



HOW WILL ORGANIZATIONS OF THE FUTURE CONDUCT BUSINESS?

A report on employee sentiment, connectedness, and leader support in the face of **COVID-19**

By Joe Kossler & Judy Johnson, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few months, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the global economy. From city epicenters to rural towns, its impact has been felt in a variety of ways.

Amid this crisis, organizations have been forced to navigate a new environment, transitioning work offsite and enabling their employees to work virtually. While this has presented many challenges, it has also opened the door to opportunities for operational improvements and new ways of working.

Utilizing **Digital Discovery®**, our proprietary AI powered platform, Aspirant has assessed more than 7,000 employees to understand employee sentiment, connectedness, and leader support.



This report explores the outcome of these assessments and seeks to understand how lessons learned will impact the way organizations of the future do business.

*Our proprietary **Digital Discovery®** software uses AI to accurately pinpoint high-value information while gathering rich insights across your company, enhancing stakeholder buy-in, and revealing areas that require further inquiry.*



EMPLOYEE SENTIMENT

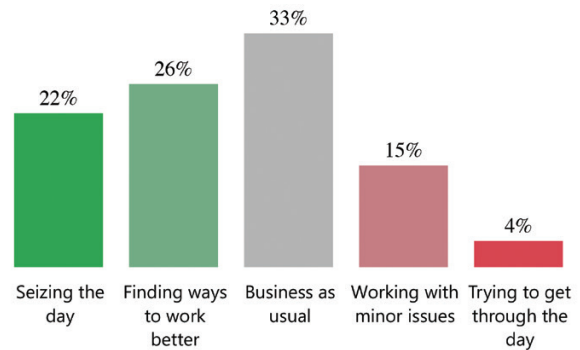
With individuals having different levels of exposure to the pandemic, the first concern was understanding how employees were coping with the crisis. Given the rapid disruption in their daily lives, our initial question focused on how employees were handling the virtual work environment.

As shown in GRAPH 1, approximately four out of five employees felt things were either “Business as usual” or better. In fact, 22% of respondents chose “Seizing the day” as the way to describe how they were coping.

These predominantly positive responses were a welcome surprise to many leaders. Seeing how well their organization was responding to their virtual work validated the effort and investment their teams put into smoothing the rapid transition in work environment. This effort allowed for a tone-shift from resolving issues to capitalizing on momentum. While 19% of respondents reported facing some challenges, the remaining questions in the assessment provided insight into their specific needs, allowing each organization to identify and implement tailored solutions.

1

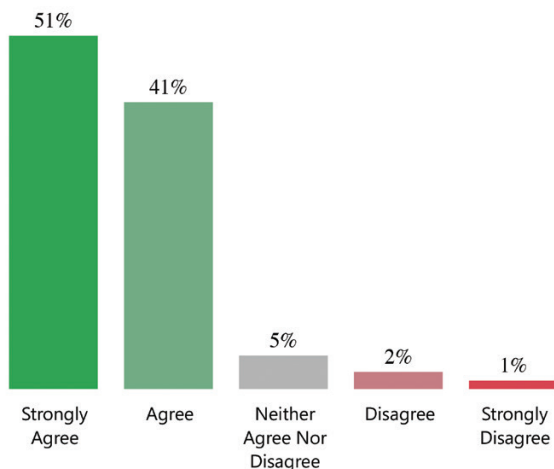
How are you doing working virtually?



Source: Aspirant “Virtual Work Effectiveness Assessment” 2020.

2

I am keeping up with the required responsibilities and pace of my job.



Source: Aspirant “Virtual Work Effectiveness Assessment” 2020.

The strong positive sentiment extended into employee performance, with 92% of employees affirming that they were keeping up with the pace and responsibilities of their job (GRAPH 2).

Organizations have long been concerned that a virtual workforce (specifically working at home) opens their employees up to too many distractions, however, these results suggest otherwise. Furthermore, employees stated that in their home environment they are able to focus more with less of the typical office interruptions, reallocate commute time to both work and personal responsibilities, and be generally more available.



22% of respondents chose “Seizing the day” as the way to describe how they were coping.



