

# Six ways your office job will be different in 2021

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## FULL TEXT

After a year in which the coronavirus pandemic upended the very concept of the workplace - one in which millions of white-collar workers traded office attire, business travel and lengthy commutes for comfy pants, webcams and virtual school with their kids - predicting 2021 office trends might be a perilous exercise.

But with vaccines beginning to be distributed across the country, many companies have started to imagine some return to office life next year. At the same time, remote work isn't going anywhere. And neither - despite our fatigue with it - is Zoom.

To get a sense of what 2021 might hold - beyond continued job market uncertainty, benefits focused on child care and mental health, and the proliferation of plexiglass - The Washington Post asked human resources advisers, workplace designers, employment lawyers and compensation analysts to share predictions for a year that could bring back some normalcy while returning people to workplaces that may never be the same.

"We're just not going to go back to five days a week in the office," said Erica Volini, Deloitte's global human capital leader. "The idea that we're going to get to some new consistent way of working flies in the face of what we've learned in the pandemic."

Here are six predictions for what to expect at work in 2021 .

### **As recruiting and remote work go national, some salary ranges will, too.**

As work-from-home employees fled high-cost cities for cheaper locales, some employers threatened to cut workers' pay, bringing Bay Area compensation more in line with South Bend, Ind., budgets. Facebook, for instance, has said it could adjust the pay of workers to their new locales, and an October survey by advisory firm Willis Towers Watson found that 26 percent of respondents said they would base compensation on location for remote workers.

But Catherine Hartmann, WTW's North America rewards practice leader, said she is seeing companies take a more nuanced view. Many employees, she said, will need or want to return to an office at least part of the time.

And if employees can move to other locales, employers can recruit from elsewhere, too, making location-based salary less of a focus. "As talent becomes more of a national marketplace, some of my clients have been contemplating the idea of having more of a national approach" about pay decisions, Hartmann said. Hot skills and expensive markets will still get a premium, but "maybe the bottom rises a bit," she said. "Given the number of my clients who are asking about that, it's on the table for sure."

More likely than pay cuts, said Brian Kropp, chief of human resources research at the advisory firm Gartner, is that people who move to cheaper markets could just see smaller raises. "If you move to a lower-cost place and your pay is already above market, you may get a slower rate of increase," he said. "The reality of a more remote workforce is you're going to start seeing wages for jobs that can be done remotely start to even out."

Josh Bersin, a human resources industry analyst, also predicted that efforts to cut pay for those who depart for cheaper spots may not last if there's fallout: "If you have an engineer making \$150,000 in San Francisco pick up and move to Montana, and now you're going to pay him \$120,000, what is that guy going to do? Look for another job."

### **Video chats will get smarter - and, potentially, creepier - thanks to artificial intelligence.**

If 2020 was the year video conferencing truly went mainstream, 2021 could be the year it gets smarter. Some of

the largest platforms will begin using artificial intelligence to recognize and track certain gestures participants make, automate to-do items and help manage the challenges of workers split between work and home.

Zoom Video Communications, for instance, announced a "smart gallery" feature it plans to roll out in June 2021 that will use cameras to make multiple people in the same on-site conference room appear as separate, equal-size windows on their live-stream video. Those working from home will see the individual faces of each colleague rather than just a view of the whole conference room, an effort to visually shrink the differences between remote and in-person workers.

"We want to maintain the democratization of Zoom, and have everyone on the same level when people come back to the office," said Oded Gal, Zoom's chief product officer.

Cisco Systems, meanwhile, will launch "gesture recognition" early next year using artificial intelligence to recognize specific movements - clapping, raised hands, a thumbs up or thumbs down. For large virtual meetings with hundreds of attendees, it could help gauge reactions to an idea without requiring attendees to answer a survey or click on-screen emoji.

Asked whether recognizing facial expressions like smiles, frowns or eye rolls in a video call might be next, Cisco Senior Vice President Jeetu Patel said addressing privacy concerns has to come first. Even collecting anonymous data might make people uneasy, he said. "This is much more of a privacy and comfort issue than it is a technology issue," Patel said. "It's just a matter of what is going to be acceptable."

Microsoft Teams, meanwhile, added a new feature late this year that uses AI to recognize what tasks participants agreed to complete during a meeting and send them reminders afterward, as well as create searchable meeting transcripts.

"It will follow up with me with 'action items' that I agreed to," Jared Spataro, corporate vice president for Microsoft 365, said in an interview. "A lot of things that people are thinking 'Yeah, someday that will be reality' are actually already in the product." Microsoft has also filed a patent for a system that could use sensors, cameras and software to examine body language, expressions and participant contributions to come up with an "overall quality score" for how the meeting went. But Spataro said, "Neither research nor patents is a good predictor of product pipeline. We're always looking at all those types of things."

