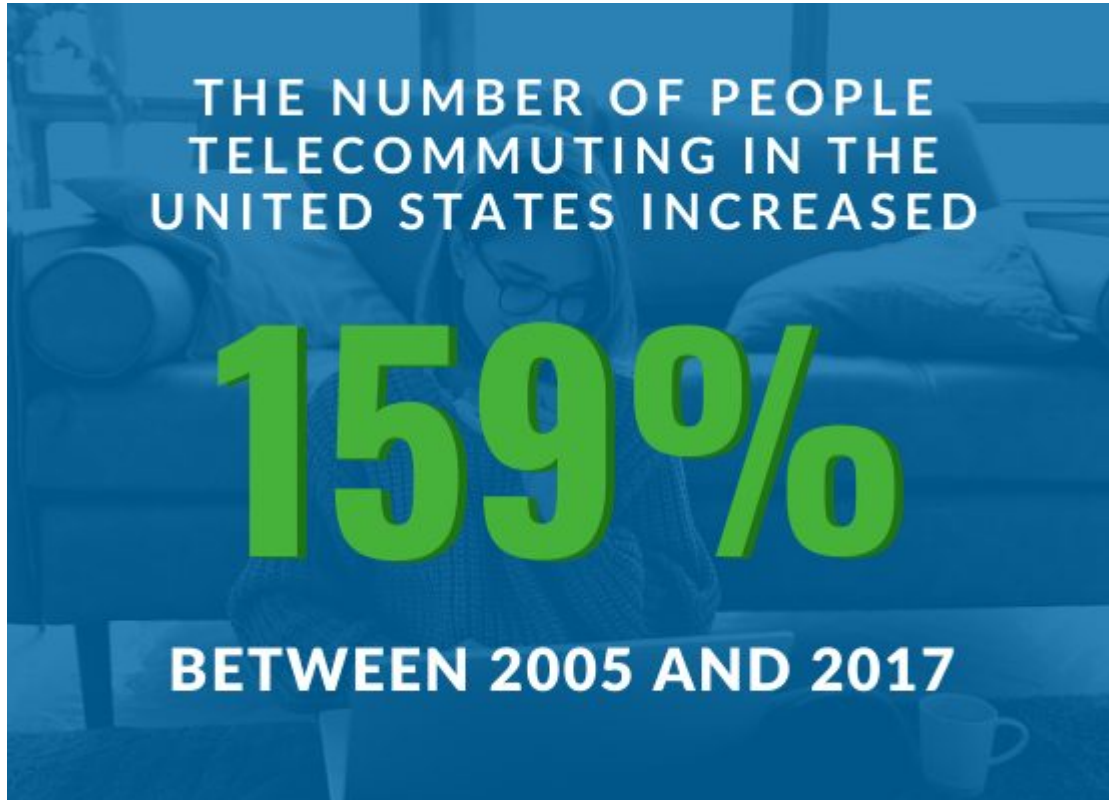


# 4 ways COVID has changed work forever



The COVID-19 pandemic has changed work in ways that are unlikely to go away with the virus. Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic threw most companies for a loop. Organizations scrambled to make accommodations necessary for the sake of safety while still trying to maximize productivity. Operating in survival mode became the norm.

Now that employers had a chance to adjust and catch their breath, leaders can begin to ponder what's ahead. "Business as usual" remains a rather lofty concept, but patterns are beginning to emerge as to what might be in store as (hopefully) the crisis winds down.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) teamed with Oxford Economics and SAP SuccessFactors to "understand the realities of a post-pandemic workplace for both employers and employees." They compiled their research in the report ["The Future of Work Arrives Early: How HR leaders are leveraging the lessons of disruption."](#) Here are some of the key findings for the United States.

## Expect more safety measures, even after the pandemic

Despite the start of the vaccination process, companies realize vigilance must remain a priority in the months ahead. Top safety measures reported by respondents include increasing sanitation and cleaning (90%) and implementing social distancing guidelines and precautions (81%). However, it's possible we will see the change in focus on safety and sanitation at work remain, even once the COVID-19 pandemic has passed.

