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Remote Work After COVID-19

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Initiatives: Future of Work and 3 more

COVID-19 shattered the existing remote work paradigm, rapidly shifting organization policies and employee preferences. This research provides HR leaders with a framework for deciding how best to leverage remote work in their organizations and outlines emerging considerations for a hybrid workforce.

Overview

The abrupt shift to remote work during COVID-19 upended firmly entrenched assumptions about how work should be done. As organizations plan to resume operations, HR leaders will have a series of critical decisions to make around which employees should return to work sites, which should remain remote and how to navigate a potentially permanent hybrid workforce. Using current data on remote work in practice and a three-part decision framework, HR leaders will be better equipped to adapt to new employee preferences and organizational needs in the new world of remote work.

Key Findings

- The vast majority of organizations plan to permanently shift to more remote work after COVID-19 recovery.

- Common impediments organizations cite for prohibiting expansion of remote work — including ability to complete core tasks, employee productivity levels and maintaining organizational trust and culture — are not borne out in actual employee behaviors and experiences.

- The most successful organizations will differentiate themselves by using a three-part framework to decide how to most productively implement remote work in their organizations in the wake of COVID-19.

- The three key framework components are feasibility (gauging where remote work is possible), portability (identifying what work can be done effectively outside the office) and sustainability (navigating follow-on implications for the organization and employees).

Recommendations

HR leaders considering the optimal configuration for remote work post-COVID-19 should:

- Begin remote work decision making by reviewing workforce requirements for remote feasibility. HR leaders should map roles in which remote work is impossible (e.g., for roles that require direct manipulation of physical objects), remote work is possible but at a cost (e.g., for roles where specific equipment or workflow reconfiguration would be required) or remote work is possible at low or no cost.

- For roles where remote work is possible, or possible at a cost, determine the degree of work portability using a task-based assessment. Even where roles may require some degree of on-site work, some tasks may be productively completed remotely.

- Determine which touchpoints need to be done in person by examining business priorities only after assessing remote feasibility and work portability. Each organization's calculus for designating activities that are most effectively done on-site will vary based on culture, industry or size, but that decision should be made only after broadly assessing what can be done remotely.

The paradigm of in-office work has been shattered as a result of COVID-19. Remote work, once a consideration for many organizations but rarely a priority, became a health and safety imperative. But even as organizations plan their recovery strategies, remote work will remain a cornerstone of the postpandemic future of work.

This leaves HR leaders with a series of critical decisions to make around which parts of the workforce can work remotely, which should stay remote even after recovery and how organizations should navigate follow-on changes to work, including facilitating collaboration and building relationships. Organizations need a new framework not to answer "how soon can our employees be back in the office?" but rather to answer "what touchpoints in our organization require in-person interaction?"

Beyond simply adapting to new postpandemic realities, effective decisions around remote work can also create a competitive advantage for organizations. A well-managed hybrid workforce provides employees with more autonomy and flexibility than they might have in a physical office, boosting productivity and engagement. A hybrid workforce strategy can also set employers apart in the marketplace as talent segments increasingly see the option of remote work as a job requirement, not a perk.

This research will help HR leaders make better decisions around remote work by:

- Benchmarking current remote adoption rates and outline future remote patterns

- Addressing perceived barriers to continued remote work

- Providing a framework for making decisions about which parts of the workforce can or should stay remote

- Outlining future implications for decisions organizations make now about remote work

Benchmarking Remote Work

To inform the decisions HR leaders will make about remote work, they should first understand existing remote work adoption patterns and employee expectations. Our recent surveys of employees and HR leaders provide valuable insight into the ways remote work was instituted before, during and moving forward in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before COVID-19

