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SHIFT HAPPENS

The pandemic changed the way we work and live—yet, employee attitudes are still radically evolving. **To successfully navigate an uncertain future, what must leaders understand about the people they lead?**



In 2021, Insigniam published the results of our Post-Pandemic Survey, which revealed sweeping changes in how employees perceive themselves, their lives, and, as a result, their work environments.

Within our findings, a profound truth emerged: people refuse to let history repeat itself. The experience reshaped their priorities and shifted their perspectives. What was once deemed acceptable is no longer seen as desirable or even tolerable. Life now takes precedence over work, as health triumphs over deadlines, family surpasses the rigors of commuting, and the importance of seeing friends outweighs the allure of staying late in the office.

The finding from our research identified five shifts in the way people view the world. According to those surveyed:

1. [Life takes precedence over work—the latter will not displace the former.](#)
2. [The illusion of “two selves”—work and home—has been shattered.](#)
3. [We now see that in an instant anything can change.](#)
4. [Leadership can be found anywhere and in anyone.](#)
5. [We are all inextricably connected to others around the globe.](#)

To understand where attitudes have further evolved over the past 24 months, let's compare our initial research with recent trends and insights from leaders around the globe.

For many, life still takes precedence over work—yet overall employee disengagement is on the rise.

Early in the pandemic, many people came to a startling realization: they had let their work displace their families and personal lives.

In our 2021 survey, 42% of executives said life and family would come first in the future, and 41% indicated they would no longer choose an inflexible workplace.

However, according to a recent report from Gallup, while this sentiment still resonates strongly among executives globally, many are still attempting to find the right balance.

“We know that engaged employees produce far better outcomes, but [we] recently discovered that engaged workers who are not thriving in their lives are much more vulnerable and add risk to your organization,” notes Gallup.



When employees are out of balance (i.e., they feel engaged in their work but do not feel that they are thriving in their personal lives), the following risks arise: 61% are more likely to experience burnout often; 48% are more likely to report daily stress; 66% are more likely to experience daily worry; 2x are more likely to report daily sadness and anger.

Furthermore, the analytics giant emphasized that, “In the absence of a good job and fulfilling career, there is no net thriving. When organizations intentionally address both wellbeing and engagement, the effects are additive and mutually beneficial for employees and business outcomes alike.”

Additionally, the MIT Sloan School of Management explored the challenges working women faced before and during the pandemic in a conversation with Emily Oster, author of *Disparate Burdens*, to explore how healthy work-life balances may be within reach.

“Before the pandemic, mothers who wanted to be successful in their careers rarely discussed with others the physical and mental tasks associated with caring for a family,” said Ms. Oster, speaking to MIT alumnae and faculty. “Then, remote work pulled the curtain on women’s lives. Everyone saw you in your bedroom [with] your kid behind you, jumping on the bed. They saw everything and that made parenting less of a secret.”

Revealing these tensions, said Ms. Oster, can bring about positive change.

“We still have a lot to learn, and a lot of adjustments need to be made along the way,” said MIT alumnus Lilia Castillo Dearth, a managing director at Wellington Management, who participated in the forum. “We need to continue building that flexible mindset muscle.”

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— Lilia Castillo Dearth
Managing Director,
Wellington Management



2 The illusion of “two selves” was shattered—yet worker anxiety and a lack of healthy boundaries still permeate.

Before the pandemic, people tried to keep work and life separate. The pandemic shattered that “two-selves” illusion. Working from home physically brought the two worlds together. Children and pets wandered into Zoom frames; team members worked from small apartments with shared, limited bandwidth; coffee in the break room became time for laundry and household chores. Some were forced to take meetings from bathrooms or cars just to get privacy. Needless to say, boundaries were blurred.

In our 2021 survey, 28% of executives said they could no longer keep life and work separate, and 57% said they expected leaders to understand that “being real” and caring mattered.

According to a 2023 trends report published by Gartner, 82% percent of employees now say it’s important that their organizations see them as a whole person, rather than simply an employee.

In February 2023, Rachel Feintzeig, the *Wall Street Journal*’s “Work & Life” columnist, spoke as part of the R. Peter Straus Lecture series at the Yale School of Management, suggesting that although the pandemic blew up the traditional, in-the-office work week for many, it didn’t necessarily make achieving a healthy work-life balance any easier.