One potential way of getting more workers back to the office while still promoting safety received a more lukewarm response. Only 55% of those surveyed said they are staggering the number of employees in the workplace at once. Participants did not report their reasons for not adopting an [alternative schedule](#). However, some possibilities include not wanting to extend the workday/workweek to allow for multiple shifts or that remote work is simply working well enough for the time being.

## Flexibility and remote work will continue to expand



One of the biggest changes COVID brought to the way we work was the drastic expansion of remote work. When asked about the long-term (12+ months) changes they expected COVID-19 to have on the workplace, the top three responses from participants were:

- Greater flexibility regarding remote work (64%)
- Decreased business travel (52%)
- Increased employee demand for remote work (39%)

Remote work has been gaining momentum throughout the 21st century. The [number of people telecommuting in the United States](#) increased by 159% between 2005 and 2017. That was way before anyone ever imagined the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote employees valued the lack of a commute and the better work-life balance created. Employers benefited from talent pool expansion beyond local geography, greater worker satisfaction and loyalty, and oftentimes less overhead.

The crisis led many organizations that previously shunned such arrangements to discover their plausibility and rethink company stance going forward. Similarly, more employees became aware of the advantages of remote work. These workers may increasingly seek employers who are flexible about where and when work gets done.

For the next few months, the continuation of remote work likely will remain more of a necessity than a perk. Many staff members continue to face challenges associated with childcare and distance learning, caring for sick or elderly relatives, and self-isolating because of pre-existing health concerns.

Companies realize increased flexibility brings with it the need to re-evaluate policies and procedures to create an environment conducive to reaching objectives. Thus, it comes as little surprise that respondents expect maintaining productivity under new working conditions (60%) and establishing a culture that supports more remote employees (54%) to become top challenges for businesses over the next 12 months.



## Securing talent remains a concern

With the unemployment rate at 3.6 percent in January 2020, employers focused heavily on filling vacancies. It's unlikely such a figure will appear again very soon. However, about a third of those surveyed still expect [competing for top talent](#) to be a main challenge post-pandemic.

Why the concern? A large number of job seekers does not automatically translate into finding folks with the skills your company needs. Financial hits from the pandemic may make it difficult to offer monetary incentives for the most desirable talent to sign on or stay. And the increase in remote work options expands the range of possibilities for job candidates as they no longer need to find employment close to home.

Thus, it makes sense that nearly eight in 10 polled in SHRM's U.S. study believe COVID-19 will make flexible work more important to attracting and retaining talent. Evaluators of the survey results, however, wonder if American employers might be underestimating the importance of other factors that influence securing talent. International respondents put a higher premium on both healthcare/benefits and compensation compared to their U.S. counterparts.



Likewise, international data reveals 38 percent of leaders expecting to invest in learning programs for reskilling and upskilling over the next year. Only 22 percent of U.S. respondents predict engaging in this long-term talent investment in 2021.



## The role of technology is increasing, for better or worse

Imagine the effect on the economy if the COVID-19 pandemic had occurred during an era with less technology. Many companies had to change how they work to adapt to COVID. Video-conferencing, project management platforms, chat channels, document sharing, and the like are not perfect substitutes. However, they allowed many companies to continue operating.

In general, U.S. organizations seem content with their technology. More than three-quarters (79%) say their company has the technology it needs to navigate the changing work environment. (Whether this stat would have been the same at the start of the crisis or whether this figure results from tech improvements over the past few months is unclear.)

Survey evaluators, however, note some mixed messages. Despite the vote of confidence in their technology, the above percentage would suggest fewer than half (42%) of respondents say most of their workers can work

remotely and have the necessary technology and environment to do so effectively. Leaders view customer service workers, general staff, and service/field workers as particularly disadvantaged in this area.

It would not be surprising, then, to see companies continue to search for products or upgrades that meet their needs. Technologies in which respondents plan to invest in the most over the next 12 months include:

- Remote collaboration tools — 34%
- Automation tools (such as self-service portals) — 25%
- Recruiting and onboarding programs — 25%



## Going forward

Based on the findings, evaluators conclude that “U.S. employers expect to make major operational and strategic changes in the coming year — but may be overlooking critical long-term planning around employee reskilling.” How the pandemic continues to play out and subsequent national response undoubtedly will influence the ultimate actions of business leaders. This survey offers a glimpse at what to expect based on current conditions. However, during this unprecedented time in history things could easily change.