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POPPULO BOOTCAMP SERIES

# The changed workplace 2021 – How employees feel and what leaders & communicators need to do about it

Accenture Insights, in partnership with Kelly Monahan  
and Tchicaya Ellis Robertson

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# Introduction – What matters most to people at work?

Working from home was an emerging trend even before COVID-19, but as we know so well, the pandemic threw out many of the old rules, creating incredible cultural shifts almost overnight. Nowhere have these changes been more prevalent than in the workplace.

That's why we wanted to introduce you to Accenture's important and compelling recent research findings. They highlight the powerful relationship between how workers feel about their circumstances and the trust they invest in their employer, with its consequential ramifications.

Accenture's [Kelly Monahan](#) and [Tchicaya Ellis Robertson](#) identified six key areas for improvement, with demonstrable effects on how employees can respond to the rapid changes in work habits.

The research started before the pandemic, identifying the pre-existing trends that COVID-19 put into overdrive. Consisting of a global workforce program of over 5,400 workers and 1,000 C-suite perspectives, Monahan and Ellis Robertson gathered insights on the dramatic changes in workplace habits over the past few years, and what those changes may mean for the future.

The insights build on several years of examining what matters most to people at work, observing changes before and through the COVID-19 pandemic. It asks how companies can use these insights to adapt for 2021 and, ultimately, a post-pandemic world.

We hope you find it insightful.

**Tim Vaughan,**  
**Head of Content,**  
**Poppulo**



# **The major trends in workforce preferences and habits in 2021**

# Trend #1: Remote work prevails

## The shift to majority-remote work

Today, 60% of the global workforce is still working remotely. This caused a profound shift in the dataset: before COVID-19, most workers didn't feel that employers adequately supported them working remotely. Less than 60% of workers reported that their employers were flexible when it came to remote work.

Then COVID-19 flipped a switch: before the pandemic, 90% of the global workforce worked in physical locations such as office, retail, and manufacturing. The majority of the workforce still left their homes to attend work at a separate physical location. Today, the majority of organizations face the reality of prolonged, full-time remote work.

## Long-term fatigue setting in

As the vaccine rolls out, workers expect to return to some physical work location. But even then, there will likely be a hybrid between remote and physical work. Many workers prefer this model. The problem is that the current state of remote work isn't a hybrid model. At Accenture, the common phrase is that workers are "living at the office." Many workers still "live at their office" today, and it's difficult to predict when circumstances will change.

This has led to a troubling trend: people are tired. The global pandemic has been a long-term struggle, forcing workers to find new ways of achieving work/life balance without clear boundaries between home life and the workplace.

A consequence of this shift has been the concept of "change fatigue." Workers have had to undergo a tremendous amount of change in a short amount of time, learning to adjust to a new model of work-life balance. And given that the pandemic has changed the nature of the work itself, even workers used to logging in remotely have faced substantial adaptations. As a result, one-third of the workforce now reports some level of change fatigue.

*This global pandemic has been a marathon. As I go around and speak with clients and executives and also talk with workers, what I hear over and over again is this notion of, We thought this was going to just be several months. We're now close to a year into this pandemic with really not quite that light at the end of the tunnel.*

— Kelly Monahan



## Trend #2: Workers report high levels of loneliness and digital isolation

A major consequence of the pandemic is an emerging mental health crisis. In our research, a staggering 76% of workers reported high levels of loneliness. Combined with the shift in work habits, the failure of remote work to replace the physical interaction of a workplace has increased feelings of isolation and fatigue.

*We've been able to do a longitudinal study, and time and time again, the one data point that's remained consistent is this notion of loneliness.*

— Kelly Monahan





This goes hand-in-hand with another trend: workers need genuine human connections. During the worst days of COVID-19, there was a spike in physical needs. Despite the capability of technology to keep workers plugged into the work itself, it hasn't yet addressed the need for a sense of belonging that only a workplace can bring.


Other physical needs, like the need for safety, will also be important as employees begin the uncertain process of stepping back into a physical workplace.


## Trend #3: A rapidly changing workplace requires new skills and jobs

Even before COVID-19, surveys noticed the increasing trend of human-machine interaction at work. This trend was going to have an impact even without a pandemic. But the demands of COVID-19 shifted “workplace influx,” the rapid changes brought about by technology, to the forefront.

### 2021 Workforce Trends

-  Remote Working Prevails: Living at the office
-  Change Fatigued: The global pandemic marathon
-  New Skills or Job Needed: A workforce in flux
-  Demanding More: Power to the people





Many CIOs reported that their companies were already engaged in two-year-long digital transformation roadmaps. But in many cases, companies introduced new digital technology into work processes within one week. This overwhelmed workers. Suddenly, they needed new digital skills if they were going to pursue better job opportunities.

