



THE GREAT OPPORTUNITY

How the Great Resignation is Shaping the Future of Work

KFORCE



Introducing the Great Opportunity

After a year and a half of navigating a world where the boundaries between work and life began to blend in a way we had never experienced, we have all seen that business can not only survive, but thrive, in hyper-flexible, empathetic and remote workplaces. Now, many are not excited about the prospect of returning to a "normal" that consists of rigid schedules and the five-day in-office grind.

As a whole, the world of work typically changes very little over time. When shifts do occur, they usually coincide with a new generation entering the workforce. The changes forced upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic gave us all a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to examine every aspect of our lives through a completely new perspective. A great opportunity now exists for job seekers, employees and business leaders to shape the future of work by choosing which pandemic-era lessons we carry forward and which changes we leave behind. In this eBook, Kforce experts share unique insights and original data that explore five key themes that are shaping the future of work.



41%

of remote workers said they would likely consider resigning from their current role and look for a new job if their employer mandated on-site work

What you should know about the 'Great Resignation'

"The Great Resignation is coming," warned Anthony Klotz, an Associate Professor of Management at Texas A&M University, in early May 2021. It didn't take long for his bold prediction to go viral – leaving professionals across various industries and experience levels wondering what the impact of a great resignation would mean for them.

Klotz's prediction was based on the idea that people who chose to shelter-in-job for stability throughout the pandemic were now preparing to quit. Indeed, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics seemed to support his theory – with overall annual quit rates down in 2020 compared to 2019, and a record-setting 4 million resignations in April 2021. And while the overall quit rate was lower in May, it was still higher than prior year averages.

"One thing I didn't build into my hypothesis," said Klotz in an interview with The Denver Channel, "is the thought that there would be all these job openings, these great opportunities for people." While this creates a clear opportunity for potential job seekers, it also creates an opportunity for companies to become employers of choice and attract and recruit top talent.

Work-life balance is out, work-life fluidity is in

Employees want more than WFH

In a recent Kforce survey, 70% of candidates said they would be most interested in flexible hours or the freedom to choose where they work when considering a job offer. Furthermore, 60% of those surveyed also said their work-life balance is now a higher priority than it was pre-pandemic, with 36% saying the current flexible work environment is making that balance easier to maintain.

If those statistics, coupled with the percentage of people willing to resign or look for new jobs if faced with mandated in-office work, are not enough to signal a change in what employees and candidates are looking for, then the backlash against companies over their plans to resume in-office work is clear. It's no longer enough to offer in-office perks and standard PTO to attract and retain top talent—the collective workforce now expects the freedom to choose when, where and how their work gets done.

Enter work-life fluidity

“Work-life fluidity is really creating more of a coexisting balance between work and life—that an employee can definitely have it all—but they now must set different boundaries and time-block their day strategically since many are working and living in the same place,” says Kforce’s SVP of Talent Acquisition, Lindsay Weakley. In contrast, Weakley says work-life balance pre-pandemic for many employees was compartmentalized into work life and home life with little room to transition between the two during the day.



Work-life fluidity has gained momentum with job seekers and employed professionals alike. In a recent [Pulse of the American Worker Survey](#), 80% of workers reported they've adapted well to remote work, 64% saying they are keeping less formal hours or breaking up their workday and 51% have opted to work during weekends.

The draw for staying remote is more than just being able to attend meetings in sweatpants or take a late lunch, though. Employees and companies have both discovered they can

save money and time by not prioritizing in-office work. While employees can save on gas, wear and tear on their car, childcare costs, commute time and more, companies also have the freedom to downsize or eliminate in-office space, save on office maintenance, security and more. With increased time and resources, employees—and the organizations they support—have both become more productive.

However, increased productivity could threaten well-being

Being able to switch from employee to parent or caregiver with the close of a laptop has its perks. It's easier to grocery shop, visit the vet, or pick up a child from school with the remote and flexible work environment many companies are supporting today.



But when the separation between our professional and personal lives extends to the other side of our homes, it is easy for stress from both sides to impede the other and burnout to occur. “It’s a big topic that’s very common and challenging right now to both employees and their managers,” says Weakley.

