worktango

2021 WORKPLACE REPORT

The Year of the Employee Experience

worktango

What happens when a global pandemic and sweeping social change destabilize life and the workplace for humans worldwide?
In 2020, nearly every person on the planet experienced a complete disruption of our lives due to the coronavirus, social change, and more. Now, employers and employees are tasked with navigating a new normal nobody foresaw.

With the year drawing to a close, we took stock of 2020's biggest takeaways for the workplace - and a data-driven look at what comes next.

[1]Gallup, "Untapped Human Capital is the Next Global Resource."
https://ww.gallup.com/workplace/231764/untapped-human-capital-next-great-global-resource.aspx

"Untapped human capital is the next great global resource."[1]

– STEVE CRABTREE, Gallup

The greatest workplace challenges of 2020

worktango

At the end of 2020, we surveyed more than 600 HR leaders across the globe for an inside look at the challenges they faced this year – and how those challenges are shaping their outlook for 2021.

Respondents identified the following areas as their biggest challenges in 2020:

- **65%** – EMPLOYEE MORALE

- **58%** – MAINTAINING COMPANY CULTURE AND CONNECTION

- **33%** – TRUST BETWEEN MANAGERS AND TEAMS

- **27%** – PRODUCTIVITY AND ALIGNMENT

2020's challenges: Digging deeper

How did we get here? What has led to these shifts in employee morale, company culture, trust, and productivity?

It's easy to point to the coronavirus pandemic as the big disruptor in 2020. But that doesn't tell the whole story.

The workplace also experienced these major changes in 2020:

- **42%** experienced a reduction in their workforce due to the coronavirus pandemic

- **89%** had some or all of their employees shift to remote work

- **41%** experienced increased dialogue around social issues such as racial inequity, the U.S. presidential election, etc.

- **40%** implemented official discussions or trainings on diversity, equity & inclusion

Primary Contributing Factors:

- Calls for more diversity, equity & inclusion in the workplace

- Political polarization

- Shift to remote work

- Workforce reduction

Top priorities for 2021

As workplace leaders recover and start to look ahead from 2020, the name of the game is rebuilding. Our survey respondents' key initiatives for 2021 range from restoring headcount after layoffs to reviving company culture strained by virtual work.

As we analyzed the results, we found that the things you've been dealing with over the past nine months aren't going away. In fact, they are now more important than ever.

The overarching trend? It's all about organizational resilience.

Focus areas for next year:

- **58%** – BOOSTING EMPLOYEE MORALE

- **48%** – REBUILDING COMPANY CULTURE & CONNECTION

- **42%** – IMPROVING PRODUCTIVITY & ALIGNMENT

- **41%** – BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MANAGERS & TEAMS

Your 2021 action plan

Ready to build organizational resilience for a company that can thrive through anything? We'll walk you through the key challenges, explain their importance, and provide clear steps.

Priority 1
Boost employee morale by mitigating employee burnout and enhancing employee experience

Priority 2
Rebuild company culture and connection with action-oriented diversity, equity & inclusion efforts and a calculated hybrid remote work model

Priority 3
Improve productivity and alignment by using meaningful data and taking a strategic approach to goal-setting

Priority 4
Build individual and organizational resilience by fostering relationships between managers and employees

Priority 1: Build employee morale

Why does morale matter?

It's not just about feeling good. Morale is the unsung hero of workplace metrics, playing a critical role in employee engagement – which feeds directly into productivity and retention.

How can you build morale?

Morale is all about your employees' emotional connection to their job. And luckily, it's in your power to make it great. We'll focus on two key action areas: mitigating burnout and enhancing your employee experience.

worktango

Building employee morale: Mitigate employee burnout

A 2020 survey revealed that 69%[2] of employees experienced burnout symptoms while working from home during the pandemic - an alarming majority.

How big a deal is burnout? You should consider preventing burnout to be mission critical. Burnout significantly diminishes your ability to maintain employee morale, productivity and retention. In fact, 80% of employees say that if necessary, they would leave their current organization for one that focused more on mental health.[3]

On a positive note, mental health conversations in the workplace are on the rise - 96% of respondents stated they were encouraged to discuss mental health issues at work.

