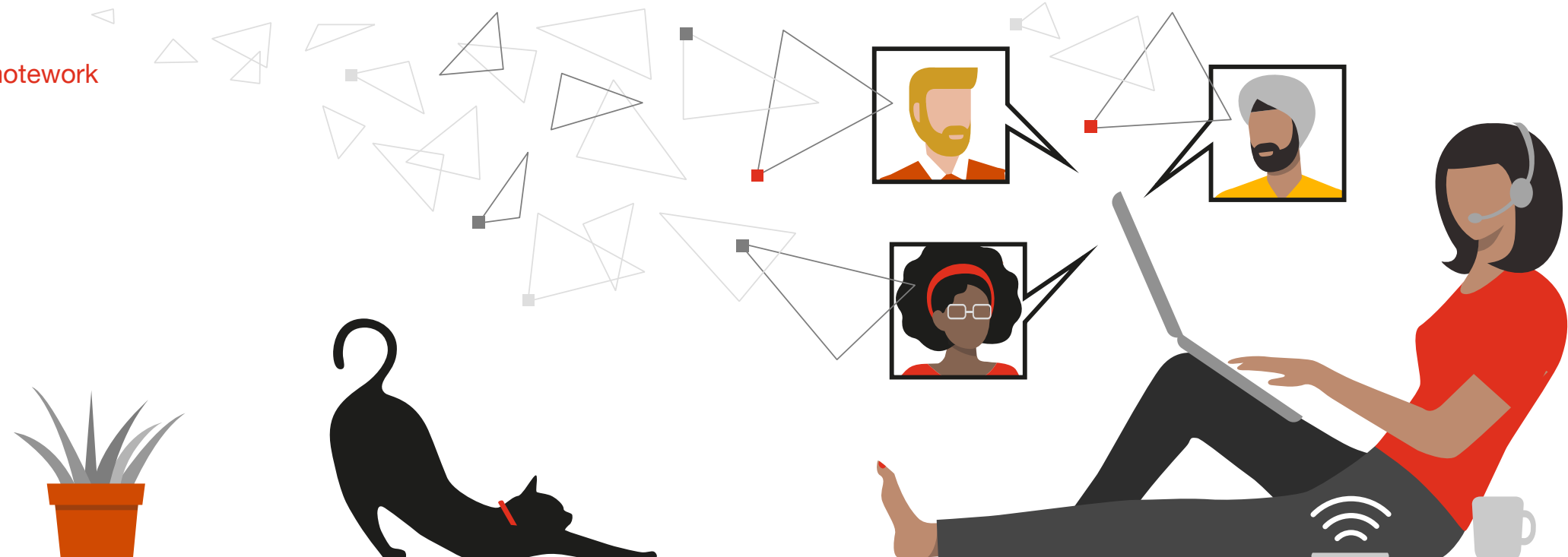
When everyone can work from home, what's the office for?

PwC's US Remote Work Survey — June 25, 2020

pwc.com/us/remotework



Key findings

Office workers say they'd like to have the option to work from home more frequently, even after COVID-19 is no longer a threat. They also want help setting work-life boundaries to improve their own productivity.

Employers need to prepare for flexible workweeks, as a majority of office workers would like options to work remotely at least one day a week. More than half (55%) of executives expect to offer that option.

The office isn't obsolete yet, but it is changing. While the COVID-19 crisis showed that staff can interact well when apart, people still want to engage with colleagues in person. It's why 50% go into the office.

While 30% of executives foresee the need for less office space due to remote work, 50% are anticipating an increase due to longer-lasting requirements for social distancing or growth in their workforce.

Executives embrace remote work models that relax where and when office work gets done

