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BENEFITS OF BUILDING A CONNECTED CULTURE

How HR teams can leverage technology for happier, healthier employees

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If you've read a business blog, company newsletter, or earnings report in the past couple of years, you've likely encountered some well-worn language about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This global event's effect on business cannot be understated, though — it changed even in the way people communicate about work itself. Words like "digitalization," "remote work," and

"telecoms" — all terms that already had a foothold in the business lexicon — began popping up even more.

And it wasn't all talk. Work became increasingly digitized and even automated as companies had to learn on the fly how to keep up the flow of operations as employees started working remotely. Businesses that adjusted early, or had already begun a foray into digital and automation tech, fared far better than those who were left to play catchup or fall irreparably behind.

Yet, so far, too many internal corporate conversations have focused on the pandemic's effect on worker productivity, rather than digging into how the changes it brought have trickled down into workers' lives.

While it may come as no surprise that the pandemic has pushed the discussion of employee burnout and turnover to the

forefront, the sentiment isn't entirely new. Without the proper tools to keep employees healthy and happy, burnout has crept into daily work life, which the World Health Organization (WHO) notes causes exhaustion, negativity about work, and feelings of reduced efficacy among workers.

The last point should be of particular concern for human resources (HR) and culture officers in any company. The stress of the pandemic often made it harder for workers to complete simple tasks, from filing forms to completing payments.

By failing to prepare for the remote work environment, some businesses left many employees feeling that their daily work wasn't up to usual standards. As a result of the disjointed, new working style and the additional stressors of COVID, workers felt compelled to work a lot harder to achieve the same pre-pandemic result.

Rather than accept these working conditions as inevitable, HR teams across industries have a unique opportunity to significantly improve the day-to-day lives of employees. The flaws in HR systems that have contributed to burnout existed for years before being exposed by COVID, but the accelerated pace of their exposure has forced teams to focus on improving their work culture or face enormous attrition.

The opportunity here lies in a business's willingness to adopt forward-thinking, innovative technology that's built to foster happier, healthier employees. Identifying tactics to seamlessly bridge the gap between old ways of doing business and the future of work will allow organizations to better provide for their people, especially in the post-COVID world.

With a more effective and positive workforce, your business can foster an efficient approach to work that retains good employees for longer while producing higher returns for your bottom line. According to Great Place to Work, a happy workplace leads, on average, to triple the revenue growth, triple the stock performance, and 50 percent lower turnover.

Throughout this white paper, we'll explore the tangible steps your business can take to identify and implement the best technology to empower and connect employees, build off

lessons learned from the pandemic, and, most importantly, position you for long-term success in the future. By the end of this report, you'll have a clear pathway toward unleashing the underutilized strengths of your employees and empowering your company with transformative tools.

A new frontier for HR teams

Your human resources team holds the key to creating a connected corporate culture. By investing in HR resources and technology, you'll solidify your company's ability to provide the necessary support for your employees' well-being.

To start, an agile, digital HR platform is essential to set organizations up for the future. As [McKinsey stated](#) in its March 2021 HR report, "To be successful, a transformation should touch every facet of an organization — people, process, strategy, structure, and technology." Your HR team can lead this transformation by implementing a people-centric process that focuses on employee development and performance tracking, exposing your staff to new challenges in a structured way.

Working (properly) with data collection

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, companies had to quickly come to grips with how and when their employees worked away from the office. Companies began to lean into employee monitoring tools that preceded the shift to remote work, as [a 2019 Gartner report notes](#). They sought to combine data-collection methods like direct employee feedback via surveys with transparent monitoring tools — although with mixed levels of comfort from employees.

While the increase in collecting data on employees precedes the pandemic, it skyrocketed over the past two years. A 2021 [Gartner report showed](#) 16 percent of employers increasingly use technologies to monitor their employees in various ways — some tracking productivity while others observe employee engagement and well-being.

But this type of data is just as important to improving a company's culture for employees as it is to measuring productivity. As such, HR teams need to shift the conversation about gathering data on remote employees to focus on how it can be informative rather than punitive, providing insight on how to make the new world of work more effective. So how can you [properly leverage data collection](#)?

The best approach is through transparency, communication, and an employee-first attitude.

Develop a clear code of ethics and conduct for how your HR team approaches this information-gathering effort, how to review and use it in the interests of both employees and your overall business, and the kinds of data you'll use. Beyond that, hammer home that data collection has a specific purpose, clearly articulating to your people that the point of the effort is to improve the workplace to benefit them, not just your profit margins.

