

WHITEPAPER

# The Future of Work

How COVID-19 Has Impacted  
Employee Behaviour

OCTOBER 2020





## KEY FINDINGS AND THE IMPACT ON THE WORKFORCE, CULTURE AND BUSINESS PERFORMANCE

### 1. EMPLOYEES ARE DEMANDING CHANGE AND EXPECTING EMPLOYERS TO SUPPORT NEW WAYS OF WORKING.

With working arrangements needing to change in accordance with evolving government guidelines, we do know that the impact of local lockdown measures this year has meant that our perception towards working at home has also fundamentally altered. Productivity, well-being and maintaining a company culture are things often cited as being under threat from these new ways of working.

We asked respondents in a recent (September 2020) poll, whether the amount of work they can get done in a week has increased or decreased since the start of the pandemic. Interestingly, men are more likely than women to have seen increased productivity. In the U.S., this is by a margin of 40% to 27%. While in Japan, workers are much more likely to say the amount of work they are able to complete has decreased.

While our research told us that a very high number of employees who are currently working from home would like to continue to do so - with this number above 70% in all countries - it is the longer term impact that interests us.

Our research tells us that employees are not just expecting but demanding changes to office and home working environments.

While one third of employees worldwide say they are likely to ask to split their work between the home and the office we are also seeing emerging demands that have more of a longer-term implication.

**19%** of workers in the UK are likely to change their work patterns so they are home more for childcare.

**4 in 10** U.S. workers say that they are likely to ask their employer if they can work from home permanently. A quarter of German workers expect to ask for the same thing as are one in five of their Japanese counterparts.

**2 in 5** workers in Hong Kong are likely to split their work between home and the office.

**A fifth** of workers in Sweden are looking at a move to the countryside and the same proportion in the UK are likely to change their work patterns to be home more for childcare.

In France, **62%** are now more likely to commute by car or bike, avoiding public transport.

*42% of 18-45 year old employees in the U.S. say they are likely to leave their job permanently for some time off.*

**Employees in larger firms, those who are on higher incomes, and younger workers are the most likely to demand changes.**

Across all markets, higher-income workers are more likely than lower-income workers to ask to work from home permanently, for example in the UK 30% of higher-income workers say they are certain or likely to do so compared to 24% of low-income workers.

Beyond this, we found that employee demands differ, depending on the age and income level of the employee in question.

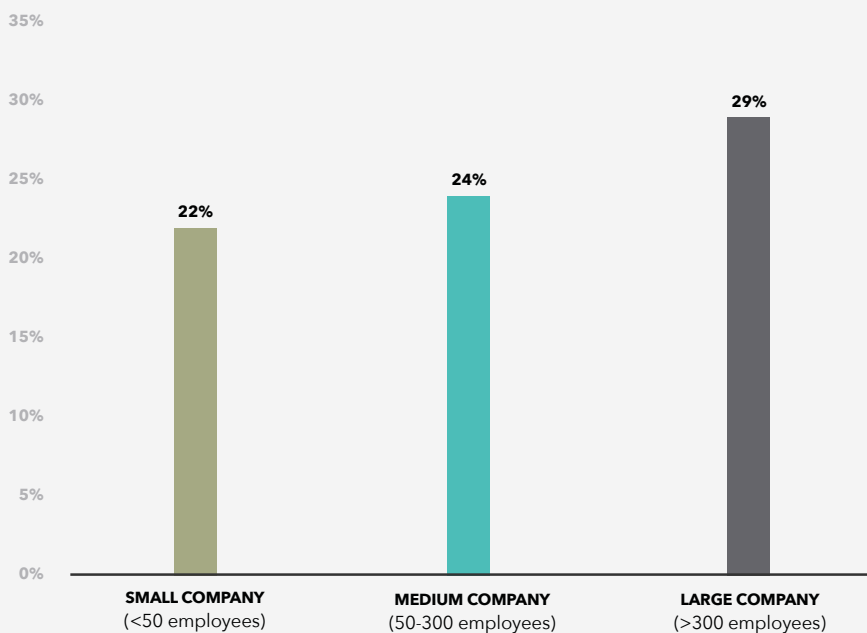
Larger companies are more likely to see employees ask to work from home permanently – in Germany 25% of employees of large firms are likely to do so.