CONNECTEDNESS



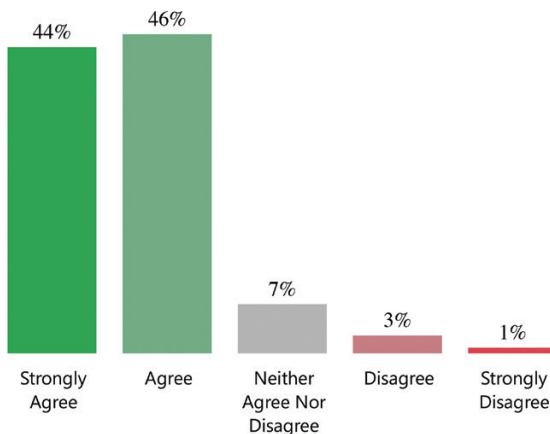
Shifting your entire workforce offsite is a daunting task. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, companies looking to move employees to remote or virtual work would take months to devise a process, and even longer to systematically implement it. The pandemic shortened that cycle from months to hours, forcing the world to rethink how we work overnight.

Many organizations are matrixed and highly integrated across the value delivery chain; combinations of business processes and informal networks are the new standard for how work gets done. For the workforce to achieve their goals, it is necessary to have constant communication and collaboration across teams, functional areas, and the organization.

In the shift to virtual working, it was critical not to disrupt but to enable effective collaboration across the existing matrix. There was no time to redesign the organization or map new work processes. Organizations needed to quickly share information, gather feedback, and equip employees to work in new ways.

3

I am connecting effectively with my team and other colleagues within my company.



Source: Aspirant "Virtual Work Effectiveness Assessment" 2020.

For employees to continue to be effective in their jobs, they need to have uninterrupted communication. We assessed how well employees were able to stay connected with each other and any key stakeholders outside the organization (eg, customers, suppliers, partners).

Employees were connecting with their teams and colleagues (GRAPH 3), with 90% responding "Agree" or "Strongly Agree."

While employees overwhelmingly agreed that they were connecting effectively, they struggled with several related challenges, including

1. Effectiveness of their collaboration tools
2. Limitations of no face-to-face conversations
3. Weak or slow home Internet connections

The pandemic shortened that cycle from months to hours, forcing the world to rethink how we work overnight.



Employees were slightly less positive about their ability to connect with people outside of their organization, with only 74% of responses being positive (GRAPH 4).

Interestingly, this shift was to neutral responses (22% “Neither Agree Nor Disagree”), with only 4% indicating disagreement. This increase in neutral responses, coupled with the verbatim comments, suggests that these employees do not work with people outside the organization.



... employees frequently cited tools and technology as challenges to their ability to be productive.

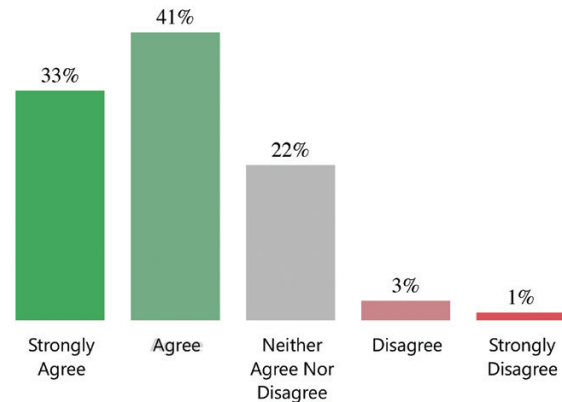
As a final question in understanding employees’ ability to stay connected with work and each other, we asked if employees were provided with the necessary tools and technology to remain effective (GRAPH 5).

Again, we can see a similar trend, with 85% selecting either “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” and a small cohort of 6% responding “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree.”

Although the responses were predominantly positive, employees frequently cited tools and technology as challenges to their ability to be productive. The three most common technological challenges were:

1. Internet access at home
2. Lack of collaboration tools
3. Limited remote access

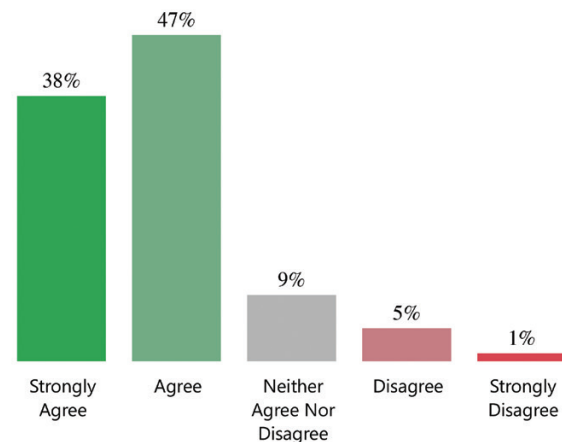
I am connecting effectively with key stakeholders (customer, clients, etc.) outside of my company.



