

# How the Remote Work Revolution Will Change the Employer-Employee Relationship

By Andrea Granieri



Remote work was already becoming more popular before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the trend is now accelerating. A larger remote workforce will challenge HR leaders to rethink their approaches to recruiting and managing talent.

One of the most visible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on work has been the acceleration of an existing trend: more knowledge workers spending some or all of their time working from home. Our research suggests 48% of employees will work remotely at least some of the time in the postpandemic world, compared to 30% before.<sup>1</sup> While primarily or completely remote organizations will remain rare, most HR leaders will face pressure to enable remote work for a greater segment of their workforce from the perspectives of cost and employee experience.

Looking at several of the key impacts we expect this trend to have on the workplace, here are some key considerations for HR leaders to bear in mind as they make decisions about the future of remote work at their organization.

## **A Well-Designed Remote Work Policy Will No Longer Be Optional**

Most organizations already had a remote work policy for at least some segment of their employees before the pandemic forced millions of people to start working from home full time. HR functions were already feeling pressure to manage costs and prioritize resources in an increasingly cost-constrained environment. Reducing the organization's office footprint by having more employees work remotely can be an effective way to reduce expenses.

Enabling remote work can also improve employee engagement and productivity. Not having to commute to work saves employees

time and eliminates a daily source of stress, potentially improving their quality of life and job satisfaction. Remote employees also have more control over their work environment and are free of the distractions that come with working in an office. Employees who primarily work independently and do not need to collaborate extensively are often more efficient in a remote setting. However, the expanding market of enterprise communication technology means even highly collaborative jobs can also be done remotely, as many organizations have discovered over the past few months.

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Many of the employees working from home due to COVID-19 will seek to continue this arrangement going forward. Meanwhile, the cost pressures bearing down on HR will be even greater. In light of these trends, an effective remote work policy will become a must-have in many industries. A strong remote work policy must clearly define accepted practices and procedures for remote work, articulate the responsibilities of the employer and the employee and provide guidelines on:

- Processes for technical support
- Employee accountability for specified tasks
- Terms of participation and eligibility for remote work
- Creation and maintenance of a suitable work site
- Security and confidentiality
- Performance assessment criteria

We provide HR leaders with a variety of guides and toolkits for crafting a comprehensive policy that keeps remote workers engaged, productive and connected to the broader organization.

## Flexible Work Will Make Talent More Accessible and More Employees Will Expect It

Many candidates and employees who seek to work from home are driven by work-life concerns, including the need to balance work with child care or elder care. Giving employees more control over where and when they work through telecommuting and flexible scheduling eases the burden on working parents and caregivers and enables them to manage both their careers and their family obligations. On the employer side, enabling these employees to remain in the workforce retains their institutional knowledge and experience and saves you the cost of replacing them.

The potential benefits of flexible work policies to an organization include increased intent to stay (nearly three times higher for women), stronger commitment from employees and greater attractiveness to top talent.<sup>2</sup> Remote work also allows organizations to hire talent from anywhere, not just the cities or regions where their offices are located. In the U.S., many millennial workers were already moving away from large, high-cost cities to smaller, more affordable cities and suburban areas — another trend the COVID-19 pandemic may accelerate. Organizations that offer more remote work opportunities can cross geographic and demographic boundaries to tap a larger and more diverse talent pipeline.

To reap the benefits of remote work in terms of employee value proposition, engagement and employer brand, organizations must also set their remote employees up for success. HR leaders pursuing an expanded remote work program should ensure managers have the tools and training to effectively manage these employees. Setting expectations of desired behaviors and practices is particularly important in a remote environment where team members don't necessarily interact with each other on a daily basis. In setting expectations for remote workers, managers should consider:

- Preferred work styles
- Methods of communication
- Accessibility (i.e., working hours, patterns)
- Common approaches to conflict resolution



Understandably, some managers may express concern about a lack of face-to-face interactions and fear employees might not work as efficiently and productively in a remote setting. However, by establishing clear guidelines, project management processes and expectations, managers can enable their teams to collaborate remotely without the need for micromanagement.

## **Management Will Focus More on Outcomes and Less on Activity**

For many managers, the past few months have been their first time supervising employees without being able to look over their shoulders. The logistical and communication challenges of remote work demand a new, less direct approach to management. Successful remote managers establish the outcomes they expect from their team members in a given time frame, make sure employees know the steps to achieve those outcomes and address obstacles along the way. Giving employees more control over their work styles and the structure of their workdays means performance conversations and assessments focus more on the results of an employee's work than on how it got done. This requires a foundation of trust between employees and managers.

In certain cultures, the hands-on management approach can be hard to shake. For example, a manager of a sales team that typically thrives on in-person motivation in a high-energy environment might be reluctant to let their direct reports work from home. They may fear that working remotely will hinder the sense of camaraderie on their team and their own oversight. However, embracing remote work

as an option could also become a differentiating factor for a historically hands-on function such as sales: Some individuals might find that working from home best suits their working style, while others require the in-person experience.

To manage effectively in a virtual environment, our research recommends managers and teams communicate using videoconferencing rather than through emails or voice calls. Video calls allow managers and employees to more easily express empathy with voice, facial cues and body language, which helps establish a stronger rapport (see "How to Cultivate Effective 'Remote Work' Programs.") Video calls and workplace collaboration platforms enable more constant and direct communication among the workforce, no matter where they are located. Maintaining open channels of communication supports a culture of trust and prevents remote workers from experiencing isolation.

## **Social and Environmental Impact Will Become a Bigger Part of the Employer Brand**

Our research has found employees today expect their employers to take stands on social issues.<sup>3</sup> Environmentalism is one area where employee activism has been growing as well as efforts to address racial, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has stress-tested organizations' commitments to corporate social responsibility, also threatens to widen these inequalities.<sup>4</sup> Commitments to positive social impact and environmental sustainability will likely become even more significant employer brand differentiators in the decade to come, while the reputational risks of inaction will grow.

Embracing remote work is an effective way for an organization to make its operations more environmentally sustainable. The bulk of this impact comes from reduced emissions as fewer employees drive cars to and from work each day, but having a smaller physical office also has environmental benefits, including lower energy use and less paper waste.<sup>5</sup> Reducing business air travel by holding more virtual events can also cut an organization's carbon footprint significantly. These environmental benefits can be a valuable element in an organization's employer brand.

As mentioned previously, organizations can also leverage remote work as a vehicle for diversity and inclusion. Making work-life balance more manageable for parents helps retain and develop women employees especially, which in turn contributes to closing the gender gap. Removing geographical constraints on recruiting opens your organization to talent from marginalized communities and to people with disabilities who may not be able to travel to or work in an office. The technology that enables remote work can also make the workplace more accessible. Organizations that take advantage of this increase in accessibility give themselves a compelling story to tell, improving their employer brand and broader public image.

<sup>1</sup> Modeled based on responses to three Gartner surveys: Gartner COVID-19 Crisis Benchmarking Against Your Peers Webinar Poll, 2020 Gartner Cost Cutting and Employee Experience Survey and COVID-19: How Finance Leaders Are Responding to the Emerging Situation Webinar Poll

<sup>2</sup> 2013 Gartner Global Labor Market Survey

<sup>3</sup> 2018 Gartner Optimizing Communications for Changing Stakeholder Expectations Survey

<sup>4</sup> "Is Working Remotely Effective? Gallup Research Says Yes," Gallup.

<sup>5</sup> "The COVID-19 Recession Is Creating a Crisis of Inequality," LSE Business Review.



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