Before COVID-19, remote work was a small part of the way organizations designed work, but it typically was not a material part of workforce strategy. Even where a remote work policy was in place, most employees had to make an individual case for working remotely, most commonly to their manager. This approach often led to managers acting as barriers to remote work adoption because many find managing staff in person to be simpler than managing remotely. As a result, only around 10% of workers worked remotely all the time.
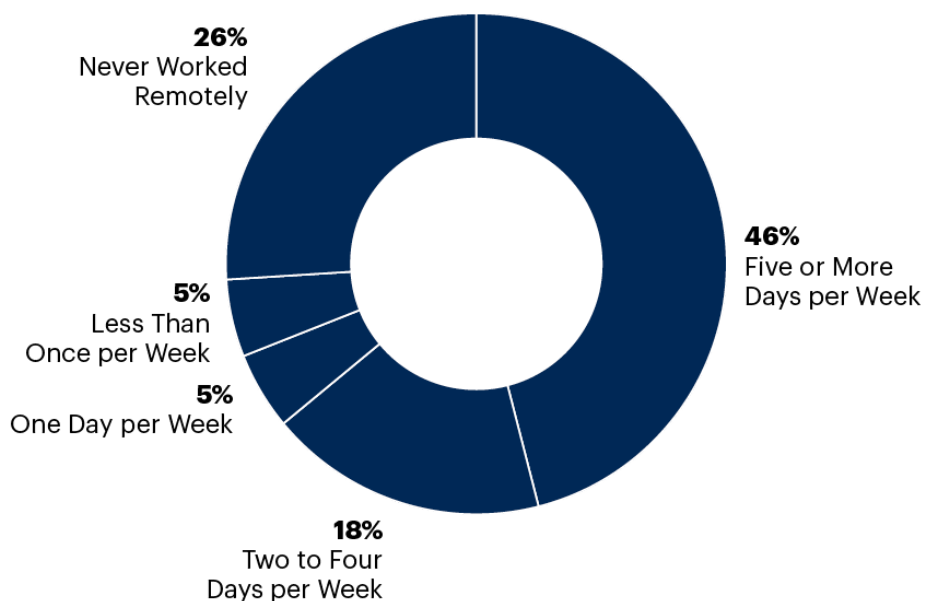
During COVID-19

COVID-19 forced many physical work sites around the world to close, requiring employers to implement remote work for all but their most essential on-site staff. Nearly half of employees worked remotely full-time during the pandemic, and another 28% reported working remotely at least part of the time (see Figure 1). This was a break with the basic paradigm of where work gets done: Employees who previously had to justify working remotely now had to justify going into the office.

Figure 1. Employee Remote Work Patterns During COVID-19

Employee Remote Work Patterns During COVID-19
Percentage of Respondents

26% Never Worked Remotely
5% Less Than Once per Week
5% One Day per Week
18% Two to Four Days per Week
46% Five or More Days per Week

n = 2,500 employees
Source: May 2020 Gartner ReimagineHR Employee Survey
Q: During the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately how many days per week did you spend working remotely?
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After COVID-19

As a result of increased remote work during COVID-19, organizational plans and employee expectations around the future of remote work implementation shifted (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Projected Percentage of Employees Working Remotely, Before and After the Pandemic

