Continued shifts in the workplace provide organizations with opportunities to create people-centered strategies that engage their workforce and help all employees thrive. What will 2024 bring? Read on to see 5 workplace culture trends for this next year and how you can prepare for them.
Culture trend #1: Workplace flexibility is here to stay, but what it means is shifting

The discussion of whether to return to the office and the impact on employee productivity has gotten a little, well, heated.

Almost half of employees (47%) would quit or look for a new job if they were required to return to the office, and 80% of people who applied for a remote job and were offered an office-based one instead declined the offer.

Yet flexibility is no longer just about where employees work. The future of workplace flexibility is in how employees are able to do their work, and while this includes time and place, it’s also about autonomy and control over their time at work. Research from our 2024 Global Culture Report found there are 5 factors to workplace flexibility that contribute to employees feeling balance, trusted, and valued at work:
Flexibility now includes things like time for personal matters and development, as well as autonomy in how employees accomplish their work. But flexibility must be equitable and available to all employees. While not all jobs can have the same types of flexibility (nor do employees expect them to), organizations can still offer some to every role. This could be adjusting work hours to fit childcare needs, a doctor’s appointment, or to attend a class. It could also mean letting employees find a quiet environment when they need to focus, and allowing them to choose projects they’re interested in.

“Every job deserves some flexibility. It cannot be viewed as a scarce or privileged resource. True flexibility aligns employers and employees to achieve mutual gain in meeting both performance and work-life needs.”

—ELLEN ERNST KOSSEK, PATRICIA GETTINGS, KAUMUDI MISRA, HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

What organizations can do

Ensure all employees, including your frontline employees (see Culture Trend #3), have flexibility to take time off and adjust their schedules and workloads as needed to fit their unique situations. And when they do, leaders and teams should be supportive. Provide flexibility around how employees do their work and build skills. Also, instead of looking at time in the office or computer keystrokes, evaluate employees by outcomes, goals, and job performance.

Recognize leaders and team members when they provide and facilitate flexibility for employees, and use recognition to connect and build community when employees aren’t in the office.
Culture Trend #2: Employees are looking for empathy—with action

With return-to-work mandates, layoffs, strikes, and continued post-pandemic burnout, empathy seems to have taken a back seat. Nearly half (42%) of employees don't feel cared for by their organizations, even though 87% of organizations think they demonstrate enough care.

Empathy is not a new concept in the post-pandemic workplace, but employees need more than just feelings of sympathy from their leaders. They need supportive action that is sustainable.

Practical empathy is a step beyond understanding what an employee is experiencing and verbalizing concern. It is a practice of care that all leaders can do. When leaders act in concert with their empathy, they can dramatically improve employees’ sense of connection and wellbeing. Unfortunately, our research finds 41% of employees feel their leaders’ expressions of empathy are empty of actual, meaningful deeds.
Leaders demonstrate practical empathy when they identify, understand, and actively meet employee needs. Providing resources for work or flexibility for personal matters, removing roadblocks, and making changes in processes to help employees are all ways leaders can put empathy into practice.

When employees perceive both their leader and the overall organization is empathetic, they:

- Feel more seen and valued (+64%)
- Feel more fulfilled at work (+40%)
- Are more satisfied with workplace culture (+40%)
- Want to stay longer (+3 years)
- Are more creative (87%), efficient (86%) and innovative (85%)

“Empathy is a muscle, so it needs to be exercised.”
—SATYA NADELLA, CEO, MICROSOFT

What organizations can do

Empathy is a practice, not a trait, and small shifts in how leaders practice it can make a big difference. Establish actionable steps, policies, programs, and empowerment that allow leaders to practice empathy in ways that meet employee needs. Train leaders to listen to their people and understand their unique situations. Provide them with the knowledge, resources, and support to help their employees. And recognize leaders when they take supportive action.

Also important: establishing boundaries on leader empathy. Clearly define where a leader’s responsibility ends and where other company or outside resources are available for employees. Doing so will effectively address employee needs while protecting leader wellbeing and preventing burnout.
Culture Trend #3: Remembering the essential 80%

The 80% are essential workers who have limited access to technology that connects employees to their organization and also lack autonomy, voice, and opportunity in their roles. These critical workers are everywhere—healthcare, manufacturing, hospitality, construction, retail, etc.—and are at the heart of our companies, economies, and communities.

But their efforts and their constraints with access and enablement often go unseen, leaving them feeling invisible, unappreciated, and expendable compared to their corporate counterparts. Over 90% of all large global companies employ these workers, yet only 8% of them plan to invest in the frontline employee experience. This has led to turnover rates of up to 500% per year and, for those who do stay, disconnection and disengagement from the organization.

