

bluivy



COVID-19 And The Impact On Employee Experience

A 2020 Employer Branding Report



Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has been the cause of unprecedented change around the world. Never before has an epidemic impacted lives, families, and the global economy as profoundly as this.

The world of work, in particular, has been thrown into a tailspin. Faced with an avalanche of talent management challenges, employers and HR leaders have struggled to deal with restructuring, layoffs, and transitioning staff from the office to home-based working environments in impossibly short timeframes. With no playbook for how to lead HR through this type of crisis, we've also had to figure things out as we go. How do you manage teams remotely? Keep up morale and productivity? Uphold intrinsic company values at the same time? All this, while the global health pandemic spikes stress levels and keeps children home from school, vying for space, attention, care and computer time.

Now, as lockdown comes to an end and we look towards a return to work, we must prepare for and predict what “the new normal” will look like. That may be the greatest challenge of all. Your employer brand and culture must adapt to the new world of work.



Key Takeaways

- 1 Workplace culture and flexibility is more important than ever
- 2 Employee loyalty and engagement levels predicted to decline in the coming months
- 3 People above profit perceptions now a driving force in brand reputation
- 4 Direct managers must take on the role of delivering a meaningful and branded employee experience
- 5 Ambassadorship and employee-led culture panels will be of utmost importance to the employer brand moving forward

What talent want now:

- 1 Flexible hours and ongoing work from home options
- 2 Streamlined communications and new collaboration tools
- 3 Better management of people versus projects
- 4 More frequent and personal employee recognition

A Strong Employee Brand Can Be A Guiding Light Through Crisis

The pandemic has also shone a spotlight on leadership, revealing the very best and worst examples of employer brand management. We believe that the strongest employer brands are the ones that have stayed true to their employee value propositions (EVPs) during these most challenging of times. Indeed, it is through these trials and transitions that a strong culture demonstrates its value and guides leaders and teams to keep a company strong, come what may.

As the crisis gradually enters the “return to work” phase we felt it was time for an important barometer check. We wanted to find answers to the following questions to help leadership evolve their EVP and brand communications through the next months. Specifically, we wanted to find out:

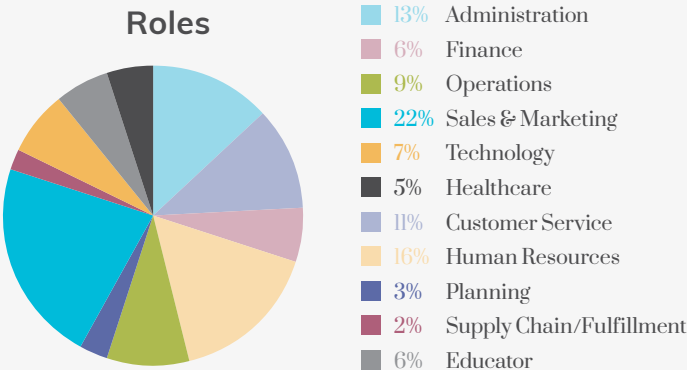
How has the COVID pandemic impacted employee branding so far?

How well have employers done in supporting their talent through this crisis?

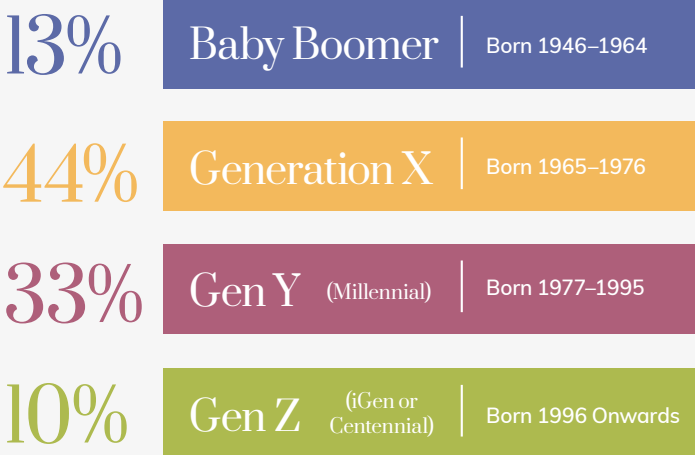
What must employers do now to embrace their brand and re-engage talent as we move to the next phase of the COVID crisis?

