



2021 STATE OF
WORKPLACE
EMPATHY

EMPATHY ENDURES
DESPITE COVID-19 IMPACT



Necessity is the mother of invention, the proverb goes. At no time has this been more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To keep serving their customers, restaurants shifted to curbside pickups and delivery services. To meet consumer demand, manufacturers reconfigured their production floors to allow for social distancing and introduced new safety protocols to protect workers and products. To earn a living—and spread much-needed joy—artists and entertainers took to the internet to share their talents. And every teacher earned a pair of angel wings.

Families—no longer running in multiple directions—found themselves sharing space and internet bandwidth. Recess became ok for the grown-ups, who needed to step away from their makeshift desk at the kitchen table. Teenagers helped younger siblings with the “new math” their parents couldn’t quite comprehend. Even the dog tried to horn in on conference calls. And on days filled with even more distractions, employees ended up putting in extra hours, causing them to wonder if they worked from home, or lived at work.

Employers got the picture, and adapted to the “new normal,” too. According to the [2021 Workplace Empathy Study](#), organizations rose to the occasion to support their employees in several ways, such as expanding remote work options, extending COVID-19 sick leave, and promoting or introducing new [mental health benefits](#). Most importantly, they responded to their employees’ need for flexibility.

As the COVID-19 recovery continues and the nation looks ahead to what the new “new normal” looks like for the workforce, now is the time for employers to explore:

- ▶ **Which benefits, policies, and programs employees rate most highly as empathetic.**
- ▶ **The pros and cons of remote work, including the potential impact to organizational culture and employee well-being.**
- ▶ **How employers can—and should—capitalize on their renewed commitment to workplace empathy as they move beyond the pandemic.**





First, “How it Started”

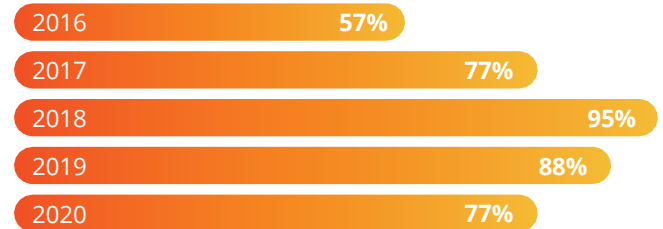
Coincidentally, the 2020 data was gathered in February of that year, just before the pandemic required everyone to pivot—from front-line workers to the C-suite. This data, along with the findings of the previous four years, provides a good baseline for comparison.

According to State of Workplace Empathy data gathered from 2016 to 2020, workplace empathy had been on the decline in the two years prior to the pandemic. In 2018, for example, 78% of employees said their organization was empathetic. By 2020, however, that number had tumbled 10 points to 68%.

Other dips from that five-year analysis include employees rating their CEOs 7 points lower (63%) and their HR teams 6 points lower (68%) from 2018 to 2020. Managers also took a hit, dropping 6 points to 78% in the same period.

Even HR professionals believed their own organizations were slipping. In 2018, 95% of HR professionals claimed their company was more empathetic than other US employers. In 2019, that sentiment fell 7 percentage points, and by 2020 it had dropped to only 77%.

Percentage of HR pros who rate their workplace as empathetic.



Source: [Five-Year Update: Businessolver's State of Workplace Empathy Study 2016-2020.](#)





Now, “How it’s Going”

Nearly a full year into the pandemic, the 2021 State of Workplace Empathy data (gathered in February) indicates that a silver lining to COVID-19 could be a resurgence in workplace empathy. **Notably, employees (72%) rate their CEOs 9 points higher than in 2020.** HR teams also get a ratings boost from employees: 73% say their organization’s HR team is empathetic—an increase of 5 percentage points over last year.

Managers also made up some lost ground in 2021, with 82% of employees saying their manager is empathetic (+3 points). When asked about their peers, 82% of employees rate their coworkers as empathetic (+ 2 points).

As for HR professionals’ estimation of their own organization, **85% believe their workplace to be empathetic, representing an 8-point increase over the previous year.** And even 96% of CEOs—who typically rate their organization as highly empathetic—believe they were headed in the right direction, with an increase of 5 percentage points.

Employees rate their colleagues as more empathetic in 2021.

