COVID-19 & Careers: The Effect of the Pandemic on Career Progression

Survey of 1,000 Office Employees Working Remotely
Due to COVID-19

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APRIL 2021

Career Progression AND THE
COVID-19 Effect

For decades, American office workers have been given the same instructions on how to get ahead: show up, work hard, play nicely, and you'll be rewarded with pay, benefits, and advancement, or at least enough experience to seek advancement elsewhere. Whether or not this fair exchange became reality for more than a privileged few, most still understood it as how things ought to be.

Enter the COVID-19 pandemic.

In March 2020, a tidal wave of change washed away the familiar road to professional success as millions of office workers were sent to work from home. While telecommuting has been on the rise in recent years, most were unprepared for the abrupt transition to full-time remote work. On top of tremendous outside stressors, the deviation from routine and the loss of community left many capable employees fighting just to remain p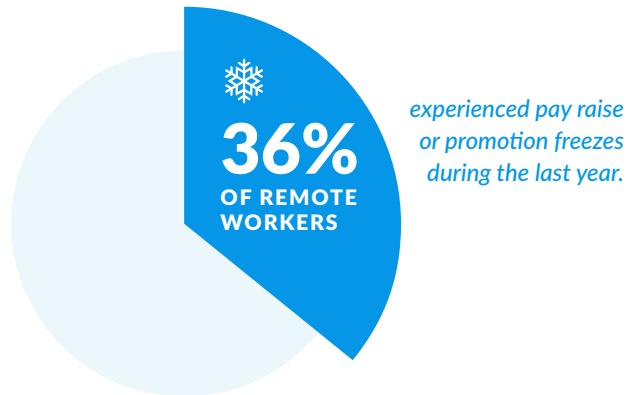roductive, not to mention advance their careers. Organizations that survived the initial financial impact of lockdown often struggled to stay afloat, further derailing career plans. All of this while many already-marginalized groups faced disproportionate impacts from the pandemic on their communities.

We care deeply about employee experience and providing an environment where employees can do great work, and we know effective HR and business leaders do, too. That's why we need to know more about how COVID-19 has impacted employee morale and perceived career progression. In pursuit of better understanding, we asked 1,000 adults about their career progression experience since working remotely. We selected individuals aged 18–75 who work full-time in an office or desk job setting in the United States and are currently (as of April 2021) working remotely or have since March 2020.
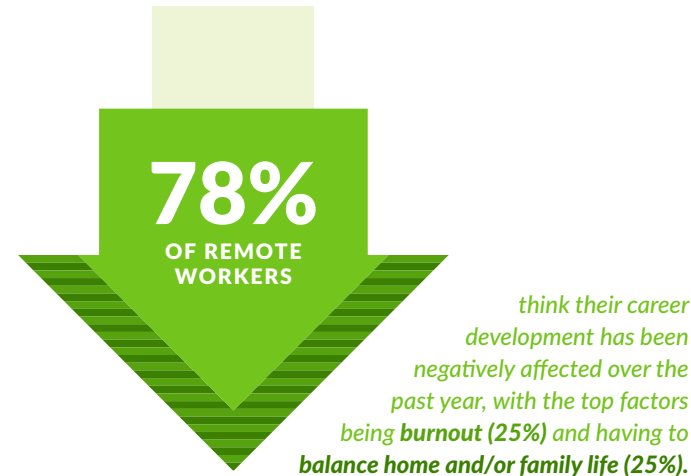
This report shares our key findings.

Most employees feel their career development and bottom line have been negatively affected.

Whether it's a feeling of moving backwards or just being stalled, the majority of employees feel their career development was negatively impacted over the past year. Employees point to **burnout** and **balancing home and family life** as the top factors negatively affecting their career progression.

78%
OF REMOTE WORKERS

*think their career development has been negatively affected over the past year, with the top factors being **burnout (25%)** and having to balance home and/or family life **(25%)**.*

36%
OF REMOTE WORKERS

experienced pay raise or promotion freezes during the last year.