Our COVID-19 Employee Experience Survey

Between April 1st and 30th, 2020, we surveyed more than 200 respondents across North America, representing a cross section of age groups, sectors, and roles. Our goal was to find out how this pandemic has impacted their career, their expectations of their employer, and their views about workplace culture – and how it has changed both for now and in the future.



About our survey respondents



Most Prominent Sectors





What Employment Attributes Matter Most To Talent?



We asked our respondents to rank the importance of different aspects of their employee experience in an effort to gauge their current values and preferences.

Responses revealed a definite change in priorities and what matters most. As we move towards a new world of work, the aspects of employer brand that matter most to employees today seem to be shifting dramatically.

Workplace culture and flexibility more important today:

Based on our survey results, overall ‘employee experience’ at work, and the personal support offered by a company and its leadership team are among the most valued attributes an employer can offer. While compensation and benefits topped the list of attributes that our respondents value (63%), a large percentage

also selected workplace culture (60%) and flexibility/balance (59%) as top priorities and what they viewed as positive attributes in an employer. Inspiring leadership, selected as important by 57% of respondents, is also an increasingly important factor shaping employees’ perceptions of what makes a good work environment.

Employment attributes that scored lower with respondents include workload (19%), tools and technology (22%) and physical location (29%). These findings also underscore a shift in employee priorities that should be taken into consideration when re-evaluating your branding direction and messaging.

In fact, organizations with employment brands and value propositions strongly focused on the physical workplace design, office perks, tools and innovation are at risk of no longer promoting what matters to talent in the new work world. Technology firms that typically emphasize

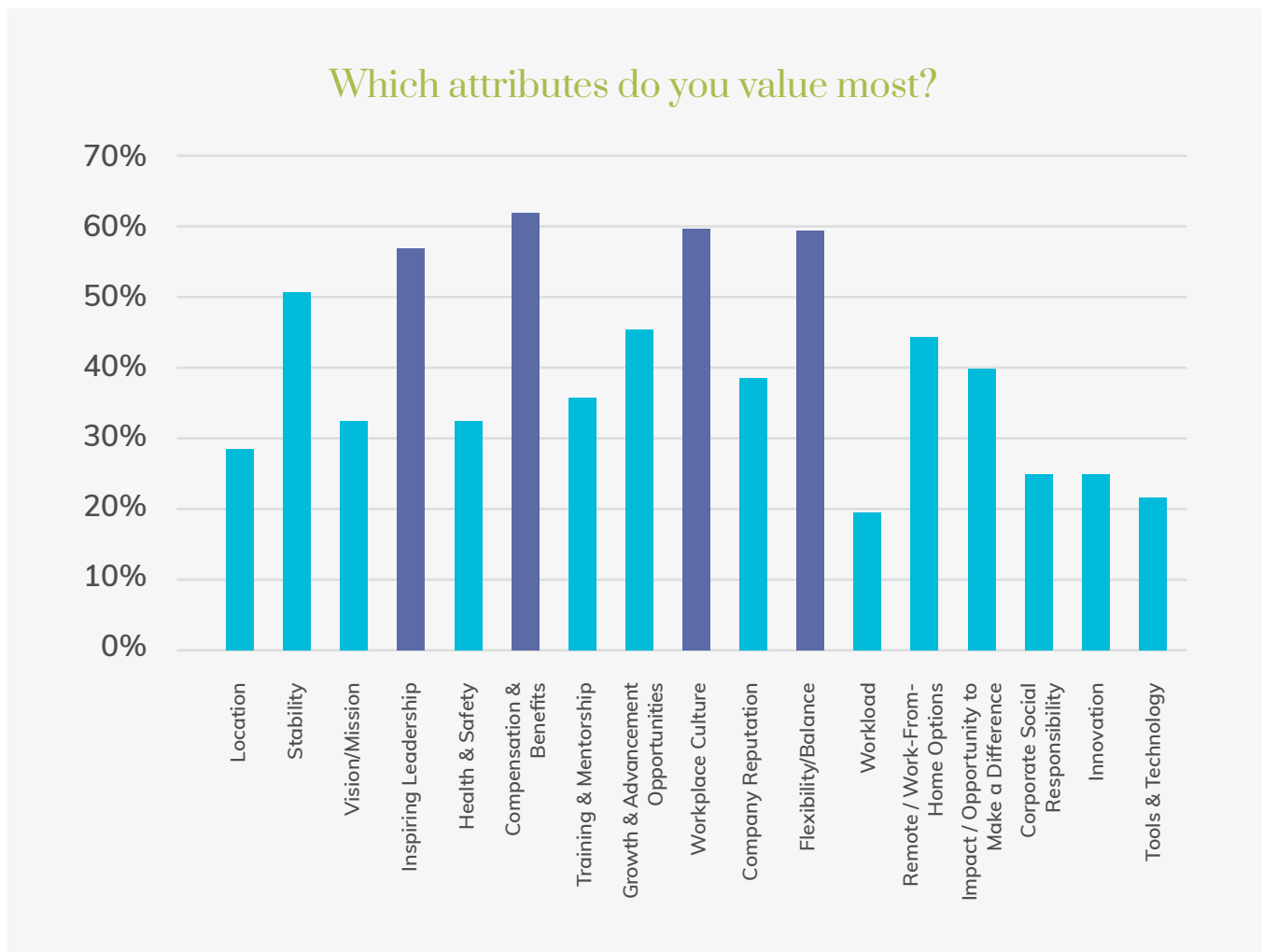
these attributes, (whether start-ups or divisions of multinational firms) may need to seriously overhaul their positioning in face of these findings.