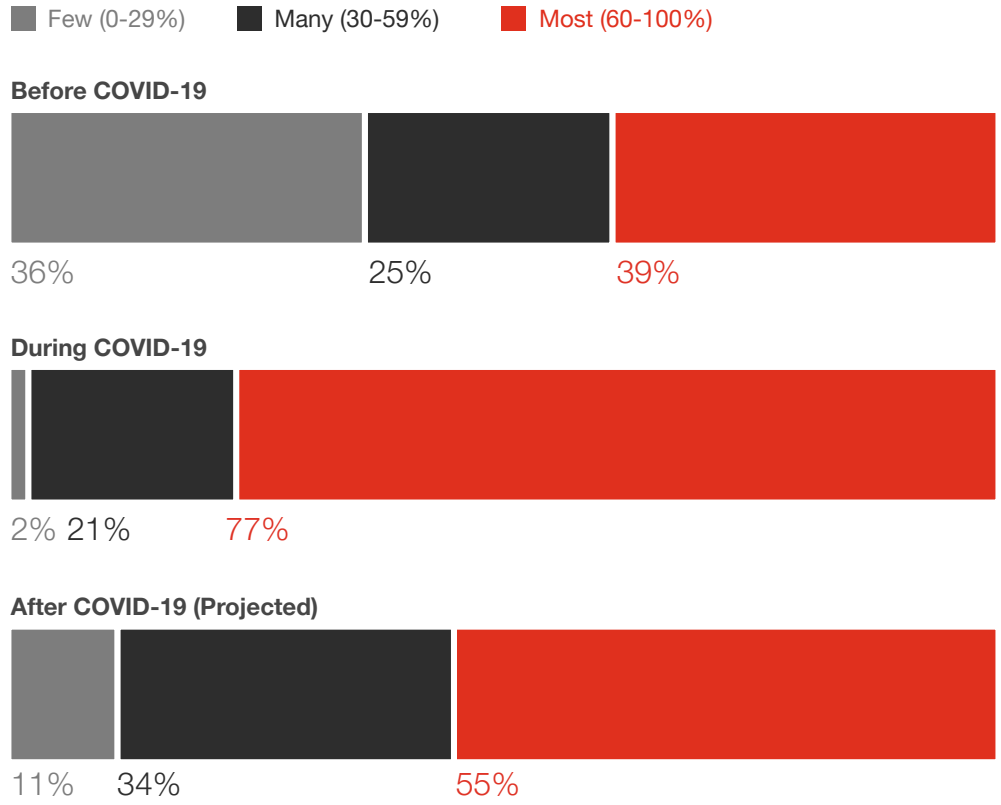
PwC's June survey of executives and office workers shows that a permanent flexible workweek (and perhaps workday) has broad support. Most office workers (83%) want to work from home at least one day a week, and half of employers (55%) anticipate that most of their workers will do so long after COVID-19 is not a concern.

However, the office is not obsolete yet. We're in the midst of a transition that's going to take more time than many may have expected, considering how quickly companies were able to switch to remote work during the crisis. Today's choices about office space are intertwined with ideas about the work and the workforce that companies think they will need in the future. Many businesses will need to use their office spaces more creatively to accommodate hybrid on-premise and work-from-anywhere models.

Employers and employees will also need to figure out how to make remote work a success for both of them. Many employers still see a need for collaborating and community building in a physical space, and are also trying to figure out how to maintain the current high level of productivity once the pandemic recedes. Employees, on the other hand, are looking for help alleviating pressures to be "always on," while they look for new ways to work effectively with colleagues and stay connected to the company.

PwC surveyed 120 US company executives and 1,200 US office workers between May 29 and June 4, 2020, to see how effective remote work has been. Employee respondents were either required to work from home during COVID-19 (70%) or did so routinely anyway (30%). (Essential workers were excluded.)

What percent of your office employees do you anticipate will work remotely at least one day a week?



Source: PwC US Remote Work Survey
June 25, 2020. Base: 120 US executives.

