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# Survey reveals two-thirds of NZ employees want more work-life flexibility – how should employers respond?

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COVID-19 has had a significant impact on all facets of our lives, including the ways we work and our work-life priorities.

Globally, workplaces are navigating trends such as the “great resignation”, “quiet quitting” and the “great recruitment”. But in New Zealand, the “great return” to work is still being negotiated, providing employees and employers an opportunity to redesign the workplace in ways that benefit both.

One common theme in the employment trends to emerge during COVID-19 is a shift in the value people place on their work and their lives outside of work. But has this gone too far? Are workers being selfish – or “self-first”, as in putting their non-work preferences ahead of workplace productivity?

Or are they prioritising personal wellbeing in order to be better employees? And are these global employment trends meaningful in the New Zealand context, where small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) dominate the business landscape?

Our ongoing survey of more than 600 SME employees found workplace practices and future working preferences have changed since 2020. Workers are looking for jobs that better fit their lives. The results suggest now is the time for employers to

work with employees, rather than against them, for mutual benefit and increased productivity.

## Global trends: big players and trendsetters

More than two years after the first COVID-19 lockdowns, employers are calling their employees back to the office – but also having to respond to employee push-back. Employees are expecting and asking for more flexibility in where and when they work – they aren't just quietly accepting the “old ways” of working.

Workers have had a taste of work-life flexibility and are demanding this more frequently and with more confidence. Meanwhile, some employers are focused on “traditional” 40-hour weeks in the office, while others are offering flexibility in hours worked, work style and location.

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*Read more: [The 'city' is becoming increasingly digital, forcing us to rethink its role in life and work](#)*

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Tesla recently told workers to return to the office for 40 hours a week, or work elsewhere permanently. Apple's mandate for employees to return to the office was met with a petition for a work-from-home policy, as implemented at Facebook and Twitter. The company eventually settled for a hybrid “two days at home, three days in the office” model.

In the UK, a four-day work week pilot involving 70 companies is underway, while in Canada some workplaces are navigating the broad pushback from employees who have seen they can work in different places and during different hours and who now want a say in how, when, and where they do their job.

Some businesses are mandating a return to the office while other Canadian businesses have embraced a four-day work week with no change in daily hours for employees.



Employees' expectations around work have changed and now is the time for employers to negotiate with their staff over what work looks like. [Getty Images](#)

## **NZ workplaces in a state of flux**

While similar trials are under way in [New Zealand](#), the big questions are whether employers need to worry about the actions of large, multinational companies (given SMEs make up approximately 97% of local businesses), and whether employees have the same desired future work-life preferences as workers overseas.

A quick search of vacancies on the job website Seek.com showed more than 700 jobs mentioned “working from home”, 5,000 mentioned “flexibility”, and 38,000 mentioned “work-life” in the job descriptions. Businesses clearly have the sense that staff preferences are changing.

Our research provides insight on what employees want and why. We asked questions about when, where and how many hours they work, as well as the levels of autonomy they have in setting their own work patterns. We also asked what changes they had seen in their organisations since 2020.

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While more than half of the respondents (52%) said they had more flexibility in terms of their work arrangements compared to before COVID, and 62% agreed they were able to manage their work-life demands, two-thirds (67%) indicated they now wanted more work-life flexibility.

Nearly half of the respondents (48%) reported that their organisation had already made formal policy changes to enable more work-life flexibility (not including temporary changes during the pandemic). Some 41% said they knew of employees who had left organisations because the employer did not provide enough flexibility to match their needs.

Flexibility in this context meant control over their working patterns. Employees wanted to decide how, where and when they carried out their work. This does not necessarily mean only working from home, but start and end times, number of daily hours worked, and preferred locations such as the homes of friends and family, cafes, libraries and shared open spaces.

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***Read more: Even Google agrees there's no going back to the old office life***

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The dominant reason for people seeking greater flexibility was personal wellbeing (60%) – above family care, lifestyle, community involvement, fewer interruptions and increased productivity.

We also found 77% of respondents wanted to feel a strong sense of belonging to their organisation. Despite wanting more control of their working patterns, including not necessarily being in the same building as their colleagues, respondents still wanted to be part of an organisation – just in a different way.

## Finding common ground

The survey results offer local employers an opportunity to work with employees, rather than face the backlash that has been seen overseas.

With record low unemployment, employees are seeking organisations that are responding to the shift in employee values. Employers need to look past what might appear, on the surface, to be employee selfishness and accommodate the new “self-first” preferences in the post-COVID environment.

By embracing the preferences of their workers, employers can show they value employees and employee wellbeing, which might help navigate the best options for employees – including helping set the new “rules” of working and where compromises might take place.

Remember, employees want a sense of belonging to something bigger. But they also understand the importance of taking care of themselves first. It is time for employees and employers to work together to carve out the mutual benefits of finding new ways of working.

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