Caring leadership and additional support

What does this data really mean? We believe it suggests that talent will be demanding more from their companies and their direct managers, in particular. More support. More flexibility.

More inspiration. How you, as an employer, connect meaningfully with talent, motivate each employee and support teams will matter more than ever in the short and possibly long-term future.

Survey results also indicated that talent will be looking to companies that put people above profit. Most importantly, they now expect a workplace culture that is kind and caring (over profit-driven) and one that also offers employees greater flexibility and work-life balance.



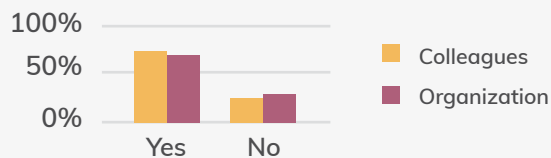


2 How Much Do Good Colleagues & Supportive Co-Workers Matter?

Co-workers matter a great deal, as our survey revealed. Through our experience as employer brand and engagement leaders, we know that a key reason talent stay is due to the friendships and bonds formed with their colleagues.

We asked respondents “Have your colleagues or has your employer done things to make you proud during this crisis?” The answers underscore just how critical friendships and relationships will remain to the stickiness and appeal of a supportive workplace culture.

Have Your Colleagues or Employer Done Things to Make You Proud Through This Crisis?



Bonds strengthened through regular check-ins and acts of kindness

This data—along with stories shared over the course of the survey—drives home how critical work friendships are to the overall employee experience. We heard how much employees appreciated their colleagues for their regular check-ins, generous sharing of resources, and many acts of kindness beyond the call of duty such as volunteership, taking on extra workload and charitable acts—all things that serve to deepen respect and connections within the teams. Certainly, these bonds will become even stronger as we all emerge out of the lockdown.

The conclusion we draw is that ‘ambassadorship’ along with grassroots and employee-led components of workplace culture will be of utmost importance to the employer brand moving forward.

3

A Consistent Message Needed From Both Leaders And Managers



Overall, we received positive feedback about CEOs' and managers' communications to employees during the crisis. The communications from C-Suite and senior leaders, however, stood out more positively to survey respondents. A greater percentage of respondents felt their CEOs did a better job at communicating during the crisis than their manager. When asked how well CEOs and managers communicated, CEOs garnered a stronger positive response: **49%** of respondents said they communicated "extremely well," (versus **47%** for managers), and **28%** of respondents said they responded "well" (versus just **21%** for managers).

Managers must be the ones to deliver a more meaningful, branded employee experience

The widening gap between leadership vision and management reality is being felt today

by employees in companies across North America. As managers are the ones on the front-line speaking and interacting with their teams daily, it is more important than ever that their messages should reflect and reinforce the corporate vision and culture. Our respondents commented on the need for managers to communicate better, more frequently, to provide more support, recognition...and to "stop stressing them out with their own stress".

