

# RETURN-TO-WORK SENTIMENT REPORT

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*Hands-On Employee Surveying to Help People Leaders  
Reduce Turnover and Improve Culture!*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the face of America's tight labor market and the increasing cost and frequency of turnover, most companies understand the need to take employees' views into account when developing their hybrid or return-to-work strategy.

However, as it currently stands, data on employees' preferences, fears, and overall sentiment for returning to work is quite limited – leaving many leaders with more questions than answers.

Using primary survey data from 4,300 employees across all 50 States, plus a robust meta-analysis of 17 independent studies, this report aims to answer many of those vital questions to help your team inform, develop, and optimize your return-to-work strategy.

We explore a wide range of topics, including the top needs and concerns amongst returning employees, including health concerns (66% expressed COVID safety concerns,) childcare needs, and employees' desire to retain a hybrid schedule (preferred by 55% of employees.)

*It is worth noting that employees' return-to-work sentiment can vary, sometimes dramatically, across different industries, locations, roles, ages, and companies. We recommend having frequent conversations with your workforce and conducting regular employee feedback surveys before and during the implementation of your return-to-work or hybrid strategy.*



# EMPLOYERS' REASONS FOR & AGAINST RETURNING



## Reasons to Return



### #1 Teamwork, Innovation, & Collaboration

For companies and executives pushing for a full return-to-work, the primary motivation is their opinion that working in person is more conducive for effective collaboration, teamwork, and innovation.



### #2 Retaining & Improving Company Culture

Company culture continues to be a primary factor in a company's ability to attract, motivate, and retain top-tier talent. Yet many people leaders and organizations feel that remote work stifles their company's culture.



### #3 Effective Onboarding, Training, & Development

Many executives and talent-focused leaders report difficulties training, developing, and mentoring remote staff. **Furthermore, 30% of employees say coaching and onboarding new hires is worse than pre-COVID.**

## Reasons to Remain Remote



### #1 Savings from Less In-Person Expenditures

As companies successfully adapted to the new normal of remote work, many want to maintain lower in-person costs enabled by remote work, including less office space, in-person perks, and business travel.



### #2 Ability to Attract & Retain Top-Tier Talent

**58% of professionals would "absolutely look for a new job if no longer permitted to work remotely.** Many organizations feel that forcing employees to return will negatively impact their ability to attract and retain top talent in this tight labor market.



### #3 Taking a Wait & See Attitude

Rather than being the first to return to work, many companies and executives are taking a wait-and-see attitude so they can learn from the mistakes and successes of others before developing and implementing their own strategy.



# PRIMARY REASONS WHY EMPLOYEES WANT TO RETURN

## IN-PERSON SOCIALIZATION

# 26%

For many professionals, interacting with peers in the workplace constitutes the majority of their social interactions. After more than a year of Zoom interactions, some employees, primarily those younger than 28, are eager to return to resume pre-COVID socialization in the workplace. **In fact, 26% of employees who want to return to work ranked socialization as their primary motivation to return.**

## COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

# 75%

**75% of employees reported that communication and collaboration are less effective and efficient when working remotely.** Employees frustrated by this reality, especially those who care deeply about their career growth and their ability to serve their clients, cited improved communication and collaboration as their primary reason for returning to work.





# SECONDARY REASONS WHY EMPLOYEES WANT TO RETURN

## WORKFORCE SUPPORT & ADVANCEMENT

**70%**

### Promotion Opportunities

*70% of employees, primarily new hires and millennials, fear that working from home will hinder their chances of being promoted, regardless of their performance or productivity.*

**35%**

### Ability to Unplug

*35% of remote employees cited overworking or an inability to unplug as their most significant remote-work challenge*

## AT-HOME PRODUCTIVITY BARRIERS

**26%**

### Non-Work Distractions

*26% of remote employees, primarily those with young children, cited non-work distractions as their prevalent remote-work challenge.*

**28%**

### At-Home Technology

*28% of remote employees cited at-home technology difficulties and limitations as their most significant remote-work challenge, and 26% cited a lack of reliable WiFi.*

# PRIMARY REASONS EMPLOYEES DO NOT WANT TO RETURN

## COVID SAFETY & PROTOCOLS

# 36%

Even in cities with high vaccination rates, COVID is a primary reason employees aren't eager to return.

