HRO TODAY RESEARCH FLASH REPORT

HR'S 2021 RESPONSE DEFINES EMPLOYER BRAND

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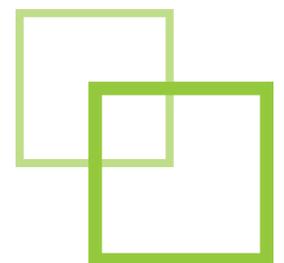
HR'S 2021 RESPONSE DEFINES EMPLOYER BRAND

HRO Today Flash Reports are a series of ongoing research initiatives that address today's topics of interest in the HR community. *HRO Today* Flash Reports are focused briefs that can be used to support business decisions and further discussion among industry practitioners and thought leaders. The markets served are North America, EMEA, and APAC. This report covers the North America region.

This report examines the practices of candidate experience measurement, employer brand practices and the impact of COVID-19 on employer branding. It also discusses how the importance of diversity and inclusion messaging in employer branding has changed over the last 12 months.

Where appropriate, findings from this year's study are compared with those from the 2020 report.

This study was sponsored by PeopleScout.

Methodology

Between April 26-June 4, 2021, a series of email invitations were sent to North American subscribers of *HRO Today* Magazine and *HRO Today* newsletters to take part in an online study. Study respondents were manager level or above within their Human Resources departments.

Respondents were screened to ensure that they were personally very familiar with their company's employer brand. Because of the size and diversity of the region and small sample size, these results should be viewed as directional.

Those invited to take the survey were not aware of PeopleScout's sponsorship of this study.
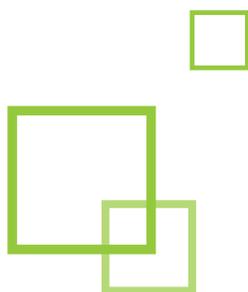
INTRODUCTION

Recruiting in 2021 looks radically different than it did 18 months ago. Accelerated by COVID-19 and the movement for racial justice, changes that were expected to take years are happening instead in months. Virtually recruiting remote workers is the new norm for many. Internal mobility and upskilling programs are being built out, many for the first time. Diversity, equity and inclusion is being treated with greater urgency and accountability.[1]

But how have all these changes impacted the candidate experience? How will organizations refocus their employer brands to reflect new priorities? This report explores those areas and discusses the implications from the findings.
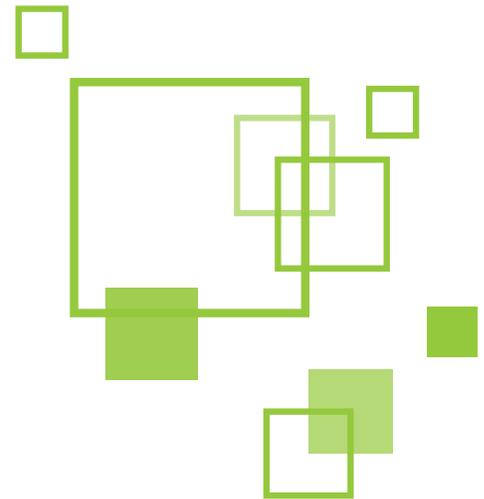
CONCLUSIONS

While companies' own overall assessment of their candidate experience acknowledges challenges, it has improved since 2020. Nearly three-quarters (71%) felt they had a good or excellent candidate experience, up from 65% in 2020.

The top three candidate experience challenges faced by employers are providing a timely interview process, not having a formal way to capture candidate feedback, and onboarding practices that are in need of improvement. The timeliness of the interview process is paramount in providing a good candidate experience and is an ongoing challenge for recruiters. In 2020, a red-hot job market halted nearly overnight, and the lull was followed by many companies not being able to hire enough workers, matched with candidate demands about continuing to work remotely. Candidate perception of an inefficient interview process not only conveys a poor image of the company but increases the likelihood of a candidate accepting another offer.

Employer value proposition (EVP) priorities cover a wide range of goals. The most widely-held priority of an EVP is to reinforce company values, as indicated by over two-thirds (68%) of respondents. The next most common priority is distinguishing the company as a great place to work, according to 57% of respondents. Seven other areas are indicated as part of EVP goals by at least 30% of HR executives, suggesting a broad spectrum of objectives.

