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Appcast Futurecast: Recruiting and Hiring Workers for Remote Jobs

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Introduction

The future of remote work is a key topic for many recruiting and hiring organizations.

Data suggests that employees prefer working from home, at least some of the time. Meanwhile, numerous studies suggest that remote work is a growing trend and that its opponents are quickly losing their counterarguments.

A grand-scale test of remote work is currently underway. Yet, is widespread remote work here to stay?

No one has a crystal ball, but data does serve as an indicator. And the data suggests that expert predictions about how, **post-pandemic, 25 to 30% of the workforce will work remotely** may not come to pass. In addition, data shows that a frequently shared statistic, **42% of the U.S. labor force now works from home because of the coronavirus pandemic**, is based on a small survey sample and does not align with more comprehensive data from official sources.

It's important to note this doesn't mean there won't be a sizable shift to remote work. It just may not be as seismic as some predict.

Here's what Appcast Research finds about the current and future state of the remote workforce, along with what you need to know to attract and hire the remote workers you seek.

Remote Work: By the Numbers

In September 2020, 22.7% of the labor force worked from home because of the coronavirus pandemic, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Separate research from the BLS finds that approximately 45% of U.S. employment is in occupations in which remote work is feasible.

Taken at face value, these numbers suggest there is room for continued growth. However, the September figure of 22.7% represents a significant decline from May 2020, when 35.4% of the labor force worked from home.

In fact, the BLS shows an ongoing decline in the percentage of people working from home because of the coronavirus pandemic.

**Percentage of Labor Force Working from Home
Because of the Coronavirus Pandemic**

% of Labor Force, Remote by Month, 2020

BLS, October 2020
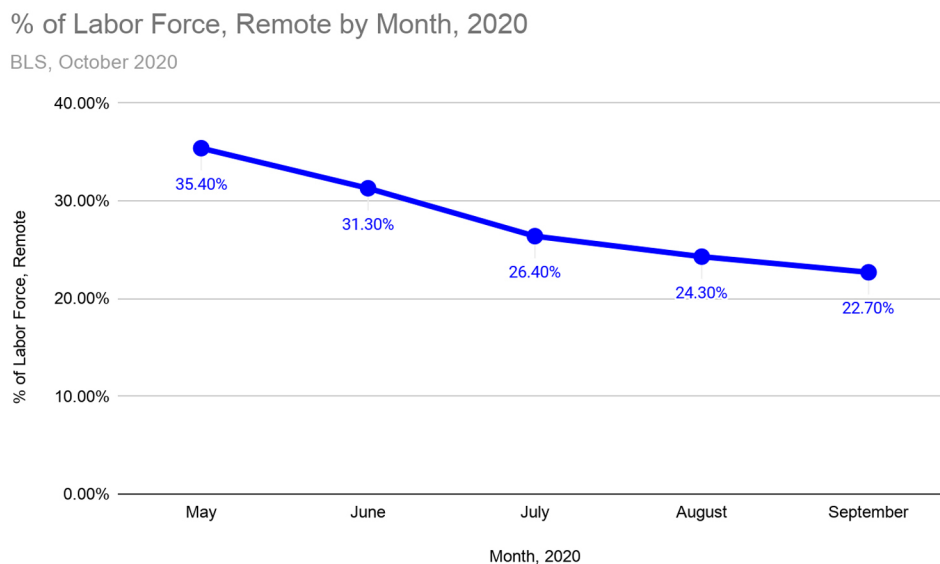
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)

The decline is likely the result of a number of factors, including offices and schools reopening. Also, companies bringing back furloughed workers—employees who would have been unable to do their jobs remotely—may have influenced the decline in percentage of remote workers over a five-month period, as the percentage is based on the overall labor force.

Separately, Appcast Research finds an increase in remote job ads as a result of the pandemic; even so, it is not significant. Prior to the pandemic, job ads that include the terms "work from home," "WFH," "virtual" or "remote" accounted for only 2.20% of total jobs. Even though ads for these jobs jumped by 38% from April 1 through September 30, 2020, remote jobs still only accounted for 3.00% of total job ads during this period.

