

COMMENTARY

Mayflower group benchmark on changes in work due to COVID-19: Now and in the future

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The authors are members of the Mayflower Group. The Mayflower Group is a consortium of top-tier, global companies dedicated to conducting thoughtful and innovative research and employee surveys that provide critical insight. Together, these companies share normative data and ad hoc benchmarks—helping create best-practices standards, influencing critical business decisions, and empowering individual members to further their organizational strategies. The group has been in existence since 1971, and it works through volunteers such as the current authors from different member companies. To become a member, any company with at least 7,500 employees has to go through a process review and voting by current members. The member companies review the survey practice and ability of the applicant company to submit normative data for a core set of items. URL: <https://www.mayflowergroup.org/>.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has disrupted the ways of working for many of us and ignited a conversation about the future of work for all of us. Nearly 7 out of 10 employees surveyed by Gallup in late April were working remotely in some capacity (Hickman & Saad, 2020). As more employees work from home, they may be more likely to struggle with unplugging after work, loneliness, and collaborating with others (Buffer, 2020). Rudolph et al. (2021) discussed 10 of the most relevant research and practice topics in the field of industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology that will likely be influenced by COVID-19. In this commentary, we provide a benchmark from 20 respected organizations who are part of the Mayflower Group. The benchmark survey as shown in Figure 1 provides a practical view from these companies on the importance of, magnitude, and questions around these 10 topics. The survey also provides a glimpse into other areas that may be considered for future research.

Defining benchmarks

Organizations and institutions are constantly striving to gather more data to determine how successful their current practices are. Therefore, organizations rely on benchmarking to compare their current thinking and metrics with other companies' thinking and metrics so they can determine whether their organizational practices are “best in class” as well as determine what the industry best practices are (Camp, 1989; Hiltrop & Despres, 1994). In one 1996 study, 65% of surveyed *Fortune* 1000 companies use benchmarks as a management tool to gain competitive advantages (Korpela & Tuominen, 1996).

Companies that benchmark may see a variety of benefits. For example, by knowing how other organizations are performing and deploying their resources, human resources (HR) practitioners can compare/contrast their own HR practices (Glanz & Daily, 1992). This can allow organizations to determine whether they are missing a certain practice or have room to improve their current practices. Additionally, benchmarking can create a sense of urgency to change. If a company is

Item order	Question stem	Question options	Response option
1	Rank the following items in terms of importance for more in-depth research due to COVID19.	A) Occupational health and safety B) Work–family issues C) Telecommuting D) Virtual teamwork E) Job insecurity F) Precarious work G) Leadership H) Human resources policy I) The aging workforce J) Careers	Ranking where 1 represents most important and 10 represents least important
2	How would you rate the change in your organization’s focus on each of the following?	A) Occupational health and safety B) Work–family issues C) Telecommuting D) Virtual teamwork E) Job insecurity F) Precarious work G) Leadership H) Human resources policy I) The aging workforce J) Careers	1 = significant decrease 2 = decrease 3 = no real change 4 = increase 5 = significant increase
3	Which focus area has the most passion and attention within your own work right now?	A) Occupational health and safety B) Work–family issues C) Telecommuting D) Virtual teamwork E) Job insecurity F) Precarious work G) Leadership H) Human resources policy I) The aging workforce J) Careers	Drop-down menu of 10 options
3a	Please describe what you are doing related to this topic.		Open ended
4	Which focus area has the <i>second most</i> passion and attention within your own work right now?	A) Occupational health and safety B) Work–family issues C) Telecommuting D) Virtual teamwork E) Job insecurity F) Precarious work G) Leadership H) Human resources policy I) The aging workforce J) Careers	Drop-down menu of 10 options
4a	Please describe what you are doing related to this topic.		Open ended
5	Which focus area has the <i>third most</i> passion and attention within your own work right now?	A) Occupational health and safety B) Work–family issues C) Telecommuting D) Virtual teamwork E) Job insecurity F) Precarious work G) Leadership H) Human resources policy I) The aging workforce J) Careers	Drop-down menu of 10 options
5a	Please describe what you are doing related to this topic.		Open ended
6	Are there other areas related to industrial and organizational psychology or human resources that may get impacted (beyond the ten you ranked earlier) due to COVID19?		Open ended
7	State the name of your organization:		Open ended

Figure 1. Benchmark Survey Items.

Note. Benchmark survey distributed via anonymous survey link.

scoring significantly below its peers on a certain benchmark, it can indicate to senior leaders that they need to change in order to catch up to their peers (Hiltrop & Despres, 1994; Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). Finally, benchmarking can help set priorities for organizations (Ulrich et al., 1989). By using benchmarks, HR practitioners can infer priorities and best practices that might be appropriate for their own organizations.

Methodology

Researchers from a *Fortune* 500 company conducted a benchmark study asking members of the Mayflower Group to participate. The Mayflower Group is a consortium of top-tier, global companies dedicated to conducting thoughtful and innovative research and employee surveys that provide critical insight. The group, which originated in 1971, comprises volunteers from various companies and across industries, such as banking, consumer goods, insurance, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, retail, and telecommunications. In order to become a Mayflower Group member, organizations must be in the private sector, have a strong company reputation, have a strong survey program that runs at least biannually where they survey at least 7,500 employees, and submit survey data to Mayflower in order to establish survey norms. Refer to the following URL for information about the Mayflower Group: <https://www.mayflowergroup.org/>.

One representative per company of the Mayflower Group was asked to complete a set of benchmark questions centered around the changing nature of work in response to COVID-19 based on Rudolph's et al.'s (2021) focal article. Specifically, members were asked to

1. Rank the importance of needing more in-depth research due to COVID-19 of each focus area;
2. rate the amount of change in their organization's focus on each area using a 5-point change scale (i.e., increase, no change, decrease);
3. select the top three focus areas that have called for the most passion and attention in their own work right now, as well as describe what is being done related to that topic; and
4. describe other areas related to industrial and organizational psychology or human resources that may be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic that have not been discussed so far.