When it comes to the age of the workforce, younger workers are also more likely to ask to work from home permanently, with the exception of the UK where this is similar across age groups.

**So, what does this mean for longer term resource planning, office configuration and workspace planning** as well as efforts to support an “office-culture”?

Arguably, those new to the company or early on in their career are potentially most at risk of missing out on learning and development opportunities, collaborating with colleagues or just the chance to embed themselves within in the culture and values of their new workplace.

Percentage of workers who are very likely to ask to work from home permanently in the next 12 months, across all seven markets surveyed



Source: Kekst CNC COVID-19 Opinion Tracker - Wave 4 (10th-15th July 2020)

*Employees in the UK and the U.S. have a clear message for companies about their vision of the new normal.*

In the U.S., we anticipate firms facing potentially significant retention issues amongst younger workers. Though only 13% of over-45s say they are likely to leave their job permanently for some time off, this applies to 42% - more than four in ten - of employees who are between the ages of 18 and 45.

### **So how should businesses respond?**

In the shorter term, employers must be flexible and listen to their employee base. Internal surveys and pulse checks will give a live temperature check of what people are feeling, flag any concerns and drive a positive message that the business is listening. Juniors should not feel pressured to adopt certain new working patterns while more senior colleagues should consider their responsibility as consistent company advocates and role models. Leaders should be encouraged to connect with colleagues, and use owned channels to tell their personal stories to demonstrate company values. Visible leadership will never be so critical to long-term success.

As we all continue to navigate through the challenges of the gradual, and in some cases interrupted, 'return to office' movement, employers need to approach each employee as an individual, with potentially individual requirements depending on their

opinions and personal work or home set up. Having said that, there will be a need to clearly communicate a broader vision of what the new normal means for the company and how it plans to get there. Supporting employees and taking them on the journey with the organisation will be critical for both engagement and retention.

**In a sentence what is the one thing you want your employer to do differently after the coronavirus pandemic?**



Source: Kekst CNC COVID-19 Opinion Tracker - Wave 4 (10th-15th July 2020)

*British employees gave a net score of 51% to their firms for instituting health and safety measures in the workplace, the highest of all countries surveyed.*

## 2. PRESSURE IS MOUNTING FOR EMPLOYERS TO BE SEEN TO REACT AND RESPOND TO CHANGING WORKING ENVIRONMENTS.

Employers are facing increasing responsibility for the mental and physical health of their employees, which is becoming more complex as the pandemic continues.

Exploring this growing responsibility further, we asked respondents whether they thought their employer had done

better or worse than usual during the coronavirus pandemic to date. So how are they performing? Overall, we saw positive ratings for employers on creating an inclusive working environment.

Generally employers scored best on “helping with public health efforts”, “instituting health and safety measures in the workplace”, as well as “creating a feeling that we are all in it together as a firm/organisation”.