Although most workers prefer remote work and flexible scheduling, a recent Kforce survey showed 41% of remote workers are working more hours than they were pre-pandemic—with 16% reporting the amount of additional time spent working was significantly more. With employees working more hours than ever before, plus the added stress and uncertainty that surrounds living and working through a pandemic, employers and their employees need to be more intentional about recognizing and preventing burnout.

Beating burnout

Now, many companies are wondering: how can we beat burnout before it beats us?

“It’s important leaders listen to their employees. Seeing what employees are struggling with and understanding it’s not a one-size-fits-all fix is the first step,” says Weakley, “Everybody’s circumstance and pressure points are different.”

Weakley, who leads a team of over 50 recruiters and sales associates, has gotten creative with ensuring her team takes the time they need to recharge. From encouraging employees to “schedule” time off for themselves on her calendar to checking up with employees to ensure they’re not online during their downtime, she urges managers and employees to foster open communication with each other to prevent burnout and optimize their productivity, while continuing to work in a work-life fluid environment.

Human-centric organizations will dominate the future workplace

If there is one thing the pandemic has made abundantly clear, it's that culture and engagement look drastically different outside of traditional office spaces. Today's workers expect their employers to genuinely care about them as a person, not just as an employee, and are seeking work environments that create emotional value through deep connections, transparency, empathy, flexibility, trust and autonomy. In return, employees who feel genuinely cared for, valued and appreciated have consistently proven to be more loyal and dedicated to delivering better performance results.



Leaders must start by building deeper connections

Many people are realizing the way they build, maintain and view their relationships with others, both personally and professionally, is drastically changing. Where there was once a clear boundary between personal and professional relationships, as our work lives and personal lives continue to become more fluid, leaders must also adjust their approach to building strong connections with their teams. It is no longer enough to simply focus on strong workplace connections, today's leaders must be able to build connections that center around the whole individual.

"Soft skills have become more important. Leaders who excelled previously probably always had those soft skills. But for many, it used to be easy to just base everything on performance. Today, if you are going to maximize your people's potential, you're going to need both sides," says Kforce's SVP of Human Resources, Greg Glass, "you need to measure and work with your people to perform at a high level, but you also have to show that you genuinely care about them."

To do this, leaders will need to get to know their people on a more personal basis to understand their individual needs and the priorities that drive them. “The most impactful thing a leader and companies can do is look at each associate individually as much as possible to create the best model and solution for them as we move forward,” says Weakley.

However, building deeper connections doesn’t stop at the relationships between an employee and their leader. The companies and leaders thriving the most in today’s economy are the ones who are also helping their people focus on relationships beyond the workplace, strengthening their connections with their families and communities. That is where empathy comes in.



Transparency and empathy are non-negotiable

While social media and peer review websites have served as powerful ways to amplify individual voices for quite some time, its impacts on business have largely centered around interactions with consumers. However, with the pandemic simultaneously affecting millions of workers in numerous ways, more people suddenly began turning to these platforms to discuss how companies were treating their employees. Many workers even opened-up about their individual experiences with their employers. As a result, it is now even more important for businesses to ensure they are consistently sharing messages that resonate with both internal and external audiences.



“We have people in all different walks of life and it’s really important that we take an empathetic approach and talk to each associate, listen to them, hear them out, ask what they need, what their struggles are and then work with each of them on an individual basis,” says Weakley.

“What we have seen through emotional intelligence sessions is that it helps leaders realize that in today’s environment you must tap into peoples’ feelings more than you did in the past. You have to consider their thoughts, where they want to go, what they want to do and what causes or issues they care about in society to achieve inclusivity,” adds Glass.

81%

of job seekers identified transparency from their employer as very important

Employee expectations for empathy and the desire to be heard “have definitely risen and changed at the same time,” says Glass. Today’s employees are demanding more transparency and empathy from the companies they work for.

“We really need to be in a position where we are asking for their feedback and ensure we are also providing our feedback to them, so they know where we are currently, where we are going and what our goals and initiatives are as a company,” adds Glass.

These expectations are also extending beyond standard business practices, with many people calling on the companies they work and do business with to show their concern and support for the overall well-being of their communities and the social issues that are important to their people.

When asked how important an organization's mission, vision, values, sense of purpose and corporate social responsibility initiatives are when considering a job offer, 83% of jobseekers said it is very important, while only 2% said it was not as important as factors such as compensation or location.