Projected Percentage of Employees Working Remotely, Before and After the Pandemic
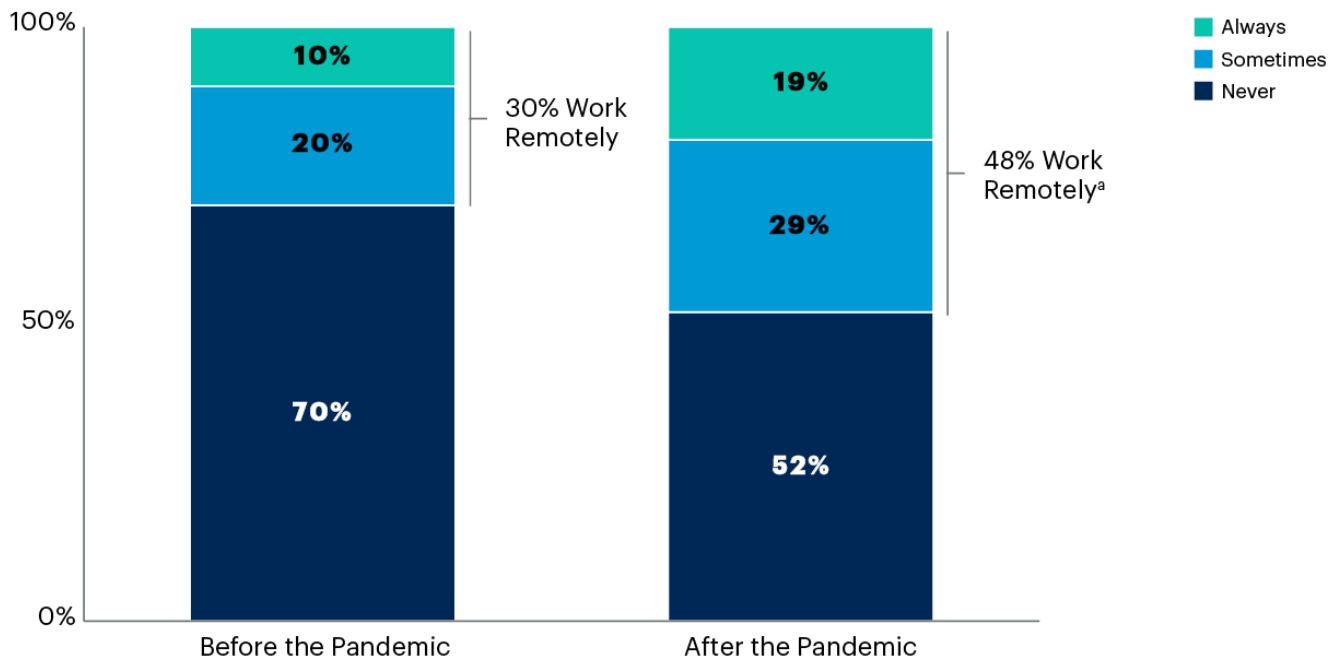
n = 421 HR leaders; 4,535 employees; 317 finance leaders
Source: Gartner COVID-19 Crisis Benchmarking Against Your Peers Webinar Poll (2 April 2020); 2020 Gartner Cost Cutting and Employee Experience Survey; COVID-19: How Finance Leaders Are Responding to the Emerging Situation Webinar Poll (26 March 2020)
[a] Modeled based on responses to three Gartner surveys
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Organizational Plans

We project that 48% of employees will keep working remotely at least some of the time after COVID-19, and nearly one in five will work remotely all the time. From the organizational perspective, three-quarters of employers plan to shift to more remote work post-COVID-19. [1] This transition to a permanently hybrid workforce provides an opportunity for a remarkable increase in flexibility. Organizations are already implementing new policies and adopting new workflows to accommodate both fully remote employees and the 29% of employees who will work remotely part of the time.

For example, some organizations are leveraging new remote work patterns as an opportunity to reallocate costs away from traditional offices. If workspaces and administrative facilities no longer have to be centralized in high cost of living areas, organizations have greater flexibility to distribute core processes and staff, passing savings on to customers or reinvesting in other business

priorities. Other organizations are leveraging higher levels of remote work to recruit from new talent pools or retain seasoned talent that prioritizes flexibility.

Employee Expectations

The remote work paradigm shift has also altered employee preferences and expectations. First, employees on average want to spend more time working from home than they did prior to the pandemic. In the 2019 Gartner Digital Workplace Survey, employees indicated they would have preferred to work from home 27% of the time on average. The May 2020 Gartner ReimagineHR Employee Survey, however, indicates employees would now choose to spend 40% of their time working from home.

