

Hybrid Work Model Likely to Be New Norm in 2021

But employees and employers disagree on how many days workers should be in the office

By Kathy Gurchiek
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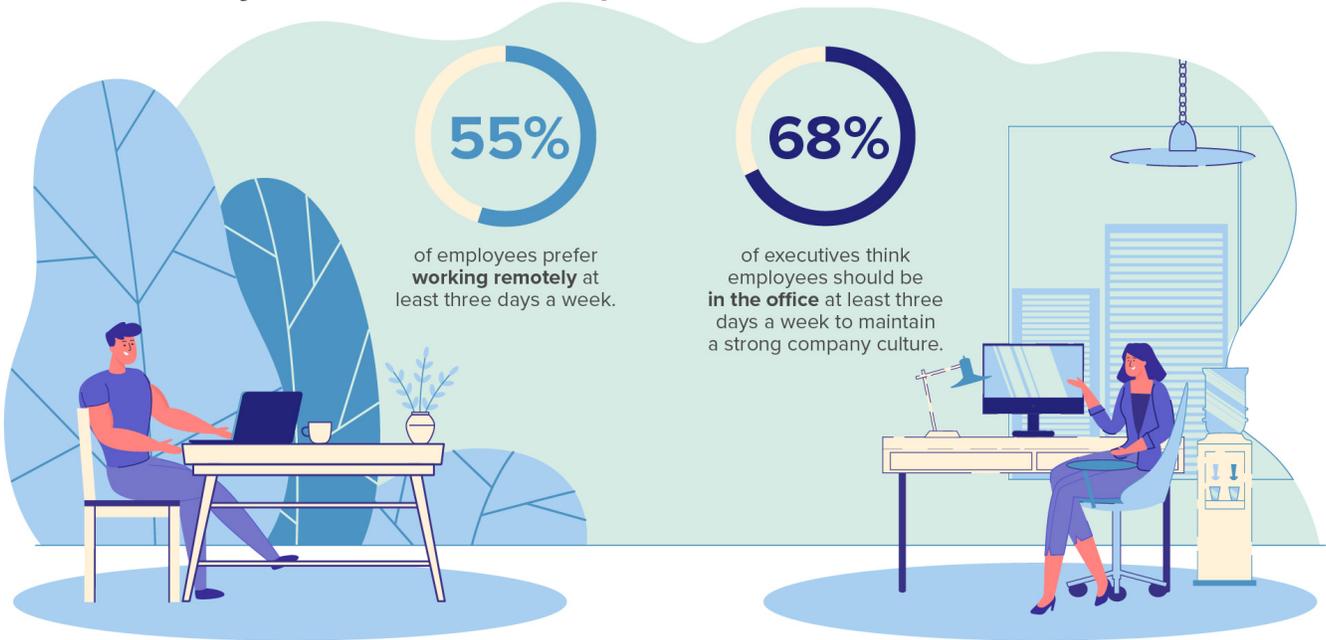
The days of physically reporting to an office every day of the workweek are not likely to resume once the COVID-19 pandemic is over. Knowledge workers have become accustomed to working remotely, and splitting time between the office and home is expected to become the new normal, according to a new PwC report, *It's Time to Reimagine Where and How Work Will Get Done* (https://www.pwc.com/us/remotework?WT.mc_id=CT10-PL102-DM2-TR1-LS3-ND30-PR4-CN_ViewpointHighlights-).

But there is a disconnect between U.S. executives and employees over how many days workers will be in the office when they do return, most likely during the second quarter of 2021.

More than half (55 percent) of 1,200 workers surveyed between Nov. 24 and Dec. 5 said they prefer working remotely three days a week. Meanwhile, 68 percent of 133 U.S. executives said workers should be in the office at least three days a week, citing concerns that company culture will not survive a purely remote work model. A survey Gartner conducted with 127 company leaders in 2020 found that only 30 percent of those leaders were concerned about maintaining corporate culture with a hybrid work model (<https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-07-14-gartner-survey-reveals-82-percent-of-company-leaders-plan-to-allow-employees-to-work-remotely-some-of-the-time>).