Empower autonomy with flexibility & trust

"I always start with the approach that I trust you until proven otherwise, but part of that trust is transparency. And whatever I ask of you, you can ask of me. So, trust also must be mutual," says Weakley. For employees, this means trusting that the things your leader is asking of you are being requested with the intention of helping you succeed. For leaders, however, this means equally trusting your employees to complete their work and meet established expectations without micromanaging them.

A great way for employers to show they trust their employees is to empower their autonomy with the flexibility they desire. At Kforce, we encourage our people to create their best lives through trust, technology and opportunity. Hear first-hand stories of how our employees are leveraging this culture of flexibility, tailored to individual needs, for maximum impact both personally and professionally.



"What people learned through all of this is 'hey, I can be really productive in a remote or hybrid environment', so people want the flexibility of what works the best with their lifestyle," says Glass. He adds that you're going to have to show that you really care about the things they may be juggling within their personal lives in a distributed environment, "and that may cause some flexibility in their schedule where they might need to log-in and work early or work late so they can juggle some of those things throughout the day."

"A lot of major organizations used to build these environments where you never had to leave, you could come into work and do everything there. And that was the community they wanted to build," says Weakley. "What I've noticed from the consultant population is that they are actually more driven by the flexibility companies are allowing them to have now, not by having all those things available at work," she adds.

With employee desires veering so far from the traditional in-office communities these companies previously invested so much in building, there is a lot of discussion around what future work environments will look like. "Right now, what we're hearing in the market is a litany of different models companies are going through, and I think we will continue to see it evolve a little bit over time," says Weakley.

How future work environments evolve will rely heavily on a company's willingness and ability to continue to pursue pandemic-era accelerations.

Businesses must continuously expand upon pandemic-era accelerations

Virtual, but not distant

As companies shifted their workforces fully remote in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it comes as no surprise that our collective reliance on tech matched our need to continue our personal and professional lives—only virtually. In fact, many executives reported the digital transformation of their companies accelerated by as many as 3-5 years due to pandemic-related technology upgrades, according to a [McKinsey Global Survey](#).

This acceleration hasn't only been felt by those in the C-Suite, though. In a recent Kforce survey, 71% of employees said their companies have implemented new technology or tools since March 2020 to help foster collaboration and productivity for their dispersed workforces. Furthermore, over 96% of those surveyed reported they felt very comfortable learning how to use new technology, even when it was implemented remotely.

So, considering how far we've come, what's next?

Office design with tech in mind

"When thinking about what the office of the future will look like, many companies are prioritizing designs that ensure virtual and in-office employees are on the same playing field when it comes to technology," says Kforce's Sr. Director of Emerging Technologies, Jerry Gates.

From open office spaces equipped with meeting booths instead of individual cubicles to the installation of large screens and surface hubs in conference areas, tools that enable real-time collaboration between remote and onsite employees will become the norm.

In a pre-pandemic workplace, most employees were expected to spend at least 40 hours per week onsite, regardless of whether their tasks could be completed alone or required team collaboration.

In the office of the future, however, employees will have agency not only over when they work, but where they work. "When work can be done by oneself, employees will most likely opt to work remote," says Gates, "but when a project requires teamwork, employees can choose to utilize office space for collaboration. Companies will be more cognizant of tasks that can be done individually vs. those that truly need to be done together—and it's in this awareness that office design will shift to meet those needs."





The cost of workplace continuity

Although abrupt, the transition from a traditionally onsite to fully remote workforce resulted in a bumpy change in operations for many companies. Where companies previously focused the bulk of their finances on leasing office space and stocking supplies pre-pandemic, a post-pandemic workforce will rely heavily on additional tools and technology to keep business running—many of which are not cheap.

“As companies went virtual, many increased their utilization of cloud services. Ultimately, this makes business continuity easier to maintain, especially with remote or hybrid workforces,” says Gates. For example, a shift to utilizing cloud services instead of the on-premises data solutions many companies relied on pre-pandemic could help accelerate the maturity disaster recovery or mitigation efforts in the event of a natural disaster. Where on-premises solutions may be taken down by a hurricane or tornado, cloud services would not likely face the same outage and remain accessible by a dispersed workforce—ensuring business continuity.

“There goes corporate real estate savings, since many companies will pay for the luxury of cloud,” jokes Gates.