To that end, you'll get the most accurate understanding of your employee's happiness and performance by examining their health, safety, and efficiency. Often, this data is tied together — for instance, if certain tasks take longer due to poor technology or bad interfaces, your staff will spend more time trying to complete an assignment and neglect their (mental, physical) health in doing so. The result? That dreaded b-word that comes up so often — burnout.

Offering flexibility

Remote work has become immensely popular in the past few years, with the pandemic giving employees even greater leverage to work out flexible arrangements with their

Breaktime
00:41

Active Time
04:38

managers. Initially, the lack of interpersonal engagement in remote work can feel like it detracts from the important social aspects and efficiency of an in-person office. But in fact, those essential interactive elements are still achievable without overstepping into employees' personal lives.

Digital-first systems aren't just helpful for supporting the new normal of work. They also give employees more control over their work-life balance as well as more room to explore their potential contributions beyond their job descriptions. Automated tools that create easily managed workflows eliminate

tedious tasks and help employees focus on critical-thinking skills, problem solving, and higher-level responsibilities.

This new frontier has been made possible through the rapid digitization of operations brought on by the rise in remote work. The more HR teams open the floodgates to digital tools and automation, the more they can allow employees to better manage their time. It's an approach to work that focuses on skills over roles, engendering a culture of exploration that creates happier workers on the whole.

Using the right technology for data gathering

Even beyond the need to build trust and create easier HR management systems, the tools you use for gathering data need to be effective. This means incorporating platforms that simplify processes for your employees and don't make your operations even more complex — or reliant on manual input.

The best approach thus far has proven to be cloud technology, both in getting quick employee participation and in producing the most accurate performance and success metrics. This type of software provides the greatest access to data that enables real-time performance updates while also tracking engagement.

According to to a survey on HR tech from PwC, 91 percent of respondents reported that more employees used core HR applications when systems were moved to the cloud, while 89 percent reported greater HR control with cloud-based systems.

HR and lessons from COVID

While many companies had compensated for gaps in HR for years, the COVID era has been a true reckoning, further revealing the work that needed to be done. Poor investment in HR can create company-wide issues, especially when the proper tools aren't in place to handle issues in a digital workplace (which became more common post-COVID).

A 2021 report in HR Magazine found that almost all of the HR professionals surveyed — 95.1 percent, to be exact — felt that their workloads had increased since March 2020. While this should come as no surprise, and probably reflects the feelings of many departments, it's a startling number that shows just how much this particular sector has suffered since COVID.

Throughout the pandemic, companies with already sophisticated HR systems in place were better able to respond to the rapid

changes in the ways they supported employees. The lessons from these success stories provide essential insights into how to implement HR best practices in this new era of work.

Hiring for an undervalued segment of your business

The "Great Resignation," which saw a massive number of employees leave jobs or change careers as the pandemic eased, spread rapidly across all industries and lines of work. But HR departments were particularly affected by this huge cultural shift. The situation has created undue pressure on hiring teams to find talent, not just to patch holes but also to create a stable, effective HR team that retains its own employees as well as those in other departments.

In its exploration of these hiring changes, the job posting site Indeed found a [30.5 percent overall increase](#) in postings compared to pre-pandemic numbers, but that stat shot up to 46.9 percent for HR postings in particular. As much as organizations rely on HR to create environments that retain employees, HR teams themselves have proven to be one of the most stressed and hardest-to-retain employee groups of all.

