2021 Flexible Workplace Strategies:
Balancing Business and Employee Needs

Livable
Buckhead

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a critical interruption in the lives of millions of people throughout 2020 and now well into 2021, with employees working from home more than ever before. Livable Buckhead has compiled research, data and local insight into a comprehensive report to measure the impact of this phenomenon and its potential future impact.

Current State of the Office Market

With businesses finding their way through this unprecedented time and a national rollout of vaccines in operation, we are starting to see an uptick in company decisions for returning employees to the office. Many large corporations have announced that telework and remote work will stay in place permanently.
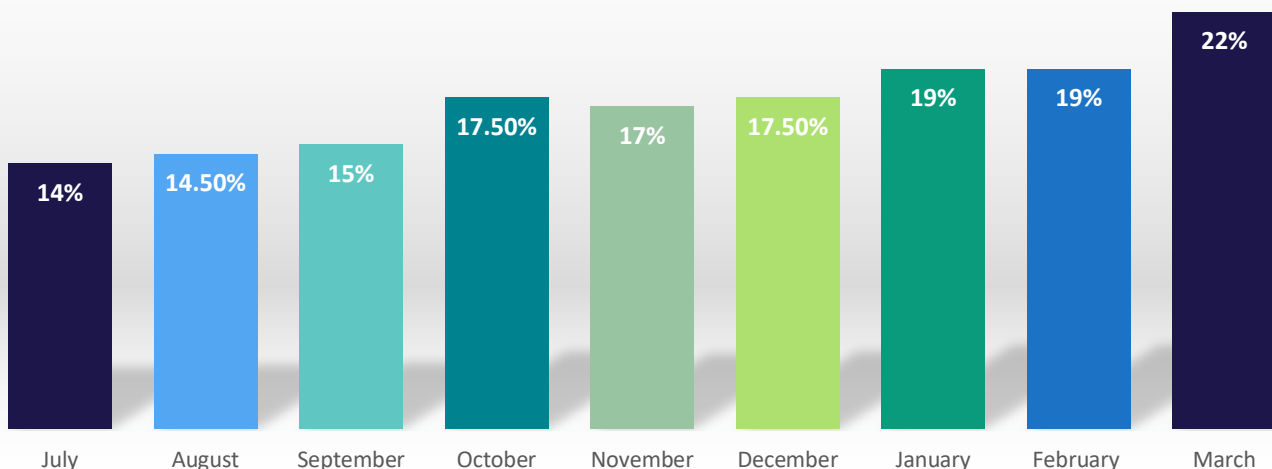
Additionally, many leaders, from small businesses to commercial real estate, are looking towards a 2021 Q3 phased return. One common key strategy is the use of flexibility, allowing many employees to continue flex schedules and remote work for the foreseeable future.

Additionally, since July of 2020, Livable Buckhead has collected weekly occupancy rates from 30 Buckhead commercial office buildings. The average rate of occupancy has ranged from 14% - 22%, with some buildings now reaching over 30%. Approximately one-third of the buildings have seen occupancy rise since summer 2020. Commercial building managers are now expecting upwards of a 50% or more return rate in 3-6 months.
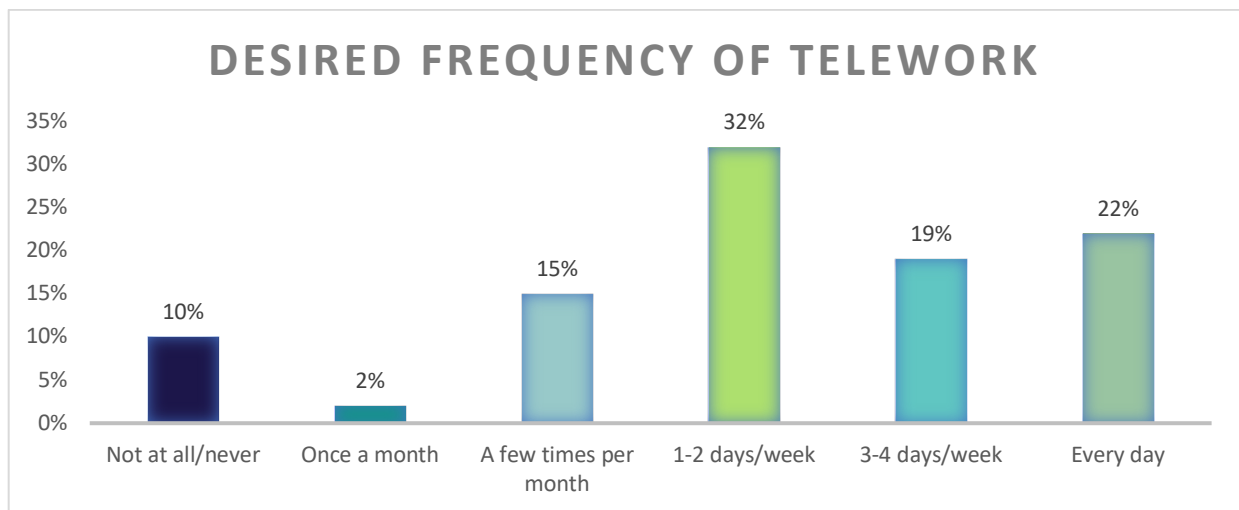
Because of previous policies in place and positive results during the pandemic, a medium-sized employer headquartered in Buckhead decided to shift their entire operations to a fully remote workforce.

