

The Future of Work: HR 2021 Outlook



Irish Life
health

Contents

Introduction	3	Protect your people	14-24
		In the workplace	15
Stay flexible	4-7	Remote businesses	16
Finding the right balance	7	Focus on wellbeing	18
		Invest in mental health	19
It's not just about the 'where'	8-10	Help your people to stay healthy	22
		Reconsider your benefits package	24
Collaboration & innovation	11-13		
Offer greater flexibility	11		
Be selective with your tech	12		
Extra tips from HR experts	13		



2020 may well have been one of the toughest years for people and businesses in the last decade. HR leaders like yourself will know first-hand the struggles your business went through, and the many ways that your employees' emotional, physical, mental and financial health have suffered.

Over the past 12 months, you've been by your employees' side through thick and thin. From offering an empathetic ear, to implementing new policies, practises and programmes to maximise health & safety, increase collaboration and boost wellbeing, you've truly gone above and beyond to support every one of your people.

At Irish Life Health, we want to help you to keep on doing what you do best. In this 2021 Outlook, we speak to experts in the industry to understand what's worked for them, and what they feel will be important to focus on over the coming months to continue maximising the wellbeing, safety and success of your workforce.

We'll also take a look at some of the invaluable insights organisations were able to identify during the pandemic, and will consider how you can incorporate these learnings into your 2021 policies, practises and strategies.

Stay flexible

In 2020, widespread lockdowns led to revelations about the many benefits of remote working. From offering greater freedom, flexibility and wellbeing for employees, to dramatically reducing business' rental costs, and improving talent acquisition and productivity, there really is a lot to offer. According to a survey conducted by employee comms experts Workvivo, at the start of the pandemic:



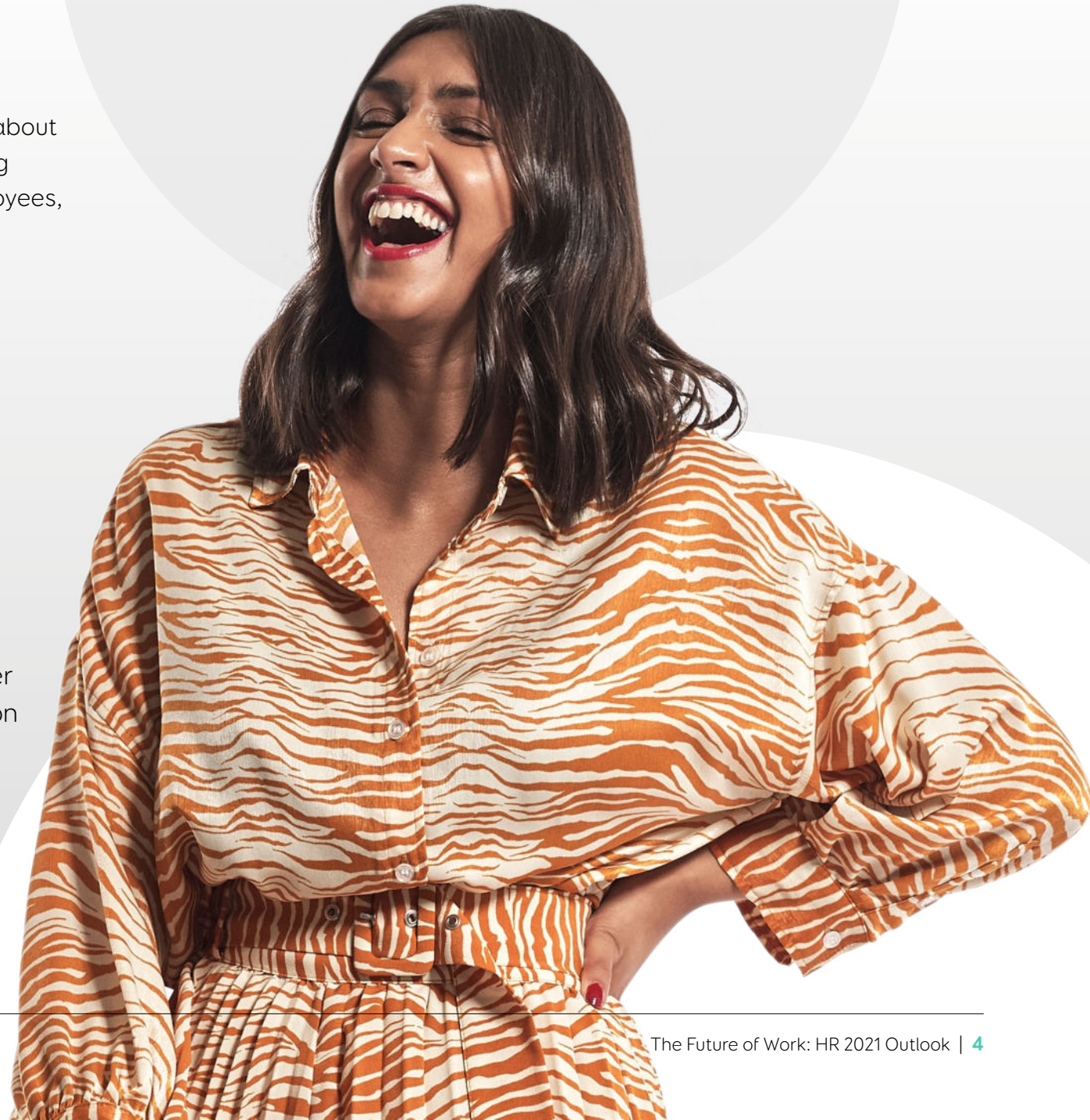
70% of employees felt more productive after transitioning to remote work



