

TRENDLINES

The Employers' Association's monthly whitepaper on essential Business/Human Resources practices

The Employers' Association (TEA) delivers reports for businesses that contain relevant and up-to-date information based on our work with hundreds of employers each month. TEA is known to produce a number of essential benchmark survey reports every year and we also compile data and observations that provide organizations practical perspectives on important business trends.

Reality of Remote and Hybrid Work

What you should know

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many people (and organizations) have re-thought traditional criteria of where work needs to be done. Can it be done more effectively from the office, a coffee shop, a home office, or a dining room table? Many employers would not have considered offering employees the opportunity to work outside of the office (remotely) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but with the government mandated restrictions forced the development of remote work policies. 42 states in the USA imposed various “stay at home” orders by April of 2020 causing employers to quickly and haphazardly allow remote and hybrid (a mix of working remotely and in the office) work types without fully developed plans, procedures, or expectations in place. Without formal rules and standards in place, many employers did not know what to expect and employees did not know what was expected in this “non-traditional” work environment.

As things are returning to “normal” again, some employers are considering re-implementing their old ways of work and eliminating the remote or hybrid option. Many participants in our HR Round Tables, however, have shared that some of their candidates have a very high preference for remote/hybrid work and will turn down job offers if that option is not provided. Their reasoning, based on such premises as the prices of gas going up and childcare issues looming, is that the workforce needs and craves more flexibility. Many individuals working remotely due to the COVID government mandates have grown into the mindset of “I worked this way for 2+ years, and got my job done. I like this, nothing needs to change.” Returning to a forced “in office” role without explanation or business-based need is, and will be, hard to accomplish.

Employees are aware that it is truly an “employee’s market” where there are many jobs open and not enough workers to fill them and they know that if they leave an organization, they will likely be able to find a job quickly – quite possibly with the benefits they desire. Workers who have traditionally performed in-person work (retail, manufacturing, hospitality) are seeking more flexibility as they are seeking jobs working different hours or placing less demand during their personal time. The market and desire for flexibility are encouraging employees to consider leaving their current organization and try and find happiness elsewhere. If they cannot find where they are, they are going to companies offering higher wages and stronger benefits.

What we know

Due to the COVID pandemic, many employers offered hybrid work to employees within positions that were able to be done away from the office. 66% of local employers were offering hybrid work for at least some of their positions according to TEA’s most recent Policy and Benefits Survey data (published March 2022). Not all

employers have offered any type of hybrid or remote work during the pandemic, however. In an effort to “get back to normal,” some employers have been asking, strongly hinting, and even mandating that people return to the workplace with no option of hybrid work.

Some employees are reluctant to return to the workplace for various reasons. These reasons range from legitimate fear of going into the office due to health concerns to just being more comfortable at home having a perceived better work/life balance. When employers require their employees to return back into the office, there will undoubtedly be an uptick of requests to remain working from home. Organizations need to balance these requests. Leaders within an organization need to establish their needs to keep their business running and the desires to have employees in the office, while potentially accommodating and understanding their employees who request the remote/hybrid work.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (applies to organizations with 15 or more employees), employers need to take special care when receiving requests from employees to accommodate a legitimate disability. According to the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the ADA does not require employers to have telework policies, but it would be difficult to require employees with disabilities who suggest a hybrid work model as an accommodation to return to the office if they have successfully done their job remotely during the pandemic. Similarly, though not protected by law, an employee who has performed effectively away from the office may be able to present a compelling case to continue working that way. In addition to potential accommodation requests and the “proven ability” to perform voiced by remote workers, there is additional trouble for employers in this arena – the competition of other company hiring initiatives. Other employers are offering remote work and employees are taking notice. If an employee desires remote work and their current employer will not offer it, many could find a different job offering better pay and more flexibility. According to PBS, there are nearly two job openings for every one unemployed person (nearly 11.4 million jobs). Employers offering remote work options to attract and retain talent are insightful but if these initiatives have not been thoroughly planned out or appear to be reactive afterthoughts the effort may cause more damage than good. Without an intentional plan, teams made up of both hybrid and “in office” workers may seem to be messily thrown together which can lead to miscommunication, a disconnection between coworkers, and significant losses in both productivity and quality due to challenges in communication.

If an organization decides to offer remote or hybrid work opportunities to employees, new reports of biases have come to light that favor the individual who works from the office. It is natural for individuals to feel a fondness for employees they see every day and with whom they work more closely – in-person work being more conducive to build that kind of a relationship. A manager with both in person and remote employees may ask more of the on-site individual because it is simply easier and quicker to communicate. The manager can receive an automatic response instead of typing an email or dialing a phone number to get ahold of a remote employee. A relationship may also bloom with the in-person employees when there is more time to get to know one another and learn more about them on a personal level. That could lead to an unfair workload or favoritism when it comes time from performance evaluations and promotions – potentially creating a discriminatory environment when the intent was to accommodate individual work preferences.