The cost of keeping a business running digitally isn't the only expense employers are taking into consideration when allocating budgets for a post-pandemic workplace, though. Emerging innovation with Robotic process automation (RPA) is proving to further change the talent and technology landscape.

Robots will continue to push advancements in technology

Robotic process automation (RPA) is a touchy subject for many employees and employers today. For companies, investing in RPA can be an effective way to save money and streamline efficiency long-term while keeping up with technology utilized by their competition. For employees, though, the implementation of software robots could signal the end of a job or the elimination of an entire industry. In the words of Eliyahu Goldratt, “Automation is good, so long as you know where to put the machine.”

But what if the machine is being placed in lieu of an employee’s duties? That is where employees need to be skilled enough for roles that cannot be eliminated by automation. Research shows many candidates already have upskilling or reskilling on their minds, though.



In a recent Kforce survey, 65% of candidates said they are rethinking their current skill set in response to the technological and global changes during the pandemic, with 42% looking for growth in their current industry and 23% seeking additional skills in a new industry.

“RPA is going to play a big role in our future workforce. It’ll almost without notice absorb and handle many routine tasks that people handle today,” says Gates. In today’s competitive landscape, companies are expected to stay on the cutting edge of technology—due to customers wanting the best-in-class customer service and security, and candidates seeking experience with the latest software and tools. However, RPA wasn’t always viewed as the future work gamechanger it is today and use of it is expected to only increase post-pandemic.

“In the beginning, RPA was almost simplistic in its task—it was able to help fix minor things, like password resets, but it has been exponentially improving through machine learning and artificial intelligence, and it is tackling more and more complex activities,” says Gates.

The evolution of RPA and its integration into our work doesn’t have to be viewed as job or industry loss, though. What automation takes away from employees and employers in routine or manual tasks, it gives back through job creation and opportunities for employees to take on more human-centric roles.

Identifying and attracting top talent is critical to success moving forward

As the world of work continues to evolve, talent acquisition processes have significantly changed. For candidates and clients to achieve success in the future, we must think critically about what job seeking, recruiting and hiring look like going forward.



Building a career of choice

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted many industries. As a result, job seekers' priorities shifted, and they started to explore new roles and industries while being driven by factors like burnout, financial concerns, safety, increased desire for job security and stability or greater need for work-life balance and flexibility. This shift showed us more than ever that career paths do not have to be linear, and job seekers should continue reevaluating their motivations in order to build careers around personal choice rather than industry-specific expectations.

The rise of virtual/hybrid work models has played a major role in this evolution, as remote roles are growing more enticing to job seekers who desire greater control in creating their ideal work-life blend, and remote talent acquisition has given job seekers more power and flexibility throughout the job search process. Job seekers can expect expanded autonomy as technology and increased flexibility continue to shape search and acquisition practices. And now that many job seekers' searches are not limited by location, they can not only pursue their career of choice, but their community of choice as well.

"In our current environment, job seekers now feel like they can have more control over their own lives," says Glass. "They have the opportunity to not only have the job they want, but also to live in a location they want. That's not something that's going to change anytime soon."

63%

of people would be very likely to relocate if they transitioned to full-time remote work, a dream that is becoming a reality for candidates and resulting in a trend of remote resettling

What does today's talent want?

"As the "Great Resignation" persists, employees are becoming empowered to build careers driven strongly by choice and personal motivators. Organizations have an opportunity to respond to this phenomenon by embracing new and innovative methods of attracting and retaining talent.

Talent acquisition practices and incentives that may have previously attracted job seekers, like on-site perks or commute reimbursement, are no longer as effective as they once were. As we trend toward a people-first, humanistic and empathetic world of work, companies that fail to evolve are at risk of losing quality talent to industry competitors.

"The incentives we're seeing are really the total opposite of what they were before," said Glass. "Now that the pandemic has made safety a much higher concern, people aren't comfortable being pushed back into the office, and the demand for flexibility is only growing. In-office perks just don't appeal the way they used to."



In a recent Kforce survey, a majority of respondents said that flexible hours would be the most attractive benefit when considering a job offer, followed closely by freedom of choice to work remote or on-site. Glass also notes that, with job seekers having greater leverage in today's market, companies are strengthening their efforts to appeal to candidates considering multiple offers: "We're definitely seeing companies offer incentives like sign-on bonuses and significantly higher base compensation than usual."