Feedback

Post-COVID-19: U.S. Employees, Execs Differ over Number of Days Workers Should Report to Office



Source: PwC U.S. remote work survey

But an organization's culture is not going to go away if people work remotely, noted Deniz Caglar, a partner at PwC and co-author of *Fit for Growth: A Guide to Strategic Cost Cutting, Restructuring, and Renewal* (Wiley, 2016).

"Your culture is not your office; it's what you do as an organization, how you work together. What you do does not change because you're working virtually," he said.

Some employers, though, fear their organization will be at a disadvantage if their employees continue working remotely while competitors bring their employees back to the office, Caglar said. They also worry their remote employees' engagement and loyalty will wane if those employees continue to work away from the office.

Bringing employees back was a higher post-COVID-19 priority for U.S. respondents than for their global counterparts in Canada, China, Germany and Japan, according to a 2021 report from The Conference Board, (<https://www.conference-board.org/pdfdownload.cfm?masterProductID=23597>) which surveyed 1,538 C-suite executives after the November elections. Among the U.S. executives, 22 percent said returning workers to the office was a priority. Only 5 percent of respondents from the other countries said the same.

Organizations should consider one critical question, the report said: "Is the culture you had, and perhaps want to preserve, the right culture for this new environment?"

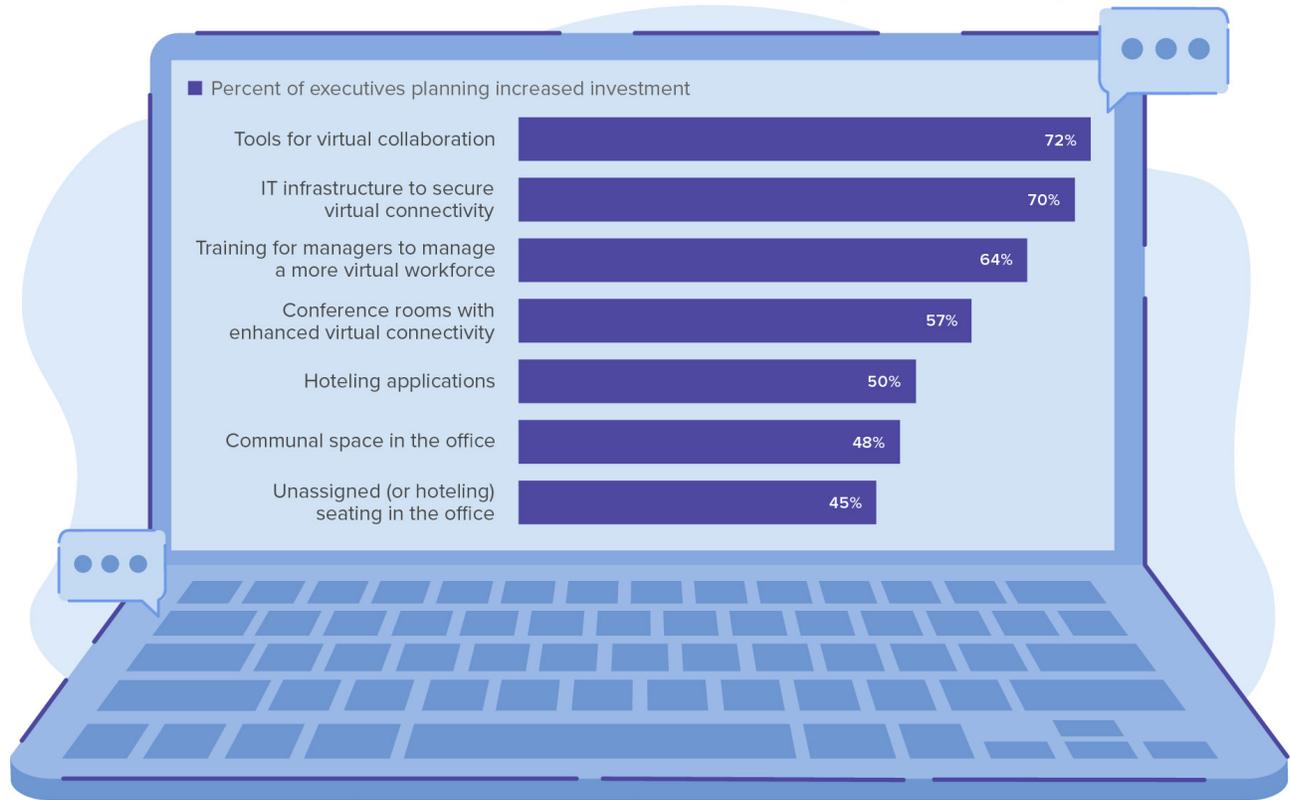
SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Return to Work (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/Return-to-Work.aspx)

