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What employees are saying about the future of remote work

Employees want more certainty about postpandemic working arrangements—even if you don't yet know what to tell them.

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As organizations look to the postpandemic future, many are planning a hybrid virtual model that combines remote work with time in the office. This sensible decision follows solid productivity increases during the pandemic.

But while productivity may have gone up, many employees report feeling anxious and burned out. Unless leaders address the sources of employee anxiety, pandemic-style productivity gains may prove unsustainable in the future.[1] That's because anxiety is known to reduce job satisfaction, negatively affect interpersonal relationships with colleagues, and decrease work performance.

Our survey results make the source of anxiety clear: employees feel they've yet to hear enough about their employers' plans for post-COVID-19 working arrangements. Organizations may have announced a general intent to embrace hybrid virtual work going forward, but too few of them, employees say, have shared detailed guidelines, policies, expectations, and approaches. And the lack of remote-relevant specifics is leaving employees anxious.

As organizational leaders chart the path toward the postpandemic world, they need to communicate more frequently with their employees—even if their plans have yet to solidify fully. Organizations that *have* articulated more specific policies and approaches for the future workplace have seen employee well-being and productivity rise.

The following charts examine our survey findings and shed light on what employees want from the future of work.

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[1] Besides anxiety and burnout, longer-term productivity in a hybrid virtual model will also require addressing the organizational norms that help create a common culture, generate social cohesion, and build shared trust. See Andrea Alexander, Aaron De Smet, and Mihir Mysore, "Reimagining the postpandemic workforce," *McKinsey Quarterly*, July 7, 2020.

Feeling included

Even high-level communication about post-COVID-19 working arrangements boosts employee well-being and productivity (Exhibit 1). But organizations that convey more detailed, remote-relevant policies and approaches see greater increases. Employees who feel included in more detailed communication are nearly five times more likely to report increased productivity. Because communicating about the future can drive performance outcomes today, leaders should consider increasing the frequency of their employee updates—both to share what's already decided and to communicate what is still uncertain.

Exhibit 1

Organizations with clearer communication are seeing benefits to employee well-being and productivity.

Importance of communicating vision and policies on productivity, support, and inclusion, impact multiples
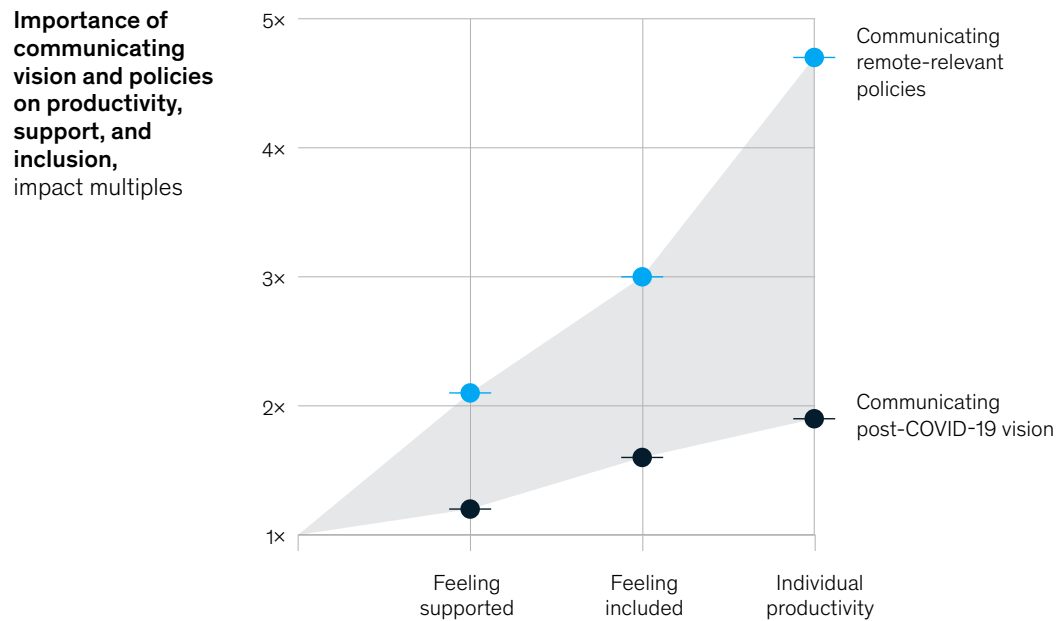
Note: All analyses conducted while controlling for all other predictors, region, industry, company size, job level, age, gender, and parental status (n = 4,854–5,043).
Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)

