

The great executive- employee disconnect

Study of global knowledge workers shows the view of the
office looks different from the top

October 2021

future forum
by  slack



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Introduction and key findings

Executives are well on their way to determining plans for bringing employees back to the office post-pandemic. But new data from the [Future Forum Pulse](#), a global study of knowledge workers, shows a massive and growing divide in how executives and employees envision the future of work.

About the Future Forum Pulse

To provide guideposts for leaders as they shape new workforce policies, Future Forum continues to convene Fortune 500 executives and conduct research into the future of work. In June 2020, Future Forum began surveying thousands of workers and managers globally on a quarterly basis, asking them a series of questions related to productivity, sense of belonging, and preferred ways of working. This report summarizes the findings of the the Fall 2021 [Future Forum Pulse](#), a survey of 10,569 knowledge workers across the U.S., Australia, France, Germany, Japan, and the U.K. conducted from July 28 to August 10, 2021.

Key findings



The great executive-employee disconnect

Findings from the Pulse survey show marked differences between executives and employees—from return-to-office preferences to perceptions of transparency to employee experience and how workers are feeling:

- Most executives (66%) report they are designing post-pandemic workforce policies with little to no direct input from employees.
- While two-thirds of executives (66%) believe they're being "very transparent" regarding their "post-pandemic" policies, less than half of workers (42%) agree.
- Of those currently working fully remotely, nearly half of all executives surveyed (44%) want to work from the office every day, compared to 17% of employees (2.6x difference). And 75% of these executives say they want to work from the office three to five days a week, versus only 34% of employees.

- Executive overall job satisfaction is now 62% higher than non-executives, driven by higher scores on flexibility (+51%), sense of belonging (+52%), work-life balance (+78%) and work-related stress and anxiety (+114%).



The battle for talent

As executives finalize return-to-office plans amid an intensifying war for talent, now is the time for careful action.

- More than half of knowledge workers—57%—are open to looking for a new job in the next year. And for those who aren't satisfied with the level of flexibility they have in their current role, the number is substantially higher (71%).
- In the U.S., people of color and working parents are greater flight risks—66% of Hispanic employees, 64% of Black employees and 63% of Asian employees say they're interested in new opportunities, compared to 56% of white employees.
- Sixty-two percent of working dads and 60% of working moms are open to a job switch, compared to 56% of female employees and 51% of male employees without kids.



A call for workplace inclusion

The desire for flexible work is strongest among women, working parents and employees of color, who have shown gains in employee experience scores while working remotely.

- Eighty-seven percent of Asian respondents and 81% of Black respondents want flexible or hybrid work, compared to 75% of white respondents.
- Eighty-five percent of women currently working fully remotely want flexible or hybrid work, compared to 79% of men.
- In particular, since the broad adoption of remote-work policies, employee experience scores for Black knowledge workers have risen most sharply, with Black men making the biggest quarter-over-quarter gains in employee experience out of all demographic groups in the U.S.

The great executive–employee disconnect

New data shows the C-suite is faring much better on nearly every measure of employee experience—and reveals a major chasm between employee expectations and executive-imposed policies

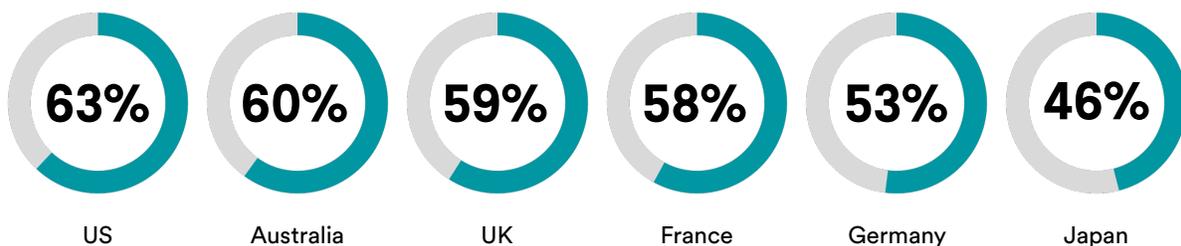
The “great resignation” is real, and it’s happening now. More than half of respondents to the Future Forum Pulse survey (57%) report that they’re open to looking for a new job in the next year, and **other surveys are finding similar results globally**. In the U.S. alone, **a record 4 million Americans quit their jobs** in April, with an additional **3.9 million in June**. And employers are struggling to make up the gap; three in four U.S. employers report they’re having trouble attracting talent—**up nearly three times from last year**.