Members were informed that their responses would be aggregated and deidentified, but their company names would be disclosed in the benchmark report. Members had an option to remain anonymous.

Results

Twenty Mayflower members participated in the benchmark study: six pharmaceutical/consumer products companies; five diversified manufacturing companies; three retail companies; two insurance companies; two remained anonymous; one airlines company; and one utilities company. The survey results indicate that virtual teamwork and telecommuting are the two most important focus areas garnering more in-depth research, whereas careers and the aging workforce are currently the least important. Similar to the rank of importance, telecommuting and virtual team teamwork also had reportedly the largest degree of change in focus at these companies, followed by occupational health and safety and work-family issues. Please refer to Table 1 for the detailed rankings of these focus areas for both importance and degree of change.

With telecommuting, leadership, and virtual teamwork being the top three areas warranting the most passion and attention at these companies, the benchmark further asked about specific actions being taken related to these topics and the following themes emerged. In terms of telecommuting, the areas that are of keen focus are the extent of flexibility that can be provided

Table 1. Company Responses Reflecting the 10 Topic Areas' of Importance as Well as Changes in These Focus Areas in Their Organizations During COVID-19

Topic	Importance ranking	Number of companies		
		Increase	No change	Decrease
Virtual teamwork	1	19	1	0
Telecommuting	2	20	0	0
Work-family issues	3	18	2	0
Occupational health and safety	4	17	2	0
Leadership	5	11	9	0
Human resources policy	6	17	3	0
Job insecurity	7	8	10	0
Precarious work	8	3	16	0
Careers	9	4	15	1
The aging workforce	10	1	15	4

Note. Organizations not required to answer every question so number of company counts may not add up to 20.

to employees and how it will affect the productivity of work, culture of the organization, and employee well-being. As leaders navigate leading through a crisis, there has been a significant focus on leadership development and how to prepare leaders to manage change and virtual teams. The increase of virtual teamwork has heightened the importance of technology and collaboration at work, as well as overall new ways working. Organizations are figuring out the most appropriate technologies for sharing work with an eye on security and training to enable effective usage. The new ways of working require a set of rules on how to collaborate (e.g., cadence of meetings and frequency, discussion via remote technology) when remote companies are in the process of consulting their employees to come up with an agreed and defined way of working.

Additionally, the benchmark also provided a set of new areas which that may warrant future research. These areas are assessment and selection, diversity and inclusion, and the role of the office and its design. These new areas of significant interest and priority have sparked the following questions. For example, as hiring processes have moved toward virtual modalities, how are assessment and selection practices affected? How can organizations check for and mitigate new kinds of biases in a completely virtual environment? As companies focus on business continuity, is there enough of a focus on diversity and inclusion? Do we have a new kind of diversity: virtually active and virtually inactive to account for our effort to provide a level playing field to all employees? Are we seeing a shift to a more virtual workforce and thereby change of role of the traditional office? Would the design of the office space in the future be different, and how? These are all potential questions that researchers can focus on to provide organizations with some direction.

Finally, one caveat to address concerns the use of a ranking methodology. It may be the case that organizations are tackling various issues concurrently; therefore, research that involves a multidisciplinary lens that covers various focal issues would provide a novel contribution. To illustrate, organizations may be addressing teleworking while also including the various factors affiliated with virtual teams. Thus, and given the novel circumstances (i.e., COVID-19), research that includes multiple domains would contribute significantly.

Additionally, it is worthwhile to consider the contextual occurrence of these constructs. For instance, many of the Mayflower organizations have separate organizational needs whereby each construct is influencing them differently. For example, an organization that requires in-person work (e.g., construction) may operate differently from a retail store that may be able to move its operations to a virtual format. Therefore, specific organizations may face challenges of a higher

priority than others. Thus, research should also explore the contextual influence of organizational type, need, location, and strategy as it relates to these focal interests.

Conclusion

The benchmark at the very least confirms some of the 10 areas of interest to companies as they deal with COVID-19. It provides a priority order that may be helpful for the researchers as they target different areas. Interestingly, several of the areas proposed in the focal article such as “precarious work,” “careers,” and “the aging workforce” rated low on the rank ordering and have seen little change (or in a few cases even downward emphasis) since the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting perhaps that these concerns outlined by the focal article authors may be overstated.

We also provide some insights on additional areas beyond the focal article’s outline. The three areas that we discovered through our benchmarking are as follows:

1. **Workspace design:** The design of workspaces is going to see a significant change, as many companies are now rethinking the needs for shared formal office spaces and how to redesign workspaces to optimize for the safety and productivity of employees. A key question here is this: What is the role of offices in our new reality where the workforce will be increasingly remote?
2. **Assessment and selection:** Another area noted is the sudden uptake of fully remote hiring practices in light of social distancing. Although some companies have adopted some degree of virtualization in their hiring processes, this rapid transformation will raise questions around validation and effectiveness of these processes.
3. **Diversity and inclusion:** We do not yet fully understand the implications for diversity and inclusion of the mass shift to telework during the pandemic. This rapid shift will raise questions around a different type of bias that may creep into our organizations. These biases may be around being physically present or being remote on the job.

As the pandemic is not over yet, there will be new questions and similar benchmark studies like this one that can help define and prioritize the research studies linked to industry needs.

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Cite this article: Brenner, J., Jain, S., Leas, K., Samudio, DC., and Amundson, M. (2021). Mayflower group benchmark on changes in work due to COVID-19: Now and in the future. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* *14*, 139–143. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2021.35>