

EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE IN 2021

Critical Issues for the CHRO Agenda



Diane Smith
CEO & Co-Founder

Over the past several months, I've offered thinking on a range of COVID-19's impacts, from the growing importance of agile talent strategies and transparent employment communications to ways organizations can reduce their talent acquisition tech stack cost of ownership while enhancing recruiter efficiency. Many of these discussions are largely tactical in nature and reflective of the need to respond immediately to rapidly-changing business and workforce conditions.

However, as one of the most tumultuous years in recent history comes to a close, it's essential to look closely at three critical issues that will dominate executive-level discussions throughout 2021 and beyond: remote work, talent mobility, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

- Diane

One of the biggest lessons HR was reminded of in 2020 is the importance of having intuitive technology in place that supports organizational agility. Yet technology is only part of the equation—you also need exceptional talent to steer the company through periods of change and uncertainty. During countless discussions with GR8 People's customers and industry executives, the clear consensus is that people have been central to not simply surviving the downturn caused by the pandemic but thriving in its wake.

Even with an increase in available candidates, many organizations report that they continue to struggle to find qualified workers. Therefore, the challenge CHROs face in the coming months is to ensure that the employee experience furthers business productivity and innovation while attracting and retaining in-demand talent. Remote work, talent mobility and DEI are all at the heart of that experience, and progress in these areas will determine an organization's success as the world emerges from the pandemic.

The Remote Workforce: Making Your Hybrid Work Model Work

Despite the announcements of numerous high-profile companies that plan to allow their employees to work from anywhere permanently, the reality is that when it's finally safe to fully return to the office most employers will adopt a hybrid work model. This is because the hybrid model offers benefits to both employees and the organization.

Employees get to work from home a few days a week—where they experience improved productivity alongside much-needed flexibility—and then go into the office on other days for the team meetings and collaborative experiences that have proven vital to innovation and to an employee's sense of belonging.

For organizations still concerned with a need to offer 100% remote opportunities, keep in mind that most research shows that employees do indeed prefer a hybrid model. Consider a June PwC survey in which 72% of workers indicate a preference for working from home two—not five—days per week. As the pandemic took hold and working remotely went from weeks to months, many employees started to realize just how much they missed the social and collaborative aspects of being in the office.

CHROs will play a major role in guiding executives through the process of determining which strategies and policies are well-suited to accommodating the flexibility that employees seek while facilitating the collaboration the business depends on.

A Hybrid Work Planning Framework

The level of planning required to help workers optimize their remote environments—which may shift from coffee shop to home office to co-working space depending on the day of the week—and to rethink office designs that foster cooperation can be overwhelming due to the range of variables that must be considered. Some of the best advice I have seen comes from London Business School professor Lynda Gratton, who advises in [Four Principles to Ensure Hybrid Work is Productive Work](#) that the most promising approach involves:

- Using office space to amplify cooperation
- Making working from home a source of energy
- Taking advantage of asynchronous time to boost focus
- Using synchronized time for tasks requiring coordination

Gratton offers CHROs a holistic view of how this year's drastic changes in where we work (space) and when we work (time) must inform the decisions made about an organization's hybrid model as doing so results in the ability to strike the right balance between group interaction and independent focus. For example, office spaces can be better adapted for collaboration by reducing the number of closed-door offices while increasing open meeting areas, which create more energy and excitement than walled-off conference rooms.

In terms of remote spaces, your HR team will need to guide employees through the practices, logistics and setup that support high levels of focus for extended stretches of time while keeping work “separate” from other aspects of their home life.

Internal Mobility: The Shift to Talent and Opportunity Marketplaces

Talent development is another aspect of the employee experience that has undergone incredible transformation in a few short months. At the start of the pandemic, many organizations focused on quickly redeploying talent to areas of the organization where it was needed most. Now, with rapid advances in AI and automation spurring massive changes in the skills that workers will need for the jobs of the future, employers recognize that they must build upon traditional internal mobility programs in order to cultivate the skills organizations need to remain competitive—a scenario that has set the stage for the rise of talent and opportunity marketplaces.

This comes as welcome news not just to organizations in need of emerging skill sets—the World Economic Forum states that global employers expect “emerging professions will grow from 7.8% to 13.5% of the total employee base” by 2025—but also to the vast majority of employees who are motivated by opportunities to take on new roles and challenges more frequently.

