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HR NEWS

IPMA-HR



Fostering Mental Well-being and Promoting Workplace Safety

We Are Writing a New Playbook for Work-Life Balance



By Kaitlin Kincaid

When COVID-19 became a global pandemic, Americans were already facing a growing silent pandemic of mental health challenges in the workplace. For instance, the CDC estimated that in 2019, more than 200 million workdays and as much as $44 billion in employee productivity were lost due to depression.

Yet, in that same year, a survey conducted by Mind Share Partners, SAP and Qualtrics revealed almost 60 percent of employees had never spoken about mental health with anyone at work. And while 86 percent of respondents stated an organization's culture should support mental health, fewer than half felt mental health was prioritized where they worked.

As astonishing as these figures were, Mind Share Partners' follow-up *2021 Mental Health at Work Report*, produced in partnership with SAP and ServiceNow, painted an even worse picture. The new study found that the prevalence of employees experiencing mental health challenges increased from 2019 and that younger and historically underrepresented workers continued to struggle the most.

Fast forward a year. Now, in the third year of the pandemic, a silver lining has appeared amid all the disruption and trauma. Discussing mental health challenges is becoming normalized.

What Drives the Great Reshuffle?

The cliche about the grass being greener comes from a song written in 1924 by Raymond B. Egan and Richard A. Whiting. The fact that "The Grass Is Always Greener (In the Other Fellow's Yard)" is nearly a century old provides more context for why millennials and Gen Z employees may not know that the expression is not always true.

The reality that "new" or "different" does not always mean "better" is reflected in results from a survey career site The Muse conducted in early 2022. Among more than 2,500 respondents who had recently changed jobs, 72 percent expressed disappointment over the new position or company being very different from what they were led to believe.

Muse CEO Kathryn Minshew, in a March 13, 2022, Bloomberg opinion piece, wrote, "I call this unpleasant surprise 'shift shock' to distinguish it from ordinary new-job jitters. It's normal to feel nervous starting a new job, but it can be a big problem to be hired into a role with one set of responsibilities and then be expected to perform another, or to join a company culture that turns out to be cliquey when you were sold on the idea of camaraderie."

Minshew also attributed shift shock to "a generational shift, driven by Gen Z and millennial candidates who are more likely to believe the employer-employee relationship should be a two-way street."

A majority of Muse survey respondents experiencing shift shock indicated they would likely be looking for another new job within two years.

U.S. employees of all ages are also struggling with rising housing costs and near-record inflation. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported on April 10, 2022, "The Consumer Price Index increased 8.5 percent for the year ended March 2022, following a rise of 7.9 percent from February 2021 to February 2022. The 8.5-percent increase in March was the largest 12-month advance since December 1981."

In an effort to slow inflation, the Federal Reserve raised the benchmark interest rate by half a percentage point in May 2022. This was the greatest one-time hike since 2000, and it increased costs for homebuyers and people with adjustable-rate loans.

It is no wonder why consumer sentiment has dropped to its lowest level since 2011.

Is Working From Home Optimal?

By April 2020, as the initial wave of COVID cases hit, Americans working from home were already putting in an average of three more hours on the job each day than they did only three weeks prior. That figure came from NordVPN, which tracks when users connect and disconnect from its service.

Commercial Real Estate Employer Actions on and Employee Expectations for Benefits and DEI, April 2022

CHANGES TO BENEFITS			
Employers		**Employees**	
What is your company adding to current employee packages?	Flexible schedules: 73.02%	What benefits are most attractive?	Performance bonus: 85%
	Performance bonus: 57.14%		Flexible schedules: 80.11%
	Employee development plans: 26.98%		Unlimited vacation time: 41%
	Home office budget: 25.40%		Reimbursement for parking/public transit: 41%
	Wellness stipend/gym membership: 12.70%		Wellness stipend/gym membership: 37.63%
DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES			
Employers		**Employees**	
What is your company currently doing to address DE&I?	Ensuring individuals from underrepresented groups are in the candidate pool before making a hiring decision: 46%	How is your company creating an inclusive work environment?	My company promotes a collaborative environment: 52%
	Implemented DEI training for leadership: 44%		Employees have access to learning and development opportunities: 42%
	Promoting the organization as a representative workplace to diverse candidates: 44%		Employees have a voice: 41%
	Does your company have a mentoring program in place? 52.17% No; 39.13% Yes		

Source: April 2022 survey by Keller Augusta

It appears that when employees stopped leaving their work at the office, many did not stop working. Still, both employers and employees are interested in at least some forms of a hybrid and remote work. This is not surprising to the recruiters at my firm, who have heard positives and negatives about working from home and returning to the office.

