

Looking forward: 11 best practices for the new world of work



The pandemic has changed the world of work as we know it. But let's be honest, the world of work was already changing – recent global crises have merely expedited the process. Though many organizations are talking about and potentially planning for the return to work, the reality is we're still without a clear understanding of what comes next.

As we continue to work through a worldwide pandemic, global political tension, and the fight for social and racial justice, it's impossible to predict exactly what the future holds – be it increased turnover, rapid globalization, or something else entirely. Even as we start to see the light at the end of the tunnel, we know things can't go back to "normal." There's an opportunity to take a fresh approach and evolve the way we are collectively thinking about the future of work.

A recent Gartner study found that 78% of HR leaders identified leaders' mindsets as a greater challenge in driving the success of a hybrid workforce model than their skill sets. To help shift that mindset, we've collected 11 best practices from HR thought leaders. They offer guidance on how to evolve your people practices to set your team up for long-term success.

11 must-have skills for future workplace success

Equity in the workplace, dispersed workforces, and the overlap between work and personal life are a critical part of the new employee experience, but to master them, we must develop our people strategy accordingly. Consider the following best practices to help your team navigate the coming months of uncertainty and shape the future of work.

1. Listen to your employees

If we've learned anything from the challenges of 2020, it's that employee engagement is integral to business success. Without a firm understanding of your employee needs, it's impossible to create sustainable success in the workplace. Not sure where to begin? [Get started.](#)



"Off the back of 2020, notably COVID-19 and the BlackLivesMatter movement, businesses need to move beyond performative actions with D&I. The time is now to put wellbeing at the front and center of an organization's people and service delivery strategy. Clean out your toxicity, establish your culture, your vision, and your values. If you are not doing so already, start to listen and find out what your people are saying – don't just march on!"

— Joanne Lockwood, Founder & CEO of SEE Change Happen

2. Rethink performance

After the economic hit many businesses took, teams are struggling to make up lost income from last year while simultaneously dealing with higher burnout than ever. As a result, high performing teams are both precious and rare. To improve team performance, it's critical to focus on individual employee development. Get started.



“While business leaders work to support employees to survive through these times, we must prioritize professional development to help employees *thrive* in this environment. Now more than ever, employee development is not just a ‘nice to have’ – it’s a proven business driver that companies ignore at their peril. As we look ahead in 2021 and move into the future of work, business leaders and organizations must make learning more accessible to employees who might feel like they have less time and more to do.”

— Shelley Osborne, VP of Learning at [Udemy](#)

3. Prioritize learning & development

This past year, we learned that we can no longer rely on the old ways of doing things. Investing in future-forward employee development, and most importantly, learning & development will position your team to succeed in the coming months. Now is the time to double down on employee growth. Get started.



“Now, more than ever, adaptability and rapid skill growth are critical to the success of both the team and individual. More often than not, it’s the context our people are put in that makes the largest difference. Take this opportunity to deliberately evolve your operating model to balance learning from the past with learning for the future and foster a true culture of experimentation. Giving your people worthy challenges to solve yields big results: from KPI’s and metrics to reductions of risk and spikes for motivation, grit, and ownership.”

— Forrest Lindekens, Partner / Head of Movement at [Vega Factor](#)

4. Commit to DEI

Honoring employees at the individual level starts with a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The pandemic and political climate served as a wake-up call to the inequities that still permeate the workplace. Now is the time to practice what you preach and take your commitment to DEI beyond face value. **Get started.**



“In 2020, employers learned to ‘see’ the many dimensions of their employees. Whether it was through the parenting realities that were apparent on Zoom or the different lived experiences highlighted by the death of George Floyd, employers have a chance to begin 2021 with this deeper understanding. Research shows us that acknowledging and addressing the different dimensions can help create an engaged workforce. 2021 is our chance to take the learnings of 2020 and create a new work environment that recognizes values, and authentically creates space for employees in their entirety.”

— Paria Rajai, CEO & Founder of [ModelExpand](#)

5. Lead with vulnerability

Amidst such uncertainty, all eyes are on leaders. Employees at all levels are looking to the top to understand what behaviors are acceptable and what could put their job at risk. Prioritizing humility, vulnerability, and empathy in leadership is critical to creating a safe environment for employees. **Get started.**



“When developing our teams, the norm used to be to hold people’s feet to the fire. In the future, we want people leaders to create an elevated responsibility for themselves where their power and privilege are used in responsible ways. To do this, our job as leaders is to figure out where our power is unproductive and become curious about the impact of our behavior.”

