

AS VACCINES ARE FAST-TRACKED, HALF OF THE EMPLOYEE POPULATION IS NOT READY TO MOVE BACK TO THE OFFICE

America and the world are about to enter the next phase of the COVID-19 crisis. As cases rise worldwide, governments and citizens are dealing with far-reaching pandemic fatigue, debates over lockdowns and how to return to pre-pandemic work, learning and living behaviors. While vaccines are coming soon, administering more than a billion competing vaccine doses worldwide will present challenges for governments, companies and overburdened healthcare systems. Millions of lives, social cohesion and economic recovery are all at stake.

Since the onset of the pandemic, Weber Shandwick has commissioned a series of U.S. surveys of American adults and employees to measure and track changing public opinion. One trend has been consistent across each survey: employees have expressed trust and confidence in their employer to put their health and safety over corporate profits. In our most recent survey, conducted on November 17-19, 70% of respondents said their employer is putting safety over profits, 73% said their employer's response to the coronavirus pandemic is "exactly what it should be," and 78% said they are proud to work for their employer.

But our survey also showed that employers' reputation could be harmed if, in the wake of vaccines becoming available, they rush to bring employees back into the workforce too early, they mandate that employees get vaccinated, or do not live up to their commitments on social justice and equity issues.

KEY SURVEY FINDINGS:

- + **Over half of remote employees would opt to continue working from home – rather than get vaccinated and return to the workplace.** If given a choice, 55% of remote employees said they will continue to work from home and not get a vaccine, while 36% said they would plan to get a vaccine to return to work either full-time or split work between their home and office environments.
- + **This division and the seeming “wait and see” attitude of the employee population, this data suggests, means employers should be carefully embracing employee sentiment and sensitivity as they enter this next phase of the pandemic.** The voice of science is paramount, our survey suggests, but the voice of the employee will also be critical to a smooth, productive transition that further establishes the role of business in aligning recovery ambitions with human values.

- + **If an employer requires their workforce to get vaccinated, half (52%) of remote employees would request to continue working remotely and not get vaccinated.** By contrast, 41% said they would get the vaccine as soon as possible and return to their workplace. Employers should carefully weigh the implication of mandating that employees get vaccinated.
- + **A majority of employees who work remotely feel productive and supported in their new work environment.** 89% said that employers are communicating frequently and providing the virtual tools needed for productive work. 79% of remote employees said they are just as productive as when they were in an office environment. 82% of remote workers agree they have the tools and resources to work effectively.
- + **Sixty percent of remote employees said they fear their employer will mandate a return to the workplace before it is safe to do so.** In addition, 66% of remote employees said they are planning or seriously considering continuing to work remotely either full or part time.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPANIES:

- + **Employers have been an anchor in the pandemic storm.** They've earned a high level of trust from both their workers and society. But executives will now face a new set of critical workplace decisions as vaccines become available and our leaders urge citizens to get vaccinated.
 - + Should companies mandate that their workforces get vaccinated?
 - + How and when can companies bring employees back together safely in workplace environments in a manner that instills trust and confidence?
 - + What new protocols should be put in place?
 - + What flexibility can employers offer to help employees balance work and home environments?
 - + How can employers better understand employee experiences to ensure they can retain top talent in a post-COVID world?
- + **The future of work will be shaped by employees.** They will drive the design of the post-COVID workplace and the workplace of the future. The pandemic has opened up new possibilities for employees. Many are contemplating lifestyle changes that will impact their employers: nearly half (45%) of respondents said they want to work remotely either full or part time, while others said they plan to change jobs (14%) or move to a different location (12%).

+ **Employees expect a civil and fair workplace—but gaps between what an employer says and does is an area of reputation risk.** While 75% of employees said their employer has created a fair work environment and 73% said their employer does not tolerate discrimination, there are gaps: 53% agree their employer “says all the right things about diversity, equity, and inclusion but does not do what it says or ‘walk the walk.’” Large majorities believe it is important for employers to reiterate zero tolerance for discrimination and harassment (81%).

Finally, our survey measured broader public attitudes in the wake of a divisive and polarizing national election.

+ A majority of respondents (65%) believe that COVID-19 is not under control and only 41% believe efforts to stop the spread are working.

+ Conflicting or changing information is sowing confusion among 63% of respondents.

+ Respondents also agreed that civility remains a problem (93%) in our politics and society. However, nearly half (48%) are optimistic that the level of civility will improve in the next few years—higher than recorded in a decade.

+ 58% said they feel like celebrating or are quietly relieved about the election outcome.

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