Feedback about the recruiting experience remains sporadic, both from and to candidates. Overall, one-third (33%) of recruiters surveyed never ask for candidate feedback, though in 2021, more (29%) make it a standard practice than in 2020. Without capturing data, employers cannot construct an informed roadmap designed to deliver a superior candidate experience.

Feedback is consistently provided to candidates who were not extended an offer after face-to-face interviews only 29% of the time, and it is never offered nearly one-third (31%) of the time. Offering feedback can create goodwill between the candidate and company, add a candidate to the silver-medalist talent pool, and help avoid negative social media chatter. However, legal considerations often dictate what can be given as feedback.

The pandemic refocused employer branding. In 2021, 41% of respondents plan to use employee recognition programs to improve their employer brand. The preponderance of remote work changed the work landscape, and the need to address some of the challenges posed by remote work, such as isolation, less connection with the employer, and a lack of acknowledgment became paramount. Increased social media usage is part of the plan to improve employer brand for the second highest percentage (37%) of respondents, but the explosion of social media usage in the last 18 months will limit the overall effectiveness of social media to get a company's employer brand message to the target audience.

Companies will continue to invest more in their employer brands, though the percentage of respondents increasing the investment may be leveling off. Nearly one-half (47%) anticipate more of an investment in their employer brands, down from 74% in 2020.

COVID-19 response is a litmus test for employer brand. Recruiters remain adamant about the importance of their employer brand as they move into post-pandemic mode. Over three-quarters (77%) of recruiters felt their employer brand is becoming more important in the long run. Companies' response to the COVID-19 pandemic will have a long-term effect on their culture, reputation as a great place to work, and ability to attract, recruit and retain talent well into the future. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of respondents adjusted their employer brand in response to the pandemic, and the bulk of those showcased what the company did to protect their workforce.

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) now plays a more prominent role in employer branding. For the vast majority (74%), employer branding strategy will change to include D&I as a critical component of the message. Failure to address it will reflect negatively on the current workforce and recruiting. D&I commitment will become a must have in employer branding.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Rating of Company's Candidate Experience

Using the scale below, how would you rate your company's candidate experience?

Study respondents were asked to rate their company's candidate experience on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1-Very Poor to 5-Excellent. In 2021, nearly three-quarters (71%) felt they had a good or excellent candidate experience, up from 65% in 2020.

While most feel they have a quality candidate experience, only 16% feel it is excellent. However, that percentage is twice what was reported in 2020, suggesting that while there is still considerable room to reach excellent, companies may be further refining their efforts with their candidate experience. The average rating for candidate experience in 2021 was 3.86, up from 3.69 in 2020.

RATING OF COMPANY'S CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE

2021
- 1%
- 1%
- 23%
- 55%
- 16%

2020
- 4%
- 31%
- 57%
- 8%

Legend: Very Poor · Poor · Fair · Good · Excellent
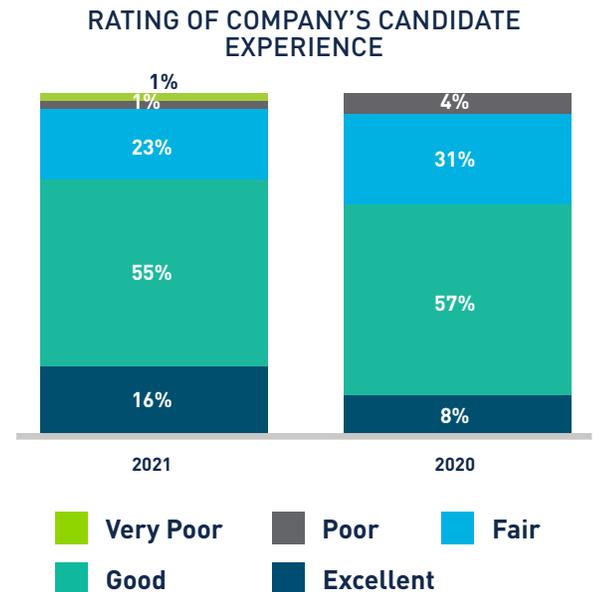
Challenges with Candidate Experience

What are your greatest challenges with your candidate experience? Please select the top three.

Study participants were asked to select the top three challenges they face with their candidate experience out of 13 options. Two areas were selected by 40% of respondents, the most of any of the areas: timeliness of the interview process and no formal way to capture candidate feedback about hiring process.