[2] CNBC, "Remote Work Burnout is Growing as Pandemic Stretches On."

https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/28/remote-work-burnout-is-growing-as-coronavirus-pandemic-stretches-on.html

[3] HR Executive, "Number of the Day: Mental Health Retention Risks."

https://hrexecutive.com/hres-number-of-the-day-mental-health-retention-risks/

Specific contributing factors to burnout in 2020:

- An uncertain, chaotic work environment

- The absence of work-life separation for remote workers

- Higher levels of social isolation

- Fear of being a victim of the next layoff

How to mitigate burnout in 2021

Make Sync-Ups more frequent and more personal.
To combat feelings of isolation, build connection by increasing the frequency of Sync-Ups between employees and managers or coworkers.

We'll note that these conversations should already be part of your company's performance management process–or as we like to call it, "employee success" process– which positions them perfectly for a pivot to the more personal. Because in some cases, these Sync-Ups may suddenly be the only social interaction your employees have all week.

Encourage managers to use them for the same performance-motivating status checks and feedback they always have. But also, take the time to check in on their reports' frustrations, needs, and state of mind.

Don't overload the calendar.
In the largely uncharted world of remote work, it can be easy to overcorrect and load the day with meetings. Interaction is healthy. A wall of meetings - especially virtual ones - is a recipe for feelings of overwhelming and disengagement. Try setting aside dedicated blocks of "meeting-free" time for your team each week to encourage people to be intentional, and set the meetings that count.

Prepare a mental health crisis response plan.
Don't wait until you need it next. Work with an external specialist, or encourage an internal HR leader to get certified in Psychological First Aid through the Red Cross.

Building employee morale: Enhance your employee experience

According to LinkedIn's 2020 Global Talent Trends report, 94%[4] of talent professionals agree that employee experience is one of the most critical elements to the future of recruiting and HR.

HR thought leader Jacob Morgan defines employee experience as "creating an organization where employees want, not need to show up to work." Think of the employee experience as 40% culture, 30% technology, and 30% physical space.

Many organizational leaders find themselves throwing money at technology and physical space, because they're concrete and easier to act on. But this strategy neglects the people, and therefore isn't sustainable in the long term.

[4] Access Perks, "2020 Employee Loyalty and Engagement Statistics."

https://blog.accessperks.com/2020-employee-engagement-loyalty-statistics

> "Employee-obsessed is the new customer-obsessed."
>
> - BRAD RENCHER, BambooHR CEO

worktango

How to enhance your employee experience in 2021

Drive a culture of recognition.
81% of employees say they feel motivated to work harder when their boss shows appreciation. But is it really that simple? It actually is! Say thank you often. Say thank you directly and clearly. Say thank you publicly, say thank you privately. Make recognition a core part of your culture to create connection and drive productivity.

Ask your employees what's missing.
Employee experience moves from negative to positive when connection, meaningful impact, appreciation, and growth are present at the same time. Where can you improve? It's simple to find out with short and sweet workplace surveys. This helps you not just address your employees' needs, but also demonstrates that you value their voice.

Let technology do the heavy lifting.
Employee Experience Platforms streamline and centralize the administration of goals, feedback, and recognition. This lets you, managers, and leadership spend time on the people that drive your company, not the processes driving them.

Priority 2: Rebuild culture and connection

Why are culture and connection important?

Culture may seem like a secondary - some say "fluffy" - measurement of a company's success. But when our biggest resource is our people, and most employees value culture even more than their salary,[5] getting it right is more than fluff: Itís critical to your core success.

How do you rebuild culture and connection?

Those of us who shifted to full- or hybrid-remote work as a result of the coronavirus pandemic struggled with the same slate of issues this year. From Zoom fatigue to a sense of disconnect, the resounding question for these companies became: How can we feel connected when we aren't together?

And regardless of whether you were in-office or not in 2020, your culture was likely rocked by pandemic-related anxiety, social issues, and a tense U.S. presidential election. We'll focus on restoring your culture and connection via two action areas: DE&I and the remote-hybrid work model.