4

Source: Aspirant “Virtual Work Effectiveness Assessment” 2020.

The tools and technology I have been provided work effectively and enable me to do my job.



5

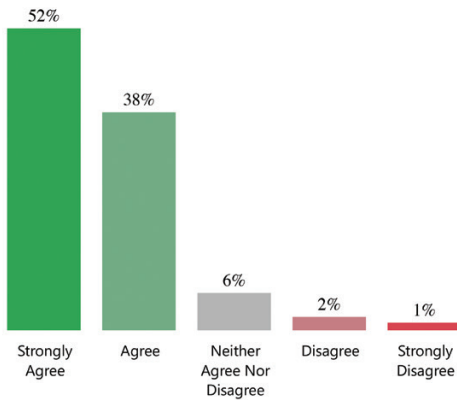
Source: Aspirant “Virtual Work Effectiveness Assessment” 2020.

While we discuss collaboration tools in more detail in the following section, it comes as no surprise for most organizations that remote access was cited. Many organizations have needed to ramp up their IT investment in the face of this crisis and have been addressing remote access concerns over time. Home internet connection, however, is a new opportunity for organizations to better serve their employees. Through assistance programs aimed at funding internet package expenses or alternatives — such as mobile wifi hotspots or “Mi-fi” — organizations can ensure greater employee access and explore new methods of work mobility.

LEADER SUPPORT

6

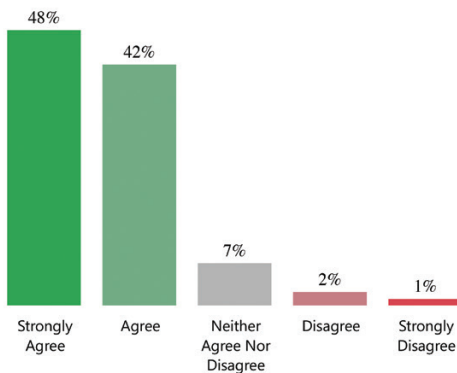
I am connecting regularly with my manager.



Source: Aspirant "Virtual Work Effectiveness Assessment" 2020.

7

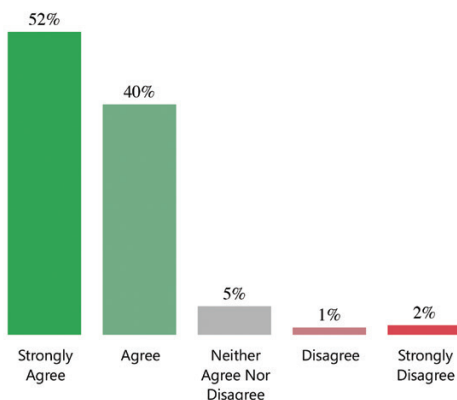
I am connecting effectively with my manager.



Source: Aspirant "Virtual Work Effectiveness Assessment" 2020.

8

I understand my manager's expectations of me.



Source: Aspirant "Virtual Work Effectiveness Assessment" 2020.

To effect change quickly, organizations must rely on leaders, as these individuals are still the main influence on employee engagement, satisfaction, and performance. No amount of corporate communications, HR directives, or policy changes can fill the gaps created by an ineffective leader.

In fact, a leader's voice can change those strong communications into ineffective, easily dismissed rumblings with one contrary statement.

Leadership is so important that we asked three questions to gauge the frequency (GRAPH 6), quality (GRAPH 7), and effectiveness (GRAPH 8) of leader / employee interactions during this difficult time.

Employees responded positively that they were connecting regularly and effectively with their managers (90% in both cases). Further, 92% agreed / strongly agreed that they understood their managers' expectations. These strong managers relationships provide a solid foundation for support of employees through the personal and professional struggles of the pandemic.