Communication breakdown

Valuable as a detailed vision for postpandemic work might be to employees, 40 percent of them say they've yet to hear about *any* vision from their organizations, and another 28 percent say that what they've heard remains vague (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2

Most organizations have not clearly communicated a vision for postpandemic work.

Employees that report their organization has communicated a post-pandemic vision,
% survey participants
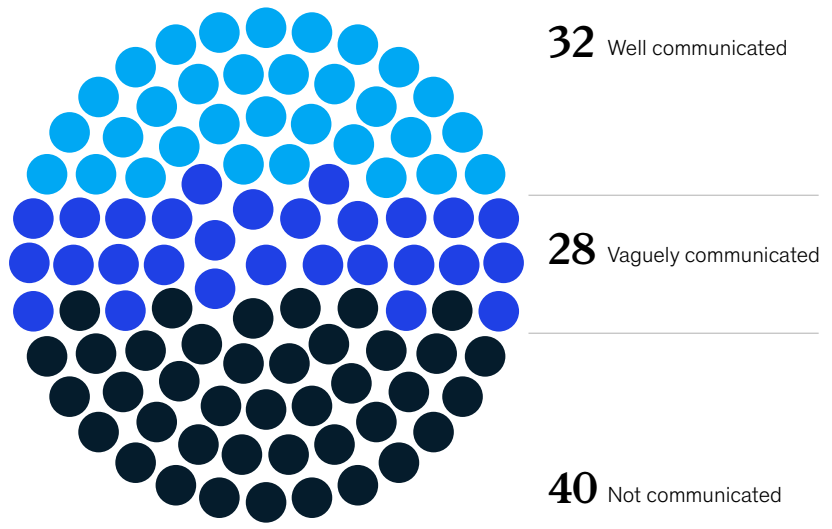
32 Well communicated

28 Vaguely communicated

40 Not communicated

Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)

Anxiety at work

At organizations that are communicating vaguely, or not at all, about the future of postpandemic work, nearly half of employees say it's causing them concern or anxiety (Exhibit 3). Anxiety is known to decrease work performance, reduce job satisfaction, and negatively affect interpersonal relationships with colleagues, among other ills. For the global economy, the loss of productivity because of poor mental health—including anxiety—might be as high as $1 trillion per year.

Exhibit 3

Individuals who are not being communicated to are feeling anxious about the future.

The lack of clear vision or plan for postpandemic work is causing me concern or anxiety,
% survey participants

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
6	12	35	38	9

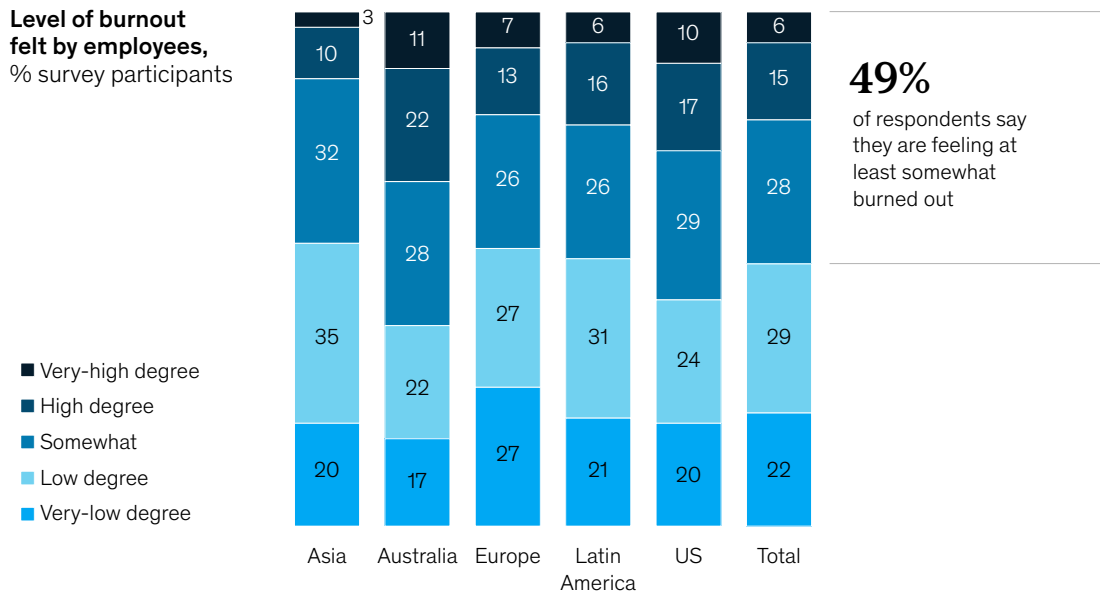**47%** feel a lack of clear vision about the post-pandemic world is a cause for concern

Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)

Burning out

The lack of clear communication about the future of postpandemic work also contributes to employee burnout. Nearly half of employees surveyed say they're feeling some symptoms of being burned out at work (Exhibit 4). That may be an underestimate, since employees experiencing burnout are less likely to respond to survey requests, and the most burned-out individuals may have already left the workforce—as have many women, who've been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

Exhibit 4

Almost half of all employees report being at least somewhat burned out–and that's likely an underrepresentation of the real number.

Level of burnout felt by employees, % survey participants

	Asia	Australia	Europe	Latin America	US	Total
Very-high degree	3	11	7	6	10	6
High degree	10	22	13	16	17	15
Somewhat	32	28	26	26	29	28
Low degree	35	22	27	31	24	29
Very-low degree	20	17	27	21	20	22

■ Very-high degree
■ High degree
■ Somewhat
■ Low degree
■ Very-low degree

49%
of respondents say they are feeling at least somewhat burned out

Note: Burnout is likely underrepresented by our sample of full-time employees, as employees experiencing burnout are less likely to respond to survey requests, and those who feel most burned out may have already left the workforce.
Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)

Share more

Burnout is especially pronounced for people feeling anxious due to a lack of organizational communication (Exhibit 5). These employees were almost three times more likely to report feeling burned out. The obvious recommendation for organizational leaders: share more with employees, even if you're uncertain about the future, to help improve employee well-being now.

Exhibit 5

Individuals who are feeling anxious due to a lack of organizational communication about the future are more likely to feel burned out.