> Before COVID January 1 – March 31, 2020
> During COVID April 1 – September 30, 2020
>
> Before % of total job ads: 2.20%
> During % of total job ads: 3.00%
> % Change   38%
>
> Includes Work from Home, WFH, Virtual, Remote
>
> *Source: Appcast Research*

BLS and Appcast data raise the question: Will remote work continue to be widespread, or is a return to traditional work environments probable once the virus has been contained?

Make no mistake, data shows remote work has increased. According to 2019 analysis from job site FlexJobs and consulting firm Global Workplace Analytics, there was a **159% increase in remote** work from 2005 to 2017. Yet, while that number suggests tremendous growth, remote workers represent a very small percentage of the overall labor force. Even with triple-digit growth, only 3.4% of the working population worked from home in 2017.

The U.S. labor force had not been working remotely to any great extent, until this year.

Remote Work: Where and Why

Remote Work Out of Necessity

Currently, many people are working remotely because of the pandemic. It has not been a choice on the part of employee or employer, and the situation has not been without challenges for both parties.

What remote work entails during a pandemic, employee perspective

To say it hasn't been easy is, for some, an understatement.

▶ The pandemic caused an immediate shift, which has led to a make-do situation: Use a spare room as an office, if one is available; if not, set up shop in your kitchen, living room or bedroom and use any available surface as a desk.

▶ Some people have thrived working under these conditions; others have floundered without the stability a structured workplace provides.

▶ Challenges include children at home, other family and household members at home, pets, ringing doorbells, traffic, and lawn mowers and leaf blowers.

▶ Many people share their small workspace with a partner or roommate, which sometimes requires navigating simultaneous phone calls and video meetings.

▶ Other obstacles to overcome include time management, distractions, isolation, and blurred boundaries.

One person put it this way: I don't work from home; I live at work.

What remote work entails during a pandemic, employer perspective

For employers, too, adjustments have been required.

▶ Despite technology tools that facilitate and, in some instances, encourage connectivity, a certain amount of spontaneity can be lost.

▶ Because there are arguably fewer opportunities for innovation, mentoring, and exchange of information, employers must find ways to compensate.

▶ Collaboration has to be more intentional.

▶ It can be more difficult to onboard employees, particularly those who are inexperienced and/or inexperienced with remote work.

▶ Monitoring employee progress can be more difficult.

▶ Management styles often need to be adapted.

▶ It is necessary to create a virtual open-door policy.

▶ Goals and timetables must be clearly articulated.

▶ Employee communication, or lack thereof, becomes even more consequential.

Return to work challenges

An October 2020 survey conducted by ComPsych, the world's largest provider of employee assistance programs (EAPs), sheds some light on employees' concerns about returning to work.

More than 85% of employees surveyed are concerned not only with getting sick, but also the logistics of getting to work and the challenges tied to caregiving.

Interestingly, when ComPsych asked employees, "As businesses consider the return-to-work process, what do you think the biggest challenge will be," only 12% said "motivating employees who enjoyed working from home to come back."

Does this suggest motivation is not needed and, once their other concerns are addressed, employees will be ready to return?

Remote Work by Choice

Motivating employees to return to the official workplace may or may not be a challenge for employers. One thing is certain, though. Remote work out of necessity is different from remote work by choice.

Contrast the current arrangement with a well-thought-out decision about remote work, where there are advantages for both employee and employer.

Advantages for employee

▶ Opportunity to create and utilize a work environment conducive to success.

▶ Increased productivity.

▶ More time and energy to devote to the work, without a commute.

▶ More opportunity for "deep work," with fewer distractions.

▶ Ability to live where they choose.

Advantages for employer

▶ Ability to determine that a position lends itself to remote work.

▶ Opportunity to attract candidates who would otherwise be unavailable, including **diverse candidates**.

▶ Savings on real estate and other office expenses.

▶ Opportunity to expand the company's geographic footprint.

Remote Work: Which Jobs

Will there be an increase in remote work for select job functions post-pandemic? Data suggests this is possible.

Current Environment: Job Functions with the Most Remote Workers

From May 2020 (when the BLS first started tracking data as it relates to the pandemic) through September 2020, there are two broad job categories that account for the majority of remote workers: Management, professional, and related occupations, and Sales and office occupations.