**36% of employees say they are very or extremely worried about exposure.**

# 32%

**32% of employees expressed concerns regarding the lack of health and safety measures (i.e., wearing masks, social distancing) in the office.** 21% stated that adhering to health and safety measures is a primary driver of their reluctance to return.

## RETAINING AUTONOMY & FLEXIBILITY

# 75%

Employees are concerned that returning to in-person work will diminish the freedom and agency that remote work has afforded them.

**Approximately 75% of Gen Z employees stated that workplace flexibility is the most important benefit they're looking for from their employer.** The same is true for Millennials at approximately 63%.





# SECONDARY REASONS EMPLOYEES DO NOT WANT TO RETURN

## FAMILIAL OBLIGATIONS

**26%**

### Not Being Around Loved Ones

*When asked to share their concerns about returning to work, 26% of respondents mentioned being away from family, loved ones, or pets.*

**33%**

### Childcare Support

*One-third of American employees have at least one child under the age of 14 – those who are single-parents are particularly reluctant to return.*

## IN-PERSON INCONVENIENCES

**32%**

### Office Distractions

*When asked to share their concerns about returning to work, 32% of respondents stated they want to avoid in-office politics and distractions.*

**84%**

### Office Commute

*When asked for the top benefit of remote work was, "not having to commute" was the most common response, with 84% of employees agreeing.*



# HYBRID WORK MODELS & EMPLOYEE AUTONOMY



## Hybrid Employees' Top Priority

Regardless of which hybrid work model your company implements, one trend is readily apparent: Employees yearn for agency and autonomy. Understandably, most organizations will be hesitant to afford employees complete control over their schedules. Consider alternative ways to increase employees' agency, such as allowing four weeks of remote work per year like Amazon has done for their office staff. Moreover, employees are willing to earn their 'freedom,' so reward high performers with trust by enabling them to have additional control over their work schedule.

## THREE HYBRID MODELS & COMMON VARIATIONS

### Split-Scheduling

**Full Agency:** Employees have the freedom to decide when to come into the office.

**Split Weeks:** Three days in-person and two days working remotely, or vice versa.

**Alternating Weeks:** Rotating weekly between remote and in-person schedules.

### Split-Workforce

**Role-Based:** Remote-work flexibility based on employees' roles/departments.

**Seniority-Based:** Remote-work flexibility based on employees' seniority/tenure.

**Needs-Based:** Remote-work flexibility depends on the needs of current projects, clients, or the company as a whole.

### Split-Combination

**Microsoft Model:** Remote at least half the time but able to request additional remote work from their direct manager.

**Amazon Model:** Three days in-person, but Team Leaders can adjust their team's schedules as needed.

**Citigroup Model:** Roles are categorized as "hybrid," "remote," or "resident" – 50% of employees are remote or hybrid.

# EMPLOYEES' TOP FOUR RTW NEEDS & CONCERNS

*Survey participants were asked to share their top needs and concerns regarding their return to work. Over 80% of responses pertained to one of the categories listed below. Insights for each category are provided on the following four pages – supplemented with relevant findings from our meta-analysis.*

## 01

### COVID SAFETY & MENTAL HEALTH

Page 11

- COVID Fears and Safety Protocols
- Mandatory Vaccination Sentiment
- Mental Health and Well-Being

## 02

### DESIRED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

Page 12

- Childcare Benefits and Support
- Physical Workspace Adaptations
- Burnout and Work-Life Balance

## 03

### RETAINING REMOTE-WORK FLEXIBILITY

Page 13

- Employees' Expect Hybrid Flexibility
- Top Sources of Return-to-Work Anxiety
- Employees Ideal Remote vs. In-Person Schedule

## 04

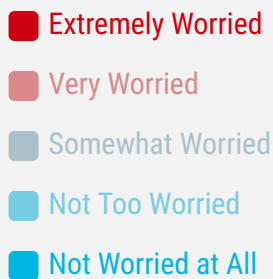
### SOCIALIZATION & COMPANY CULTURE

Page 14

- COVID's Impact on Company Culture
- Returning For In-Person Socialization
- In-Person Communication and Collaboration

# 01. COVID SAFETY & MENTAL HEALTH

*How worried are employees about their health and safety regarding their return-to-work?*



- **66%** are worried about their health and safety when it comes to returning to the workplace.
- **78%** of employees of color are worried about their health and safety if they have to return.
- **61%** of employees fear their company will relax workplace COVID safety protocols too early.

