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# GLOBAL WORKPLACE CULTURE & LEADING WITH EMPATHY

**May 2022**  
**Insights Forum:**  
*Executive Summary*



# A GOOD WORKPLACE CULTURE PROMOTES POSITIVE FEELINGS AMONG EMPLOYEES ABOUT THEIR ORGANIZATION.

*It can be used as a tool to fend off the Great Resignation globally, according to the latest findings from SHRM Research.*

“The goal of this research is to compare workplace cultures globally and examine how **solutions such as empathy** can benefit workplace cultures worldwide,” explained Ragan Decker, Ph.D., a lead researcher at SHRM Research. SHRM Executive Network members who attended the May EN:Insights Forum

got an exclusive sneak peek at the research, which included data from more than 9,000 workers in 12 different countries

“Overall,” Decker added, “we found that building a positive workplace culture should be a top priority for organizations around the world.”

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Ragan Decker, Ph.D.



# MOST WORKERS FEEL GOOD ABOUT WORK:

The **overall outlook** on workplace culture **is positive**, with 78% of workers globally saying they love working at their organization **because of the culture**. Nearly three-in-four workers (72%) rated their workplace culture as good or very good. Looking at individual countries, however, the data showed some variations.

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## Global breakout of “good” workplace culture ratings:

India .....	87%
China .....	82%
Saudi Arabia .....	80%
Mexico .....	80%
UAE .....	79%
Brazil .....	77%
Egypt .....	74%
United States .....	67%
Australia .....	65%
Canada .....	65%
United Kingdom .....	60%
Singapore .....	55%

Countries with **collectivist cultures**, such as India, China, Saudi Arabia and Mexico, where the needs and goals of the group are prioritized over the needs and desires of the individual, **received higher ratings** for their workplace culture. **Individualistic countries**, such as the U.K., Canada, Australia and the U.S., where individuals pride themselves on their autonomy and independence, **score somewhat lower**.

“This doesn’t mean that collectivism is better than individualism. Rather, this data highlights that the customs of various countries will likely impact the workplace culture,” Decker said. “We have a lot to learn from one another because workplace culture is something that has to be continuously maintained and managed. **There’s always room to improve** because the return on this investment is **invaluable**.”

## THE PANDEMIC IMPROVED SOME WORKPLACE CULTURES:

COVID caused massive disruptions in the global workforce, which required many organizations to consider new ways to keep employees engaged and happy at work. That worked – to a degree.

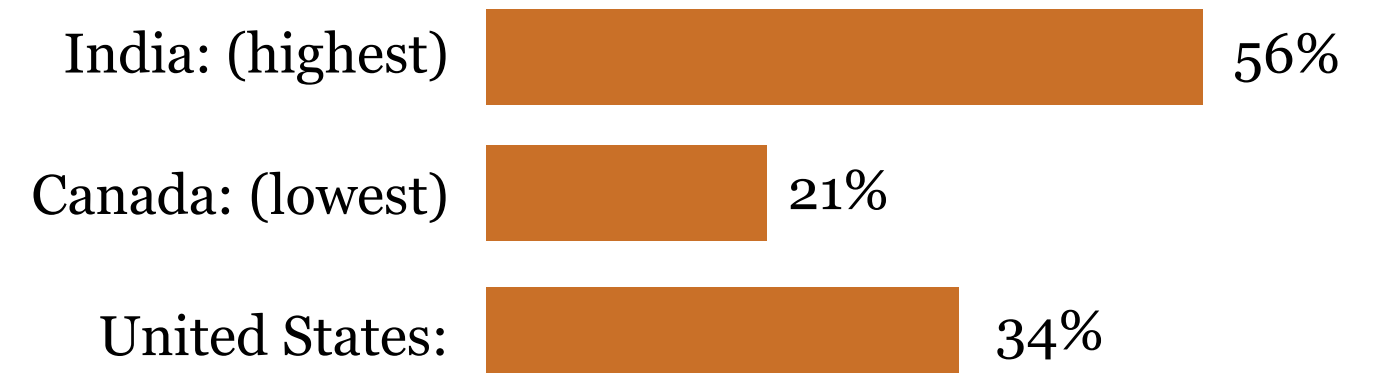


Globally, more than one out of every three workers (35%) said their workplace culture has improved since the beginning of the pandemic.

**But there's more work to be done:** Improving your workplace culture by even a little bit during a lethal, raging global pandemic is an impressive accomplishment, but that still leaves work to be done to expand that sentiment among the majority of the workforce.



### Workers reporting improved workplace culture since the beginning of COVID-19



# BUT THERE'S MORE WORK TO BE DONE:

There may be a **lesson to be learned from India**, where 87% of workers said their organization is **committed to improving the workplace culture**, the highest rating out of all countries surveyed. The takeaway here is that building a better culture isn't a one-and-done effort but needs to be part of a process of **continual feedback and improvement**.