Whilst 90% were more likely to stay with an employer for longer while remote working was an option



And just 12% wished to return to the office full time¹



When we asked **Shane O'Brien, HR Manager for Hewlett Packard Enterprise**, about the benefits of remote working, here's what he had to say...



Employees in most instances prefer the added autonomy of working from home and being able to structure their days more effectively. We have employees who are using their 'commute' time for exercise or their own self-development.

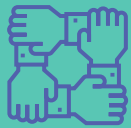
While of course we accept that people may struggle whilst working remotely, particularly with challenging personal circumstances; we've been encouraged by the sense of internal community that has come as a result of people working from home.

Benefits like these likely contributed to the Irish Government's decision to introduce new legislation by the end of 2021 which will ensure that employees have the right to request remote working from their employer.²

However, remote working also has its drawbacks. Ireland's remote working survey revealed that the main challenges experienced by remote working employees include:



Not being able to switch off from work



Collaborating and communicating with colleagues



Poor physical workspace³

Terri Moloney also noted some issues as Salesforce transitioned to a remote working set up...



Very early in the pandemic, we introduced a weekly wellbeing survey to address any pain points our people had as they made the transition to remote work. The key issues that arose were around equipment, flexibility and mental health.



Finding the right balance

So, with all of this in mind, should your organisation implement a full-time remote working strategy when the lockdown is over? Well, for many, the answer is no. Instead, numerous businesses plan on adopting physical workspaces and co-working spaces alongside a part-time remote working strategy to ensure their people reap all of the benefits of remote work, whilst still having access to a place to connect, create and collaborate away from their homes.

For example, tech giant Google have re-confirmed their interest in office space in Dublin. **Head of Google Ireland Nick Leeder** said “I think what we are looking to is the right blend of working from home and from the office in future. I think it will be more flexible.”⁵

Whilst **Apple Jing Shen, general manager at Dublin co-working space the Tara Building**, said that there has been a shift in attitudes towards hybrid working as a result of Covid-19. “We have had a lot of new enquiries and many of our existing members are looking for more flexible options during the pandemic. In response to that, we have introduced new part-time membership plans, which includes a three-day per week part-time membership plan.”⁶

To add to this, as a part of their new remote working legislation, the Irish Government aim to raise awareness of the existing remote working hubs available across Ireland, and to make a significant investment in remote work hubs and infrastructure in underserved areas.⁷

It's not just about the 'where'

It's important to emphasise that flexible working is not just about location. For many businesses, it's becoming a way of life – from the way the workday is scheduled, to the distribution of responsibilities across the workforce.

When we asked **Kevin Empey, Founder of Work Matters Consulting**, what he thought about the future of the workspace, he noted that as we move forward, businesses will need to think bigger...



