

How HR Leaders Can Support Employees Returning to Hybrid Work Models



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“Like a hurricane hitting the whole country.”

The impact COVID-19 has had on the U.S. economy is hard to comprehend, but as David Cutler, the Otto Eckstein Professor of Applied Economics, says, it equates to the devastation of a natural disaster, like a hurricane, affecting every area of the United States.

Projections suggest that the global pandemic will cost the country \$16 trillion. Companies all around the world are still reeling from the devastation and trying to adjust to a post-pandemic world.

As the U.S. begins to loosen regulations in the wake of a rapid vaccine rollout, employers are looking for ways to return to a version of normalcy we lived in before the pandemic occurred. This presents an exciting opportunity for HR leaders to support their employees as the leadership team solidifies a plan for the future of their operations.

But this shift in how people have been working throughout the pandemic has changed the employee experience – ushering in some changes in employee preferences.

A 3D-rendered hand in shades of purple and red holds a smartphone. The phone's screen displays the following text:

47%
of employees
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The pandemic forced a lot of employees to go fully remote, but what does that mean for workers and their day-to-day experience moving forward?

A staggering [47% of employees](#) say the lack of clear vision about the post-pandemic world is concerning. Meanwhile, many of them are enjoying the transition to working from home – [80% of them](#) say meeting deadlines and getting their work done has been easy since moving to fully remote work.

What's more, they're looking ahead at the employee experience they prefer, and the majority of them ([54%](#)) say they would want to work from home once the pandemic ends. Leadership teams need to be mindful of this as they plan for what post-pandemic work looks like.

Why? Because employees have a new found fondness for flexible work arrangements and [30% of them](#) are likely to switch jobs if they're returned fully on site.

The best way to return to the office space is for organizations to embrace a great solution to fit employee preferences while keeping them safe and happy – the hybrid work model.

Say Hello to the Hybrid Work Model



The hybrid work model enables some employees to work remotely while others work on site. Some organizations are adopting flexible work arrangements to permit their people to work some days at home and some days in the office.

This fits employee preferences well, seeing as how [55% of U.S. workers](#) want a blend of “as office” and “at home” work schedules.

The overall message is clear: employees want the flexibility of working from home at least a few

times during the week. That’s where the hybrid work model comes into play.

Why Hybrids Could Become the New Normal

The hybrid work model is a result of all the cultural and technological obstacles employers were forced to overcome during the lockdowns. Now, as so many employees learned during their work experience at home, people know their true capabilities in a remote setting.

[Nearly four in 10 people](#) say they can do their jobs mostly at home, with large variances across industries and levels of education and income. Generally speaking, the majority of college graduates say they can mostly do their job in a remote location.

The decision to shift to this model is mostly influenced by the activities being done in the workplace. McKinsey & Company studied which activities had the highest potential for remote work – in other words, they identified tasks that could be completed with no productivity loss when employees work remotely.



McKinsey & Company studied which activities had the highest potential for remote work – in other words, they identified tasks that could be completed with no productivity loss when employees work remotely. The top activities that show high potential include:



Updating knowledge and learning (e.g. attend an online seminar)



Communication with colleagues and clients (e.g. discuss strategies)



Interacting with computers (e.g. create data backups)



Processing, analyzing, and interpreting information (e.g. analyze industry trends)



Thinking creatively (e.g. design layouts for publications)

So when companies are considering how to provide remote work for their teams, the most important considerations are the tasks and activities that employees actually do. In most industries, a lot of jobs can be accomplished at home in an effective manner.

The sectors with the highest potential for remote work are:

- Finance and insurance
- Management
- Professional, scientific, and technical services
- IT and telecommunications
- Education

As companies shifted to the short-term solution of managing operations during a global pandemic, the employee experience changed a lot too – and to workers, it has been for the better.

The Employee Experience That Workers Want

The preference for remote work is simple to understand. When designed correctly, a hybrid work model can deliver the structure, independence, flexibility, and sociability that employee culture needs.

