

Forward to Work

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The last three years have tested organizations in ways previously unthought of. In fact, it could be argued that the job description for C-Suite Leaders has been rewritten entirely; focusing on running a successful business today means being able to understand – and engage with – an ever-growing list of stakeholders on issues related not only to operations but broader impact. And employees have solidified their position at the top of this list.

In the fall of 2022, United Minds partnered with KRC Research to survey over 100 global executives on their 2023 priorities in order to understand how leaders are navigating these new expectations. Separately, KRC Research polled 500+ working adults across America on current events and on-going trends impacting the workplace, including perceptions of leader performance.

The results of these polls have significant implications for the mutual compact between employees and employers as they continue to navigate future uncertainty, and especially in the context of defining future ways of working.

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WHAT LEADERS SAY...

IN TODAY'S ENVIRONMENT, LEADERS MAINTAIN A **BALANCED OUTLOOK.**

57% say the economy is weak.

BUT

75% say their company is growing.

LEADERS' TOP PROTECTION AGAINST RECESSION? **EMPLOYEES.**

3 in 4 see workforce development, reducing employee turnover and talent retention as a key buffer.

IT'S NO SURPRISE, THEN, THAT 4 OF LEADERS' **TOP-5 AREAS FOR FOCUS IN 2023** ALSO CONCERN EMPLOYEES:

BUSINESS PRIORITY	% OF LEADERS	ABILITY TO DELIVER
Attracting and retaining talent	93%	38%
Managing adoption of new technologies	90%	18%
Addressing the impact of inflation	81%	27%
Communications and public relations	77%	18%
<i>Supply chain</i>	76%	26%

These leaders are also honest about their own capabilities, and are clear-eyed on the organization's ability to deliver on these priorities. A significant majority do not believe that they have what it takes.

WHAT EMPLOYEES SAY...

EMPLOYEES' CURRENT OUTLOOK IS **SIMILARLY BALANCED.**

More optimistic
(**31%**) vs. pessimistic
(**16%**) about the
future of their org.

BUT

More pessimistic
(**38%**) vs. optimistic
(**26%**) about the
economy.

EVEN IN THE FACE OF **SIGNIFICANT CONCERNS:**

~ 1 in 2

worry about mental health and
wellness (MH&W) and turnover

> 2 in 5

have experienced unfair
treatment in the past year

> 1 in 3

fear more layoffs, including
impact to their own jobs

AND THOUGH EMPLOYERS ARE (STILL) GETTING VOTES OF CONFIDENCE
FROM THEIR EMPLOYEES, **IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO DRIVE RETENTION.**

While ... **75%** say their employer is taking the right steps to preserve jobs

and ... **74%** feel loyal to their employer

still ... **60%** plan to change jobs in the next few years, with **~1 in 5** in the next year.

A LIVING WAGE.

86% believe their company should commit to compensation and benefits that keep up with rising costs.

** 53% of employees say that their company is doing a good job here.*

FLEXIBILITY.

14% of LinkedIn job postings offer remote work options; these postings are receiving **52%** of applications.

** 21% of employees going into workplaces believe they can do their job from home.*

IMPACT.

~ 8 in 10 believe employers should prioritize ESG. **3 in 4** think companies should advance racial equality and address systemic racism.

** 6 in 10 employees report that their employer is living up to their expectations.*

These dynamics are important to consider in the context of a return to the workplace.

With turnover, burnout, dislocation and job insecurity all rising, it's no wonder that workers' attitudes about when and where work gets done are also changing.

Still, the reality is that the majority of employees are back in workplaces already; 68% full-time and 12% in a hybrid capacity. At the end of 2021, 40% of employees were still working from home full-time – twice as many as are today.

HYBRID WORKERS ARE THE **MOST** SATISFIED:



EMPLOYEES WHO WORK FROM HOME ARE THE **LEAST** SATISFIED:



GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES (AND SIMILARITIES) ALSO EXIST:

All generations expect that the future of work is still in the physical workplace — with nearly 7 out of 10 believing in-person connection should be required at least part of the time.

Gen Z is most likely to value the flexibility of working from home (58%), especially when compared to Boomers (44%).

Gen Z is also the most unsatisfied; 65% say the gap between what they want and what they get is significant, vs. 63% of Boomers who say the gap is manageable.

So, what's the most effective workplace arrangement?

It depends.

A variety of factors should be considered when deciding when and how to bring people back into the workplace. Setting aside roles and job types that require being in-person, **leaders must find a way to meet the needs of the business while also meeting the needs of their people.** This means:

- Surveying employees, both on preferences and levels of satisfaction and engagement;
- Taking a hard look at key performance indicators to determine where you might be falling short, and if there are trends that could be linked to current work arrangements; and
- Testing and learning, including listening to understand what's working – and what's not working – and being open to making adjustments accordingly.

