



INTELLIGENCE REPORT:
Helping DC-area marketing and communications professionals navigate the remote work model in the pandemic economy.

A note from TorchLight's CEO ...

As we navigate the effects of COVID-19 and continue to adjust our professional lives, it's becoming clear that the American workplace is in for one of the biggest evolutions in its history.

As leaders in marketing and communications staffing, we want to share the latest industry insights with you, and that's why we've taken on this research project: to provide ourselves and our clients with fresh data on employee attitudes toward their work lives in the midst of COVID-19. Our survey respondents spoke, we listened and together we can translate the results into action.

This report includes feedback from both our current and past clients and candidates—how they feel about working remotely and how it's likely to impact their employment decisions moving forward.

We hope you'll use this information to evolve your work environment and partner with us in creating the best approaches to hiring and retaining top talent. Please don't hesitate to let us know what you'd like to see in future surveys—we'll be doing these regularly to keep abreast of changes over time.

Sincerely,
Heidi Parsont
President and CEO
TorchLight Hire



Introduction to the survey

The purpose of this survey is to provide marketplace-based insights on the opinions of marketing and communications professionals in the DC metro area about how the pandemic is shaping their work and how they feel about the emerging remote work trend.

The respondent pool was comprised of our candidates and clients, both managers and individual contributors. We also included a number of professionals who are currently seeking employment.

Survey questions were developed within the context of how the pandemic is having a pivotal (and potentially lasting) impact on the workplace. This includes how professionals approach their daily work responsibilities, how the evolving work trend is impacting their productivity and satisfaction—and even how they might approach future employment choices.

To achieve our survey objectives, we focused on three broad areas of key importance for both employee satisfaction and hiring practices:

- › **How COVID-19 has affected employment status and perceptions about working from home.**
- › **How working remotely has impacted individuals' productivity—including collaboration, project workflow, interpersonal interactions, management interface and others.**
- › **The employment terms and benefits employees expect from their current and future employers.**

Key takeaways

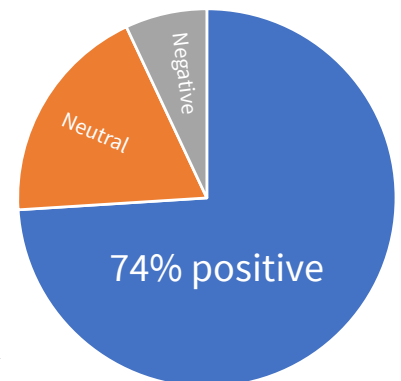
Perhaps not surprising, the survey revealed overwhelmingly positive feelings about working from home. A full 74% of respondents told us their attitude toward remote work had shifted significantly in that direction during the pandemic experience. In fact, two-thirds of them feel their work and careers are thriving with the new remote model. The majority are somewhat to very confident in their own ability to work from home, as well as in their managers' and colleagues' abilities to do the same.

It uncovered several important perceived benefits, including work/life balance, flexibility and more. We delve into the specifics of these on the following pages.

We learned that employees think remote work is having an overall positive effect on their productivity and careers. They also told us what their employers could do to help them improve their performance and job satisfaction in working through this “new normal.”

Finally, we offer our preliminary thoughts and suggestions on how employers can capitalize on this feedback to evolve their processes and organizations in order to meet these emerging employee wants and needs.

Attitudes Toward Remote Work



The methodology

We contracted with Haller Strategies, a regional research firm, to design and administer this multi-pronged study. While it focuses heavily on quantitative data collection, it also contains qualitative, open-ended input derived from several live-respondent phone interviews.

The respondent profile

Regarding remote-work status ...

- 83% - Respondents currently working from home
- 13% - Worked from home prior to the COVID pandemic
- 80% - Remote workers who share work space at home with others

Regarding employment status ...

- 13% - Respondents report job loss due to the COVID pandemic
- 77% - Respondents still working in office who are actively looking for a job

The survey was delivered via email to a cross-section of our candidate and client data pools: We received 385 separate inputs from 324 candidates and 61 clients. 84% of the responses received were from the candidate pool.

TorchLight's key research findings and implications

Productivity

Working from home means getting more done

During the first three months of COVID-19 (March-May), respondents were surprised by how much they enjoy working remotely, as well as the level of productivity they were able to achieve with home as their base.

75% reported being more productive overall

68% found it easier to focus at home

- › Despite potential distractions including spouses/partners, pets and other responsibilities, respondents were able to focus better at home. Respondents with children did, however, note that childcare would make it easier.
- › One enlightening input was that potential distractions at home were not necessarily greater, just different: Respondents mentioned workplace interruptions like unplanned visits from colleagues and superfluous conversations as examples.