With the feedback from multiple employee surveys throughout the pandemic, local Salesforce.com fine-tuned a hybrid work model, giving employees three ways to work: Flex, Remote and Office-based.

Average Building Occupancy Rate Per Month

Month	Rate
July	14%
August	14.50%
September	15%
October	17.50%
November	17%
December	17.50%
January	19%
February	19%
March	22%

Finally, in November 2020, Livable Buckhead facilitated the State of Buckhead survey, which asked how frequently employees would choose to work from home in a post-pandemic world. This question is most notable when compared to previous notions of telework. Prior to the pandemic, many businesses relied on telework solely as a business continuity strategy, with strong ideas that formal telework programs caused more negatives than positives. According to Georgia Commute Options' 2019 Regional Commuter Survey, 20% of Buckhead employees teleworked 1-2 days per week and only 10% teleworked 3+ days per week[1]. From our November survey data, we now see all position levels, from employees to executives, expecting to telework more often: Over 40% would like to telework at least 3+ days per week and another third want to telework 1-2 days a week[2].

DESIRED FREQUENCY OF TELEWORK

Category	Percentage
Not at all/never	10%
Once a month	2%
A few times per month	15%
1-2 days/week	32%
3-4 days/week	19%
Every day	22%

Flexibility is the Future

There is an abundance of new surveys, studies and data on the successes and challenges of remote work. The findings span across thousands of people and industries, employees and CEOs, nationally and internationally. The overarching theme: the future of work is flexibility[3]. Supportive technology is readily available, remote work preserves or even improves productivity, and employees are ultimately more satisfied. Most important are recruitment tactics and the idea of missing out on talent if a company does not adapt. In a world where remote work is standard, it becomes easier to hire talented employees no matter where they live[4].

> An international logistics company with a small office in Buckhead quickly realized the benefits of remote work after employees were sent home. They have since hired at least three new employees who do not live in the state and are completely remote.

[1] Atlanta Regional Commission, *Regional Commuter Survey*, 2019 - https://atlantaregional.org/regional-commuter-survey
[2] Livable Buckhead, 2020 State of Buckhead Survey, https://livablebuckhead.com/community/vision/
[3] New York Times, *Are You Sure You Want to Go Back to the Office*, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/23/opinion/covid-offices-remote-work.html?auth=link-dismiss-google1tap
[4] USA Today, Pandemic Hiring Shift: Some companies say new hires can live anywhere, 2021, https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2021/02/09/remote-work-home-jobs-economy/4435564001/

What have we learned? Telework does work, and it is now essential to happiness and job satisfaction. According to an Owl Labs survey of over 2,000 people, 1 in 2 employees will not return to jobs that don't offer remote work[5].

"Most companies learned that the modern workforce was much more resilient than expected," said Noah Dye, US senior vice president at LEWIS global marketing agency[6].

Key Findings on Remote Work Positives:

- **Productivity thrives with telework.** According to a FlexJobs survey, 95% of people say that productivity has been higher or the same while working from home[7].
    - 94% of employers said that productivity was the same as (67%) or higher (27%) than it was before the pandemic, according to a Mercer study[8].
- **Remote work attracts.** 91% of CEOs say they believe a company attracts more talent when allowing remote work, according to Typeform's study[9].
- **Employees are happier.** The same FlexJobs survey found that 73% of respondents have a better work-life balance thanks to working at home, (46% - more time with family/friends; 42% - more time with their partner; 37% - the ability to take care of their pets)[7].
- **Telework saves employees time and money.** The largest benefit from working remote is saving time and money from not commuting: 79% (Owl Labs[5]), 73% (Georgia Commute Options[10]).

