

THE NEW ESSENTIALS:

Working Lessons From a Year in the Pandemic

An Unprecedented Year in Review

The American workplace has been undergoing dramatic changes for years. Evolving employee values and enabling technologies continue to transform traditional views on how and why we work.

But 2020 was another story. The unfolding COVID-19 pandemic would shut down businesses and entire industries, demand a definition of essential workers, and send millions of Americans home to unfamiliar roles and uncertain futures.

It also created a valuable opportunity. The ongoing shift from “nice-to-have” to necessary is defining new essentials

for employees that might not have been on the table before. Some will have a profound and positive effect on American work life. The challenge for employers is to determine which of these changes are permanent and how to deliver on them.

In this study of employed Americans (people living in the U.S. employed full- or part-time), Ketchum has compiled extensive insights from both frontline and white-collar workers that reflect the perceptions, priorities, and attitudes emerging from a year in the pandemic. Employers who understand and address these values will be better positioned for the future.



Top Causes of Burnout Among Employed Americans (Numbers represent percentage of respondents)

Six Key Truths for Working Forward

The pandemic isn't over and America isn't "returning" to work — many people never stopped working, and many are working harder than ever. The big change is the evolving concept of the workplace itself, and how employees experience the company wherever they may be working from.

The New Essentials: Working Lessons from a Year in the Pandemic study shows that more than two-thirds (70%) of employed Americans say they are more likely to stay at their current jobs than they were before the pandemic. Yet the study also reveals dramatic shifts in what people want from their workplaces. While many employees may "shelter in job" for reasons of safety and security, the burden of working through a pandemic has added an element of stress.

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While many observers are looking for a New Normal to emerge from the pandemic, the better strategy is to concentrate on Working Forward. With flexibility cited as a workplace priority across the employment spectrum, the concept of "normal" remains a moving target. Employers who can engage a variety of workers in a more adaptive employee environment have a distinct advantage.

The New Essentials study identified **six key truths that employers need to know** to navigate the shifting landscape.




Embrace the Ongoing Change



Welcome to The Living Workplace



Vaccination Navigation



Elevate the Essential



Employees Are Influencers



Transparency Plus Empathy



Embrace the Ongoing Change

A year into the pandemic, employees have shifted their habits and attitudes. The goal isn't getting back to normal but understanding how these new priorities can strengthen employer communication, engagement and recruitment.

It's important to note that the pandemic wasn't the only challenge to the status quo; the political divisiveness of an election year and dramatic scenes of social and racial injustice have added to the growing desire for companies to reflect the values of their employees. Our survey revealed that 81% of workers consider employer values (supporting causes they believe in, doing the right thing) to be more important to them in the wake of COVID-19, ranking similarly to flexible hours (83%) and salary (80%). The growth of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) initiatives across the employment ecosystem reflect a trend that's not tied to the pandemic.

Pandemic responses and quarantine measures also demanded a definition of "essential" and/or frontline workers. Companies had to take a harder look at the workers who were the public face of their business and industry to address their needs differently and recognize their value in new ways. **In one of the study's silver linings, 57% of frontline workers now feel more appreciated at work by the public than they did at the start of the pandemic.**

Implications for Employers

Employers would be wise to understand that any "return to the office" message needs to acknowledge the frontline workers who never left.

By embracing the ongoing change, companies remind existing and potential employees that they are listening, reacting and committing to an improved employee experience.

(Numbers represent percentage of respondents)



66
of people now working from home want to continue doing so even after it is safe to go back to the workplace



28
of frontline workers would like to see hazard pay added to their job benefits



Welcome to The Living Workplace

The post-pandemic office is a work-in-process, but every indication points to increased flexibility and less-traditional priorities. Whether virtual or physical, people will seek more meaning from work, and a company culture that reflects their values.

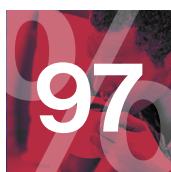
For employers, this means looking at a company through the lens of the employee experience; the interactions with coworkers, supervisors, customers, physical workspaces, and the brand itself that create the larger workplace culture. Not surprisingly, companies that create a more engaging employee experience enjoy better employee retention.

Our survey suggests that professional careers and personal lives have become more interconnected in the

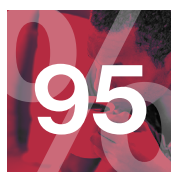
course of the pandemic year, and the quality of the employee experience needs to reflect that. In addition to the 43% of workers who would like to see flexible hours added to their job benefits (on par with wage increase, 45%), working parents, frontline workers, and remote workers bring their own priorities. **Parents of kids under 18 are more focused on health benefits for themselves and their families (54%) than workplace flexibility (50%).** 57% of parents with kids under 18 say they've been interrupted by their kids during teleconference calls. 43% of remote workers would return to the office full-time if it meant never getting on another video call. 29% of all workers would like a four-day work week.

