GLOBAL FINDINGS ON THE FUTURE OF FLEXIBLE WORK
Approximately 30 days before the COVID-19 pandemic forced many companies into lockdown, Lynchburg, Virginia-based NB Handy implemented Fuze as their cloud-based communications platform. The solution allowed the metals and machinery distribution company to implement flexible work at a scale they had never envisioned. As an Essential Business, a full physical lockdown was not feasible. The corporate office implemented a rotating one-week-in-office, one-week-work-from-home schedule to compartmentalize risk to employees.

At just the right moment, NB Handy handed employees the tool they’d need to function effectively, even if they weren’t in the office or at a worksite or client site. And with locations from Maryland to Florida, staying nimble was critical to business continuity.

Though the advent of COVID-19 in 2020 demanded companies to immediately pivot to flexible work models — whether they had allowed flexibility in the past or not — the fact is that the pandemic allowed companies and their employees alike to discover the benefits of this approach at all levels.

This year, Fuze surveyed nearly 9,000 employees and discovered the ways in which this unexpected international crisis galvanized flexibility at work. In this report, we’ll share what we learned, and how business leaders can manage people, implement policy, and hone practices to ensure teams at every level of their organization thrive in this evolved environment.

The ability for our Account Managers to stay in touch with customers they could no longer see face-to-face was HUGE. And work-from-home options for office employees gave us flexibility we never had in the past.

David Houchins
Telecom Administrator
NB Handy
Across the globe, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed dramatic changes to where, when, and how work gets done. As many large companies consider what a return to the worksite or office might look like, the challenge is helping teams thrive in this emerging hybrid environment.

One thing’s certain: flexible work is the new operating model.

Few businesses are completely unsuited for hybrid models. Most knowledge work can be done away from the office for many employees. Some tasks for particular roles may be done most effectively in-person. Many other tasks can usually be completed offsite. New desires to move to a city or to rural locations have also increased the interest in fully-remote options which are worth considering.

There are few roles which must be office-bound all day all week. If you disagree, what options have you tested? Have you asked all employees for suggestions to explore new technologies or adapt processes?

Sophie Wade
Founder and Workforce Innovation Specialist
Fixel Network
As remote-first work persisted for many workers during 2020, a gap in the perception of trust across roles surfaced. While a majority of senior leaders increased their confidence in flexible work, employees who are further away from those leadership roles are not as aligned. Less than half of frontline workers (42%) believe management is more trusting of remote work, while 70% of senior leaders believe that management is more trusting of remote work.

This divide between the roles can set up conflict — if employees feel their leaders don’t back the policy, they’ll feel less comfortable taking advantage of it, or worse, employees could move on to other companies that fully embrace flexible working models.

Employees could move on to other companies that fully embrace flexible working models.

Percentage of employees who think management is more trusting of remote work since March 2020:

- 42% of frontline workers
- 62% of office workers
- 70% of senior leadership

78% of frontline workers also report that their organization requires them to be in their current working location versus only 60% of office workers.

62% of frontline workers do not believe they can work when and in the way they want.

More than half of frontline workers expect to return to workplaces, plants, or other job sites at least four days a week.

In contrast, 70% of office workers and 57% of senior leaders expect to return to their work locations only 0 to 3 days per week.
HOW ATTITUDES TOWARD REMOTE WORK HAVE CHANGED

63%

of all respondents are personally more trusting toward remote work

Though workers across roles have become more trusting toward remote work since March 2020, frontline workers have had less of a change in their attitudes.

Percentage of employees who are more trusting toward remote work since March 2020:

- 50% Frontline Workers
- 73% Office Workers
- 76% Senior Leadership

INDUSTRY AND GEOGRAPHY ALSO MATTER

In sectors like retail and manufacturing, where work is more hands-on and in-person, employees trusted remote work policies less than in other sectors.

Percentage of employees in specific industries who are more trusting toward remote work since March 2020:

- Financial Services: 76%
- Manufacturing: 55%
- Professional services: 68%
- Retail: 54%
- Software and Technology: 79%

Percentage of employees across regions who are more trusting toward remote work since March 2020:

- Australia: 69%
- France: 53%
- UK: 65%
- US: 65%
In most organizations, flexible work was a negotiated benefit — something addressed on a case-by-case basis, often directly with managers. But now, three in four workers (75%) demand flexible work. Even frontline workers, who are less likely to get as much flexibility as office workers, are on board — 68% think flexible work should be a standard practice. Workers at all levels want flexibility without taking a pay cut, demotion, or loss of benefits to get it.

Rather than assume that centralized locations are the best way to engage workers and provide those outcomes, the anywhere-work approach recognizes that people — employees, prospective talent, managers, and other stakeholders in the ecosystem — all have preferences that, post-pandemic, will break the traditional definition of and boundary between in-office and home-based work. Companies won’t need a centralized office to amass resources for employees if they invest in technology that makes it as easy to access those resources remotely as in the office; this includes respecting the devices and connection options that workers already own or can conveniently access.