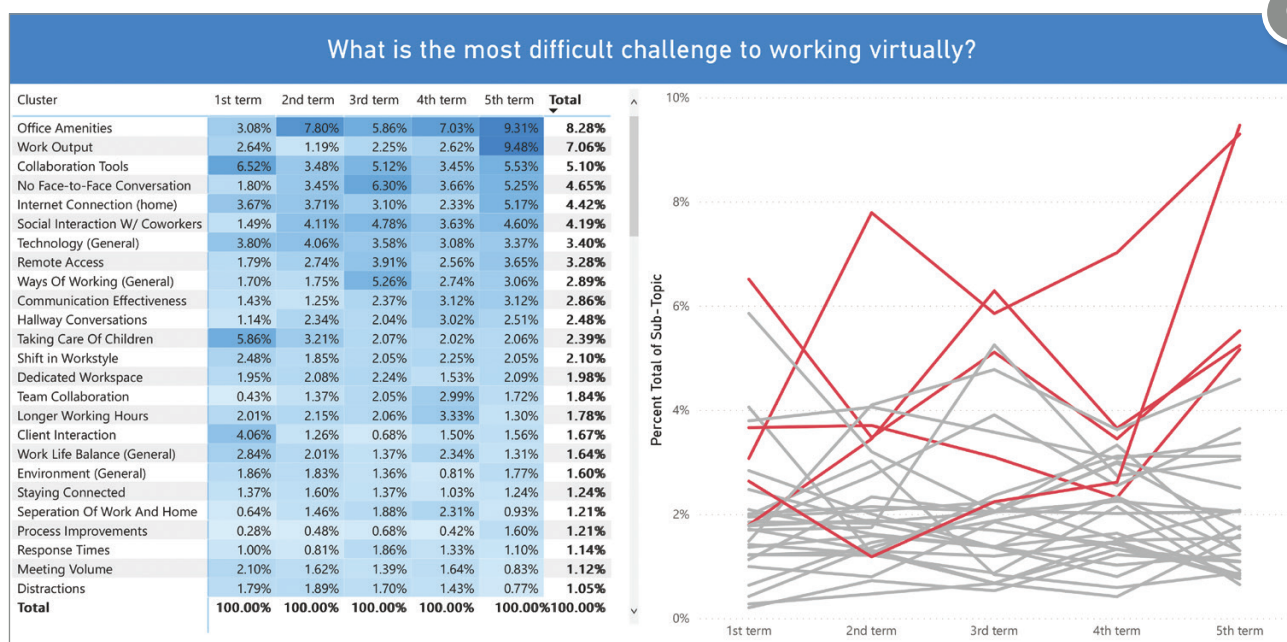
CHALLENGES AND ENABLERS



To gain deeper insight into the employee experience, we asked employees to elaborate on where they faced challenges and saw productivity improvements within their day-to-day workloads.

CHALLENGES

Employee responses about challenges ranged across numerous subtopics, totaling ~130, shifted over time (GRAPH 9).



While employees initially focused on issues in adjusting to working from home, by the 5th term concerns shifted toward barriers to productive work. In addition, collaboration tools (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, SharePoint) and Home Internet Connection remained consistent themes.

NOTE: Items in red have remained relevant | **TERM:** ~2-week period assessment was live

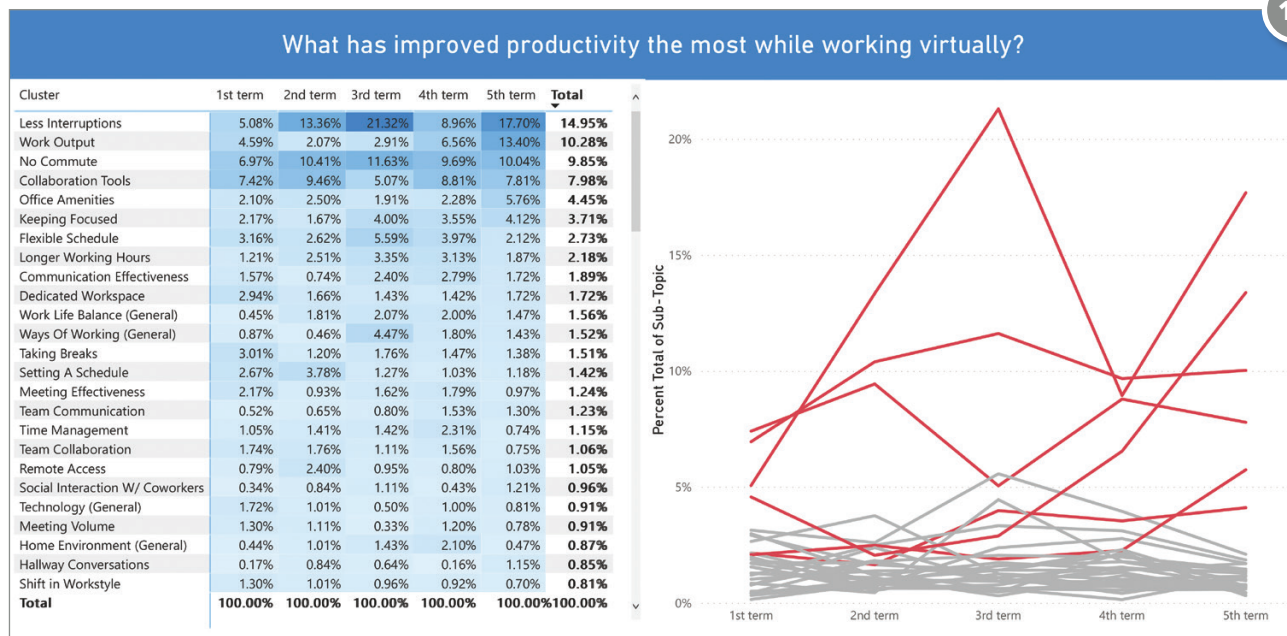
1 ST TERM	5 TH TERM
Collaboration Tools	Work Output
Taking Care of Children	Office Amenities
Client Interactions	Collaboration Tools
Technology (in general)	No Face to Face Conversations
Home Internet Connection	Home Internet Connection

