

HR Strategies for 2021 and beyond

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In a business environment that is forever evolving, filled with uncertainty and where plans are unexpectedly overtaken by world events the only constant that remains in an organisation is its human resource. Almost daily we have all found new reasons to say, “2020 has been a tough year.” 2020 turned all expectations upside down, left companies struggling to catch up with change and confronted with an uncertain “new normal”. These developments have changed the priorities and discussions about the future of HR for 2021 and beyond and navigating the unexpected.

The good news is we have already dealt with a lot of emergencies in 2020, so companies are more prepared. The COVID-19 pandemic put the spotlight (and a whole lot of work) on HR. It led to the establishment of HR as a more central position in organizations. 2020 pushed HR and employee experience to the forefront, highlighting just how important they are to a business’s success “Just as CFOs have greatly increased their scope since the 2008 financial crisis,” [Harvard Business Review](#) (HBR) argues, “CHRO’s now have that same opportunity to become central C-suite players.

HR Strategies to consider

Focus on the Employee Experience.

Remember Employees are a company's greatest asset, they are your competitive advantage. Because of this, it is important to ensure that they remain happy and committed to the organisation. Here are some questions and ideas to get you started on improving your employees’ experience in 2021:

- **What do your employees need to be healthy and safe?** If you’re not sure, now might be the perfect time to measure employee engagement, so you can find out what you’re already doing well and what you need to change.
- **Do you have resources you can offer employees?** Help employees make better use of the benefits they already have access to, even if it’s just reminding them to visit the doctor to make use of their medical aid.
- **How can you encourage a better work-life balance?** Educate managers on the dangers of burnout and stress, so they understand that more work is not always better. Track employee hours to make sure employees aren’t unnecessarily working overtime and that they take their vacation days.

The rise of remote work

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic this year, remote work quickly became a necessity. While many of us are dealing with [Zoom fatigue](#), the trend of remote work and virtual meetings will be one of the features from COVID-19 that will last long after we return to “normal. Workplaces should consider adopting

hybrid policies that allow the option for some form of remote work. Even the [World Economic Forum](#) noted that 98% of employees want the option to work from home at least some of the week across the rest of their careers. 82% of remote managers are concerned about employee focus and productivity, but 98% of employees want the option to work from home for at least some of the week across the rest of their careers. Those that opt for an entirely remote approach will have to consider technology and equipment needs for employees as they shape their more permanent home setups.

Digital ways of working

The increase of remote working requires suitable and well-functioning processes that ensure a digital workplace that supports both your organisation and your employees. This requires adjustments in the HR processes, processes for internal communication and remote leadership. Introducing new policies and procedures on how to handle remote management and methods of supervision could prove useful.

Work Culture

Mental health and work-life balance also have been key topics in 2020 and will continue into 2021. According to a Deloitte survey, 91% of employees in 2020 have an unmanageable amount of stress or frustration. The CDC found in late June 2020 that 40% of US adults were

experiencing mental health or substance abuse struggles as a result of the pandemic. In 2021 organizations should look for ways of enhancing their mental health support for their employees.

Compensation and Benefits

While the world is hoping for a positive (albeit slow) global economic turnaround in 2021, we do anticipate challenges. This means that employees should be supported in all possible ways as they are already strained financially due to other commitments. Organisations can consider reducing transport allowances for employees who are working remotely, introducing cellphone allowances as well as data provisions to enable easier communication and ease of doing work. Investing in laptops with the preferred remote working tools necessary for work to employees who may not have access to their own could go a long way in ensuring the smooth operations of business. Maintaining or introducing a risk allowance and/or hardship allowance will also show employees that you care.

Looking within

Building personal resilience and developing self-leadership skills to cope with fast-paced change is crucial for HR leaders. Self-development is a life-long journey, but self-reflection and identifying areas that need attention in these times is a good place to start. HR should consider strategies which involve the development of self-leadership, managing work at home (ensuring a work-life balance). One constant will be how to communicate, collaborate and learn in a remote working world. Reduced team cohesiveness was another top concern for remote managers (72%) and communication and or collaboration was in the top 3 struggles for remote employees. The big question for 2021 should probably be: if we can't get together in person, what's the next best thing?

Diversity, equity and inclusion

2021 could likely be the biggest year for diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I). According to the World Bank, gender equality in workplaces could aid the global economy to the tune of £120 trillion. Most obvious is the challenge of maintaining and establishing company cultures when people are working disparately. How do they make sure people feel included and connected when they're apart? A changing workplace will lead companies to look at diversity in many senses of the word, like the diversity of thought, working experiences, personalities and education. And it's likely to start with analysis: what does that data say about the current workforce? What's lacking? And how are they going to address that in 2021.

Employee wellbeing and mental health

You would have to be pretty heartless not to put some energy into employee wellbeing in 2021 after the challenges and disappointments of 2020 it could be hugely beneficial to your entire business. The main reason is that employee wellbeing is intrinsically linked to productivity.

Presenteeism (13.4%) and absenteeism (1.1%) accounted for 14.5% of lost working hours in 2019, according to a Vitality study. That equated to a loss of 38 productive days per employee per year, rising from 23 days in 2014. So, it's likely that the 2020 increase could be eye-watering. Given that only 51% of employees feel comfortable talking about mental health at work and that's a pre-COVID number, working remotely and doubting job security could make it much worse. The best way to ease those fears is to put someone on a path to development and learning new skills, showing them that they're valued and there's a vision for their future in the company.

Learning in the flow of work

In 2012, McKinsey stated that employees spent 1.8 hours searching for information each day, by 2015 it had risen to 2.5 hours. That's almost a third of the working day! And then the research trail tails off a little, but there was one article on a 2019 survey that puts the number at 25% of their day.

Once you factor in time spent checking emails and getting snacks or a coffee when are people meant to do their jobs and how are they going to do it productively? The answer is gaining back all that wasted time by allowing people to learn as they work, to give them the tools to find whatever information they need when they need it. Introducing knowledge management software and policies could go a long way in assisting with this.

Data-driven strategies

Another one that's been tipped for years but will probably take off in 2021, HR teams are more likely to lean on data as they make their decisions. More employees will work remotely, and that means HR teams face the challenges of instilling the company culture, recruiting the right people and giving them the tools to be productive and happy.

Budgets are changing, workforces are changing and that means decision-makers might need more convincing to buy into products, platforms and strategies. And it's as simple as the idea that you can't argue with the facts. If you're presenting a compelling case for why a learning platform might help a smaller team cover lost skills or why a particular app will drive productivity, retention or engagement, you'll certainly help your cause by including some data. HR teams will need to tap into the existing data to learn more about the habits of their workforce, which tools they're actually benefiting from and, well, anything else that the data throws up. I hope this article will help you navigate 2021 and beyond

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