75% reported being more productive overall

A potential boost for quantity and quality of output

Another surprising development—at least in the first three months of the shift to working from home—is that workers reported putting in longer hours than they had at the office. Some respondents attributed this increase to the additional time they gained from eliminating the daily commute. We'll continue to monitor this pattern to see if the trend sustains itself over time.

93% worked the same or more hours than when they were in an office

87% were very confident about their ability to manage their workload and responsibilities from home

- › Some respondents reported that the time saved in completing their assigned work even allowed them to use the surplus hours to sharpen their skills and/or acquire new knowledge.
- › Several expressed a desire to be valued/measured for quality of work versus mere quantity—they felt their work product from home could be done with more care and collaboration.

93% worked the same or more hours than when they were in an office

Flexibility—A key driver in work-from-home success

Based on the response data, it's clear that workers are motivated to restructure their home time and activities so that they can focus on getting more work done, participating in online meetings, etc. They also report that they have improved on prioritizing their schedules, so that they are "working smarter."

This type of flexibility appears to be very attractive to workers as a whole and will likely need to be addressed by hiring managers moving forward. In fact, in response to one of our questions, flexibility was cited as the most important (even non-negotiable) employment factor, followed by pay and environmental safety: Nearly 60% of respondents placed it in the must-have category of their employment decisions. Please refer to our recommendations section on page 8 regarding how to use the flexibility benefit as a tool to enhance retention and attract new talent to your organization.

"We weren't allowed to work from home before this, so I'd leave my laptop at the office and be able to say no to meetings past a certain time. Now I'm more flexible with those."

Does a remote work environment actually bring employees closer to one another?

Overall, respondents are highly focused on communication and collaboration—they represent two of the top three areas of focus in their work life. Some responders reported that they even felt that remote collaboration was somewhat or quite superior to face-to-face collaborations in the office. Following are the highlights from the results data:

42% of respondents say they spent focused time ensuring sufficient communication between themselves, managers and coworkers

38% view collaboration as the area they spend the most time addressing and/or perceiving as an active concern

- › One respondent shared her insight that “Collaboration isn’t difficult in remote work. It’s smoother, honestly. ‘Here’s this presentation, here’s what we’re talking about, here’s what we need to decide.’ ... People are listening better and respecting the schedule a lot more now I’m noticing.”
- › 51% of candidates feel strongly or very strongly that their managers set clear expectations on communication process and/or availability, whereas clients report 38% confidence over the same issue.

51% of candidates feel strongly or very strongly that their managers set clear expectations around communication and/or availability, whereas clients report only 38% confidence over the same issue.

Given the above data and the crucial need for effective communication and collaboration in the remote work setting, we see this as an issue that deserves continual focus and improvement. Setting clear expectations and having regular meetings are two ways to optimize communication and collaboration within remote teams.

Remote work can boost empathy and foster more authentic relationships

Our live-interview data sheds light on a promising trend: Employees report they feel more empathy with one another when they interact from their home setting. While we’d like to understand more about this, we suspect that connecting with each other as “people first”—with kids, pets and spouses frequently in the background—makes it easier to relate to and collaborate with one another.

“You have to be more understanding of others’ circumstances. It’s funny, I know a lot more about my colleagues’ lives now than before which makes me more understanding and ultimately helpful.”

Perceived work/life benefits

Workers feel newly empowered by working from home

While change itself can seem challenging, our survey provides overwhelming evidence that, as workers grow more accustomed to managing their professional lives from home, they feel that they are gaining a number of personal benefits about which they feel strongly.

- › Freedom and personal control – Respondents admit that COVID-19 has introduced much uncertainty into their lives, but working at home has made them feel more empowered and in control, at least of their personal time: “Realizing you don’t have to be chained to your desk all day is a revelation—a valuable one.”
- › A fresh outlook on life – A number of respondents told us that working at home has given them time to search for meaning in both their work and personal lives.
- › **Work/life balance – More than 51% of respondents reported that this issue was of primary importance to them.** Responders seemed pleased that working from home helps them find a more satisfying give-and-take between their personal and professional responsibilities.
- › The importance of quantity vs. quality – Many responders reported their belief that they can do their current jobs in less time than it took at the office. Assuming this is true, it may be possible for managers to accomplish more with less staff, and/or provide current staff with new projects to tackle.

“When you have more free time to evaluate your situation—to really look and pay attention—you start to see what you value and what’s really important to you.”

