



Playbook:

Success Strategies for Managing in a Volatile Environment

2021



Learning and Development



Talent Management



Diversity and Inclusion



Leadership Development



Talent Acquisition



Workforce Management



Introduction

Employers have been managing the impact of the coronavirus pandemic since March 2020. The questions continue:

- **What impact will COVID variants have on the return to the workplace?**
- **How do we manage a hybrid workforce?**
- **What will the new normal look like?**



But maybe we are already living in the new normal — an environment of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) that requires continuous innovation and agility from the very top of the organization to the most junior employee.



Introduction

The key questions are:

- How well did organizations prepare themselves during the pandemic to adapt to constant unknowns over the foreseeable future?
- Do they have well-defined business, people, technology and learning strategies that will enable them to thrive in an uncertain future?

This playbook provides insights and strategies for managing successfully in a volatile environment.





Current State

Most organizations believe they have taken prudent steps toward managing in an environment of uncertainty:

67%

- said HR and business leaders collaborate to create strategies to solve the most pressing business and workforce challenges.

66%

- view uncertainty as offering possibilities for innovation rather than as a threat.

64%

- say they are focused on developing the potential and agility of employees to meet new challenges.

62%

- have evaluated workforce strategies that were successful during the pandemic; what has been learned and what has been missed.

Source: Brandon Hall Group 2021 Studies: HCM Outlook and COVID-19: Impact on Workplace Practices



Current State (continued)

The top two business priorities in 2021, according to our research, are **increasing customer satisfaction and increasing company revenues**, while the top people priorities are **determining the critical skills employees need to drive future business growth, fostering an inclusive workplace and making employees feel valued**.



These priorities are insightful and show that the pandemic may have created a significant shift in how employers align business and people priorities. Employees will not be at their best and giving their best efforts to drive business goals unless they feel included and work in the best environment that fits their style, skills and role.

That is the key takeaway from this historic disruption and should shape the future of work.



Current State *(Continued)*

Our research shows that employers have been cautious in how they approach workforce management. With COVID variants evolving and vaccination rates flattening, the future deployment of employees is far more uncertain than at the start of the pandemic, when remote work was the only viable option for most industries.

By August 2021, less than one-third of employers had implemented their ideal

return-to-the-workplace strategies.

Brandon Hall Group's *COVID-19 Experience Pulse Survey*, completed mid-year, indicated that only 27% of employers plan to have at least half of their employees working remotely as the pandemic fades, compared to 75% during the first quarter.

But that could change significantly due to virus variants.





Current State

(Continued)

The strategies will be more complex.

Employers plan to use multiple strategies for different workforce segments, our research shows:

- **76% of organizations** plan to implement flex scheduling and hybrid deployment to provide flexibility based on health protocols and the needs and preferences of employees.
- **30%** plan to split shifts for on-site work to maintain physical distancing.
- **32%** plan to alternate days in the office/or plant between employee groups.

But strategies can — and should — change quickly if virus infections increase and other conditions shift.