Brain drain is a real concern

Executive concern—even fear—about the “great resignation” is entirely warranted. Fifty-seven percent of employees surveyed in our latest Pulse research are open to looking for a new job in the next year.

Percentage of knowledge workers who say they are open to looking for a new job within the next year, by country

Knowledge workers looking for a new job by country



Source: Future Forum Pulse, conducted July 28 to August 10, 2021. Number of respondents = 10,569. Sample sizes by country: USA (5,339), Australia (1,060), France (1,049), Germany (1,050), Japan (1,047), and the UK (1,024).

In the U.S., people of color are most likely to be considering new opportunities in the coming year. Hispanic employees lead, with 66% considering a move, followed by 64% of Black employees and 63% of Asian employees, compared to 56% of white employees.

Working parents are also more likely to be considering new opportunities; 62% of working dads and 60% of working moms are open to a job switch, compared to 56% of female employees and 51% of male employees without kids.

Among workers who report low satisfaction with their current levels of flexibility on the job, 71% are open to new opportunities. Similarly, 72% of workers who report low sense of belonging at work are open to making a job switch.

Eighty-six percent of leaders are well on their way to determining if and how they intend to bring employees back to the office post-pandemic—and more than half (56%) report they've fully completed their plans determining how employees can work in the future. Given the volatility in the job market, it's no surprise that concern about employee retention and the war for talent is the number-one driver influencing company post-pandemic workforce policies. It's also no surprise that business leaders are anxious. Employees are closely watching return-to-office policies. They have more options today than they ever had before.

New data from the Future Forum Pulse reveals one driver of the great resignation: the “great executive-employee disconnect.” In the most recent Pulse survey, executives are faring vastly better than middle managers and individual contributors on nearly every measure—from employee experience to perceptions to preferences. In addition, our data shows there's a major chasm between employee expectations and executive-imposed policies.

Executives are confident that the post-pandemic policies they're putting in place will satisfy employee demand. Ninety-four percent of executives surveyed are at least “moderately confident” that the policies they set forward match employee expectations, and 59% are “highly confident.”

So what do employees actually want? Flexible work practices are now deeply ingrained and valued, and expectations are not budging. Seventy-six percent of employees want flexibility in where they work, and 93% want flexibility in when they work. These results have not fluctuated over two quarters now—across all geographic areas surveyed. People working fully remotely feel two times better about work-life balance than those working full time in the office and 2.4 times better about work-related stress.

The data is clear. Employees want flexibility.



76%

want flexibility
in **where** they work



93%

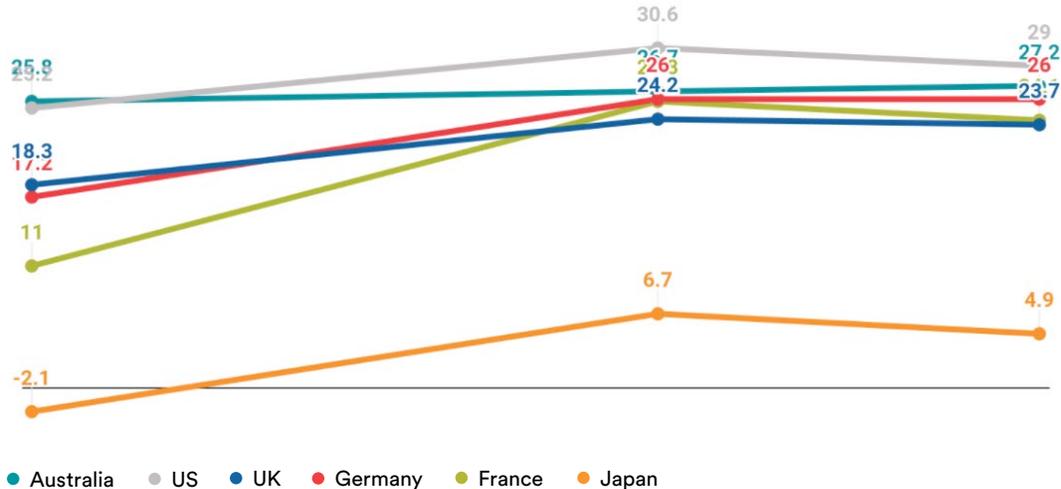
want flexibility
in **when** they work

Source: Future Forum Pulse, conducted July 28 to August 10, 2021. Number of respondents = 10,569. Sample sizes by country: USA (6,339), Australia (1,060), France (1,049), Germany (1,050), Japan (1,047), and the UK (1,024).

