Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

and How to Thrive in 2022

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Introduction

It may be hard to believe it's almost 2022. Soon, it will have been two years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, transforming people's personal and professional lives around the globe.

At work, across all industries, businesses quickly pivoted to adapt to slowing the spread of the virus and adopted contactless solutions where possible. Especially in knowledge economy sectors like accounting and finance, information technology, marketing, digital and creative, human resources, financial services and corporate support, whatever work could be done remotely went online.

Many of the changes adopted during the pandemic will continue to endure once COVID-19 is no longer a threat. As we look ahead to 2022 and beyond, the following are lessons we've learned from the pandemic and how to optimize workplaces to benefit both employee engagement and the business bottom line.

What We Learned
Employees Want from Work

01

Work from home (or wherever you happened to be in the world) became the new normal during the pandemic. Of course, some industries found it easier to adapt to remote work than others. Healthcare, hospitality, personal care, leisure, travel, construction and warehousing require physical proximity and continued to demand workers be present. But for professionals whose main tools are computers and software, remote work dominated operations.

This shift to a WFH environment significantly impacted what employees want out of work and how they view their jobs. Dozens of studies and surveys reveal prominent trends that reveal to companies what employees want from their jobs now that they've experienced the remote work environment.

In addition to the pandemic, social justice issues became more prominent in 2020 and beyond. Black Lives Matter marches and protests happened across the U.S., before the 2020 presidential election took place.

Gartner Inc.'s February 2021 Post-Election Survey of

3,000 employees revealed 68%

would consider quitting their job to work for an organization with a stronger viewpoint on social issues that are most meaningful to them. [1]

As we look ahead to the future, we look back on some of the most prominent takeaways the pandemic imparted on various spheres of professional life.

Work Environment

For many professionals, the work environment transformed drastically during the pandemic. Kitchen tables became workspaces. In-between meetings, parents tutored children attending school from home. No more commuting to the office to sit in a cubicle – the pandemic enabled workers to roll out of bed and get to work.

According to Upwork, in December 2020

41.8%

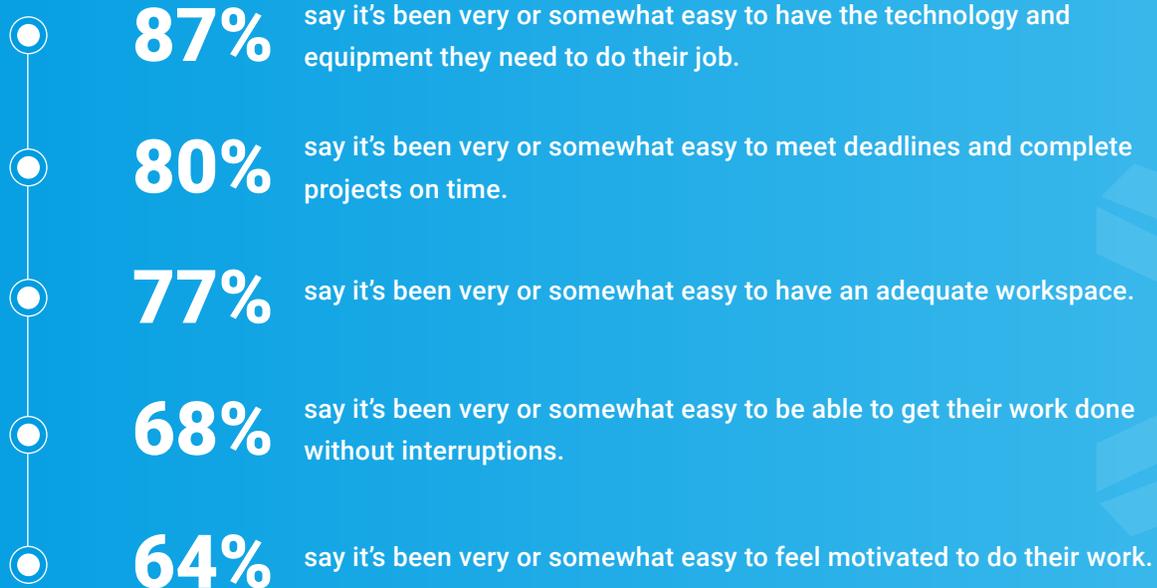of the American workforce remained fully remote

26.7%

of managers expect the workforce to remain remote in 2021. [2]

By 2025, 36.2 million Americans are expected to be remote, an increase of 16.8 million people from pre-pandemic rates.