My CEO



My HR department



My manager



My coworkers



Source: [2021 State of Workplace Empathy Executive Summary](#).



Flexibility Tops the List of Empathetic Behaviors

Shortly before this year’s survey was fielded, the U.S. had experienced nearly 260,000 COVID-19 cases per day—the highest seven-day average since the pandemic began¹. So, it’s no surprise that the most highly rated empathetic behavior for 2021 is **“understanding and/or respecting the need for time off to take care of family or friends affected by COVID-19”** (CEOs – 97%, employees – 94%, and HR professionals – 87%).

Close behind is providing workers with **flexible schedules and more accommodating project deadlines**, favored by 94% of CEOs, 92% of employees, and 89% of HR professionals. The option to work remotely during the pandemic is regarded as highly empathetic by 96% of CEOs, 90% of employees, and 87% of HR professionals.

Also near the top of the list of empathetic pandemic-related behaviors is recognizing personal challenges. These include making time to talk one-on-one about difficulties or problems individuals were facing during the pandemic (CEOs – 93%, employees – 91%, and HR professionals – 85%), and acknowledging the importance of mental health (CEOs – 92%, employees – 91%, and HR professionals 86%).

Despite our efforts to “flatten the curve” in the early days of the pandemic, the U.S.—like nearly every other nation—quickly realized that we were in for a very long haul. **Understandably, workers worried whether they would be able to continue developing their skills under these conditions, which public health officials were saying could last for a year or more.** CEOs (96%) most appreciated ways to continue their professional development during the pandemic, followed by HR professionals (90%) and employees (89%).

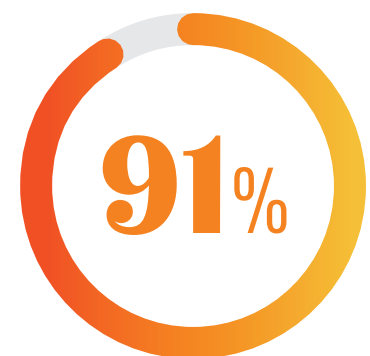
Employees’ highest-rated empathetic behaviors during the pandemic:



Time off to care for those with COVID-19



Flexible schedules and deadlines



One-on-one support for challenges

¹ Coronavirus in the US: Latest Map and Case Count. New York Times. Accessed May, 2021.



Reality Fails to Reflect Highest-Rated Empathetic Behaviors

Employees, HR professionals, and CEOs are in sync about which behaviors were the clearest expressions of workplace empathy during the pandemic. **However, reality paints a different picture.** Most of the time, employees report that the highest-rated benefits, policies, and programs were not available to them.

Despite 90% of employees ranking remote work near the top of their list of empathetic behaviors, only 50% report that this option was available at their organization. Even fewer (40%) say their organization offered flexibility with schedules and deadlines, despite this behavior getting high marks from 94% of CEOs, 92% of employees, and 89% of HR professionals.

The availability of extended COVID-19 sick leave (40%), online professional development resources (31%), and mental health services and benefits (28%) were also in sharp contrast to employees' high ranking of these benefits, policies, and programs—94%, 89%, and 91% respectively.

Ratings vs. reality: Most employees say empathetic benefits and programs were not available through their employer.

Remote work



Flexible schedules & deadlines



Extended COVID-19 sick leave



Online professional development



Mental health services & benefits



Available to employees Rated as empathetic



New Employee Expectations Surround Remote Work

As both a highly rated expression of workplace empathy and one of the more commonly available benefits, **remote work deserves special attention.** Prior to the pandemic, U.S. organizations had concerns about employees working remotely, including those related to staying on task, productivity levels, and quality control.

But the 2021 data reveals that **71% of employees believe the quality of their work has actually improved** during the pandemic. And 66% say they are more productive at home than in the office.

