



UK REPORT

State of Work 2021

How COVID-19 changed digital work.



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Methodology

This report includes data from two separate studies, both conducted by the Center for Generational Kinetics (CGK). The first study was conducted between February 13 and March 6, 2020, and the second study was conducted eight months later, between November 29 and December 3, 2020. Both studies included 1,000 respondents that were employed by a company with at least 500 employees, worked on a computer, and collaborated with other people.

Introduction

In February 2020, we embarked on a study in partnership with the [Center for Generational Kinetics \(CGK\)](#) to understand how the two largest age cohorts in the workforce—millennials (ages 23-43) and Generation Xers (ages 44-52)—approached work differently. The data came back from the field just as COVID-19 was catalysing a global shutdown that sent a majority of the digital workforce home to work.

Despite the tricky timing, the data provided insights into generational differences and employee attitudes that were helpful to companies navigating the unexpected crisis. More importantly, the study gave us a snapshot of the state of digital work just before the seismic shift. As the pandemic progressed, it became clear that employees weren't just working from home—they were working by very different, constantly changing rules.

“ In trends research we generally see change happen incrementally unless there is a significant external change or event. With just eight months between the two studies featured in this report, a change of even 3-5 percentage points is statistically significant and worth noting. The fact that in some of the uncovered answers we see changes of 5 points, 10 points—and even more—is remarkable, and reflects the unusual speed at which the pandemic is changing work, cultural and personal norms.

Jason Dorsey

President, Co-Founder, The Center for Generational Kinetics



To understand how this dispersed and dynamic environment has changed the work experience for employees—and what it means for the companies that employ them—we went back into the field in November and December of 2020 with a set of questions identical to the ones we asked before the pandemic. The result is a compelling view of how COVID-19 has changed digital work. At the top of that list is the complicated relationship digital workers have with technology.

Today's digital workforce is also a distributed one. Employees rely heavily or solely on technology as their primary lifeline for all work activity, relationships, and outcomes. So it's not surprising to find that digital employees are highly invested in work technology. What may be surprising is the strength of both the emotion and action workers attach to these technologies. They have left jobs and turned down offers—and nearly half of digital workers say they are willing to leave their current job if technology hurts their performance instead of elevating it.

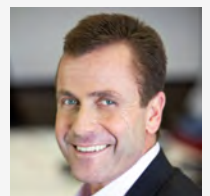


The study highlights a significant increase in the number of UK digital workers who say technology is “very important” for both collaborating (+24 points on pre-COVID levels) and doing their best work (+18 points). The amount of change over such a short time—combined with the fact that the change came in the strongest possible response—indicates an intense degree of emotion and investment.

And that's just the start. In the seventh annual *State of Work* report we've highlighted the most compelling research findings from the UK work landscape, including demands workers are placing on their business technology, the areas where workers are struggling and continue to thrive, and new expectations of a surprisingly engaged and resilient digital workforce.

“ Despite a global pandemic, our very human need to find meaning in our work is revealed in this data.

Alex Shootman
VP and GM, Workfront, an Adobe company



1



Research
findings

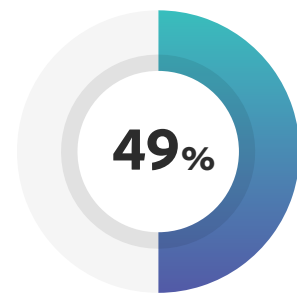
Good enough is no longer enough.

Despite the uncertainties caused by a tenuous job market, political and social strife, and personal challenges, digital workers in the UK have become far less forgiving of anything that prevents them from doing their best work—and they're willing to take action.

Businesses risk losing talent if technology fails to meet expectations.

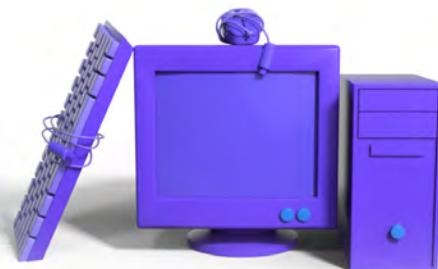
A key concern for digital workers is having access to the right technology in order to be productive and engaged in the workplace, and they are taking strong positions on what lengths they are willing to go to if they don't have it.

- In February 2020, one-in-five (21%) workers said they had already quit a job because workplace tech made their jobs harder. Today, nearly a third of workers (32%) say they have said goodbye to an employer whose tech was a barrier to their ability to do good work.
- One of the most striking findings from our research shows that nearly half (49%) of UK workers are likely to leave their job if frustrated with their work technology—this has jumped drastically from just a third (33%) prior to the pandemic.
- Bad technology is also having an outsized effect on retention and recruitment:
 - The number of people who report turning down a job because the tech was out of date or hard to use rose by 18 points compared with pre-pandemic data.
 - On the other hand, the number of digital workers who reported applying for a job because they heard a company's employees use great technology increased by 16 points compared with pre-pandemic data



Nearly half of UK workers say they are likely to leave their current job if frustrated with their work technology.