6%

None

8%

More than three-quarters

19%

Half to three-quarters

33%

One-quarter to one-half

34%

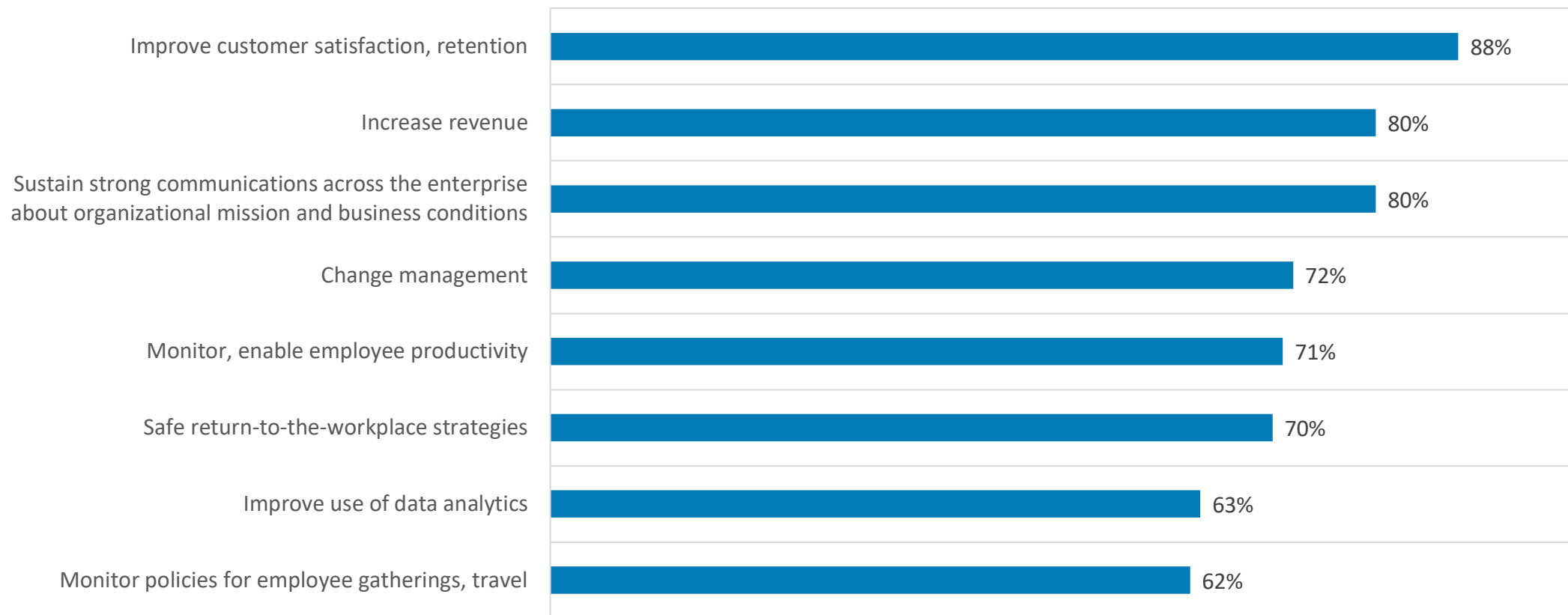
Less than one-quarter

Percentage of
Employees Expected
to Work Primarily
Remotely After
COVID-19

Source: Brandon Hall Group COVID-19 Study for 2nd Quarter, 2021



Most Important* Business Strategies to Recover from COVID-19 Impact



Source: Brandon Hall Group COVID-19 Experience Pulse Survey, July 2021
*Rating of 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale



Most Important* People Strategies to Recover from COVID-19 Impact



Source: Brandon Hall Group COVID-19 Experience Pulse Survey, July 2021

*Rating of 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale



Complexities

The complexities of driving business success cannot be overstated.

Employees will be more dispersed than before the pandemic, facing an uncertain future, requiring new or more advanced skills, and needing to be agile and flexible in how they learn and work.

Leaders will be expected to manage the day-to-day operations of a workforce split between multiple locations while providing frequent feedback, coaching performance, monitoring well-being, engagement and signs of burnout, and collaborating with each team member on their performance goals and career aspirations.

At first glance, it appears to be an impossible task. Yet many organizations have seen levels of engagement rise and leaders demonstrate new levels of kindness, empathy, compassion and resilience in the face of massive disruption.



Consequences

Leaders must be pragmatic and realistic about business goals and ensure that the heavy focus on inclusion and employee engagement and well-being that were largely successful during the pandemic are not eroded by short-sighted management during what could be an enduring and erratic transition.

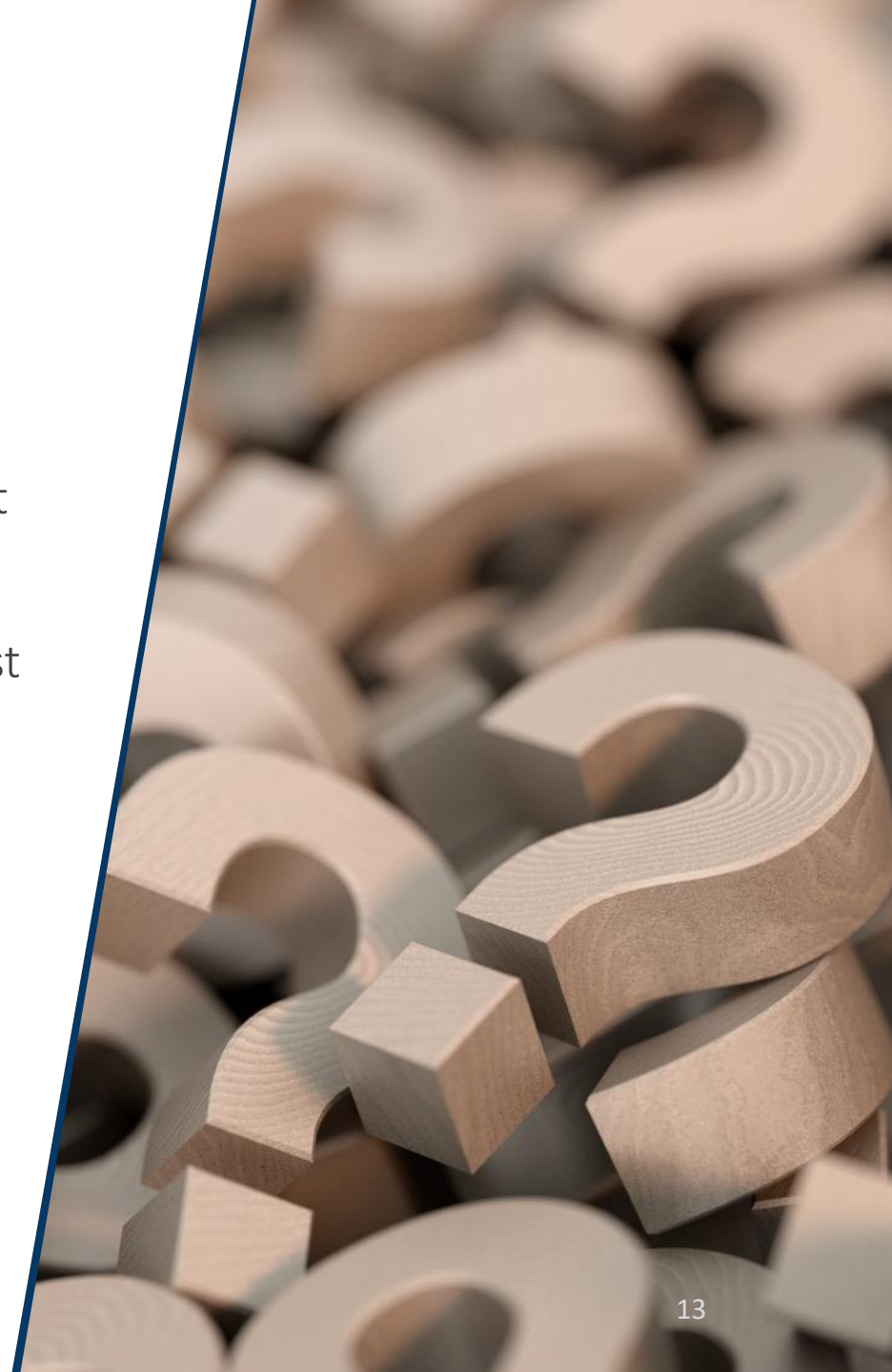
Employers must learn from their successes during the pandemic and carry them forward. They must also learn from their mistakes and mitigate them.