Notably, there has been no significant change in either the number of workers in these occupations or the percentage of workers in these categories working remotely from month to month.

Approximately 75% of workers in job functions classified as Management, professional, and related occupations have been working remotely; and approximately 18% of Sales and office occupations have been working remotely.

Current Environment: Job Functions with the Most Remote Job Ads

Appcast Research compared job ads for remote work positions before COVID, January 1 – March 2020, to during COVID, April 1 – September 30, 2020, and finds increases in a number of job functions that correspond to the BLS Management category.

▶ Education	11811%*		▶ Banking	325%
▶ Consulting	1043%		▶ Science	298%
▶ Healthcare	640%		▶ Marketing	278%
▶ Legal	384%		▶ Administration	267%

The increase in Education job ads is directly related to the outsized demand for teachers and other education professionals as schools abruptly shifted to remote learning.

In the BLS Sales category, remote job ads for the Sales job function itself increased by 697% during the period.

It's worth pointing out that remote job ads have also increased significantly in job functions outside these categories.

- ▶ Retail   3458%
- ▶ Security   2971%
- ▶ Manufacturing   1622%

Increases in these three categories might be the result of employees in any number of positions, including customer service roles, now working from home.

While conceivably many jobs in the Management and Sales categories could continue to be performed remotely post-pandemic, and it is possible that jobs in other categories could as well, whether remote work continues depends in part on the job itself.

Identifying Jobs That Align with Remote Work

Where the BLS finds that approximately 55% of U.S. employment is in occupations in which remote work is not feasible, a white paper from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business finds that approximately **63% of U.S. jobs aren't conducive to remote work**.

So, how do you determine if the remaining 37% or 45% of jobs can be done effectively on a remote basis, on a full- or part-time basis?

Start by asking and answering these questions.

- ▶ Does the job require face-to-face customer contact?

- ▶ Is direct access to unmovable equipment necessary?

- ▶ Does the job involve physically creating, assembling or moving products?

- ▶ Does the job require direct access to systems that cannot be accessed outside the firewall?

- ▶ Is physical access to documents necessary?

If the answer to each of these questions is "no," in theory the job can be done remotely. Still, you must then consider if the job *should* be done remotely.

For some roles, proximity to other people in the same or similar jobs allows for higher levels of engagement and therefore greater productivity. This is often true for customer service or inside sales positions.

For other roles, like teaching and healthcare, there are arguably similar in-person benefits, although remote learning and telemedicine have challenged some of these assumptions.

Even if the job is suited to remote work, there is another factor that must be considered: the workers themselves.

Attention must be paid to recruiting and hiring the right candidates for remote work.

Remote Work: Who to Hire

Who can work remotely, effectively?

A common misperception is that anyone can.

Remote: More Than Place

Remote is used as a workplace location in job ads, when in reality it involves much more than place.

Nevertheless, let's start with place. Is the position for which you're recruiting a work-from-anywhere role or is it a work-from-home role? What's the difference?

It's subtle, but noteworthy. Work from anywhere means a person could, in theory, sit on a mountaintop with their laptop. Work from home suggests a more structured setting, conducive to video conferencing and the like, as well as a set time zone.

Is the location flexible, or is the employee expected to have a set location? Which raises other questions. Is a home office required? Or will a kitchen table suffice? What about set hours?

When a position is remote, these kinds of specifics matter. When hiring for remote roles, ensure you have answers to these questions early in the recruiting process.

Remote: A Work Style

Previous experience with remote work, on a regular, longer term basis (other than during the pandemic) is helpful, in that it shows whether a person knows what remote work requires. This can be included as part of a job ad; for example, at least two years of experience working remotely.

Likewise, you may prefer candidates who have experience working with tools that facilitate remote work, such as Slack and Zoom. If so, it is helpful to include the tools your organization uses in a job ad and request that candidates be comfortable with these tools.

The time zone or zones in which the business operates is something that is often overlooked when recruiting for a remote role. But this information is critical. A significant time difference means less time to interact with an employee, or unreasonable expectations if ongoing interaction on the part of the employee is required. If you are looking for someone in a particular time zone or zones, or to work specified hours, include this as part of the job ad.