## Support for Mandatory Vaccinations

62%

The majority (**62%**) of employees support mandatory vaccines before being permitted to **return to work**. For technology and business services employees, it is 76%! *\*Data varies dramatically based on factors like industry, location, and education.*

## Strict Enforcement of COVID Safety Protocols

61%

**61% of employees want their employer to strictly enforce COVID workplace regulations.** More than a quarter (26%) of employees said that those who violate COVID-safety rules deserve to be demoted or fired! *\*Data varies dramatically based on factors like industry, location, age, and education.*

## The Pandemic's Impact on Mental Health

39%

**39% of U.S. employees agreed that their mental health is worse today than in January 2020.** Yet, almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents said their companies have not invested in their mental health needs since the onset of the pandemic.



## 02. DESIRED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

### Childcare Benefits

81% of executives believe their company has been successful in extending benefits for childcare. **Yet when their employees were asked the same question, only 45% of respondents agreed with their employer.** For women, that number is 41%, compared to 49% of males.

45%

### A Lack of Effective Training for Hybrid Employees

**33% of employees said they're willing to accept smaller pay increases if their employer afforded them more freedom** and opportunities to choose which skills they learn.

33%

### Prioritizing Social Spaces

When asked about their most desired workplace adaptations, almost half of respondents **(44%) wanted their company to prioritize spaces for socializing, such as cafes, walking paths, and lounges.**

44%

### Spaces for Employees to Connect to Nature

Another **44% of respondents stated more spaces for employees to connect to nature, such as a terrace or garden, is a top priority** that would improve their return-to-work experience.

44%

### Employees Want Additional Well-Being Support

More than a quarter of U.S. employees **(27%) would like their employer to provide additional support for well-being, including help coping with burnout.**

27%

### Work, Life Separation

**A lack of separation between work and life was the primary stressor among 34% of the workers during the pandemic,** followed by unmanageable workload and long work hours at 28%.