### **The new 'hybrid' workplace will have more time constraints than you think.**

As more offices reopen in 2021, businesses are preparing for a hybrid workplace, with some employees returning to the office and others working from home. Google, for instance, is planning a "flexible workweek" starting in September 2021, when, under a pilot plan, employees would be expected to spend three "collaboration days" in the office and work from home the rest of the time.

Hybrid workplaces will take massive coordination, experts say. Someone going to the office on Tuesdays and Thursdays, for example, will want to make the most of their time and ensure their teammates will also be there, said Liz Burow, a consultant and former vice president of workplace strategy at WeWork.

"I think you'll hear a lot more about H.R. departments saying we have 'no meeting Mondays' and very clear, intentional days of the week [for different activities]," Burow said. "You have to manage flexibility."

Employers will also need to guard against workers burning out. Ashley Whillans, an assistant professor at Harvard Business School, says that to fight the longer hours people are working from home and the stress they're feeling during the pandemic, managers need to make meetings shorter, set clear expectations for email use, and create guidelines for when the workday should really begin and end. "We have to make sure when we are going to the office it's worth the risk, the time," she said. "It will involve coordinating teams, as opposed to just being stuck on Zoom meetings in a different location."

### **The social bubble will come to the office.**

Now that millions of people have spent months working from home, architects and designers say, the open-office layout may not be dead, but the pendulum is swinging toward more privacy.

Somewhere between private cubicles and completely open offices is what Gensler's head of workplace research, Janet Pogue McLaurin, calls a "team zone." With people expected to come to the office primarily to work in person

with their teams - leading to louder conversations and the risks of large groups in a small space - they have begun designing corporate spaces that might offer modular furniture for both individual seating and group spaces housed within "suites" or "neighborhoods" that have full wall dividers.

"You're down to your social bubble again. Your team, your teammates - you know their story, you know them," she said. "It's an opportunity to actually fix what wasn't working in the office before."

Burow also believes team spaces will be key to new office designs, pointing to concepts like Studio O + A's "Home Room," which includes lockers or cupboards for employees to store their things - since employees aren't likely to have assigned desks - as well as seating areas for teams to gather.

"It will be all about identifying a sense of belonging focused on a team - anywhere from 6 to 30 people who are working on a project together," Burow said. "I think that space type will emerge victorious out of the pandemic."

### **Many employers will ask if workers have been vaccinated - even if they don't require it.**

One of the most pressing questions facing employers as they plot a return to the office is whether they can - or should - require employees to take a coronavirus vaccine without tripping over legal land mines. After the vaccines receive full approval from the Food and Drug Administration, labor lawyers expect some employers will require vaccinations - allowing accommodations for those with disabilities or religious objections - particularly among health-care providers. Still, they expect many companies to just strongly encourage it, whether through wellness incentives or other administrative nudges.

Citing U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines published Dec. 16, legal experts say some employers are likely to ask if workers have received the vaccine. According to the agency's guidelines, requesting proof of vaccination "is not likely to elicit information about a disability." That helps clear up confusion about whether such inquiries would be prohibited under the Americans With Disabilities Act, said Sharon Perley Masling, who leads the labor and employment practice's covid-19 task force at Morgan Lewis.

It could become a common question "by summertime," said Tom Gies, an employment lawyer with Crowell & Moring. Even if employers don't plan to terminate employees who won't take the vaccine, the information could be valuable, Gies said. "I can see some companies using this as a competitive advantage, saying 'All our employees are vaccinated,'" he said. The data could also help reassure other employees returning to the office.

Masling also predicts top executives will set an example and get publicly vaccinated to encourage employees.

"Certainly one thing that employers are considering is having the CEO or the entire C-suite get vaccinated while on video and talk about the importance," she said.

### **Part-time arrangements will make a comeback.**

For all the fanfare about the flexible hours and child-care perks some companies rolled out in recent months, many working parents are still struggling heavily with the weight of virtual school and a lack of outside caregivers.

Getting up at 4 a.m. to work to have time to step away later and help with virtual learning, after all, isn't exactly flexibility, said Carol Sladek, who leads the work-life consulting practice at Aon.

"That might work for some people, but it's not going to work for the majority," Sladek said. She says a growing number of employers may "dust off an old tool" and embrace part-time arrangements for groups of professionals they would have never considered offering them to before. "They've been wanting to offer that as a retention tool because they're losing folks - particularly women," she said.

In recent months, she's helped employers in the technology, manufacturing and financial services industries craft part-time work policies for managers and professionals - thinking through which benefits they'd keep receiving, how to adjust pay and how to cover and coordinate the work. While hardly a new idea, she said it's gotten particular attention over the past couple of months as working parents reached a breaking point, and she predicts more employers will follow suit next year.

"I have a lot of employers coming to me to saying [employees want] a four-day workweek," Sladek said. "This may just be the dawn of the era we've been working toward for many years."

jena.mcgregor@washpost.com

## DETAILS

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