

Telling statistics place employee wellness top of mind in the post-Covid world

By [Bernard Martyris](#)

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As HR leaders look towards the post-Covid economy, employee well-being will need to feature at the top of their list. According to research conducted by PwC, South African companies are opening their eyes to the benefits of investing in employee wellness as a way of creating long-term value for the organisation. To this point, Lifeline South Africa received a record number of calls, averaging around 4,000 a day in the weeks that followed the 2020 national lockdown.



Source: www.pexels.com

No business leader would have predicted that this era in history would bring with it a pandemic, economic turmoil, international employment crisis, and consequent widespread health implications. Even as the recovery process has gained momentum through 2021, Covid-19 has left an indelible mark on the way we live and work.

While many other changes may seem temporary, being predominantly employee-centric is one behaviour that will transform the future of work in permanent ways. Focusing on the right values, cultivating critical talent, and having a clear vision of organisational culture will be the cornerstones of a better and more successful workplace in 2021.



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Tough staffing decisions made

While industries have been ravaged by the pandemic, the downturn has been felt the most among the workforce – in the form of terminations, furloughs, shifts to full work-from-home schedules, pay-cuts, and overall employee demotivation. Insurance company Liberty recently published its claim statistics for 2020, showing that retrenchment claims peaked between August and October to over 60 per month, compared to around 10 during the first months of the year. Thousands of companies have been forced to take some very tough staffing decisions in their struggle to survive and save as many

jobs as possible. This picture has become undeniably evident in recent statistics which put South African [youth unemployment at a disconcerting 46%](#).

Putting out workforce management-related fires whilst being in crisis mode has shaped the year for most HR leaders, and made them arguably one of the most important business functions along with the communications department to keep the wheels turning – looking after not only the legalities around managing employees but also their well-being; a far more sensitive task. Having said that, 2021 has also been a year of new learnings, practices, and technologies in the HR space – and the year has inadvertently served to accelerate several trends that were already occurring in our work culture.



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Learning from everything that many industries have undergone this year, here's a look at the HR trends we foresee for 2021:

Redesigning the employee journey: As remote working becomes more of a norm than the exception, it will become increasingly important for HR leaders to rethink how to make employee experiences more personalised and intimate, virtually. This is especially important for new employees who have no context and interaction with colleagues and leaders, and therefore will find it difficult to absorb the culture of their new workplace. Immersive technology that can replicate the experience of personal communication will take centrestage in the new era of working – both for existing and new employees. Hybrid working could enhance employee satisfaction in a new working model.

Re-educating the workforce: The need for learning and development within the workforce has become more apparent in the last several months of remote working. The pandemic could have created knowledge gaps for many workers. In addition, evolving employee demographics and the demand across industries for data literacy, business acumen, and digital integration will make employee education key to competitiveness as the country moves forward. Early in the pandemic, VFS Global started investing in this area through training in a variety of topics such as project management, finance, operations, etc. The company has conducted over 200 of these sessions across 10 months, witnessing over 80,000 employee enrolments in total.

Active promotion of diversity and inclusion: From a D&I lens, the ripple effects of the year have been felt perhaps most keenly and most widely, particularly for working women, who have been managing full careers alongside a heavily curtailed or non-existent support system on the home front for months on end. The year's challenges have generated an in-built empathy in organisations and decision-makers, allowing many to take the time and inclination to relook at and improve hiring strategies and processes. For VFS Global, where people from 144 nationalities work and bring the benefit of a wide variety of world views, a diverse culture is an important driver of success and is at the heart of any healthy, entrepreneurial organisation.



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Increased focus on compliance: With the several changes in employee structure and working that 2021 brought, company compliance, or lack thereof, in workplace law and practice, could have come to light. Right from data privacy, to termination agreements, pay transparency and harassment protection, the breadth of corrections required to make the workplace safe and conducive for employees is quite large. Increased vigilance around making regulatory practices air-tight and non-negotiable will be an important order of business for employers from here onwards, especially for multinational and multistate organisations.

Hybridisation of workplace and workforce: If the lockdown has taught us anything, it's that organisations and employees need to be both extremely flexible and agile – whether it is regarding the nature of their work or their location. Two trends that have been around for a while but are expected to witness a sharp rise in the coming years are remote working and the gig economy. As organisations have evaluated the cost and labour-hour benefits of remote working, and the adaptability offered by gig workers, this phenomenon will only gain more prominence for the new-age workplace. But such models will only work if robust performance and delivery tracking is in place. Nevertheless, companies should act responsibly with gig workers by paying fair salaries and social securities where required.

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