Lack of clear vision as a factor in causing anxiety, multiples

Baseline

2.9×
more likely to result in moderate to high levels of burnout
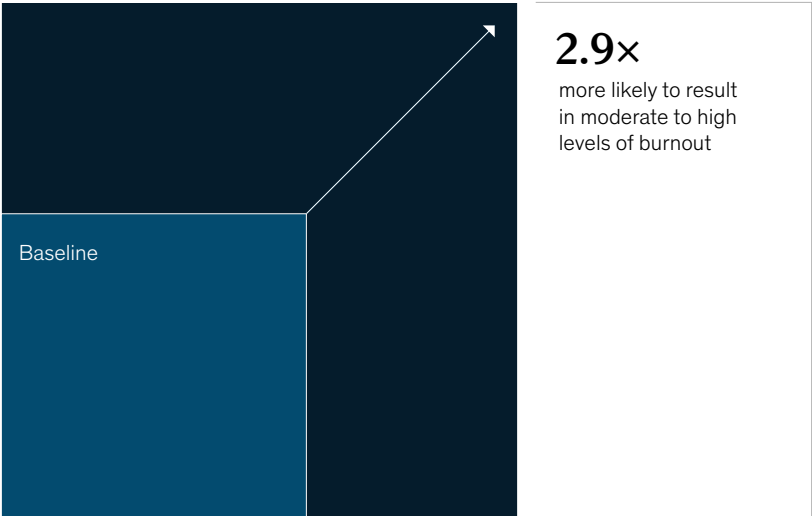
Note: n = 4,854–5,043. All analyses conducted while controlling for feelings of support and inclusion, policy communication, region, industry, company size, job level, age, gender, and parental status.
Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)
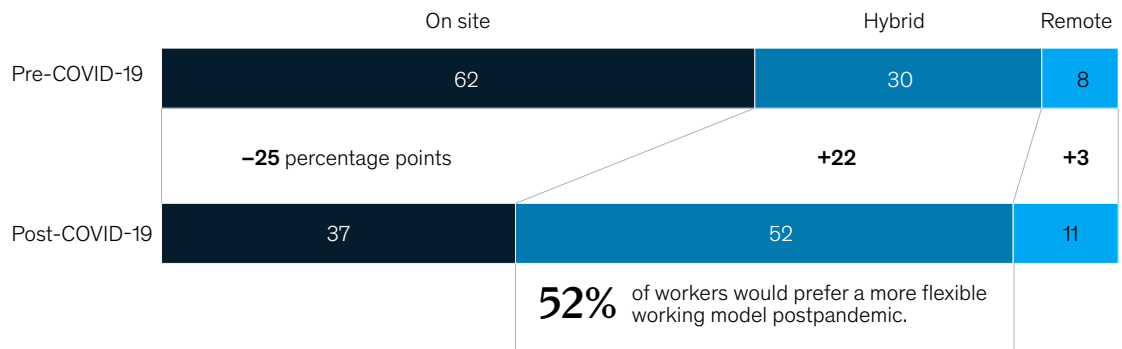
Employees want flexibility

So how do organizations help their anxious and burned-out employees? One way is to find out what employees want for the future. More than half of employees told us they would like their organizations to adopt more flexible hybrid virtual-working models, in which employees are sometimes on-premises and sometimes working remotely (Exhibit 6). A hybrid model can help organizations make the most of talent wherever it resides, lower costs, and strengthen organizational performance.

Exhibit 6

Most employees would prefer a more flexible working model after the pandemic is over.

Working models pre-COVID-19 and desired working models post-COVID-19, % survey participants

	On site	Hybrid	Remote
Pre-COVID-19	62	30	8
	−25 percentage points	+22	+3
Post-COVID-19	37	52	11

52% of workers would prefer a more flexible working model postpandemic.

Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)
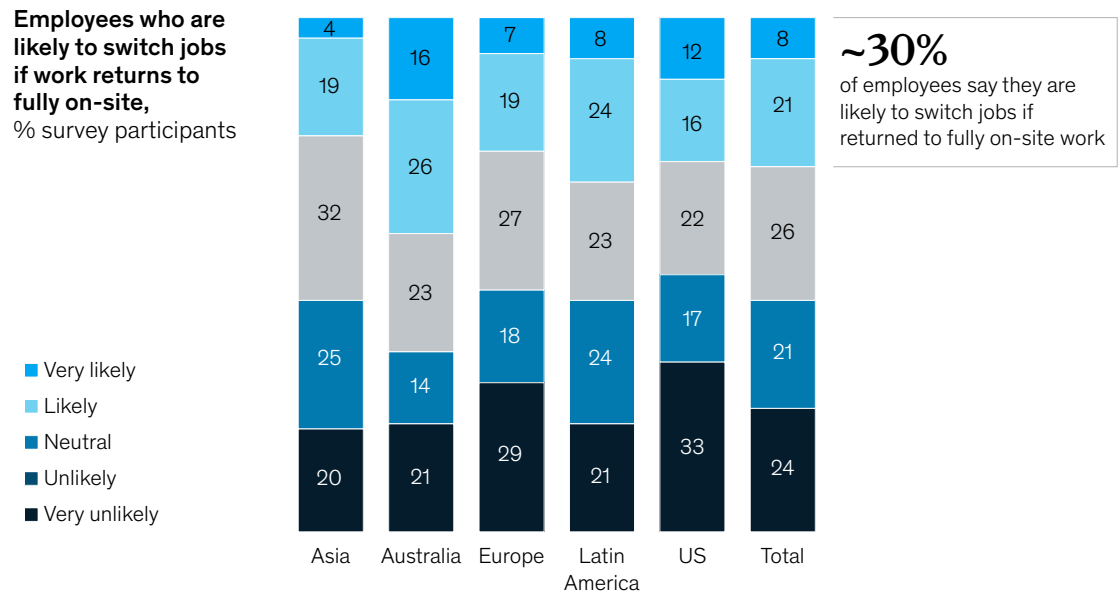
Talent at risk