[5] CNBC, "Workers value a strong company culture over higher pay, study claims."
https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/11/workers-value-a-strong-company-culture-over-higher-pay-study-claims.html

worktango
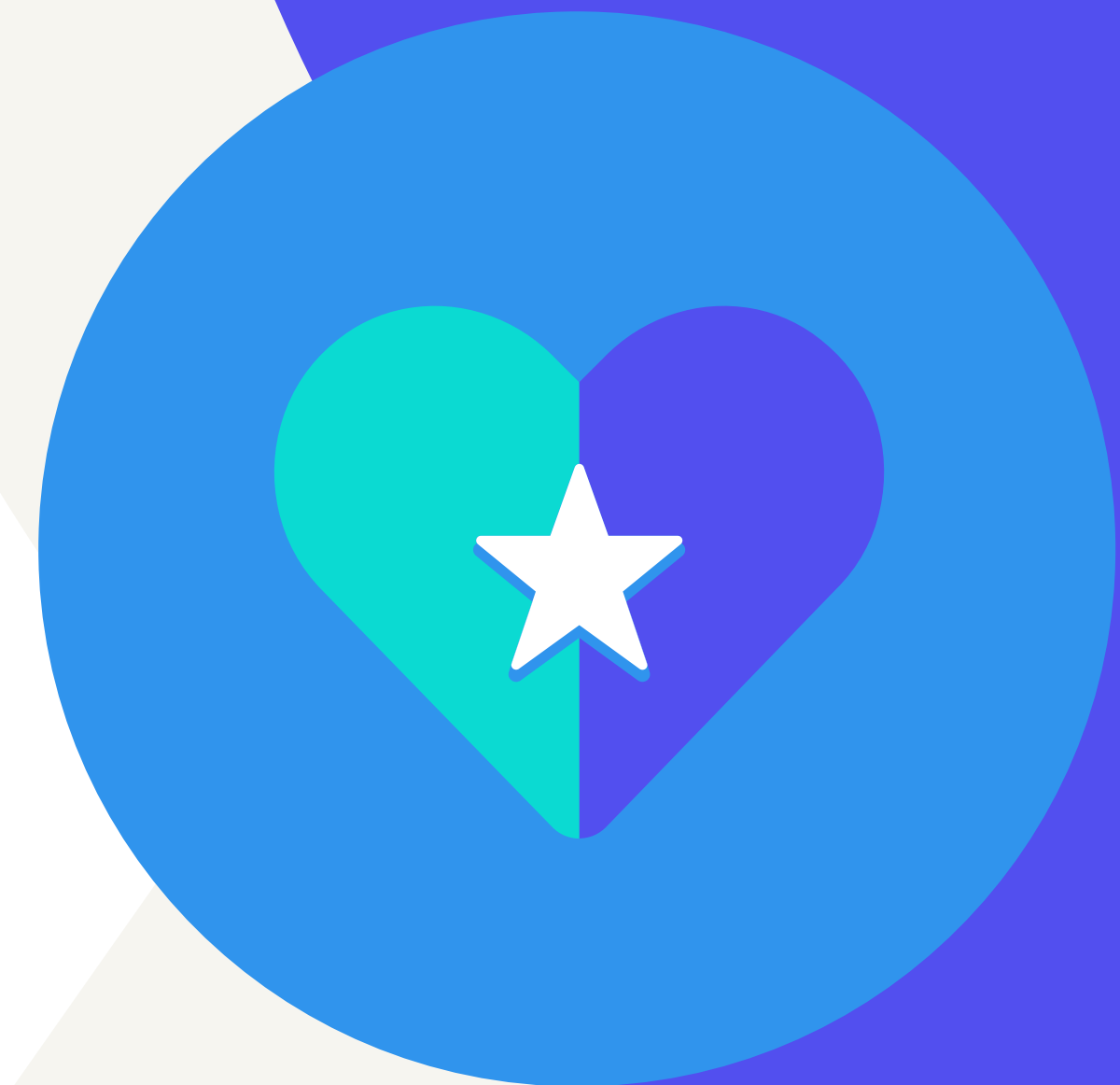
Rebuilding culture: Take action on DE&I, stat

No longer relegated to a short section in the employee handbook, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) is now front and center. And it's here to stay.

Today's employees expect their organizations to take a stance on social injustices, and to communicate a clear point of view. Staying neutral or silent on topics such as racism, gender inequity, and unconscious bias is no longer an option.