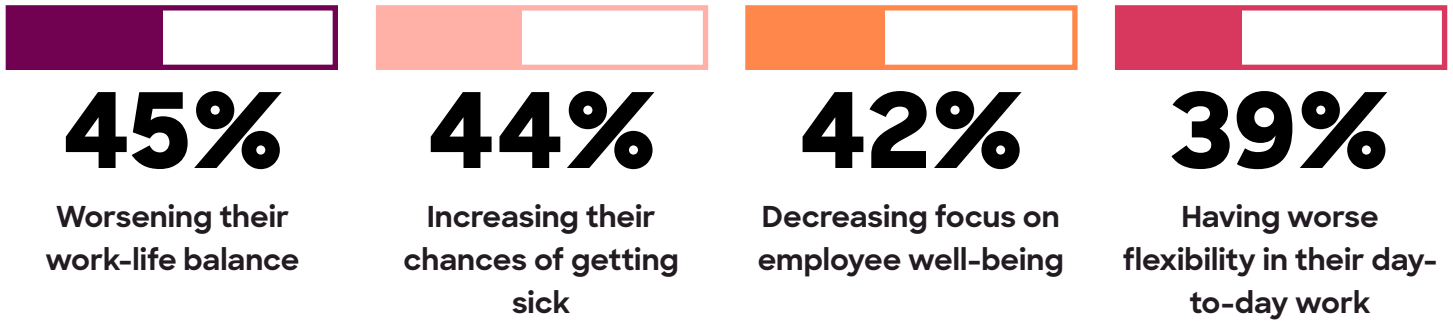
In the time before and after COVID-19, the amount of employers who prefer hybrid work models jumped from 30% to 52%. However, a prominent issue lurks for organizations planning to make this switch – their employees are worried about what the future holds for their post-pandemic workplace.

Working remotely for more than a year, it's become clear that our employees have enjoyed the freedom of a more flexible work environment and are just as productive at home. A hybrid working model will allow us to provide them this benefit while also providing the office as a place to collaborate and build relationships."

– Nikki Salenetri, VP, Human Resources at Gympass



If they're returning to on-site work, employees' top fears are:



Yet they also remain hopeful that organizations will focus on improving work-life balance, adding more flexibility, offering competitive compensation, and prioritizing employee wellbeing.

Simply put, hybrid work models will likely surge, becoming a status quo in many industries. This model has plenty of advantages.

For example, employers can reduce overhead by downsizing the size of their office or moving it to a less expensive location. This is common in urban settings as companies are moving out of high rises and into smaller spaces. It is likely that this trend will continue – [one third of COOs](#) say they plan to reduce office space when leases expire in the coming years.

Another benefit is reducing health risks for their workforce and providing options that can be tailored to individual preferences. When determining how to adopt a hybrid model, consider each type:



1. At-Will Model

Allow employees to choose the work arrangement that best fits them on any day. Adhere to social distancing by creating a process to request a day at the office.



2. Split-Week Model

Each week is split – two or three work from home days with two or three in-office days. Employers can even stagger their departments, giving team A the office for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and giving team B on-site options for Tuesday and Thursday.



3. Shift Work Model

Enable employees to work in morning and evening shifts in the office.



4. Week by Week Model

On a weekly basis, allow employees to alternate between working at the office and working from home.

However, bringing employees back to the office in any capacity does not come easily. HR leaders need a plan in place for making them feel safe so that ultimately, they can continue to be happy, healthy, and productive members of an organization.

3 Key Areas to Focus On to Support a Smooth Transition

No matter the model that's picked, employers are going to need a plan in place to ensure a safe, easy transition back on site. There are three essential aspects to consider, along with some actionable solutions to help address them.

How to Keep Employees Safe

Many people have barely left their homes during the pandemic. Most of their needs, including food and prescriptions, have been delivered straight to their home through various services.

Most people are following the basic public health guidelines, like wearing a face mask and staying six feet away from others. However, returning to an office will feel foreign for a lot of employees. This experience can be frightening, especially for those who have not been vaccinated or for those in high risk categories.

Fortunately, companies can be proactive in supporting their employees.

Solution: Adhere to Up-to-Date Government Guidelines

Pay close attention to government advisories on how to prevent the spread of illnesses in the workplace. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) outlines some very useful [considerations for people returning to work](#).

There is no doubt that each of your employees has something that concerns them about returning to the workplace. Be sure to create open lines of communication so that your employees can provide insights in whatever way they feel most comfortable. Use those insights when creating a return to work strategy to ensure that you are proactively addressing concerns and providing a safe and comfortable workplace.”

