

# Search for flexibility and meaning in the post-pandemic workplace

 By [Johan Botes](#)

15 Jul 2022

A fulfilled and thriving workforce is a goal for all progressive businesses. Post-pandemic, employers across the world are grappling with optimal staffing solutions for recovering businesses. This has been evident to many frustrated travellers at airports around the world, waiting in queues because staffing levels have not been adequately restored to match increased demand. But it is not only airports and airlines that are struggling to find the best model to manage fluctuating workflow. Globally, companies are trying to find the most efficient staffing models and flexible arrangements within those models to ensure they meet increased customer demand and new staff expectations.



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Many businesses are keen to see employees returning to the workplace, with a large number (especially in the professional and business services industries) sensing an opportunity to attract and retain sought-after talent by redefining their post-pandemic workplace policies. However, a large number of employees are less than keen to face the daily commute and canteen food after two years of the great flexibility remote working offers to them, with many resisting the urge to give up their work from home status.

## What talent wants

While workplace flexibility has become a key negotiation point in employment contracts, the modern workforce also increasingly demands that their employers' activities match their own personal ideals. This includes that the business operates in a sustainable way and provides benefits for the environment, local economies and the surrounding communities. The pandemic doubled down on this focus on corporate citizenship, and businesses have had to ensure they identify sustainability risks and opportunities in every part of their business strategy, including in workforce planning.

Attracting the right talent particularly requires responsible leadership and increasing transparency. Employees of the modern workforce want to be in an environment where they feel they are making a meaningful contribution to the greater global issues. Employees, customers, shareholders and other stakeholders are demanding that organisations take a stance

on important issues such as racism, sexual harassment, unemployment, and income inequality. Leading businesses are turning this challenge into a competitive advantage by creating workplaces with purposeful engagement and ways to accommodate a diverse set of employees with differing workplace needs. Business indicators such as staff turnover and employee engagement are now the critical markers of organisational effectiveness.

Businesses in the post-pandemic environment are also considering the composition of the workforce, creating a structure that draws on the various forms of staffing solutions that are appropriate to the business, with due regard to the benefits and drawbacks of traditional and flexible workforce options.

## Changing strategies

Employers are also considering changes in their employee relations strategy that move from a primary focus on collective engagement to recognising the needs of smaller interest groups or, where possible, individual employees. Employee engagement surveys, individual feedback sessions, career planning, performance management, employee goal and expectation setting, anonymised feedback channels and exit interviews are useful tools in the arsenal of the modern people practitioner and line manager.

These and other communication vehicles are likely to be a more accurate barometer of the employee relations climate than considering the number of days lost due to industrial action, a number of grievances filed, or labour disputes declared. In this era of high employee mobility – even when taking into account the dramatic unemployment rate – staff appear to be more inclined to vote with their feet (or social media account) than filing a grievance or demanding that their trade union resolve the issue with the employer.

A successful post-pandemic business will also create opportunities for feedback and information from staff and stakeholders outside (or in addition to) the traditional upward communication channels. They will also find workplace-appropriate mechanisms to regularly test the employee relations climate, being nimble to adjust employee relations strategies to tailor to the fast-changing views of society as reflected in the workplace. A further imperative for employers of the modern workforce will be creating a purpose for employees by communicating an understanding of what the business is and the reason for its existence, then linking that to the function of the teams and individuals.

Employers that are able to correctly identify the right workforce mix when considering the various options available to them and then find ways of accommodating and communicating with their staff to create meaning and purpose for them are at a strategic advantage when it comes to attracting the right talent and managing an engaged workforce in the new world of work.

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