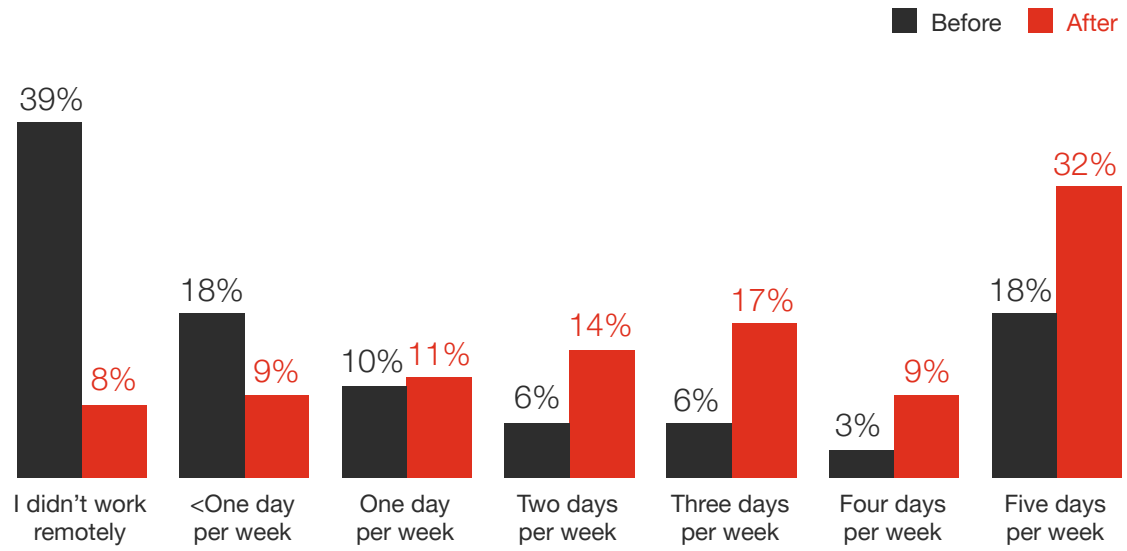
Where employees want to work

Companies shifted almost their entire office workforce to remote work as the virus spread in the US, and 73% percent of executives say it was a success. This forced experiment is opening opportunities for businesses to address how work gets done across their corporate headquarters, sales offices, contact centers, processing centers and innovation centers.

Now, half of executives (55%) expect to extend options for most of their office workers to work from home at least one day a week post-COVID, up from the 39% of companies who did so before the pandemic.

And most office workers want some option for remote work. When asked whether they'd like to continue to work remotely once COVID-19 is no longer a concern, the findings are unambiguous: 72% say they'd like to work away from the office for at least two days a week. While a third (32%) say they'd prefer never to go to the office. Employees are clearly signaling interest in a range of options.

How often did you work remotely before COVID-19? How often would you like to once COVID-19 is no longer a concern?



Source: PwC US Remote Work Survey
June 25, 2020. Base: 1,200 US office workers.

72% of office workers would like to work remotely at least two days a week.