– Nikki Salenetri, VP, Human Resources at Gympass

Make it clear to the staff exactly how the company is keeping its workplace safe and clean by detailing all of the preventive measures being followed, like:



Providing hand sanitizer



Staggering in-office days for each team to maintain social distancing



Hiring cleaning companies to disinfect regularly



Installing plastic partitions



Providing masks in the office

In any case, consult with the company's employment council to understand all measurements to maintain a safe work environment. This can give employees peace of mind and show them that organizations are taking their health seriously.

What Can Employees Expect?

At this point, many leadership teams have remained silent or provided vague information

about the future of their operations. In fact, [40% of employees](#) say their organization has not yet communicated any vision for post-pandemic work, and 28% say they only received vague information.

This can cause more frustration and worry as employees anxiously wait for what their day-to-day will look like in the coming months and years. The solution is simple – keep them in the loop! be proactive in supporting their employees.

Solution: Establish Open Communication Channels Now

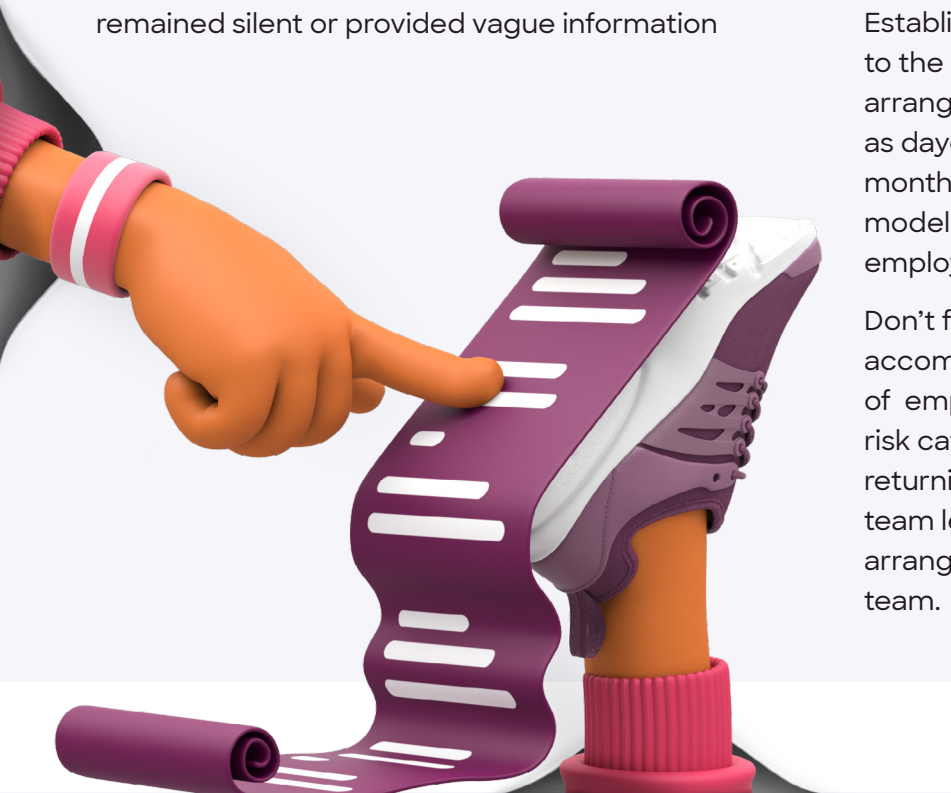
Develop a communication plan that outlines all expectations for employees, and encourage transparency and open communication across the board.

Businesses want their employees to feel comfortable in expressing their concerns, and they should have direct contact with someone who can address those concerns.

Simply put, teams want to feel included in company communications about the future of the organization after the pandemic. In fact, those who do feel included thanks to detailed communication about policies are about [five times more likely](#) to report increased productivity.

Establish concrete dates for employees to return to the office well in advance so they can start arranging for important lifestyle changes such as daycare and pet care. Strive for at least one month of notice before enacting the hybrid work model, but ideally, provide three full months so employees can plan accordingly.

Don't forget that it will be important to provide accommodations to fit the individual needs of employees too. If some people are in high risk categories and still don't feel comfortable returning to the office, coordinate with their team leaders and see if there is a flexible work arrangement that fits both the employee and the team.



How to Make Employees Feel Valued

Cultivating and maintaining a positive workplace culture where people feel valued for their work is hard enough in the office. Implementing an employee recognition program takes a good deal of planning and execution.