A landscape filled with both opportunities and challenges

By now you may be saying to yourself that the on-site work landscape will never be the same moving forward, and we wholeheartedly agree. One of the most important inputs from the survey is that people are thinking about their jobs and careers in a new way, and they're perhaps even willing to make job changes to give them better work/life balance and to map better to their personal values.

- > 71% of those surveyed and currently working from home are somewhat or very likely to consider a new job at this time if it presents itself.
- > Those interested in a new job cite three conditions they would need in order to consider a career move: **security, flexibility and meaningful work** that aligns with their values.

Whether they are looking for new roles or happy in their current positions, a full 70% report that they are not very comfortable or comfortable at all in returning to the office to work. While it's probable that many factors discussed earlier—such as flexibility—come into play here, one important new consideration takes center stage: The need to feel safe.

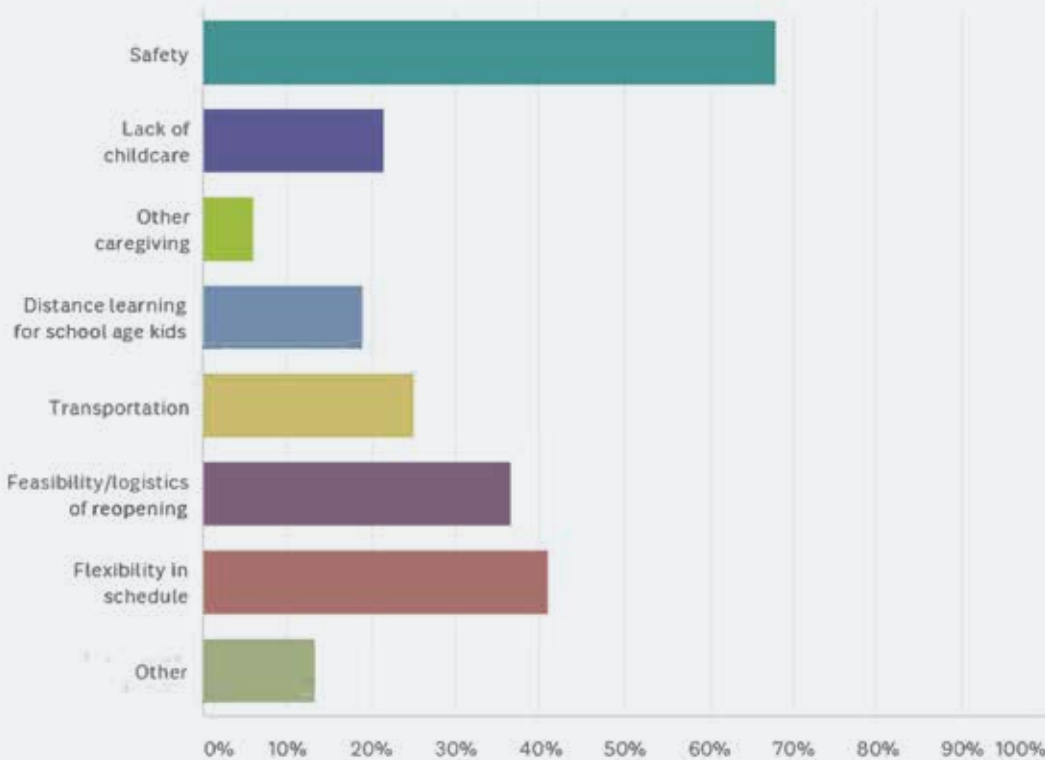
- > 68% cite safety as their primary concern about returning to the office to work.
- > Only 51% trust their employer to “do the right thing” related to reopening.

In all cases, overwhelming feedback points to the importance of working from home (at least part of the time).

71% of those currently working from home are somewhat or very likely to consider a new job

70% report not being comfortable returning to the office

Going Back to the Office: Respondent Concerns



ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

As we embrace the “new normal,” how can managers use these valuable insights to increase employee satisfaction, performance, engagement, and retention? While the remote work trend is relatively new—at least in terms of a full-time work-at-home practice—several actionable management initiatives are beginning to take shape.

1. Address workers’ emerging need for flexibility

- › Develop realistic policies on how much/what kind of flexibility you can offer: number of hours worked, on-site versus remote, ability for flex schedules based on workload, etc.
- › Prepare for shifting priorities and be willing to accommodate schedule challenges as they arise.
- › Keep an open mind when recruiting new employees and listen to their need for flexibility. Your willingness to adjust can be the difference between gaining or losing valuable talent.
- › If you are concerned about a particular employee’s ability to effectively work from home, implement a trial period and outline specific expectations around availability, communication and outcomes.