To that end, some companies have pushed to
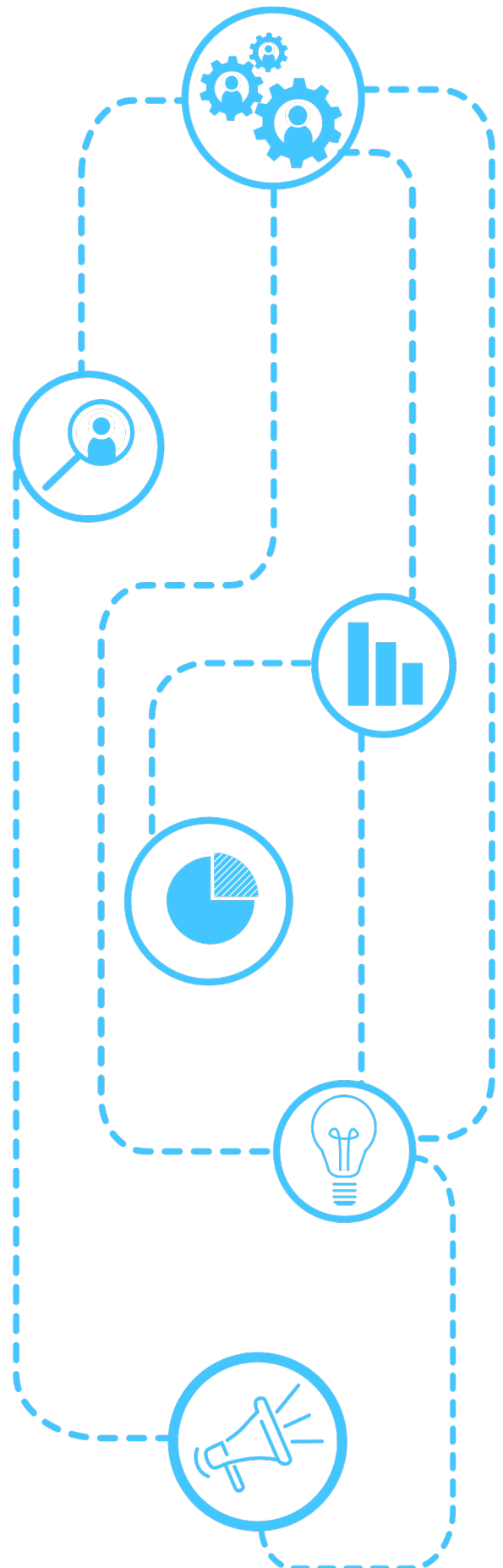
sweeten the hiring pot, aiming to entice top HR talent in this particularly precarious period of turnover. In a report on HR executive pay trends from research firm Equilar, 53 percent of HR executives from Fortune 500 companies said they had offered signing bonuses to new talent. Lucrative opportunities for new hires are certainly justified according to the data, and the competitive hunt for the best and brightest will prove fruitful for those who take a calculated, strategic approach to flesh out HR for the long-term success of their company.

Competition for the best and brightest talent is heating up

53%
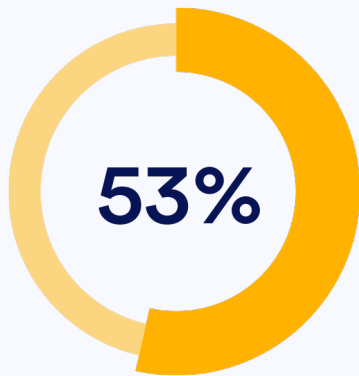
of HR executives from Fortune 500 companies offered signing bonuses to new talent.

The first line of defense for employee safety

The phrase "human resources" calls to mind many aspects of day-to-day work — often,

the frustrating parts of business like trying to answer questions about healthcare or a 401(k). But COVID showed that HR has a role in protecting employees at the workplace and helping them navigate more complex environments.

While some industries began to use remote work widely post-COVID, others still needed people to work in person in areas like industrial work, manufacturing, commerce, and supply chain fulfillment. Workers in these areas were most at risk of contracting COVID during day-to-day operations. As a result, HR teams had to step up so that they could provide the necessary level of employee safety. This included ensuring strict adherence to evolving Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidelines.

HR teams were also responsible for protecting employee data and medical information. These teams learned to follow