To make the most of today's wide pool of motivated candidates, organizations should expand their scope of acquisition beyond local talent. By embracing hybrid and/or remote models, companies open themselves up to a more diversely qualified pool of candidates. In this virtual world, talent is everywhere, and organizations should seize the opportunity to not be limited by geography.

Cultivating an environment of meaningful work

Organizations can also appeal to candidates by strongly factoring transparency into their revamped talent acquisition strategies. For example, including benefits, perks and compensation in job postings will go a long way in enticing talent. This practice not only demonstrates respect for candidates' priorities, but also ensures the company and the candidate have aligned expectations early in the acquisition process.

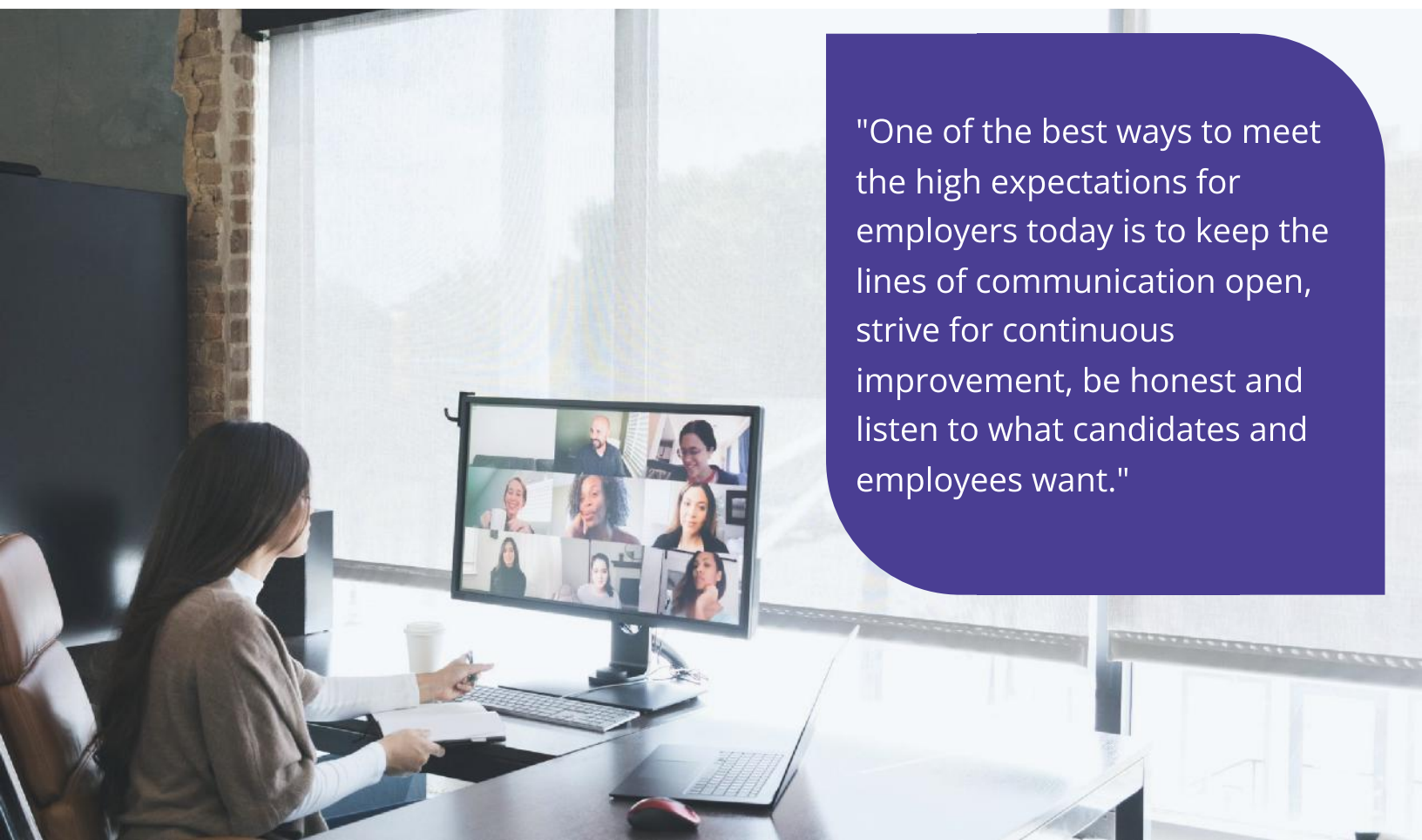
Glass also stresses the importance of organizations developing strong communication and feedback processes regarding corporate values, DE&I strategy, and social impact. In a Kforce survey, most respondents said that an organization's mission, vision, values, sense of purpose and corporate social responsibility

practices were very important to them when considering a job offer.