What are the challenges of the current situation? The current conditions of working remotely during a global pandemic while handling virtual schooling and economic uncertainty are not normal. These circumstances have put increasing stress and worry on employees.

"The reality is that we have the technology to serve our clients from anywhere and we've been able to do just that. However, we've also learned that we miss some of the intangibles," says Frank H. Sheppard, managing partner of RumbergerKirk, a Florida-based law firm[6].

---

[5] Owl Labs, State of Remote Work, 2020, https://www.owllabs.com/state-of-remote-work/2020

[6] Forbes, Lessons Learned About Remote Work, One Year In After The Great Dispersal, 2021 https://www.forbes.com/sites/joemckendrick/2021/02/07/lessons-learned-about-remote-work-one-year-in-after-the-great-dispersal/?sh=2373e2be7664

[7] FlexJobs, Productivity, Work-Life Balance Improves During Pandemic, 2020, https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/survey-productivity-balance-improve-during-pandemic-remote-work/

[8] SHRM, Study Finds Productivity Not Deterred by Shift to Remote Work, 2020, https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/Study-Productivity-Shift-Remote-Work-COVID-Coronavirus.aspx

[9] Typeform, Remote working statistics for CEOs vs. employees: an unexpected finding, 2020, https://www.typeform.com/blog/ask-awesomely/remote-working-for-ceos-vs-employees/

[10] Georgia Commute Options, Remote Work Survey, April 2020, https://gacommuteoptions.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/GCO20_Remote-Work-Survey-Summary-Commuters_Final-002.pdf

Key Findings on Remote Work Challenges:

- The National Bureau of Economic Research found that employees' workdays lengthened by 48.5 minutes and the number of meetings increased by 13%[11].
- Georgia Commute Options' regional survey shows that 28% of employees have trouble unplugging from their work and 23% are more distracted[10].
- Buffer's 2020 State of Remote Work study says the top challenges for remote workers are collaboration, communication and loneliness[12].
- According to a Chief Executive Group survey, 60% of CEOs said that managing culture was their top challenge with remote work[13].
- 87% of employees say the office is important for collaborating with team members and building relationships, according to PWC's US Remote Work Survey[14].

Many of these challenges are a direct result of the realities of remote work during a pandemic. Employees are craving interaction with their coworkers, the chance to socialize again, and the community support they once had. The office will remain an integral part of business, with telework being a key strategy to maximize business productivity and employee satisfaction.

Returning to the Worksite

What will the future look like? "We'll see more hybrid models deployed. Some individuals feel they are more productive, in a collaborative office environment. Others feel they achieve better results with fewer disruptions. The ability to offer both to employees will be a huge benefit to companies in the future," says LEWIS's Noah Dye[6].

It is now clear that previous notions of telework have been shattered. However, what's also clear is what could be at stake: culture, communication and employee well-being. During the pandemic, employers have found that although many tasks can be done remotely, many need to be done in person: coaching, onboarding, customer experience, creative collaboration. We've also learned that 20% of the workforce can work from home the majority of the time and be just as effective, if not more than, in the office[15].

While there are still many unknowns, the ideal future (for some, not all) will be a balance between in-office and at-home schedules. "Companies must reconfigure how they operate to help meet the new demands of workers, prioritizing effective communication and collaboration", says Cisco Vice President Gordon Thomson[16].

---

[11] National Bureau of Economic Research, Collaborating During Coronavirus: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Nature of Work, July 2020, https://www.nber.org/papers/w27612

[12] Buffer, The 2020 State of Remote Work, 2020, https://lp.buffer.com/state-of-remote-work-2020

[13] Chief Executive, What's Keeping CEOs Up at Night About Working Remotely?, October 2020, https://chiefexecutive.net/whats-keeping-ceos-up-at-night-about-working-remotely/

[14] PWC, US Remote Work Survey, 2021, https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/us-remote-work-survey.html

[15] McKinsey Global Institute, What's Next for Remote Work: An analysis of 2,000 tasks, 800 jobs and nine countries, 2020 https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/whats-next-for-remote-work-an-analysis-of-2000-tasks-800-jobs-and-nine-countries

[16] Reuters, Nearly nine of 10 workers want to keep work-from-home option: survey, 2020, https://cn.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-wfh-survey/nearly-nine-of-10-workers-want-to-keep-work-from-home-option-survey-idUSL8N2H467B

