities.

That is rapidly changing now, however. Career progression has once again become a priority for workers, and they will seek out employers that take an interest in their careers and invest resources to help them develop skills needed to grow.

⁷ <https://news.prudential.com/presskits/pulse-american-worker-survey-post-pandemic-work-life.htm>

Talent Mapping Improves Employee Retention

Employees need a clear picture of their futures with a company. Without that, those employees lose their motivation, become less satisfied with their jobs, and eventually start looking for new places to work.

That's why talent mapping is so important. It gives employees clearly defined roadmaps of their career paths with their company and how that future aligns with their career goals. Career maps give employees detailed instructions on how to progress in their careers within the company, the specific milestones they need to meet, and how long it will take them to achieve that progression.

It may seem like an overwhelming task to map careers for every employee, but the process can actually be broken down into three essential steps:

- > **Conduct self-assessments.** The first step for hiring managers and HR teams is to talk to employees and ask them questions that encourage them to explore where they are and where they expect to be in their careers. It's also the step in which HR must assess employees' knowledge, skills, abilities, experiences, accomplishments, interests, and goals as they relate to their current positions and future ambitions.
- > **Create customized career maps.** The next step is to use employees' answers to outline positions within the company that would be good career moves. That may be a lateral move into a different department or a promotion in the current department. What's important is to ensure each change capitalizes on the individual's knowledge and experience and helps them achieve their future goals.
- > **Explore other opportunities.** Career maps are meant to be flexible and evolve with the company's path and an employee's career. So, when job opportunities do become available within the organization, whether or not they are in the map, HR should encourage employees to explore those opportunities by demonstrating to them how those new roles may fit within their career paths.

By creating career maps, organizations demonstrate their commitment to their employees' futures, thereby enticing those workers to stay.

Learning Opportunities Motivate Employees to Stay

Workers want to develop the skills they need to advance in their careers, and they expect their employers will provide those opportunities. Otherwise, they will seek out employers that will.

To retain these workers, HR departments must support their organizations in creating learning and development programs (including upskilling, reskilling, and cross-training programs) that meet the needs of their workers. That means:

- > **Adopting a growth mindset.** To establish a culture of learning, HR teams must help create an environment that encourages employees to want to learn and develop new skills. This can be accomplished by piquing their curiosities and then rewarding them for their interest and efforts.
- > **Offering personalized development programs.** Because everyone has different skills, backgrounds, roles, and paths, training must be personalized to meet individual needs. HR leaders must learn what those needs are to create training programs that workers want to participate in.
- > **Pairing employees with mentors.** Mentoring is an important part of professional development. By assigning mentors to employees, HR leaders ensure employees understand how their skills will be used on a daily basis, which often accelerates their training.

Workers are actively seeking out better job opportunities and career paths. To keep them from leaving, organizations must focus on showing them a future at the company and providing them the learning opportunities to achieve that future.



Across Industries and Across Borders: Talent Is Up For Grabs

Boundaries for talent sourcing are dissipating.

The lines between industries and geographic locations that limited hiring capabilities will continue to fade away largely due to two things:

- > The normalization of remote work.
- > The advancement of AI-backed talent acquisition technology.

In the new world of work, workers are no longer required – or even expected – to be within commuting distance of the office. For HR teams, this means nearly limitless access to a wider range of candidates for available positions. As a consequence, hiring managers must rethink their strategies for recruiting talent.

Broaden Talent Pools to Find Qualified Candidates

Companies should cast wider nets to broaden their talent pools. For starters, HR teams should reach into different cities, states, and even countries to find the right talent to fill pipelines. To aid this, AI-powered talent acquisition tools are capable of locating qualified candidates nearly anywhere.

HR teams must also bring in nontraditional hires to expand their talent pipelines. Examples of unconventional (or nontraditional) hires include military veterans, recent college graduates, workers in other industries, ex-offenders, gig workers, and stay-at-home parents.

These candidates are key to companies' abilities to meet workforce demands in a post-pandemic environment. Such candidates may be more difficult to find, however, which means HR teams will have to rethink their approaches to recruitment. Again, the data-mining and predictive analytics capabilities of AI-powered talent-acquisition tools are useful here.



A mindset shift is necessary, as well. Companies must redefine the “perfect” employee for any role. Skills that were ideal for a position before the current workplace transformation may no longer be such good fits. This evolution opens the door for HR teams to explore other qualities or capabilities that could lay the groundwork for a person’s success in a role. Soft skills or translatable experiences, for example, might make someone a better fit for a role today, and AI-backed software can draw those conclusions.

Another way to broaden the talent pool is to hire for cultural fit instead of skills matching. Cultural fit is more difficult to instill in someone than a new technical skill. So, hiring managers should look past technical skills listed on resumes to find candidates with a wide array of skills and experiences who understand and connect with the brand. Doing so opens the door to let in more candidates to meet workforce needs. AI-powered tools are capable of making those inferences.

The companies that cast wider talent nets will have the advantage in building broader talent pipelines at a time when candidates who were previously out of reach have become almost easily accessible.



Implement Virtual Talent Acquisition Processes to Quickly Hire and Onboard Candidates

Sourcing those now-accessible candidates is only one piece of the puzzle. Actually reaching them and bringing them on board is the other piece, and it requires companies to use AI tools to design virtual recruiting and onboarding processes.

AI lets HR automate hiring processes to speed them up and stay competitive in this race for talent. For example, keyword and historical data searches enable hiring teams to find candidates from more diverse sources. Faster searches of higher volumes of resumes and applications enable HR teams to move more quickly in finding and securing qualified talent. Conversational AI shortens the application process, and chatbots help hiring teams stay engaged with candidates.

In short, AI enables hiring managers to streamline talent acquisition processes so they can source and hire top talent from across new industry and geographic boundaries.

Virtual onboarding is also key to making all new hires — regardless of location — feel welcome. When hiring from an expanded talent pool, create positive hiring experiences for all employees, whether the process takes place in-person or virtually. Reimagining the onboarding experience to work for everyone requires companies to:

- > Personalize the experience.
- > Create digital onboarding documents.
- > Make onboarding videos,
- > Set clear goals and expectations.
- > Facilitate connections.

By adopting virtual talent acquisition processes, organizations make themselves more available, more appealing, and more approachable to candidates, wherever those candidates are located or whatever their qualifications may be.

Now Is the Moment for HR

People are getting back to work. Remote work is becoming the norm. Talent is looking for more from their careers. The boundaries between industries and geographies are crumbling.

In this moment of great workforce transformation, HR teams are tasked with ensuring the workforce needs of employers and the workplace needs of employees are met. HR is perfectly positioned to help their companies overcome the challenges related to these changes and capitalize on the opportunities presented by them.



Eightfold's Career Hub is built on the Eightfold Talent Intelligence Platform™, a purpose-built, deep-learning artificial intelligence technology that is powered by an ever-refreshing global data set of billions of talent data points and over 1.4M unique skills.