UK workers are so invested in the quality of the digital tools available to them that they aren't willing to compromise, despite the UK unemployment rate being at a four-year high and there being fierce competition for open roles.



+8pt

Our study found an eight-point increase in those saying that collaborating across many teams is *critical* for them to stay at a job. Gen X workers saw an even sharper increase (+11 points) compared to millennials (+6 points).

A cross-generational concern.

While previously, demand for the latest tech was often considered to stem largely from younger, digital native members of the workforce, our research proves that the pandemic has significantly narrowed the generational digital divide, causing demand for the newest and best tech to rapidly spread across the generations.

- Pre-pandemic, just under a quarter (24%) of Gen X respondents considered leaving their job due to a lack of new technology, but the latest data shows this has grown drastically by 24 points during the pandemic to almost half (48%). In comparison, the same response from millennials grew by 13 points to exactly half (50%).
- Of the workforce who confirmed they had actually left a role because workplace tech made their lives harder, the number from Gen X rose by a giant 21% (from 11% pre-pandemic) to nearly a third (32%), putting them almost level with the millennial workforce at 33% (who reported an eight-point increase).
- And it's becoming easier to entice both generations away from their current employers by upping your tech game. Some 41% of Gen X respondents said they would actively seek out a new role in a company with better tech, up 22% from pre-COVID-19. The same applies to 51% of millennials (a 13-point rise).

“ Digital workers know how technology should work, and they know that it's critical to their ability to be successful. When their employers provide them with subpar tools, it's more than an inconvenience. It demonstrates that the company isn't very concerned with either the quality of work or the people doing the work.

Elizabeth Volini

Executive Director, ePMO Lead, PPM Platform Owner, JLL



“ We tend to assume that because younger workers grew up as “digital natives,” they’re very comfortable with a technology-enabled workplace and don’t need extra support. But younger workers haven’t had the opportunity to build collective resilience through a national catastrophe, are still growing their professional networks, and haven’t logged as many years absorbing all the nuances of corporate culture. On top of all this, they’re more likely to have young children at home that they’re trying to care for and educate during the work day.

Laura Butler

SVP, People & Culture, Workfront, an Adobe company



A rapid digital evolution.

In the midst of a pandemic, and in a nod to the human ability to grow through adversity, workers around the world rose to the challenge of work as we knew it changing almost overnight. It required every individual to adapt to and master new digital tools and processes within just a few days.

The UK has transformed at pace.

Every country we surveyed showed an increased reliance in technology, but none more so than the UK. Before COVID-19 it was widely reported that the UK was lagging behind the US and Germany when it came to digital transformation, yet our research has shown that the pandemic has been a catalyst for necessary transformational change.

- UK workers now rely on technology to do their job 12% more on average than they did before the pandemic. That is more than double the US growth rate of 5%.
- Digital tools are vital for teamwork. 56% of UK workers state technology is very important for fostering collaboration at their job, a huge 24% rise since before the pandemic.
- Significantly more workers state that tech is very important to enable them to do their best work (+18%), compared to a rise of just 8% in the US.



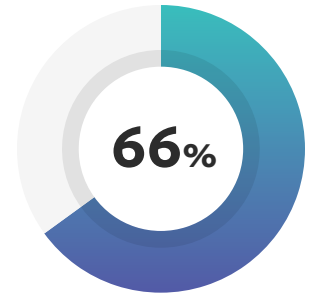
+13pt

We found a sharp increase in workers who stated they felt comfortable dealing with work-related conflict or hard conversations (+13 points). This is highest among Generation X, who saw a huge 20-point rise in their comfort levels with conflict since the pandemic (compared to millennials' 3-point rise).

Technology now touches all aspects of work.

At the beginning of the pandemic there was huge buzz around digital tools to enable communication and collaboration across the newly dispersed workforce, but UK workers have embraced technology across all core work competencies. For example:

- 68% of UK workers report relying on technology to foster creativity and innovation. This is up 19 points from February 2020, compared with an eight-point increase in the US. Almost two thirds (63%) are using tech to develop new ideas, a 14% rise on pre-COVID-19 data. The US reported an 8% rise, in comparison.
- Two thirds (66%) of UK workers rely on technology to manage their time—15% more than pre-COVID-19.



Two thirds of UK workers rely on technology to manage their time.