Critical Questions

- ❑ How can the experiences from remote work during the apex of COVID-19 help us reimagine the best ways to work as we build post-pandemic strategies?
- ❑ Which of our COVID-19 management practices have been most successful and how do we keep the momentum going?
- ❑ What did we miss or mismanage during COVID-19 that we must improve to be successful post-pandemic?
- ❑ Should decisions about remote versus on-site work be based exclusively on business need or safety, or should there also be flexibility based on job role and employee preference?
- ❑ What should be the guiding principles for managing the ambiguity of ongoing change?





Critical Questions *(Continued)*

- ☐ What role does inclusion play in driving employee engagement during a state of continual change?
- ☐ How can we optimize our technology to meet the long-term needs of the workforce?
- ☐ How can HR and business leaders collaborate more effectively to solve the most pressing business and workforce challenges?
- ☐ How do we leverage successes during COVID-19 and lessons learned to build organizational agility to drive future success?
- ☐ How do we manage change and demonstrate resilience as an organization so the workforce sees uncertainty as an opportunity for innovation rather than as a threat and driver of stress?





Success Strategies for Success in a Volatile Environment



These strategies are based on quantitative and qualitative research from five COVID-19 studies and the following Brandon Hall Group 2021 studies: *HCM Outlook 2021*; *How Can We Develop Great Coaches and Mentors?*; *Career Development: Are You Considering What Employees Want?*; *How Do We Make Leadership Training Better?*; *How Do You Build Teams for the Future of Work?*; and *How to Develop Inclusive Leaders: An Inside Look*.



1. Ensure Alignment Between HR and Business Leadership

Brandon Hall Group research shows that all areas of Human Capital Management — learning, talent management, talent acquisition, leadership development, diversity, equity and inclusion, and workforce management — **struggle to align their priorities with those of the business.**



Ensure Alignment Between HR and Business Leadership

(Continued)

That must change. Our 2021 *HCM Outlook Study* shows that strategic alignment with the business is one of the top three priorities in all areas of HCM.

More than ever before, HR must be a strategic partner with the business for organizations to successfully navigate the turbulence of recovering from the impact of COVID-19. HR must be a partner in every aspect of an organization's recovery plan, and HR must reflect the organization's business priorities in everything it does.

For example, our research shows the top three business priorities are:



Therefore, everything HR does should be aligned with those top business priorities. It sounds simple, but it is not, especially in global, dispersed, matrix operations with several layers of leadership.



Ensure Alignment Between HR and Business Leadership *(Continued)*

Collaboration and governance are critical. So are resources. HR leaders' single biggest concern, by far, for recovering from COVID-19 is a lack of adequate resources to carry out business objectives.

In government, they call these “unfunded mandates.” HR and business leaders must communicate openly and

honestly about objectives and the resources to achieve them. This is always critical, but particularly in building momentum as organizations recover from the pandemic.

Agreeing on goals without agreement on the resources to accomplish them is not alignment; it's dysfunction.

Top HCM Concerns for 2021

44% Adequate resources to meeting objectives

31% Economic recovery from COVID-19

31% Retaining the best people

25% Having the right technology in place

Source: Brandon Hall Group HCM Outlook Study 2021



2. Transparency and Inclusive Leadership

In scores of interviews Brandon Hall Group conducted with employers during COVID-19, those who rated their level of employee engagement highly had two behaviors in common:

1

Top leaders communicated regularly (often daily) and honestly about the state of the organization and what they were doing to manage the disruption of the pandemic. They communicated the good, the bad and the ugly, and were transparent.