Priorities vary across sectors:

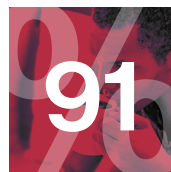
(Numbers represent percentage of respondents)



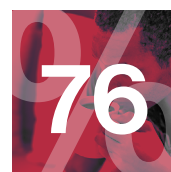
of restaurant industry employees say their health has become more important to them.



of retail industry employees say feeling safe at work has become more important to them.



of financial and professional services industry employees say flexible hours have become more important to them.



of tech industry employees say feeling intellectually challenged at work has become more important to them.

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Vaccination Navigation

The pandemic isn't over, and neither are difficult decisions. How many employees intend to get vaccinated? How do those numbers differ between frontline and non-frontline workers? Corporate policies, incentives and outreach will need to respond accordingly.

At the time this study was conducted, 19% of frontline workers said they had already been vaccinated. But despite one-third of employed Americans saying that mandatory vaccinations of all employees would make them feel safe going into work, about a quarter of all workers (26%) say the vaccine isn't a priority for them — they want to get vaccinated at some point, but they do not necessarily want to do so as soon as they are eligible. Or, they will only get vaccinated if their employer requires or incentivizes it.

Implications for Employers

The health and safety of employees is a priority in the best of times, and in the wake of a pandemic it will be crucial for businesses moving forward. Employers need to be fluent and up to date on ongoing safety protocols, provide knowledgeable information on local vaccination sites and policies, and consider the role of company incentives, health plans, and even mandates for securing workplace safety. With a quarter of employed Americans in our survey not currently inclined to get vaccinated, it's important that employers understand employee viewpoints on vaccination, and tailor policies and communications to reflect company concern for all its workers.

(Numbers represent percentage of respondents)



of employed Americans plan to get vaccinated as soon as they are eligible.



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Elevate the Essential

C OVID brought essential and frontline workers to prominence, elevating the importance and appreciation of their jobs. Similar assessments are taking place throughout the workforce as employees consider their own roles and value to a company. For their part, employers must now consider the new essentials emerging from their experience this past year.

The most pressing essentials involve workplace safety and employee burnout. Nearly half of employed Americans (47%) feel more burned out in their job now than at the beginning of the pandemic. This is even higher among those working remotely full-time due to the pandemic (56%). Half of remote workers now struggle more with work-life balance (49%). Two-thirds (66%) of people working from home say they'd like to keep doing so after it's safe to go back to the workplace, and one in 10 non-frontline employees (10%) say nothing could make them feel safe going back to work in person. Although most office workers would prefer to keep working from home, half of employees working remote full-time due to the pandemic

(49%) say they would return to the office full-time if it meant they never had to get on another video call.

Frontline workers (74%) are more likely than non-frontline workers (66%) to say that the pandemic has made having a sense of connection to their immediate coworkers more important to them. 51% of frontline workers say they've experienced a negative impact from the pandemic due to their income level. Interestingly, a majority (57%) of frontline essential workers now feel *more* appreciated at work by the public compared to the beginning of the pandemic.