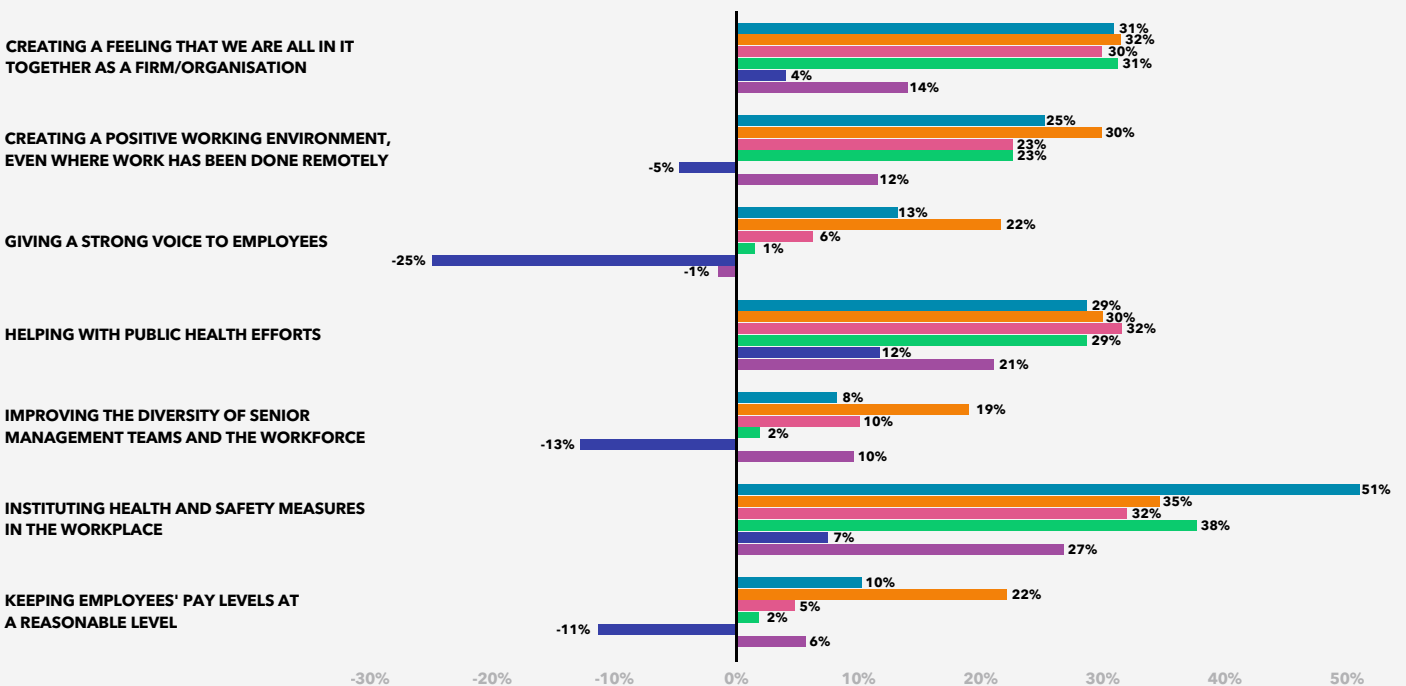
Where employers received lower marks was when it came to providing financial support, and help with mental health issues.

On mental health support, employees are split across countries on how well their employer provided for employees who need it. In the UK and the U.S., employers are rated highly on +21% and +20% respectively. But Germany, Sweden and France are only marginally positive, and this falls to -21% amongst Japanese employees.

With growing pressure on employers to be seen to provide support in areas that are often open to personal scrutiny, the role of employee communications to support employer action has never been so important.

### Has your employer done better or worse than usual during the coronavirus pandemic to date?

The net score is displayed



Source: Kekst CNC COVID-19 Opinion Tracker - Wave 5 (16th-22nd September 2020)

### 3. EMPLOYEES CAN HOWEVER BE FRUSTRATED BY THE SUBSTANCE AND FREQUENCY OF EMPLOYER-DRIVEN COMMUNICATIONS.

Globally, employees rate their company well for day-to-day comms and workplace safety, but less well on communicating long-term company strategy and performance.

Our research tells us that there have been frustrations with the frequency and substance of internal communications during the pandemic. Going forward, employee communications will need to be better structured, more consistent and be seen to address these new demands.