34%

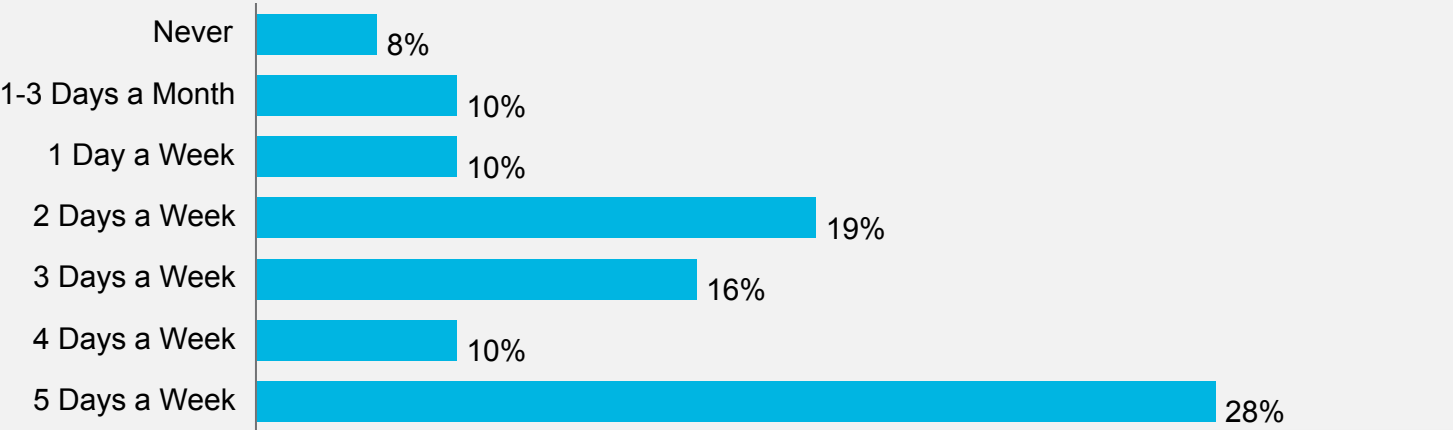
### Feeling Burned Out

**28% of employees report feeling burned out "very often" or "always,"** and more than half (56%) said they experienced burnout during the pandemic. 27% of U.S. employees would like their employer to provide additional support and resources to help prevent and cope with burnout.

28%

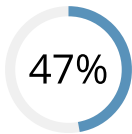
### 03. REMOTE-WORK FLEXIBILITY

How often do employees want to work remotely after COVID is no longer a concern?



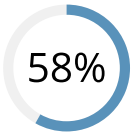
#### Hybrid and Remote Work Flexibility

**47% of employees stated they would likely leave their current employer if they don't offer hybrid or remote work.** 41% said they would be willing to accept a lower-paying job if their current employer doesn't allow for a hybrid or remote work.



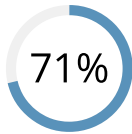
#### Commuting Anxiety & Public Transportation

When asked to share the top three sources of return-to-work anxiety, **58% of employees mentioned having to commute to work.** 34% of remote employees who previously took public transit say they plan to find alternative commuting methods once they return to work.



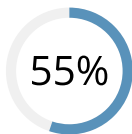
#### Top Sources of Return-to-Work Anxiety

The two most common reasons employees feel anxious about returning to work are COVID exposure (77%) and **less flexibility (71%).**



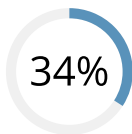
#### Prefer to Work Remotely Three or More Days Per Week

**55% of all respondents (51% male, 58% female) would prefer three or more days per week working remotely.**



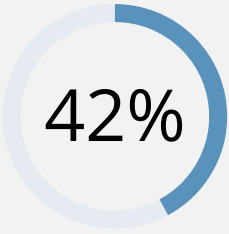
#### Young Employees Are More Likely to Choose Working In-Person

**34% of respondents aged 18 to 24 prefer to work remotely one day a week or less,** compared to 20% of all respondents.



## 04. SOCIALIZATION & COMPANY CULTURE

### COVID's Impact On Company Culture

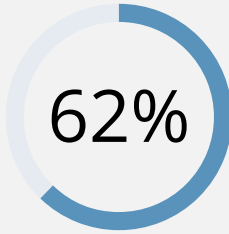


42%

42% of employees feel that company culture has been diluted during the pandemic.



### Transitioning From Isolation to Socialization



62%

One in five said loneliness was their biggest struggle with working remotely. That's why **62% of employees stated that socialization and company culture are primary factors encouraging them to return to in-person work.**



### Reviving In-Person Collaboration



39%

In addition to company culture and socialization, **in-person collaboration and communication are primary RTW motivators for more than half of employees (55%).**





# KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS REPORT

## COVID SAFETY PROTOCOLS

A substantial proportion of the respondents (66%) stated that worry over health and safety was their primary barrier to wanting to return to work, with 62% of employees supporting mandatory vaccines. A similar proportion wanted more regular cleaning schedules and strict adherence to safety regulations. This report's meta-analysis further supported these findings, though COVID-related sentiment varies dramatically across different locations and demographic groupings.

## FLEXIBILITY - WHEN AND WHERE TO WORK

Approximately half of the respondents reported wanting to retain a hybrid working model in some form, with 55% saying they'd like to be remote at least three days a week. However, employees' remote-work preferences varied significantly across industries, roles, and especially generations. Younger employees (age 18-24) were 14% more likely to want to be in the office. Across all respondents, 46% expressed concern that returning to the office would reduce flexibility and negatively impact their work-life balance.