Employer brand and culture messaging must be shared by leadership, embraced by managers, and become a major part of what they do and say as leaders. No longer can leaders confine their roles to project management and technical supervision. As many in an organization will experience culture almost exclusively through their direct manager, delivering it the right way is integral to the management role. Their daily conversations must be in sync with the employer brand. In fact, company-wide values around crisis management, organizational support and

unique aspects of the workplace culture must be delivered and driven through them.

Although they have a massive impact on the employee experience, in many companies today the middle management is the least engaged group of all. Organizations will need to focus on engaging middle managers and enabling them to deliver a more inspiring and consistent employee experience.

More than anything, management communications can have the greatest daily influence on your people and can make or break the employee experience within your organization. As we return to the new world of work, with sweeping changes still coming in the way we collaborate, management communications will need a steep correction to support morale, productivity, and engagement.

More employee recognition programs needed

A high number of respondents gave high marks to employers for the speed and effectiveness with which they enabled work-from-home environments, training, and support. Some commented how several organizations provided gift cards and monetary perks to help employees set up their workspaces.

Where organizations fell short was in the category of employee recognition. Great workplaces today – especially through this crisis – require powerful recognition and rewards programs. With the added stress and anxiety that your teams face now, a special focus on this will be needed to maintain high levels of engagement.



4

How Organizations Are Successfully Supporting Talent



Our survey respondents also shared valuable insights on the different ways their company was supporting them through the crisis – and what initiatives were making the biggest difference.

There are three main areas singled out by a majority of respondents, where management has made the greatest impact. They are:

-  Support in the transition from the office to working from home
-  Flexible work hours
-  Regular team video calls

These work changes may come as no surprise, and were certainly offered by a majority of companies. Respondents, however, also indicated a number of more remarkable and caring initiatives rolled out by organizations to ease the transition and lend support to employees. These include:

- ✓ Reimbursement of a one-time fee to set up employee home offices
- ✓ Re-imbusement of some fees for running home offices on an on-going basis
- ✓ Some employers went the extra length, allocating a portion of their budget to offset these home office costs through the crisis.
- ✓ Increase in mental health benefits
- ✓ Addition of mental health hotlines and other support services

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Employer branding is one fruitful avenue for organizations to establish the value they offer employees and to differentiate themselves from competing firms.

CRYSTAL M. HAROLD & KEVIN P. NOLAN

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Inspiring messages from senior leaders have kept employees loyal and engaged

The employees we surveyed also told us how much they appreciated receiving strong leadership and CEO messages on a regular basis. From communications on company

performance and daily updates to virtual town halls, respondents gave kudos to leaders for the way they have been keeping everyone informed and united. Leadership teams overall seem to be stronger than ever at communicating vision, goals and intentions. As a result, engagement and loyalty among employees has remained somewhat steady through the crisis.

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Poor Handling Of Terminations And Communications With Laid Off Employees



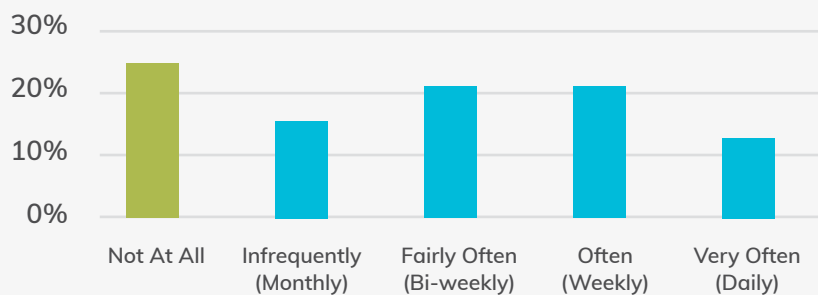
While communications and support for working employees have been fairly strong, the handling of layoffs—and communications with terminated employees—has been less than adequate.

Our survey results reveal serious issues around the delicate area of staff terminations. **26%** of talent surveyed, in fact, indicated that they were terminated or laid off within the first two weeks of the crisis and have not heard from their employers since. Not only does this

have a negative impact on your people, it also reflects very poorly on the organization and culture as a whole.

The way in which employers demonstrate their care and value of employees, before, during and after employment with the company will affect the way the world views their organization. Insensitive practices around terminations not only reflect poorly on the workplace culture, they may also damage the employment brand itself.

How often has your employer communicated with you since you lost your job, were laid off, or your hours were reduced?