In addition to wanting to work from home more often, 62% of employees now expect their employers will allow them to work remotely moving forward. For many employees, this expectation is grounded in experience. Employees who were forced to work remotely during the pandemic not only successfully did their jobs from home, they also developed new digital dexterity and collaboration skills to work more effectively while away from the office. As a result, employees generally see fewer obstacles to continuing with remote work when crisis conditions subside.
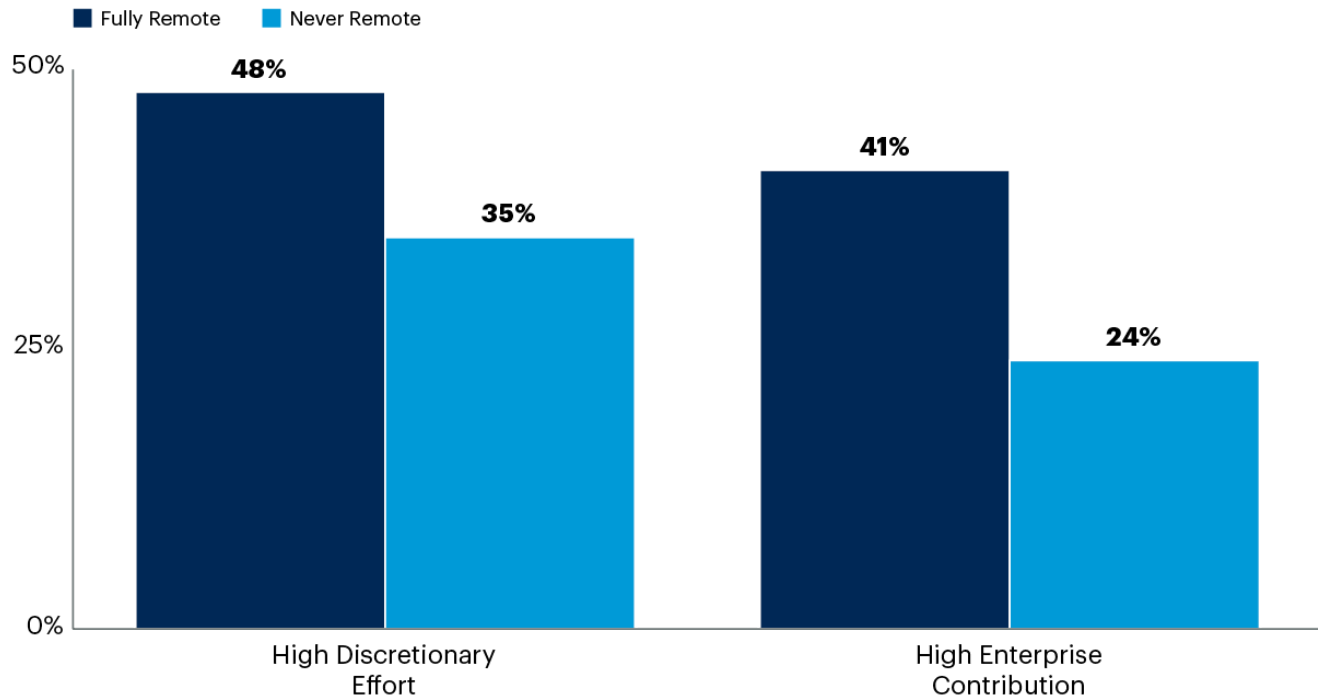
Perceived Barriers to Remote Work

Though they turned to remote work out of necessity during COVID, some employers continue to perceive barriers to remote work. Persistent concerns around worker productivity, trust and culture may influence organizations' decisions about remote work after the pandemic subsides. This section provides an objective picture of how remote work influences these factors so HR leaders are equipped to make data-based decisions.

Employee Productivity

One common barrier to remote work is the fear employees will be less productive and potentially more distracted when working from home. The May 2020 Gartner ReimagineHR Employee Survey indicates this is not the case. Even during COVID-19, 83% of employees report they're more productive working from home, and 78% agree they want to work remotely to avoid distractions. In addition, the 2020 Gartner Workforce Responsiveness Survey found employees working remotely are more likely than their in-office counterparts to report high discretionary effort and high enterprise contribution (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Higher Performance of Fully Remote Employees

Higher Performance of Fully Remote Employees
Percentage of Employees Reporting High Scores

