2021 HR trends: the 7 things you need to prepare for

Predicting 2021 HR trends is a blend of looking into a crystal ball and looking into the past. While there's light on the COVID horizon, uncertainty won't be tossed out with the 2020 calendar. In the coming year, HR departments will need to continue to adapt to changing health, economic, and social conditions.

Here are seven key 2021 HR trends to prepare for.

1. The CHRO will be an even more strategic and in-demand role. This year, HR cemented its position at the right hand of the CEO. That won't change in 2021. Companies will need to reinvent their operating models, working cultures, and policies — and totally rethink the employee experience. HR leaders will continue to be at the center of these changes as they support the C-suite and employees.

2. "Digital dexterity" is the top skill for new hires. With a more long-term remote or hybrid workforce, employers will put new evaluation processes in place to make sure new hires bring the right skill set.

"Employees will need to become familiar with—and perform their jobs using—new tech apps, platforms and tools," says Naveen Bhateja, chief people officer at Medidata Solutions. "Technological acumen and motivation to learn will be the competencies for every hire, not just in the IT dept."

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3. Rethink your productivity and performance measures. Without regular face time or transparency into an employee's day-to-day work, new standards around productivity will arise. For example, says Bhateja, a company may need to start measuring the cost per remote employee to ensure their people investments are aligned to the business strategy.

4. Mental health is no longer just a benefit. All employees went through emotional challenges this year. HR needed to do more than point to the EAP.

"We're seeing a shift in how employers view mental health in the workplace," says Julie Gurican, senior director of people at BenchPrep. "It is no longer a binary category where you either have a mental illness or you don't … HR leaders will need to continue to lean in on normalizing mental health in the workforce and ensure employees know 'it's ok' to 'not always be ok' at work."

5. The physical workspace is not dead. Millions went remote in 2020—and many will stay. But Gurican predicts that after 12–24 months of being in home offices, the shift back to the physical work office may be another trend. HR leaders will need to plan ahead to assess the gains and losses of remote work, weighing what employees really want with what the business really needs.

Additional Resource: Is working from home going to be a permanent thing?

6. Culture will be harder, but more important. With face-to-face engagement gone, HR leaders will be forced to get creative to maintain a cohesive workplace culture. Technology can help, but leaders need to take concrete steps to focus on their core values and keep people engaged.

7. Professional development is vital. With more time on their hands, people are jumping into online learning at home. Unless you support employees' need for certifications and enhanced learning, they may take their renewed skills elsewhere.

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