2

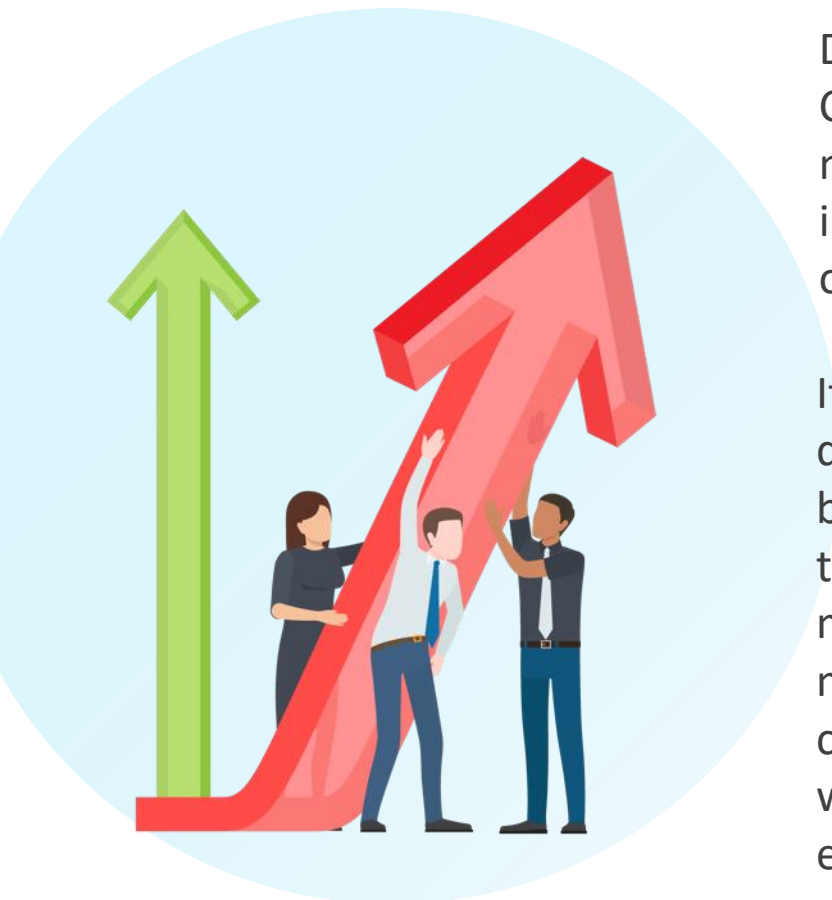
They sought the opinions and involvement of employees to help solve their challenges. They reached out to all levels of the organization, in all locations. They were inclusive.

The challenge now is to translate that transparency and inclusion from a crisis behavior to a norm.

Most organizations had not gone to the lengths in “normal” times as they have during COVID-19 to engage their workforces. The employers that invested in transparency and inclusion were rewarded with a workforce that was adaptive, agile and engaged.



Transparency and Inclusive Leadership *(Continued)*



Despite some success during COVID-19, most organizations still must improve transparency and inclusion to make them organization-wide competencies.

It starts with leaders, who must demonstrate the values and behaviors they want everyone in the organization to adopt. For many organizations, becoming more inclusive requires significant change, which requires leaders who are agile, creative and emotionally centered.

The top traits of inclusive leadership, according to Brandon Hall Group research, include:

- Being aware of one's biases and preferences
- Authenticity
- Empathy
- Collaboration
- Learning-focused
- Action-oriented
- Accountable
- Courage
- Adaptable
- Emotional intelligence
- Cultural intelligence

Source: Brandon Hall Group Study, How to Develop Inclusive Leaders: An Inside Look

✧ Transparency and Inclusive Leadership

(Continued)

Less than half (44%) of organizations say their leaders demonstrate a high degree of inclusive leadership, according to Brandon Hall Group's 2021 study, *How to Develop Inclusive Leaders: An Inside Look*. The good news is that most organizations (76%) say they are receptive to improving inclusion.

While top-down leadership focuses on the leader having all the answers and being in control, inclusive leaders are humble enough to acknowledge their vulnerability to bias and ask for feedback and assistance in addressing their blind spots and habits. This is critical because it empowers employees to exhibit the same level of humility and introspection.

The inclusive leader must then be empathetic to employees' vulnerabilities and ensure they feel heard and valued. These behaviors, and other elements of inclusive leadership, help build an environment of psychological safety, which is needed for the culture change required to build a workforce that can thrive in a VUCA environment.



Transparency and Inclusive Leadership

(Continued)

The key to improvement is to train on inclusive leadership at all levels of the organization, from the C-suite to individual contributors. No more than 41% of organizations are training people on inclusive leadership at any level. Our research showed that organizations in which top leaders support inclusive leadership training and have specific owners of inclusive leadership development

initiatives are more likely to have success.

In most organizations, the research shows, leaders excel in showing kindness, patience and genuine interest and curiosity about the well-being of others and adapting and persevering in the face of challenges. But they struggle most with self-awareness, managing their own emotions and building trust.