At the end of the day, one of the most discouraging effects of a stalled career is lost wages. On average, **remote workers in the U.S. estimate they lost out on over $9,000 due to pay and promotion freezes during the last year.**

The lack of progress and money isn't for lack of effort; most employees have worked extra hours and more than a third have worked on days off. **The pandemic put pressure on many employees to take these added measures just to stay on top of work,** let alone gain harder-to-earn promotions.
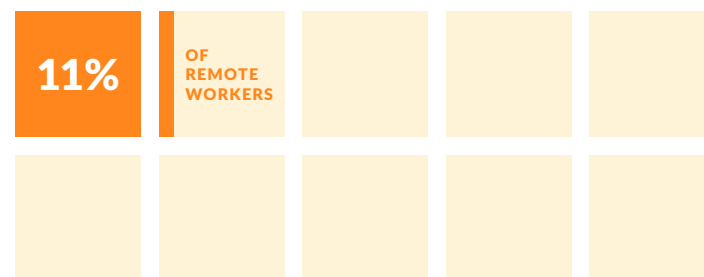
53% **OF REMOTE WORKERS**

feel that in the last year, they've had to put in more effort to prove their worth at their company.

Working harder and blurring the lines between workspace and home space has led to high levels of burnout.

Most employees report feeling burned out at least every month, and more than half say they're burned out every single week. **It seems that work-life balance has been incredibly difficult to strike when working remotely.** Employees rank the top three reasons for burnout as:

1. "'Always-on' remote work culture / expectations"

2. "Juggling extra responsibilities at home or in my personal life"

3. "Juggling extra responsibilities outside my job description"

56%
OF REMOTE WORKERS

have felt totally tied to their desk and computer over the last year.

11%
OF REMOTE WORKERS

say they've taken a day off in the past year just to get caught up on work.

The combination of remote work, mobile connectivity, and an "always on" work culture means employees feel pressured to be available to customers, clients, and colleagues 24/7—even while in the bathroom—**leading some employees to take vacation days just to get caught up on work.**

Unsurprisingly, the increased burnout levels and work expectations have led to poorer employee mental health, particularly among younger generations of employees.

There are clear differences in the experiences of different races and generational groups.

A surprising finding (and perhaps silver lining) of the abrupt move to remote work is that **people of color (POC) report feeling like they've made career progress in the past year at a significantly higher rate**. However, **POC also report having to take on more responsibilities than white remote workers.**

76%
BLACK

65%
HISPANIC/LATINX

60%
ASIAN

59%
WHITE

76% of Black remote workers feel like they've made career progress in the last year, compared to 65% Hispanic/Latinx, 60% Asian, and 59% White.

60% of Black remote workers and 59% of Hispanic/Latinx say that in the last year, they've had to put in more effort to prove their worth, compared to 48% White.

BLACK

HISPANIC/LATINX

WHITE

48%

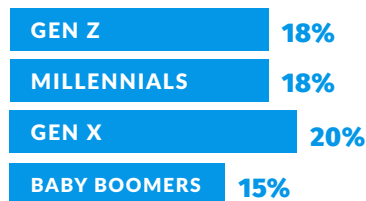60%   59%

GEN Z 51%

MILLENNIALS 51%

GEN X 41%

BABY BOOMERS 38%

say that social capital and having social interactions and relationships at work is important to career development.

GEN Z 35%

MILLENNIALS 33%

have a new expectation of employers for more empathy for minority populations.

BUT

GEN Z 18%

MILLENNIALS 18%

GEN X 20%

BABY BOOMERS 15%

have a new expectation of employers for corporate strategy for DEI and CSR initiatives.

Gen Z and Millennial employees responded at higher rates compared to Baby Boomers and Gen Xers that their careers were stunted by an inability to have social interactions and connect with others during the pandemic. Perhaps because many of them are more novice in their careers, younger generations also reported at a significantly higher rate they've had to put in more effort to prove their worth at their companies.

The past year also shined a spotlight on social inequalities and injustices, and **POC and younger generations both report the highest expectations among demographics for more empathy toward under-represented populations from their organizations.** That being said, those same employees don't hold nearly as high expectations that their **employers will create corporate strategies for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) or corporate social responsibility (CSR).**

This discrepancy between high and low expectations is puzzling; the empathy younger employees expect to see has to come from somewhere, but they appear to doubt it will arrive in the form of company policy. Perhaps they're hopeful that even without any official DEI or CSR strategy, increased awareness of social justice issues will encourage empathy at the individual level.

COVID-19 Damage Control: What Can Businesses Do Next?

So, now that we know how employees are feeling about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their careers, what can we do to help? Being proactive can not only help employees feel more comfortable with their career progression but may also help avoid the negative impacts looming from high burnout and poor mental health.