Implications for Employers

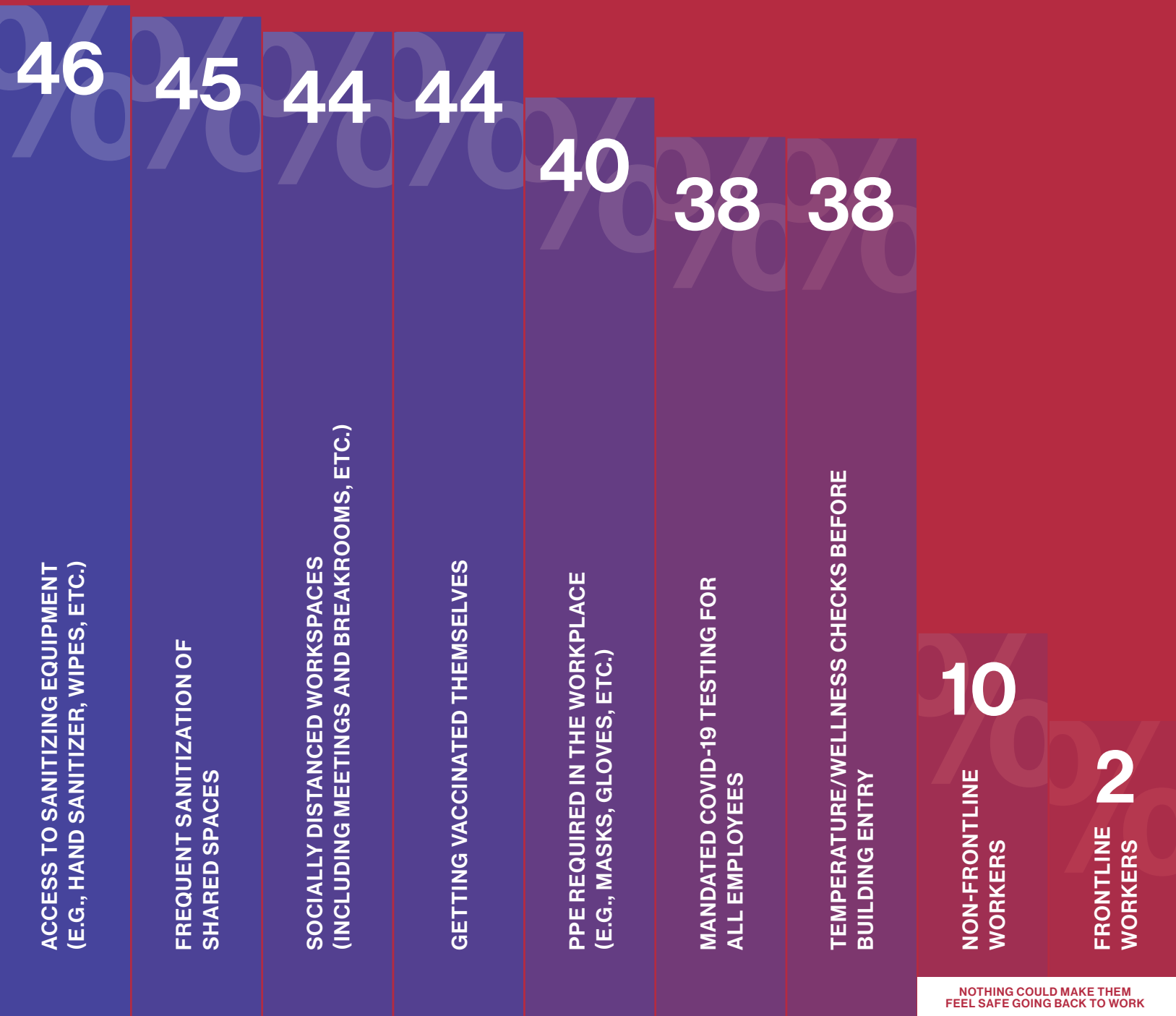
What benefits align with the new definition of essential? The financial, mental and physical strains of pandemic conditions have helped create a new list. Employers will need to decide which of these have been shaped by temporary events, and which should be part of a more permanent benefits package.

(Numbers represent percentage of respondents)

What Workers Want



What will it take for employees to **feel safe** at work again?



NOTHING COULD MAKE THEM FEEL SAFE GOING BACK TO WORK



Employees Are Influencers

As COVID-related uncertainty eases, people will begin to feel more comfortable switching jobs, and the war for talent will soon be coming back. The pandemic has shown the importance of loyalty and how companies either earn or lose it. Knowing what matters most to employees will guide successful recruitment and retention.

As companies continue to define their purpose, mission, vision and values, employees become key influencers in living those behaviors and amplifying the message. Given the setbacks, sacrifices and economic uncertainty of the pandemic, employers could still enhance their reputation through positive, proactive and direct communication with their workforce.

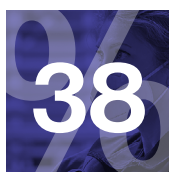
While 70% of employed Americans say they are less likely to leave their current job for another employer compared to before the pandemic, a reopening of the economy is likely to lessen the number of people “sheltering in job” and increase the competitiveness of the job market.

Implications for Employers

It’s critical for employers to maintain open channels of communication throughout the organization, to amplify recognition efforts, obtain ongoing feedback from all employee groups and take action swiftly to address it. Companies that can define their difference, react to change, and inspire their employees will enjoy a deeper dive in the talent pool.

Traits of influential colleagues:

(Numbers represent percentage of respondents)



best represent the company’s values.