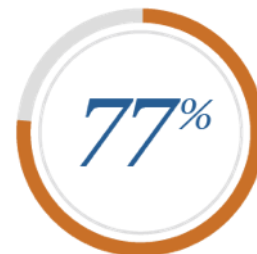
“What we can learn from India is that **maintaining workplace culture** is a **continuous process**,” Decker said. “When asked to describe their organizational culture, workers in India most often use the words **honest**, **progressive** and **empathetic**. Both empathy and honesty are important traits for leaders to possess, especially during the pandemic. This could mean anything from being **flexible**, **communicating clearly** and **listening well** to recognizing diverse working styles.



# SAFETY BRINGS SUCCESS:

The research found that workers **who feel safe at work** – both physically and emotionally – are more likely to rate their organization’s culture as good or very good.

Workers who feel **physically safe** rating the culture as good/very good:



Workers who **don't feel physically safe** rating the culture as good/very good:



Workers who feel **emotionally safe** rating the culture as good/very good:



Workers who **don't feel emotionally safe** rating the culture as good/very good:



“As a leader, it’s important to **ensure workers feel safe** because physical and emotional safety **are often drivers** of workplace culture,” Decker said. “Workers who feel safe at work are more likely to rate their workplace culture as good or very good, as compared to workers who do not feel safe at work. A commitment to **improving workplace culture** is a commitment to employee **physical and emotional safety.**”

# CULTURE IS THE ANTIDOTE TO THE GREAT RESIGNATION

If you thought the Great Resignation was a U.S. phenomenon, think again. **Nearly half** of all workers **globally** have thought about quitting their job, and nearly a third are **actively job-hunting**. And just as you might expect, workers who like their organization's culture are less likely to be combing job board listings than those who say they're experiencing a bad workplace culture.

“These numbers are powerful, especially during a time when many organizations are searching for ways to retain their employees,” Decker said. “As you and your colleagues develop strategies and invest in initiatives to recruit and retain workers, **remember how important culture** is to the employee experience and for retention.”

## **Workers thinking about quitting:**

Globally **45%**

In organizations with poor/  
very poor cultures **90%**

In organizations with average  
cultures **72%**

In organizations with good/  
very good cultures **32%**

## **Workers looking for a new job:**

Globally **30%**

In organizations with poor/  
very poor cultures **64%**

In organizations with average  
cultures **43%**

In organizations with good/  
very good cultures **22%**



# CULTURE-BOOSTING TACTICS FOR ANY COUNTRY

No matter where people are working and what kind of society they're part of – individualistic or collectivist – **workers all want and value** a culture built on key components of **respect, safety, good communication and empathy**.

## **My manager encourages open and honest communication:**


Global average **82%**

Workers in poor/very poor workplace cultures **24%**

Workers in average workplace cultures **61%**

Workers in good/very good workplace cultures **93%**

As for empathy, the research uncovered an important disconnect. While **94% of workers** say that **empathy** is an essential quality of a healthy workplace – and **85% of workers** say empathetic people managers **are better supervisors** – in some countries, less than half of organizations offer people managers empathy training. That's a **missed opportunity** for improving culture and retention.



“The overall takeaway from this research is that workplace culture matters everywhere. Building a positive workplace culture should be a **top priority** for organizations around the world,” Decker said. “Another key takeaway is that people management and safety, both physical and emotional, are **universal drivers of workplace culture**. Further, we found evidence that workplace culture is a **powerful retention tool** and that empathy is universally seen as an **essential quality** of a healthy workplace.”



# IDEO GLOBAL HEAD OF TALENT DUANE BRAY: STEP INTO EMPATHY WITH CO-DESIGNING

*After a successful career as a top-level designer, Duane Bray now puts those same creative skills to work in the realm of human resources. To cope with the challenges brought by the pandemic, Bray and other IDEO leaders are using the process of co-designing, treating the firm's managers, supervisors and workers as if they were external customers providing feedback and controlling the ultimate approval of changes to company practices.*

*Duane has a long history at IDEO, joining in 1995 to lead and develop the discipline of interaction design, now one of the firm's most sought-after capabilities, before becoming a partner. He led the firm's digital business for many years, working in San Francisco and London. His clients include American Express, BMW, Lincoln Center and United Airlines, among many others.*

**How he got into HR:** Bray started his career as a graphic and digital designer but became involved with the talent component of IDEO shortly after the firm split off from its parent to become a partnership, a process that Bray said, “didn’t land well in our culture.” Because his role had him spending time in all of the company’s different locations, he was asked to travel to all of IDEO’s operations and look at what was happening within the culture.

“I learned that we took a lot for granted about how we thought about our people and our processes,” Bray said. “I started by taking the most hated thing inside of IDEO and redesigned our performance management system and our whole career development track.”

Along the way, Bray considered how IDEO could start looking at itself through the lens of the design methods the company brought to bear for its clients.

“I thought if I don’t get fired, maybe there’s some potential for me,” Bray said.