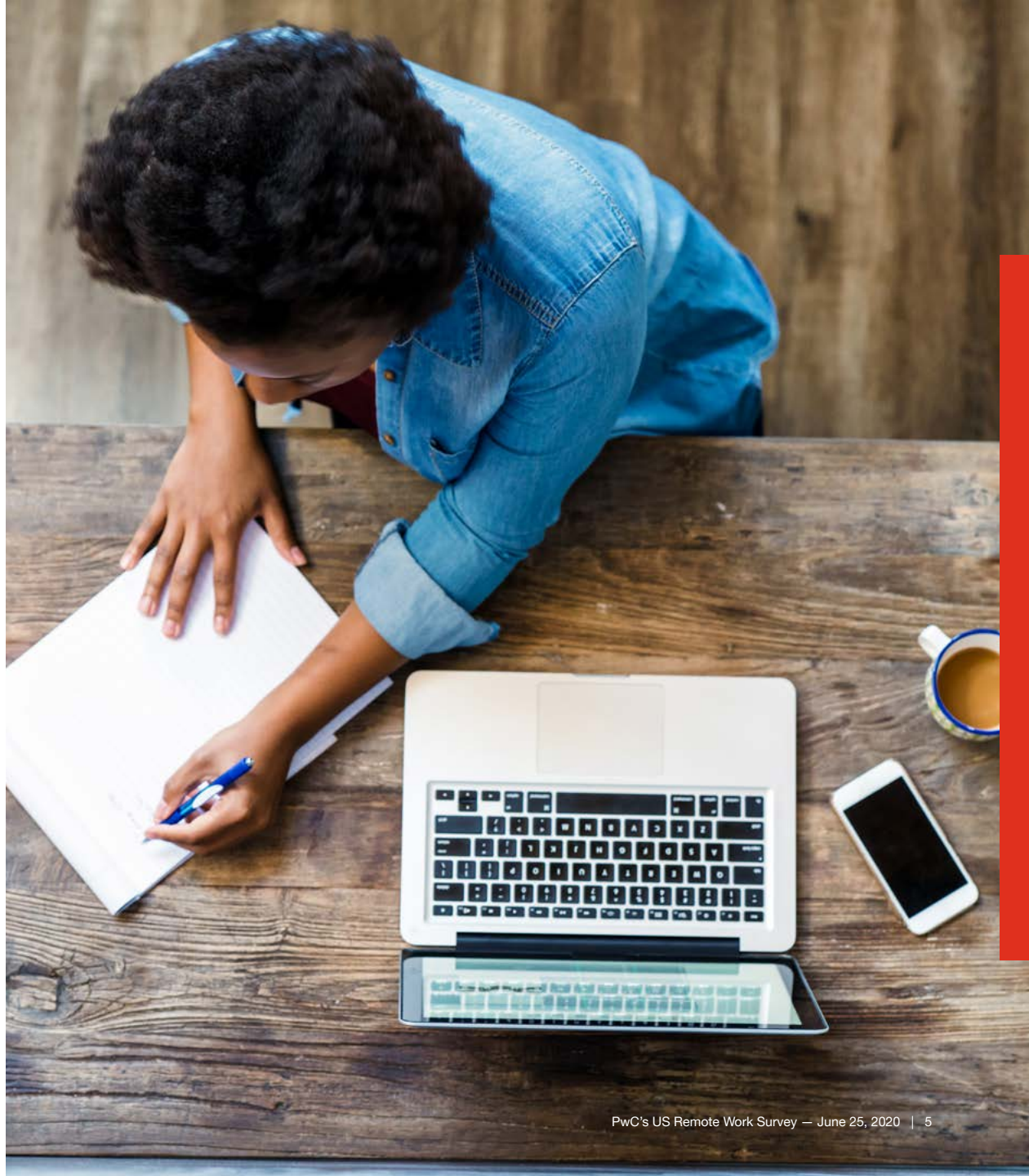
Where employees want to work — Takeaway

This is the time to ask office employees what has and has not gone well while working remotely, who sees an increase in remote work as a benefit, and what remote workers need to work more successfully. Some of the reasons why workers say they rely on the company office can be easily adjusted for remote work. For example, 28% say they went to the office pre-COVID-19 to use equipment like printers, while 22% said work had not been digitized, and they needed to access paper files.

Other reasons that draw employees to the office may be harder to achieve in a remote environment. The number one reason employees say they go into the office is to collaborate with other team members (50%). Difficulty collaborating is also the number one reason people give for being unproductive as they sheltered in place (39%), second only to balancing work with home duties such as childcare (38%).

The reality is, employees will not be returning to the same office they left behind. There will be fewer people, restricted collaboration spaces and rotating shifts — all of which will require teams to find new ways to connect and collaborate. More than anything else, this need for connections is likely to shape what the office is going to represent.

Employees will not be returning to the same office they left behind. Everyone will need to find new ways to connect and collaborate.

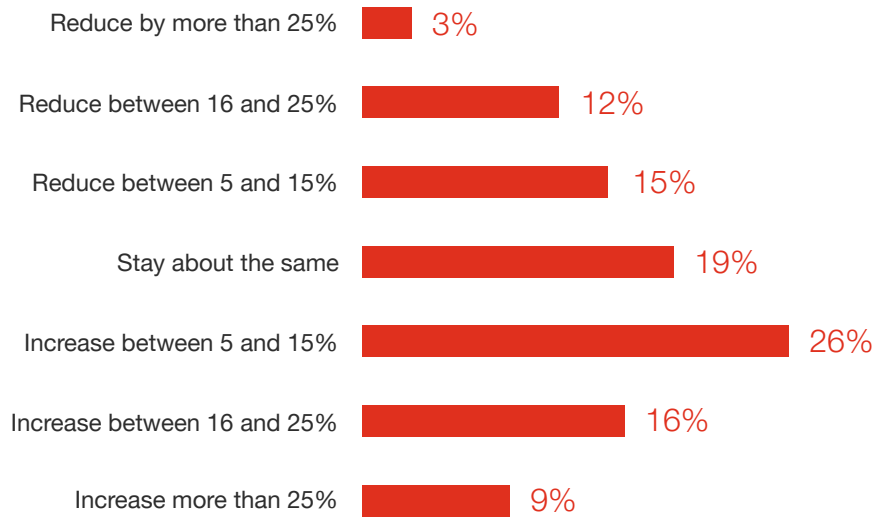


Not ready to abandon the office

One-third of executives (30%) anticipate they'll need less total office space in three years, primarily due to remote work. The rest, who either foresee no change (19%) or an increase in office space needs (50%), are anticipating growth and/or health and safety changes requiring physical distancing. As a result, the longer-term impact on office real estate is unclear.

The responses indicate that social distancing practices due to COVID-19 will last as a feature of office life beyond 2020, which will influence how much space is needed, what the office looks like and how it functions. As companies develop their plans to return to the workplace, they have been reconfiguring office layouts to cut capacity sometimes by half or more, while taking actions such as health assessments, staggered shifts or delayed reopening to limit how many people can physically be together.

How do you anticipate your total office space needs will be different three years from now?



Source: PwC US Remote Work Survey
June 25, 2020. Base: 113 US executives.