While a blended or hybrid model seems to be the direction that most employers are travelling towards, it is also worth noting that flexible working is not just about “where” people work. If you replicate your old ways of working in a new model, where the only change you make is the location, then you're missing a trick.

Start with a clear strategy and vision

So, how can you truly capitalise on the opportunities offered by flexible working?
Well, alongside Kevin, we spoke with **Teresa Kilmartin, Chief People Officer at Irish Life;** and **Terri Moloney, Senior Director of Employee Success at Salesforce,** who gave us their top tips...



With the help of WorkMatters Consulting, we developed a strategy for our future work model and a roadmap for managing the transition to the next phase of work. Persona analysis and design was a helpful step in framing and informing that strategy. It involved identifying and analysing a core set of roles that represented the majority of work scenarios and role types in the organisation.

The roles were then assessed to determine how much activity was office-dependent, what could be done remotely, and how. This not only gave us the hard facts we needed, such as occupancy ratios and projections, but also a sense of how the work would be done most effectively, the skills and talent implications of the new model, and how the office space should be configured to accommodate the new blended work model arrangements.

- Teresa Kilmartin, Chief People Officer at Irish Life

Prepare your people for change



While the immediate focus might be on the issue of work location, perhaps use the opportunity over the coming months to at least question and signal that roles, skills and work patterns will also be up for longer-term change in the times ahead.

- Kevin Empey, Founder of Work Matters Consulting

Integrate flexibility into every workday



There is a broader opportunity to bring significant flexibility and agility into other aspects of work and workforce planning. A strategic approach to flexible working also includes a look at when, how and what work is being done - and by who. Work is facing a significant period of disruption anyway.

- Kevin Empey, Founder of Work Matters Consulting

Use your flexible offering to expand your talent pool



Flexibility is the greatest thing you can offer employees. If people know they can complete their tasks in their own time, they'll be super productive. With a more flexible offering at Salesforce, we've been able to move into a whole new talent market. Traditionally, we asked people to move to Dublin - now we can hire people anywhere.

- Terri Moloney, Senior Director of Employee Success at Salesforce

Collaboration and innovation

Of course, if you're among the many businesses that are working remotely right now, you may not be able to return to the workplace for some time. So, how can your business leaders help to foster collaboration and innovation in a remote environment? **Well, here's what we recommend...**

Give your people more freedom

From increased childcare responsibilities to mental health challenges, employees working remotely during the pandemic are likely experiencing significant stress, which makes both collaboration and innovation incredibly challenging.

With this in mind, your business leaders should offer your people the freedom (where possible) to manage their own schedules, and to plan their working day around their other responsibilities and needs. This will help your employees to regain their focus, find more time to collaborate by expanding their schedules outside of typical working hours, and gain the freedom they need to create innovative solutions for your business.



Be selective with your tech

Digital transformation has been an absolute necessity throughout the lockdown, and it would have been impossible for many businesses to function without a variety of technological solutions, such as video conferencing and work management software.

However, if your team leaders have overloaded your people with too many digital tools, this may actually prove counterintuitive, as your employees waste precious time trying to familiarise themselves with a variety of solutions, and have less time to spend collaborating with colleagues and thinking outside of the box.

With this in mind ask your managers to survey employees, so you can determine which tools they actually need, and get rid of those that are hindering collaboration and productivity. For example, your workforce may be using five different single-feature tools to complete five different tasks, when they could be using a single multi-feature software solution for all of them.



Advice from a HR expert

We spoke with **Shane O'Brien, HR Manager for Hewlett Packard Enterprise**, to find out how he thinks businesses can encourage collaboration and innovation in a remote working environment.

Here's what he recommends...

“

Ask for input at every opportunity

Don't feel that you have to come up with an elaborate plan that covers off every aspect of remote working. Ask employees and managers how they feel certain topics should be addressed and how such measures can be reasonably implemented. Ask 'How do we want to work together? What works for you?' Don't assume or be prescriptive. Look at how to best navigate differences in your individual preferences.

For example:

Does everyone or can everyone accommodate an 8am call?

Do individuals prefer long emails with lots of details, or short, succinct messages?

Do employees prefer video calls or not?

Asking these questions will give people a greater sense of involvement in decision making and enables a feeling that we are all on a journey together (key word being journey!).