Remote work brought up questions about productivity, since managers weren't in the same space as employees. But moving to remote environments has actually increased productivity.

A September 2020 study of 3 million people by Harvard Business School found people were working an average of 48 minutes more each day after the lockdown started. [3] A December 2020 report by Pew Research Center found among employed adults who are currently working from home all or most of the time, since the pandemic: [4]

87% say it's been very or somewhat easy to have the technology and equipment they need to do their job.

80% say it's been very or somewhat easy to meet deadlines and complete projects on time.

77% say it's been very or somewhat easy to have an adequate workspace.

68% say it's been very or somewhat easy to be able to get their work done without interruptions.

64% say it's been very or somewhat easy to feel motivated to do their work.

Many employees enjoy remote work capabilities. A January 2021 Stanford University study of 22,500 Americans found those who can work from home will be likely to do so two or three days a week. [5] Even more compelling, workers are willing to take an 8% pay cut for the opportunity to do so.

Pew Research Center found when asked how they'd feel about returning to the workplace if it were to reopen in the month following, 64% of professionals said they'd feel uncomfortable returning, while 31% said they'd feel very uncomfortable. For those whose workplace is available to them, 60% of people say they have a preference for working from home.

But not everyone is thrilled with a remote work environment.

Microsoft

According to Microsoft's 2021 Work Trend Index, which includes a survey of more than

30,000 workers, while about 60% business leaders and managers

say they're **"thriving"** working from home, a similar percentage of Gen Z workers are only **"surviving,"** due to struggling with mental health and well-being. [6]

According to a 2020 study of 424 teleworkers by Bucknell University, employees younger than 40 were more likely than older age groups to want to return to the office because they're missing out on soft skills and mentorship opportunities. [7]

Various races, genders and family roles also view WFH capabilities differently. A March 2021 report by "Vox" found women are much more likely than men to report burnout due to difficulties balancing childcare with working from home. [8]

Parents in general face challenges in a WFH environment. Pew Research Center found half of parents with children younger than the age of 18 said it was difficult to get work done without interruptions, compared to 20% of those without kids at home.
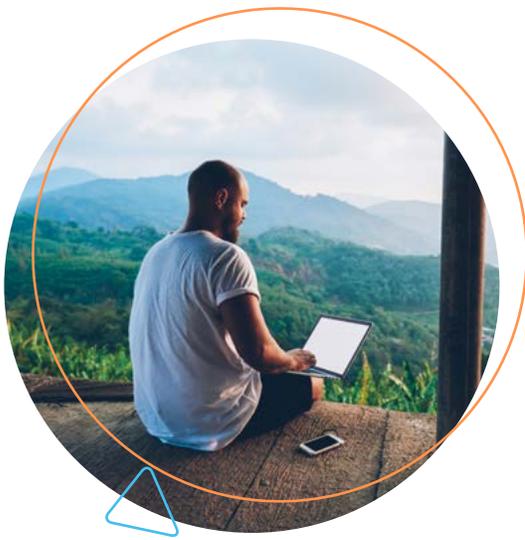
The rise of remote work is transforming where workers are living, as well. Upwork reported between 14 to 23 million Americans are planning to move as a result of remote work, many away from big and expensive cities. (10)

Another perk to remote work environments?

The elimination of commute stress and expenses. One study found eliminating the daily commute in the U.S. has saved more than 89 million hours each week. (11) According to an October 2020 report by Upwork, it saved $90 billion. (12)

For individuals who commute by car, they saved an average of more than $2,000 in commuting costs in 7 months.

Eliminating the daily commute in the U.S. has:

eliminated stress

saved 89 million hours each week

saved $90 billion

Lesson Learned:

- Many professionals prefer remote work and are demanding it from their employer.
- But not all workers enjoy working remotely. Younger workers, in particular, are more likely to be dissatisfied with remote work environments compared to older workers. Some professionals prefer a hybrid work environment.
- When enabling remote work, companies must acknowledge WFH challenges like parenting responsibilities.
- With remote work on the rise and employees moving to global locations, that creates diverse work schedules for teams.
- Professionals who work for companies with hostile or non-inclusive work environments are more likely to embrace remote work.