And while words certainly matter, the future workforce has its eyes not only on what organizations are saying about DE&I, but what they're doing.

"To everyone fighting to fix our broken nation: Do not stop."

- ALEXIS OHANIAN, Reddit CEO, after resigning from his board position in order to fill it instead with a Black board member

How to take action on DE&I in 2021

First, do no harm.

When it comes to inclusion, intent doesn't matter – impact does. Foster a more inclusive workplace by educating employees – and yourself – about the impact of phrases such as, "I'm not racist; I have Black friends," "I don't see color," and other psychologically harmful statements.

Now, make a plan.

Organizations that truly promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in the long term consistently:

- Empower employees to recognize and respond to bias

- Train hiring managers to mitigate bias

- Make decisions collectively

- Report hiring, promotion, and retention data publicly

- Source candidates widely

worktango

Rebuilding culture: Get a handle on the hybrid-remote workplace

worktango

Remote work - love it or hate it, is here to stay for most industries in some form or fashion. In fact, nearly 50% of our 2020 Workplace Survey respondents reported they'll be implementing a hybrid-remote schedule next year.

Though we may give an uncomfortable side-eye to the unknown, there are loads of advantages to the hybrid remote model. Chief among them? Flexibility for employees to decide when, where, and how they want to get their work done.

As this significantly boosts[6] morale, motivation, and engagement, it's an advantage for your company, too.

Return-to-office model post-pandemic

- **43%** – PARTLY REMOTE WORKFORCE/FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING

- **27%** – WE'RE STILL FIGURING IT OUT

- **21%** – FULL RETURN TO OFFICE

- **5%** – OTHER

- **4%** – FULLY REMOTE WORKFORCE

[6] Buffer, "The 2020 State of Remote Work."
https://lp.buffer.com/state-of-remote-work-2020

How to approach hybrid-remote work in 2021

Implement regular remote work pulse surveys.

After implementing a change this big, it's critical to listen to employees often and thoroughly. People who were eager to get back to the office at the beginning of the pandemic may feel differently after adjusting to work from home - and vice versa. Remember, meeting the human needs of your people is key to your organization's success. Don't just guess! Ask!

Ensure communication channels and workflows are set up for both in-office employees as well as remote ones.

A decade or so ago, it would have been challenging to include a remote employee in day-to-day moments that matter, such as a quick birthday celebration, a spontaneous team huddle, or a pat on the back for a job well done. Thankfully, with technologies such as Slack, Zoom, and WorkTango, it's easy to stay connected - no matter where you are.

Priority 3: Improve productivity and alignment

Why are productivity and alignment important?

This one's simple, so we'll keep it short and sweet. No matter where your people are working or what your situation is, the survival of your organization depends on hitting key targets.

When your people aren't aligned (or when you're not sure what they're doing), the future gets frightening, fast.

How to improve productivity and alignment.

A resounding question for managers and leaders during the pandemic was, "How do I know what people are working on, and how do I know we're focusing on the right thing"

Good communication is key – and if that sounds challenging, don't worry. You've got some great tools in your belt. We'll walk you through two of them: using data and goal setting."

Improving productivity and alignment: Use meaningful data

worktango

With the average HR department using 22 different tools for administration and people management, there's no question that we have a wealth of data at our fingertips. And if we want to make informed strategic decisions that reduce bias, we should be using it.

So, why does data matter? And how does it make our organizations more resilient?

Thriving companies use data to:

- Track trends to see what's driving top performers

- Reduce bias in compensation and growth opportunities

- Identify business units with decreased productivity, retention, or satisfaction

In 2020, companies used data to drive decisions about:

- **67%** – PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

- **51%** – COMPENSATION

- **37%** – OVERALL EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

Source: WORKTANGO'S 2020 WORKPLACE SURVEY

How to use meaningful data in 2021

Start by figuring out your end purpose.
With so much data available, it's no wonder a great deal of it never gets used. Clarify your intention to set yourself up for success: Start by deciding what you want from your data. This helps you interpret what's useful, filter out what's not, and apply your learnings for success.

Invest in a data visualization tool.
According to Employee Cycle CEO Bruce Marable, **91% of HR leaders are still using spreadsheets to track their HR data.** If this is you, no shame – but it's time to step up your game. Why? On one hand, entering the data and crunching the numbers takes valuable time and resources.