The 5th term topics provide insight into how employees may feel about transitioning back into the office / onsite work. Understanding the meaning behind this will help companies develop transition plans that consider the subtleties that will be important both for morale and productivity:

- 1. Work Output** — Being proficient in doing their job, getting their work done, or the product of their effort in alignment with expectations.
- 2. Office Amenities** — Includes amenities employees used to have in office that they do or do not have now, i.e., dual monitors, keyboards, mice, equipment, files, printer, scanners, and ability to mail.
- 3. Collaboration Tools** — Comments associated with tools, including Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, and SharePoint.
- 4. No Face to Face Conversation** — Referring to a lack of formal (business related) face-to-face conversation.
- 5. Home Internet Connection** — Comments specifically about home internet / Wi-Fi connection or speed.

ENABLERS OF PRODUCTIVITY

Most employees felt they were still able to meet the expectations of their work on a regular basis. To capture what was driving their ability to remain productive, we asked what improved their productivity the most while working virtually.



While employee responses spanned many different topics, three common themes emerged and remained top themes over time:

1. **Less Interruptions** — Having less interruptions and distractions from the everyday commotion that occurs in a typical office environment.
2. **No Commute** — No commuting was associated with saved time and an ability to utilize that time in other productive ways.
3. **Collaboration Tools** — Comments associated with tools like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, and SharePoint.

In addition, three more themes emerged in the later assessments, as employees settled in to working from home, and some began returning to on-site work. These additional topics provide insight into important aspects of transition planning:

1. **Work Output** — Being proficient in doing their job, getting their work done, or the product of their effort in alignment with expectations.
2. **Office Amenities** — Includes amenities employees used to have in office that they do or do not have now i.e. dual monitors, keyboards, mice, equipment, files, printer, scanners, ability to mail.
3. **Keeping Focused** — Ability to have self-manage and appoint periods of uninterrupted time to focus on tasks i.e., blocking off calendar, going into "Do not disturb" mode.



NUANCES BETWEEN CHALLENGES AND ENABLERS

In our analysis of the top challenges and improvements, the same subtopics arise: office amenities, collaboration tools, and work output. The contradictory responses provide an opportunity to understand the nuances of employee needs.



Organizations have an opportunity to aid employees in that effort through reimbursement programs or other initiatives that allow employees to create their ideal workspace at home...



Office amenities were the biggest challenge over the course of the last three months. In more recent assessments it has also become one of the biggest reasons for improved productivity, a direct result of employees looking to remove their biggest barrier to being productive by setting up their own office environment to include things like multiple monitors and the ability to print. Organizations have an opportunity to aid employees in that effort through reimbursement programs or other initiatives that allow employees to create their ideal workspace at home to maximize their own efficiency.

Collaboration tools are another interesting subtopic that we see hitting both sides of the spectrum. Given recent developments to tools — including Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and even Google Meet — companies have been forced to roll these technologies out rapidly. What we are finding is a split in employee persona, where more technologically adept employees are viewing this as a much needed upgrade from previous technologies, while others are having a hard time making the shift and utilizing the tools to their full potential.

To ensure employees are getting the most out of the technology, organizations must provide ample training and best practices as these new collaboration tools continue to evolve. Furthermore, organizations can benefit from forming SWAT teams to assist and inform others that may be having difficulty collaborating. By ensuring the best use of these tools, leaders will have broader impacts on other challenges such as missing social interaction with coworkers and the lack of face to face conversation.