6 feet
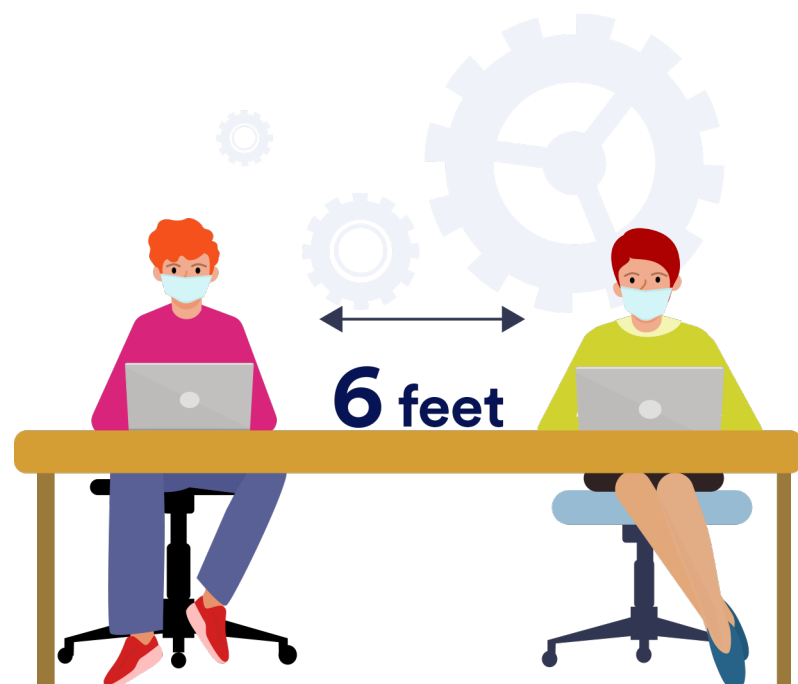
both the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) regulations on vaccine compliance in tandem with HIPAA privacy protection.

In both these examples, human resources played a high-profile role in supporting and defending workers. When done well, these efforts helped people feel safe coming to work, enabled them to do their jobs effectively, and allowed them to put their trust in the organization.

The next era of HR management

The recurring theme of the COVID-era workplace is the use of transformative digital technology, and HR management is a key area for companies to invest in and improve. But as a department that's often bogged down by unnecessary bureaucracy, implementing new systems in HR can be tricky. The goal here is to identify how and why these technologies should be used, with the objective of improving the employee experience and, subsequently, the overall quality of work.

Comparable fields, like medical care, that are also driven by human interaction have successfully used digital methods like artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, particularly during the pandemic.

Technology can help employees navigate a health crisis like COVID without detracting from the quality of the service, using automated operations to help fill in the gaps that previously required the intervention of an HR representative.

HR management has this same opportunity to grow through technology. Leaders in the field are eager to take advantage, with 40 percent of senior HR department heads citing technological transformation as their main goal for the next 12 months, according to a Grant Thornton survey and report. Just as other fields have benefited from data analytics, HR needs to become better acquainted with these types of insights in order to use information to better manage workflows.

In particular, leaders in HR management should look for a platform that

● Is easy for employees to adopt and use, ideally one that's low- to no-code for all involved

● Manages data securely using tools like single sign-on (SSO) to seamlessly authenticate users while also complying with domestic and international regulations like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and HIPAA

- Provides a consistent and helpful level of service in onboarding and supporting your HR team's embrace of digitization

- Allows for further innovation in your internal HR processes, providing avenues to achieve the flexibility and freedom that modern employees crave

Enhancing your health and wellness programs

A well-known aspect of HR's responsibilities is the selection and cultivation of employee health and wellness programs. For newer and growing companies, in particular, these programs are used to signal that a company has an uplifting, positive corporate culture — at least superficially.

People-centric perks like group yoga classes or free, healthy lunches tend to be the highlights of job postings for up-and-coming tech companies looking to attract young talent. Unfortunately, such efforts aren't really enough to achieve a true sense of health and wellness among employees.

COVID revealed the significant potential for health and wellness programs to assist in people management (when used properly). By leveraging technology to allow for smoother day-to-day operations, improved work-life balance, and long-term employee health, you can create an integrated system that exemplifies truly effective HR practices.

The state of employee health and wellness

To understand how to best approach health and wellness, companies need to do a transparent evaluation of their current efforts to understand what aspects of their employees' well-being are being overlooked. Equally important is identifying the underlying factors that contribute to issues like burnout, exhaustion, and a sense of job insecurity (metrics that have all seen sharp rises throughout the pandemic).

A lack of work-life balance is a key contributor to poor health. The WHO's categorization of burnout as a strictly occupational phenomenon suggests a lack of separation between work time and free time as part of the problem. Remote work blurred the lines between personal and professional time by removing the office and commuting elements from work, making that separation more difficult to maintain.

Leaders in HR recognize these issues and are reportedly determined to fight back — as your company should, too. In the 2021 Grant Thornton survey of HR leaders, the group identified health and wellness priorities for the coming year, which included addressing work-life balance issues and overall mental health concerns.

policies *as well as* poor communication and management practices as major anxiety producers in the workplace. To combat this, companies need to rapidly and effectively implement technology solutions that enable easy, online access to workplace policies and protocols, and automation tools to keep employees in the loop whenever new practices, plans, or tools are introduced.