Executives' and employees' thoughts on keeping remote work:

- 69% of executives said more employees will work from home periodically, according to Georgia Commute Options' survey[10].
- According to the State of Buckhead survey, 34% of C-suite individuals want to continue teleworking 1-2 days per week post-pandemic and another third would like to telework 3+ days per week[2].
- 83% of executive respondents to a Mercer survey said that even after the health crisis has passed, they plan to put more flexible work policies in place, such as allowing more people to work from home or letting them adjust their schedule[8].
- 50% of employees surveyed by Typeform would prefer a hybrid model of in-office and remote work[9].
- Over half of employees want to work remotely three days a week or more according to PWC's survey[14].

Employers have the chance to create a completely new work environment that can exceed the standards of the business as well as the needs of the workforce. To ensure business and employee needs are met, companies should implement telework policies that establish expectations for worker productivity and communication without creating the "hidden overtime" that has become common during the pandemic.

Defining Flexibility and Supportive Measures

In sum, the pandemic proved to be a catalyst for remote work. While telecommuting has been possible for many years, remote work during the pandemic was supported by rapid deployment of new digital solutions, such as videoconferencing, document-sharing tools, and expansion of cloud-based computing capacity[17]. The extent to which the impact will last is yet to be seen; however, there is growing evidence that flexibility in the work environment is here to stay. It is also important to note that remote work is not a one-size-fits all and not all employees will want to continue teleworking: the State of Buckhead survey found that 12% of employees only want to telework once a month or not at all[2].

Additionally, many employers are currently strategizing on how to continue a successful hybrid work model that will expand access to talent, increase employee satisfaction, and increase their bottom line. In order to do so, companies should have an intentional approach for defining the structure of their program by implementing policies or guidelines that outline expectations and company standards. Employers should define what flexibility means for them:

Flexibility in the work environment is typically associated with three different areas of focus: time, location, and environment.

> Flexibility in time: ability for an employer to define a certain bandwidth of core hours and employee/employer agreement on timeframe of work hours.

> Flexibility in location: ability for an employer to hire an employee that does not live close to the office and/or can work remote full-time.

---

[17] McKinsey Global Institute, The Future of Work Post COVID-19, https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19

Flexibility in environment: physical place where an employee works on a given day, whether that be in the office, at home, a satellite office or other remote location.

As a result, Livable Buckhead anticipates a large number of employers implementing these flexible strategies, evaluating the tasks and requirements of job roles and exploring how this experience may impact their future work environment. This flexible work culture will lead to a new classification of employees:

- **Remote Workers:** Employees whose jobs allow or who don't live close to the office can work remotely full-time, 4-5 days per week.
- **Flex Workers:** Employees who are able to work from home but need more time for in-person collaboration and meetings can be flexible, with the ability to telework 1-3 days per week.
- **Traditional Workers:** Employees whose roles require them to be in the office 4-5 days per week.

It will be up to each employer to decide which classifications best fit their company and further specifics around telework options. A local finance management firm has announced a permanent telework policy that will allow employees to continue working from home one day per week post-pandemic. Companies will also need to consider the common challenges that have arisen and provide support where needed. Key supportive elements include:

- Communication – A standard practice of communication should be implemented company-wide that may include weekly team meetings, one-on-one manager/employee meetings, coffee chats, and informal huddles. Open lines of communication between employees and managers should be encouraged.
- Technology – Effective tools should be in place that allow for all employees to easily communicate, such as messaging/chat forums and virtual meeting platforms, VPNs, intranets, and collaboration tools. Employers will also need to decide whether they will provide the physical equipment necessary, which could be a company-provided laptop or one-time stipend.
- Performance Management – Companies and managers need to have a clear understanding and trust in their performance analytics. Daily or weekly check-ins, task lists, projects updates/deadlines, and software management systems are some of the standard practices for tracking productivity.
- Engagement and Wellbeing – Employers should ensure employees are staying connected through different means and activities. Days that employees are in office should be targeted for team collaboration and meetings. Remote workers will need consistent check-ins and recognition as well as virtual activities to feel connected.
- Commutes – Employees will need more flexibility in how they travel to work. Employers will need to expand the traditional benefits (monthly parking or transit pass) to include part-time passes, transit trip passes, daily parking validations, and other more flexible options.

In the coming years, business leaders will have to make important strategic decisions regarding remote work that will take culture, clients and employees into consideration. Employers should ensure all necessary standards and policies are in place in order to continuously measure the program.