Whereas internal mobility programs were designed around pre-determined career paths and upward trajectories, marketplaces emphasize the development of skills that sustain mobility across departments and functional areas.

What do employees say? Today, it's all about opportunity:

- 33% of employees would make a lateral move or accept less pay for a growth opportunity
- 77% say it's important that a company provide learning opportunities

Source: Ceridian's 2021 Pulse of Talent

The most evolved approach to talent mobility comes from work conducted by MIT Sloan Management Review and Deloitte, who argue in [Opportunity Marketplaces: Aligning Workforce Investment and Value Creation in the Digital Enterprise](#) that while talent marketplaces do take a broader view of internal mobility, there remains a tendency to focus on transactional labor needs because workers are usually categorized by type (e.g., employee, contractor or contingent), fostering a relationship in which workers “sell” and companies “buy” labor as needed.

Thus, while talent marketplaces can deliver value to both organizations and individual workers, opportunity marketplaces emphasize an investment in the workforce. It's a commitment to career advancement that benefits both the employee and the employer while strengthening a company's ability to meet changes in the skills that are paramount to success. It's about empowering workers to “evaluate, choose and act on opportunities” while driving “greater efficiency, value and productivity.”

The most effective organizations will be those who manage to forge close partnerships among learning and development, performance management, and talent acquisition to pave the way for a seamless transition to an opportunity marketplace, and then leverage the marketplace to both develop the existing workforce and attract the talent needed to meet future demands.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: It's Time for Meaningful Action

Perhaps no other issue has reverberated across corporate America more than the persistent and pervasive lack of diversity, equity and inclusion and the tremendous amount of work to be done, particularly at the leadership level. According to DDI's Diversity & Inclusion Report 2020—based on responses from 2,102 human resource executives and 15,787 leaders around the world—the too few minority executives already in place have a higher risk of departure than their non-minority counterparts. The departures are imminent, too, with one-quarter of minority leaders saying they plan to “leave the organization within the next year.”

Women also struggle to advance and at all levels within an organization, from first-level where they represent only 30% of leaders to senior-level where representation declines to a mere 21% of executives. Worse, 45% of women executives “said they would likely need to switch companies to advance” compared to 32% of male executives.

What's most troubling is that the business case for gender and racial diversity is strong, as DDI reports that “organizations with above-average diversity are 8x more likely to be in the top 10% for financial performance.” It's also simply the right thing to do, as well as an influential factor in talent attraction and retention. According to Glassdoor's September 2020 Diversity & Inclusion Workplace Survey, 76% of employees and job seekers say that “a diverse workforce is an

important factor when evaluating companies and job offers.”

While there are many factors that influence DEI within an organization—such as maintaining an inclusive culture, establishing equitable pay practices and leveling the playing field for advancement—your talent acquisition team should be focused on improving its effectiveness in attracting diverse talent to the organization. This includes revising irrelevant degree requirements and other similar criteria, developing apprenticeships for diverse candidates, and identifying sources of talent that connect your organization with people who have unique perspectives to contribute.

Technology can aid in these efforts, too. At minimum, companies should be using algorithms that flag biased job posting language or implementing AI-driven sourcing applications that can ignore information fields on applications and profiles known to trigger bias, such as the individual’s name and schools attended. Ridding your hiring process of bias is key to overcoming the roadblocks that have kept organizations from achieving their diversity objectives in the past.

Finally, one more thing to acknowledge as you shape your workforce strategies: Don’t assume that what executives currently believe about the state of your organization is accurate. Too much has changed and too fast, so complement what you know from industry trends and research with insights gathered directly from your workers. This will make it possible to identify and correct for gaps in perceptions among leaders and arrive at the strong foundation of knowledge CHROs need to guide their organizations to success in 2021.

Entrepreneur, coach, leader and former recruiter, Diane Smith has significant experience launching and running SaaS companies. Currently co-founder and CEO of enterprise recruiting software company GR8 People, Diane co-founded and grew VirtualEdge Corporation (VE) into a worldwide HR technology leader, seeing it through its successful acquisition by Automated Data Processing, Inc.



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19 W College Ave, Suite 200
Yardley PA 19067
215.693.1122
contact@gr8people.com