Legend: ■ Fully Remote ■ Never Remote

High Discretionary Effort: Fully Remote 48%, Never Remote 35%
High Enterprise Contribution: Fully Remote 41%, Never Remote 24%

n = 5,002
Source: 2020 Gartner Workforce Responsiveness Survey
Note: Values represent the percentages of employees who scored greater than 78.6 on indexes ranging from 0 to 100.
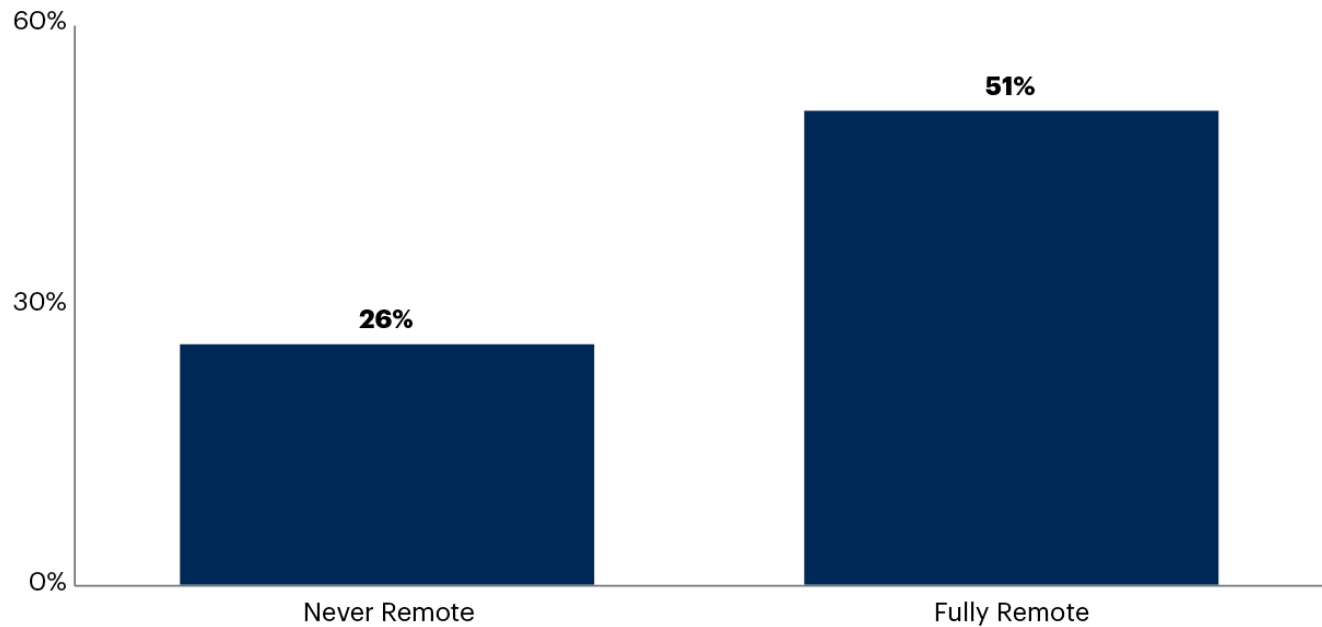725049_C

Organizational Trust and Culture

Another factor impeding long-term remote work adoption are fears around organizational trust and culture. Some employers worry employees will be less connected with the organization and culture will suffer as a result. However, our research finds remote workers actually view their organizations more favorably than their in-office counterparts. Fully remote employees are almost twice as likely to agree that the communications they received from the organization are honest and open (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Higher Organizational Trust of Remote Workers

Higher Organizational Trust of Remote Workers
Percentage of Employees Who Agree or Strongly Agree Communications From the Organization Are Honest and Open

n = 4,097
Source: 2019 Gartner ReimagineHR Employee Survey
Q: Communications we receive from the organization are honest and open.
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Framework for Remote Work Decisions

Having established a data-based understanding of remote work in practice, organizations are better prepared to approach decisions around remote work post-COVID-19. To support those decisions, we have developed a three-part framework for determining what work can be done remotely, which employees should work remotely and what follow-on implications exist for the workforce:

1. **Feasibility** — Determine if remote work is possible.

2. **Portability** — Where remote work is possible, identify what work can be done effectively outside the office.

3. **Sustainability** — Navigate follow-on implications for the organization.