“I think something has shifted, but I’m not sure where it’s going to go,” Feintzeig said to the audience at Yale. “While remote work arrangements have made life less hectic for some workers, others feel isolated in at-home offices and anxious about missing out on valuable facetime with managers.”

Karen Guzman, associate director of communications at Yale School of Management who also attended the lecture writes, “A new generation of workers, more invested in their personal lives, is seeking environments that foster work-life balance. This realization has fueled the ‘quiet quitting’ trend that’s seen employees leaving the workforce or opting for reduced roles.”

Ms. Feintzeig is quick to point out that an emphasis on work-life does not denote a lapse or absence in terms of professional ambition.

“It’s a different kind of ambition,” Ms. Feintzeig said. “[Executives] are serious about their careers and building skills and making a difference...but they also want to be their best selves and kill it in their personal lives, too...it’s not all about climbing the ladder.”

Ms. Feintzeig noted that employees, “at all career stages need also to be upfront about their need for boundaries between work and life—especially with managers who believe that technology means an “always available” workforce—and to prioritize self-care and time with family. Periods of unplugged time when an employee is literally unreachable are a good start.”



of workers want organizations to see them as more than simply an employee



of executives say life and family will come first in the future

3 While uncertainty about the future persists, it creates a unique opportunity for leaders and organizations.

One respondent in our 2021 survey articulated this point perfectly when noting, “I am now more aware of the fragility of our global ecosystem.”

This heightened awareness of the fragility of life means that we are no longer able to view the world as stable or predictable. The pandemic revealed the fallacy of certainty regarding the future. And even though that status quo has returned for many, we will never see it as quite the same again.

In our 2021 survey, 17% of executives said an increased awareness of uncertainty changed them, and their organizations must adapt to increased uncertainty. At heart, the issue of how leaders can help their business flourish through uncertainty and bolster institutionalized resilience remains top-of-mind for many global executives.

According to a recent report from the Forbes Nonprofit Council, “Through shifts in consumer behavior to changes in regulations, technological disruptions and geopolitical events, effective leaders must remain nimble. It is critical to manage these uncertainties through strategic planning, scenario analysis, and a willingness to adapt and pivot whenever necessary.”

The council suggests that by “expecting and perhaps even embracing uncertainty, leaders can build resilient organizations better prepared to weather future challenges.”

The council goes on to say that maintaining a strong work culture is vital in the face of business uncertainty, as it provides a sense of stability and purpose that can help guide employees through challenging times.

Forbes Council member Azzedine Downes—President and CEO of International Fund for Animal Welfare—expands on this point, noting, “From my experience, [embracing uncertainty] is crucial for several reasons: It fosters a sense of community and support among employees, helping them stay motivated and focused despite external challenges; a positive work culture can create a sense of stability and security for employees, which is critical during times of uncertainty; and it can help businesses weather difficult times by providing a foundation of trust.”

Ms. Downes advises enterprises to, “Realize that regardless of whatever change a business is undergoing, employees are still at the center of an organization’s greatest efforts. Acknowledge them. Challenge them. Give them a safe space but remind them that they have to deliver as well.”

Leadership can be found anywhere and in anyone, regardless of title or position.

In the midst of the pandemic, many found a quality within themselves that they were perhaps unaware of: leadership. The urgency of the crisis caused people to don the mantle of leader—whether it was leading other people or leading themselves. It shifted their perspective on what they were capable of and what they had to offer others. In other words, people began to view themselves as leaders.

In our 2021 survey, 70% of respondents said they found a greater sense of empathy and awareness amid the global pandemic.

Although the practice of empathetic leadership is not new, it has taken on fresh significance post-pandemic, writes Rob Volpe, CEO of Ignite 360, a U.S. consumer insight and strategy firm based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

“We’ve been heading toward this embrace of empathetic skills for over a decade now with the growing awareness that EQ [emotional quotient] is as important as IQ [intelligence quotient],” said Volpe in an interview with *Business Chief* magazine.



Forward, Together

In our survey, 10% of executives polled said they felt an increased sense of connectedness and believed their organizations should adapt to reflect this.