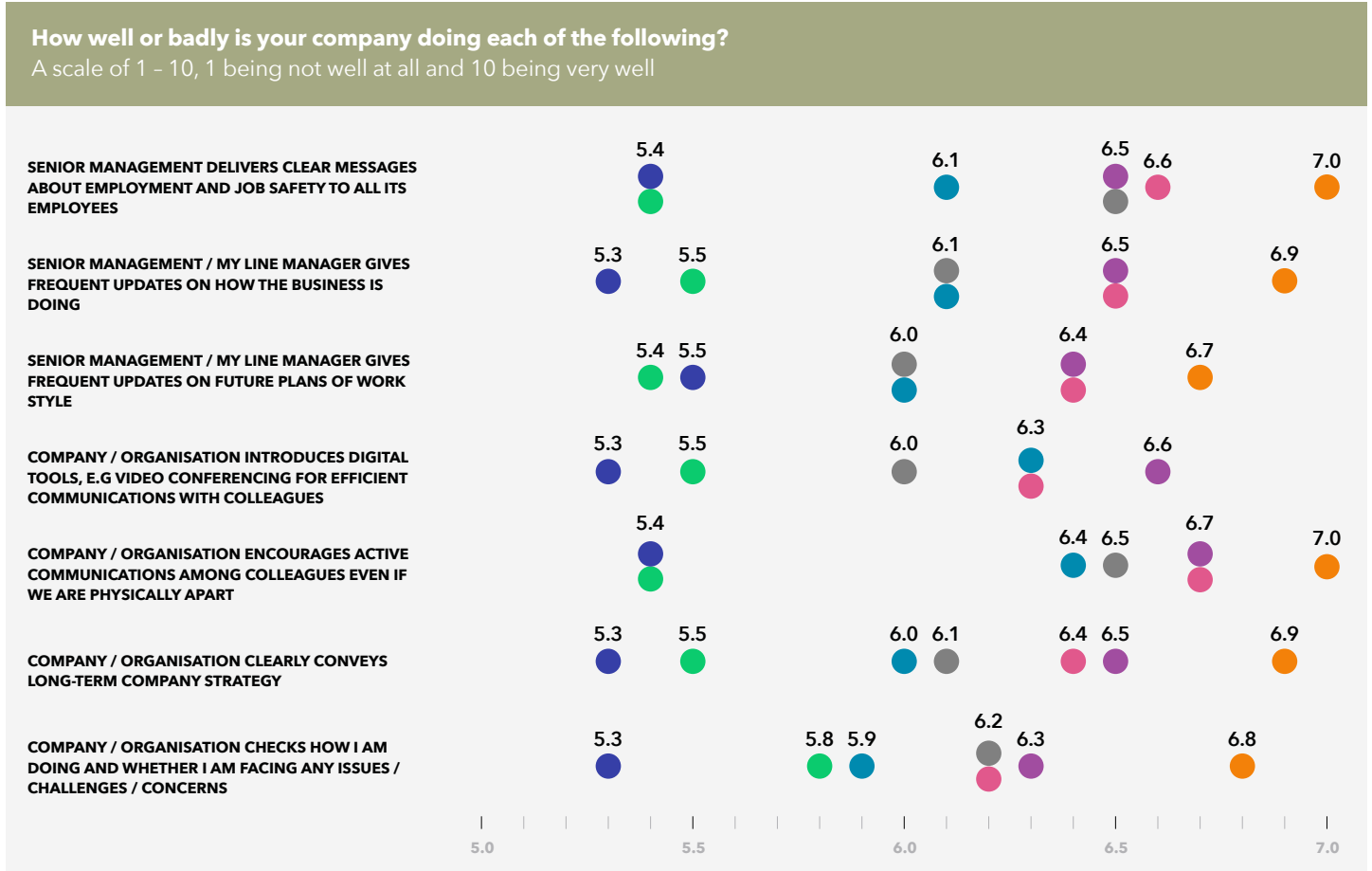
*'At the beginning of the pandemic companies were overcommunicating - 'lots and often' appeared to be the mantra. We are now seeing employers embrace longer-term planning and a more strategic approach to internal communications. Companies are waking up to that the fact that it can drive long-term business value and have seen that senior leaders who have been both visible and compassionate have the most engaged and productive workforces.'*

LUCY CORDING, KEKST CNC

When it comes to a reflective assessment of employer communications during the first few months of the pandemic, the global study showed significant differences in how employees rate the communications sent from their employers across the seven markets surveyed.

The graph below indicates the differences in ratings against a series of actions including clarity of senior management delivery, level of encouragement for active communications, conveying of company strategy and employee 'check-ins'.

It shows that employers in the U.S., France and Germany are rated consistently higher for the quality of internal communications, whereas the ratings given to employers in Sweden and Japan are consistently lower.



Source: Kekst CNC COVID-19 Opinion Tracker - Wave 4 (10th-15th July 2020)

## 1 in 5 UK employees say their company is doing a bad job of checking how they are doing and whether they face any issues.