Most Important* Leader Behaviors Needing Development



Source: Brandon Hall Group Evolution of Leadership Development Study

*Rating of 4 or 5 on 5-point scale



3. Embrace Employee Development

Personal and career growth are top drivers of employee engagement, according to Brandon Hall Group research.

During times of disruption, it's easy to emphasize getting work done to the extent that employees are not provided needed opportunities to grow in their jobs and their careers.

The most effective employee development occurs when career development, learning and performance goals are aligned.

Organizations are focused on upskilling and reskilling and express frustration about employees' lack of engagement with the learning. There are two main reasons – one is the lack of personalized learning tied to employees' learning styles and the other is that learners don't see what's in it for them.

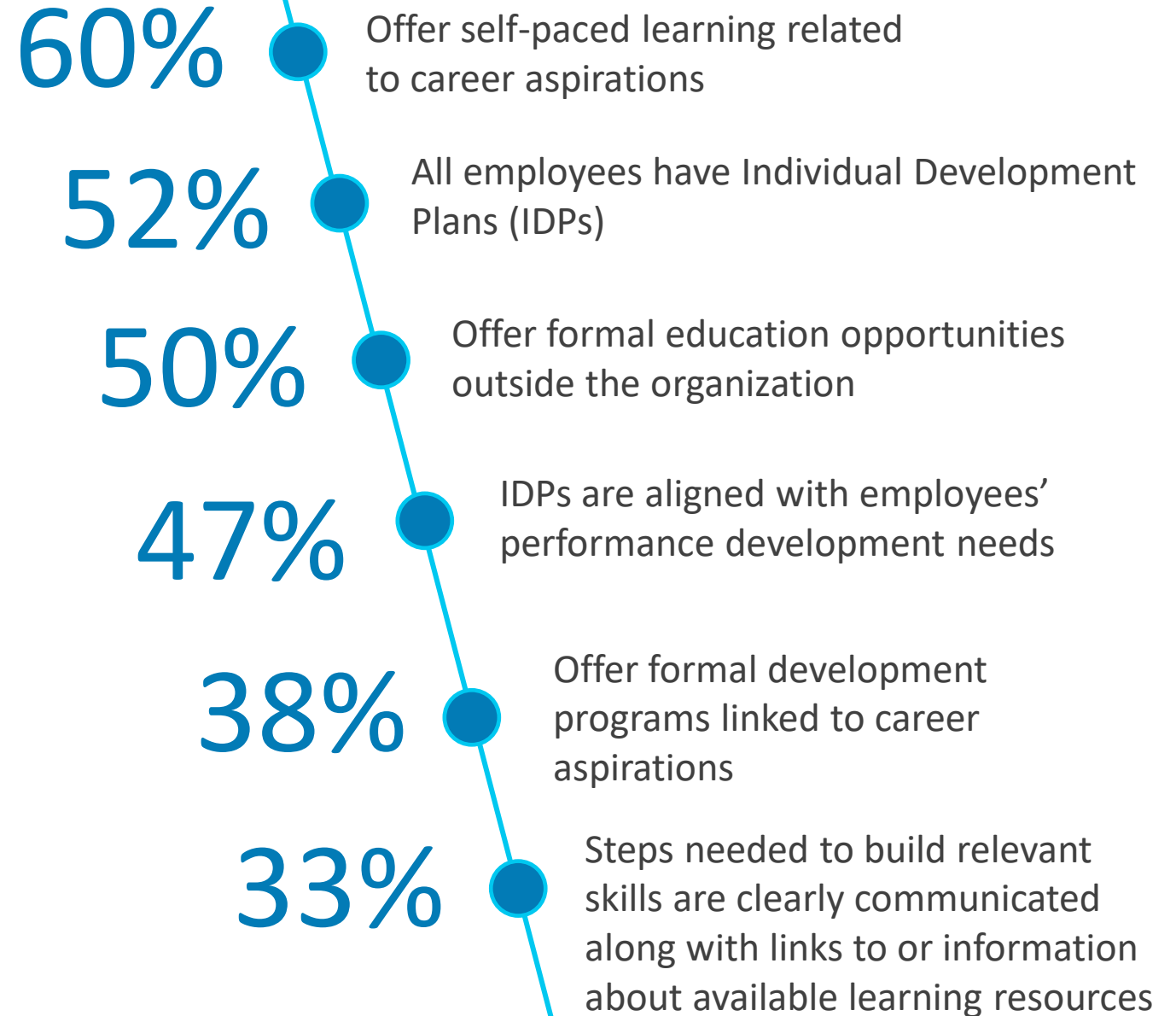
Employees must be able to see how development opportunities at the organization will help them meet their personal and professional aspirations while meeting the needs of the business.

Performance development needs to be continuous, through regular check-ins, feedback and coaching — with supervisors but also peers and team members — and goal revision as needed based on the employees' performance, career objectives and changing needs of the business.



