

Little Survey: Most European Employers Reopening Offices, But Disconnect Emerges with Employees on Hybrid Work Models

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Fourth annual survey of more than 530 executives reveals the myriad forces transforming the European workplace and the future of work

Little, the world's largest employment and labour law practice representing management, has released its fourth annual European Employer Survey Report, completed by more than 530 human resources executives, in-house attorneys and business leaders based mainly across Western and Southern Europe. The survey data provides insight into the myriad forces transforming the European workplace and how employers are approaching return-to-office plans, new work models and other emergent workforce issues amid the continued uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Return-to-Office Plans Largely on Course

Even following the COVID-19 outbreaks caused by the delta variant, 52 percent of respondents said in late September that they were proceeding with their return-to-office dates or planned to. Though 36 percent had delayed in some fashion, only half of that subset said delays would stretch into 2022. These decisions are likely driven by a range of factors, including the prevalence of government guidance around keeping the workplace safe and that, as of late August, 70 percent of

adults in the European Union (EU) had been fully vaccinated against the virus.

“Broadly speaking, European employers have been eager to bring their employees back into the workplace – in part due to safety policies implemented and enforced by EU governments,” said Laura Jouselin, Littler partner in France. “Though these policies can help usher along return-to-office plans, amid the wide-ranging novel and complex issues this pandemic continues to bring, employers also remain nimble and focused on adjusting their plans as the situation evolves.”

Not all European countries are moving forward in the same way. For example, a higher percentage of employers based in France and Italy – 65 and 62 percent respectively – are proceeding with return-to-office plans, while far fewer are doing so in Germany (28 percent).

Work Models Are Not Broadly Aligned With Employee Preferences

As companies implement return-to-office plans, tensions may flare if there is a disconnect between their plans and employees’ preferences for balancing remote and in-person work. Only 28 percent of respondents believe the work models their organisations are offering align with the preferences of employees who can work remotely. Most employers (52 percent) believe employees want hybrid or remote work to a greater extent than they expect to offer it – and that figure is even higher for respondents in the UK, Germany and Spain.

Even so, European employers recognise the role remote or hybrid work plays in supporting employees, citing the potential for improving job satisfaction (57 percent) and employee well-being and work/life balance (54 percent) as the top benefits of offering these models. Enabling greater productivity (34 percent), reducing physical office costs (31 percent) and reducing other company costs (20 percent) – which all centre on improving the company’s bottom line – ranked

significantly lower.

“Over the past year, employers have largely begun to see hybrid working models less as an opportunity to improve efficiency or cut costs and more as a way to attract new employees and keep their existing ones happy,” said Jan-Ove Becker, Littler shareholder in Germany. “That’s a real and positive shift. Moving forward, however, it will be crucial to strike the right balance between employee well-being and the myriad logistical, legal and cultural challenges these new models can pose.”

Relatedly, 67 percent of employers surveyed are at least somewhat concerned about the legal and logistical challenges that could come with a workforce split between in-person and remote work. Employers managing these new arrangements face an array of challenges, including scheduling obstacles, measuring remote work performance and ensuring that remote employees feel included.

Employee Well-Being Is a Priority – But There’s Room for Improvement

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (73 percent) are concerned to a moderate or large extent about the pandemic’s impact on employees’ mental health and well-being. When asked about various resources to address mental health, the top response, selected by 53 percent of respondents, was offering flexible work schedules. Other actions – such as training for managers, Employee Assistance Plans and internal programming – were all selected by fewer than a third of respondents.

“It’s a positive sign that employers are truly recognising the importance of employee well-being and the significant toll the pandemic has taken on mental health,” said Stephan Swinkels, Littler’s Coordinating Partner International. “This will only become more important in the workplace of the future and in organisations’ efforts to attract and retain talent. Offering

flexible work schedules is a great step, but to maximise its effectiveness employers should consider providing other resources or benefits – such as training and internal programming – in tandem to deliver a more comprehensive solution.”

Technological Development Continues to Disrupt Workers and Employers

With the pandemic accelerating the technological revolution, European employers are taking steps to equip employees with the skills they need for the workplace of the future. About half (48 percent) are developing internal training programs, while 35 percent are conducting analyses to identify new skill sets and guide talent planning and job training.

At the same time, the pandemic appears to have stalled the collaboration and investment needed for employers to adopt artificial intelligence or data analytics solutions that would improve workforce management. In every area covered in the survey – including HR strategy and employee management, workforce automation, and recruiting and hiring – adoption remained relatively stagnant from when respondents were asked this question prior to the pandemic.

Additionally, as many employers shift to a hybrid working model, the productivity of remote workers might come under greater scrutiny. The survey found nearly 60 percent of employers either using (17 percent), planning to use (23 percent) or potentially interested in using (19 percent) software tools that track or monitor remote employees' productivity. Yet respondents also expressed hesitancy about implementing these technologies, with the top concerns focused on the impact on employee morale and trust in the company (42 percent) and employees' fundamental rights beyond compliance obligations (39 percent).

Widespread Workforce Reductions Largely Avoided

Although Littler's 2020 survey found most employers worried about their ability to stave off job cuts, 60 percent of respondents this year have not made workforce reductions or reorganisations – and the largest subset of those respondents (41 percent) do not anticipate doing so. While the other 40 percent have made reductions or reorganisations in one form or another – roughly half of that subset (18 percent) do not anticipate further changes.

“Government support programs saved millions of European jobs throughout the pandemic, and our survey data supports the effectiveness of these efforts. At the same time, the portion of employers citing the potential for future workforce reductions or reorganisations also shows that the full repercussions of the pandemic aren't behind us yet,” said Raoul Parekh, Littler partner in the UK. “The decisions executives make about how to structure their businesses for the long term, and the impact of the wind-down of government support, will continue to transform workforces across Europe in the months to come.”

In addition to the topics noted above, the survey report covers a range of other legal and HR matters impacting European employers, including new safety precautions; vaccine policies; actions to support inclusion, equity and diversity goals; and managing “wandering workers” who perform their job functions from a different country; while providing country-specific insights for the UK, Germany, France, Spain and Italy.

[Download the Littler 2021 European Employer Survey Report](#)

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delivering groundbreaking innovation that prepares employers for what's happening today, and what's likely to happen tomorrow. For more information, visit www.littler.com.