"Use The Lessons From 2020 To Create Your Anywhere-Work Strategy", Forrester, November 17, 2020

FLEXIBLE WORK SHOULD BE STANDARD PRACTICE, NOT A BENEFIT

75% of workers DEMAND flexible work

EVERYONE WANTS MORE FLEXIBILITY

Percentage of workers, by role, who consider working flexibly to be important:

- 59% Frontline Workers
- 78% Office Workers
- 74% Senior Leadership

Percentage of workers, by region, who consider working flexibly to be important:

- 71% Australia
- 64% France
- 69% UK
- 71% US

59% of frontline workers consider flexibility to be important
A full-time return to the office or worksite mandate could result in destabilizing job churn. Six in 10 frontline workers would consider changing jobs to get more flexibility at work and nearly seven in 10 senior leaders would consider finding a new job. There are regional differences as well. In France, 57% of workers across all roles would consider changing jobs to gain more flexibility at work. For workers in Australia, the UK, and the US, this number increases to 67%.

2/3

Nearly 2/3 of employees would consider finding a new job for greater flexibility at work.
Employees are both more productive and more engaged than companies might think. 86% of respondents feel as or more productive as they did before the pandemic. But the risk of burnout is still a threat. Only 66% of respondents said they are ensuring they take a break every day. In addition, a quarter of respondents report that they find themselves working longer hours since they started working remotely. Less effective tools and too many meetings exacerbate that risk.

**The more senior the role, the more productive.**

Although 60% of respondents working remotely 100% of the time said they felt more productive than they did in the office, senior leaders — who spend more of their days in meetings and on strategic tasks, rather than doing tactical, hands-on work — drove some of that response. Also, senior leaders are further in their career, and are able to leverage that experience to be more comfortable and confident in remote-first environments.

**BREAKS SUPPORT PRODUCTIVITY**

Burnout also stems from the inability to disconnect. 60% of UK respondents were unable to disconnect compared to almost the same amount in the US who said they were able to disconnect and recharge (58%). Of those workers who have trouble disconnecting, workers in the UK (23%) feel the most anxious about getting caught up, while workers in France are most distracted by looking at their phones (23%).

**WORKING REMOTE VS. ONSITE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Frontline Workers</th>
<th>Office Workers</th>
<th>Senior Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>69%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Common tools have been used more heavily during the pandemic.

Technology has played a major role in connecting remote workers throughout the pandemic. 64% of respondents say the right tools allow them to work more productively outside a company office or worksite. But those tools need to be secure, useful, flexible, and the appropriate ones for the situation. They also need to evolve to meet the needs of workers who traditionally have not relied as heavily on meeting-focused collaboration tools. There are still sizable employee audiences NOT using these tools to accomplish their work.

WHAT TOOLS ARE EMPLOYEES USING NOW?

In every industry, every job category, and every region, fewer than 1 in 10 employees consider seeing someone’s face the most critical part of an effective meeting.
There are lots of workers who report being happier working at home or another chosen location, but if their time is completely jammed with meetings, they will quickly become less effective and engaged. In fact, 59% of our respondents said the ideal time in meetings each day is less than 2 hours. Senior leaders, whose roles often demand more time in meetings, are the exception.

Comparing the ideal time spent in meetings by all workers and senior leadership.

Percentage of employees who agree less than two hours of meetings per day is ideal:

- **57%** Frontline Workers
- **64%** Office Workers
- **40%** Senior Leadership

Percentage of employees by region who agree less than two hours of meetings per day is ideal:

- **58%** Australia
- **63%** France
- **60%** UK
- **54%** US
Surprisingly, employee engagement has not suffered during the pandemic. In fact, our research found 75% of all respondents currently feel engaged at work. French respondents were the most engaged: 81% say they feel engaged overall.

### Remote Workers Still Feel Very Engaged

- **73%** Frontline Workers
- **77%** Office Workers
- **82%** Senior Leadership

### Employee Engagement by Region:

- **Australia:** 76%
- **France:** 81%
- **UK:** 67%
- **US:** 77%

Employee engagement compared to before the pandemic:

- **Feel more engaged:** 45%
- **Feel the same:** 31%
- **Feel less engaged:** 23%
The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the evolution of flexible work faster than anyone could have imagined. As we have begun to emerge from the disruption caused by global lockdowns, many companies have decided to shift their policies and practices permanently. Companies in industries where flexible work was not the norm have had the opportunity to flex new muscles around hybrid ways of working, and can measure where these practices are working for them, and where they may still need to adjust further.

What we know, based on our research, is there are some key principles to follow to ensure a flexible, healthy work culture:

1. **Flexible work is the new operating model.** Companies must keep this in mind if they want to attract, win, and retain employees going forward. Flexible work is now either a recruitment tool or a churn risk.

2. **It’s the responsibility of organizations to provide the blueprint, tools, and trust** for employees to succeed in this new flexible work model. It’s critical that frontline workers are not left behind.

3. **Ongoing innovation is key.** There is a wave of technology and experiential innovation coming to meet the demands of flexible work. To succeed, companies must continue to invest as they move forward.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the companies that embrace flexible work will be the ones most likely to retain stable workforces, accomplish ambitious goals with the help of engaged employees, and thrive in their respective industries.

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**CONCLUSION**

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the companies that embrace flexible work will be the ones most likely to retain stable workforces, accomplish ambitious goals with the help of engaged employees, and thrive in their respective industries.

*Brian Day*
CEO
*Fuze*

When organizations adjust their policies and practices to optimize for flexible work, people thrive. Companies that use this unique moment in history to pivot toward the future of flexible work and invest in a hybrid work model will see ongoing employee productivity, engagement, and satisfaction.