

The Pandemic Paradox: New Research Reveals Deep Divisions in American Attitudes About the Future of Work, the Role of Employers and the State of the Nation

As another year winds down, America is reckoning with social and cultural aftershocks of the global pandemic and continued domestic political divisions. Companies, workers and consumers are navigating related economic uncertainty heading into 2023, as well as complex challenges associated with shifting attitudes of the workplace and its role in society.

Findings from Weber Shandwick's most recent National Pulse Poll,¹ conducted after the U.S. midterm election, illustrates these realities and reveals three key intersecting themes:

1. The nation is steadfastly divided, which permeates the way Americans live, work and engage.
2. Employees are largely back in their workplaces, but question the value of being there.
3. People believe in the power of business to make a positive difference, but are growing skeptical of their own employers' impact.

Here's a deeper look into the findings – with implications for business leaders:

THE STATE OF THE NATION

Americans remain sharply divided in their outlook about the country's direction.

- About half of respondents (52%) are optimistic across a set of both political and economic issues, but a similar cohort (48%) are more pessimistic.
 - Democrats are slightly more positive in their outlook than Republicans and Independents.
 - Overall, there is more concern across the board today than we saw in the aftermath of the 2020 elections.
- Respondents said they are most optimistic about the state of American democracy and voting rights for people of color, while they are more pessimistic about the economy and rising costs – including the cost of gas, energy and food.
- Sixty percent (60%) said they want businesses to respond to continued polarization in the nation's politics by anchoring company actions in core values or aligning company values with those of their employees and customers.

THE FUTURE OF WORK:

Employee turnover, burnout, dislocation, mental health and job insecurity are all rising among workers – and respondents describe different attitudes based on how they work and by age.

The majority of employees are back in workplaces, with 68% reporting that they are back full-time, despite 21% of those employees saying their work can be done from home. Only 12% split their time between home and workplace.

- Hybrid workers are most likely to say:
 - They are loyal to their employer (85%, compared to 74% at the workplace and 66% at home)
 - They feel proud to work for their employer (87%, compared to 72% at the workplace and 69% at home)
 - They are satisfied with their job (83%, compared to 71% at the workplace and 66% at home)
- Those working from home are most likely to say:
 - They worry about losing their job (53%, compared to 31% at the workplace and 35% hybrid)
 - They worry about their mental health and wellness (61%, compared to 56% at the workplace and 43% hybrid)
 - They are experiencing burnout (51%, compared to 42% at workplace and 43% hybrid)
- This time last year, 40% of employees were still working from home full-time – twice as many as today.

Millennials and Gen Z employees are significantly more restless about their jobs than Gen X and Boomers, which also seems to challenge worker loyalty to their employers.

- Sixty percent (60%) said they plan to change jobs, with 19% expecting to do so within the next year.
- Sixty-two percent (62%) of Gen Z and 59% of Millennials say they worry about their mental health and wellness, compared to a lower percentage (46%) among Baby Boomers.
- Fifty-seven percent (57%) of Gen Z and 54% of Millennials say employee turnover is a problem where they work, compared to 40% of Baby Boomers.
- Fifty percent (50%) of Gen Z and 40% of Millennials say they worry about losing their job, compared to only 29% of Gen X and 21% of Baby Boomers.

¹National survey among 1,006 U.S. adults between November 14 and 16, 2022. Sample randomly drawn from large national opt-in panel. Survey data weighted on key demographic variables to reflect the adult population based on U.S. Census data. Full- and part-time employees (~549 in total) just over half the total national sample; non-employed include homemakers, students, unemployed, and retired individuals.

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THE ROLE OF EMPLOYERS:

Employees, especially younger workers, are reshaping the future of work and raising the bar on the employer-employee contract.

- Sixty-two percent (62%) of consumers and 69% of employees said they believe business is a constructive force for positive social change. Gen Z (76%) and Millennials (72%) are most likely to share this view, compared to Gen X (59%) and Baby Boomers (45%).
- Most consumers (55%) and employees (59%) believe businesses have a responsibility to address important societal and cultural issues. Those saying companies should address societal issues if they directly affect their business increased 7 points (to 41%, from 34%) since the previous survey in June.
- Large majorities believe companies should keep acting on their societal and environmental commitments even in the face of an economic downturn. Fewer than 2 in 10 consumers think companies should stay focused solely on their financial health and not address societal issues at all.
- Forty percent (40%) of consumers believe a company's stand on societal issues is as important as its products and services.
- Both consumers and employees believe businesses should prioritize protecting employee jobs (22% for consumers, 23% for employees), committing to a living wage for all employees (29%, 26%) and committing to compensation and benefits that keep up with rising costs (19%, 22%).
- A significant majority – 71% to 85% - believe companies should create societal value and uphold their own company, employee and community values. However, fewer than 1 in 3 respondents gave their own employer an excellent rating in any one of these value areas.

- Many employees say employers are taking the right steps to preserve jobs as the economy slows, but only a third say they are very confident.
- And for first time in more than two years, only 50% of consumers and 59% of employees are confident that they are taking the right steps. Such confidence among employees is down 8 points since June.

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS:

Amid lingering pandemic effects, instilling workforce loyalty will continue to be a critical challenge for employers, especially with a softening economy and as Millennials and other younger workers redefine the intersection of workplace and social issues.

- **Seek to understand and address the distinct expectations and values among the generations and political perspectives** in your workforce. Doing so will be critical to effective employee engagement and to attracting and retaining talent and driving productivity.
- **Prioritize the social issues your employees care about most and communicate progress.** While many corporate leaders have been demonstrating this over the past two years, employee confidence is declining for the first time since the pandemic.
- **Keep a pulse on employee sentiment and concerns – both of which are essential as companies adjust to a slowing economy.** While workplace flexibility influences employee attitudes and loyalties, the remote workplace environment has broken social bonds with companies that have not been repaired (and in a still tight national labor market, workers are impatient and reactive to convenient online job searches and recruitment).
- **Act with sensibility.** While pandemic fears are abating, there are deep residual anxieties that require sensitive consideration. This includes acknowledging and addressing mental health issues among employees caused by disorder related to persistent social, economic and public health strains.

For more information, please contact:

PAM JENKINS
Chief Public Affairs Officer
pjenkins@webershandwick.com

CHRIS DERI
Chief Corporate Affairs Officer
President, C-Suite Advisory
cderi@webershandwick.com

KATE BULLINGER
CEO, United Minds
Kate.Bullinger@unitedmindsglobal.com