What do employees want? Change.

Today, the future of work is a bigger, more complex topic than ever before. The COVID-19 pandemic has driven seismic shifts in workplace culture, shaping the preferences, goals, and motivations of employees in virtually every organization. In many ways, businesses are experiencing more of a Great Re-evaluation than a Great Resignation — and workers are sending that same message loud and clear.

In partnership with market-research firm Ipsos, Google surveyed 1,000 U.S. employees at all job levels in a wide range of business-to-consumer companies to learn about their experiences, perspectives, and hopes for the future. Following are key findings from the survey, which we hope will help organizations plan and create employee-centered environments for attracting and retaining the best talent.

A Turning Tide

Among those surveyed, 76% are satisfied with their current jobs. At the same time, 58% report that they’re either actively seeking new positions or that they aren’t actually looking but are open to new opportunities.

Of course, individual circumstances play a critical role in how and when employees leave jobs. However, these findings are a clear indication that many are seeking meaningful changes in their work situations and environments.

3 Key Takeaways

Employees care about money — and quality of life.

Flexibility is king.

It’s essential to Invest in career development, not just work.

1. Employees care about money — and about quality of life.

While salary still matters, our research confirms the overwhelming importance that employees place on well-being. Responding to questions about work-life balance, 74% of respondents say quality of life is more important than money. In fact, participants rank paid time off as the most important benefit, even above compensation.

That's a crucial insight. With well-being topping salary, it's important that organizations understand what their workers value most. Clearly, benefits other than compensation matter more now than ever before, but there's still room for individual organizations to explore what that looks like. Organizations should consider annually surveying their employees about benefits focused on well-being, then improve their offerings accordingly, viewing such efforts as investments for recruiting and keeping top talent.

2. Flexibility is king.

No question: The issue of in-person vs. hybrid vs. remote work is among today's biggest business challenges. It's important to start by acknowledging the millions of employees who needed to quickly adapt to new working conditions and routines in response to COVID-19. Many also took on additional caretaking responsibilities or changed their living situations. As a result, these employees are emerging from the pandemic with new priorities and needs that influence their thinking about work.

What do the numbers actually say? Respondents with specific career goals have strong preferences about where, when, and how they want to work. Forty-six percent prefer full-time, in-person workplaces; 28% prefer remote set-ups, and 22% prefer hybrid situations (with the small remainder seeking other, less-common options). But indications are that organizations aren't yet meeting those preferences. Employees' pre-pandemic preference to work in person was 15 percentage points higher than it is today, according to earlier research. Bottom line: Post-pandemic, there is a significant gap between the workplace options employees want and what employers are actually offering.

All companies should consider the business ramifications of employee location and schedule flexibility. Successfully addressing these issues requires C-suite involvement and clear understanding of both the financial implications and the company's long-term goals for collaborative working structures.

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3. It's essential to invest in career development, not just work.

Today, employers have more opportunities than ever before to help workers reach their goals by providing upskilling, training, and other career-development activities. These are wise investments. After all, what better way to engage and retain employees who might be itching to move on than helping them achieve their larger career aspirations rather than relegating them to focus solely on their current jobs?

Our research indicates that employees view ongoing career development as critical for staying up-to-date on trends in their fields, building upward mobility, and gaining the skills needed to switch jobs or industries. But providing such opportunities involves more than just helping workers gain technical, or “hard,” skills. According to the survey, 31% of employees who actively maintain their skills do so by developing “soft” skills such as communication, leadership, and presence. Those respondents take multiple paths to such skill development: 25% do so by independent reading, 24% earn professional accreditations or certificates, 24% watch online videos, and 24% set and track professional goals.

When asked about their reasons for developing and maintaining professional skills, the majority of those with specific career goals say they want to keep up with the latest industry developments. Thirty-four percent find short courses and bootcamps from online certification platforms essential for career growth.

The takeaway here: Organizations can help employees achieve this connection by leveraging available online content rather than inventing it from scratch. They can offer subsidized training through online courses or partner with universities to make certifications and upskilling programs available to their employees.

Conclusion

Ultimately, employers need to “be the change” their people want to see. More specifically, organizations hoping to attract and retain talent must commit to emphasizing quality of life, flexibility, and support for career development. To the last point, they must focus on building awareness of opportunities for mobility and investing in upskilling and reskilling initiatives to remain competitive.

The Great Reevaluation will set the tone for the employer-employee relationship well into the future. Smart organizations will consider what they want that relationship to look like, then design for the future with the employee in the center. To put it another way: If you build it, they will come.