6

Ten Outstanding Ways Employers Have Made A Difference



The challenge of supporting employees through extraordinary times has brought out the best in some companies. In best-run organizations, it

has inspired extraordinary resourcefulness, acts of generosity and highly creative approaches to team management.

Based on our results, here's the top 10 list of outstanding ways companies have stepped up during this crisis:

- 1 Financial relief:** Providing reimbursements for setup costs related to your home office
- 2 Creative team building:** Hosting virtual bake-off competitions and other challenges to keep teams connected
- 3 More pay:** Providing increased pay to front-line and essential workers
- 4 Paid Leave:** Providing additional time off with pay
- 5 Inspiration and Information:** Leadership communications to keep staff engaged and informed
- 6 Health benefits:** Making health benefits available from day one
- 7 Financial support:** Providing full pay, even while offices temporarily shut down
- 8 Safety:** Producing and distributing Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) to ensure the safety of employees
- 9 Charity:** Supporting the community and foodbanks
- 10 Mental health support:** Offering reduced or compressed work weeks, including taking Fridays off during the crisis, to support mental health



7

How Has The Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) Been Impacted Since March 2020?

We felt it was important to measure just how positive staff felt about their organizations, before and after the pandemic. Specifically, we asked respondents how likely they were to recommend the company as a place to work, to friends and family before COVID-19, and after, based on how their employers managed the crisis. Respondent scores broke down into those classified as “promoters” – likely to recommend, “passives” not likely to either recommend or not recommend, and detractors, likely to recommend against the company.

While the number of promoters remained relatively unchanged both before and after the pandemic, there was a greater percentage of “detractors” after the crisis (25%) than before (20%). This suggests employee pride in and enthusiasm about companies has decreased slightly since the COVID crisis began.

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A culture that fosters growth and innovation, employs effective leaders, and has a good product is more likely to evoke total employer brand commitment.

KEN CARRIG & PATRICK M. WRIGHT

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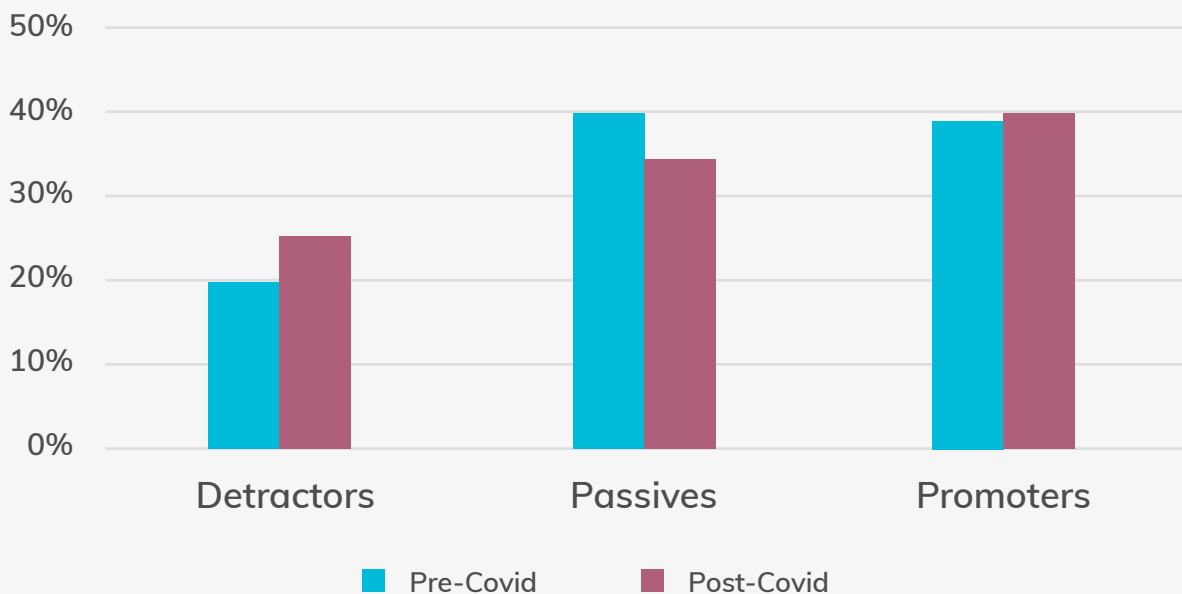
Based on our knowledge of trends, this is a critical early indicator that employee loyalty and engagement levels will decline in the coming months.