How Organizations Align Learning, Performance Management and Career Development

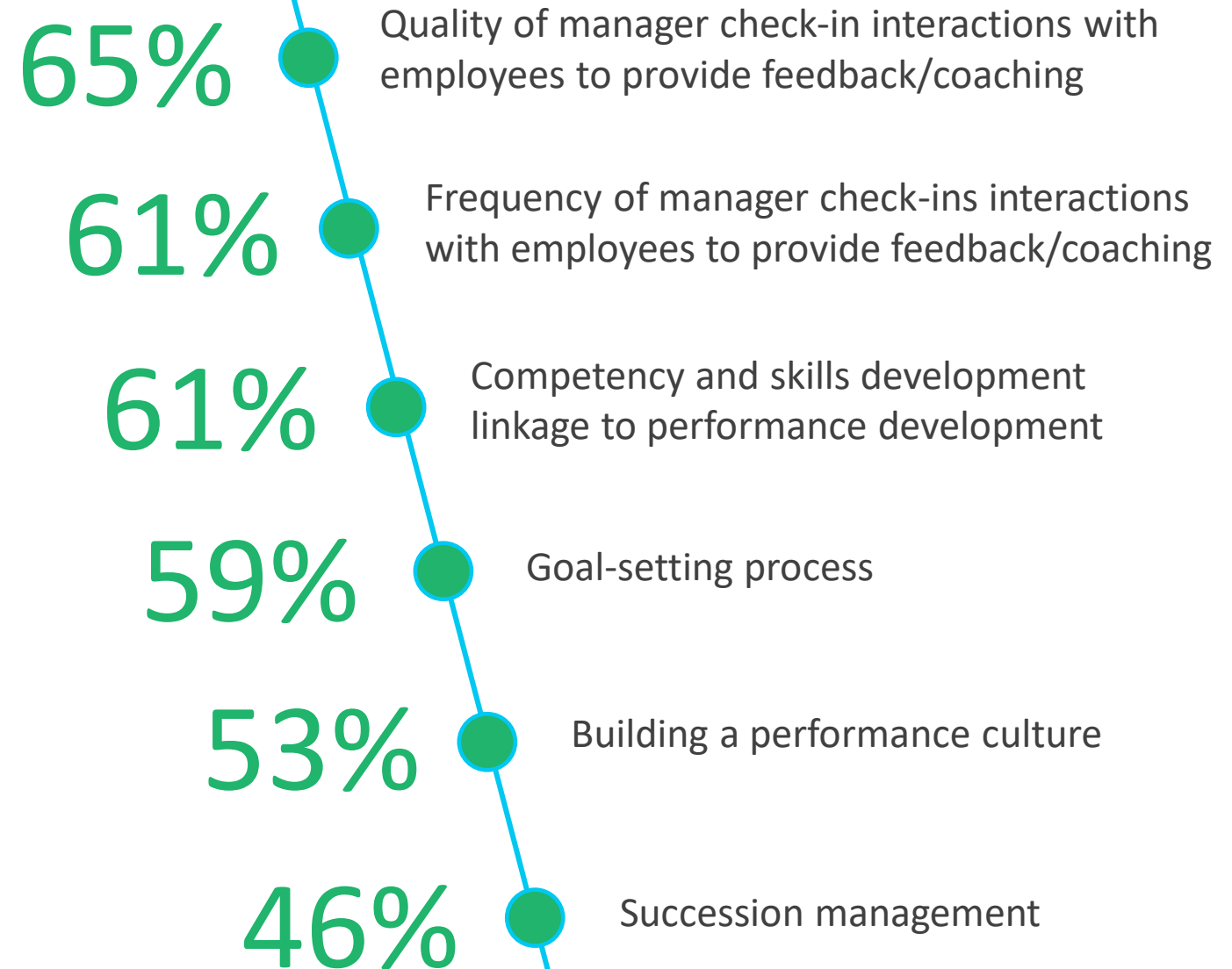
Source: Brandon Hall Group Study, Career Development: Are You Considering What Employees Want?





Areas of Performance Development Needing the Most Improvement

Source: Brandon Hall Group Performance Management Study





Embrace Employee Development *(Continued)*

Personal and career growth are top drivers of employee engagement, according to Brandon Hall Group research. Our research shows these are leading practices to build an environment of rich employee development:

- Establish a culture of coaching and mentoring.
- Use Individual Development Plans (IDPs) at all levels of the organization and update as often as warranted.
- IDPs should include clear development paths with prescriptive learning content to address competencies and skills development.
- Leverage assessments using a consistent strategy across the organization for candidates and/or employees to determine strengths and areas of development.
- Offer personalized, contextualized learning on any device at any time.
- Offer support programs, such as certifications or external education, for many or most functions so employees can position themselves for advancement.
- Use scenarios and/or simulations to help employees apply new skills and competencies in a no-consequence environment.
- Have a team mindset and a mature approach to team development and collaboration skills.



4. Foster Employee Wellness



Many organizations excelled at this during the pandemic, and it is among the three most important strategies for recovering from the impact of COVID-19, according to our *HCM Outlook 2021 Study*.