In fact, more than a quarter of those surveyed reported that they would consider switching employers if their organization returned to fully on-site work (Exhibit 7). Of course, even employees who say they might depart could ultimately decide to remain, depending on the policies companies end up adopting, the availability of jobs at the same or better rates of pay, and the role of automation in shifting the tasks people do.

Exhibit 7

Going back to a fully on-site model might have significant talent implications.

Employees who are likely to switch jobs if work returns to fully on-site,
% survey participants

- Very likely
- Likely
- Neutral
- Unlikely
- Very unlikely

	Asia	Australia	Europe	Latin America	US	Total
Very likely	4	16	7	8	12	8
Likely	19	26	19	24	16	21
Neutral	32	23	27	23	22	26
Unlikely	25	14	18	24	17	21
Very unlikely	20	21	29	21	33	24

~30%
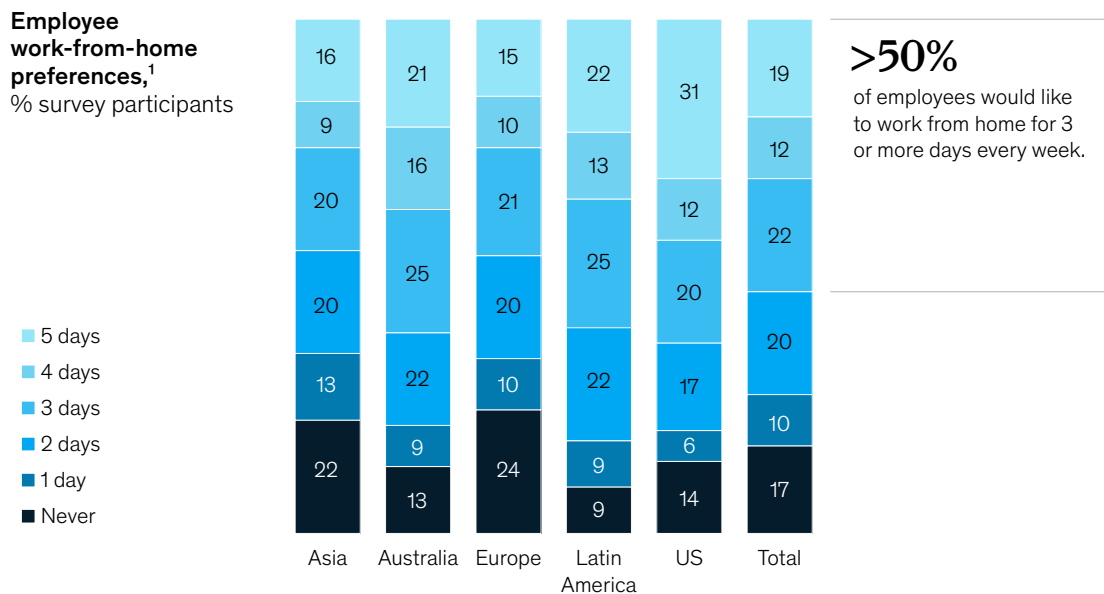of employees say they are likely to switch jobs if returned to fully on-site work

Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)

Staying home

In describing the hybrid model of the future, more than half of government and corporate workers report that they would like to work from home at least three days a week once the pandemic is over (Exhibit 8). Across geographies, US employees are the most interested in having access to remote work, with nearly a third saying they would like to work remotely full time.

Exhibit 8

The majority of employees would like to work from home at least three days per week in the future.