Globally, knowledge workers remain satisfied about the new normal

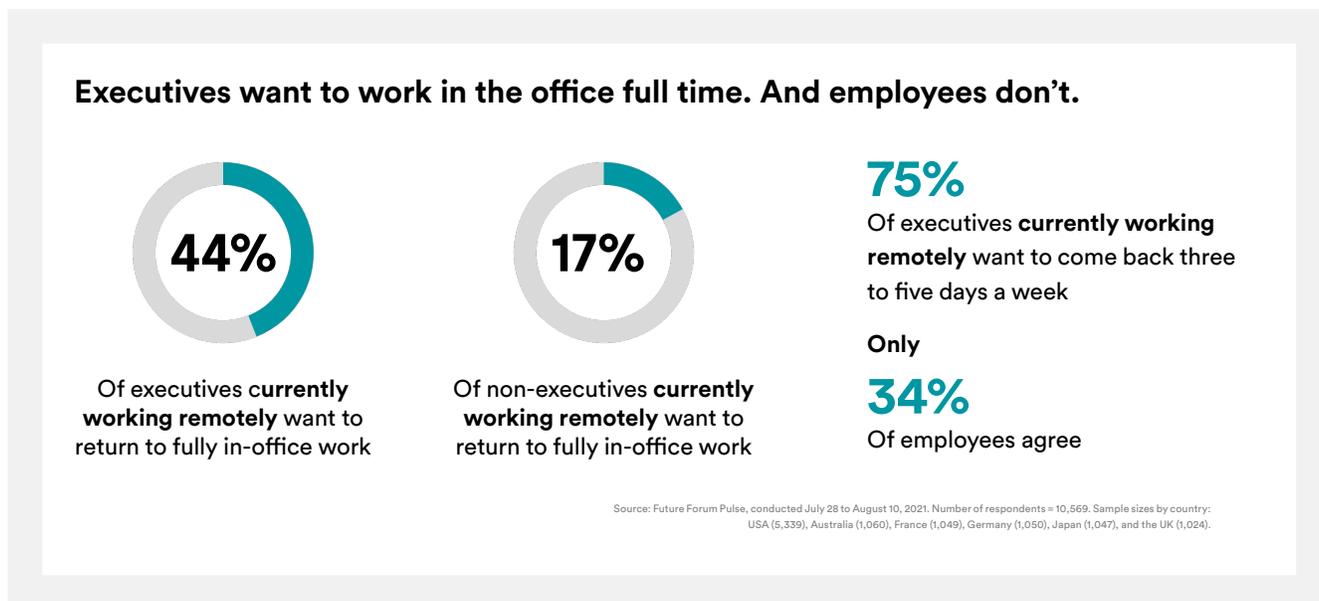
Since December 2020, knowledge workers “overall satisfaction with working arrangement” rose significantly and is now holding relatively-steady around the world. The countries reporting the greatest gains in employee satisfaction are Japan (+233%) and France (+119%).

Future Forum Pulse scores by country—change over time since December 2020



Source: Future Forum Pulse, conducted July 28 to August 10, 2021. Number of respondents = 10,569. Sample sizes by country: USA (5,339), Australia (1,060), France (1,049), Germany (1,050), Japan (1,047), and the UK (1,024).

The certainty among both executives and employees about expectations and perceptions of return-to-office policies is extremely high on both sides. At the same time, our data points to a disconnect. Most executives (68%) report they want to work in the office most or all of the time—and 59% of this group report their company intends to bring people back to the office most or all of the time.



What is driving the disconnect between executives and their employees?

Responses to the most recent Future Forum Pulse survey show that employees are more than four times more likely than executives to want to work remotely full time. And yet the data also shows that the majority of executives are building return-to-the-office plans that favor the perspective of the C-suite over what employees say works best for them. What's driving the disconnect?