The order of these three framework components is critical. This approach begins with the widest possible aperture for considering remote work then narrows when the nature of the work or the organization requires in-person touchpoints. Simply put, organizations should assume remote work is on the table, unless proceeding through this decision framework convinces them it is not. This is how the ability to work remotely was assessed during the pandemic and reflects how employees will expect future remote work to be assessed as well. In this way, organizations are
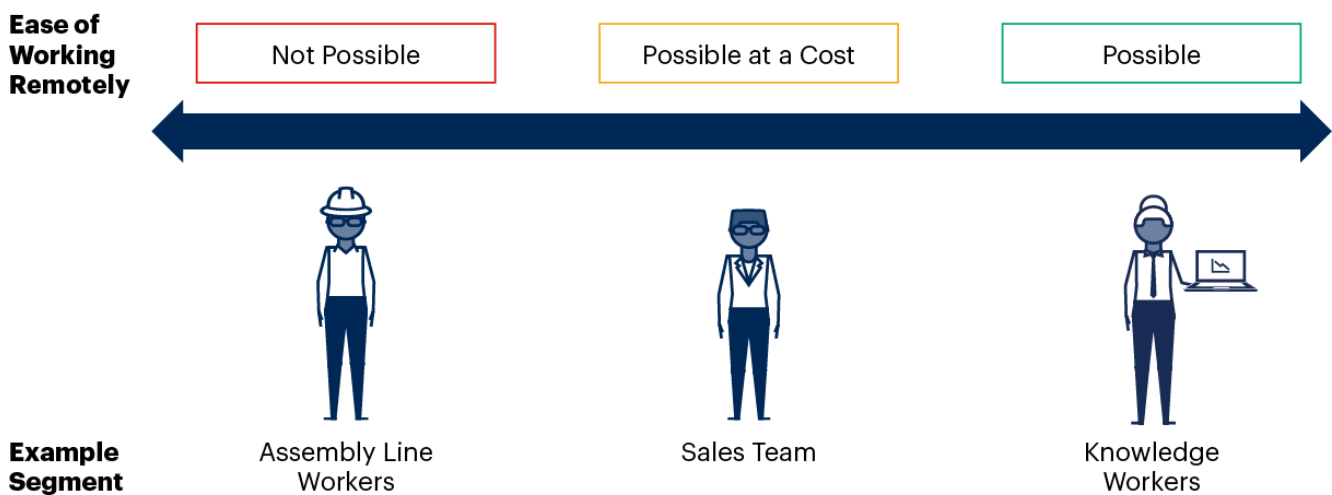
best-positioned to capitalize on the productivity, engagement and cost advantages of remote work while meeting evolving employee expectations.

Feasibility

The first step is to determine if remote work is feasible in the organization (see Figure 5). For some industries and workforce segments, remote work is not a possibility. These are typically areas in which employees are required to manipulate physical products that are only available in a specific location or must interact face-to-face with customers. Examples include assembly line workers, in-store retail associates and clinical care workers. For these organizations, deciding whether to adopt remote work is simple: The basic nature of the work prohibits it.

Figure 5. Remote Work Feasibility

Remote Work Feasibility

Ease of Working Remotely

| Not Possible | Possible at a Cost | Possible |

Example Segment

Assembly Line Workers   Sales Team   Knowledge Workers

Source: Gartner

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For all other organizations, remote work is possible, though sometimes at a cost. Sales teams, for example, can complete the vast majority of their tasks remotely, but organizations must absorb the cost of any additional required connectivity tools and the potential losses associated with forgoing in-person pitches. On their own, however, those costs should not deter organizations from proceeding through the remaining steps of the remote decision framework.

Portability

Once organizations have determined remote work is feasible throughout the various segments of their workforce, the next step is to identify what work can be done while remote. The key factor in this process is work portability — the extent to which employees' critical tasks are intangible and able to be transported from one location to another. The sales team that can work remotely (but at a cost) has highly portable work. Sales calls, prospect management, lead generation and other foundational elements of these roles are intangible and can be completed efficiently from a wide variety of locations.

This portability analysis should be done at the task level rather than the role level. Some roles may include individual tasks at opposite ends of the portability spectrum. Consider surgeons, for example, whose actual time in the operating room is minimally portable but whose tasks around completing research, charts and paperwork can be done anywhere. For these roles, organizations should consider allowing remote work where portable tasks exist.