## CHILDCARE AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Access to childcare is a significant issue for more than 50% of working parents (63% of parents struggle to find childcare). This effect is worse in regions of the country that have been slower to reopen their schools, summer camps, and daycare centers. While 81% of executives believe their company has been successful in extending benefits for childcare, when their employees were asked the same question, on average, only 45% agreed. For women, that number is 41%, compared to 49% of males.

## MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT, SOCIALIZATION AND CULTURE

To reduce COVID anxiety and support mental health, 44% of employees want their organization to adapt their workspace to have more social spaces and places that allow team members to connect with nature. More than half of employees reported frequently feeling burned out during the pandemic (56%), and 27% want their organization to provide additional mental health support. The most common (34%) source of work-related stress amongst remote employees during the pandemic was an inability to separate work life from home life. Additionally, 62% of employees cited socialization as their primary motivation to return to in-person work.

*Not Just Another DIY Survey Platform – We are a team of hands-on employee surveying experts dedicated to helping People Leaders gather, analyze, and utilize employee feedback.*

450,000+ SURVEYS ADMINISTERED ACROSS:

47

COUNTRIES

52

INDUSTRIES

50

STATES

## SURVEY SOLUTIONS TO SUPPORT YOUR RETURN

*Customizable Surveys Helping Leaders Develop, Adjust, and Optimize Their Return-to-Work Strategy*

### RETURN TO WORK PREPARATION SURVEY

Before you finalize your RTW strategy, use this survey to identify your employees' primary concerns and needs for their return.

### REMOTE WORK PULSE SURVEY

Keep your finger on the pulse of remote employees' needs and challenges, such as communication and collaboration.

### EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING ASSESSMENT

An opportunity for you to uncover which factors impact your employees' well-being the most, such as stress about childcare.

### BACK-AT-WORK CHECK-IN SURVEY

Once back at work, use this survey to understand what is and isn't going well in the eyes of your employees.



*Reach Out To Learn More About These  
And Other Survey Solutions*

[CLICK TO CONNECT](#)

### COVID-19 VACCINATION SURVEY:

Determine what percentage of your employees have received the vaccine and the sentiment of those who haven't.

“

*"Superior insight, superior service, superior partnership. These are the attributes that differentiated my experience with NWS from the dozens of other companies in the HR surveying space. Couple these attributes with a fundamental understanding of how to turn people data into business results, and NWS proves without a doubt why they are the partner of choice to so many People Leaders."*



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SOLUTIONS





## APPENDIX & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### RESOURCES TO HELP SUPPORT PEOPLE LEADERS

#### RETURN-TO-WORK RESOURCES

- [COVID-19 back-to-work checklist – SHRM](#)
- [Toolkit for resuming business in the workplace – CDC](#)
- [Return to work \(RTW\) framework – Work Logic HR](#)
- [How major companies are returning to the office \(and useful resources\) – i4cp](#)

#### HYBRID WORK MODEL RESOURCES

- [Hybrid work model: 4 best practices for fairness – Red Hat](#)
- [Hybrid WFH work model: here's how to make it work – WWR](#)
- [What to consider when moving to a hybrid work model – SHRM](#)



### META-ANALYSIS SOURCES AND CONTRIBUTORS

- |                                     |                                      |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. <a href="#">Apollo Technical</a> | 10. <a href="#">Hartford</a>         |
| 2. <a href="#">Avalere</a>          | 11. <a href="#">Harvard Business</a> |
| 3. <a href="#">Bloomberg</a>        | 12. <a href="#">HRBartender</a>      |
| 4. <a href="#">CNBC</a>             | 13. <a href="#">Linkedin</a>         |
| 5. <a href="#">Deloitte</a>         | 14. <a href="#">LucidsPark</a>       |
| 6. <a href="#">DigiDay</a>          | 15. <a href="#">NYTimes</a>          |
| 7. <a href="#">EHSToday</a>         | 16. <a href="#">Tech Republic</a>    |
| 8. <a href="#">FiercePharma</a>     | 17. <a href="#">ViewSonic</a>        |
| 9. <a href="#">Forbes</a>           |                                      |

Additional information is available upon [request](#)