A 2021 Grant Thornton survey of HR leaders identified mental health and work-life balance as priorities for the coming year.

At first, one might assume workplace anxieties are largely the fault of bad management practices — and they'd be right to some extent. But the problem actually goes much deeper into how companies, and HR teams, in particular, function, as well as how effectively they leverage technology for effective communication.

The WHO points specifically to inadequate

Connection and collaboration among employees

Though it may be the less popular of the two topics, the "wellness" in "health and wellness" is an equally important, and often harder to quantify, aspect of HR management. Wellness tends to relate to the overall experience of

work and the intangible aspects of creating a positive, flexible environment that retains employees.

To achieve a wellness-focused workplace, companies need to foster "cultural cohesion," a fancy way of describing consistent and healthy employee connections and interactions. Like any organization, a business has the ability — and in some ways, the duty — to encourage social support and collaboration among employees.

In the era of remote work, this is even more necessary. A 2021 Upwork study showed that remote workers had a strong desire for social interaction at work, with many even pushing for alternative, hybrid working arrangements before their offices had officially reopened.

For HR departments, the key isn't to force people to socialize, but to allow it to happen freely. Create a culture where workers don't feel overburdened or over-supervised by managers so they can openly interact with other departments, both socially and in a way that facilitates clear communication about the work itself. The Journal of Management and Organization notes that a great place to start is by creating your own digital handbook on organizational culture, which you can provide to employees as a transparent example of your push for communal support.

When considering ways to create

opportunities for social interactions, try to think beyond virtual happy hours. Instead, organizations should explore technologies that replace existing intranets with mobile-friendly online portals that support and connect employees. Look into options for creating private, company-only apps to give workers the ability to connect and converse unfettered by leadership.

Technology to transform your approach to health and wellness

The health and wellness industry is itself seeing a major boom, spanning a more than $1.5 trillion market of apps, services, products, and more. Needless to say, businesses have no shortage of options when it comes to choosing tools for their employees.

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In a study on mental health solutions in the post-COVID work environment, EY identified a wide range of solutions for improving workplace health and wellness. Mindfulness apps, therapeutic chatbots, and telehealth services provide technology-driven solutions that fit nicely into either remote or in-person work. On top of that, HR-specific tools like feedback mechanisms enable closer employer-employee communication and streamline the ability to hear and respond to specific concerns.

So what's the best choice among these solutions? In that same report, **The key to true post-COVID wellness** is to build employee resilience — giving them the **benefits and tools to sustain themselves,** their coworkers, and their families **as well as** create a generally supportive attitude toward **mental health.**

To attack this proactively and comprehensively, HR teams should focus their use of technology on the long-term needs of employees, using tools like surveys and communications to consistently check in. Additionally, HR leaders can use that same technology to schedule employee outreach around times that generate even greater business stress, like major campaigns, product launches, or holiday sales.

Streamlining HR processes is also essential to health and wellness, and basic online tools are available for enterprises to effectively target and tackle these internal issues. The right platform will provide both necessary baseline features as well as high-level capabilities to accomplish essential tasks. Automating processes with no-code forms to gather information through surveys or to offezr wellness program signups can make a world of difference to your employees.

Specialty digital tools for HR, like some app builders and templates, help consolidate all aspects of health and wellness programs for quick and easy access. Others leverage automation to streamline HR forms and turn those documents into workflows to ensure consistent, repeatable processes. And with all the information these tools generate from satisfied, well-served employees, you also need a way to aggregate the data, put it into an accessible format, and generate reports for a quick view of essential employee info.

Streamlining services to boost productivity and job satisfaction

When employees feel like they aren't being productive, they become dissatisfied with their work on the whole and subsequently start to look elsewhere for opportunities (a main driver of the "Great Resignation"). On the flip side, investing in productivity-boosting tools and streamlining HR services leads to happier, more fulfilled employees, which in turn provides positive results for your organization.

Many HR departments have struggled to make their work more efficient and to better support employees. Potential solutions depend on available technology as well as defining how HR departments can best serve their employees. By combining best practices for both, organizations can not only meet employees' HR-related health and wellness needs, but also improve the quality of their work overall.

Digitizing HR for an improved employee experience

Less modern HR systems can feel confined by outdated methodologies that trickle down to every employee, causing frustration and inefficiency. Businesses need to make significant investments in digitizing HR to improve the employee experience and address the concerns of those who feel underserved by their own HR departments.