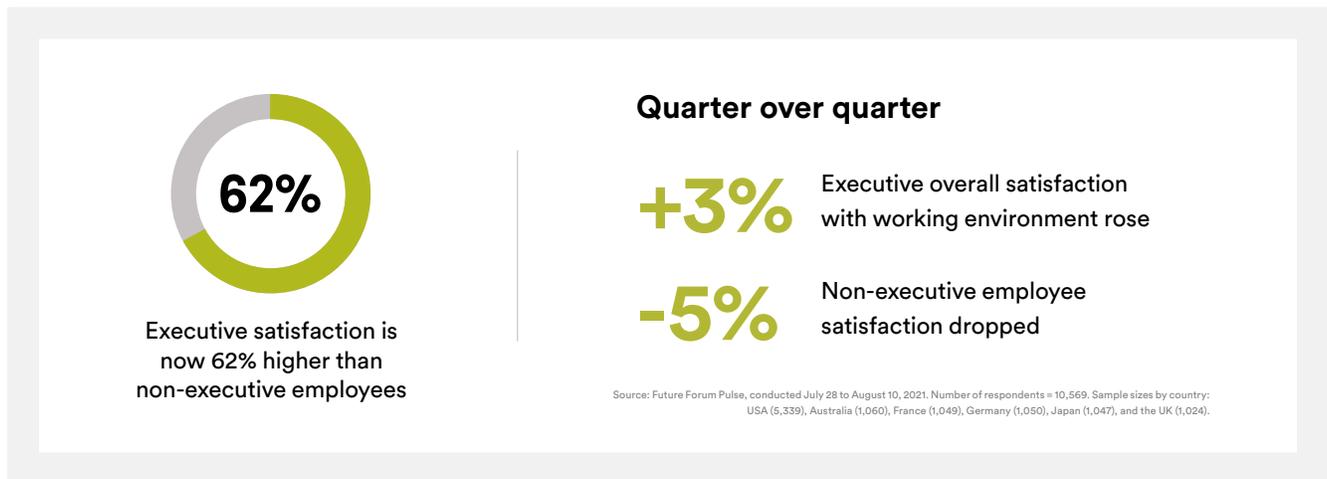


Experience disparities

The differences between the executive and employee experiences are glaring and, alarmingly, this divide is getting wider. This past quarter, as some companies ordered employees back to the office, executive “overall satisfaction with the working environment” rose 3% while non-executive employee satisfaction dropped 5% over survey results from June 2021.

The great executive-employee disconnect

Executives score 62% higher than non-executives for overall satisfaction—driven by flexibility (51% higher), sense of belonging (52% higher) and work-life balance (78% higher)—and a whopping 114% better on “feeling good about stress and anxiety.” Male executives report the highest scores for most experience indicators, including “sense of belonging,” “level of access to resources,” “ability to focus on work” and “overall satisfaction with the working environment.”



Confirmation bias

CEOs recognize that workforce policies are business-critical; therefore, most CEOs (69%) are personally leading the planning process. HR chiefs, surprisingly, are leading the process in only 3.1% of companies.

The majority of CEOs, however, are not adequately involving employees in post-pandemic return-to-work plans. Sixty-six percent of executives report that post-pandemic planning conversations are happening mostly at the executive level, with little to no direct input from employees or consideration of their preferences.



Lack of genuine transparency

Two out of every three executives (66%) believe they're being "very transparent" regarding their post-pandemic remote-working policies. Less than half of workers (42%) agree.

Similarly, 81% of executives say their company's leadership is "transparent about sharing new developments that affect the company." Only 58% of employees concur.

Given that executives are reporting sky-high employee experience scores, it raises the question of why they're so motivated to return to the office. When asked to cite their motivations for where they want to work, the data shows executives and non executives hold different perspectives.

All workers, executives and employees alike, cite "better work-life balance" as the number-one reason for preferring remote work.

But non-executives are more than two times more likely than executives to cite "not having to spend time commuting to work" as a main reason for preferring remote work (26% of employees versus 11% of executives).

Whereas executives are more likely to cite "having a quiet space to focus on getting my work done" (23% of executives versus 18% of non executives) and "collaborating with co-workers or clients on specific work projects" (38% of executives versus 32% of non executives) as reasons for wanting to return to the office.

Non-executives are more likely to cite "building general camaraderie or rapport with co-workers or clients" as the reason for office work (27% of non executives versus 23% of executives). This makes sense, given that executives already report the highest scores for sense of belonging. Eighty-five percent say "my sense of belonging at work" is good or very good compared to just 67% of non-executives.

The equity picture: disparities in employee experience by race and gender

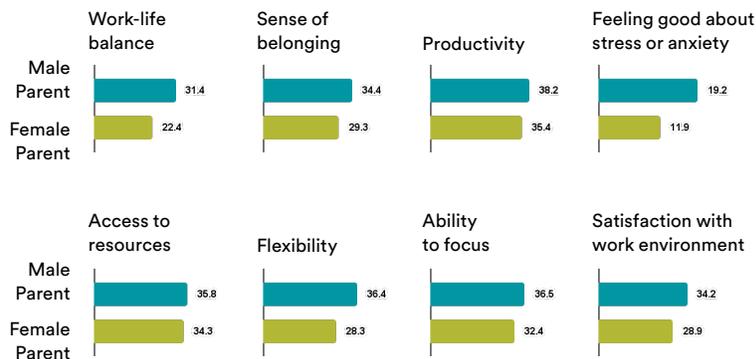
Separating the employee experience data by race and gender, an inequitable picture emerges.