So when teams are physically separated, this can become even more of a challenge. Employers can't coordinate in-office parties or publicly praise top players during an in-person company meeting. However, given the technological capabilities, they can make the most out of the resources – they just need to plan for this.

Solution: Continue Building a Culture Where Employees Feel Valued

A company's culture should be considered a top priority. If employees feel disconnected from each other and their team, they're going to feel left out, which can hurt [productivity](#), engagement, and [retention](#).

When looking at culture through the lens of the employee experience and how it supports performance and retention, one thing is clear: building a positive culture is a business strategy, not just a nice-to-have.

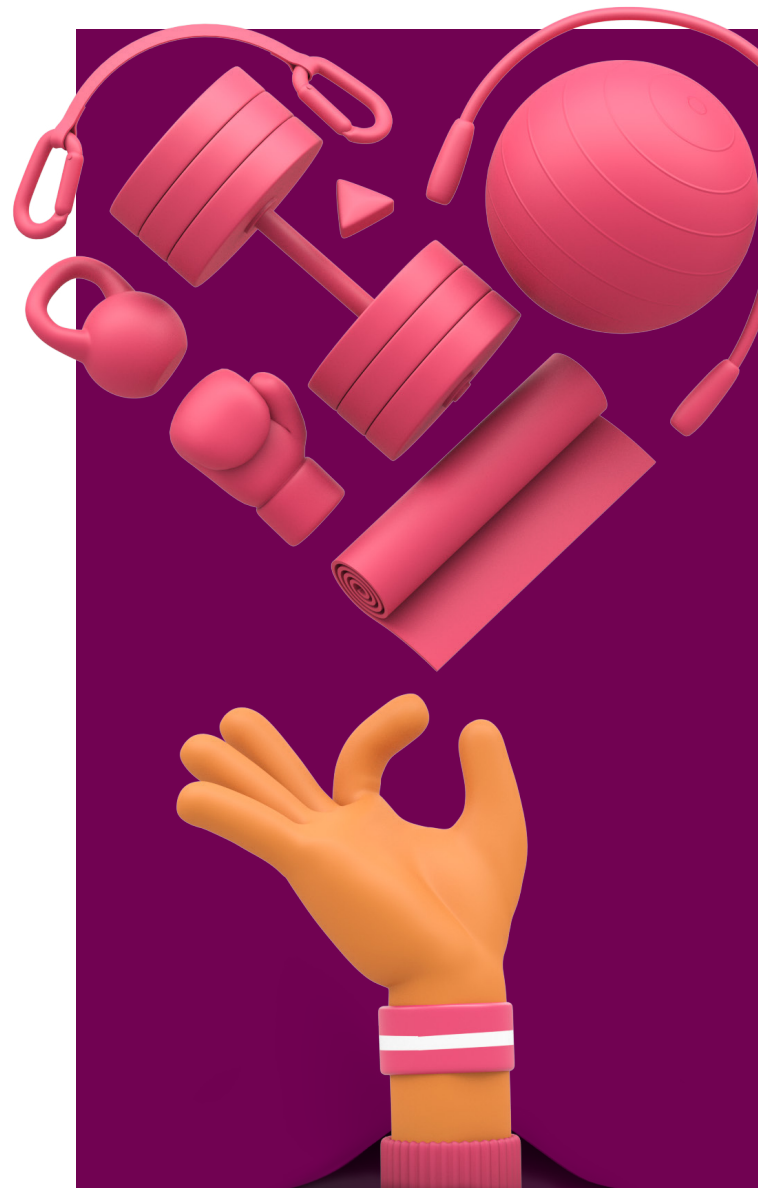
Find a way to make all employees (those in office and those working from home) feel recognized and valued. Employee recognition programs need to be fair for all teams. So if employers are hosting team meetings with in-office and remote workers, praise all key players equally, no matter where they're working from.

These can be virtual shout outs in team chat groups or larger gestures, like mailing remote employees recognition gifts, such as lunch delivered by a local restaurant or a thank you card with a gift card.

Also, make time for hybrid culture events. These can be video chat calls where teams gather and play fun games, like trivia, would you rather, charades, and two truths and a lie. Companies can also host happy hours where employees can socialize and engage in fun group conversations.

Perhaps one of the most impactful ways to make employees feel valued is developing a holistic wellness program. Employee wellness is increasingly becoming a major area of focus for employers, especially in the wake of a global pandemic. There is strong evidence showing how [stress can weaken the immune system](#) and how [sedentary lifestyles](#) contribute to a slew of health issues.