Employee Treatment & Communication

Remote work transformed how coworkers collaborate. Digital tools like email, virtual whiteboarding, Microsoft Excel, Google Docs, videoconferencing and chat channels like Slack enabled collaboration in the cloud. From any connected device, knowledge workers could contribute to a project, join a meeting, turn in an assignment or get briefed on a task.

While remote work means work schedules can be more flexible, it's also created an always-on environment where many workers are working longer hours on a 24/7 schedule.

Microsoft's 2021 Work Trend Index found:

1 **Time spent in meetings** is more than double what it was early last year.

2 **54%** of people report feeling overworked.

3 **39%** say they feel exhausted.

"Vox" reports people spend an additional hour (total of 10 hours) connected to Slack a week than they did pre-pandemic. How people are communicating on the platform is also changing. Slack's Future Forum survey found people are using emoji 80% more since the pandemic onset, since intentions can be lost or misinterpreted on text
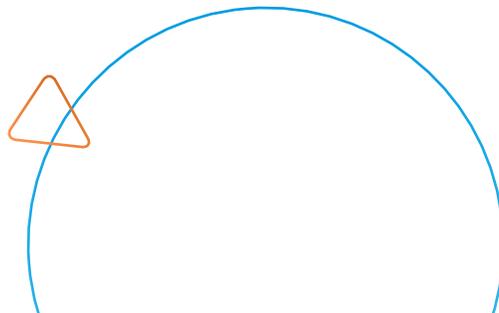
The tools we're using to communicate are impacting work satisfaction. According to Pew Research Center, among those who frequently use video conferencing services:

37% say they're worn out by them.

35% say they're not a good substitute for in-person contact.

As the way we work and the tools we use to accomplish tasks are evolving, more professionals are considering new career paths. The Great Resignation saw a record 4 million people quit their jobs in April 2021 and 3.6 million more resigning in May 2021. [13]

People who lost their jobs during the pandemic also reflected on what's next. Many are exploring new career paths. A January 2021 Pew Research Center survey found 66% of unemployed people, across all income levels, have seriously considered changing occupations. [14] A third of unemployed people surveyed have started taking job retraining or courses.

The pandemic has also made it challenging for certain groups, particularly women, to accelerate their career success. According to a May 2021 report by NBC News, 4.2 million women left the labor force from February 2020 to April 2020. [15] Nearly 2 million still haven't returned.

According to an April 2021 report by Oxfam, women globally **lost $800 billion in income in 2020.** [16] "The New York Times" reports women's progress in terms of U.S. workforce participation has been set back by 30+ years due to the pandemic. [17]

Why have women been disproportionately impacted by the effects of the pandemic?

+ Women lost their jobs at a faster rate than men because they're more likely to work in hard-hit industries like travel, retail, customer service and hospitality.

+ Women make up the majority of workers in the health sector, which lost 540,000 jobs throughout the pandemic.

+ Women are more likely to take on caregiving responsibilities at home for children, older parents and other family members.

The combination of women being more likely to take on more domestic work and working in vulnerable industries or in part-time positions has made this group in particular more professionally damaged by the pandemic.

"Will the world finally get serious about gender equality?" asked Melinda Gates, co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, on the BBC. "That's a question of long standing, but I'm asking it even more insistently now. Because when the world's economies were pushed to the brink, it was women who fell over the edge." [18]

Lesson Learned:

- Software and technology make collaboration easier than ever, but that's also leading to job burnout and exhaustion.

- Professional communication is evolving, with emoji use becoming more frequent and acceptable.

- Technology isn't always a perfect substitute for in-person communication.

- More workers than ever are quitting their jobs. Many are reskilling or upskilling to move to new industries. [19]

- Women workers have faced more work challenges and job insecurity compared to male workers.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) represent an employer's conscious effort to ensure all employees feel like they belong in a workforce. DEI is accomplished in the following ways.