Making the Hybrid Model Work

This new model can work, PwC said in its report, but it is "a complicated way to organize the workweek and is likely to transform a company's culture, employee engagement (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/technology/pages/employee-engagement-tech-key-post-pandemic-success.aspx), the way the work gets done and how office space is used."

U.S. Executives Plan New Investments to Support Hybrid Working



Source: PwC U.S. remote work survey

Feedback

Given the trends accelerated by the pandemic—the success of remote work on a large scale, the migration of workers to less expensive locales, the redesigning of office space to accommodate social distancing—executive leaders need to quickly articulate what working in the office is meant to accomplish.

"That clarity will enable them to reimagine how and where their work gets done, how much office space they need and how to support employees to be effective in any work environment," PwC said in its report.

Weigh the following factors to develop a successful hybrid model:

- **The nature of the employees' work and the specific jobs they perform.**

Some employees need to be physically present to receive mail or deal with sensitive information kept in the office. Meeting with clients, showcasing products and services, and collaborating on projects also are good reasons to be present; 87 percent of employees in PwC's survey said team collaboration and building relationships were the top reasons for being onsite. But employees who spend four to six hours by themselves at their desks—such as analysts poring over Excel sheets—can just as easily work elsewhere, Caglar pointed out.

- **Personality.**

"The reality is that some jobs just don't work remotely and some people don't work well remotely," said Cynthia Spraggs, author of *How to Work from Home and Actually Get SH*T Done* (Advantage Media Group, 2020). She also is chief executive officer of Virtira, an online company in Nova Scotia, Canada, that helps other businesses work virtually.

Spraggs noted the difference between employees who thrive while working from home and those who are happier commuting to a brick-and-mortar office. The latter derive strong social relationships from work and need the camaraderie of being in an office. There also are people for whom work is their life, she added, and who feel compelled to be in the office.

"These are the ones who pull down 80-hour weeks to move up the ladder. They stay glued to their boss and likely are the ones who just won't function well at home."

The best candidates for working remotely—regardless of whether they are introverts or extroverts—have "passions and interests outside of work. They work efficiently and are strong performers because they see work as a means to fund their life," Spraggs said.

- **Employee tenure or experience level.**

Consider whether an employee has been newly promoted and needs to be in the office to work closely with his or her supervisor. Also, is the employee someone new to the company who would benefit from being onsite? Pointing out that new employees will have little personal contact with departments and existing team members under this new model, the authors of The Conference Board report noted that "leaders will now need to ensure that all [employees] have a sense of belonging and that no group is more valued, supported or developed than another."

- **Age.**

Members of Generation Z—the oldest of whom were born in 1997—in general prefer being in the office, various surveys have shown. They are new to the professional work world, and their social life often is intertwined with work. A *Fortune*-SurveyMonkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/fortune-poll-walmart-ecommerce>) poll of 2,802 adults conducted July 17-21 found that members of this generation are more likely to report that their productivity has dropped since working from home (<https://fortune.com/2020/08/01/gen-z-is-struggling-to-be-productive-working-from-home/>).

- **Timing.**

Seventy-five percent of executives anticipate that at least half of their office employees will return by July. Sixty-one percent of employees expect to spend half their time in the office by then. How soon offices open up likely will depend on the rollout of vaccines; firms may move quickly to bring workers back to the office as vaccines become available or slowly if vaccinations are not administered as soon as expected. Employees working at home with school-age children also may want a slower return to the office.

"Take real stock [of] what your employees are asking (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/remote-workers-not-comfortable-returning-to-office.aspx)," Caglar advised employers, "and how you can [accommodate them] without hurting your businesses' performance." Recognize that some people don't need to be in the office.

"Can you provide that flexibility?" he asked. "It can be a strategic tool for recruitment and retention. You may lose some talent if you're not keeping up with the times."

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