



Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



After the quick COVID-19-related pivots that many organizations experienced during the pandemic, employers have gradually invited employees back to work on-site. But that doesn't mean a return to the way things were in 2020, just before many businesses went remote.

Employees are now expressing their need for supportive, respectful, and flexible workplaces¹. They are re-evaluating their careers, assessing not only the value of the knowledge, expertise, and skills they bring to their work, but also exploring the purpose of their role, ethical contributions to the world, and the quality of life they have in consort with their jobs.

Employers should embrace the chance to re-imagine the roles they play in creating and fostering healthy work environments. It's an opportunity to collaborate, addressing the needs of everyone involved to develop healthy workplaces for now and in the future.

What benefits flow out of healthy workplaces?

Healthy workplaces have several benefits:

- Increased productivity because employees “are engaged and satisfied with the culture in the workplace, [so] it boosts their motivation to do good in their work. This creates a better quality of output that satisfies clients.”²
- Diversity helps inspire creativity, increased job satisfaction, and increased engagement by helping employees feel safe to share ideas and opinions and be themselves.
- Lower absenteeism and reduced presenteeism make for a more effective workplace, a great sense of teamwork, and shared contributions for success.
- Healthier employees which leads to greater awareness of their well-being and what the organization does to support good physical and mental health.

- Improved loyalty and retaining employees, reducing expenses associated with churn and turnover.

What does today's healthy workplace look like?

Workplaces and complexity are synonymous. The pandemic contributed to creating some additional layers: for employees, it's between chronic stress, flexibility, and staying with an

employer, that top their list of concerns. Employers are in a tough spot. They need to focus on both attracting and retaining talent, while at the same time growing their businesses. Let's look at some of the characteristics of today's workplaces, especially those that have the best potential to create healthy employee experiences.

Generational differences affect motivation

In 1960, the average global life expectancy was 54 years.³ By 2019, that had increased by nearly two decades to 73 years.⁴ We're living longer and subsequently staying in the workforce longer, sometimes out of economic necessity to pay for "essential expenses" and "not being eligible yet for pension or supporting family members," but also by choice because people appreciate the social aspects of work.⁵ As a result, there are five generations within the workplace, each with its strengths and different work ethics.⁶

	The Greatest / Silent / Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials	Gen Z
Current age	76 or older	57 - 75	41 - 56	26 - 40	25 or younger
Loyal to their	organization	team	manager	colleagues	experience
Authority preferences	structure hierarchy seniority job titles	flat organizations democracy challenge decisions	unimpressed by authority expect respect for their competence and skills	respect demonstrated competence	respect process follow direction want to be engaged
Work style preferences	follow rules make changes to fix something broken	challenge rules cautious about change	flexibility = good want to change rules change = opportunity	fluidity = good want to create rules change = improvement	agile seek balanced rules change = reality
Post-pandemic they want	to share knowledge and advice but have retired or are exiting the workforce	to share knowledge and advice but have retired or are exiting the workforce if they can afford to	flexibility to work remotely to feel significantly less stressed	flexibility to work remotely to feel significantly less stressed ethical workplaces with positive impact on society	flexibility to work remotely to feel significantly less stressed ethical workplaces with positive impact on society

Opportunities for creating healthy workplaces with generational knowledge exchange

Organizations can take advantage of knowledge exchanges between seasoned and experienced workers and those newer in the workforce. It can help to break down stereotypes and transfer skills while at the same time allowing for the re-imagining of existing operating models. For example, consider how a “reverse tutoring” scenario might help accelerate learning for an experienced employee who needs to gain comfort with new technology.⁸ By accepting “the principle of mutual enrichment,” organizations could match executives with a younger employee who is highly skilled in the digital space. The pairing would facilitate an exchange of knowledge, experience, and skills, helping the organization address information gaps organically.⁹

Investment and focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I)

During the pandemic, many women exited the workforce to take the lead on family, eldercare, and childcare responsibilities. Organizations should focus on offering more tangible support to help facilitate a return to work and increase diversity. For example, introducing financial incentives to address childcare challenges, “family-supportive policies and supporting workforce development via training programs for women,” investing in mental health services and providing “greater access to male-dominated jobs” will aid in rebalancing.¹⁰

Workplaces that are serious about DE&I also demonstrate greater awareness about ensuring the rights of racialized and marginalized people are respected. A clear stance and policies on what will not be tolerated, helps shift an organization’s culture, enriching it with essential perspectives that influence its operating procedures, products, and services.

Similarly, a review of hiring practices may show improvement areas that align with job seekers’ trends:

- organizations that ask for many years of experience for entry-level positions;
- postings that demand graduate degrees for roles that do not require that level of specialization; and
- excluding crucial details, such as salary information, could influence their decision to apply.

Companies who are respectful, transparent, and responsive will attract top talent.

Where can employers start?

Healthy workplaces should focus on crafting “a vision of good work culture where employees enjoy working while still being successful for the business. It is what companies strive to achieve to keep employees happy, earn a profit, and attract talent.”¹¹ Three areas can bring about significant gains because they address top-of-mind issues for current and prospective employees.

1. Flexibility with where work happens

Workplaces must embrace and introduce more flexibility related to hybrid or remote work arrangements. The pandemic proved that getting the job done from a remote location was entirely feasible for many jobs. Employees found more productive hours during the workday because they didn’t lose time commuting. Communication technology has always helped facilitate connectivity with colleagues, managers, and customers.

