

Workforce Listening Series
Report: The Emotional Toll of COVID-19

LIS conducted an online survey during the week of April 27th, 2020 with a population-representative sample of American employees who are currently working full time for companies with at least 20 employees.

All respondents normally work in an office setting but have been forced to work from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The national survey of 425 employees has a statistical confidence level of 95 percent with a margin of error of 4.8 percent. Data are weighted to the Bureau of Labor Statistics distributions of employment by employer size (Table F. Distribution of private sector employment by firm size class: 2019). This step ensures that the sample is representative of the US population of similarly situated workers.

The survey focused on both cognitive and emotional predictors of employee well-being, and how specific employer responses have supported, or failed to support, these employees. The latter assessment examined employee unmet emotional needs, which were contrasted against a separate assessment of employee feelings toward their employer's response to COVID-19. When the emotional profiles of employee needs and employer responses are contrasted, significant gaps emerge.

Summary of Findings

American workers are struggling emotionally

- The US workforce is increasingly anxious about re-opening too soon, and the majority fears the worst is yet to come.
- A majority is fearful of inadequate social distancing, and half express frustration at these limitations on their activities.
- **Seven in ten fear for the economy** and the uncertain duration of the pandemic.
- Two in five **worry about the breakdown of society.**
- Underscoring the pervasive emotional impact of the pandemic, more than one-third are concerned for their own mental health.
- **One in six admits being vulnerable to an addiction** to cope with the increased stress.
- **One in ten employees working from home has no support network.** These employees are more likely to worry about their own mental health and to feel that their home is not emotionally supportive.
- Underscoring the importance of support networks, those who have support networks contact them multiple times per week, and this rate has become more frequent since the pandemic began.
- The stress and isolation of the pandemic has led many to a search for meaning. They report spending time pursuing meaningful activities, and one in four reports that they are using this time for personal growth.

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American workers are finding working from home challenging

- **Two-thirds find it at least somewhat challenging to work from home;** more than one in four find it very or extremely challenging.
 - Social and mental health factors (vulnerability to addiction, lacking emotional support, being vulnerable to criticism, having to care for others) are prominent drivers of feeling more challenged.
 - Having the tools and resources, feeling socially connected, having a sense of control, and a clear company vision are prominent drivers of feeling less challenged.
- The **most prevalent issues relate to communication** (i.e., difficulty of conducting meetings), loss of routine and the distracting needs of family members.
- **Only half feel connected to their teams.**
- One quarter have not been provided the essential tools and resources to do their jobs.
- One third don't receive weekly expectations from their manager.
- Although the majority understand their company's response plan and feel that their employer has expressed concern for their well-being, one quarter to one third do not agree:
 - 21% do not understand their company's response plan
 - 28% do not feel their company shows concern for their well-being
 - 33% do not feel that leadership has communicated a vision for navigating the crisis
- Most expect to work from home for another two to eight weeks, although some fear it will be much longer.

Many expect the nature of work to change fundamentally

- One-third expect work to change fundamentally.
 - **Less than 10% believe that things will go "back to normal"**
 - The strongest predictors of expecting fundamental change are the beliefs that others aren't being careful enough and more time will be spent working from home, as well as an affinity for online learning.
- Increased sanitation and social distancing measures are widely expected; health screening and quarantine are less expected.
- **One-third expect their bond with their employer to change as a result of COVID-19.**
 - **1 in 4 expect it to grow stronger**
 - Predictors of expected stronger bond include clear employer communication and showing concern for the well-being of employees
 - **1 in 8 think it will get weaker**
 - Predictors of expected weaker bonds include expectations of job and compensation insecurity, and feeling that employer's response was *unjust*, which, in turn, is associated with the following:
 - Worrying about access to essentials like food and medicine
 - Feeling that the employer hasn't made it easy to work from home
 - Feeling that the company has acted materialistically or unethically
 - Feeling ashamed or unloved

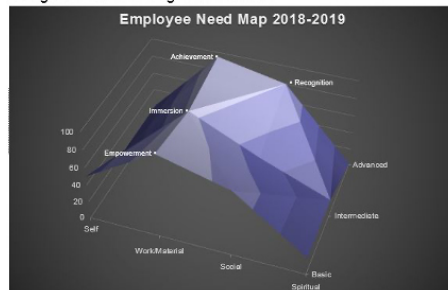
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The profile of employee emotional needs has been radically transformed