Employee work-from-home preferences,[1]
% survey participants

Legend:
- 5 days
- 4 days
- 3 days
- 2 days
- 1 day
- Never

Category	Asia	Australia	Europe	Latin America	US	Total
5 days	16	21	15	22	31	19
4 days	9	16	10	13	12	12
3 days	20	25	21	25	20	22
2 days	20	22	20	22	17	20
1 day	13	9	10	9	6	10
Never	22	13	24	9	14	17

>50%
of employees would like to work from home for 3 or more days every week.

[1]Question: How often would you prefer to work from home in the future?
Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)

What parents say

Employees with young children are the most likely to prefer flexible work locations, with only 8 percent suggesting they would like to see a fully on-site model in the future (Exhibit 9). Employees without children under 18 are nearly three times as likely to prefer on-site work, but the majority still prefer more flexible models.

Exhibit 9

Employees with young children are more likely to prefer primarily remote working models.

Employee work-from-home preferences by household type,[1]
% survey participants

[1]Question: How often would you prefer to work from home in the future?
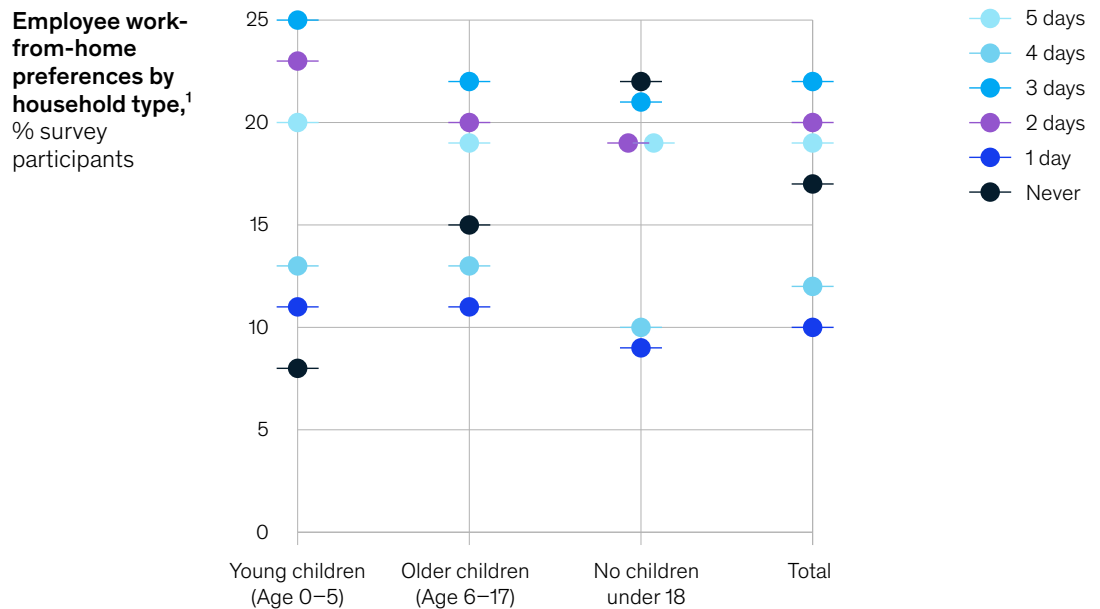Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)
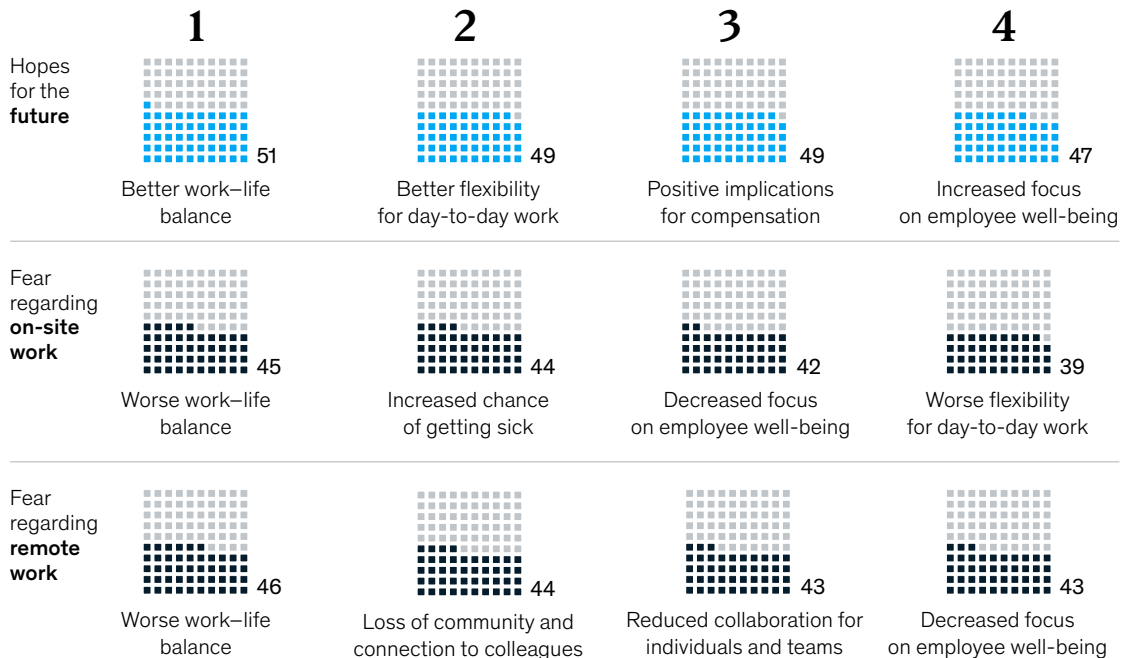
Hopes and fears