# FROM PANDEMIC PANIC TO A NEW WAY OF THINKING:

**Before the pandemic, IDEO had a culture focused on in-person collaboration, both with the company's own teams and its clients.**

“That was all in-person collaboration, team collaboration, and it also was with our clients, who expected to be with us in person,” Bray said. “I’m not going to lie. It was this scary moment like, ‘Can we do this? Can we even make this work and then, will our work be any good?’”

IDEO leaders realized that a centralized decision-making process wouldn’t work in that situation. “Leaders don’t know what they don’t know,” Bray said. “We learned a lot about what it meant to say, ‘Let’s not assume that a group of leaders sitting in a room can answer everything,’ that we actually need help from everybody.”

The company asked everyone in the firm to consider how to switch to remote work, creating a global project to capture everything workers and teams were doing while looking to understand trends and patterns that could scale. That included having people share how they altered their workplaces to do their jobs remotely.

*“We started to effectively dismantle our offices and send equipment to people’s homes,” Bray said.*



# RETHINKING HOW TO RETURN:

Bray and the rest of IDEO leadership applied that same approach in considering how to return to in-person and hybrid work. To prepare, IDEO surveyed its 600 employees in locations stretching from New York to Shanghai, asking what the easiest and most difficult aspects of delivering results in a new hybrid working model would be.

“We dug into getting people’s perspectives to understand where did things feel natural, where did things feel difficult?” Bray said.

“The people who are best equipped to help us do this are the ones who are living it day-in and day-out. That was where the decision was made about this idea of co-designing, to playback what we heard from the surveys and what we think that means in terms of actions we should take and get others to build on that. It’s a really wonderful way to start to step into empathy by understanding how people who have different experiences in the organization see the organization.”

## A LOVE LETTER FROM THE FUTURE:

One approach was to create what Bray called a “love letter” from the IDEO of 2025 writing back to the IDEO of 2022.

“We were trying to say, ‘if we did it well, how would it feel?  
What would the workplace feel like?’”

Many of the most valuable insights came from asking about workers' autonomy and flexibility needs, both in work and their personal lives. The responses, comments and other results were plotted out for review. With those results in hand, every employee was invited to consider the results and judge the insights gathered by IDEO management. The idea was to find out whether the company's managers had interpreted the data from the survey correctly. The staffers were also invited to review several briefs.

Participants looked over the initial survey insights and were told to indicate on a chart whether or not the insight resonated with their experience or not. “Then they were asked to confirm or complicate that insight with further details they could share that went beyond what had been asked in the survey,” Bray said. Then management reviewed the results to see whether the company's conclusions were correct or needed to be reconsidered.

“We took a lot of that back to understanding whether we were hearing people correctly,” Bray said. “And then we considered whether we were taking those insights into action, were we actually connecting those back to the biggest challenges or the biggest opportunities that people saw?”



## FLIGHTS AND PILOTS:

Working from the survey results and the staff feedback, IDEO created five different pilot projects that came out of the research, including one that examines how the firm will align its various resources to different needs, how projects are tracked and how the employees come together in various company rituals. The firm also has redesigned its process around “flights,” which are project reviews where team members check in to gauge how work is progressing and to assess project quality.



“This process was about engaging literally our entire employee population,” Bray said.

### **How a global culture can transcend localities:**

Partly because of the nature of IDEO’s workforce, the company culture tends to exist beyond the larger cultures around its offices in the United States, United Kingdom, Europe and Asia. About 85% of IDEO staffers classify themselves as some type of designer, a role that involves creativity and a high degree of autonomy.

“That involves wanting the ability to try new things, do new things and feel that they have permission to do that balance, as well as what I would say is a high degree of altruism, a desire to do good on behalf of the company and your coworkers, and do good on behalf of our clients,” Bray said. “We exist in quite a few different locations around the world, but there is a consistency to that culture that almost transcends the local context.”

## ISSUES FROM THE Q&A SESSION

- **Creativity and learning:** One EN:Insights Forum participant asked Bray about the role creativity and learning play in creating the positive workplace culture IDEO has achieved. According to Bray, creative problem solving incorporates principles such as empathy and pattern recognition and iteration, along with a willingness to accept feedback and make changes.

*“I think one of the things that we saw in the last couple of years is a big uptake in people learning to expand their core skill set and taking on new courses,” he said. “There’s been a hunger for that.”*

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- **Increasing time off for on-site workers:** One participant in the healthcare field shared a solution aimed at workers who are required to work set shifts in specific locations and can’t do their jobs remotely. To compensate for the flexibility enjoyed by remote workers, the company granted the on-site workers an additional 10 days off a year.
  - That time can be used for things such as dentist appointments, caring for kids and other tasks that remote employees can work around. **One caveat:** The added time off can’t be used as sick days, so the bonus days allow workers to tend to life tasks while preserving their other paid time off for actual vacation days.



- **Get ready to rebuild:** One participant described how their company redeployed an artificial intelligence application to examine job descriptions, sorting in-person tasks from those that could be handled remotely. Managers could take jobs apart and reassemble them by looking at those individual chunks of work. The result was the creation of full-time roles for workers who could be physically present on the job while eliminating the on-site aspects of positions that were reconfigured as fully remote.



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