



2020 AND BEYOND:

HR Reflections and Projections

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Undeniably, 2020 has proven to be one of the most challenging and unpredictable years. In 2019, when organizations were carefully planning for the upcoming year, who could have predicted that world events would so drastically change their operations?

As an HR and employment law firm, we partner with organizations to provide human capital solutions to effectively grow their businesses. One of our key areas of focus this year has been supporting business owners through this extraordinary year of change. This article takes a critical look at four major themes of 2020 that will have a lasting impact on organizations for 2021 and beyond.

1. REMOTE WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

Many organizations shifted to a remote workforce operational model to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic, and some will likely make certain roles permanently remote. For many, working remotely/virtually inherently means working differently, which leads to a new set of challenges to consider, some of which are outlined below:

- ▶ Employee engagement and motivation
- ▶ Virtual onboarding and integration of newly hired employees
- ▶ Email and video conferencing etiquette and best practices
- ▶ Proper and safe home office set-up
- ▶ Effective remote work performance evaluation

Conversely, remote work also has its advantages:

- ▶ Flexible staff scheduling
- ▶ Broader candidate talent pool for organizations to hire from
- ▶ Less commute time and more flexible work hours
- ▶ Fewer costs spent on items such as office supplies, snacks, coffee/tea, parking spots, etc.
- ▶ Decreased (or eliminated) physical office rental costs/purchases

The way organizations manage a remote workforce will have long-term implications for the business and its growth potential. If done poorly, productivity and morale will suffer. If successful, it will help boost engagement and build a culture of loyalty.

2. EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

According to the *2021 Hays Salary Guide*, 71 per cent of employers are confident that the Canadian economy will show positive signs of recovery over the next 12 months. Employees, on the other hand, are not as optimistic. They credit reduced social interaction, increased workloads and an overall lack of mental health and well-being support as their key concerns — with 43 per cent saying their employers took no measure to support their well-being during the pandemic.¹

The trend we are seeing in the current (and expected future) workforce is that employees are looking beyond the traditional aspects of what a job offers, seeking organizational cultures that truly have the employee's best interest at heart. Team members who feel unsupported at work tend to look for opportunities elsewhere.

In addition, the negative mental health implications brought on by the pandemic do not look like they will be going away any time soon. Organizations need to prioritize supporting their employees' mental health and emotional well-being now more than ever. For instance, introduce wellness advocacy programs such as employee assistance programs and caregiving benefits, and identify the root causes of turnover and burnout early. If neglected, there will be detrimental effects on the bottom line, employee morale, productivity, attendance, retention and overall performance.

3. REDUCTIONS IN HEADCOUNTS

Many organizations were — and still are — being forced to make difficult decisions to reduce operational costs and headcounts. The pandemic also added an extra layer of complexity for employers: as terminated employees may find it more difficult to find new and comparable work, employers need to critically consider this risk factor when working with their HR and/or legal professionals to determine a reasonable separation package.

Several organizations were also forced to place valuable employees on temporary layoffs or reduce their hours and/or pay during this time. Prior to the pandemic, these actions could trigger consequences in accordance with employment standards; however, new leaves were created in most jurisdictions to allow employees to take unpaid, job-protected leaves of absence from work for reasons related to COVID-19.

To successfully adapt to a rapidly changing COVID-19 environment, leaders need to be aware of the ongoing changes in legislation, as temporary regulations expire and new ones are introduced, to prepare their business and workforce planning strategies for 2021 and beyond.

4. DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION (DEI)

A recent Glassdoor survey predicted recruitment of diversity and inclusion professionals to be a growing priority in the talent acquisition space.² DEI and social justice are not new issues that emerged from 2020; however, a long overdue spotlight has been placed on them this year. As a result, many organizations are focusing on creating and fostering more diverse and inclusive workforces.

Honest conversations about topics such as racial injustices and systemic inequities will continue, no matter how difficult or uncomfortable. Through continued dialogue and learning, organizations can help bring about much needed changes in workplaces, communities and everyday lives.

Organizations can support employees, clients and the public by implementing some of the changes outlined below:

- Develop an organizational DEI statement and plan;
- Understand DEI as connected to organizational values and ensure the well-being of staff and the communities served;
- Acknowledge and dismantle any inequities within organizational practices, policies, systems, programs and services;
- Explore potential underlying, unquestioned assumptions that interfere with inclusiveness;
- Partner only with organizations that have similar DEI missions, values, policies and processes;
- Ensure internal committees are focused on keeping the conversations alive and helping to enact change where needed through education;
- Ensure ongoing DEI training from experts for both employees and clients;
- Foster teamwork and employee participation, encouraging the representation of all groups and perspectives; and
- Dedicate resources to develop more diverse leadership, management, employees, clients and community.

ORGANIZATIONAL YEAR-END HR CONSIDERATIONS

To finish this year strong and prepare for 2021, leaders need to devote time and effort to strategizing while maintaining employee engagement. Below are some of the year-end house-keeping items to keep in mind from an HR perspective:

- **Year-end reporting:** Assess retention, turnover, training costs and recruitment.
- **Employee engagement survey:** Determine whether to do the annual survey given the challenges in 2020.
- **Benefits program administration:** Manage annual open enrollment period.
- **Health spending account:** Remind staff to spend their annual allotment and track any roll-over.
- **Unused staff vacation:** Manage vacation schedule (with managers) to ensure employees take their yearly entitlement and control carry-over. Update HRIS to ensure accuracy of 2021 time-off balances.
- **Workplace legislative compliance review:** Ensure organizational practices adhere to all legal requirements.
- **Annual performance review program:** Kick off program and hold calibration sessions to review talent across the organization for succession planning, career development, etc.
- **Employment agreements, policies and procedures:** Update according to most recent legislation and best practices.
- **HR training and development:** Start planning schedules, materials and content for 2021 programs.
- **Employment terminations close to the holidays:** Consider timing of any employee separation decisions, as the courts look at the optics of terminations in deciding the terminated employees' loss or damages, not to mention the human impact on the employee's holidays.
- **HR calendar:** Organize for the upcoming year by noting important dates such as performance review program milestones, probationary periods, and training/licensure/certification renewals and expirations.

To say our working methods have gone through changes this year would be an understatement, and the way leaders conduct their organizations should reflect the "new normal." Now, more than ever, leaders need to be the driving force in creating fluid, agile-thinking cultures that can quickly respond to change. In doing so, their organizations will be better prepared to handle and adapt to unpredictable challenges in the future (pandemic-related or not). As we approach the finish line to year-end, organizations should reflect on the year to celebrate the wins and learn from the mistakes to be better prepared for whatever 2021 has in store! ■

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¹ Hays Canada. *2021 Canada Salary Guide: Hiring Trends & Compensation Insights*. <https://www.hays.ca/resources/reports/2021-salary-guide>

² Andrew Chamberlain. (2020). *Glassdoor's Job & Hiring Trends for 2020*. https://www.glassdoor.com/research/app/uploads/sites/2/2019/11/Job_Hiring_Trends_2020-FINAL-1-1.pdf