- Shane O'Brien, HR Manager for Hewlett Packard Enterprise



Protect your people

Throughout the pandemic, there have also been a variety of businesses that have not been able to implement remote working strategies, and have instead enforced strict social distancing guidelines.

HR representatives in these businesses will have been working tirelessly to make sure their employees and customers stay safe. So, let's take a look at how health and safety is set to change for these organisations moving forward, as well as those that will continue to work remotely, so that no matter where you're working, you can continue to protect and support your people.

In the workplace

In the wake of the pandemic, there is even more to consider in terms of workplace health & safety. As a HR leader, you must not only ensure that you are compliant with all of the standard health and safety legislation, but you will now also need to make sure that your premises and your people are protected against a Covid-19 outbreak.

Whether you're continuing on as usual, or you're returning to the workplace for the first time this year, your business should continue to prioritise the physical and psychological safety of your employees. This means modifying the layout of your workplace to ensure your people can keep to social distancing measures and increasing the stringency of your cleaning and sanitation measures to minimise the spread of germs.

Your organisation may also want to consider investing in new technologies such as temperature scanners, so you can reduce the likelihood of an outbreak at your workplace, whilst providing psychological reassurance to your people.



Remote businesses

Businesses that continue to work from home for the foreseeable future will have a slightly different set of health and safety concerns. For these organisations, wellbeing will be top of the agenda (more on this later!), as will physical health considerations.

According to the Health and Safety Authority, people who are working at home on a long-term basis are at greater risk of experiencing physical health problems associated with sitting for long periods of time, and using display screen equipment (DSE), such as fatigue, aches and pains, and other physical health issues. Organisations will therefore need to combat these risks by teaching employees how to conduct workstation assessments at home (if you haven't already done so).⁸



Here's just a few ways your business can help employees to optimise their home working set up...



Provide ergonomic seating and reliable equipment



Encourage regular screen breaks to minimise eye strain



Ensure employees have a quiet and comfortable place to work



Offer portable equipment so employees can work from a variety of environments



Provide eye tests and any necessary spectacles for DSE work

When we asked **Terri Moloney** what **Salesforce** have done to support their employees' home working needs, she said:

“

Our wellbeing survey revealed that some of our people were struggling to create the right home office set up for their unique needs.

To combat this, we now offer home office set up grants, so all our employees have the tools they need to thrive.

Focus on wellbeing

80% of people surveyed by Irish Life Health had experienced feelings of nervousness or anxiety in 2020.⁹ This widespread increase in mental health problems caught the attention of many employers and HR representatives over the past year, who were eager to optimise their EAP programmes and wellness packages to ensure their people got the help they needed.

Now that social distancing measures and remote working are here to stay for the foreseeable future, businesses across Ireland are developing corporate wellbeing strategies to maintain the physical and mental health of their workforce - in the short and longer term.

So, as you move forward, how can you develop a comprehensive wellness package for your people that caters to their shifting needs?



Invest in mental health

Following the events of 2020, your employees may be more susceptible to stress, depression and anxiety, and in turn, this is likely to have an impact on their comfort levels if they will be working at your physical premises this year. **In fact, 43% of remote workers in Ireland say they are anxious about the risk of exposure to Covid-19 upon returning to the workplace**, with two-thirds concerned about the lack of additional mental health supports being offered by their employers.¹⁰

Equally, employees that are working from home are at risk of experiencing mental health problems and increased feelings of loneliness due to the isolation brought about by remote work.¹¹

With this in mind, offering mental health support in the form of counselling sessions and educational resources (alongside implementing thorough physical safety measures), will be vital in maximising the wellbeing of your people.



When we asked **Shane O'Brien** what **Hewlett Packard Enterprise** have done to improve the wellbeing of their people over the past year, here's what he had to say:



We offered every employee a premium subscription to mindfulness app Headspace. Every second Friday of the month we have what is called 'wellness Friday' where we all finish at 2pm and are encouraged to spend the remainder of the day on something that we enjoy - or just use the time for ourselves.

We've increased communication on our EAP and mental health first aid program and have also put together a wellness playbook and tip sheet to help employees to manage their wellbeing and keep their career as a key focus whilst working from home.