In the U.S., white male employees score highest overall across many key well-being indicators.

White men are up to 12% more likely than Black men and white or Black women to agree with the statements “I value the relationships I have with my coworkers” and “My manager is supportive when I need help.” They’re up to 19% more likely to say, “I feel empowered to share my perspective when I disagree with decisions made by my company’s leaders.” And they’re 12% more likely to agree with the statement “I am treated fairly at work.”

For employees with children, working mothers are struggling, especially when compared with working fathers. Working fathers in the U.S. score higher than working mothers across all employee experience measures, but especially on work-life balance (+40%) and work-related stress (+61%).

Future Forum Pulse scores—working fathers vs. working mothers



Working fathers in the U.S. score higher across all employee experience measures:

+40%

Better about their work-life balance

+61%

Better about their work-related stress

Source: Future Forum Pulse, conducted July 28 to August 10, 2021. Number of respondents = 10,569. Sample sizes by country: USA (5,339), Australia (1,060), France (1,049), Germany (1,050), Japan (1,047), and the UK (1,024).

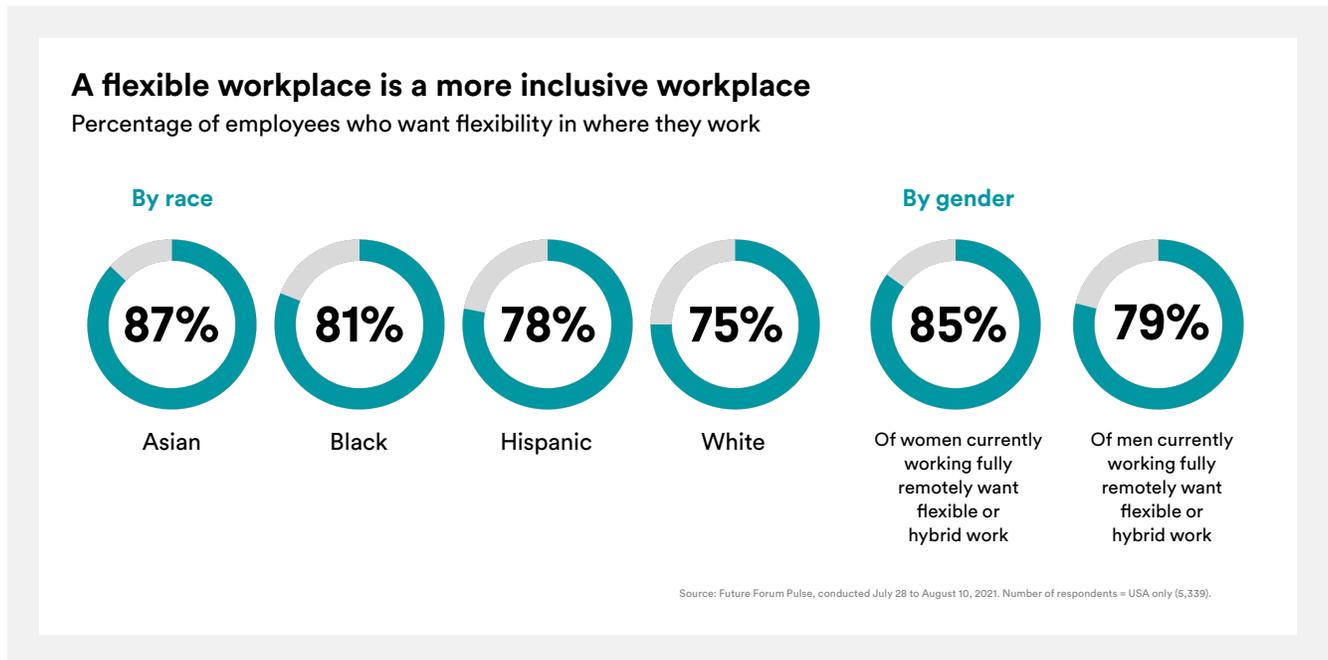
Working dads are 3% more likely than working moms to agree with the statement “I value the relationships I have with my coworkers” and 5% more likely to agree with the statement “My manager is supportive when I need help.” They’re 9% more likely to say, “I feel empowered to share my perspective when I disagree with decisions made by my company’s leaders.” And they’re 7% more likely to agree with the statement “I am treated fairly at work.”

To achieve diversity, equity and inclusion goals, offer flexibility

The latest Future Forum Pulse data shows that while most employees want some flexibility, people of color, women and working moms value this benefit the most.