Current data would appear to confirm Mr. Volpe’s assessment: According to a recent survey conducted by The CEO Forum, for nearly half (44%) of those polled said that being in a workplace with more empathy and human connection is more important to them now than it was pre-pandemic.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that leaders should not feel obligated to fulfill every request or indulge every whim, says Rhys Cater, managing director of Precis Digital, a UK-based digital marketing agency.

“As leaders, we [now must] balance the needs of tens, hundreds, or even thousands of people along with the success of the business,” says Mr. Cater, speaking to the CEO Forum.

5 We no longer view ourselves solely as individuals, and instead, we are inextricably connected to others around the world.

Before the pandemic, people viewed their actions as relatively isolated from those outside of their immediate circle. It was difficult to believe that a personal choice to go to a restaurant, board a plane or attend a conference could change a stranger’s life a thousand miles away.

On a global scale, we no longer situate ourselves as individuals. Rather, we see ourselves as inextricably interconnected with others—part of a complex, adaptive system. Our decisions have ripple effects on others, effects we were unaware of before, and many of us take them seriously.

In our 2021 survey, 10% of executives polled said they felt an increased sense of connectedness and believed their organizations should adapt to reflect this.

Writing on the topic in *Fortune*, Dov Seidman, author of *How* and founder of The HOW Institute for Society, and Angela Ahrendts, former SVP of Apple Retail and current board member at Airbnb, Ralph Lauren, and WPP say, “While many factors influence human connection, leadership is disproportionately consequential in shaping communities, institutions, and society.”

Furthermore, the authors note that, “We had an instinctive sense that given our physical distance from one another owing to the pandemic, it was imperative that leaders work harder—and differently—to create a sense of connection and community. We found human connection was strained for all employees but particularly for women and younger workers—those historically in positions of less power. In fact, 30% of U.S. workers felt less deeply and meaningfully connected to their organizations, and 44% felt less connected to coworkers since the start of the pandemic.”

Yet, the authors note that these findings also suggest workers feel more connected when their supervisors exhibit and embody behaviors and attributes associated with moral leadership.”

“In fact, gender and age disparities dramatically decrease, and in some cases disappear completely, with moral leadership. When reporting to moral leaders, 60% of workers feel more meaningfully connected to their organization, 80% more connected to coworkers, and 90% more connected to their leaders,” write Mr. Seidman and Ms. Ahrendts.



of U.S. workers are concerned about their mental health in the pandemic’s aftermath¹



increase in remote job listings in Europe since 2021, with approx. 200% working remotely²



of APAC workers want more flexibility and autonomy over their work schedules³

1. The Conference Board: 60% of US Workers Concerned About Their Mental Health in Pandemic’s Aftermath
 2. Remote Work Statistics for Europe, 2023, Zoe Talent Solutions
 3. Shifts In Workplace Expectations For The Post-Pandemic World: Research From The Adecco Group Asia

So, how should leaders meet the challenges of tomorrow? Authentically.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no magic bullet or singular solution. However, the experts who monitor these issues from a variety of angles tend to agree that there is one common denominator that leaders should keep in mind when attempting to address evolving concerns from their employee base: authenticity matters—now more than ever.

“The movement is mainly driven by the widespread transparency enabled by social media and a passionate younger generation who are committed to building a better world,” writes Robert Reiss, in a *Fortune* article entitled, *The 3 Mistakes Companies Make in Trying to Become Purpose-Driven Enterprises*.