Not ready to abandon the office — Takeaway

The office stands for something important that few executives are willing to let go. Executives worry about what might be missed, even with more flexible work and a workforce that's ready to make the leap — with remote work two or three days per week a likely sweet spot.

These concerns include impacts on innovation and creativity, as companies shift their focus to rebuilding the top line in an environment that's pressing for changes to products or service offerings. Increases in remote work also raise new questions on how effective teams will be in the long run, for example, with engaging new clients or helping onboard staff.

The physical office is set to evolve too. Companies are already redesigning for better collaboration spaces to make the most of the time in the office together. Some are leaving denser cities for the suburbs to reduce exposure to mass transit and crowded public spaces as fears of a virus linger.

Increasing remote work? Provide people what they need to be more productive

Executives are more likely to report that employees have become more productive (44%) while working from home during the crisis. Employees, however, are less sure, with only 28% feeling more productive.

When employees were asked what could help them be more productive while working remotely, four needs rose to the top.

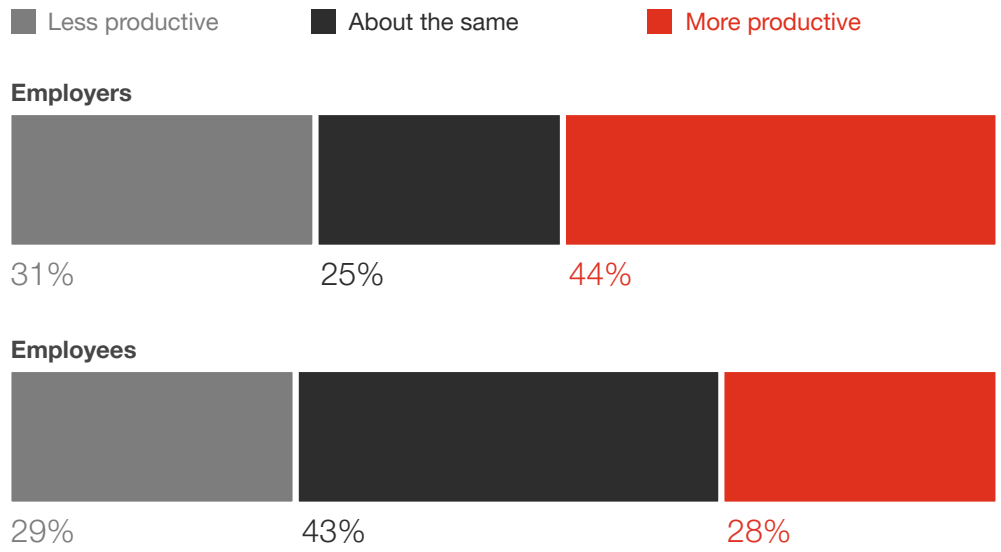
Greater flexibility in work hours would move work hours away from a traditional eight-hour work block and provide some flexibility in when work can be done. Fifty-seven percent of executives plan to provide this.

Better hardware and equipment — including laptops, monitors, printers and chairs — would help the millions of people who were not set up for remote working before the pandemic. Fifty-five percent of executives plan to provide this.

Clear rules that establish the times when people must be available would provide common standards for responsiveness. Forty-two percent of executives plan to provide this.

Help managing workloads would improve cultures where an "always on" mode of work can strain work-life balance. Forty-three percent of executives plan to provide this.

Has productivity changed during COVID-19 shelter at home?
(Employers vs. Employees)