Giving employees more flexibility in both where and when they work improves employee experience for everyone, but it makes the most significant difference for underrepresented and historically marginalized populations.

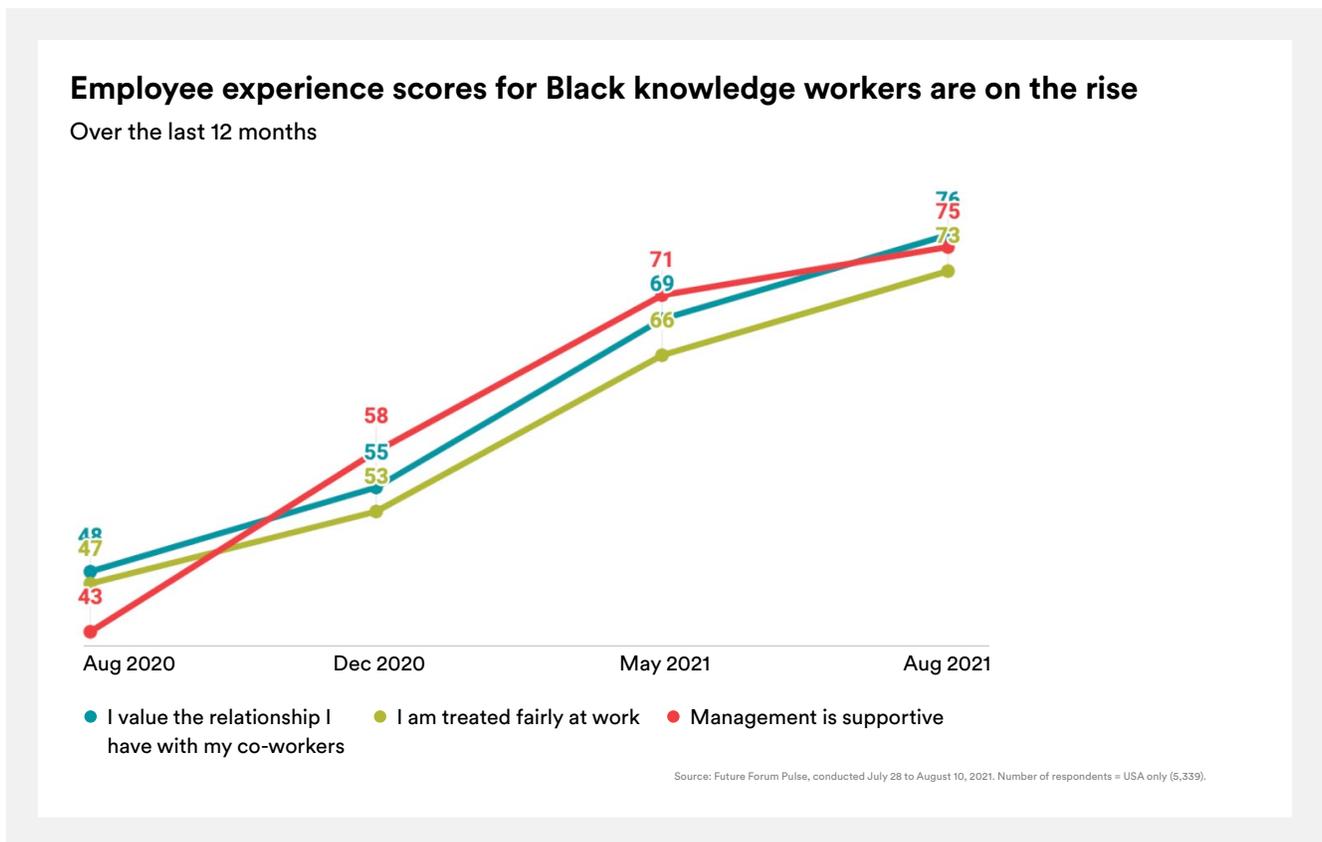
Eighty-seven percent of Asian respondents and 81% of Black respondents want flexible or hybrid work, compared to 75% of white respondents. And 85% of women currently working fully remotely want flexible or hybrid work, compared to 79% of men.



The equity picture: disparities in employee experience by race and gender

These groups also want more schedule flexibility. In the U.S., 66% of Black respondents want a fully or mostly flexible schedule compared to 59% of white respondents. And working moms are most likely to value schedule flexibility.