These concerns aren't new; a 2020 Gartner report sourcing information from numerous HR leaders across industries found that 77 percent of employees expect easier options for completing routine tasks and 69 percent expect more intelligent systems that anticipate their needs. Similarly, 73 percent of those leaders agreed that "adopting new HR technology will enable our function to deliver a better HR experience.

77% of employees expect easier options for completing routine tasks..

69% of employees expect more intelligent systems that anticipate their needs.

employee issues, while employees benefit from a work style aimed at solving their problems as efficiently as possible.

Finding the platform that serves your enterprise best is key. To have a tangible impact on your employees' lives, you'll need access to an array of tools for streamlining HR practices and general day-to-day task management.

Essential tools that simplify access to HR resources, like single sign-on (SSO) integrations, coupled with flexible and easily generated PDFs, forms, and other documents, allow companies to streamline and accelerate the HR experience — empowering employees by giving them greater control of the assets at their disposal.

Even more helpful are automated workflows that simplify HR-specific tasks, enabling teams to respond to and update requests with just a few keystrokes. By marshaling a truly comprehensive set of tools, HR becomes less of a dreaded necessity and more a helpful support and guidance system for employees to leverage throughout their careers.

More importantly, streamlining the process needs to be a matter of approach as much as technology. To that end, the same Gartner report pinpointed an innovative, employee-first approach to HR in which employees are seen as the consumers of "on-demand" HR services.

While this may seemingly create additional barriers or separation between HR and employees, it's actually a far better final product when applied correctly. Your human resources staff benefits from a more technologically sophisticated approach that allows them to concentrate on recurring

Applying human capital management

For companies with more advanced HR capabilities looking to implement a more structured approach, human capital management (HCM) is worth exploring. HCM systems are defined sets of practices for human resources management that provide specific competencies in three key areas:

- 🔴 Workforce acquisition
- 🟡 Workforce management
- 🟢 Workforce optimization

Beyond traditional HR management tools and platforms, HCM takes a larger, strategic role in defining employee goals, performance trajectories, and, ultimately, the long-term retention and well-being of each member of your workforce.

As Gartner analyst Helen Poitevin notes, when applying HCM, these systems can help organizations "improve diversity and inclusion as well as improve employee engagement — i.e., [the] degree to which employees feel supported by their organizations."
In the long term, the goal of HCM is to foster greater use of people as resources in your company, amplifying their strengths and clearing the way for them to shine

professionally with the ultimate goal of improving engagement and driving business value. At the highest level, it can enable your enterprise to successfully turn your workforce into a powerhouse of employee performance and revenue-driving capability.

Improving long-term culture through technology

We've talked quite a bit about the role of technology in HR management, particularly as it pertains to facilitating easier access to portals, forms, tools, and other essential employee resources. Beyond these basic but transformative tactics, companies have the opportunity — particularly in this new era of

remote work — to look beyond the current uses of technology in the workplace and think about how to evolve and future-proof their corporate culture with these tools.

It can feel a bit scarier to confront these larger questions, especially if it seems like you'll be throwing money at areas of your business merely in the hopes that they'll drive revenue or long-term growth. But the shifts that numerous consulting firms, larger companies, and other experts recommend are applicable across several industries and internal departments. Within HR, the difference simply lies in applying the solutions and thinking about their objectives as employee-driven vs profit-driven.

The new era of work

Ever since COVID lockdowns rocked the working world in March of 2020, everyone from business leaders to individual employees has struggled to agree on or even identify the

ideal moment to return to in-person work. Over time, we've come to realize this binary choice was the wrong question to consider.

The term "hybrid work" — referring to a mix of remote and in-person working styles — became a buzzword and then a widespread practice. Now, companies are making important decisions about how to set up the future of their employment spaces in a world where individuals are more conscious than ever of their physical, in-person safety.

In their report on post-COVID mental health solutions, EY noted an intriguing and likely prediction: communal, office-based work as we know it would no longer be compulsory but rather intentional. When people gather in shared workspaces, it'll be for activities or tasks that are less effective in remote settings (like networking or brainstorming).

As noted earlier, socialization is a major driver for employees of all stripes, so the never-be-around-anyone-again option is highly unlikely to be the norm — and is ultimately unhealthy. The key is to be specific about how and when in-person work is necessary and recognize the desire for balance.

