

The Future of Work is Now: the Employee Experience Premium

As we continue to navigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, most organisations are realising that there will be no return to “normal” and that the way we work has changed forever. *The Future of Work is Now: the Employee Experience Premium* is the first in a series of white papers from United Minds, Weber Shandwick’s specialist organisational transformation consultancy, exploring how organisations can create the right employee experience for their people in this new world.

Employment is no longer a simple transaction where money is exchanged for skills, capabilities and experience. These days, employers and employees expect much more from this exchange of value.

Employers don’t just want their staff to be present – they want them to be productive, empathetic to customers and colleagues, innovative, creative and display a number of other attributes. In return, employees expect considerably more than simply monetary payment.

82%

of those temporarily working from home due to coronavirus would like to continue doing so even after we return to the office.

Source: KRC Research

In order to achieve this, different employers offer a wide range of tangible and intangible benefits, ranging from the infamous ping pong table and gym memberships to stimulating and purposeful work. Organisations have value propositions based on a unique combination of these benefits in order to attract and retain the best talent. When this

exchange of value is in equilibrium and everyone feels treated fairly, an organisation is delivering a good employee experience.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed this exchange of value in a very profound way and continues to do so. A recent study from United Minds and KRC Research, revealed that over two thirds of those surveyed consider themselves as productive at home as they are in the office and that 82 per cent of office-based employees would like to continue working from home some of the time after organisations have started to return to offices.²

Many of us are considering even more substantial changes as a result of the pandemic, with large numbers of office-based workers considering relocating from cities to more rural locations knowing they can work just as effectively remotely. New work habits have formed; talk of returning to “normal” misses the point and organisations need to adapt.

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The current situation has changed the point of equilibrium that creates a great employee experience. In the course of just a few months, many elements of the value proposition that employers have relied on for so long were significantly devalued. A subsidised gym membership that employees can’t use has no value. Neither does a ping pong table nor a fridge full of beer in an empty office.

¹ Siegrist, J. (1996). Adverse health effects of high-effort/low-reward conditions. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 1, 27–41. doi: 10.1037/1076-8998.1.1.27

² United Minds & KRC Research, *The Return to Work Paradox* (May 2021)

What made us successful in the past is not what will make us successful in the future. As we adjust to a new world of work, in order for organisations to attract, retain and motivate top talent they need to look forward and evolve their employee experience in light of the lessons we have learned during the pandemic. Two factors above all will determine an organisation's future employee experience: empathetic leadership and radical flexibility.

I. Provide empathetic leadership

Over a year since the pandemic started, many organisations are realising they need to address the challenge posed by the impact of continued isolation on their employees' mental health, career development and personal networks, as well as the corporate culture. In a world where employees are not only navigating the effects of the pandemic but also the economic, political and social justice crises caused or amplified by it, there is a premium on genuine, empathetic leadership.

As the value of more material benefits has declined, the value employees are placing on good leadership and effective line management is increasing. There is no secret to leading organisations today – it's the same as it has always been.

A few years ago, Google analysed the leadership factors that differentiated high-performing teams from the rest and eight attributes emerged:³

1	Be a good coach.
2	Empower the team and do not micromanage.
3	Express interest/concern for team members' success and personal well-being.
4	Be very productive/results oriented.
5	Be a good communicator – listen and share information.
6	Help the team with career development.
7	Have a clear vision/strategy for the team.
8	Have the important technical skills that help advise the team.

These qualities are more critical now than ever before – nothing about the pandemic has changed these fundamentals. Any leader who displays these eight attributes will be creating an employee experience that will drive better business performance and enable organisations to attract and retain the talent they will not only need to survive the current situation but be more resilient in the future.

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Line managers have a particularly important role to play. On a day-to-day basis they are the people that create positive work experiences for employees. They are the essential link to employees, able to assess and ameliorate morale and mindset in real-time. All organisations should be looking to find ways to empower line managers to take the steps they feel are appropriate to maintain and improve employee well-being.

II. Embrace radical flexibility

For many years, the flexible working discussion revolved around whether employees could be trusted to work from home on an occasional basis. The pandemic has been a catalyst in this debate. Now that working from home has become the default, employers and employees have benefited from the partial flexibility it has allowed. Many organisations, however, are beginning to face the challenge of reducing burnout in a workforce trying to work flexibly at home within a contractual framework that is designed for more traditional ways of working.

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³ Laszlo Bock, *Work Rules!: Insights From Google That Will Transform How You Live and Lead*, (New York, Twelve Hachette Book Group, 2015), pg 195

In order to combat the toll that the new ways of working have had on the mental health of employees, the next frontier of flexible working is to give people much more control over their time. The traditional model of working 9am to 5pm, 40 hours a week, with a fixed number of holidays no longer fits with the experience employees are looking for.

The discussion about flexible work in the future will be driven by trusting employees to deliver outcomes rather than focusing on their inputs (time and location, primarily). Introducing activations such as core working hours (e.g. 10am-3pm, with other hours worked at the employee's discretion), shorter working weeks, increased holiday allowances and workplace closures, can all help people to make the new ways of working more compatible with their lives.

One of the greatest challenges of any crisis is that of helplessness; the feeling that everything is out of our hands. As organisations explore what radical flexibility could mean, there is an opportunity to regain a sense of control and to listen to what their people want. Many will be familiar with the Netflix high performance culture grounded in the trust that

people will make good choices – concepts such as unlimited vacation time or an expenses policy that is reduced to five words, “act in Netflix’s best interests”. Organisations don’t need to mirror this but, as with the Netflix example, they should listen to their people and identify solutions that will work for everyone. Applied successfully, organisations should see a reduction in employee burnout and the general toll that the current working conditions are having on mental health.

Conclusion

The future of work is now. Employers expected employees to adapt, almost overnight, to a different way of working. Now employers, too must adapt and look to the future in order to keep their current and prospective workforce engaged. Different organisations will find their own answers to the challenges that this presents. Failure to ensure that employees have empathetic leaders who truly embrace radical flexibility in the way their teams work will lead to a failure to offer the employee experience required to survive the pandemic and rebound robustly once the crisis has passed.



About the author

Stephen Duncan brings more than 25 years' management consulting experience and has helped clients across a range of industries manage change and deliver great employee experience. As head of United Minds for EMEA, he oversees a team of specialists in employee engagement, organisational culture, employee advocacy, employer branding and employee experience design.

You can reach Stephen direct at stephen.duncan@unitedmindsglobal.com