“ We were already ramping up our use of digital collaboration tools. When the pandemic hit, we had no option but to accelerate those efforts, and that’s been a gift. Today, we can take the creative process that happens by being together and building on each other’s ideas in person, and make it possible virtually. Our creativity isn’t limited because we don’t sit next to each other.

Robyn Tombacher
Global Head of Workforce Management, WPP



The far-reaching impact of outdated tech.

With technology now woven into the fabric of the digital workplace more than ever before, the impact of the wrong technology can also be felt more acutely. When left with outdated or irrelevant tech, UK workers feel that they are:

- Less productive
- Less able to take on new tasks
- More stressed
- Less motivated to get things done

Digital workers are even more engaged.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the economy, and the position of many individual businesses. This hasn't escaped workers' attention and many have tuned into the particular struggles, challenges, or successes in their industry. In light of this, people are paying closer attention to how their work contributes to the company and its overall goals, and what they can personally do to ensure the success of their business.

UK workers feel they are more invested in their work.

Overall, substantially more workers are emotionally connected to their work than they were at the beginning of last year.

- Three quarters (75%) of UK workers feel that their daily work 'very much' impacts their company—that's up 16% since February 2020. This is consistent across the generations with both millennials (74%) and Generation X (77%) agreeing strongly that they make a difference.
- More than four in five workers (81%) feel 'very invested' in their current role. That's an increase of 27% since before the pandemic.
- UK workers are now feeling as invested in their work as their US peers. 81% of US workers felt invested in their business before the pandemic, and that has stayed at a similarly high level.

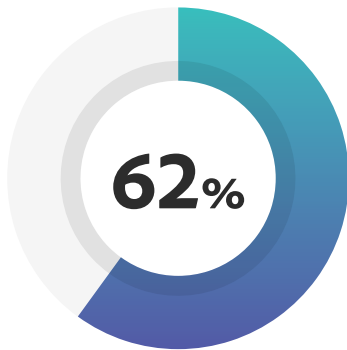


12%

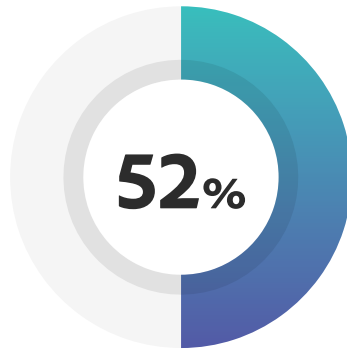
Generation X feel particularly strongly that being able to do their best work is more important than a pay cheque (up 12% compared to millennials +1%).

Barriers still need to be overcome.

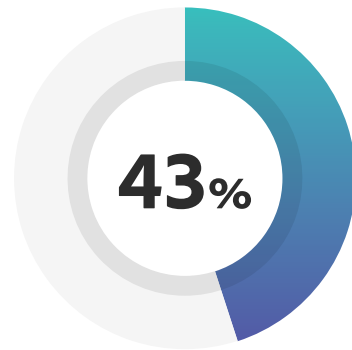
While this elevated engagement is great news for companies, barriers to employees feeling invested in their work still exist. The top three barriers for UK workers are:



Feeling underappreciated
(up 4% since February 2020)



Feeling like their work doesn't matter
(up 4% since February 2020)



Not having good communication with colleagues or managers
(up 4% since February 2020)



Prior to the pandemic, the third largest barrier was “being micromanaged” but the latest data has shown this has fallen into fourth place. Working remotely appears to be giving workers more space for autonomy and empowerment in their role. However, business leaders should be mindful that on the flip side, the dispersed, virtual workplace has made workers feel like they can’t always connect their daily work to ever-shifting company goals. This is an issue that can be exacerbated by a lack of good communication with coworkers or managers, which has emerged as another top barrier to engagement and investment.

2

The role
of work
management
in powering
digital work

The role of work management in powering digital work.

Enterprise-grade work management applications centralise and connect work across teams, departments, and companies. They eliminate silos, integrate applications and data, and keep people in the environments they prefer while surfacing insights to help companies pre-empt problems, reallocate resources, and optimise their people and processes. Work management powers and optimises digital work by enabling organisations to:

Conquer conflict.

Work management facilitates productive conversations by providing data that mitigates friction with transparency and truth. It empowers teams to navigate conflict with facts versus opinions, and gives everyone visibility into goals, priorities, and the work being done. Workfront, an Adobe company, recently commissioned a report by independent analyst firm Forrester, which highlights the specific role work management data can play in successfully navigating inherently difficult topics at work:

“ Workfront improved employee experience (EX) by eliminating ‘squeaky wheel’ arguments. The interviewees said their company cultures became more positive, especially during budget season, because employees no longer felt like they had to battle for resources. The consulting director for a chemical manufacturing organisation said, ‘We appreciate how quickly we can get approval on business cases and how easy it is to provide the narrative on our activities and diffuse rumours and assumptions. We’re able to provide transparency to a level we know executives appreciate because it is timely and factual.’