Even those employees who have access to technology at work don’t necessarily have the same experiences as corporate employees when it comes to things like flexibility, decision making, or autonomy over how they do their work. Many workers in the 80% aren’t able to take time off work for a doctor’s appointment or family event, or be recognized with the same rewards as their corporate peers.
To help workers in the 80% feel seen, valued, empowered, and engaged, leaders need to look at challenges and opportunities across both access to technology as well as enablement at work (having autonomy, influence, and a voice). When employees in the 80% have high access and enablement at work, their employee experience improves dramatically:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTCOME</th>
<th>IMPROVED ODDS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>+599%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>+568%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of fulfillment</td>
<td>+749%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong connection to leader</td>
<td>+450%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong connection to organization</td>
<td>+372%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong sense of community</td>
<td>+421%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong desire to stay with organization one more year</td>
<td>+599%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to stay with organization at least three more years</td>
<td>+208%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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2024 GLOBAL CULTURE STUDY, O.C. TANNER INSTITUTE

What organizations can do

Remember all your workers, including employees in the 80%, in your employee experience initiatives. Ensure the 80% also have flexibility at work, which may look different than their corporate peers, but provides them time off for personal matters and skill building. Seek their feedback and voice in important decisions.

Organizations should have tools for HR processes, culture building, and employee recognition to reach the 80% in meaningful ways. Provide offline tools and physical awards and tell stories of their accomplishments so everyone can see the contributions and value of the 80%.
Culture Trend #4: Skill building builds more than just skills

According to the World Economic Forum, the fastest growing roles today are driven by technology, digitalization, and sustainability, and 44% of current skills will be disrupted in the next five years. Over half (6 in 10 workers) will require new training, and only half have access to the right training opportunities.

The needs for skills are changing, and so should our skill-building strategies.

Skill building is important in providing growth and development opportunities for employees, helping organizations fill gaps when there are talent shortages, and enabling companies to get ahead of emerging trends like AI and industry shifts. But skill building also does something else—it shows employees they are valued, that the company cares about them, and it helps build belonging and inclusion.

There is a 9x increase in odds that employees plan on staying another year when organizations and their leaders support skill building

—2024 Global Culture Report, O.C. Tanner Institute
“If you give employees adequate training and resources, you will actually keep more employees. You’d be surprised how many people want to stay because people see that this company is investing in me with all this training and all the opportunity.”

—FINANCE PROFESSIONAL, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

To be effective, skill-building efforts must be thoughtfully crafted by organizations together with their people. Employees need a variety of options for skill building, including classes and opportunities to learn personal and non-work-related skills. Skill-building must also be available to all employees, regardless of type, level, or location. Organizations should work hand-in-hand with their people to identify meaningful skill-building opportunities, and provide the autonomy and support to seize them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SKILL-BUILDING PROGRAM ATTRIBUTE</th>
<th>INCREASED ODDS OF BELONGING</th>
<th>INCREASED ODDS OF INCLUSION</th>
<th>INCREASED ODDS OF COMMUNITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support for skill-building opportunities with the team</td>
<td>2.6x</td>
<td>2.6x</td>
<td>3x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reimbursement for hobby classes</td>
<td>2x</td>
<td>2.4x</td>
<td>2.5x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reimbursement for professional classes not directly applicable to work</td>
<td>2x</td>
<td>2x</td>
<td>2.4x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reimbursement for professional classes directly applicable to work</td>
<td>2x</td>
<td>2.4x</td>
<td>2.5x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition reimbursement programs</td>
<td>2x</td>
<td>2x</td>
<td>2x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time during work to complete training</td>
<td>2x</td>
<td>2x</td>
<td>2x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All of the above combined</td>
<td>4x</td>
<td>7x</td>
<td>12x</td>
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2024 GLOBAL CULTURE STUDY, O.C. TANNER INSTITUTE
What organizations can do

Give people ample time and opportunities for skill building at work, including hobby-type classes. Ensure all employees are able and encouraged to take advantage of skill building opportunities. Solicit employee feedback on what classes, programs, or opportunities would be most meaningful to them.

And remember to recognize employees while they’re building new skills, whether it’s learning something new along the way, achieving a certification, or applying their extended abilities in the workplace.

Culture Trend #5: Workplace challenges will require more than blunt endurance

Traditional definitions of resilience—asking employees to push through, or grin and bear it—can directly lead to burnout. Truly resilient organizations know that the key to survival is not to simply withstand hardships, but to anticipate and adapt to them.

Nimble resilience is not reactive, but rather proactive to challenges. From advancing technology to evolving customer demands to industry or political

“The way we look at resilience has changed. We used to think it was grit, being strong, getting through it. Now it has shifted to more self-awareness and responsiveness to the people around you.”

—STEVEN STEIN, FOUNDER, MULTI-HEALTH SYSTEMS
disruptions, the ability to embrace and innovate through adversity is what enables organizations to thrive in a dynamic workplace.

Building nimble resilience in a workforce and organization requires three things:

**Adaptability:** Anticipating changes or challenges and adjusting or innovating to meet them.

**Proactivity:** Continually evolving by seeking new ways of doing things instead of only reacting.

**Perseverance:** Seeing setbacks as opportunities to learn and grow rather than as crises.

Organizations that create policies and practices to support nimbly resilient behaviors will see more innovation, retention, and prosperity.
What organizations can do

Rather than ask employees to simply endure, put in place policies that encourage nimbly resilient practices. Ask leaders to openly share information about challenges and changes in the organization, give employees autonomy and flexibility in their work to meet those challenges, and prioritize employee wellbeing and psychological safety. Promote collaboration across the organization and empower employees to rethink how things are done.

Recognize and reward employees when they’re nimbly resilient and share their stories across the organization, so all employees understand what it means to be adaptable and proactive, and to persevere.

See more culture trends and best practices to manage them in our 2024 Global Culture Report

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