One and a half years into the pandemic, the broad adoption of more-flexible policies appears to have contributed to marked improvements in employee experience for Black knowledge workers in particular. Over the last 12 months, the share of Black respondents agreeing with the statement “I value the relationship I have with my co workers” has risen from 48% to 76%. The share of Black respondents agreeing with the statement “I am treated fairly at work” has risen from 47% to 73%. And the share of Black respondents agreeing with the statement “Management is supportive” has risen from 43% to 75%.

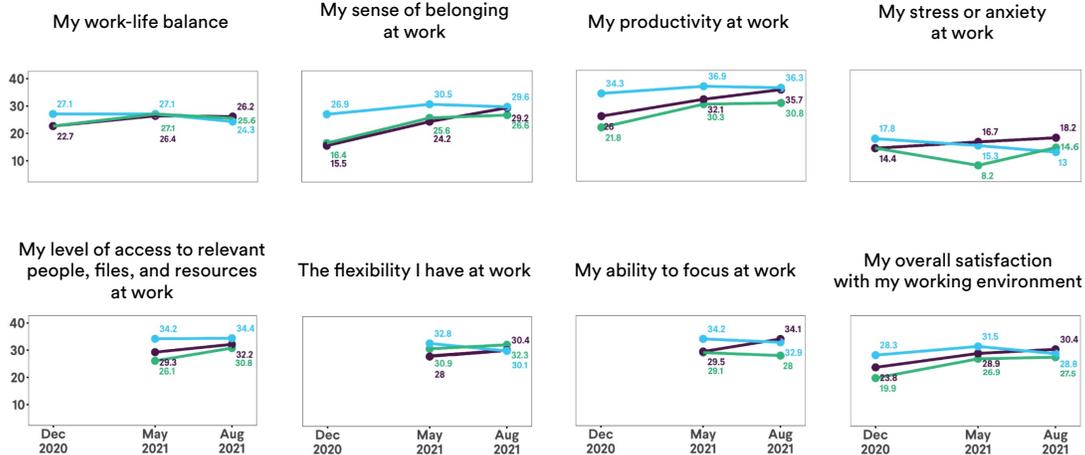


In the U.S., employee experience scores for Black employees have risen most steadily, while scores for other groups plateaued.

The equity picture: disparities in employee experience by race and gender

Employee experience scores over time, by race

● Black ● White (Non-Hispanic) ● Asian



Source: Future Forum Pulse, conducted July 28 to August 10, 2021. Number of respondents = USA only (5,339).

“Going virtual levels the playing field,” says Dr. Ella Washington, organizational psychologist, faculty member at Georgetown’s McDonough School of Business and founder of **Ellavate Solutions**. “When Covid and remote work first started, employers had to become much more transparent and communicate much more. Because everything is virtual, there’s less of this informal chatter we had in person. So that’s going to make anybody feel more like they belong, especially folks that are not usually in those conversations.”

Brian Lowery, social psychologist and professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Business, agrees. “A big part of the experience of race at work is your sense of comfort or belonging. If you work in an environment where you’re in the minority, the office might be less comfortable. But if you can work at home and not feel a sense of being constantly on the outside—if you remove that ‘everyday tension’—that can improve your experience. You don’t have to go into the cafeteria and wonder who you’re going to sit with or who is eating with whom.”

How to win the war for talent

So what can employers do to sidestep the great executive-employee disconnect, stay competitive, and attract and retain top talent?



Embrace flexibility in where and when people work

When it comes to job satisfaction, flexibility is second only to compensation. Those with schedule flexibility feel 3.2 times better about their work-life balance and 6.6 times better about their work-related stress. Those with place flexibility feel two times better about their work-life balance and 2.4 times better about their work-related stress.

“Going virtual levels the playing field.”

Dr. Ella Washington

Georgetown McDonough School of Business

Those with
schedule flexibility feel

3.2x

Better about their
work-life balance

6.6x

Better about their
work-related stress

Those with
place flexibility feel

2.0x

Better about their
work-life balance

2.4x

Better about their
work-related stress

Source: Future Forum Pulse, conducted July 28 to August 10, 2021. Number of respondents = 10,569. Sample sizes by country: USA (5,339), Australia (1,060), France (1,049), Germany (1,050), Japan (1,047), and the UK (1,024).

These results point to the need for executives to move to a digital-first workplace and build the infrastructure required to support place and time flexibility. Accommodating different locations and schedules has proven more productive than leaders could have imagined. Plus, it's what employees want. Leaders must sustain and build flexible norms in order to recruit and retain diverse talent.



**Reimagine the role of the manager as an “inclusive coach,”
focusing on measuring outcomes over inputs**

To attract and retain talent, organizations must reshape and reorient “good management.” Executives should give managers the training and rewards they need to evolve from information gatekeepers to **inclusive coaches**, and task them with building a culture of belonging that meets the needs of all, particularly underrepresented and/or historically marginalized populations.