- **Employees come from diverse backgrounds, including various genders, ethnicities, races, ages and sexual orientations.**
- **Workplace processes provide equal possible outcomes for all individuals.**
- **Diverse employees are included in decision-making.**

Since the pandemic, McKinsey & Company found diverse employees are struggling the most. [20]
The firm states diverse groups including the following are having the most difficulties in the workplace and with work-life balance:

Women — **LGBTQ+** — **People of color** — **Working parents**
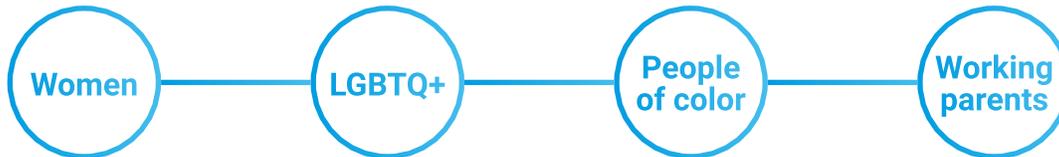
These groups are more likely to report challenges related to job opportunity concerns, mental health, workplace safety and health, and a missing sense of connectivity. But research from Great Place to Work found when businesses make an effort to improve their DEI strategies, employees (and customers) view the company more positively. [21]

Ultimately, as McKinsey & Company reported in May 2020, companies that prioritize DEI are more likely to see success in areas like revenue, employee engagement and retention. [22] The report found companies whose leaders focused on DEI were more likely to emerge from the pandemic stronger.

Lesson Learned:

- During challenging times like a global pandemic, certain minority groups are more likely to experience hardship.

- Companies that prioritize DEI are more likely to see success, no matter what the external circumstances are.

- DEI efforts can help businesses increase employee retention and engagement, which are especially important during challenging times.

How to Keep Improving
in 2022 & Beyond

02

▷ The business world is constantly evolving. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated change, in many ways for the better despite the trying times.

In 2022 and as we emerge from the threat of the pandemic, businesses can respond to employee demands and create a better work environment that also boosts revenue and results. Takeaways from the pandemic lead to the following guidelines for future business success.

How to Maintain an Employee-Centric Culture

Employees are more likely to quit their jobs now than ever before. To keep your employees happy as we emerge from the pandemic, they need to come first. [23] Policies and processes must be employee-centric to retain talent. Businesses should:

1. Create an atmosphere of trust.

The pandemic created uncertainty for most professionals, regardless of their job stability. When an employer can provide a source of trust during challenging times, that can increase employee loyalty, as 33% of workers who trust their leaders would stay longer with an employer. [24]

Be transparent with company updates. Provide employees with development opportunities so they're confident they can grow their careers at your company. Promote a strong mission and purpose your ideal talent aligns with. Build relationships on a foundation of honesty and open communication.

33%

of workers who trust their leaders would stay with an employer longer

2. Provide flexible work options.

Since many employees want remote work capabilities, businesses need to accommodate those demands. According to a March 2021 study of 1,000 employees by Envoy and Wakefield Research, 47% of employees would leave a job if it didn't offer a hybrid work model post-pandemic. [25]

Your business might consider giving employees the option of where to work (at home, at the office or a hybrid) at least several days a week. You might also offer flexible schedules that enable employees to work any days or hours they like, as long as the work gets done.

47%
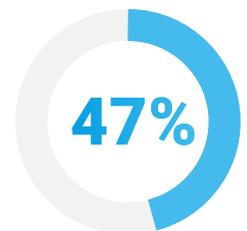
of employees would leave a job if it didn't offer a hybrid work model post-pandemic.

McKinsey & Company found 20% to 25% of workforces in advanced economies can work from home between 3 to 5 days per week. [26]

McKinsey & Company

3. Support work-life balance.

Today's employees are more selective in what they want from an employer. Consider offering in-demand benefits like:

- **Health insurance**
- **Retirement accounts and employer matching**
- **Childcare and parental leave**
- **Tuition reimbursement**

Mental health support is also important for businesses to provide post-pandemic. According to a February 2021 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), during the pandemic, rates of anxiety and depression increased to 40% of all U.S. adults, which was quadruple previous levels. [27]

Mental health services will be more of a priority for business offerings. If your business isn't providing them, you might lose talent to a company that is.

4. Be mission-based.

Glassdoor's Mission & Culture Survey found 77% of adults would consider a company's culture before they applied for a job there, while 79% would analyze a company's mission and purpose before applying. [28] Employees want business leaders to promote and abide by a mission in its operations and in how a company interacts with community organizations outside of the company.

