The 3 Things That Will Rock Your Workplace in 2021, and How to Get Ready



What can you expect in your company's workplace for 2021? Here's what we see coming down the pike and how to prepare now.

January 7, 2021 6 min read

Opinions expressed by *Entrepreneur* contributors are their own.

Obviously, 2020 broke all the rules when it came to the world of work and workplace issues. But what's on the horizon for 2021, and how can managers and leaders be prepared?

One thing is for sure: It will not be a return to work as usual this year, even if and when we get a widely available vaccine in the U.S. Those who are expecting a smooth

transition from chaos and turmoil into calmer (more predictable) waters might be in for a rude awakening, as it's likely to be a bit of a bumpy re-entry into "normal life" – or a complete reinvention of what normal looks like at all.

That's because there are at least three major factors that will continue to disrupt and challenge corporate culture in 2021 – and that effective managers need to prepare for.

Return to the office chaos

Over the past nine months, much of the world that formerly filled offices and clogged trains and freeways has been holed up in front of their laptops, holding down the fort via Zoom and email. Although many are eager to get out of their sweats and out of the house, more than a few are likely to extend the work-from-home arrangement or at least shift to a hybrid model once vaccinations make it safe to do so. Managers will be tasked with an even more widely dispersed workforce than ever.

In fact, the vaccine might cause even more chaos as companies struggle to implement hybrid work models as well as implement safety protocols among the workers who do venture back into the office. Managers will need to determine if employees who receive the vaccine should be allowed back in the office with fewer restrictions on social distancing. Or perhaps even more important, what about the now 42 percent of Americans who say they will not get the vaccine? Should they stay at home? The Emtrain Workplace Culture Report 2020 found that an unhealthy In Group/Out Group dynamic is one of the biggest indicators of poor workplace culture. The polarization surrounding the vaccine could create an entirely new set of in group/out group dynamics at companies.

Related: **5 Ways a Remote Manager Can Kill Your Workplace Culture**

Pendulum swing from cronyism and corruption to increased business regulation and compliance

Under the Trump administration, we've seen four years of little to no business regulation – along with what some would call unprecedented levels of cronyism and corruption, where even sitting U.S. senators are investigated for insider trading. With the shift in power at the top, it's likely we'll see a major swing back in the other direction as a reaction to perceived imbalances in wealth and power. It's more than likely we'll see the modern-day equivalent of the muckrakers come in: busting up monopolies, regulating businesses and increasing scrutiny on ethics and compliance. Some of this has already begun. In June 2020 the U.S. Department of Justice updated its guidance on how it would evaluate a company's corporate compliance program in the event of complaints.

Part of the guidance asks, "Has the company evaluated the extent to which the training has an impact on employee behavior or operations?" So now, companies are expected to figure out whether the training has had an impact: actual improvement. Regulations on things like ethics and compliance are going to go beyond just making sure you check a box to show you've impacted behavior. Businesses are going to have to show real change.

Related: **Bringing Ethics Back to Business: Alethia**

Social justice, equity and inclusion become a priority beyond HR and diversity officers

The pandemic and economy free-fall highlighted the inequalities in our society on the basis of race, gender and

economics. Black and brown people suffered disproportionately, women shouldered more work due to school closures and stay at home orders, and front line workers were impacted significantly more than knowledge workers.

Given the amount of disparity, the visibility of these problems and the collective public anger, I believe that in 2021 we'll see an increased focus on social justice, equity and inclusion in business that addresses racial and gender equity and provides protections and rights for front line workers. An increased public consciousness about these issues, coupled with employees' use of social media, will lead to an empowered workforce that businesses will have to adjust to. Look no further than the outrage over Google's firing of one of its employees who was a vocal critic of tech companies' treatment of Black workers. Businesses will realize that they can no longer simply get rid of "troublemakers," because in just one tweet those troublemakers can embarrass the company, make headlines and hurt the bottom line.

Related: How Brands Can Go From Performative Allyship to Actual Allies

How can business owners and managers prepare for these challenges headed our way in 2021?

- Establish and reinforce clear, open and regular communication with your employees on the status of the workplace, expectations and policies regarding vaccinations and remote work, and stay flexible in the transition process.
- Understand and prepare for the fact that that polarization surrounding Covid, politics or social justice issues requires you to find different ways to communicate and reach disparate audiences in the workplace and establish common ground.
- Transition from a reactive culture management strategy

to a proactive approach that optimizes for solving problems first and thinking about litigation defense second.

- Map out the workplace social indicators of respect and inclusion and measure and increase those indicators in your workforce as you drive behavior and culture change.

The amount of change that 2020 forced upon all of us was dramatic to say the least. I believe the chaos will continue, but in different ways. Not all change is bad. A renewed focus in the workplace on social justice and measurable change is positive. More accountability for corporate leaders to their employees and the ideals those employees hold dear is progress. It won’t be easy, but it will be necessary. And business leaders who take time to plan and prepare for the massive change should be better equipped to handle it.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/362207