

The End of Top-Down Management: Adjusting to a More Empowered Workforce



With a tightening labor market and evolving employee expectations, the working world has experienced a dramatic change in the last couple of years. This change is pushing the boundaries of the traditional top-down management model, shifting more power and focus to employees. We explore the trend of this more empowered workforce and look at what it will take to make a positive, long-term change in the landscape of work.

The Shift to a More Empowered Workforce

The 9-5 workday is said to have originated in the 1800s, sticking around ever since and claiming a stronghold in enterprise-level corporations. The pandemic accelerated a growing trend to flip this model on its head—taking a concept

that many smaller companies have pioneered and scaling it to all corners of the business world. It's an approach that advocates for greater flexibility, stronger employee wellbeing, and increased freedom in how, when, and where employees do their work.

In essence, it's a shift to a more empowered workforce. Increasingly, employees have more autonomy and a louder voice about how a company does business. This has become especially clear as more [employees cite their reason for leaving](#) as a response to employer demands for returning to the office. On a global level, 64% of survey respondents say they either already have quit or would consider quitting if they were forced back onsite full-time.

This seems to be a global trend, particularly as employers struggle to fill openings and retain top performers. [Record-high numbers of job vacancies](#) are plaguing both the U.S. and the U.K., allowing workers to cherry-pick the best positions at the best companies. And despite [union strength declining](#) since the 1950s, strikes are becoming more common, with unions demanding higher pay and better treatment. The fact that some of this union activity is occurring within iconic U.S. companies—such as [Amazon, Starbucks, and Apple](#)—could indicate what experts are describing as “the most significant moment in the American labor movement.” Workers at these organizations are looking for improved working conditions and greater scheduling stability.

A growing number of companies agree with these employees. The [CEO of investment firm BlackRock](#) recently noted that “employees across the globe are looking for more from their employer—including more flexibility and more meaningful work.”

Furthermore, he points out that pay and flexibility are only the starting point; workers are also looking at employers to address issues like racial equality, child care, and mental health. If a company avoids these considerations, turnover is inevitable; Fink says, “turnover drives up expenses, drives down productivity and erodes culture and corporate memory.” The stakes are high.

Is the Empowered Workforce a Long-Term Fixture?

Is it realistic to believe that the pandemic-driven shift in the workforce is a permanent change? Many experts believe it's short-term.

The pandemic's impact on the employment market certainly gave many workers the advantage. And in the current

competitive job market, workers often have the upper hand. But non-union, hierarchical organizations are still common, and sign-on bonuses and similar benefits and perks are often just band-aid solutions, masking the big-picture problems at hand.

An entrenched corporate hierarchy typically grants leadership more money and more power, with little representation at the employee level. In these types of environments, the pandemic-induced shift to an empowered workforce appears to be surface-level at best, not indicating any glimmers of long-term systemic change.

The result is worker burnout and job dissatisfaction—and inevitably turnover. But the consequences don't end there. As mentioned above, turnover significantly impacts productivity and culture, which in turn hits the bottom line.

Enacting Long-Term Change

The pandemic was a catalyst, disrupting the world of work in shocking ways. While some of its impacts on the workforce may be short-lived, there's an inarguable trajectory towards a more empowered workforce—and companies that recognize and act on this now will gain the competitive edge, not to mention a more productive employee base with less turnover.

This begs the question: How can leaders enact long-term change? Most workforce experts agree that lasting positive change is going to require a flatter organizational structure with “servant leadership” style management.

A [McKinsey report](#) says that large enterprises should avoid a hierarchy with more than six layers of management—and ideally close to three. With this flatter model, front-line employees are more likely to have their voices heard and collaboration in general is more productive. With a more streamlined management, the organization can be more agile, allowing for faster decision-making and more empowered employees.

However, the only way a flatter org chart really works is with a major shift in attitude at the leadership level. The concept of servant leadership is key in this model, where people—not the company—come first. When the focus is on the wellbeing and empowerment of employees, it makes for a more authentic, collaborative, and productive work environment, which naturally leads to the growth of the company.

[Servant leadership](#) is particularly effective for a more successful remote or hybrid work model. It's an approach that

prioritizes communication, helps employees find meaning and purpose in their work, and anticipates and leads through change.

Shifting to the model of leadership—particularly in combination with a flatter hierarchy—is more likely to be a lasting change because it promotes sustainable success on every side.

What does employee empowerment mean to your organization? Have there been long-term changes enacted since the pandemic?