DEI efforts can support a company's mission and bring in a wider pool of talent. McKinsey & Company reports younger generations are twice as likely to raise the need for DEI than older employees. As Millennials are the largest generation in the workforce, businesses must prioritize DEI to attract younger candidates. [29]

77%

of adults would consider a company's culture

79%
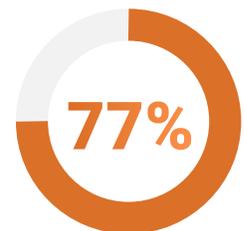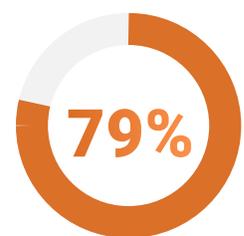
would analyze a company's mission and purpose

Employees today also want companies to take a stand on social justice issues. These include issues like racism, sexism, gun control, climate change and transgender rights, according to a June 2021 report by "Time." [30]

03

How to Be Proactive vs. Reactive

Knowing the trends and lessons from the pandemic, companies can also take a more proactive approach in making operations flexible and accommodating, no matter what challenges lie ahead. We're already seeing business office transformations, a rise in contractor and freelance hires to enable global teams, and efforts to improve and maintain company cultures despite fragmented workforces.
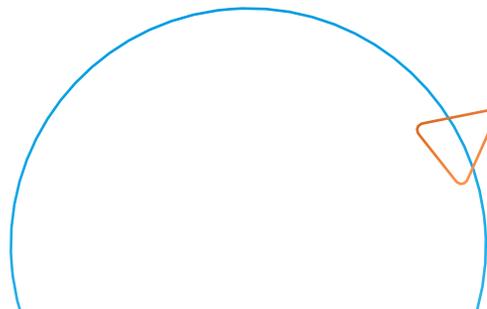
Offices of the future

Office space is becoming scarcer. For what is available, design and use is changing. Consider:

A survey of 278 executives by McKinsey in August 2020 found that on average, they planned to reduce office space by 30%.

A December 2020 report by CNN stated companies will likely focus on creating space designed for collaboration and teamwork rather than solo work. [31]

According to "Vox," Global Workplace Analytics predicts 80% of office space going forward will be collaborative, while only 20% will be for personal space. People's personal desks will be replaced with "hot desks," which any employee in the office can use for private work.

Businesses that retain offices can rethink how they' should be used to accommodate the type of work environment and schedule they provide their employees.

"If we can move past decades of orthodoxy about 9-to-5, office-centric work, there's an opportunity to retain the best parts of office culture while freeing ourselves from bad habits and inefficient processes, from ineffective meetings to unnecessary bureaucracy," Stewart Butterfield, CEO and co-founder of Slack, stated on BBC. "Every leader believes they can do better, and things can move faster. This is their chance."

Evolving offices (or the lack of offices altogether) also impacts how productivity is measured. Instead of metrics like how long someone stays in an office (which previously tended to benefit young men without families who could work longer hours), now productivity will rely more on how much work an employee actually does. Productivity metrics can be more qualitative, with managers measuring the outcome of production, rather than the raw amount of something produced.

Fully remote teams may benefit from office rentals when needed, as some work that could be done remotely may be best done in person. This includes tasks like negotiations, brainstorming sessions, critical business decisions, onboarding new employees and providing sensitive feedback.

Hybrid workforces

One work sector that has continued to increase in prevalence, despite the pandemic, is that of contractors and freelancers. CNBC reports there was a 22% increase in the number of freelancers during the pandemic compared to 2019, with more than one-third of Americans freelancing and contributing $1.2 trillion to the U.S. economy. [32]

"Vox" reports more companies since the pandemic are saying they're going to increase their use of external talent or non-employee labor.

On LinkedIn, there's been a **500%**

increase in the number of remote job postings compared with last year. Nearly half of workers said they're planning to move now that they can work remotely.

"The volume of job searches using the 'remote' filter on LinkedIn has increased 60% since the beginning of March [2020], and the share of Remote Job Applications has increased nearly 2.5 times globally," Karin Kimbrough, Chief Economist at LinkedIn, stated on the BBC.

Hybrid work teams give businesses access to a wider talent pool who can positively contribute to a team with full-time employees. New ideas and approaches can invigorate a workforce's way of operating and drive innovation.

Remote full-time workers can easily adapt to working with remote freelancers. Upwork reports those who are most comfortable with remote work are also most likely to be engaged with freelancers, who are increasingly becoming a part of hybrid work teams.

Hybrid workforces also refer to workforces that combine full-time remote employees with employees who are in the office. With hybrid teams come some pitfalls, such as lack of visibility or communication breakdowns. Businesses can take a proactive approach to prepare for hybrid work.

