

Houston Business Journal

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Many workers would rather quit than return to office full time, Robert Half survey finds

By [Jeff Jeffrey](#) – Reporter, Houston Business Journal
Apr 12, 2021

More than a year into the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, many employers across Houston are in the process of bringing employees back into the office. But some companies are finding that after months of getting used to the convenience of working from home, employees aren't nearly as excited about going back to the office as their bosses are.

A recent nationwide survey by Menlo Park, California-based recruiting firm Robert Half International Inc. found that 34% of respondents working from home as a result of the pandemic would look for a new job if required to be in the office full time.

Nearly half of all respondents, 49%, said they prefer a hybrid work arrangement, where they could divide time between the office and another location. Respondents said that if employers insist on bringing employees back into the office, they would prefer that companies offer the freedom to set preferred office hours, a “personal, distraction-free” workplace, employer-paid commuting costs, employer-provided child care and a more relaxed dress code.

“After a year of drastic change, many business leaders are eager to restore a sense of normalcy and welcome staff back to the office,” said [Paul McDonald](#), senior executive director at Robert Half. “But reopening doors will bring new obstacles for companies to navigate. Not all employees will be ready — or willing — to return to the workplace, so staying flexible and responsive to their needs will be critical.”

[Brandi Clark](#), a Houston-based senior regional president at Robert Half, said that what the past year of working from home has done is create three separate pools of candidates that employers have to choose from when seeking to fill a position. Some, she said, have zero interest in returning to the office at all, while others would like more flexibility in their work schedules to work from home at least part of the time. The third pool includes those who seemingly have no problem returning to the office, so long as the process is as safe as possible.

“It used to be that employers had a single pool of candidates to choose from because everyone was operating under the assumption that most positions were in the office full time,” Clark said. “Now, every client and candidate is different. That makes things more challenging for recruiters, who are trying to find the best fit for everyone.”

Differing candidate needs have even begun to affect salary negotiations, Clark said. In some cases, prospective hires have told her they would be willing to take a salary cut to have the ability to work from home 100% of the time. Those who are willing to go into the office have begun to ask for additional pay to make up for the perceived cost of commuting every day, she said.

“The key for every one of these negotiations is to determine how flexible everyone is willing to be,” Clark said. “On the candidate side, if they say they want to work from home 100% of the time, you have to see if they would be willing to go into the office at least a few times a week or several times a month. On the employer side, if they say the position is 100% in office, you have to see if they’re willing to budge on that a little.”

What most of the candidates are seeking, Clark said, is a hybrid schedule where employees have the option of working from home, at least part of the time.

“Of course, it also depends on the position in question,” Clark said. “An operational role is different than an account manager, so the expectations are also different as well. The companies and candidates that are going to be the most successful are those that are willing to bend a little.”

Even with the benefits of working from home expressed by employees, the Robert Half survey found that many said there were downsides to being out of the office. About a quarter of respondents said they worried relationships with co-workers could suffer, productivity could decrease while working from home and there might be fewer opportunities for career advancement due to lack of visibility.

The Robert Half survey was conducted by an independent research firm between March 9 and March 16 and involved polling more than 1,000 U.S. workers over the age of 18.

Clark said that as the number of vaccines continues to rise, many companies need to ensure they are communicating with employees about the procedures they intend to take to ensure the process of returning to the office is as smooth as possible.

“Companies need to remember that the past year has been traumatic for everyone,” Clark said. “There is no one-size-fits-all (scenario). They need to understand that employees have gone through a lot, both professionally and personally. They should speak with employees to see what the future looks like for them.”

The question of when and how to bring employees back into the workplace is a challenge facing companies across the United States, and many C-suite executives expect Covid-19 to cause permanent changes in how companies operate.

The latest CEO survey conducted by Marcum LLP and Hofstra University's Frank G. Zarb School of Business found that more than 80% of top executives at middle-market companies said they are likely to allow for a partially remote workforce even after the pandemic is over.

Nearly half of CEOs (45%) also said they will require employees to be vaccinated against Covid-19 if it is legal to do so, and another 36% said they would offer incentives to employees to get the vaccine.

The survey polled the leaders of 251 companies with revenues ranging from \$5 million to \$1 billion-plus.

"There is no doubt that workplace practices, policies and behaviors will be changing permanently in many ways, post-Covid," said [Janet Lenaghan](#), dean of the Zarb School of Business. "Mid-market CEOs clearly recognize that giving people flexibility is a smart business strategy that leads to greater productivity."