

What HR Professionals Are Looking Forward to in 2021

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January 8, 2021

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However, many HR professionals agree that they adapted well and now they're much better equipped to deal with whatever comes their way in 2021 and beyond.

With the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine, businesses are expected to start settling into a new normal. HR professionals say that, in addition to looking forward to seeing colleagues and operating in person again, they are optimistic about many new developments they embraced last year that likely will continue into 2021.

Effective New Practices

HR professionals say they had to figure out new ways to cope with COVID-19 last year, including scheduling meetings over Zoom and working on innovative project management systems, and they don't plan to give up their innovative and improved practices in 2021.

"The pandemic compelled us to reimagine the way we work—everything from how we support our front-line teams who make, move and sell our products to how we build an efficient, sustainable, remote 'office' culture—and we're extraordinarily proud of our associates and how they have adapted to the new normal," said Andrea Ferrara, chief human resources officer of PepsiCo Beverages North America in White Plains, N.Y. "As

we head into 2021 and hopefully the pandemic moves behind us, we have a unique opportunity to take the best of the old and new ways of working and optimize them to energize our culture and fuel our growth."

A Stronger Focus on Strategy

Last year was all about business survival and not necessarily growth or exploring big new ideas. But James Kinneer, chief human resources officer at Indiana Regional Medical Center in Indiana, Pa., said he can't wait to advance HR strategy once again as the dust settles.

"A lot of projects were put on the back burner due to COVID-19, and I'm optimistic that with the vaccine and continued mitigation efforts, we can start to resume more in-person meetings and activities" to brainstorm big ideas for the future, Kinneer said. "I think these are an important part of building successful teams and a strong rapport with leadership."

A New Approach to Hiring

Cassandra Pratt, senior vice president of people at Progyny, a fertility benefits management company in New York City, said that in 2020, her company developed new talent acquisition tactics to support its expanding workforce, and she anticipates that these measures will continue to work well in the year ahead.

"Fortunately, we have been able to continue growing our company and hiring remotely in 2020, [and] it has allowed us to streamline and increase our hiring speed in a way that wasn't possible pre-COVID," Pratt said. "I'm excited to be able to continue those enhancements in 2021."

Designing a Better Workday

Prior to the pandemic, many full-time employees sat in office cubicles all day long and weren't given much flexibility with their schedules. Now they've proven they can effectively work from home, said Jo Deal, CHRO of LogMeIn, a software firm in Boston.

"One of the things I'm most optimistic about going into 2021 is the changing role of physical office spaces and the power that HR has in shaping the employee experience," she said. "Moving forward, people want to be less tethered to their office, with the ability to work more-flexible hours and spend fewer hours commuting. Gone are the days of every employee having a desk to do solo work and coming into the office five days a week."

Deal said she's optimistic that remote work will continue to grow in popularity. "When it's safe to return to offices post-pandemic, I expect offices to look very different and be built more for collaboration and networking rather than individual work," she said.

A Bigger Investment in Employees

The pandemic accelerated the development of new digital, e-commerce, wellness, and diversity and inclusion efforts in the workplace, say many HR professionals, and that investment is likely to continue.

"The acceleration in 2020 forced companies to rethink their role in creating shareholder value and their impact on employees and communities," said Anthony Onesto, chief people officer of market research platform Suzy in New York City. "I am most excited about this renewed focus when it comes to HR in 2021. The renewed focus will open up many discussions and, more importantly, investments from companies that will increase employee engagement and well-being, including mental health, financial progress, diversity, equity and inclusion."

Improved Workplace Empathy

In 2020, employees may have lost family members to COVID-19 or been infected with it themselves. They may have had to home-school their children while working or change their hours to accommodate family demands. As a result of these challenges, workplace empathy grew significantly, said Cara Brennan Allamano, senior vice president of people and HR at Udemy, a learning platform in San Francisco.

"This year has completely underscored the importance of maintaining humanity within an organization," she said. "I've seen honest concern and compassion for co-workers and peers, in addition to amazing solidarity around each other's health and safety."

In 2021, she said, she's "optimistic that this sense of workplace camaraderie will be a lasting change. I also predict that people will continue to have deeper conversations about navigating work and home and building more flexibility into how we work. Our role as people leaders will be key to making sure we evolve the workplace to accommodate these shifts, and I'm excited to continue to work on and grow these areas in 2021."

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