To accommodate a hybrid workplace, businesses are investing in more advanced software and videoconferencing technology to make everyone feel like a part of the team. [33] Managers can also set clear expectations for communication and work tasks so employees stay on track.

Maintaining company culture

With fewer teams working full-time in offices, that has created challenges for company cultures. According to Time Is Ltd., the number of connections new hires make at work is down 17% compared with pre-pandemic. In remote work environments, workplace culture is at risk of suffering, since employees are less likely to communicate with workers outside their departments.

Pew Research Center found

65% of new teleworkers say they feel less connected

to their coworkers now. This can create massive silos in businesses. Companies will have to be intentional in fostering cross-department connections for employees.
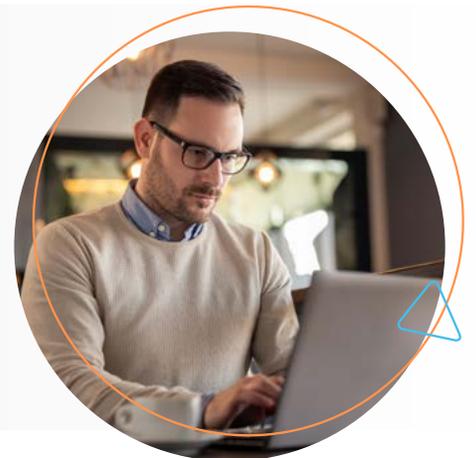
The good news is, in some ways, the pandemic brought coworkers closer together. The closeness people have felt at work due to going through a hardship (the pandemic) and getting a glimpse of people's at-home lives has strengthened coworker bonds.

According to the Microsoft 2021 Work Trend Index, one in six people reported crying with a coworker over the past year. One in three say they're more likely to be their authentic selves at work compared to the previous year. This all correlates with a better sense of well-being, more positive perception of work and higher productivity.

Knowing how positively company culture can impact work results, businesses must proactively maintain a strong culture. This could be through virtual happy hours or coffee dates, off-site excursions or annual conferences where global teams meet.

04

How to Manage Changes
to Recruiting in 2022

As we outlined in our August 2021 report, "How HR Should Transform the Talent Acquisition Process to Meet Candidate Demands," the next year is going to be transformative for both employers recruiting candidates and for talent who's being recruited. [34]
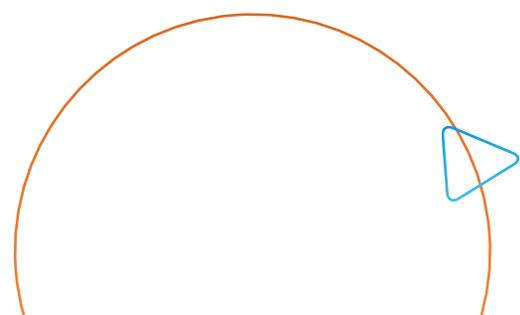
The most notable trends we're seeing that could impact your company's ability to attract candidates include:

■ **Long recruitment processes:**

67% of job seekers have experienced a recruiting process of 1 month or longer.

■ **Too many interview steps:**

72% of job candidates are currently going through 3 or more interviews, while 31% go through 4 or more.

■ **No feedback:**

28% of candidates were ghosted by an employer. More than half of candidates (55%) will move on from an employer they haven't heard from in 2 weeks.
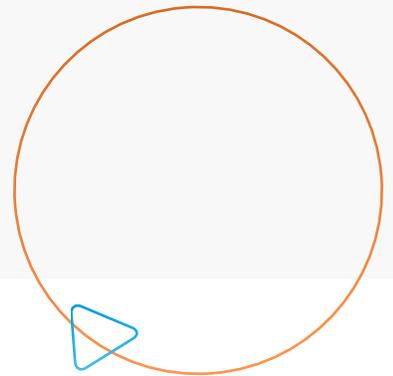
So what do today's job candidates want?

- Virtual interviews to make the process more convenient time- and location-wise
- HR technology and customized messaging that keep them engaged throughout the process
- Company transparency and clear benefits
- Professional recruitment and hiring, since 49% of candidates have turned down an offer due to a poor experience

Amid all the uncertainty the pandemic caused, employees are becoming clearer on what they want from an employer. To ensure you attract and successfully hire the best talent for your business, work with AccruePartners for professional talent acquisition solutions. Contact us for a free consultation.

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