Work output as a topic has become more prominent over time both as a challenge employees faced and as an enabler for employees adapting to the current environment. Our analysis revealed that employees have settled into their new environment and aligned their ways of working to meet the needs of the business. At the same time, many organizations increased their expectations to achieve more from their employees. This created increased tension around work output, and reinforces the importance for organizations to keep a pulse on employees' ability to perform their work. Furthermore organizations should continue to explore new technologies and virtual friendly processes to provide their employees the opportunity to further improve their productivity.



LESSONS LEARNED

The learnings from this assessment highlight the importance of staying connected with your employees and seeking deeper insight into what is truly making a difference in their ability to get work done.

This report revealed five unconventional truths that challenge what we thought we knew about organizational effectiveness:

1. **Increased productivity requires reorganization and process improvement** — Through the COVID-19 pandemic, we learned that we can do a lot to improve productivity by changing the ways we work, the tools we use, and the expectations we set.
2. **Changing leadership behavior requires training** — Faced with a need to work differently, many leaders changed their behaviors to better meet employee needs without the need for a training course, job aids, or career development programs. All are important but should not be the crutch leaders rely on to explain away poor performance.
3. **You can't manage it if you can't see it.** This old school philosophy of 'management by walking around' is not necessary, and in fact may not give you insight into actual performance (just a view that the person is in their seat). Employee performance can be managed and supported remotely, and in fact, many employees flourished while working from home.
4. **Culture change takes three years.** It is a myth that we (and many others) have said many times. Our experience over the past several months challenges that by showing how employees can quickly step into new, more effective ways of working and create new cultural norms when needed. The challenge with culture change is not calendar time, but rather an understanding and shared acceptance of the value that the new culture creates for everyone.
5. **We should treat everyone equally.** While fairness is important, people are different. Employees each come to your organization with different needs, challenges, and strengths. By listening and understanding those unique differences, and the nuances of what each employee needs, you can help support them to bring out their best.





ORGANIZATION OF THE FUTURE

So, where do we go from here?

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated workplace trends that were already developing. In fact, in our recent report on Organizational Effectiveness for 2030, we discuss several trends that are expected to change the workplace. Three of those trends are quickly coming to reality: omnipresent workforce, whole person employment, and the upended pyramid.

- 1. Omnipresent Workforce** — First identified as recognition to companies utilizing the expertise of employees all over the world, this has now been amplified by traditionally onsite employees being pushed into the “at home” office. With employees spending less time commuting, and more time working from home, they have invested in their own workspace, and are now taking the opportunity to be online and productive at all hours. This has afforded employees the ability to get ahead with their deliverables, respond to inquiries at a much faster pace, and be more present in meetings as they are able to shift more focused hours around. Leadership must be engaged and help employees draw the line that separates home from work to ensure their employees don’t feel any burn out.
- 2. Whole Person Employment** — Given the rise in peoples’ interest in health and wellness, organizations can take this time to provide additional value to their employees by offering programs aimed at helping employees reach wellness goals and avoid the sedentary pitfalls of having your office 30 feet away from the bed. Moreover, providing schedule flexibility will result in better work life balance as employees can mix personal responsibility into their workday in more meaningful ways, getting rid of external barriers preventing concentration on work priorities.
- 3. Upended Pyramid** — Due to entire workforces working off site, managers will need to adapt their management styles and grow to be more than just people leaders. Those that are more adept in other areas, such as client management, business growth, and having technical expertise, will be key pillars for organizations to remain competitive.



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CONCLUSION

While there are many lessons that can be learned as organizations continue to navigate this ever-changing landscape, listening to employees can help organizations begin to shift the conversation from one of how to survive the current environment to one of sustaining innovation from our workforce of tomorrow.

If you would like to learn more about Aspirant, go deeper into the results, or wish to check in on your workforce, please reach out to us insights@aspirant.com or visit our website aspirant.com.



ASSESSMENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Aspirant's Virtual Work Effectiveness Assessment was conducted between March 15 – June 30, 2020. Participating companies ranged in size from 10 – 5,000 employees. Participants represent industries, including pharmaceutical, technology, consumer product, retail and professional services, and non-profit organizations. Participants spanned locations across the U.S. and Europe. The assessment was conducted in five different languages.

AUTHORS NOTE



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Joe Kossler is a Sr. Consultant, Insights & Innovation, and helped found Aspirant's Insights and Innovations team by building out the promise of richer insights faster through using Artificial Intelligence. Utilizing his mathematical background in finance and economics, he supports client engagement teams with strong business intelligent techniques that help him analyze and visualize data sets to effectively tell the story behind the data.



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