What it means

There is a high demand for qualified employees and employers offering remote work may entice some individuals to leave their current employer to find a more flexible work environment elsewhere. There is some debate as to whether remote workers are MORE productive or LESS productive. According to a study of 800 employers by Mercer (a workplace benefits firm), 94% said productivity has remained the same or improved since employees began working remotely. This result, however, depends on how well the organization tracks productivity, assigns accountability, and allows for autonomy in employee roles. Each organization must clearly

communicate the expectations they have for remote workers and manage their employees based on results rather than the measuring performance by the more traditional “time required to do the job” methodology. Remote / hybrid work requests are not going to subside in the near future so employers will have to clearly establish work rules and expectations for individuals engaged in off-site work.

HR professionals share concerns about company culture for the folks who work remotely. A recent SHRM study found that “Maintaining Culture” was the number 1 remote work challenge. Many employers feel that it would be difficult to engage employees and teach them about the organization’s unique culture if their employees are not in the office. Employers are facing a fear of the unknown since remote/hybrid options are newer to many so when deciding to offer remote options, employers need to consider their organizational values and how they might be impacted. Employers recognize that culture is very important, so not knowing how to handle it with a hybrid workforce presents its challenges. Some employers are convinced that the hybrid/remote work cannot be successfully implemented and have decided not to explore it at all. Most employers, however, will at some time face the question which is more important – maintaining the status quo by keeping culture as it is OR adapting to the changing times and developing something new? There is no incorrect answer but sooner than later employers will be faced with the question and should be prepared to answer it.

What you can do

Some employers are adjusting how they do things due to the popularity of hybrid work schedules and others are not. Both responses and actions are acceptable but working through the organization’s decision may create challenges.

A good place for an organization to start is to evaluate the desires of their employees. Organizations should try to work with employees to uncover what works best for the organization as a whole as well as the individual employees. An organization may consider implementing a survey to see where employees stand.

Many employees are seeking more flexibility, in both remote work options and work schedule. Practical reality should be used to determine if the organization would be able to accommodate those requests for one employee or across the organization without compromising the organization’s ability to conduct business. Being open to switching employees to part time or to work around a schedule for childcare and other needs may go a long way with an employee as long as the work can still be accomplished, and internal resentment is not created. While evaluating, be sure to consider other employees when establishing policies or expectations – providing more flexibility to one person should not mean that another employee will have an increased workload and unfair treatment to pick up the slack.

Regardless of whether an organization offers a hybrid work model or not, employees will undoubtedly submit requests for remote work. It is wise to have an established plan on how to respond to these requests. If it is a request due to a disability, employers are required to attempt to “reasonably accommodate” employees when they have a request as long as it does not cause an “undue hardship” on the employer (be sure to include the employee in the process). The financial cost of a remote employee will rarely be significant enough to constitute an undue hardship so employers will need to evaluate job descriptions and duties of the jobs to confirm if being physically at the worksite is truly an essential function for the job.

Additionally – and more frequently – there will be requests that do not fit under a “protected area” such as a disability. Some parents might want to leave early to pick up a child from school while others may just prefer to work from home. It is wise to establish a plan to help determine the course of action when those requests come. An organization needs to develop and implement actual policies and procedures if an organization allows employees to work within a remote or a hybrid environment. During the frenzy at the start of the

COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations haphazardly allowed people to work remotely. There needs to be consistency with employees if these practices are to continue and it is beneficial for administration to know what is acceptable. TEA has sample policies if organizations would like to view examples. If an organization decides to implement a remote or hybrid work style, it is important to get buy-in from the leadership team. If the leadership team is not on board with the hybrid workforce, there could be actual or perceived tension and bias when employees do exercise their option to work from home. Employees should feel comfortable utilizing that benefit if it is offered to them.

Employers should be careful of natural biases towards those who are working in the office vs. those working remotely. People who work remotely have many reasons to do so and if your organization has remote and hybrid workers, they should not be negatively impacted due to those reasons as long as the work they are assigned is accomplished as expected. An organization may need to conduct training to help avoid bias towards “non-traditional workers” performing “traditional” tasks – starting with management and leadership before extending into the workforce – to avoid such unintended consequences. People who choose not to (or do not have the option to) work remotely should not be responsible for picking up work not completed by their remote counterpart. Make sure there are clear expectations for both sets of employees and make sure they are being held accountable.

If employers are deciding to offer hybrid work or not, considering culture is important and having clear expectations will help maintain company culture while they clarify job expectations and performance measurements. Most organizations have worked for years to build a strong corporate culture and they want to maintain it. Having in-person, remote, and hybrid employees may require organizations to change their policies, practices and expectations but keeping their strong values (and perceived identity) are pivotal components to successfully building an environment that meets and exceeds customer demand while accommodating a workforce that may seek to work remotely.