This is known as the “digital divide,” leading to workers feeling uncertain about their future. 38% of workers believe they can bring more to the job, but surveys found an imbalance between the digital skills required in the future and where workers find themselves today.

## Trend #4: Demanding more and “Power to the people”

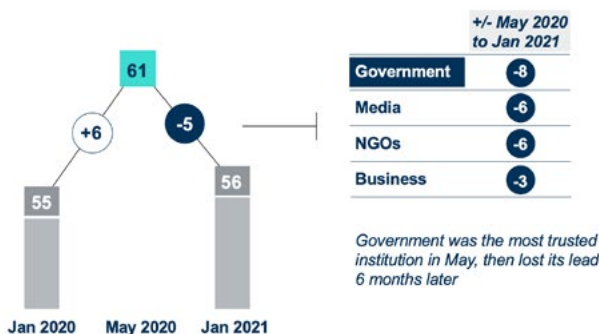
Given the state of many workers – digitally-divided, change-fatigued, and increasingly isolated – there are early signals of a trend known as “power to the people.” Workers feel empowered to expect more of the world around them. One sign, for example, was a rise in unionization within high-tech companies. Another came in financial markets in February 2021, when a crowd of Reddit users looked to disrupt the dominance of hedge funds.

The Edelman Trust Barometer results showed that trust has dropped five points since May of 2020. Trust in government has gone down, but one more important pattern-breaker emerged: trust in businesses was going up. As companies addressed employee needs at greater rates, it changed how people perceived them.

**Yet, companies are struggling to build trust right now...**



Global 11



2021 Edelman Trust Barometer. The Trust Index is the average percent trust in NGOs, business, government and media. TRU\_INS. Below is a list of institutions. For each one, please indicate how much you trust that institution to do what is right. 9-points scale; top 4 box, trust. General population, 11-mktavg.



This has a direct impact on how employees feel. It changes how they react to problems like change fatigue and isolation. There are measurable differences in how people feel about a company as their feelings of well-being change. In organizations where people report low levels of well-being, only 59% reported that company empathy was good. But among workers who had higher levels of well-being, nearly 100% reported empathetic communication from their company.

## Trend #5: Responsible businesses will have the pick of the talent

**Expectations around the employee-employer relationship are being rewritten in real-time.**

Workers are asking tough questions:

- How is the organization responding to meet people's needs during this pandemic?
- How is the organization going to keep me safe when re-entering into the workplace?
- How is the company helping to dismantle racism in the workplace?



Due to this shift in attitude, there is a growing trend in which workers are willing to ask new questions of their employers. Three different categories of questions are growing in popularity:

- How are employers going to meet the needs of workers, which have changed so much due to the pandemic?
- How is the company going to keep employees safe, particularly front-line workers who face risks in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How are companies going to help dismantle racism through changes in corporate policies and programs?

With workers demanding more from their companies, there is an opportunity for some organizations to fill the gaps. Only 60% of people trust that their organization “is going to do the right thing.” This leaves a need in the marketplace. Businesses that respond to the needs of their workers may have their pick of the talent – especially as that talent makes new demands from company leadership.

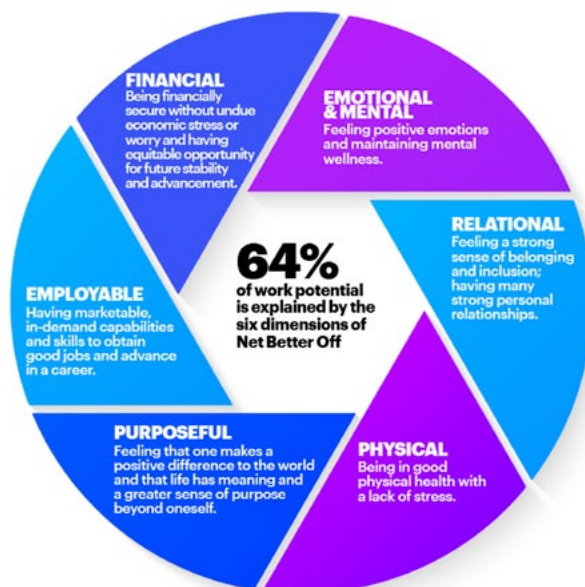
## Trend #6. Organizations need to embrace “Net Better Off”

### Introducing a ground-breaking new model: Net Better Off

By meeting six fundamental human needs through work, companies can unlock their people's full potential. We call this framework “Net Better Off”.

Net Better Off measures and brings into focus what inspires workers' potential.

We found that each of the six dimensions of net better off were significantly correlated with people trusting their employer.



Companies perform better when they leave employees feeling “Net Better Off.” This refers to the idea that companies – from both an organizational and societal level – should identify ways to leave workers better off for having worked there. Workers who have their needs met will trust their employers more. They will also increase their capacity to collaborate at work.