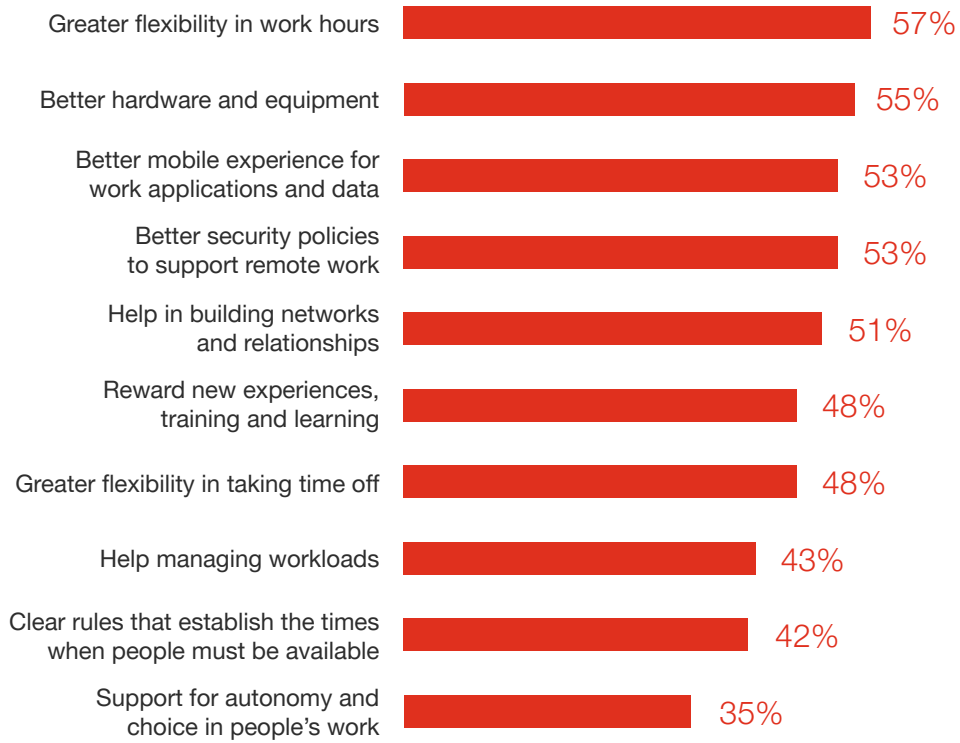
Source: PwC US Remote Work Survey
June 25, 2020. Base: 118 US executives; 1,200 US office workers.

Increasing remote work? Provide people what they need to be more productive — Takeaway

Executives and employees agree on the top-two requirements remote workers need to increase their productivity — better equipment and greater flexibility in work hours. Yet less than half of executives plan to take steps to help manage workloads or set clear rules on when people must be available. Employers have an opportunity to make remote work more effective by addressing these concerns directly.

Employees are clearly signaling they need support in setting boundaries that help them produce at their highest levels, while leaving time for rest and recharging. While flexibility in work schedules and locations has often been touted as a means of achieving work-life balance, it often comes at a cost, as employees discover the line between professional and personal lives blurs over time, with work hours expanding and encroaching into personal time.

Employers plan to give remote workers what they need to be more productive



Source: PwC US Remote Work Survey
June 25, 2020. Base: 120 US executives.

Sustaining productivity with a remote workforce

Getting remote work right can help companies keep employees engaged, broaden the talent pool, increase diversity and reduce real estate costs. But collaboration and the social side of working together shouldn't be overlooked. Here's what you can do to make your remote work program more successful for both your company and your people:

Take stock of your real estate. Review leases coming due in the next 18 months. Remote work may reduce office space needs. Think about how you may need to remodel your existing offices to enable stronger collaboration.

Develop your mobility plan. Evaluate all jobs for their suitability for remote work and establish guidelines for how many days a week employees in each role should work remotely. Base your guidelines on specific needs to access equipment, systems or team members.

Ask your people. While a top-down, employer-driven mobility plan is the first step, be sure to ask your employees their preferences via employee surveys and conversations with their managers. Personal circumstances may lead some employees to work remotely more or less frequently than your company guidelines would suggest.

Enable the right technologies. Provide everyone with the collaboration tools and access to data they need to work remotely effectively. This may include small stipends to pay for home office equipment or high-speed internet. Be sure to assess and close the security and control gaps in your remote work set-up.

Define the new ways of working. Many companies have been ready to embrace new, more digital ways of working and a virtual-first mindset. Set new expectations for your meeting habits and determine how people should collaborate in projects. Pay attention to how managers will coach their employees, develop them, manage their performance, and maintain team community and culture. For each of these areas, define the basic standards and guidelines, routines and processes, and tools that collectively describe your company's new ways of working and consider changes to individual performance metrics as a result.

About the survey

PwC surveyed 120 US executives between May 29 and June 4, 2020. All respondents were from public and private companies in three sectors: financial services (42%), technology, media and telecommunications (29%), and retail and consumer products (29%). Eighty-three percent of respondents are from companies with annual revenues greater than $US 1 billion. Of the participants, 40% have Chairman, CEO or Executive Director titles, and 18% have Vice President titles.

To understand employee needs, PwC surveyed 1,200 US office workers from a range of industries between June 1 and June 4, 2020. They all identified themselves as employed and currently working remotely — either because they were required to work remotely due to shelter-in-place mandates (70%) or were already working in a flexible arrangement with their employer (30%).

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