2. Accommodation for life events that are the fabric of our society

The pandemic complicated many people’s lives and exposed conflicting priorities due to illness or caregiving obligations. The highly contagious transmission of COVID-19 brought to light that when someone is sick, they may need to isolate themselves from everyone and focus on recovering. Family members, including children and the elderly, may need dedicated care that makes it difficult for someone to complete all their work obligations. Supportive employers make employee health a priority rather than a source of stress. Ensuring that people can have time off to recover from any illness and access supports and tools that can help them without worrying about work demonstrates respect and builds loyalty.

3. Support and encourage good health and well-being

Demonstrating support for physical and mental health and well-being builds trust, boosts morale, and increases motivation to help an organization succeed. There are some great ways to incorporate this into your workplace culture:

- Encourage employees to take breaks to exercise and move throughout their workday.

- Ensure some areas facilitate social collaboration in your physical workspace, like centralized printers and copiers, coffee stations, water coolers, and lunch and meeting rooms.
- Encourage regular drop-in social time in virtual spaces where people can take a lunch or coffee break and not talk shop.
- Support opportunities for personal and professional growth and development. Employees will develop life-long learning habits that bring many positive health benefits.
- Allow time for employees to embrace self-care through mindfulness, meditation, and journaling, which may mean a later start or a different kind of re-energizing break during the workday.
- Focus on embedding meaningful recognition, transparency, and communication as fundamentals within your organizational culture. Remember that recognition does not have to be a big-ticket item or public. Employees value a heartfelt and considerate thank-you or handwritten personal note.

What can you do as a leader to create and maintain a healthy environment?

It's important to listen to employees and other organizations, but don't be tempted to copy a trend or something "cool" you heard another company was doing. It may not be a good fit for your situation and could appear disingenuous. Instead, you might want to focus on building resilience and respectfulness to show workers that you care. A study conducted at Kansas State University found that "there are two types of respect...that matter to employees."¹² The first is "respectful engagement, which refers to being a good member of the team and doing a good job."¹³ The second is "autonomous respect which had to do with feeling respected for who you are beyond your position."¹⁴ Employees who participated in the survey attributed the highest value to autonomous respect, which is conveyed through the personal interactions they have with their managers.

Consider how different generations have unique strengths to offer. It would help if you learned what motivates all employees so that you can adapt to their needs and form effective connections with anyone.

Focus on establishing boundaries, offering flexibility, and conveying trust. Operate with empathy and make informed decisions that encompass the notion of applying equity when

it comes to HR policies. Spend time coaching, be generous with your knowledge, and model professionalism and humanity.

When you encounter a situation where the course of action is unclear, think about what you would want to happen and what is best for the employee and the organization. When in doubt, utilize available resources such as HR and other product or service wellness offerings. Those should help you develop the right approach.

What about remote work? How can leaders influence healthy work from anywhere/home?

Some employees have thrived and proven that there are no barriers to alternative work arrangements such as Work from Home (WFH), Work from Anywhere (WFA), or a hybrid model. These represent opportunities to rethink ideas about work and create accountability and demonstrate the trust, recognition, and confidence that employees want. It challenges the notion that "monitoring" productivity through observation and physical presence is necessary.

Leaders can stay connected through available technology and encourage participation in discussions during meetings. Respect that someone may not have their camera on for a good reason. For example, it may not be because they are working in their pyjamas but rather because they have bandwidth challenges with their Internet Service Provider. Be well informed about time zone differences, and don't place unreasonable demands on team members to attend meetings that may occur during the middle of their night. Establish regular updates to check in where you can observe signs that an employee may be experiencing stress.

By discussing clear expectations for productivity, you'll arrive at a mutually beneficial outcome.

Ten tips for being a supportive leader

1. Take the Canadian Mental Health Association's Mental Health First Aid training course so that you can recognize and respond to signs of stress, fatigue, and burnout.
2. Learn about generational differences to adjust your approach and understand people better.
3. Listen to understand. You don't always need to say something. Avoid the temptation to take over a conversation or provide direction. Let your employee lead the way.

4. Promote learning opportunities that you are interested in and that your employee may also enjoy.
5. Demonstrate how to embrace change. It's okay if you struggle a bit.
6. Show how failure leads to growth.
7. Communicate clearly. Be consistent. Do it regularly.
8. Speak to your team about what you envision when you think of success. Involve your employees in the conversation so you can hear their perspectives and develop a shared view.
9. Learn about your leadership style and grow from identifying situations that make you uncomfortable.
10. Embrace your humanity and your humility.


How do healthy workplaces help with employee job satisfaction and retention?

Finally, healthy workplaces understand the interconnections between physical, mental, and social well-being. When employees feel that they belong and contribute to the company's success, they are more likely to believe that there is a fair exchange of value in their employer/employee relationships.

Workplaces will continue to evolve, and employers need to appreciate that people will want to retire or leave the organization for new opportunities. Recognize that this will allow current employees who have been dedicated to your organization to move into new roles. It's not always necessary to bring new people in when you may have employees who have been patient and loyal for a long time and would relish the chance to contribute more to your organization's success.

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