Just as businesses can boost productivity by being more empathetic to employee needs, this model helps workers use their full skills and strengths – to the tune of 64%. There was a significant correlation between workers who had these needs met and those who trusted their employers.

Many companies already know the two first needs to address to make employees “Net Better Off”:

- **Financial:** The transactional, baseline dimensions in which an employee feels they're getting enough incentive to perform the work. Do employees feel financially secure?

- **Employable:** Does the worker feel like a viable contributor? Is the company valuing the work they offer, utilizing skills that matter in the marketplace?

However, this is where many companies stop. If a worker feels valued, receiving adequate pay, what more is there to the equation? But there are deeper, emotional needs that employers should address if they want to create more trust:

## Emotional and Mental

In the U.S., the majority of heart attacks happen on Monday mornings, possibly as a result of widespread workplace anxiety. That leads to some key questions. How does an employee feel when they log in to work? Or when they report to a job site? Do they groan as they pull into a parking lot or check in to a Zoom meeting?

## Relational

Given the high rates of loneliness in remote work, relational needs are more important than ever. The ability to collaborate and contribute is even more important to workers when they have to weigh in remotely.

## Purposeful

Is a worker having an impact when they perform their job? Do they feel that not only their contributions matter, but that they can see some results for their efforts?

## Physical

The feeling of safety, of being in good physical health, and having confidence in the future. Will the company look out for their workers' well-being?

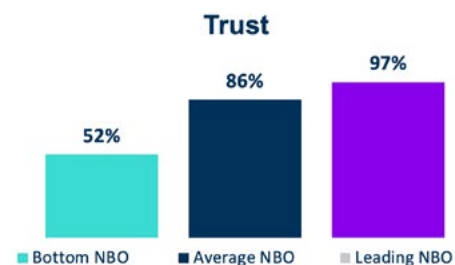
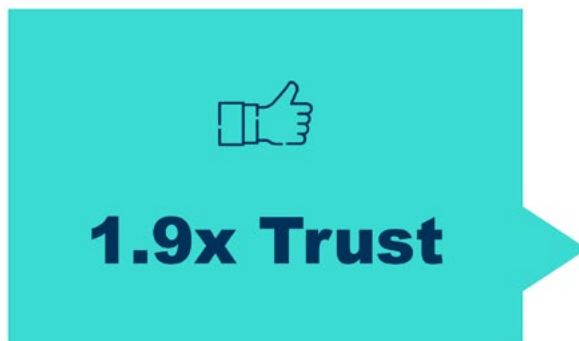
## Trend #7: Leaders can double trust by focusing on well-being

Focusing on employee well-being produces tangible results in how workers engage with their company. When workers felt a higher sense of well-being, they were 1.9x as likely to trust their employers. Companies with the Net Better Off approach drove 97% rates of trust; companies without it were at about 50%.

“Trust is the most important currency,” said Kirstie Graham, CEO-Global Public Affairs of Edelman Inc. “It is how you bring people with you.”

### Why should companies focus on making their people net better off?

When people's well being is maximized, they are twice as likely to trust their employers.  
(Percentages represent % All + Most of the time).



Categories are based on performance on net better off dimensions: Leading/Bottom represent the top and bottom 25% and the average represents those in the middle.



But it goes beyond making workers feel better about their work. Productivity is one key characteristic through which workers respond to corporate empathy. Paul Zak, writing in “The Neuroscience of Trust,” pointed out that when people trust their leaders, their productivity statistically increases.