Consider talent from other industries and locations: **27 percent of remote workers plan on switching career paths or looking for a new job in the next six months.** This underscores the need to focus on caring for your existing employees, but it also reveals an opportunity if you're looking to recruit more. If remote or hybrid work is a new possibility, consider employees from new locations—61 percent of remote workers think geography isn't a barrier to career path and progression. Consider reaching out to employees in industries that have been hit hard—and realize the good you're doing by opening up new avenues for job seekers.

Train managers to communicate: **42 percent of remote workers reported that they were meeting with their direct supervisor less frequently than prior to COVID-19, but those who met frequently had greater rates of career progression.** Managers are often expected to operate autonomously; providing training that helps them be better connected and more vocal advocates for their direct reports benefits employees, managers, and the organization.

Provide opportunities for connection: Whether through better communication technology or extra social events at work this year, employers have multiple ways to fill the void for connection that many employees felt in 2020. Given that

46 percent of remote workers think social capital and having social interactions and relationships at work is important to career development, it's crucial to make up for opportunities lost in the past year.

Invest in mental health: One of the great opportunities to make an impact is in our response to employees' need for increased mental health support. **With 79 percent of remote employees feeling burned out monthly, 53 percent feeling burned out weekly, and 21 percent feeling burned out daily, work is clearly taking a toll on mental health.** Whether through an increased focus on work-life balance, bulked-up benefits, or both, employers can help turn back this tide by finding more ways to better support employee mental health.

A warning about flexibility: In the past, flexibility has often been touted as a great way to improve work-life balance. However, **half (50 percent) of remote workers say their company has been more flexible with working hours in the last year.** Considering what we've learned about employees feeling pressured to be available around the clock, employers should take steps to ensure "work" and "home" remain separate, even when the physical difference may only be a few steps.

Drive understanding with data: While this survey may provide some general insight into remote-employee sentiment throughout the past year, it's not enough to use as a blueprint for your specific industry or your organization in particular. You should consistently seek specific insight from your employees to find opportunities for improvement. **With 85 percent of employees saying they have new expectations of their employers following the pandemic,** it's crucial to know what those unique expectations are from your employees. Various tools can help you identify, measure, and track any issue of either mountain or molehill proportions.

Career Progression and the COVID-19 Effect

Survey Results Summary | April 2021

Methodology

BambooHR conducted this research using an online survey prepared by Method Research and distributed by Dynata among n=1,000 adults ages 18-75 in the United States who work full-time in an office/desk job setting and are currently working remotely or have since March of 2020. The sample was equally split between gender groups, with a nationally representative geographic spread of respondents. Data was collected from April 6 to April 15, 2021.

Sample Profile

Age:	18-24 (Gen Z)	20%	*Region:*	Northeast	21%
	25-40 (Millennial)	35%		Midwest	18%
	41-56 (Gen X)	31%		South	37%
	57-75 (Baby Boomer)	14%		West	24%
Gender:	Female	50%	*Location:*	Urban	46%
	Male	49%		Suburban	39%
				Rural	15%
Race:	Caucasian/White	43%			
	African-American/Black	18%	*Marital Status:*	Married/Committed partner	56%
	Asian	15%		Boyfriend/Girlfriend	15%
	Hispanic/Latinx	19%		Single	24%
	Other	5%		Separated/Divorced	4%
				Widowed	1%
Job Title:	C-level executive	8%			
	Vice President	8%	*Children:*	Age 0 - 12	2-%
	Manager	35%		Age 13 - 17	16%
	Team lead	14%		Adult child(ren) 18+	19%
	Individual contributor	29%		No children	46%
	Other	5%			

Q1.

Did your company do any of the following in the last year?

Hiring freeze	36%
Pay raise freeze	28%
Layoffs	27%
Reduced hours or made employees part-time	26%
Promotion freeze	21%
Salary cuts	18%
Furloughs	17%
Forced use of vacation time	15%
Benefits reduction	13%
None of the above	31%
NET: Pay raise/promotion freeze	**36%**

Q2.

Which of the following best describes how you'd characterize your career progression over the past year?

I made a lot of progress in my career	28%
I made some progress in my career	36%
I feel like my career progress stalled/was stagnant	32%
I feel like I went backward in my career progress	3%
I changed careers entirely	1%
NET: Career progression	**64%**
NET: Stalled/backwards	**36%**

Q3.

