Understanding Employee Engagement in 2021

Lessons from a global pandemic
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The mental health and wellbeing effects of your people from Covid-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Effective leadership in times of crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Work-life balance amidst a global pandemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Why compassion is your biggest ally in 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

It’s been more than a year since the world heard the first mentions of the coronavirus. In a short period of time Covid-19 has dramatically changed the landscape and shape of how many of us work. It has challenged us to find new ways of working with each other when we all must be apart. It has encouraged us to be resourceful and adaptable, fluid, and flexible.

But it has not come without huge cost to the businesses that are the foundation of this country’s economy. The true cost and impact of the pandemic is yet to be revealed, but it is already having a significant impact on your most valuable asset. Your people.

This eBook will examine the effect that 2020 had on the wellbeing of the workforce, what is most important to them right now, and how you can tap into these insights within your own organisation.

Yes, the way we work is changing. But has the pandemic only accelerated that which many of us already longed for? A better work-life balance, shorter commuting hours each week, and a more flexible approach to their role, for example?

Autonomy is replacing micromanagement as we begin to realise people need independence and trust to thrive. And we must strive for our people to thrive. Now, more than ever, it is unacceptable for them to feel they are merely surviving.

The following chapters will outline the impact that Covid-19 has had on employee engagement and what you can do to support your people throughout the ongoing pandemic, and beyond.

With exclusive access to expert advice from HR thought leader Josh Bersin, you can be confident that navigating your people through these challenging times can itself be a rewarding and worthwhile learning experience that will ensure your organisation progresses through 2021 with strength and unity.

Join us as we explore how a global pandemic changed the way the world works and how we can positively move forward, putting our people first.
The mental health and wellbeing effects of your people from Covid-19

Read the blog post ➤
As a nation, we’ve shown true British grit against the coronavirus pandemic. Parents became teachers overnight yet were often grappling with their own professional struggles too. Working from home was no longer a ‘nice to have’ option. It was the only option.

Those without children were often faced with isolation and loneliness. Many moved back in with parents, some became their parent’s carer. And for those on the frontline, there was no option to Stay at Home. They continued to face the public in essential areas including shops, hospitals, and schools.

Many individuals were also put on the government’s newly formed Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), more commonly known as furlough.

The furlough effect

Recent numbers from HMRC show that from March to November, no less than 9.6 million people were furloughed. With a 20% reduction in salary that many households could already ill-afford. Figures from the Guardian state that two thirds of employees that have been placed on the scheme also continue in their role. While this goes against regulations, the fear of losing their job seems too great.

For those that have remained working, many have reported unhappiness following the furlough or redundancy of their peers, increasing workloads a major concern.

Unsurprisingly, the state of the nation’s mental health is now at critical levels. Mental health charity Mind found that more than half of adults (60%) and over two thirds of young people (68%) said their mental health had worsened during the first lockdown.
Why we should care

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines good mental health as ‘a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.’

Supporting a workforce to achieve optimum mental health makes good business sense. But more than that, as an employer who cares, it’s the right thing to do. Good health boosts productivity increases engagement and significantly reduces the costs related to taking no action, such as sick days and hiring costs.

Mitrefinch analysed Google search data during the period of March to June and found that the term ‘Back to work anxiety’ had increased by 567%. While ‘Fear of returning to work’ had increased by 200%.

Recognising and supporting mental health concerns has never been more important. Employees need assistance not just in the here and now, but throughout 2021 and beyond.

Mental health belongs at the top of all HR priorities. Always.
What does poor mental health look like?

The CIPD suggest that typical signs include:

- Working long hours / not taking breaks
- Increased sickness absence or lateness
- Mood changes
- Distraction, indecision, or confusion
- Withdrawal
- Irritability, anger, or aggression
- Uncharacteristic performance issues
- Over-reaction to problems or issues
- Disruptive or anti-social behaviour

Displaying one or more of these signs does not automatically mean that the individual is experiencing poor mental health. It does however prompt reason for a conversation surrounding the wellbeing of that person and possibly a referral to Occupational Health or professional coach.

Burn out and the impact of remote working

An alarming 86% of workers said that remote working has had a negative impact on their mental health, specifying increased anxiety and problems sleeping. A study commissioned by LinkedIn and in partnership with the Mental Health Foundation found that workers were pushing themselves to demonstrate their worth to the company, often causing burnout, through fear of losing their job.

The research found that on average, office workers were increasing their workload by an extra 28 hours each month of remote working. Presenteeism has simply metamorphosed into ‘e-presenteeism’. Workers feel obliged to be online, even outside of their working hours, and in many cases when they are feeling unwell.
We must endeavour to put the pieces of this fractured society together again. We start by providing a work environment in which people feel safe. Thought leader and HR expert Josh Bersin has been studying the impact of Coronavirus within the workplace. He believes it is vital for organisations to communicate and reinforce the changes they are making to create a resilient, safe, and sustainable workplace. Bersin says it will require patience, flexibility, and forgiveness during this period of ambiguity. One thing is certain. a shift in focus to health and wellbeing is crucial, and the art of listening has never been more important.