[Forrester Total Economic Impact™ \(TEI\) study](#)

Foster creativity and innovation.

The workforce is increasingly leveraging technology to solve problems and transform work, shifting from in-person roundtable brainstorming to innovating and collaborating virtually. Work management is the foundational platform that connects data, people, processes, and technology across the organisation and enables digital workforces to solve pandemic-related problems and reimagine and optimise digital work.

Promote autonomy and alignment.

Digital workers crave autonomy and freedom when deciding how to support company goals. Successful autonomy requires companies to shift from a hierarchical to egalitarian operational model—from telling people what to do, to providing context so they can determine what needs to be done and giving them the ability to do it. Work management provides every level of the organisation the same context that leaders have in connecting strategy to delivery—and it supports digital workers in making good decisions.

“ Employees who were forced home to work now expect the flexibility and autonomy that comes along with remote work. Regardless of where people work in the future, companies will need to continue to support a more independent workforce with the right technology, transparency, and a shared agreement on the outcomes they want to achieve.

Elizabeth Volini

Executive Director, ePMO Lead, PPM Platform Owner, JLL



Support agility.

Anticipating and adapting quickly to change is a modern business imperative. Businesses need to make agility a permanent state of mind and give digital workers and their leaders quick and easy access to the data they need to continuously adapt, prioritise, and realign. Work management technology is the connective tissue between tools, linking and presenting data and insights from disparate systems to key decision-makers at the right time. A centralised place for work becomes the source of truth for all work information and the fuel for data-driven decisions—the basis of making agility not just a crisis response, but a steady state.

Make work meaningful.

Doing meaningful work—and feeling appreciated for delivering it—influences digital workers’ productivity and engagement. It’s also an absolute essential for younger workers who are feeling more stretched and vulnerable. Work management technology provides workers with the “why” behind their workdays, ensures they are aligned to the most important priorities of the company, provides context and information that helps them deliver quality work, and gives leaders visibility into what they’re accomplishing, so they can remove frustrating barriers and recognise great work in a timely manner.



3



Takeaways
for leaders

Takeaways for leaders.

It's safe to say that digital work will never return to a pre-pandemic state. Regardless of how much of what has changed will endure, the quantitative data combined with the qualitative experiences leaders are having with their frontline employees every day provide important learnings that companies can apply to support their digital workforce through uncertainty.

Treat technology as a critical workforce issue.

Technology cannot be separated from the humans who use it. In making technology decisions, leaders must put at the centre of their consideration how and whether, technologies empower or hobble their workforces. Investing in new technologies is important, but investing in the *right* technologies is even more critical.

“ For digital workers, technology is an integral part of engagement. Leaders who understand this are leveraging work technologies to mitigate the mundane and burdensome, and enable everything from flexibility and creativity to mental and personal well-being. Deployed thoughtfully—even in the most challenging times—technology can support employees in doing the best work of their lives.

Paul Tasker
VP Marketing Operations, Sage



Personalise the employee experience.

Allow employees to work where and how they are most creative and productive. Invest in ecosystem technologies that provide common information and collaboration spaces, while at the same time allowing employees to stay in their tools of choice and minimise context switching. Encourage autonomy by providing the right support systems, and then trusting employees to do the right thing.

“ As consumers, workers are having these wonderful personalised customer experiences with brands, but when they go to work most get a one-size-fits-all employee experience. The next frontier will be leveraging our technologies, resources, and lessons learned to create great experiences for our customers—and doing the same for employees.

Robyn Tombacher
Global Head of Workforce Management, WPP



Don't take engagement for granted.

Although employees are working longer hours and may even be producing more than before the pandemic, don't mistake involvement for investment, or busyness for value creation. It's the company's job to provide the right support and a clear, shared definition of success that every employee has a part in building. Employee engagement can't be just an HR issue, it must become a strategic and multifaceted imperative for the board and C-suite.

“ All of these factors are combining to create a complicated mix for companies. While crises of the past may have created a 'buyer's market' where employers could set the terms, the pandemic is different. Companies are facing a very real urgency to understand and cultivate resilience in their digital workforces—from technology and communication to mental health and flexible work hours—in order to retain and attract the talent they'll need to stay competitive.

Laura Butler
SVP, People & Culture, Workfront, an Adobe company



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About Workfront, an Adobe company

Workfront is the leader in work management, trusted by more than 3,500 companies, 1 million users, and 10 out of 10 of the world's top brands. Workfront helps people, teams, and companies do their best work. For more information, visit www.workfront.com.



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