In an age where information about companies can be widely and rapidly disseminated (such as on social media or company review board platforms like Glassdoor), organizations need to be increasingly proactive in making sure their practices and values align not only with the expectations of today's jobseekers, but with the needs and wants of their current employees.

"Candidates are seeking firms and companies that show strong support for the societal topics and issues that are meaningful to them," said Glass. "It's important that a firm needs to be able to deliver those items; otherwise, it will be readily known that they're not an employer of choice or a leader of choice."

To stay competitive, Glass recommends firms proactively gather, implement and provide feedback around the issues and policies that matter most to their employees:



"One of the best ways to meet the high expectations for employers today is to keep the lines of communication open, strive for continuous improvement, be honest and listen to what candidates and employees want."

Talent development is crucial for establishing dynamic workforces

We must continuously refresh and refine our approach to talent development to meet the needs of our ever-changing world of work. Here's what to expect as the way we work, lead and learn changes.

One of the most significant shifts affecting candidates is an increased focus on performance and impact vs. the time spent in-seat. Our work culture is evolving toward a greater emphasis on overall productivity, results and growth rather than hours worked.

"The old mantra was, 'you're not getting any work done unless you're in the office and in the seat,'" says Greg Glass, SVP of Human Resources at Kforce. "Today, we obviously know that's not true – the last eighteen months proved that didn't have to be the case."

However, this diminished focus on visibility means employees will have to put more effort into self-advocating, building and maintaining trust with leadership and making their accomplishments and contributions known. One increasingly impactful way for employees and candidates to show value is evolving and expanding their skillsets. In a recent Kforce survey:

42%

of respondents cited increased productivity as the most significant benefit of a highly skilled organization

45%

of respondents said that transferable skills (a combination of hard skills, like software proficiency, and soft skills, like problem solving) are the most important skills in today's workforce

Today's employers are seeking candidates who can quickly and capably pivot to new projects, tools and tasks. Candidates who go beyond their comfort zone to diversify their competencies will be more desirable than ever.

Learning and leading for the future

While the rise in flexible work culture has encouraged greater freedom and autonomy, it also means two experiences that were once separate – work life and home life – are now increasingly collective.

“It used to be that, in the workplace, you didn’t get involved in what happens at home or what happens in society,” says Glass. “Today, it’s just the opposite: everything comes to work.”

This shift means emotionally intelligent organizations will be in high demand as we move toward workplaces built upon open communication, humanizing messaging and an increased focus on transparency. As a result, expectations for leadership are changing significantly.

“Supporting a distributed workforce is not without challenges,” says Glass. “We have to be prepared as leaders to work through those challenges, demonstrate care and empathy for our people, and grow our soft skills while still maintaining high standards and advocating for our people.”

Glass says practices such as emotional intelligence training will become increasingly necessary for leaders in the future world of work, as they learn to balance metrics like KPIs with supporting the overall wellbeing of a diverse and distributed workforce. Leaders also need to prepare to champion employees’ and candidates’ renewed focus on career development and skill growth.

Making upskilling and reskilling opportunities accessible to employees will strongly benefit the organization by supporting employee satisfaction and increasing retention.

65%

of job seekers said the COVID-19 pandemic made them want to grow their skills

Luckily, in today’s virtual work landscape, continuous learning is not only more widely available, but also highly popular among candidates.

In a recent Kforce survey, most respondents cited virtual learning (such as webinars and online courses) as their preferred method of learning new skills. The survey also found that respondents considered the most significant benefit of learning new skills was becoming more knowledgeable and confident in their role, followed closely by career advancement potential. Organizations must keep these priorities in mind and support upskilling through talent development strategies in order to stay employers of choice in the new world of work.

“At Kforce, we strive to support our people in building the career that works for them – and we do this based on a foundation of trust, technology and empowerment,” says Glass. “Organizations that strive to do the same will be well-positioned going forward.”



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