2020 had a severe and detrimental impact to large proportions of the workforce. The LinkedIn/Mental Health Foundation research found that three in five (58%) leaders fear that the mental toll of homeworking will cause them to lose staff through burnout and poor mental health.

So, what next?

Listen to the podcast
Hear more from industry analyst Josh Bersin—plus find out his top three predictions for HR strategy in 2021, plus plenty more powerful insights on the Winningtemp podcast.
Effective leadership in times of crisis

Read the blog post
In 2020, leaders faced unprecedented pressures, having to make unimaginable decisions. Household names such as Debenhams, Edinburgh Woollen, Peacocks and Arcadia Group fell into financial difficulties, while Virgin Atlantic announced cuts of more than a thousand jobs due to restrictions placed on the travel industry from the Covid-19 outbreak. Demonstrating further still the difficulties that business leaders have encountered.

In times of crisis, the culture of the company can often be overlooked for more 'pressing' matters. However it would be negligent to dismiss the impact that a positive company culture can have throughout the entire organisation during those tougher times. Motivation and morale are intrinsically linked to a positive employee experience. And it starts from the top down.

Covid-19 has normalised remote working but creating a strong company culture virtually has been a challenge for many leaders.

The coronavirus has forced many leaders to dig deep – literally and figuratively – in a bid to keep business going. Many CEOs for example have discreetly sacrificed significant amounts of their salary to stay afloat. Data from Impact International found that no less than 41% of those that had relinquished their salary, did so by 100%.

Recent research by Microsoft found that 63% of business leaders think it is hard to effectively lead teams digitally. Additionally, 69% are unsure how to create a strong team spirit in a virtual workspace.

HR expert Josh Bersin suggests that it is far less complex than it might seem. “It’s mostly about making people feel good about their jobs, their work, about their team.”
Making your people feel good is not location bound. Positive reinforcements can be given and received anywhere, at any time. One-to-ones over video calls and each conversation, whether verbally or electronically offers the opportunity to build trust and demonstrate that you are listening.

The changes for people will be significant and it is a golden opportunity for leaders to be at the forefront of the phenomenon.

Not everything that Covid-19 has touched has to leave a negative footprint. Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “A leader is a dealer in hope.” In times of crisis, people look for reassurance and confidence from those guiding them. It would be all but foolish to waste this moment through fear of the unknown.

While it may not be possible to have all the answers, compassion and clear communication is fundamental to building a trusting relationship between management and workers.

Following years of resistance from many organisations, the remote working genie is well and truly out of its box. And, it would seem, most workers are keen to embrace the changes permanently. In the UK, Rightmove report that city dwellers are on the move. Cramped into small abodes, with little to no garden, the pandemic lockdowns heightened awareness of what country life might offer, if a long commute ceased to be an issue.

Supporting the findings from Rightmove, Slack’s Future Forum research found that out of 4700 workers, most did not want to return to their previous work life. A massive 72% said they wanted a “hybrid remote-office model moving forward”.
CHAPTER 3

Work-life balance amidst a global pandemic

Read the blog post →
With the dawn of the digital revolution facilitating an ‘always on’ culture, work-life balance has become a complex conundrum. With the forced closure of offices nationwide in March 2020, it became more important than ever for business leaders to safeguard employees work-life equilibrium. HR expert Josh Bersin agrees and says that one thing is now certain: the working landscape has changed, forever: “You don’t go to the workplace; the workplace comes to you.”

Prior to Covid-19, working from home was still somewhat the work-life balance unicorn, available only for the privileged few. Now, with working from home happening ‘en masse’, we see for the first time that it could in fact have a negative effect if not managed appropriately.

A study commissioned by LinkedIn in partnership with the Mental Health Foundation supports these findings and say that throughout the pandemic, people who have been working from home have often been exerting themselves beyond their capacity, leading to high levels of fatigue. The research found that on average, office workers were increasing their workload by an extra 28 hours each month by working from home.

In addition, the ONS report that a disproportionate amount of childcare is falling upon women who have been working from home while home-schooling or providing the main childcare for children under school age. Parents have been fitting their work around their childcare responsibilities with data suggesting that they’ve been working in the morning and at night – an unsustainable juggling act.

Since the first lockdown in March, 73% of workers believe that they are more efficient when working remotely according to Statista Research Department, while 68% say they also work more hours at home. However, working more hours doesn’t necessarily equal higher productivity, at least not in the long-term.
In 2021 it is probable that at some point, workers will begin returning to the office again, and we are yet to understand what that return will look like. However, the accelerated shift to working from home that 2020 brought seems set to become a permanent feature to our working week.

Whether an omnipresent workplace is a positive experience or not, rests on the shoulders of employers. With workload intrinsically linked to a person’s mental and physical health it is imperative that employers take a keen eye on how much they are expecting of their people.

CIPD Tips for a healthy work-life balance while remote working

1. Be clear about when your working day begins and ends and take breaks to refresh.

2. When work is over, be sure you switch off to avoid burnout. Cultivate healthy habits such as taking exercise and fresh air every day.