And unless your HR team is packed with data scientists, it's hard to draw insightful conclusions that can strategically drive your company to success. Do yourself a favor by investing in a solution that leaves insights right in your inbox. That way, you can do what's most important - use it to take action.

Improving productivity and alignment: Goal setting

Studies show that a whopping **93% of employees can't tie their actions to larger organizational goals.** Yikes.

Add that to the world of work we saw in 2020 (remote or hybrid, with record levels of stress and an uncertain economy), and it's no wonder productivity and alignment were a major concern for our survey respondents.

Want to make sure your teams are working toward a shared purpose – and the right one? Goals are your ticket to success. Why? Goals give us a framework for both quantifying our work and tying it to deadlines. They also help us define our progress for those around us, helping us to track our success and stay aligned with our teams.

worktango

How to set goals that align – and work – in 2021

Incentivize goal-setting.
If setting goals isn't already a part of your team's process, it's time to shift gears. Create a culture in which goals are top-of-mind by incentivizing simple but key tasks such as setting goals, seeking feedback on goals, and updating and completing goals. Incentives can be anything from reward points in your company's recognition program to shout-outs from leadership. The most important thing is to get that ball rolling, and keep it going.

Align your objectives.
Want to make sure everyone is working on the same page? Start from the top down. First, have company leadership set high-level objectives for the quarter and year. Then, leaders on each team should assess those objectives and identify how their team can contribute. This generates team-level goals. Then, repeat the process for individuals. This ensures that everyone in the organization is working toward the same larger goals.

Make goals part of the culture.
Set aside time in your regular manager-employee 1:1 Sync-Up conversations and feedback to discuss the employee's goals. These conversations should be happening weekly, which helps keep goaling top of mind

Priority 4: Build individual & organizational resilience

What is resilience? Why does it matter?

Resilience isn't a personality trait. It's a learned skill - which means anyone can develop it. Which is good, because a big takeaway from 2020 is that stressful circumstances can come in at any time, and without warning. To succeed in the long term, people, teams, and companies must learn to be flexible and adaptable, able to find new and better ways to function and thrive.

As leaders, we can help our teams build resilience by facing the reality of inevitable challenges that come our way, then modeling constructive ways to respond.

worktango

"Resilience is less about bouncing back, and more aligned with how we extrapolate the lessons from our loss to reimagine, reclaim and reinvent our life in new ways."

- BRITTANY COLE, Career Thrivers

How to build individual & organizational resilience in 2021

Start each meeting with a two-word emotional status update
Thank thought leader Brené Brown for this simple, yet powerful, resilience-building tactic. Especially beneficial in video meetings, when nonverbals are much harder to read, urge team members to open up by naming 1-3 emotions they're feeling in that moment. Doing so doesn't take much time, and prevents your team from responding with "I'm fine," when they're really not.

Integrate debriefing sessions into your workflows.
As Brittany Cole, author and CEO of Career Thrivers, said at BambooHR's 2020 Virtual HR Summit: "In order to build resilience for our futures, we must learn from our pasts." The best way to practice this concept as a team is to reflect on changes, problems, and other challenging situations, and allow time to process relevant learnings. As a leader, it's important that you provide the space for this to take place, and facilitate a discussion where each participant feels safe to voice their insights.

Next steps

The process of improving employee experience, and becoming more resilient, makes us better leaders, better colleagues, and better humans.

We'd love to talk.

At WorkTango, we're revolutionizing how the world's most forward-thinking companies engage and inspire their people. We offer the only Employee Experience Platform that enables meaningful recognition and rewards, offers actionable insights through employee surveys, and supports alignment through goal setting and feedback.

WorkTango is built for the workplace we all want to be a part of – where priorities become clear, achievements are celebrated, and employees have a voice. So if you're ready to make work lives better, check out this short WorkTango overview video, or schedule a demo today.

Interested in how WorkTango can help you...

- Mitigate employee burnout?

- Boost employee experience?

- Promote diversity, equity and inclusion in your workplace?

- Make working with HR data easy and impactful?

- Keep your team aligned, whether working from the office or at home?

- Become a more emotionally resilient workforce?

worktango