Which of the following was true of you during the last year?

I was promoted	28%
I was promoted, but it was delayed	36%
A promotion I believe I should've received was delayed/denied	32%
I wasn't due for a promotion	3%

Q4a.

How much of a net increase on top of your prior annual salary was your promotion?

Base: Those who were promoted, n=372
　　*Subgroups too small for analysis

Q4b.

How much of a net increase on top of your current annual salary do you think your promotion would have been if it wasn't delayed/denied?

Base: Those whose promotions were delayed, n=161
　　*Subgroups too small for analysis

	Remote workers promoted	Remote workers whose promotions were delayed/denied	NET: Remote workers who were promoted or whose promotions were delayed
$1000	25%	17%	22%
$1001-$2500	10%	12%	11%
$2501-$5000	17%	22%	19%
$5000+	48%	49%	48%
Mean	$15,531.29	$9,823.05	$13,701.07
Median	$5,000	$6,000	$5,200

Q5.

Did you do any of the following to try to help you get promoted?

Base: Those who were promoted / Promotion was delayed, n=533

I worked extra hours	56%
I volunteered for extra projects / responsibilities	50%
I was proactive engaging with leadership	47%
I took on the responsibilities of someone who was laid off/had hours cut	40%
I worked on days off (i.e., weekends)	38%
I worked so hard I got burned out	29%
I worked during paid time off (i.e., vacation)	23%
I threatened to quit (without a job offer from another company)	5%
I threatened to quit (with a job offer from another company)	4%
None of the above	5%

Q6.

What do you think has negatively affected your career development over the past year?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

Burn out	25%
Having to balance home and/or family life	25%
Lack of social interaction in the workplace	24%
Remote work has made my contributions less visible	21%
Remote work has made me less productive	16%
Poor mental health	15%
My company's financial performance	15%
Company undervalues employees	15%
Promotion freeze at my company	14%
Manager who doesn't advocate for me	12%
I got sick with COVID-19	8%
I had to care for someone sick with COVID-19	8%
Loss of personal brand equity in the workplace	7%
My race	6%
My vocalness on company stances around societal issues (e.g., voting, COVID-19 vaccines, racial justice, etc.)	5%
My gender	4%
Other	4%
My career development hasn't been negatively affected in the last year	22%

Q7.

What do you think has helped your career progress over the last year?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

Remote work gave me more flexibility	43%
I'm more productive when working remote	27%
Remote work played to my strengths and allowed me to stand out more	21%
My company thrived financially during COVID-19 (increased demand for our services)	20%
I feel that I'm now on more equal footing with other employees when it comes to learning opportunities, internal mobility, manager access, etc.	18%
I'm more vocal on company policy/executive decision making remotely	16%
I changed jobs/careers	10%
Other	3%
I don't feel I've made career progress in the last year	18%

Q8.

For each of the following statements, please indicate how much you agree or disagree.

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

	Completely agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely disagree	NET: Agree	Net: Disagree
I have someone senior to me at work who is a strong advocate for my career progression	16%	38%	25%	14%	7%	**54%**	**21%**
In the last year, I've had to put in more effort to prove my worth at my company	15%	38%	24%	17%	6%	**53%**	**22%**
The inability to show my personality/connect with others in the office over the past year has stunted my career development	6%	26%	27%	28%	14%	**31%**	**42%**
I prefer having less work and not getting promoted over having a larger workload just to get promoted	6%	20%	25%	33%	16%	**26%**	**49%**

Q9.

Compared to a year ago before COVID-19, do you meet with your direct supervisor more often or less frequently?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

Much more often	6%
More often	19%
No change	33%
Less frequently	29%
Much less frequently	14%
NET: More often	**25%**
NET: Less frequently	**42%**

Q10.

How important is social capital and having social interactions/ relationships at work in regards to your career development?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

Very important	18%
Important	28%
Moderately important	31%
Slightly important	17%
Not important at all	6%
NET: Important	**46%**
NET: Slightly/not important	**23%**

Q11.

Which of the following has your company done over the past year?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

Socially distanced in-person meetings or gatherings	39%
Frequent supervisor/manager check-ins	38%
Held team/company meetings to recognize co-workers	33%
Promoted team wellness activities (e.g., virtual yoga class)	30%
Virtual happy hours	28%
Instituted casual virtual meetings and hangouts (beyond lunch)	28%
Company paid for informal, virtual lunch meetings with coworkers	18%
None of the above	12%

Q12.