3. Minimise stress. Managers should set clear expectations about the way employees should deliver and receive communications throughout the working day. This will help alleviate pressure and anxiety.

4. Have a daily virtual huddle. This is essential for keeping connected and a means for line managers to check in on their team’s physical and mental well-being and discuss any additional support they need to fulfil their roles from home.

5. Discourage presenteeism. If you’re unwell, take leave and do your best to give an update or handover on urgent work. As a manager or team leader, encourage people to take time off if unwell.

6. Offer support on well-being. Remind staff of their existing health and well-being benefits and how to access them when working remotely.
Why compassion is your biggest Covid ally

Read the blog post ↗
Almost one year on from our first lockdown, the pandemic still has a stronghold over the political and economic landscape of not only the United Kingdom, but the rest of the world too. While there is now, finally, light at the end of a very long tunnel thanks to the rapid development of a vaccine, we can be sure of one thing, the way we live and how we work has forevermore been changed.

According to new research from Edenred, UK workers are increasingly unhappy in their jobs as they enter 2021 and in need of support for their mental wellbeing in the year ahead. Proof, if ever it were needed that employers must now prioritise the resilience and care of their people. Those who showed strength 10 months ago, are likely to now feel fatigued and dejected.

The stats...

The study found that as nearly two thirds of employees (64%) worked from home in the last 12 months – double the level reported at the beginning of 2020 – a similar number (61%) worked outside of their normal hours.

As a result of the pandemic, employees reported a fall in job satisfaction (35%), concerns about job security (31%) and dissatisfaction in their work-life balance (27%).

The fall in satisfaction comes despite the majority of employees (81%) saying their organisation did a good job of supporting them in the last year.

Employees said that whilst they were satisfied with the support given for managing work-life balance (73%), collaborative working (72%) and physical wellbeing (71%), they needed support in different ways during 2021.

One in four employees wanted help with mental wellbeing and roughly one in five (17%) need help in adjusting to a return to the office.

Employers were seen to be falling short in reward (32%) and recognition (21%) for their staff’s work through the pandemic.
Evidently, high levels of engagement aren’t necessarily a sign that your people are fine. Pandemic or not, organisations must support their people throughout long periods of uncertainty and stress. Bersin agrees, imploring companies to put their workforce first, now.

“Companies must invest in various programs and solutions that help people maintain themselves, get rest, and learn how to deal with this uncertainty”

“It goes to the real issues of public health and collaboration. People helping each other and people supporting each other, checking in and listening. A lot of the human skills that are needed in any kind of a crisis, that is what companies are going to have to do. Because people aren’t going to stay on high alert for two years, they just can’t, it’s impossible.”

Compassion is key. Understanding your people and being able to display empathy over judgement, and kindness over frustration, will be critical to your business. How your workers view you in times of crisis will undoubtedly have a direct impact to how your business is perceived in the good times.

Tellingly, research by Maxis Global Benefits Network (Maxis GBN) found that just under half (46%) of employees say the Covid-19 pandemic has compelled them to re-evaluate the importance of the benefits their employer offers. The survey also revealed that 33% of workers want their employer to prioritise health over lifestyle benefits, with almost one-fifth (21%) requiring greater access to wellness support.
Conclusion

Everything you knew about employee engagement holds as true today as it did pre-Covid-19. However, in less than one year, employee engagement has significantly been turned on its head. It has become glaringly evident just how dramatically our working life has now changed. Vastly increasing the need to prioritise employee engagement.

The pandemic has served to accelerate a welcome focus on this fundamental area and has rightly shone a spotlight on what’s most important, our people. It is a pivotal moment in history for all organisations and how they handle this crisis will be remembered long after any lockdown and compulsory remote working is lifted.

Data shows that significant drivers of happiness in the workplace continue to be autonomy, people development, clear, transparent goals from management, a flexible work environment, the opportunity for growth, and trust in leadership. And the stats chime with how Bersin views the current situation:

“If you’re providing substandard care to your employees this year, I’m sure they know about it. It’s time to put as much money into that as you can. If you expect your company to grow through the pandemic you better be taking care of your people and those benefits better be competitive.”

As things stand, we don’t know how long the pandemic will last. As vaccinations roll out, there is hope. Yet, it would be careless to think that things will go back to ‘normal’ any time soon. If in fact, they ever can, or should. Now is the time to change the narrative and shift the mindset that has seen presenteeism and fear create burnout and employee checkout. Instead of resolutions that we fail to keep for more than a few weeks, let’s make flexibility, sensitivity, and support the new ‘normal’.

Discover how your people are honestly feeling by offering them a voice in a safe, anonymous environment. Establish trust and open communication lines that will increase engagement and productivity across the business.

Build a reputation for being leaders that listen.
After a year of using Winningtemp, our customers record, on average, a 21% increase in job satisfaction amongst their employees.

Thanks to this heads-up and the ability to take swift, targeted action, our customers report an average 26% decrease in negative stress and a 30% reduction in employee turnover.

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