### Why is it so important for leaders to build trust?



Productivity



Collaboration



Discretionary Effort



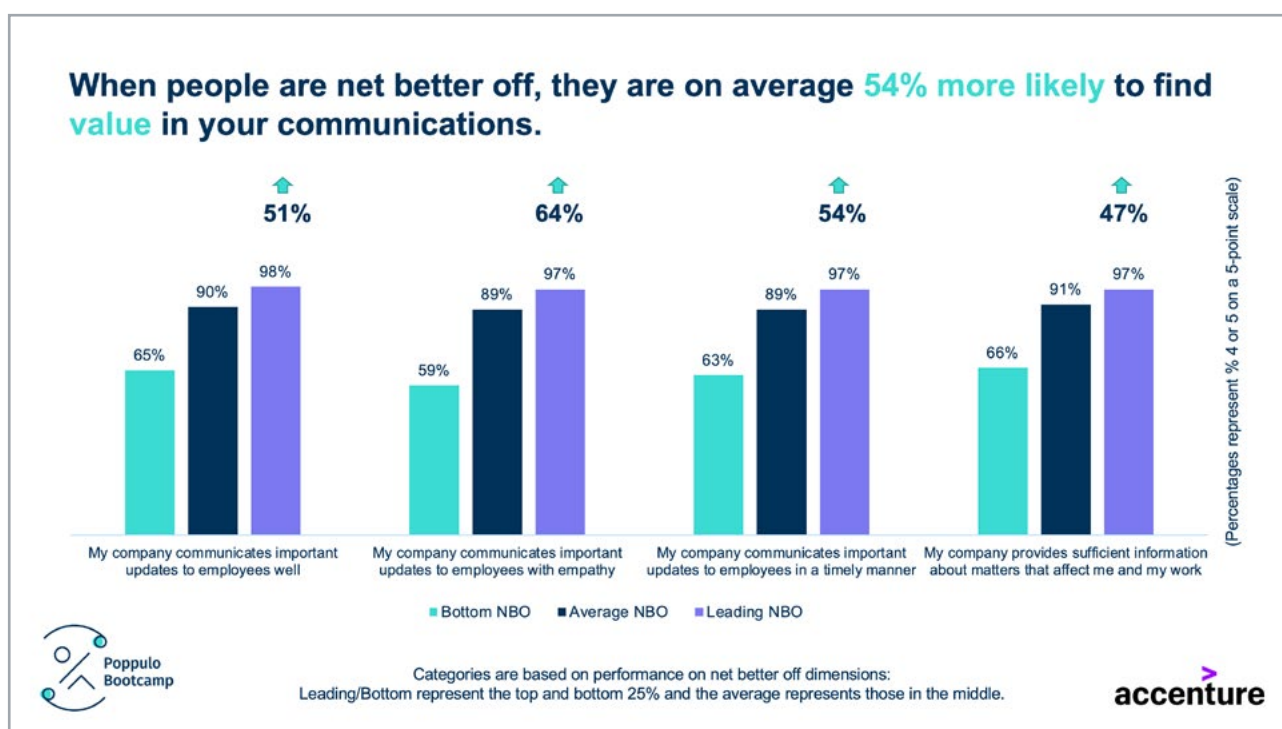
In these situations, workers are more likely to collaborate. They'll also be more likely to stay with their employers for a long time. Companies that take time to build trust and empathy with their employees will see statistically significant changes in productivity and discretionary effort.

***Fundamentally, if people are checked out, there is no way that they're going to give the company their best. And right now, that's exactly what we need. Take the pandemic. It's literally ravaging families. People have to come to work and perform as if they aren't operating in crisis mode. It just isn't sustainable. So what should companies do? They have to treat people with empathy and compassion. People have to really feel supported.***

— Tchicaya Ellis Robertson

## Trend #8: When people are Net Better Off, they are more likely to find value in communications

With people Net Better Off, the research found, they would find company communications more valuable. This was an observable effect with a 54% increase in likelihood:



*While emotional wellbeing is the strongest correlate of Net Better Off in communication, when we leave people Net Better Off across all six dimensions, putting mental, physical, emotional, financial, purposeful, and relational health at the forefront, people are more receptive to messages coming from leaders.*

— Tchicaya Ellis Robertson

With greater trust, employers can create more impactful messaging. In a time when most work is completed digitally, companies need to find a way to reach their workers. The research suggests that when employees feel a sense of well-being, they're more likely to tune in to communication from leadership.

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## Conclusion

Over the past year and beyond, workers across the world have experienced a sea change. From rising digital developments to the rapid move to remote-based work due to the COVID-19 pandemic, “change fatigue” has set in.

Fortunately, the research shows that business leaders can impact how people feel about these changes. Companies that place a premium on the well-being of their employees will see stronger trust, longer loyalty, and greater productivity from workers. This research presents a plan of action for companies that need to support employees feeling isolated, overworked, and overwhelmed.

## About the authors



### **Kelly Monahan, Ph. D.**

**Global Lead Talent Researcher, Accenture**

Joining Accenture in 2018, Monahan has over two decades of experience in research and analysis. She previously served as the Lead Researcher - Future of Work at Deloitte, where she consulted with teams on how to apply advanced research into applied insights and business practices. In 2018, Monahan released a book: “How Behavioral Economics Influences Management Decision-Making: A New Paradigm.” An author, TedX speaker, and lecturer, Monahan believes in the power of using empirical research to identify and help solve “big workplace problems.”



### **Tchicaya Ellis Robertson, Ph. D.**

**Senior Principal, Global People Experience/  
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Research Lead,  
Accenture**

With over 14 years in survey research at Accenture, Robertson functions as an applied psychologist. Robertson’s expertise in psychometrics, advanced analytics, and consumer psychology has helped drive thought leadership and key insights across a range of industries, from retail to consumer goods. Her expertise in the Future of Work has helped companies better understand the emerging trends in company leadership and worker relations, identifying key insights and strategies to improve the employee experience. An author of two books, Robertson is a thoroughly experienced thought leader and employee and customer experience researcher.



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