— Christen Bavero, Partner at [ThinkHuman](#)

6. Double down on culture

Gone are the days where culture meant snacks, standing desks, and a ping pong table. People leaders are tasked with finding ways to make culture stretch across time zones, work environments, and personal circumstances. While challenging, it's not only possible but necessary to help your employees maintain a sense of community and purpose. Get started.



“As people return to the office, it will not be a return to ‘normal’ or how it was; it will be another major disruption and adjustment. It’s tempting to assume that people know how to return to the office because we used to work there. However, smart companies are using this as an opportunity to process the experience together and proactively form a new, collaborative, in-person culture that leaves them stronger than before.”

— Steph Stern, Director of Global Expansion at [SIYLI](#)

7. Account for holistic wellbeing

With the increasing overlap between work and personal life, wellbeing touches every part of the employee experience. Beyond companies’ usual surface-level focus on fitness, the need for mental health support is at an all-time high. Anxiety, depression, lack of sleep, and other physical and emotional challenges plague the modern workforce. Organizations have the opportunity and the responsibility to provide support. Get started.



“The way we work has been forever changed by the coronavirus pandemic, and the impacts have been dramatic. One of the silver linings that has come out of all of this is a greater focus on employee mental health. We’re seeing organizations step up to help their employees by offering more comprehensive, diverse, and accessible mental wellness resources like Calm. Instead of solely focusing on illness, more and more companies are realizing the importance of mental health promotion through better sleep, improved mindfulness, and meditation.”

— Claire Clarke, Community Manager at [Calm](#)

8. Avoid one-size-fits-all solutions

Within your response to wellbeing and planning for the future, there should be room for flexibility. Don't think that the same solution will work for everyone. Explore different resources and tools that you can provide to meet each individual where they are. [Get started](#).



"As we navigate a return to physical offices and continue to support our teams amidst an ongoing pandemic, flexibility is key. Employees are balancing childcare and remote school, increased workloads, and persistent anxiety. Enable your teams to pick from a list of health-centric benefits that focus on improving their mental and physical health, such as company-sponsored fitness classes, remote therapy, and extra days off. By providing multiple options for your teams, you empower them to design a toolbox that is specific to their individual needs."

— Nicole Wolfe, Head of Corporate Programs at [ClassPass](#)

9. Adopt a global mindset

Remote-first work has become increasingly common in the face of the pandemic. However, the many success stories from distributed workforces have empowered organizations to explore this as a permanent option. This is a huge advantage for companies looking to expand their talent network, cut costs on real estate, and expand their global customer base. [Get started](#).



"Last year taught us that we're stronger, more courageous, and more resilient than maybe we thought. It also showed us a better way to work; that business operations are not confined by borders, that geographic location shouldn't be a factor when it comes to recruiting and hiring the best talent for your business, and it's shown us that many roles can be performed anywhere in the world, at any time. Transitioning to a remote-first model taught our managers to trust their team and how to apply technology to engage their employees online. We hope that the future of work is more inclusive, flexible, and fuelled by purpose."

— Alex Hattingh, Chief People Officer at [Employment Hero](#)

10. Focus on managers

Managers are the direct link between company leadership and the broader workforce. As a result, it's critical to empower them with the skills they need to motivate and engage their teams. Without manager enablement, all the work done by people leaders is a lost opportunity. Get started.



“The new year always brings hope and optimism, but as we enter 2021, this sparkle can feel overshadowed by the darkness of continued uncertainty and suffering. People leaders are determined to make the sparkle shine through at work by doubling down on what we can control.

At Culture Amp, we're focused on providing a compelling growth pathway for each of our employees. In order to carve out these pathways, we need exceptional leadership. We need leaders to use the scaffolding that the people team provides, but also to bring their own skills and judgment on what their teams really need and to ultimately do the work to deliver on it.”

— Kath Rau, VP of People Operations at Culture Amp

11. Bring humanity into the workplace

Every piece of advice has one thing in common: the need for a more individualized focus on employees. The overarching takeaway from this past year has been the need for more flexibility, empathy, and humanity at work. Get started.



“2020 brought us a seemingly unmanageable flood of crises, but we learned that our people can succeed (and even thrive!) at work through transparent communication and mutual respect for each other. As we think about coming ‘back’ to work in 2021, we're encouraging our employees to stay true to the lessons learned: that setting boundaries is vital to growth and success, but that each of us is responsible for communicating and advocating for our boundaries. And when someone communicates with you vulnerably and transparently, hold a respectful, solutions-focused space for them to do so.”

— Casey Cole, Senior Advisor, Coaching & Performance at W2O

Looking forward

While undeniably scary and overwhelming, the past year's challenges have presented an opportunity to reshape the world of work into a more human experience for employees and customers alike. We may not yet know all the implications of the past year, but these timeless skills and practices will help you lead your teams into the future with resilience and adaptability.

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