For each of the following your company has done in the last year, how effective was it in maintaining social capital?

Base: Those whose company held activity, n=varies

	Very effective	Effective	Somewhat effective	Not very effective	Not effective at all, worthless	NET: Effective	Net: Not effective
Company paid for informal, virtual lunch meetings with coworkers	32%	42%	19%	3%	4%	**74%**	**7%**
Frequent supervisor/manager check-ins	22%	39%	30%	9%	1%	**61%**	**10%**
Held team/company meetings to recognize co-workers	19%	40%	32%	7%	3%	**59%**	**10%**
Socially distanced in-person meetings or gatherings	22%	37%	30%	9%	2%	**59%**	**11%**
Promoted team wellness activities (e.g., virtual yoga class)	18%	35%	29%	12%	5%	**54%**	**17%**
Instituted casual virtual meetings and hangouts (beyond lunch)	14%	37%	33%	13%	3%	**52%**	**16%**
Virtual happy hours	17%	28%	31%	19%	5%	**45%**	**24%**

Q13.

Have you done any of the following in the last year?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

Took training classes to further my career development	30%
Side hustle (Uber driver, freelance, etc.)	17%
Took training classes in hopes of changing careers/industries	14%
Continued or started higher education	13%
Went from full-time work to part-time work for personal reasons	7%
Switched to another industry	6%
Switched to another career	6%
None of the above	44%

Q14.

Why did you do the following?

Base: Varies

*Subgroups too small for analysis

	Side hustle (Uber driver, freelance, etc.)	Continued or started higher education	Took training classes to further my career development	Took training classes in hopes of changing careers or industries	Went from full-time work to part-time work for personal reasons	Switched to another industry	Switched to another career
Needed extra money	68%	31%	18%	31%	-	40%	39%
I needed something to fill my excess time	34%	27%	25%	26%	39%	33%	21%
Remote work made it possible	32%	24%	38%	29%	29%	24%	23%
I needed a distraction	24%	17%	14%	23%	30%	15%	14%
Family responsibilities required it	15%	16%	6%	16%	41%	18%	23%
I was worried about job stability in my current role	11%	18%	17%	23%	7%	18%	18%
I was bored in my current job	10%	13%	12%	23%	23%	33%	20%
I thought it'd help me get promoted	9%	45%	42%	29%	23%	20%	18%
Other	3%	8%	11%	4%	6%	9%	14%

Q15.

For each of the following you said you've done, how much time on average did you spend per week doing it?

Base: Varies

*Subgroups too small for analysis

	Less than an hour	1-2 hours per week	3-4 hours per week	5-6 hours per week	7-9 hours per week	10 or more hours per week	NET: Less than 2 hours a week	NET: 3-6 hours per week
Side hustle (Uber driver, freelance, etc.)	3%	12%	32%	23%	11%	18%	**16%**	**55%**
Continued or started higher education	2%	12%	26%	27%	19%	14%	**14%**	**52%**
Took training classes to further my career development	9%	31%	31%	15%	9%	5%	**40%**	**47%**
Took training classes in hopes of changing careers/industries	4%	28%	33%	21%	12%	3%	**32%**	**53%**

Q16.

Reflecting on the past year, how often do you feel burned out from work?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

Constantly	11%
Daily	10%
Several times a week	19%
Weekly	13%
A few times a month	21%
Monthly	6%
A few times a year	13%
Never	9%
NET: Daily	**21%**
NET: Weekly	**53%**
NET: Monthly	**79%**

Q17.

What are the factors contributing to your burnout?

Base: Those who feel burned out at least once a month, n=789

"Always-on" remote work culture / expectations	41%
Juggling extra responsibilities at home or in my personal life	41%
Juggling extra responsibilities outside my job description	30%
Extra pressure from my company / manager(s)	29%
Working more hours overall remotely than when I was working in-office	29%
The loss of buffer time before and/or after work (previously spent commuting, etc.)	25%
Dealing with subpar technology for remote work	25%
Extra economic pressure	23%
Extra work trying to get a promotion	20%
Other	5%

Q18.

How would you describe the burnout you've experienced this past year compared to in years prior?