2. Make on-site work safe—and communicate it!

- › If your company deems it necessary for employees to work on-site, make certain that you clearly and thoroughly communicate with them about the steps you’ve taken to ensure their personal safety, and the safety procedures you have/will put in place moving forward.
- › Listen to each employee about the risks involved in their home environments (e.g. an aging parent living in their homes), and be prepared to offer them whatever flexibility you can, based on their individual situations and your need to keep them engaged with your company.
- › Determine which roles absolutely need to be in the office and which can be negotiated or filled through remote work or a combination.

3. Work to build trust

- › At the outset of new working norms, it is important to begin from a base of “trust,” so that your staff morale will stay high and even grow over time. For instance, you may need to find new ways to monitor and measure productivity and output so that your teams feel supported versus micro-managed.
- › Find out what each individual needs in order to be productive and collaborative—everything from digital tools like remote collaboration software, to basic office equipment and supplies.
- › Show empathy for individual home situations and re-opening concerns—and make adjustments where possible. Do they have access to predictable childcare? Do they have children attending school virtually from home? Do they have a special needs child?

4. Live—and express—your company’s commitment to meaningful work

- › Actively work to discover how your employees define “meaningfulness” and support them in finding projects that feed their passions as well as support the organization’s mission.
- › Encourage employees to participate in your existing corporate social responsibility programs—and help you devise/support new causes that reflect your company’s values.
- › Champion the importance your company places on supporting work/life balance and flexibility as proof of your commitment to job satisfaction.

5. Evolve your company’s work style to optimize team dynamics, productivity and satisfaction

- › Challenge yourself to delegate more work and responsibility to your team(s).
- › Consider restructuring your staff to capitalize on their improved productivity patterns: Do you have the right people for the right jobs? Can you accomplish more with fewer employees? If you were to be able to cut costs, could you supplement your staff with contract (versus full-time) employees?
- › Consider using contractors to cover un-forecasted projects or to help with spikes in workload.
- › Use individualized employee management techniques to ensure that each employee feels heard and appropriately supported.
- › Watch for employee burnout—remember that the majority of responders reported they are working more hours than previously. Accordingly, make certain you provide training on how to set priorities and boundaries, and make your expectations clear. This is a great opportunity to give new/junior employees extra support and mentorship.

6. Address challenges before they become obstacles

- › Make certain your staff understands the need to master new technologies attached to remote working scenarios and provide the support to set them up for success.
- › Take an active role in helping your team monitor and optimize workflow processes and efficiencies—this is critical to maintaining seamless project management.
- › Get the most out of team conference calls: Encourage team leaders to set call objectives, list them clearly and thoroughly and actively keep their meetings on track.
- › Keep your team apprised of when and how you'll be available, and also make sure you're up front with them on how you plan to monitor their performance and progress (i.e. "What is your new definition of success?").

7. Tune up your own remote-management fitness abilities

- › Learn about and use the new technologies and tools that are built to optimize any/all of these—collaboration, communication flow, project management, productivity measurement, to mention a few.
- › Talk with HR, your managers and colleagues about remote-worker management strategies and effective tactics (including training for you).
- › Use behavioral/personality assessments to help you understand your workers' natural strengths and areas where they're likely to need extra support.
- › Don't be afraid to ride the wave of the remote work trend and make sure you consider it for yourself as well. It presents a great way to boost satisfaction, retention and productivity!

In conclusion ...



As we mentioned in the beginning of this report, our workplaces are undergoing radical (and likely permanent) change. We hope we've been able to shed new light on the implications it holds for working professionals. Their attitudes and evolving needs present us with some great opportunities: We can actively address emerging wants and concerns. We can structure a more flexible working environment that offers them greater power and control over their performance and professional relationships.

And perhaps most important of all, we can create a "workplace of the future" that will inspire more productive output, more active engagement—and greater employee retention and satisfaction. We hope you've found this report useful and welcome your feedback. Please let us know how we can structure future research projects so they deliver the information you find most beneficial. Stay safe and we hope to hear from you!

For nearly 9 years, TorchLight Hire has been the Washington, DC region's leading marketing and communications recruiter, matching some of the area's most exciting companies with some of the best and brightest full-time, part-time and contract marketing and communications professionals. To learn more about TorchLight and how we can support your hiring needs, please visit torchlighthire.com or email us at info@torchlighthire.com.