Foster Employee Wellness

Organizations must recognize that wellness goes beyond employees being and feeling healthy and safe, which has been the chief focus during the pandemic, especially in the early stages. It should encompass:

Work-Life Integration

This includes enabling a flexible work schedule when the job allows it and creating some level of separation — or boundaries — between work and the rest of employees' lives. Many organizations worry about employee burnout. Work-life integration and empowering employees to take time for themselves so they can meet personal and family obligations is critical in guarding against burnout.



Financial Health

Many employees and their families suffered financial hardships during the pandemic, including loss of employment or a spouse having to quit work to handle daycare and home-schooling responsibilities. It's important that employers provide services for employees to receive financial advice. For the most vulnerable employees, it's helpful to provide flexibility on when and how those workers are paid.



Foster Employee Wellness *(Continued)*

Recognition

Many employees are asked to handle new or unfamiliar responsibilities in frequently changing work environments. That could continue for quite a while. Increasingly, many employees will have to undergo training to improve their skills or acquire new ones to keep their jobs or meet the changing needs of the organization.

It is critical for the organization to be sensitive to the stress and anxiety these ongoing changes cause and recognize employees regularly for their meaningful contributions. Even when employees struggle and are not performing at a high level, it is important to recognize effort and improvement.

Everyone craves recognition. Brandon Hall Group research shows that recognition is most effective when it is performance-based, timely, inclusive and frequent.





Foster Employee Wellness *(Continued)*

However, less than half of organizations did any of those things before the pandemic. It is even more important now to recognize meaningful contributions and behaviors that reinforce organizational values.

Employees crave connections to their peers and leaders and want to contribute and do meaningful work. It is important to recognize good work and behaviors such as kindness, empathy, innovation and collaboration that reflect and reinforce organizational values.

Organizations that rate their culture of recognition highly* are:

**3 times
more likely**
to see increased
employee retention

**2.5 times
more likely**
to see increased
employee engagement

Brandon Hall Group
Culture of Recognition Pulse Survey
*High rating = 4 or 5 on 5-point scale