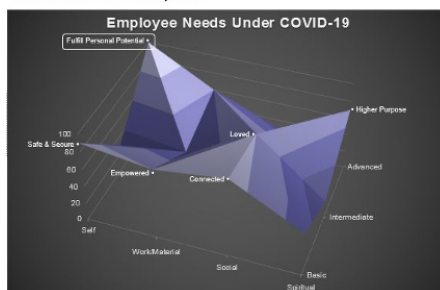
- The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a massive increase in stress accompanied by apocalyptic-level fears amidst long periods of solitary reflection. This has led to a fundamental re-orientation of employee emotional needs.
- Pre-COVID employee emotional needs typically focused on work-related aspirations for self-efficacy, autonomy, productivity, immersion, achievement, and recognition.
- A new set of strivings has emerged that eclipses these material and utilitarian needs. The new profile is a radical departure, emphasizing the fulfillment of personal potential, pursuing a higher purpose, sharing love, and building community.
- The leading emotional relief needs are desires to feel less *overwhelmed* and *bored*.

Employee Emotional Needs Before and After COVID-19

Worker empowerment, immersion, achievement, & recognition ruled during normal times



The Tent has Collapsed



Employee needs contrasted with employer response to COVID-19

- The top emotional need addressed by employer response has been to increase feelings of *connectedness* during this time of social isolation.
- Employees are striving for *personal growth*, *empowerment*, and *higher purpose* to a much greater extent than being delivered by employers.
- The top aspiration is for *personal growth* (i.e., mastery or self-actualization) suggesting that meaningful employer-sponsored development has the potential to be highly motivating during this crisis. Consistent with emphasis on growth is the secondary striving for *higher purpose*.
- Those scoring higher on this emotional need are more likely to:
 - Meditate
 - Spend more of this time doing things that are personally meaningful
 - Hold a leadership position
- Echoing the new emphasis on self-actualization and meaning, employees report engaging in related activities:
 - 4 in 10 are using this time to focus on activities that are personally meaningful
 - 1 in 4 is spending more time on learning and personal growth
- Employees are also looking for relief from feeling both *bored* and *overwhelmed* to a greater extent than is being delivered by employers.

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A new strategy for employer success

Employers may wish to seriously consider the new emphasis on meaning that has emerged among their employees. Employers may wish to deliberately work with employees to understand what really matters to them, and to incorporate these values or principles into how they “frame” their work. Talent Development professionals especially can benefit from embedding training and development plans within this larger context of higher purpose, and to work with employees to design development plans that are mindful of their visions of fulfilling their personal potential. This may mean personal growth and development toward greater mastery of the skills needed to impact what matters most to them. This may also mean valuing projects both in and outside of work that address what matters most. Company vision, mission, and purpose, expressed powerfully by leadership, is also an essential part of the meaning-making process, and resonates powerfully when it is backed up with actions.

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Appendix: Sample Characteristics

	Frequency	Percent
5,000 or more employees	111	30.7
1,000-4,999	66	18.2
500-999	47	8.4
100-499	104	20.8
50-99	50	9.3
20-49	31	12.6
Total	403	100%

Household Size	
Average Household Size	2.7
Average Number of Adults	2.1
Average number contributing to HH Income	1.6

Household Income	
\$30,000 – \$99,999	47%
\$100,000 – \$149,999	30%
\$150,000 +	22%

Demographics	
Male	51%
Female	49%
Median Age	49

Health Status	
Excellent/very good health	66%
HH member at high-risk	33%
Known someone personally who tested positive for COVID-19	27%

Industry	
Banking, Finance and Insurance	16.3
Manufacturing	15.6
Information Services & Software	10.6
Retail & Wholesale	9.2
Government and Public Administration	8.5
Health Care and Social Assistance	6.4
Real Estate & Construction	4.1
Religious and Non-Profit	3.8
Transportation and Warehousing	3.1
Utilities & Telecommunications	2.8
College, University, and Adult Education	2.5
Hotel and Food Services	1.4
Primary/Secondary (K-12) Education	1.3
Scientific or Technical Services	1.3
Legal Services	1
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	.4
Agriculture and Forestry	.4
Broadcasting & Publishing	.2
Other Industry	11.1