As the pressure to move to a more hybrid style of working increases, the importance of strong internal communications will grow. The analysis indicates that this may well be more of a challenge in some markets than in others.

For the UK, workers on lower incomes rate their company's communications about long-term strategy less highly.

34% of those on higher incomes rated communication highly, 29% of those on middle incomes and just 21% of those on lower incomes.

When it comes to company encouragement for active communications, older workers are more likely to say they see this within their organisation with 50% of those aged 55-64 vs just 33% of those aged 18-34.

### What does employee judgement really mean for business?

Communications aimed at employees (and that means those sent out via both internal and external channels) have the potential to significantly impact staff motivation, engagement and performance as well as talent retention and employee advocacy efforts. We know that those with a more positively engaged workforce will benefit from higher trust and loyalty so the risk of getting it wrong can be significant.

*'The pandemic has put the internal communications function front and centre. We must continue to work closely with seniors leaders to ensure we communicate the longer term strategy in a timely, clear and transparent way if we are to avoid effects on morale, engagement and productivity and engage employees with the 'new normal'. And we must continue to listen to our people.'*

JANE YOUNG, LEGAL AND GENERAL

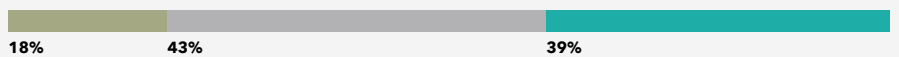
Organisations should consider the variety of touchpoints that can be used to communicate with employees - this includes the owned website, emails, social media, intranets, virtual meetings, townhalls, ambassador channels and even traditional media - and businesses should ensure a consistent tone and message. In addition, the following questions should be considered:

- What is the objective?
- What tools can be utilised?
- How will impact and influence be measured?

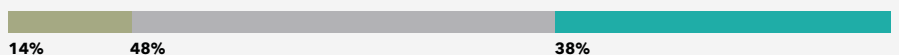
#### How well or badly is your company doing each of the following?

A scale of 1 - 10, 1 being not well at all and 10 being well

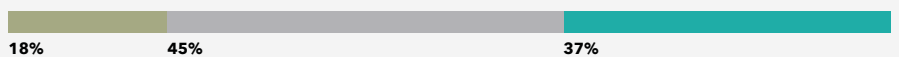
##### COMPANY / ORGANISATION INTRODUCES DIGITAL TOOLS, E.G VIDEO CONFERENCING FOR EFFICIENT COMMUNICATIONS WITH COLLEAGUES



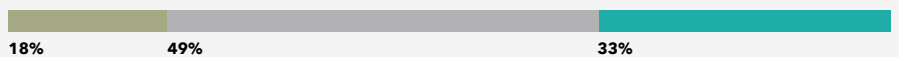
##### COMPANY / ORGANISATION ENCOURAGES ACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS AMONG COLLEAGUES EVEN IF WE ARE PHYSICALLY APART



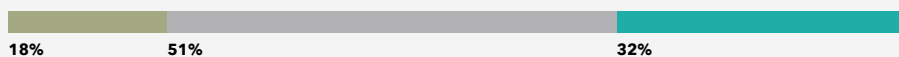
##### SENIOR MANAGEMENT DELIVERS CLEAR MESSAGE ABOUT EMPLOYMENT AND JOB SAFETY TO ALL ITS EMPLOYEES



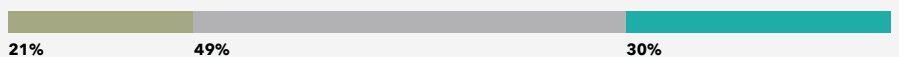
##### SENIOR MANAGEMENT / MY LINE MANAGER GIVES FREQUENT UPDATES ON HOW THE BUSINESS IS DOING



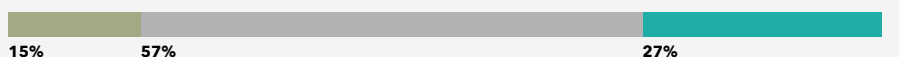
##### SENIOR MANAGEMENT / MY LINE MANAGER GIVES FREQUENT UPDATES ON FUTURE PLANS OF WORK STYLE