Managers must shift from monitoring traditional productivity inputs—such as facetime, presentee-ism, keystrokes or hours logged—to **measuring outcomes**, such as increased customer satisfaction and employee engagement.

“Studies show that many executives are holding on to the remnants of the past and failing to see this as an inflection point in the workforce,” says Ella Washington. “If employers don’t pay attention and take action to re-create the best of what we’ve learned working virtually in the office and in hybrid-work environments, then opportunities for inequity could skyrocket. Executives have to overcorrect for this possibility now because by the time the return-to-work trends for marginalized groups become clear, it’ll be too late—they’ll be losing talent to companies that were intentional now and did it right.”



Build connection through transparent communication

Employees who don't believe their company "is being very transparent regarding post-pandemic remote-working policies" report substantially lower levels of job satisfaction (-26.7%), feeling valued (-24.6%) and perceived equity (-25.2%), and they're nearly two times more likely to disagree with the statement "I am excited about the future of my company." In keeping with those low scores, they're 17.3% more likely to say they're open to looking for a new job in the coming year.

Employees who don't believe their company "is being very transparent regarding post-pandemic remote working policies" have lower employee experience scores.

-26.7%

Lower job satisfaction

-17.3%

Lower retention

Source: Future Forum Pulse, conducted July 28 to August 10, 2021. Number of respondents = 10,569. Sample sizes by country: USA (5,339), Australia (1,060), France (1,049), Germany (1,050), Japan (1,047), and the UK (1,024).

Employees expect full transparency, so let them know the "whats" and "whys" behind decisions. For leaders who don't include employees in the conversation, the conversation doesn't stop—it just happens without them. Honesty and shared information from the executive level down is a fundamental requirement for employee engagement, organizational alignment and talent retention.

Transparency requires investing in digital tools that foster communication and collaboration.

People who work at companies they **describe as technology innovators** report much more positive work experiences, including 160% higher scores on work-life balance, 111% higher scores on sense of belonging, 58% higher scores on productivity, 60% higher scores on access to resources and people, 117% higher scores on flexibility, 66% higher scores on ability to focus and 177% higher scores on overall satisfaction.

People who work at companies they describe as technology innovators see:



177%
Higher scores on
overall satisfaction



160%
Higher scores on
work-life balance



117%
Higher scores on
flexibility



111%
Higher scores on
sense of belonging



66%
Higher scores on
ability to focus



60%
Higher scores on
access to resources



58%
Higher scores on
productivity

Source: Future Forum Pulse, conducted July 29 to August 10, 2021. Number of respondents = 10,569. Sample sizes by country: USA (5,339), Australia (1,060), France (1,049), Germany (1,050), Japan (1,047), and the UK (1,024).

The office is not dead—but headquarters are now virtual. Executives should consider repurposing physical office space toward environments that intentionally foster collaboration and connection among co-located and remote colleagues, while retaining some space for solo, focused work.

In summary

If leaders proceed without listening to their employees and establish policies colored by their overly rosy view of in-office work from the executive lens, then they run the risk of their number-one concern coming true—and inciting turnover within their organizations.

If leaders put flexible policies in place but don't personally commit to and model those policies, they risk alienating people of color, women and working moms, and creating more inequities between remote and co-located workers.

But leaders who genuinely listen to employees, foster flexibility, embrace inclusion, build connections and lead by example will create a work environment that is more productive, balanced and innovative than before.

Methodology

This Future Forum Pulse surveyed 10,569 knowledge workers in the U.S., Australia, France, Germany, Japan and the U.K. between July 28 and August 10, 2021. The survey was administered by Qualtrics and did not target Slack employees or customers. Respondents were all knowledge workers, defined as employed full-time (30 or more hours per week) and either having one of the roles listed below or saying they “work with data, analyze information or think creatively”: Executive Management (e.g., President/Partner, CEO, CFO, C-suite), Senior Management (e.g., Executive VP, Senior VP), Middle Management (e.g., Department/Group Manager, VP), Junior Management (e.g., Manager, Team Leader), Senior Staff (i.e., Non-Management), Skilled Office Worker (e.g., Analyst, Graphic Designer).

The Future Forum Pulse measures how knowledge workers feel about their working lives on a five-point scale (from “very poor” to “very good”) across eight dimensions on a scale from –60 (most negative) to +60 (most positive).

How to cite this report

Future Forum Pulse (October 5, 2021), futureforum.com/pulse-survey