Similarly, **Terri Moloney** said that **Salesforce** has been implementing a variety of solutions to support their workers' wellbeing...



We provide employees with a wellbeing allowance every month, so they can invest in the tools they need to support their personal wellness. We also offer a ton of free resources, and have an EAP which offers comprehensive mental, emotional and financial advice and support. Beyond this, we provide our people with free subscriptions to meditation apps, and have created a wide variety of wellbeing webinars available online. Our main goal is to teach employees to put their own oxygen mask on first.



Help your people to stay healthy

According to the Irish Government's latest Healthy Ireland Summary Report, just 46% of Irish adults are achieving the minimum level of activity recommended by the National Guidelines by being moderately active for at least 150 minutes a week, whilst 60% of the Irish population are either overweight (37%) or obese (23%).¹²

Now that many employees are working remotely, they're even more likely to be sedentary for long periods of time, and these low levels of activity can wreak havoc on their health.

In fact, a large review of studies published in the Annals of Internal Medicine found that even after

adjusting for physical activity, sitting for long periods was associated with worse health outcomes including heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and cancer.¹³

Sedentary behaviour can also increase your risk of dying, either from heart disease or other medical problems, and can even intensify feelings of depression and anxiety.¹⁴

As a HR leader, you understand just how important it is to help your people to stay healthy, so, how can you help your workforce to get moving? Well, here's what we recommend...

Offer free exercise classes

Whether you direct your people to free online exercise classes, or you hire someone to host quick lunchtime workouts each day, encouraging your people to get moving is a great way to counteract some of the health problems brought about by sitting for long periods. This will also give your people an opportunity to connect and socialise, no matter where they're working.

Encourage walking meetings

Walking meetings offer a fantastic way to help employees to squeeze extra exercise into their working day. If your people are working at your premises, you could encourage them to take a walk around your local area whilst they have a meeting, and if your employees are working remotely, simply ask them to join the meeting on their phone and take a walk around their neighborhood whilst they talk.

Invest in standing desks

If you want to help employees to spend less time sitting down, then you'll need to supply them with the right tools. Standing desks offer the perfect solution, giving employees the freedom to work comfortably whilst standing. When compared to an afternoon of sedentary work, an equal amount of time spent standing has been shown to burn over 170 additional calories, which equates to almost 1000 extra calories burned weekly.¹⁵





Reconsider your benefits package

Now more than ever, the right benefits can make a big difference to your employees' quality of life. In fact, The Global Benefits Attitudes Study found that in the wake of COVID-19, 54% of employees believe that their benefits package is more important than ever before.

Aside from the traditional benefits, employees stated a desire for assistance in other areas such as financial planning (53%), parents/carers leave (52%), wellness (45%), further education (44%) and commuting (42%) among the most popular.¹⁶

With this in mind, your business leaders should consider investing in a health insurance solution that is designed to support your employees' physical, mental and financial wellbeing, whilst also providing a range of additional benefits that can be personalised to reflect the unique needs of your diverse workforce. That's where we can help...

Keep on supporting every employee

You've gone above and beyond to support your people over the last 12 months, and at Irish Life Health, we want to help you continue doing this. As your partners in employee health and wellbeing, we strive to continually develop innovative, preventative health benefits and services, as well as expert, insight-led wellness programmes. Our Wellbeing Consultants will work with you to understand the needs of your organisation, set objectives for your wellbeing strategy, and develop bespoke solutions that will help your people to live healthier and more fulfilling lives.

As the only health insurer in Ireland who can offer personalised cover, you can be proud knowing that you've given your employees the cover that's right for them.

To find out how we can help you keep on doing what you do best:

Call

01-5625248

or visit

irishlifehealth.ie



Sources:

¹Workvivo | ²Government of Ireland - Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment | ³Whitaker Institute | ⁴Irish Tech News

⁵Irish Times | ⁶Silicone Republic | ⁷Government of Ireland - Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment | ⁸Health & Safety Authority

⁹The Health of the Nation, Irish Life Health, 2020 | ¹⁰Irish Examiner | ¹¹The Health of the Nation, Irish Life Health, 2020

¹²Healthy Ireland, Summary Report 2019 | ¹³Hopkins Medicine | ¹⁴MedlinePlus | ¹⁵Healthline



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