##### COMPANY / ORGANISATION CHECKS HOW I AM DOING AND WHETHER I AM FACING ANY ISSUES / CHALLENGES / CONCERNS



##### COMPANY / ORGANISATION CLEARLY CONVEYS LONG-TERM COMPANY STRATEGY



Source: Kekst CNC COVID-19 Opinion Tracker - Wave 4 (10th-15th July 2020)



#### 4. EMPLOYEES' ARE PRIORITISING PAY, KEEPING THEIR JOB AND HEALTH AND SAFETY.

Although considerations about climate and diversity have been shown to be important in studies related to ESG, for employees the message to their employers for the next three months is clear: put me first.

When asked what their top asks from their employer were for the next quarter, employees across all six markets overwhelmingly focus on real and concrete issues linked to their own livelihoods and security. The top demands of employers globally are to keep employee pay reasonable, to institute health and safety measures in the workplace, to protect jobs and to prevent redundancies, and to support those working remotely.

Employers will need to bear this in mind as they look to take their employees with them going forward.

#### What should employers prioritise the most over the next three months?

Displayed are the percentages of respondents in each markets who put each statement in their top three priorities

	UK	U.S.	DE	SE	JP	FR	AVERAGE
KEEP EMPLOYEES' PAY LEVELS AT A REASONABLE LEVEL	26%	23%	22%	28%	42%	27%	28%
INSTITUTE HEALTH AND SAFETY MEASURES IN THE WORKPLACE	29%	18%	27%	20%	30%	25%	25%
PROTECT JOBS / PREVENT REDUNDANCIES	39%	14%	22%	27%	21%	24%	25%
SUPPORT EMPLOYEES WITH WORKING FROM HOME	23%	31%	21%	30%	18%	17%	23%
BUILD A FEELING THAT WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER AS A FIRM/ORGANISATION	20%	24%	33%	28%	15%	19%	23%
BUILD A POSITIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENT, EVEN WHERE WORK HAS BEEN DONE REMOTELY	21%	23%	16%	24%	15%	19%	20%
HELP WITH PUBLIC HEALTH EFFORTS	11%	25%	26%	18%	17%	15%	19%
PROVIDE FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO EMPLOYEES WHO REQUIRE IT	15%	18%	15%	15%	22%	14%	17%
SUPPORT EMPLOYEES WITH CHILDREN	11%	19%	20%	8%	11%	19%	15%
SUPPORT EMPLOYEES WITH COMMUTING TO WORK	6%	23%	13%	13%	13%	15%	14%
ENSURE TOP EXECUTIVE/SENIOR MANAGEMENT ACT RESPONSIBLY	6%	10%	8%	20%	19%	17%	13%
PROVIDE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TO EMPLOYEES WHO REQUIRE IT	17%	11%	11%	16%	12%	10%	13%
PROVIDE TRANSPARENCY ON BUSINESS ACTIVITIES AND PLANNED BUSINESS DECISIONS	13%	9%	5%	6%	11%	5%	8%
GIVE STRONG VOICE TO EMPLOYEES	9%	6%	7%	11%	4%	5%	7%
PROVIDE CHEAPER OR FREE GOODS/SERVICES FOR CUSTOMER WHO ARE KEY WORKERS IN THE ECONOMY	4%	5%	4%	7%	5%	6%	5%
MAKE CHANGES TO IMPROVE THE BUSINESS' IMPACT ON THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT	5%	3%	4%	4%	2%	6%	4%
IMPROVE THE DIVERSITY OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAMS AND THE WORKFORCE	3%	5%	2%	1%	5%	4%	3%

Source: Kekst CNC COVID-19 Opinion Tracker - Wave 5 (16th-22nd September 2020)

## 5. TRANSPARENCY ON PURPOSE AND BUSINESS RESILIENCE WILL GO HAND IN HAND WITH LONGER TERM PLANNING.

While responding to new working environments and ensuring that employee experience is managed effectively through tailored communications should evidently be front of mind, those responsible for wider corporate positioning and protecting brand reputation will also need to understand the longer-term implications of changing workforce behaviour.