Sustainability

The next step is for organizations to ensure that remote work policies can support organizational and employee needs long term. In many organizations, for example, face-to-face interactions are perceived to be a cornerstone of healthy organizational culture. As a result, concerns around maintaining effective collaboration and robust relationship building are often impediments to fully embracing remote work. In addition, adopting remote work more broadly throughout the organization will require some existing processes to be reconfigured, which may in turn affect the opportunities available to employees. The most successful organizations will proactively consider these sustainability factors as they incorporate remote work into their strategies.

In-Person Touchpoints

The remote work decision framework outlined above guides organizations to start with the broadest possible range of remote work options on the table and narrow remote work policies only as specific business needs require. As a result, organizations must redefine the touchpoints that are best done with employees in a particular physical location. Even in a more permanently hybrid workforce, organizations may decide that certain processes, meetings or tasks are better as face-to-face interactions. These touchpoints will vary for individual organizations: Virtual interviews or onboarding may be complemented with some in-person elements, for example, or conferences may become new types of events with a mix of virtual and on-site sessions. Instead of asking if everything can be done in person, organizations should instead be focused on effectively and safely planning the new selection of touchpoints that should be done in person.

Collaboration

Post-COVID-19, collaboration in itself should not be a justification for denying remote work. While in-person collaboration has benefits, employees have been collaborating across continents using videoconferencing and teleconferencing for years. During that time, technology has advanced rapidly to facilitate remote workflow management, digital collaboration and remote connectivity. In addition, COVID-19 has helped employees and managers master these tools and processes. Organizations are better equipped than ever to collaborate as hybrid workforces. As collaboration tools advance and become more sophisticated, barriers to collaboration will continue to fall away.

Relationships

While organizations typically think of relationship building as an in-person process, COVID-19 revealed productive relationships can be built and maintained virtually. In many cases, as individual employees adapted to new home offices, additional caregiving responsibilities and other "new normal" circumstances, professional relationships became more personal and human than

they had been in the office. Remote work does not prohibit the fundamental building blocks of positive professional relationships.

Equity and Fairness

A hybrid workforce presents new challenges in ensuring equal access to opportunities for all employees. For example, if an organization decides to reduce the number of in-person sales calls, employees who can travel to attend those meetings may be exposed to a broader network of clients and organizational leadership than employees who do not travel, which could bring advantages for future assignments. For regular team meetings, employees who attend in person may have a greater opportunity to have their voices heard than those who dial into a call remotely. In each of these examples, distribution of remote work leads to varying employee experiences throughout the organization and even within teams.

To avoid erecting barriers to inclusion and equitable advancement, HR leaders must consider the effects their remote work policies can have on how information is shared and how work is assigned. Even simple solutions — like ensuring all team members dial into a meeting rather than having some in person and a few calling from separate locations — can level the playing field. This can prevent small remote work habits from turning into major structural issues that have culture, performance management and leadership implications as they compound over time.

Other Implementation Considerations

Once organizations have decided what parts of the workforce will remain remote after COVID-19, a few key implementation questions remain to ensure sustainable success. HR leaders should consider these three questions in particular in building a postpandemic remote work policy:

- **Manager Autonomy** — Will managers have a role in determining which employees will be allowed to work remotely? How will the organization ensure managers are enablers of, not impediments to, an effective remote workforce?

- **Communication** — How will remote work policies be communicated to employees?

- **Worker Discretion** — For those workers that can work remote, do they want to? How will the organization deal with employees that prefer in-person work?

Conclusion

Remote work is increasing and will become a permanent fixture post-COVID-19. Organizational plans and employee expectations have evolved to include higher levels of remote work long term. This is good news for many organizations: Employees working remotely report higher productivity and greater trust in their organizations than those in the office. To decide how to best implement remote work as part of pandemic recovery, organizations should start with all remote options on the table and narrow as their circumstances require.

- First, organizations should assess feasibility — if remote work is possible within their organizations and where it may be possible but at a cost.

- Then organizations can gauge the portability of work to determine what parts of the workforce can successfully accomplish their tasks remotely.

- Only then should organizations consider how best to facilitate collaboration and relationship building in the newly hybrid workforce.

With this framework in mind, HR leaders can help build a more productive, engaged and flexible workforce in the wake of COVID-19.

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