That said, employee health and safety are critical to long-term success through retention and high performance. When employers fail to account for and invest in

their employees' well-being, they'll subsequently struggle to retain their most productive workers and fall behind competitors.

Facilitating a better workplace

What does the workplace of the future look like?

Beyond just the "where" question explored in the previous section, workplaces have evolved immensely in how they function, especially in terms of deconstructing typical hierarchies. Experts have clearly taken note —a key next step for HR leaders, according to **Gartner,** is to reduce organizational complexity by shifting to agile operating models, flexibly deploying resources and employees to solve problems based on skills instead of roles. This approach will dismantle antiquated work bureaucracies and move to a minimum viable product mindset, a streamlined idea of work that reflects the experience of modern employees coming out of the pandemic.

The possibilities of these agile, efficient, and streamlined workplaces brought on by HR excellence are more than just pipe dreams — they're revenue-driving goals every business should strive for. McKinsey's workplace report, "The new possible: How HR can help build the organization of the future," clearly

Key next step for HR Leaders

Reduce organizational complexity by **shifting to agile operating models flexibly deploying resources and** employees to **solve problems based on** skills instead of roles

shows how happy, healthy employees are the building blocks of a company that's thriving, both culturally and financially.

In the report, the authors note, "Culture is the foundation on which exceptional financial performance is built. Companies with top-quartile cultures (as measured by McKinsey's Organizational Health Index) post a return to shareholders 60 percent higher than median companies and 200 percent higher than those in the bottom quartile."

Later in that report, the data emphasizes this point by identifying organizations where HR facilitates a positive employee experience. By

The Employee Experience Equation
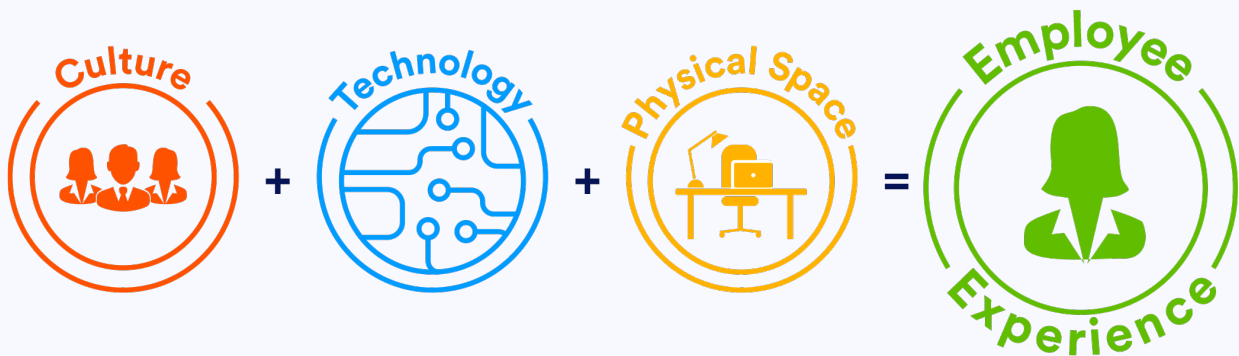
By encouraging these **employee-empowering cultures**, companies are **1.3 times more likely to report** their organization **outperforming their goals**.

encouraging these employee-empowering cultures, companies are 1.3 times more likely to report their organization outperforming their goals.

This information is a clear indicator of a cultural shift in how workplaces are structured and measured. HR is the guiding light of this transformation, and by properly implementing the related technology and employee-centric approaches listed here, companies can prove themselves capable of embracing this new normal of work.

The goal of human resources can be viewed superficially as managing the details of an employee's information and the finer points of their benefits. But as COVID revealed, it has the potential to be so much more — a resource for the underserved, a platform to uplift, and a tool to connect. HR shouldn't be an afterthought, and leaving it as one is no

longer possible if companies want long-term success.

HR-based technology is the key to building a future-proof, connected culture. Automation and services that support your employees are essential for a modern workplace, particularly in light of how drastically the way we work has changed. With these resources, your teams can more readily interact and engage with one another, rely on your internal processes and programs for guaranteed support, and leverage that support to achieve better overall work performance and greater job satisfaction.

Connected culture means more than simply removing a few barriers and boosting a technology or two — it's the holistic approach for fostering organizational success and, ultimately, the success of your employees and your business.