

THE YEAR THAT (SORT OF) WASN'T: Five Lessons Employers Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic and What They Mean for the Future

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As a labor and employment lawyer, over the past year, I had both a front row view of the ways the COVID-19 pandemic shaped workplaces in a broad array of industries and the privilege of working with employers to tackle truly unprecedented issues. With the milestone anniversary of the pandemic at hand, it is time to reflect on some of the lessons we can learn from this transformational experience.

Lesson 1: The Value of the Mission-Driven Employee

A common thread that ran through many of the often unique challenges businesses faced this past year is that the value individual employees contribute to an organization is both inestimable and not necessarily tied to salary grade. Some of the lowest paid employees risked their wellbeing to remain on the frontlines, and their dedication and hard work opened employers' eyes to the value these employees provide. We have seen that dedicated employees can often find creative ways to solve problems. We have also seen other employees struggle in this new environment for innumerable reasons, including more limited supervision, fewer support resources when working from home, limited adaptability and flexibility of the employee, and the challenges of balancing work and parenting responsibilities (which are more pronounced when children are attending school from home).

The one thing that has been universal is that mission-driven employees find a way to succeed, while employees who view work as a job often come up short. From entry level to the c-suite, this dichotomy in attitude reinforces that employees who buy into the mission of the organization find ways to accomplish that mission. Going forward, employers can learn from this equation and use it in all phases of employee relations, including recruitment, promotion, employee benefits and incentives, and workforce management to identify and develop employees who are mission-driven. At the same time, employers can foster dedication and loyalty by treating employees fairly, showing them appreciation and respect, and fostering unity behind the organization's mission.

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An interrelated factor is the importance of mental health. We saw once valuable employees so overwhelmed by fear and anxiety that they became unable to focus on their jobs. This sobering experience gives employers a new perspective on and appreciation for the importance of paying attention to their employees' mental health as much as their physical health. Employers who formerly recognized the need to provide their employees with health insurance benefits but who disclaimed responsibility for tending to their employees' mental health have awakened to the truth that mental health issues can be one of the most serious drains on employee productivity and company morale.

Lesson 2: The Office is not the Only Place Employees can Work

While the steady rise of technological advances already made it possible for employees to work from home efficiently, many employers have been resistant to allowing work remote, fearing loss in productivity and dilution of corporate cohesion and culture. When the pandemic forced many office workers to work from home on a prolonged basis, employers learned their fears were, in many instances, overstated. Dedicated and loyal employees (see Lesson 1) have worked as efficiently, if not more efficiently, outside of the office, finding new and creative ways to get the job done.

An important takeaway from the new prevalence of remote work is that, even within the same position, employers have witnessed varying degrees of success from employee to employee working remotely. Although some employees cannot concentrate at home, others can focus much better without the distraction of co-workers and the fatigue of commuting. Employers should take note of this fact and look for ways to allow employees to work in the environment where they are most productive and successful. Employers who are overly rigid about where workers perform their jobs risk impairing productivity, morale, dedication, and, ultimately, retention and recruitment.

Lesson 3: Reports of the Death of the Office are Premature

Although employees are working productively outside of the office, on-site work still holds an important place in successful businesses. From training new employees to setting a corporate culture, working in an office creates important synergies within an organization. When employees are together, their ideas cross-pollinate, producing better ideas. Employees can work better as a team, and motivate and inspire one another when they interact with each other face-to-face in an office setting. Remote work has taken a toll on these beneficial activities that we have not replaced despite all the technology at our fingertips. Although a Zoom call can be a valuable tool and is often a necessity in today's forced remote work arrangements, it is sometimes a poor substitute for a face-to-face meeting and is seldom as effective in building teamwork and creating and enhancing a business's culture as a live social event.

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Successful businesses will look for a balance between isolated workplaces where some employees thrive and the cohesion that comes from working in an office. Organizations suffer without collaboration and, when their employees work only in silos, they seldom develop the unity of mission that leads to success. In addition, employees often find job satisfaction and inspiration in their interactions with their colleagues. It is usually easier to walk next door to ask your colleague a question or chat with her about an issue than to make a phone call or exchange emails or text messages. What's more, the results of the face-to-face meeting are usually more productive, not to mention, more satisfying than the remote conversation. Each organization will have to strike the right balance of office and remote work, but we have learned that technology alone is not a substitute for in-person interactions.

Lesson 4: Travel is Less Essential than we Thought

Although there is no substitute for meeting in person with a customer, there is also no doubt that corporate travel is a significant expense and disrupter of productivity. Corporate travel can be invaluable in promoting in-person interactions that help build key relationships both within and outside the organization, but all too often in the past it was done without even thinking about whether there was a cheaper, less time-consuming, but just as effective alternative. The era of corporate travel is far from dead, but the pandemic taught us that it is not as vital as we once thought. We can use technology to train, gather information, work collaboratively, and develop relationships. Again, technology is not a substitute for in-person interactions, but we now know there are viable alternatives to planes, trains, and automobiles that may help increase employee efficiency and boost employee morale.

Additionally, for certain positions, finding talented employees who are willing to travel extensively can be a real challenge. Employers who can find ways to minimize the personal sacrifices employees make to travel will find themselves rewarded with loyal employees who are satisfied with their jobs.

Lesson 5: Adapt or Die

Perhaps one of the most important lessons from the pandemic is that employers must be prepared to adapt. Those who are unable or unwilling to do so will suffer the adverse consequences. Employees who have found a new work-life balance working remotely will not want to give it up, just as clients who have grown comfortable with video meetings will not want to pay for travel that does not provide sufficient value. We are in a transitional period and employees are becoming more assertive and clear-headed about what they do and do not want out of their employment. That trend started when the millennial generation entered the workforce, but it has become more pronounced across all generations due to the pandemic.

Employers looking to recruit and retain top talent will need to meet the expectations of these employees or risk losing them to competitors who offer more flexibility.

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ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

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