Other findings from our survey bear this out. Roughly **20%** of respondents said their employers have done little to nothing to support them through this crisis. Even worse, **25%** of respondents who were terminated

within the first two weeks have not heard from management since. For all these reasons, it's hardly surprising the survey revealed a growing number of detractors of the employer brand, signaling decrease in engagement.

The real concern is that this decline will not only weaken engagement, retention and productivity, but will also impact corporate brand trust and sales. After all, detractors talk. Not just to their colleagues but to consumers and the buying public at large across social media forums.

eNPS Scores Overall Trend



What Talent Wants Now:

Flexible hours and ‘work from home’

It may be no surprise that the benefits of working at home (at least part of the time) and flexible work hours have now been embraced and appreciated by many employees. Our survey showed that a great percentage of employees hope these two important changes in the way we work may remain an ongoing part of their workplace culture.

Now that companies have invested (some heavily) in transitioning their talent to the work-at-home environment, the shift may make good sense from an infrastructure and office space cost perspective as well. Not only are flexible hours top of the wish list for talent, they are also another excellent way for employers to better safeguard employees and help maintain social distancing. Limited staff on staggered hours in the workplace serves to reduce numbers in the office at any given time without compromising productivity.

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Employee turnover can be reduced by 28% by investing in employer brand.

OFFICE VIBE

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Streamlined communications and new collaboration tools

A torrent of communications of all kinds were used to keep us connected through “locked down”. Many organizations saw a great deal of experimentation and innovation take place with different media and conferencing platforms used for sharing all manner of things. With a return to the “new normal” employers should look at streamlining these communications and focus on sharing what’s most important, at different levels through one key platform. For this reason, successful organizations should look at adopting key

collaboration tools such as Slack, Trello or Microsoft Teams to keep their teams productively and consistently connected.

Better management of people versus projects

Our respondents also identified a dire need for improved support from their managers. Our survey results showed that managers scored

the lowest through the crisis in terms of how they communicated with, recognized and caringly supported their employees.

Going forward, project-focused managers should be elevated to the increasingly important role of “people managers”. Their role should be expanded to drive the employee experience and uphold a supportive work culture, rather than just manage technology and processes.



Key Takeaways And Concluding Remarks:

The wheels are still in motion driving dramatic transformation across the world of work. COVID-19 may soon have a cure and the crisis may gradually come to an end, but this experience has changed us all in a lasting way.

Our employee experience survey reveals that values and needs have radically shifted, not just for today but for tomorrow as well. In order to be successful, companies must review and adapt their workplace cultures and employer brands to the changing times.

Ask yourself: does your culture and messaging need to change in the post-COVID world?

Is your employer brand and the employee experience you deliver still meaningful to the talent you wish to attract, engage and retain?

Work-from-home as the next normal

The work-from-home revolution may be the biggest shift of all. More organizations and roles are fast emerging based on work-from-home models. Cash-strapped companies will continue to embrace this as a way to ensure employee health while lightening their financial burden, significantly reducing organizational expenditures on real estate and leases.

A work-from-home work world, however, also brings risks. While people have been willing to do it short-term, for some it has been a cause of stress, anxiety and even mental health issues. The line between personal life and work has for some people become blurred throwing healthy routine out of balance. Employers will also have to take action and address these dangers to support and safeguard employees.

If the world of work becomes more remote, certainly the way we communicate, manage and deliver the employee experience will also need to change.

Here are some of our key survey takeaways to inform, strengthen and inspire your 2020 employer brand:

- ✓ **A human, caring and personal approach** to managing talent
- ✓ **Flexible hours and work-from-home culture**
- ✓ **Streamlined communications** via collaboration platforms
- ✓ **Management and director-level training** to drive the employer brand and deliver a top employee experience
- ✓ **Ultra-personalized recognition programs**
- ✓ Increased focus on **health, wellness and support programs**
- ✓ **Grassroots or panel-based communications** and culture work

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Based in Toronto, **Blu Ivy Group** is a North American leader in employer branding, talent recruitment and workplace culture. Our agency helps companies define their employer brand and provide bespoke strategies to communicate and manage it.

By partnering with executives, we build award-winning people practices that inspire extraordinary employee engagement and cultivate better workplaces.

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