This is why developing an employee wellness program is so important. Not only will it help employees stay healthy and happy, but it can also improve their levels of engagement, productivity, and satisfaction. Plus, when employers support them in improving their health, they're sending a clear message: they care for them on a human level.



How to Launch an Employee Wellbeing Program



Wellness is gaining more traction as employers start to see the impact the health of their employees has on their business. With employee wellness programs in places, companies are seeing all kinds of benefits, such as:



Reducing stress

48% of employees are reporting that company-sponsored training has helped them the most to manage stress. ([Udemy](#))



Improving job satisfaction

70% of employees enrolled in wellness programs report higher job satisfaction than those not enrolled in the program. ([Aflac](#))



Reducing absenteeism

56% of employees had fewer sick days thanks to wellness programs. ([United Healthcare](#))



Boosting productivity

62% of employees say wellness programs help them improve their productivity. ([United Healthcare](#))

Developing an employee wellness program is vital to helping employees manage their transition back into the hybrid work model. Follow these steps to get started.



“Talk to your employees about what they want in a wellness program and use that feedback when designing it. Creating a program that benefits everyone demonstrates that you see employees as individuals and you appreciate their individual needs.”

– Nikki Salenetri, VP, Human Resources at Gympass



1. Determine What Employees Want and Need

Identify exactly what teams need help with and what they're interested in by conducting health assessments and surveying them directly. When gathering data, it will be clear what wellbeing initiatives are top priorities, and it will help employers determine the best way to promote them.

For example, if an assessment determines that a company has a lot of smokers on the team and the survey shows that most smokers want to quit, provide them with a smoking cessation program.

2. Establish Clear Goals and Measure Progress

As with all business strategies, set clear objectives to measure. For example, if an organization wants to address costly absenteeism, then set a clear goal for the program, such as “reduce absenteeism by 5% quarter over quarter.”

Knowing what the target is helps employers determine a reporting process. If the goal is centered on employee satisfaction, the KPI is customer satisfaction scores. So conduct surveys on a regular basis to track changes.

3. Showcase Buy-In from the Leadership Team

Employees learn by example, so a business wants all levels of their organization involved in wellness initiatives. Getting buy-in from leadership teams and showcasing it directly impacts the success of the program.

In fact, [73% of employees](#) with senior managers who show support through involvement and commitment to wellbeing initiatives said their organization helps employees develop a healthy lifestyle, as compared to just 11% who work at a company lacking this support.



4. Start a Wellness Committee to Foster a Wellness Culture

With the support from the leadership team and a good understanding of all employees' needs and preferences, companies will know what programs to include. However, it's important to deploy resources to further build this enthusiasm for wellbeing in the work culture.

With an employee-led wellness committee, employers will have a team of people who can assess needs, evaluate current wellness initiatives, promote events, and help implement activities.

5. Set a Budget to Plan Accordingly

Wellness programs have a lot of moving parts, so know how to properly plan for the expenses associated with planning and implementing. Otherwise, if a program is not properly funded, it will not be effective.

Consider all costs associated with the program, like provider fees, incentives for participants, fitness tracking devices, and promotional efforts.

6. Finalize All Initiatives and Start Promoting Them

With a budget in place, teams can start planning out themes and initiatives for the year. For example, commemorate breast cancer awareness in October by encouraging employees to get free testing.

Employers also need a final list of all the tools they'll be using for implementation of the program. With the right software and wellness resources at hand, they are better equipped to succeed.

As employers maintain wellness program schedules, collaborate with wellness committees to help promote each initiative. Start an incentive program with rewards to achieve high utilization rates.

With a well designed wellness program, leaders have the foundation they need to support their employees as they adjust to the new normal of a post-pandemic hybrid work model.

Gympass: The Only Solution to Improve Employee Wellness



There are a lot of different ways to piecemeal wellness tools together to run a program. However, the more disparate the tools, the harder it is to manage.

This is where multi-option wellness solutions come in handy. They provide an “all-in-one” option for employers so HR teams can manage an effective wellness program without all the headaches.

Gympass is the only complete corporate wellbeing platform that provides holistic support for every employee, no matter where they are and when they want it – the ideal solution for hybrid work models.

Learn more about how Gympass can help improve employee wellness with a results-driven strategy and inclusive plans that will meet the unique needs of all employees.

[Learn More](#)

