

Work & Life: Work's Future, by the Numbers

--- September is ushering in a weird season, as the question of where we do our jobs remains in limbo

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FULL TEXT

This month was supposed to mark the triumphant return to the office, to non-wobbly child care and a postwork happy hour or two.

Instead, September is ushering in a weird season. In-person school is precarious, Covid-19 cases remain elevated, and the question of where we work remains in limbo. Many employees are nervous or burned out or just feeling restlessness in their careers.

It isn't the moment many of us hoped for, yet it feels like a pivotal one. To understand where we are and what's coming, let's look at the data.

The numbers say attitudes around vaccine mandates are changing. Frustrations with work, and the urge to throw it all away for something new, are accelerating. The gap between what employees want their work lives to look like, and what bosses think we'll eventually snap back to, persists. And parents, especially mothers, are staring down another strange school year and struggling.

Here's where 18 months of change has landed us.

'I quit'

People are on the move -- or want to be. Nearly two-thirds of workers are looking for a new job, according to an August survey of 1,007 Americans by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP. That's up from about one-third of workers polled in May. Job seekers say they're motivated by the promise of more money, benefits and chances to climb the ladder.

Bosses feel the pressure. The overwhelming majority -- 88% -- said they're seeing higher turnover than normal, according to an August PwC survey of 752 executives.

Meanwhile, polls show employee engagement ticking down and workers willing to walk if they're called back to the office. Search firm Korn Ferry recently asked 378 professionals what they'd do if their employers mandated in-person work, even just a few days a week. Twenty-one percent said they'd refuse to go back, and 17% said they'd quit.

Changing calendars

Those employees may have more time before they need to bust out their remote-work ultimatums. Four in 10 corporate leaders polled by employment law firm Littler Mendelson P.C. said last month that they were delaying plans to bring more employees back, in an effort to keep staff safe amid the Delta variant of Covid-19. In recent weeks, companies such as Apple Inc., Chevron Corp. and Wells Fargo & Co. have pushed back their dates.

The delays also reflect an increase in employee concerns. Some 42% of 2,482 people polled by the Conference Board last month said they worried about the possibility of catching the virus while returning to the office. That's up from 24% with such concerns in a June survey by the organization.

It's a moment of jitters, and limbo. Some employees have watched multiple return-to-work dates sail by. Yet they're still typing away from their kitchen tables. Sure, many are eager to stay home. But others are craving their old office lives, or at least a firm plan about what comes next.

A stance on shots

Getting to the next phase could require rolling up your sleeve. Even before President Biden's plan requiring large employers to mandate that their workers get vaccinations or weekly Covid-19 tests, more companies were moving toward such mandates. About a fifth of 961 employers surveyed by Willis Towers Watson from Aug. 18-25 said they had some sort of vaccination requirement, whether it be to access an indoor cafeteria or stay employed. By the end of the year, a total of 52% could have such a rule, the survey found.

More employers are considering tracking who's been vaccinated – 59% do so now, 19% are planning to or considering it. And of those who require vaccinations, more companies are asking for proof.

What does the public think? In a September poll from CivicScience, 56% of 2,282 people surveyed agreed that proof of vaccination should be required to go to work, compared with 27% who disagreed. Some employees are losing patience with unvaccinated colleagues, increasingly supporting measures like restricting them from in-person work and business travel, according to spring and summer polls from Eagle Hill Consulting.

The weight on working mothers

What has happened to moms during the pandemic? They haven't left the labor force in droves, says Misty Heggeness, a Census Bureau economist whose new paper analyzes mothers of school-aged children. The share of those women in the labor market dropped to 71% in May 2020 from 74% in 2019, then climbed back to 72.4% this July.

"I think it's amazing that more mothers didn't peel off," she says.

Still, moms were 26.4% more likely to leave the labor force than dads of school-aged children and 15.8% more likely to leave than women living without dependent children. Those who stayed employed struggled, too. Many mothers veered into burnout, took stretches of leave and suffered setbacks in their careers.

With parents stumbling into a school year of exposure risk and quarantines, there's a chance that more women exit. And the ones who already have?

"It gets less and less likely that they're going to ever return," she says.

The future is hybrid

Good news: Employers are getting more comfortable with the idea of you working from home indefinitely. Bad news: They still want you in the office more than you'd like.

Since the start of the year, employers have boosted the number of days they plan to let employees work from home post-Covid by 18%, to an average of 1.23 days a week from 1.05 days a week. That's according to research from Nicholas Bloom, an economist at Stanford University, Jose Maria Barrero, an assistant professor of finance at Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, and Steven J. Davis, an economist at the University of Chicago.

Workers, on the other hand, want to telecommute 2.29 days a week, or 86% more than their bosses envision, the economists found.

Most people want a mix, but the purists overwhelmingly prefer home. The Conference Board survey found that 4% of workers want to work exclusively in the office, while 20% want to work remotely full time.

Credit: By Rachel Feintzeig

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