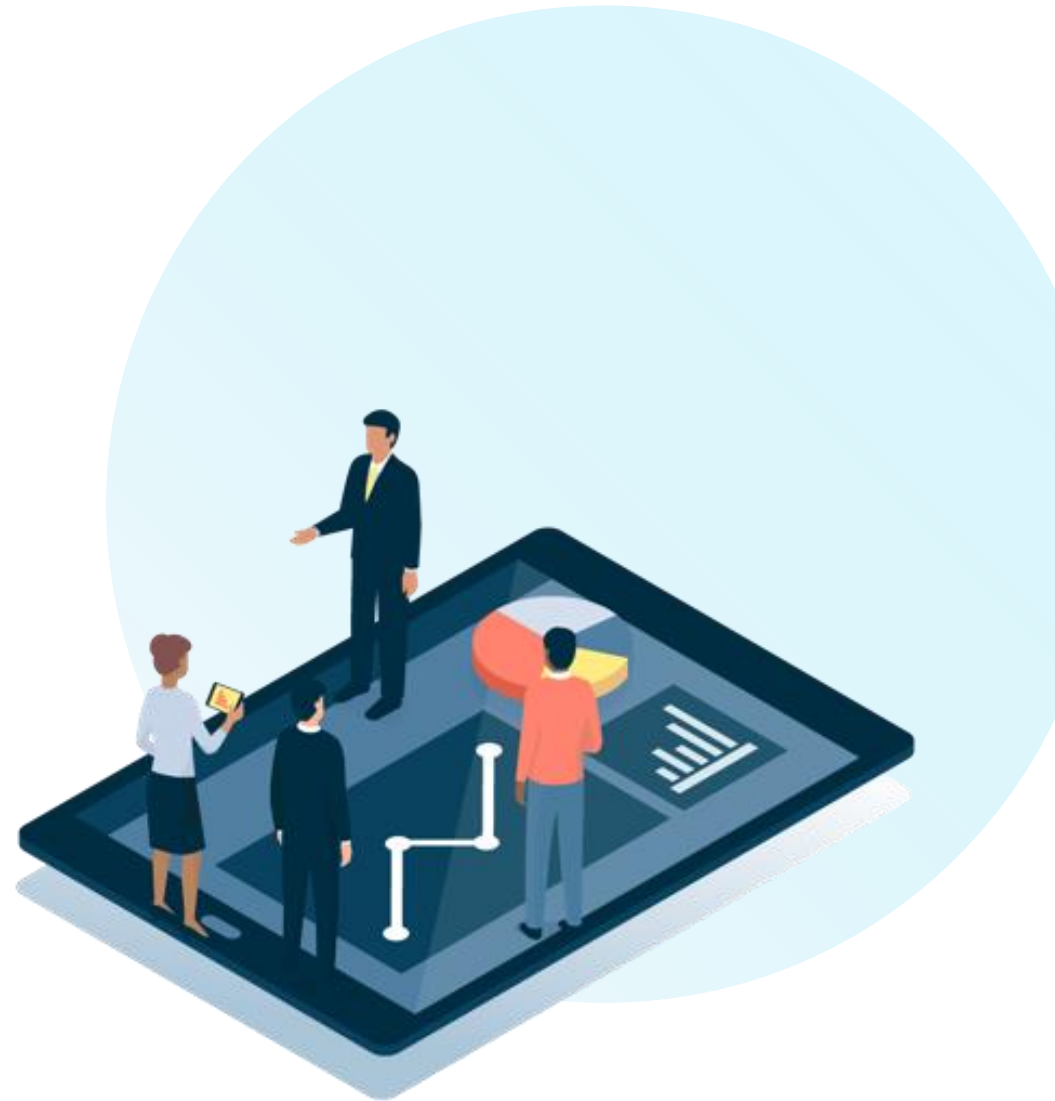


Foster Employee Wellness *(Continued)*

This can be done during virtual group meetings or person-to-person. Organizations with rewards and recognition technology have an easier time because they already engage the relevant tools.

Showing recognition and appreciation is a foundation for creating great everyday employee experiences.

This is a perfect time to improve recognition, which 65% of organizations rate as important to drive employee engagement as the pandemic adjustments continue.



Foster Employee Wellness *(Continued)*



Sense of Belonging

Employees want to feel a strong connection to the organization they work for. This is even more important during a crisis.

There are many elements to creating a sense of belong, including:

- Employees feel managers are invested in employees' performance and success.
- Employees feel empowered to connect with peers across the organization.
- Employees believe onboarding prepares them for success.
- Employees feel the workforce is diverse.
- Employees feel top leaders are representative of the composition of the workforce.
- Employees feel the organization welcomes their opinions and ideas.
- Employees feel there are many ways to make contributions to the organization besides their jobs.
- Employees feel they will be given the technology and tools they need if asked to work remotely.



Foster Employee Wellness *(Continued)*

To have a workforce with a strong sense of belonging, organizations must take a holistic approach that includes, but is not limited to:

- Offering employees frequent feedback.
- Enabling employees to provide feedback to their leaders and peers.
- Offering a rich onboarding experience — for employees new to the organization or new to a role — that includes initiation into the culture and learning opportunities.
- Establishing coaching and mentoring programs.
- Making inclusion of all employees a part of the organizational culture.
- Creating and supporting employee resource groups in a variety of areas to enable involvement in the organization and the community.





Analyzing Employee Wellness

Use this grid to think about what strong employee wellness looks like.

Compare that to what your organization offers, then determine any action steps.

We provided a few examples to get you started.

Type of Wellness	What Your Organization Does Now	Where Your Organization Wants to Be	What to Do
Physical wellness			
Emotional wellness			
Financial wellness			
Sense of belonging			
Feeling heard			
Feeling valued			



5. Manage Change Strategically



In the months — and perhaps years — ahead, change will be continuous.

In this environment of ever-present and ongoing disruption, it is easy to react to the moment without considering the impact of your actions. **Change is made easier by following a simple change-management process.**

As your organization transitions, strategic change management will be important.

The key is to always understand who your “customers” are and solve challenges from several angles.

The tool on the following slides can provide guidance that you can use and build upon.

Remember there are many different types of change — it is not one thing. You may need several change-management strategies depending on the situation.

Regardless, it is important to create a process to handle the nature of the change and how to approach it. The following slides provide a model template to think through your change strategies.



Change-Management Planning Made Easy

CONSIDER THE CUSTOMER



CUSTOMERS/USERS

- Who is the target audience?
- What do they need to know?
- For whom are we creating value?

EARLY ADOPTERS

- Who is a potential advocate/ambassador of the solution?

NAYSAYERS

- Who will push back on decisions and actions in implementing the change?



Change-Management Planning Made Easy *(Continued)*

THE SOLUTION

BUSINESS NEED <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What business challenges do you expect the change to resolve?	UNIQUE VALUE PROPOSITION <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the short, compelling “elevator speech” about the benefit of the change?	OUTCOMES <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the top three to five challenges the change will solve?• If applicable, what are the top three to five talent gaps the change will solve?	WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What key metrics will indicate a successful change-management effort?
FINANCIAL ANALYSIS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are your high-level requirements?		TIMELINE <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is your timeline? What is your critical path?	
KEY STAKEHOLDER <ul style="list-style-type: none">• From whom do we need to get buy-in?• Which executives and other business leaders do we need to champion our case?• Who will be the executive sponsor?		KEY RESOURCES <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the key processes (including governance) and technologies we need to execute the change?	



Author and Contributors

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Claude Werder wrote this report. He runs Brandon Hall Group's Talent Management Practice, focusing on solving corporate's challenges in developing and retaining talent. He takes a strategic, unified approach, with a keen eye on leveraging technology to drive efficiencies that enable leaders to better engage employees and drive performance.

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About Brandon Hall Group

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HCMA PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATIONS are comprehensive educational programs that center around a multiphase knowledge test.