Working from home eliminates the commute, which reached an all-time average high of 27.6 minutes each way in 2019, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Commute times were even longer in major metro areas. Remote work also provides flexibility regarding hours of work, and it creates a sense of balance.

On the other side of the ledger, drawbacks to working from home include Zoom fatigue and missing out on the people factor. Remote employees do not see colleagues in-person and may struggle to achieve real-time collaboration. Last, one's home is rarely free of distractions from barking dogs, landscaping noise, endless Amazon package deliveries and frequent trips to the refrigerator.

So, hindsight on fully remote work may not be 20/20, as the saying goes. But reflections on fully remote work could drive a desire for a 30/70 or 40/60 split between time spent working in the office and working at home.

Do Employees and Employers Agree on What Makes a Strong Workplace?

The workplace continues to evolve. In addition to offering hybrid schedules, employers are (re)analyzing their benefits offerings and physical offices to remain competitive for top talent.

Rather than waiting for a return to a pre-2020 normal, human resources teams and organizational leaders must understand how to combine people and purpose, redefine culture, and focus on the employee experience and well-being. To get a pulse on employers and employees in the commercial real estate industry, our firm conducted a survey in April 2022. We found that 73.51 percent of employers are planning or have implemented a hybrid work model. Bringing employees into the office three days each week was the most common model (36.33 percent), followed by four days in the office (23.29 percent) and two days (20.9 percent).

Findings regarding what employers are doing in terms of benefits and diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as what employees expect, are summarized in the above table. As you can see, what employers offer is not always what employees want.

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Work-Life Balance

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Rebooting to Retain

Returning to the office means relaunching teams with a new understanding of the soft skills required in today's work environment. Necessary adjustments are likely to include the ways in which tasks are prioritized, communicating efficiently in real-time, reestablishing camaraderie and setting expectations for collaboration.

Well-being will also need to be prioritized because productivity and morale in the workplace go hand-in-hand. For this reason, a strong organizational culture in which employees—new hires and existing team members—are supported and rewarded for their commitment and skills is crucial.

The good news is burnout is not inevitable. But employee retention strategies can no longer be based on cool perks, office happy hours and free lunches. Organizational purpose, team cohesion and employee experience are now the critical drivers of engagement and retention—and the deterrents to career changes. Therefore, employers must ensure their values and culture are showcased.

To excel at hiring and retention, employers must:

- Earn employee loyalty;
- Create growth opportunities, build an internal recruitment pipeline and develop mentorship programs;
- Practice wage equity;
- Evaluate organizational and job market conditions to understand what is causing employees to leave; and
- Prioritize employee well-being and provide support and opportunities to ensure good physical and mental health.

The pandemic has caused everyone to reassess how they work. While pay and benefits continue to be important, focusing on the well-being of employees is what will do the most to create a win-win for employees and employers. As Andrew Carnegie famously said, "There is little success where there is little laughter."

We are writing a new playbook in which well-being is vital to the happiness, longevity and sustainability of an organization. When employers and employees come together to recognize and act on what is needed to build the future, all will thrive, personally and professionally. There is no denying that this will be a great challenge. But developing and pursuing a purposeful strategy aimed at ensuring employees thrive in this new normal will be a blessing.

Kaitlin Kincaid is the senior managing director of Keller Augusta, a national, full-service boutique search firm specializing in commercial real estate. With experience spanning almost 20 years, Kincaid leads the firm's research strategy and oversees the execution of search assignments. Kincaid also advises organizations and leaders on organizational planning, competitive compensation analysis, and diverse and equitable hiring strategies. —N

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