Across the board, employees are eager to see organizations put a greater emphasis on flexibility, competitive compensation, and well-being once the pandemic is over—and conversely, they're concerned that future work, regardless of whether it is on-site or remote, will negatively affect these needs (Exhibit 10). Employees also fear that on-site work will lead to a greater chance of getting sick and that remote work will reduce community and collaboration between colleagues.

Exhibit 10

Employee hopes and fears for the future reflect a focus on flexibility, well-being, and compensation.

Employees' top 4 hopes and fears, % survey participants

	1	2	3	4
Hopes for the **future**	51 Better work–life balance	49 Better flexibility for day-to-day work	49 Positive implications for compensation	47 Increased focus on employee well-being
Fear regarding **on-site work**	45 Worse work–life balance	44 Increased chance of getting sick	42 Decreased focus on employee well-being	39 Worse flexibility for day-to-day work
Fear regarding **remote work**	46 Worse work–life balance	44 Loss of community and connection to colleagues	43 Reduced collaboration for individuals and teams	43 Decreased focus on employee well-being

Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)

Policy matters

Which working arrangements and related policies do employees say will lead to the highest levels of well-being, social cohesion, and productivity? More than a third of respondents ranked clear hours and expectations for collaboration in their top five policies; several other collaboration policies, including technologies that enable on-site employees to dial-in to remote meetings and guidelines for documentation, also received significant support (Exhibit 11). Collaboration tools, and training for those tools, also rate highly for employees, as does reimbursement for remote-work office setups. Microconnectivity policies, meanwhile—from small team events to a listening and response strategy— were top policies for more than a quarter of all respondents.

Exhibit 11

Employees are most interested in collaboration, connectivity, training, and technology policies.

Support for company policy, % of respondents who ranked the policy in their top 5[1]

34	29	27	26
Clear hours for collaboration and expectations on when to be online, with flexibility outside of those hours	Robust, standardized, and integrated virtual-collaboration tools	Listening and response strategy (eg, pulse survey) that provide insights into what is and isn't working	Regular small team-connectivity events to facilitate social cohesion
26	26	25	25
Guidelines that allow employees in the office/on-site to dial-in during meetings	Clear guidelines and norms for documen- tation for remote and in-person employees	Trainings on digital technologies and tools for remote work (eg, collaboration tools)	Reimbursement policies for home-office setups for remote work

[1]Percent of respondents who ranked the policy in their top 5, when considering which policies they were most excited about and which policies would have the greatest impact across productivity, well-being, and social cohesion.
Source: Reimagine Work: Employee Survey (Dec 2020–Jan 2021, n = 5,043 full-time employees who work in corporate or government settings)

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