Attracting Remote Candidates

In addition to requiring experience working remotely, identifying specific tools, and asking that candidates reside in a particular time zone or zones, it is essential that you clearly define the long-term nature of the position.

> If the job ad requests that a new hire must live within commuting distance to an office location, is the position truly remote? Or is the job "remote for now"?

Clarity is important for setting candidate expectations.

Terms like "remote"; "work from home (WFH)"; and "virtual" once had slightly different meanings in job ads. In the current environment, though, they have become interchangeable. As such, it's essential to clearly define what you mean by remote.

And about those terms. Job sites, with the exception of those catering to remote work, were never designed to include remote job ads. Some job sites now allow for entering remote as a location, where for others you may need to include remote as part of a job title, as in "Customer Service Remote."

Screening Remote Candidates

In addition to assessing a candidate's fit for the job, you want to make sure they are a fit for a remote role. With this in mind, here are questions to ask as part of the interview process.

▶ What is your biggest challenge when working remotely?

▶ What is the biggest advantage for you personally?

▶ How comfortable are you with the technology we use to keep our dispersed workforce engaged, for example, Slack and Zoom?

▶ How do you handle distractions?

At the same, the hiring organization should share information as part of the interview process.

This includes attention to the following.

▶ Requirements, as far as hours and employee availability

▶ Collaboration with team members

▶ Expectations for frequency of interactions/touchpoints

▶ How employee performance is evaluated

▶ Tools the organization uses

▶ Dress code information, especially if the person will video conference with clients

Video interviewing is generally part of the screening process for remote workers. In addition to "meeting" with a candidate, video interviewing allows a hiring organization to learn about a candidate's work environment. Is their setting professional? Is it neat and organized? Is the candidate sitting upright in a chair or lounging on a sofa? Say what, lounging on a sofa? Stranger things have been known to happen.

Remote Work: Making the Shift

As employers weigh the pros and cons of long-term remote work, it's worth recognizing that not every employee wants to work remotely. Some are eager to get back to their traditional workplaces.

A survey of office workers in a range of industries, conducted by professional services firm PwC, finds that, once the pandemic is over, **only about one-third of employees, 32%**, **want to continue to work remotely five days per week**. By contrast, 51% want some form of hybrid arrangement and 9% want to work from home less than one day per week; the remaining 8% have not been working remotely.

It's important to emphasize this is a survey of office workers, employees with jobs that can be performed remotely. These individuals represent approximately 45% of the labor force. So, if 32% of these workers want to continue to work remotely five days per week, this translates to 14.4% of the overall labor force.

PwC also surveyed executives. Findings show that, in general, employers **are not ready to abandon the office**.

Nevertheless, several high-profile organizations, including retailer REI and social network Twitter, have used the word "permanently" with regard to working remotely. Other high-profile organizations have also committed to long-term remote work, but they have used the word "indefinitely."

Still, even a number of employers that are not all in on remote have committed to a shift. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has pledged to have half of the company's global employees working remotely within five to 10 years, according to Fast Company, which also reports that the social media giant is recruiting for a **director of remote work**, a position it hopes to fill by the end of the year.

Whether an employer embraces remote work post-pandemic may depend on any or all of these factors.

▶ Corporate culture

▶ Demand for certain types of talent / availability of talent

▶ Societal response to the trend

▶ Competitors' practices

▶ Outside support for employees (for example, childcare and eldercare options)

▶ Individual employee preferences

It also remains to be seen how prolonged social distancing will affect members of the workforce personally and how this may influence their professional decisions. Similarly, as companies adapt to accommodate a lengthy pandemic, new ways of doing business have and will continue to emerge. As these are evaluated, they may influence remote work.

It's entirely possible, as a survey of 800 global executives, conducted by management consulting firm McKinsey & Company, suggests, that **a hybrid approach to remote work post-pandemic will become the norm, but that it will be highly concentrated in a number of sectors**.

This appears in line with where other data is pointing. Of course, to know what lies ahead, employers must first get to the post-pandemic phase of business operations.

Whether your organization favors or opposes widespread remote work, you'll no doubt agree: Post-pandemic can't come soon enough.

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