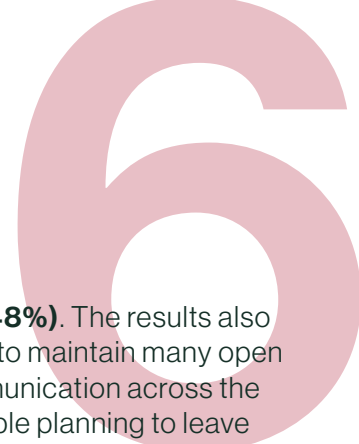
are in leadership positions.



are “just like me.”



(of parents with kids under 18) have a strong social media presence (vs. 19% of employed Americans overall).



Transparency Plus Empathy

The pandemic has tested the lines of communication, amplifying the need for clarity, consistency and digital channels. Employees' expectations will mean new standards for engagement and connectivity, increasing the need for managers to be effective communicators.

The good news is that most companies got it right. The majority (72%) of employed Americans say their company provided “just the right amount” of important updates and health and safety-related communications during the pandemic, while only 14% cite not enough information. 43% say they prefer to hear directly from their manager about important updates and health & safety-related topics, 29% from the CEO or equivalent, and 24% from Human Resources.

Email blasts are currently the most common form of communication (56%) followed by direct manager

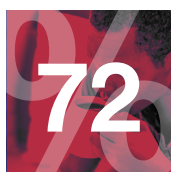
conversations (48%). The results also indicate the need to maintain many open channels of communication across the organization. People planning to leave their job often cite poor communication as a primary reason. The survey suggests managers play the most critical role, providing direct conversations on topics important to employees.

Our data revealed some other silver linings. Employed Americans say they feel more empathetic toward colleagues and they've become more resilient. And working parents feel supported by their managers and colleagues.

Implications for Employers

During this pandemic year, successful companies got creative with new ways to connect with employees. Leaders, guided by their internal communications teams, reset the bar on engaging employees this year. And as we move to what will likely be a hybrid model, employers will need to continue to raise the bar to maintain culture and cultivate community. Next generation leaders must be human, transparent and empathetic for their messages to resonate. As a result, employers can encourage their inspired, engaged and influential employees to leverage their social networks and shine a light on their companies as great places to work, as doing good in the communities where they operate and as thought leaders in their category.

(Numbers represent percentage of respondents)



of employed Americans say they've received just the right amount of important updates and health & safety-related communications from their company during the pandemic.



of frontline essential workers feel more empathetic toward their colleagues as a result of the pandemic.



of employed Americans say they have become more resilient because of the pandemic; even higher among frontline essential workers (68%).



of employed Americans feel more appreciated by their employers now compared to the beginning of the pandemic.

The takeaway: **It was a big year for lessons learned.**

Major change can happen fast, as the last 12 months have demonstrated. The unprecedented year will continue to influence who we are, how we work, and what we expect. By reviewing the New Essentials, companies can create a blueprint on Working Forward and engaging their most valuable stakeholders – their employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forever altered the relationship between employer and employee.

Priorities of the workforce have shifted significantly and permanently, shining a brighter spotlight on the need for companies to be more transparent in additional ways, drive culture, instill confidence, align on purpose and motivate employees.

Employers need to ask: **What are the new essential elements of a strong employee experience?** Now is the time to reimagine those.

It's not all bad news – the American employee has proven to be remarkably resilient and empathetic. Many feel more appreciated by the public and their own employers – giving companies a powerful base to build on.

As the saying goes, if you can't measure it you can't manage it. Tools and wide-ranging metrics exist today to better understand the employee's mindset, how to better reach them, their impact on the business and the effectiveness of internal communications.

Employees have been changed by the year's events. While they currently seek security, they also reject the status quo, leaving them open to new and improved employee experiences.

Communicate regularly, transparently and empathetically, and use internal influencers to help share key information and keep employees engaged.

This is internal comms' moment. Take advantage of this opportunity to help employees, innovate processes, demonstrate value and advance the company's strategic goals in a return to consistent business performance.

About the New Essentials Study

The New Essentials Study is based on the results of an online survey of 1,000 nationally representative full- or part-time employed Americans aged 18 or older. The survey was conducted by Ketchum Analytics and fielded from February 22 to March 1, 2021. The margin of error for the data at a 95% confidence level is +/- 3.1 percentage points.

Learn more at:
ketchum.com/covid-burnout-survey

About Ketchum Employee Engagement & Communications

Employees are your most important stakeholder. We work closely with our clients to help them understand, transform, grow and communicate with their workforce.

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- FRONTLINE COMMUNICATIONS
- COMPANY CULTURE THROUGH COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMMING
- EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE (EX)
- RETURN TO OFFICE / NEW WAYS OF WORKING

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