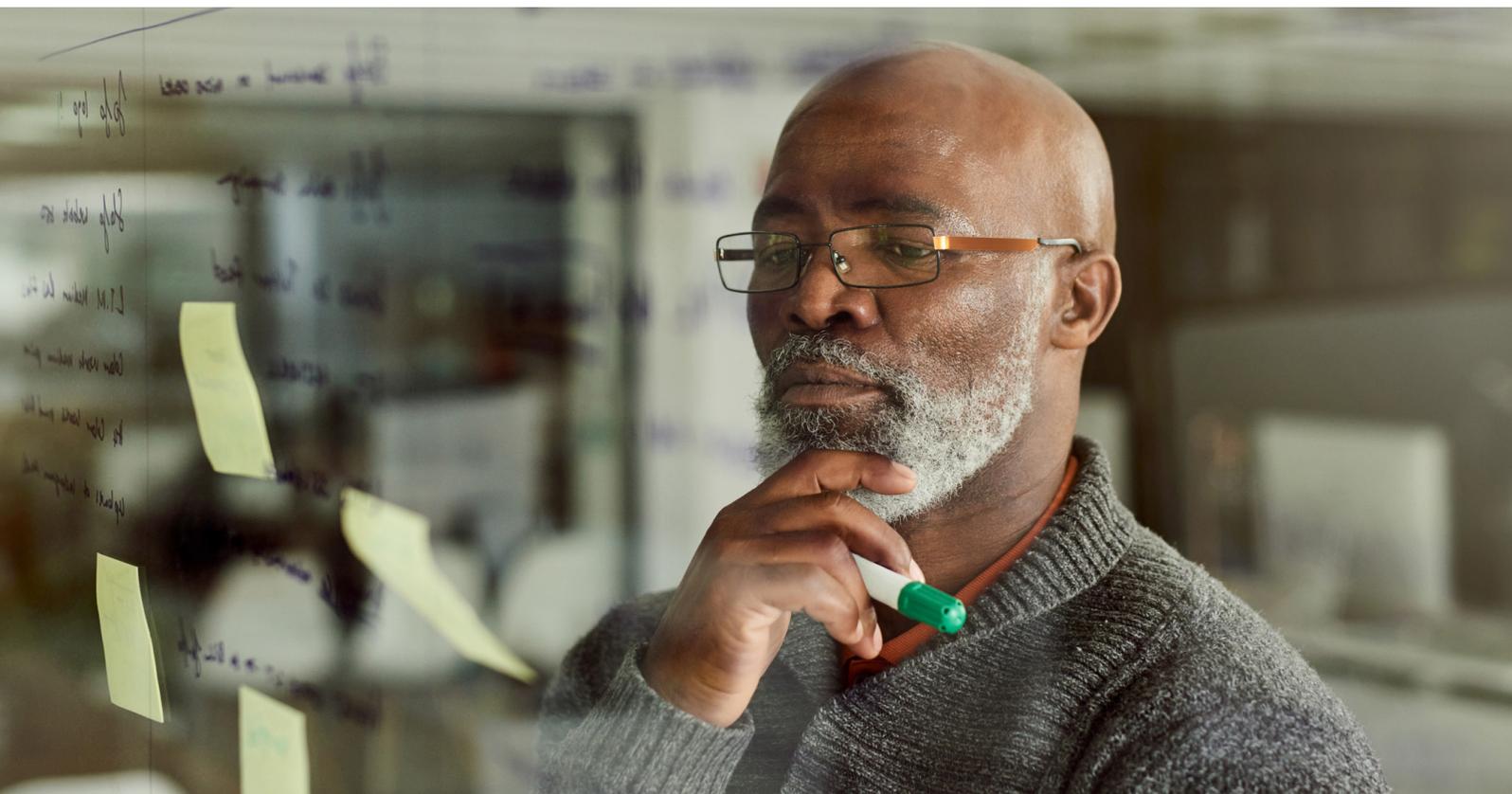
“And while purpose-driven companies have existed for well over a century, the second wave of purpose-committed companies, “Purpose 2.0,” is now becoming central,” says Mr. Reiss.

“The magic of being a purpose-driven company is you don’t have to consider what others want you to be. Instead, you can decide what unique value and model you believe your company can bring to society,” concludes Mr. Reiss.

As leaders grapple with a rapidly changing world, where attitudes continue to shift following cataclysmic disruptions sparked by the pandemic, Mr. Reiss believes

“Employees need to be upfront about their need for boundaries between work and life—especially with managers who believe that technology means an “always available” workforce.

— Rachel Feintzeig
The Wall Street Journal



ABOUT INSIGNIAM

In the face of complex problems and rapid change, business as usual is not enough. To succeed, leaders must breathe life into big ideas and bold commitments.

Over 35 years ago, Insigniam pioneered the field of organizational transformation. Today, Insigniam is a trusted partner to senior executives of the world's best-run companies for whom speed to transformation, breakthrough and innovation are imperatives. With a dedication to service, we are with you at all points from:

- Building a bond amongst your people
- Establishing leadership as a core to success
- Seeing what has not been seen before
- Designing novel approaches
- Effective and sustainable execution

We promise your people will think newly, act differently and deliver unprecedented results.®

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