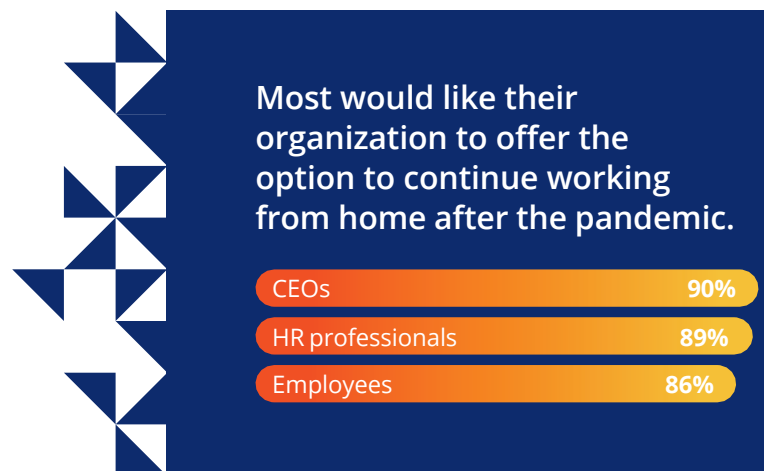
It's also important to point out the value of remote work from an employee attraction and retention perspective. Our 2021 data reveals that 88% of employees, 78% of HR professionals, and a whopping 98% of CEOs claim that organizations that **"offer the option to work from home during the pandemic are more empathetic than those that don't."**

The big question is whether remote workers will return to brick-and-mortar settings once the pandemic ends. The answer lies in the data.

According to our survey, 90% of CEOs, 89% of HR professionals, and 86% of employees say they would like their organization to offer the option to continue working from home after the pandemic. Also, 78% of remote employees say they have a better work-life balance, making an even stronger case from a hiring and retention perspective.

As for teamwork, employers are understandably concerned about the ability for remote workers to stay connected and collaborate with their colleagues. Employees are split down the middle on this issue. **Half report no issues with collaborating and building relationships in virtual environments; the other half are struggling to do so.**

Of course, for many organizations and industries—including workers in health care, retail, and many roles within the public sector—remote work is simply not feasible. Understandably, these employees find it easier to collaborate in person and don't believe it would be possible to work from home, **though 82% of them still see the option as an empathetic behavior.**





The Challenge for HR and Leadership

Despite the significant gains in 2021, the key drivers of empathy in the workforce—HR professionals and CEOs—are struggling to reconcile their workforces' need for empathy with how to demonstrate it. This year, more HR pros and CEOs report that it's hard for others—including their colleagues—to demonstrate empathy in their work and personal lives.

While two-thirds of HR professionals believe empathy can be learned, that reflects a 10-point drop from the previous year. And 68% of CEOs say they fear they will be less respected if they show empathy in the workplace, up 31 points from 2020.

Consistency is an issue as well, with 7 in 10 CEOs saying it's hard for them to regularly demonstrate empathy at work, a 29-point increase from the prior year. And over half of HR professionals agree, representing a 13-point increase.

Even though CEOs recognize the difficulty of consistently expressing empathy and the fear of judgement involved, just half of them believe that the state of empathy in U.S. organizations is sufficient, marking the lowest point in the six years of the study. **This may be because CEOs have greater levels of visibility into the programs and offerings that make workplaces empathetic in the wake of the pandemic.**

The number of CEOs saying that empathy in their organizations is sufficient plummeted 22 points from last year, with just half agreeing. That said, this number is significantly higher than the 1 in 4 employees who believe empathy in their organizations is sufficient, **indicating a wide and persistent gap between leadership and workers' perceptions of just how empathetic their organization is.**



50%
of CEOs believe the state of empathy in organizations is sufficient—a decrease of 22 percentage points from last year.





Finding Opportunities over Obligations

The COVID-19 pandemic made the case for workplace empathy stronger than ever. Many organizations consider their workforce to be their greatest asset, so demonstrating increased levels of workplace empathy during the pandemic was not only the right thing to do, it was necessary to keep the business going.

What may have begun from a sense of obligation, however, should not end once things return to “normal,” whatever that looks like. **The pandemic likely forever changed employees’ expectations for empathy in the workplace.** And the data tell us they already want more.

To attract and retain top talent, maintain worker productivity, and support a positive organizational culture, **savvy HR professionals and executives will look at their successes during 2021 as an opportunity take to workplace empathy to new heights.**



Learn More

Ready to take a deeper dive? Read the [2021 State of Workplace Empathy Executive Summary](#) to learn about the advancements organizations made in other areas, including DEI efforts and supporting mental health.





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