We know that employee perception and sentiment have the potential to influence wider corporate reputation. We also know that companies who get employee communications and communications around business direction wrong, will be at risk of being called out and embroiled in the heroes and villains discussion in the media.

In addition, alongside the immediate and obvious long-term challenges presented by COVID-19, businesses must also recognise the heightened need for a succinct and authentic company purpose as well as transparency around commitments to (and progress on) Environment, Society & Government (ESG) and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DE&I).

Here are the areas companies should be considerate of:

- **Talent attraction efforts:** In light of a global pandemic and changing work environments, businesses now face additional challenges when it comes to attracting top talent. Corporate and employer branding efforts will need to align and be empathetic to any job losses while still speak to business growth ambitions. Publishing clear and consistent messages across key channels will reduce doubt and reduce the potential for criticism.
- **Gender equality and broader diversity:** Changing working environments will not only influence employee perception, but can also disrupt company culture which in turn has potential to impact wider business ambitions for gender equality and progress for diversity and equity.

As a business, employee sentiment can differ across different demographic groups. The global survey found that across the board, female employees feel least positive about their employer's communications, with the exception of the UK, where female employees in fact give better scores. The differences seen can be polarising and can cause significant impact to D,E&I efforts. Companies should be aware of these potential nuances and tailor communications accordingly.

- **Executive profiling:** The role that senior business leaders play in protecting business reputation, especially during and after a crisis,

is unquestionable. When it comes to engaging and reassuring employees at this time, visible accountability will build the necessary trust. Leaders will need training and coaching to adapt to the "new normal" and a review of owned and earned channels is recommended.

- **Employee advocacy:** In the same way that consistent senior visibility will help build trust, providing an infrastructure that supports engaged employee storytelling will give an indication of stability to a variety of stakeholders. Driving advocacy amongst a remote workforce will mean changes to programmes and policies, but will empower those involved. Employees telling or engaging with personal stories should be told what impact it is having, and so smart measurement will be key.

All employers have had to adapt to new ways of working incredibly quickly and our analysis shows that overall the quality of the response in communications terms has been well received by their teams.

What goes beyond communications is the transformation that we are seeing in respect of how employees view not just the future of work but the future of their own work. Our analysis has given a clear indication of the pressures that this will place upon employers. Our work with clients has reinforced just how seriously this is being discussed by management teams and communicators.

## METHODOLOGY

Polling conducted by KEKST CNC, nationally representative sample of



1,000 adults  
IN THE UK



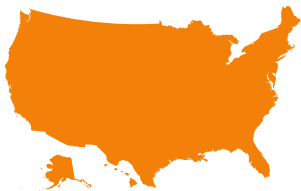
1,000 adults  
IN SWEDEN



1,000 adults  
IN GERMANY



1,000 adults  
IN FRANCE



1,000 adults  
IN THE U.S.



1,000 adults  
IN JAPAN



1,000 adults  
IN HONG KONG



Quotas and weights on **gender, age,  
and region** in each country

Fieldwork took place on  
1) 10th - 15th July 2020  
2) 16th - 22nd September 2020

Margins of error of **+/- 3.3%**  
for all markets

The full results of the Kekst CNC COVID-19 Opinion Tracker - Wave 5 are available  
at <https://www.kekstcnc.com/insights/covid-19-opinion-tracker-edition-5>

**For more information, please contact:**

**[Lucy.Cording@KekstCNC.com](mailto:Lucy.Cording@KekstCNC.com)**

**[Liam.Clark@KekstCNC.com](mailto:Liam.Clark@KekstCNC.com)**

#### **About Kekst CNC**

Kekst CNC is a leading global strategic communication consultancy. The team of over 250 experienced professionals serve clients from 13 offices in New York, London, Munich, Berlin, Frankfurt, Paris, Brussels, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Stockholm. As trusted advisors, the firm contributes its expertise on such high-stake matters as: M&A, shareholder activism and governance, crisis communications, restructurings, regulatory investigations, litigation support, investor relations, IPO communications, issues and reputation management, change management and employee engagement, as well as digital and social communications. For more information, please visit: [www.kekstcnc.com](http://www.kekstcnc.com)