That said, certain work arrangements are more effective for certain types of organizations, specific goals and/or job types. For example, if silos that are holding back the business, in-office interactions can help break these down. If innovation is critical, a balance of live collaboration and protected time for individual creativity might speed the path to success. A few more considerations:

ARRANGEMENT:	WORKS BEST WHEN:	INCREASE ODDS OF SUCCESS BY:
100% in the workplace	Majority of work is regulated and/or collaborative and iterative; especially effective where there was a strong pre-pandemic culture	Allocating and protecting adequate time and flexibility for employees to manage personal commitments, protect MH&W without stigma
Hybrid multiple, specific days per week	Work requires regular collaboration and protected time; employees (who may skew more early-career) appreciate clarity, constancy and supervision	Providing guidance on the types of work that are most effective in-person vs. at home; encourage leaders / managers to prioritize
Hybrid several days per month, at manager / employee discretion	Fewer meetings needed to achieve business goals; managers and employees have high levels of trust and open communication	Ensuring managers have training and support to maintain equity, navigate issues that might arise from a less-structured policy
Hybrid a few times per year, tied to major meetings	Strong culture of autonomy and/or geographically dispersed workers (who may have more responsibility at home); most likely to be equitable	Making time together count; focus not only on achieving meeting goals but on creating meaningful, on-going connections
Work from home	Infrastructure and/or budget does not allow for people to come together; org. mutually decides this is the best structure	Codifying and leveraging what worked well from past few years of work from home; build into organizational values and norms

Ultimately, it's very likely that multiple work arrangements will be present at organizations now and into the future. **Aligning workplace practices to support the culture you need to deliver on the business strategy is critical, as are frequent communications that reinforce this connection.**

Once a decision has been made to bring people back into workplaces – either full time or in a hybrid capacity – communication becomes critical. After all, this decision represents a significant change in the way people have been working over the past few years, and the ability to achieve the goals of any change is heavily reliant on building understanding, belief and buy-in for the future vision.

Best practices for communicating return to workplace (and all other) company policies

#1: Be straightforward and confident in the decision, not apologetic. All communications should be simple and transparent. Make requirements and expectations clear and connect them to the benefits for the business AND for employees. And while you should not be apologetic in your decision, it is important to remain empathetic and recognize that not everyone will be on board.

#2: Reinforce company values in messaging and communications. A company's *purpose* defines why it exists; its *values* guide the beliefs upon which the business is based. Both should drive all major decisions, and communications on all company policies should connect back to these core cultural touchstones. Remember that through return to workplace announcements, you are demonstrating through action your true (and ideally stated) values to employees and other stakeholders; policies that don't match values are more likely to create employee backlash and reputational risk.

#3: Equip people leaders with the right information at the right time. Within an organization, managers and people leaders are the number one channel for reaching employees. They need to be equipped with the information needed to support any new policy, including how to talk about misinformation and address questions and concerns.

#4: Address the elephant in the room: What are the consequences of not following company policy? There will always be employees who disagree with a decision or policy; many who have valid concerns about what it means for them. In your communications, openly respect the varied reactions employees will have while reinforcing how this decision ultimately helps the company to reach its goals. It's also important to be clear about consequences for not adhering to the policy, and that while there will be some special exceptions, these will truly be *exceptions*. The process for requesting exemption should be reinforced.

#5: Keep listening to employees and establishing lines of two-way communication. Over the past three years, leaders and organizations did a great job of listening regularly and keeping a pulse on employee sentiment. This behavior should be embedded within all future engagement with employees, regardless of the internal and external environment. Communications should foster an open and inclusive culture that invites conversation and incorporates feedback from employees. While the company may not change its policies, it should continue to build trust by showing it cares about employee concerns and is willing to be flexible in other ways.

MORE ON ENABLING LEADERS AND MANAGERS

- Equip people leaders with talking points, Q&A and guidance on the role they will play as change champions so that they can best manage tough questions and their own team's dynamics.
- Give an appropriate heads up before the announcement goes out to all employees so they have an opportunity to ask questions, have enough time to manage their own reaction to the news and can adequately put it in context for their team.
- Remind them not to make promises they cannot keep; instead, they should lean on internal communication resources and be comfortable with saying "I don't know but will find out" to questions they are unprepared to answer.
- Urge people leaders to maintain channels for two-way feedback. This can be done by establishing office hours or inviting employees to have open dialogue and share feedback.
- Encourage all leaders to be attentive and empathetic. Employees are people too, and many will continue to navigate competing pressures inside and outside of work.

Tips for establishing a supportive, positive workplace environment.

Be intentional about when and why people are expected to come in

- Make sure in-office moments are meaningful
- Consider the flow. Are there days that are more suited to in-office work? Can we schedule meetings and collaborations around in-office schedules and focused work on work from home days? Can we have “no-meeting” days allowing workers to focus on creative work on a work from home day?

Ensure office space and technology are up-to-date

- Equip office with docking stations, monitors and other equipment
- Create designated spaces to store belongings
- Offer a variety of spaces for workers to complete a variety of work tasks including collaboration rooms for group work and quiet spaces for individual work

Honor and embed the lessons of the past three years

- Understand that employees have gone through a collective perspective altering experience and accept that employees' priorities have changed
- Discourage leadership and workers from glorifying grind-culture and encourage leadership to model healthy working behaviors
- Encourage open communication, especially around burn-out and mental health

Defend work/life balance (and reduce commuting costs) for employees

- Shift employee wellness from perk to priority
- Consider additional support services to enable employee focus (e.g., care-giver stipend, on-site meal services, etc.)
- Encourage employees to log off outside of the office; leaders should model this behavior to normalize it

Lean into – and revitalize – your culture

- Stay connected to values by demonstrating how ways of working will support your culture, collectively and individually
- Prioritize contribution in the form of training, mentoring and collaborative thinking, especially for younger generations
- Actively listen to employee perspectives, especially around preferred ways of working

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