



5 HR Trends to Monitor in 2021

BY MARIA CLYDE, PHR, SHRM SCP

EMPLOYERS MUST CONSTANTLY SEEK WAYS to innovate and stay on top of trends to compete in the marketplace, particularly amid the COVID-19 pandemic. If there's anything we've learned from the last year or so, it's that human resources responsibilities are growing and changing rapidly, while bandwidth for these additional responsibilities remains limited. Below are five HR trends to watch for in 2021. Employers should consider how their organizations may benefit by implementing similar strategies, while considering their HR bandwidth to do so.

1. EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed the perception of what qualifies as a “safe and healthy” work environment. A couple years ago, any business with a wellness program may have fit that definition. And, even then, a company lacking those qualities wasn't always a deal breaker for some employees.

Now, “safe and healthy” means something much different. In 2021, expect an increased focus on more rounded employee well-being. Baseline efforts will include safeguards against COVID-19, but many employers will likely go beyond illness prevention.

Already, some organizations have transitioned to a more holistic well-being approach, and others will undoubtedly follow suit. These initiatives examine the larger picture and aim to help employees better themselves, even outside the workplace. Efforts include mental health programs, dependent care assistance and flexible scheduling. Focusing on these areas can lead to healthier, happier, and more productive employees.

2. GREATER INCLUSIVITY

While much of last year was defined by the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant portion was also devoted to stemming racial inequity. Months-long protests forced a national conversation about diversity in the workplace and beyond. This prompted many businesses to make statements about committing to more diverse representation in their ranks.

While public statements and private company actions don't always align, some workplaces are keeping good on their word. Notable efforts include consciously trying to diversify leadership, scrutinizing hiring processes to identify barriers to diversity and developing training to foster greater cultural and racial inclusivity. Employers can expect an uptick in these types of efforts in the new year.

3. EXPANDED REMOTE WORK

Many businesses were forced to shut down or migrate to remote work during the pandemic. Now, even with a vaccine in sight, a large number of those employers will likely continue offering remote work opportunities. In fact, some tech giants like Twitter and Google have indicated workers may not be required to return to the office ever again.

This suggests remote work, at least part time, will remain for the foreseeable future. As such, employers should consider expanding their own remote opportunities, as applicable. This won't be feasible in all situations, but it might be for some positions. Doing so will not only provide a safeguard against COVID-19, but it can also serve as an enticing recruitment perk. Moreover, remote positions give employers greater hiring flexibility, allowing them to expand talent pools to any area with an internet connection.

4. INCREASED EMPLOYEE MONITORING

A natural counterpart to remote work is employee monitoring software. When a number of employees operate outside the workplace, employers sometimes need other ways to keep track of productivity. That's where these tools come in.

Employee monitoring software is what it sounds like—software that tracks computer usage. Depending on the software, it might record and employee's website traffic, app activity and time spent idle. Some solutions even give employers access to employees' webcams.

While some of these monitoring capabilities may seem extreme, the demand for such tools has only increased amid the COVID-19 pandemic. That means employers with remote workers should consider whether monitoring software is right for them. Particularly, employers should weigh the need to manage workers against the consequences of infringing on employee privacy. In other words, a heavy hand in this area might actually breed more resentment than encourage productivity.

5. REIMAGINED ONBOARDING

Onboarding is yet another workplace facet that was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This critical process of hiring, training and welcoming new employees is one of the most important functions of HR. What was once a series of carefully outlined in-person meetings has now been upended.

Employers had to reimagine the onboarding process in 2020 and will likely continue adapting it in the new year. For many, this means transitioning to an entirely virtual onboarding process, while maintaining the same level of quality. Virtual onboarding may include remote meetings via webcams, online quizzes, video tutorials and other creative methods of educating new employees remotely. Even among employers that have reopened, developing these processes now will better position HR teams in the event of another COVID-19 wave and shutdowns.

COVID-19 affected nearly every workplace function last year, and that influence will linger into 2021 and beyond. Entire functions are being reimaged and reevaluated. Employers will need to adapt quickly if they want to compete in this innovative landscape. ■



Maria Clyde, PHR, SHRM SCP is the director of human resources at B&H Insurance (BHI).

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