Base: Those who feel burned out at least once a month, n=789

This was the first year I've experienced burnout	25%
I've always been prone to burnout and it's just more of the same	31%
I've had burnout before, but it's been a lot worse this year	30%
I thought I'd been burned out before, but 2020 was a whole new level of bad	15%

Q19.

Has your company been more or less flexible with working hours in the last year during COVID-19?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

Much more flexible	13%
More flexible	37%
No change, we've always been flexible	25%
No change, we've never been flexible	13%
Less flexible	8%
Much less flexible	3%
NET: More flexible	**50%**
NET: Less flexible	**12%**

Q20.

How has your company been flexible on working hours during COVID-19?

Base: Those whose company has been flexible with working hours in the last year during COVID-19, n=751

Let us set our own working hours	32%
Encouraged breaks throughout the day	26%
Adjusted sick day policy to include mental health/wellness	16%
Increased paid time off available to employees	10%
Other	16%

Q21.

What tactics do you use to stay visible while everyone is working remotely?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

Keep my phone on me at all times with my work notifications on	55%
Make myself reminders to reply to coworkers	37%
Send emails late at night / early in the morning	35%
Work through my lunch break	33%
Avoid taking breaks so I don't miss anything	22%
Bring my phone to the bathroom so I can reply to customers/clients/colleagues	19%

Q22.

How many days off work did you personally take last year during 2020?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

I took 1-5 days off work	31%
I took 6-10 days off work	25%
I took 11-15 days off work	14%
I took 16-20 days off work	8%
I took 21 or more days off work	7%
I didn't take any days off work	15%
NET: 1-10 days off work	**56%**
NET: 11-20 days off work	**22%**

Q23.

Have you ever taken a day off in the last year for any of the following reasons?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

For personal mental wellness	44%
To reduce burnout	37%
To take a break from my company's atmosphere	25%
To tend to a sick partner or children when I wasn't personally sick	21%
To get caught up on work	11%
To participate in social justice activities or protests	9%
To interview for another job	8%
None of the above	24%

Q24.

For each of the following statements, please indicate how much you agree or disagree.

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

	Completely agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Completely disagree	NET: Agree	Net: Disagree
Geography is no longer a barrier to career paths and progression	16%	45%	25%	11%	3%	**61%**	**14%**
Taking time off helps me with my career development	15%	41%	29%	11%	3%	**57%**	**14%**
I've felt totally tied to my desk/computer over the past year	16%	40%	20%	19%	6%	**56%**	**23%**
The "perfect remote employee" is an unrealistic expectation from companies	13%	33%	31%	18%	5%	**46%**	**23%**
Taking time off is perceived negatively at my company	6%	19%	26%	33%	16%	**25%**	**49%**

Q25.

What type of employee do you admire more?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

		Neutral / No opinion		
The person who's always on camera on video	35%	39%	26%	The person who's always off camera on video calls
The person who responds right away	43%	26%	32%	The person who takes a few minutes to respond
The person who works late	24%	28%	48%	The person who sets boundaries and doesn't work late
The person who puts in more time at work	16%	20%	64%	The person who gets results

Q26.

Do you have any of the following plans in the next six months?

Base: Total Respondents, n=1000

Non-work travel	60%
Looking for a new job	20%
Changing where I live to better suit remote work	15%
Returning to school full or part time	13%
Switching career paths	12%
Take a prolonged break from work (three or more months)	11%
Changing where I live to go back to the office	10%
Changing industries	7%

Q27.

Why are you planning to switch careers or look for a new job?

Base: Those who plan on switching career paths or looking for a new job, n=265

I've felt "stuck" in my current job	40%
I'm burned out	36%
Lack of promotion	31%
Personal reasons	29%
I lost respect for my company over how they treated employees over the past year	26%
I was considering switching careers pre-pandemic, and then the pandemic pushed me to	24%
Remote work opened up new opportunities that I'm exploring	23%
I've gained clarity on my priorities and my current career is in conflict with those	22%
I want to be in a new industry	20%
Remote work isn't for me	12%
Other	5%

Q28.

Do you have any of the following new expectations of employers?

Flexibility with work hours	56%
Remote work opportunities	51%
Added benefits (i.e., paid internet and cell phone)	33%
Expanded wellness/sick time	32%
More empathy for minority populations	27%
Corporate strategy for DEI and CSR initiatives that encourage employees to participate	15%
Other	2%
I don't have new expectations from employers	15%

About BambooHR

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