No area was selected more often than the timeliness of the hiring process in either 2020 or 2021. This component of the candidate experience includes scheduling interviews, extending offers, and negotiating contracts. Prior to the pandemic, the U.S. job market was hot. And, as the effects of the pandemic begin to recede, many employers are struggling to find enough workers. Oxford Economics identifies four factors keeping workers on the sidelines: lingering fear of the coronavirus, unusual child care obligations, early retirements and federal jobless benefits.[2] In this environment, the most qualified candidates tend to receive offers quickly, so the more concise and focused the interview process, the better the chance recruiters have of candidates accepting their offers. Additionally, long delays and inefficiencies can negatively impact the perception of the company, even before the candidate is considering the position.

No formal way to capture candidate feedback about the hiring process was also selected as a top challenge in 2021 by 40% of respondents, up nine percentage points from 2020. The extent of this challenge is somewhat surprising given the options available to capture candidate feedback. Recruiters can map the candidate touch points, identifying the key areas where candidate interaction occurs. Once these areas are identified, brief pulse surveys can be implemented from initial outreach through the onboarding process. Pulse surveys can be sent out via text links to smart phone users, which are now nearly ubiquitous in the U.S.

The third greatest challenge is onboarding practices that are in need of improvement. While this was also a challenge for many at the start of 2020, it became a more formidable task over the last year and a half. Companies began hiring again, but still faced the constraints imposed by the pandemic. Companies need to develop virtual training programs that provide an engaging and immersive experience. Ways to do this include a highly structured accountability plan and providing a positive cultural environment.[3]

Lastly, a positive candidate experience not considered a priority in the organization was cited least frequently, down 11 percentage points to 6%. This may indicate a greater emphasis on candidate experience over the last 12 months.

CHALLENGES WITH CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE

Challenge	2021	2020
Timeliness of hiring process	40%	40%
No formal way to capture candidate feedback about hiring process	40%	31%
Onboarding practices in need of improvement	34%	29%
Mobile-friendly communication not being optimized	28%	40%
Lack of notification providing candidate application status	22%	23%
Lack of monitoring of social sites to reinforce or correct employer brand perceptions	22%	14%
Lengthy process to complete applications	18%	11%
Employer brand is not compelling	16%	14%
Limited or no hiring manager contact after position acceptance prior to start date	14%	17%
Job descriptions that are incomplete or inaccurate	14%	20%
Sourcing personalization used to address each candidate	12%	11%
Lack of candidate feedback	12%	9%
Timeliness of candidate feedback	10%	17%
Positive candidate experience not considered a priority in your organization	6%	17%

■ 2021
■ 2020

Priorities with the Employer Value Proposition
What are the priorities of your EVP? Please select all that all that apply.

Respondents were asked to identify all the priorities of their employer value proposition (EVP). Overall, the priorities of the EVP cover a wide range of goals, with none of the nine examined selected as a goal by more than 70% or by less than 30% of respondents. The most widely-held priority of an EVP is to reinforce company values, as indicated by over two-thirds (68%) of respondents. The EVP provides a framework to showcase commonly shared values among employees and aspirations and goals for what the company wants to accomplish and stand for.

Distinguishing the company as a great place to work was a priority of the EVP by 57% of respondents. The EVP provides the unique set of benefits and rewards offered to employees in return for their commitment and skills. Gartner says five fundamental elements that make up an EVP are compensation, work-life balance, stability, location, and respect.[4]

The last area, with over one-half (55%) of respondents citing it as a priority, was the organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Perhaps no priority changed more in 2020 within the U.S. than defining and emphasizing an organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others were catalysts for the movement in the United States which demanded change in long-standing negative attitudes and practices regarding race.

WHAT ARE THE PRIORITIES OF YOUR EVP? PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT ALL THAT APPLY.

Priority	Percentage
Reinforce company values	68%
Distinguish company as a great place to work	57%
Commitment to diversity and inclusion	55%
Employee health and well-being as a prority	43%
Establishing the company vision and how employees fit in with it	43%
Establish growth opportunities	43%
Emphasize training and development opportunities	39%
Showcase work environment	36%
Corporate responsbility and citizenship vehicle	30%
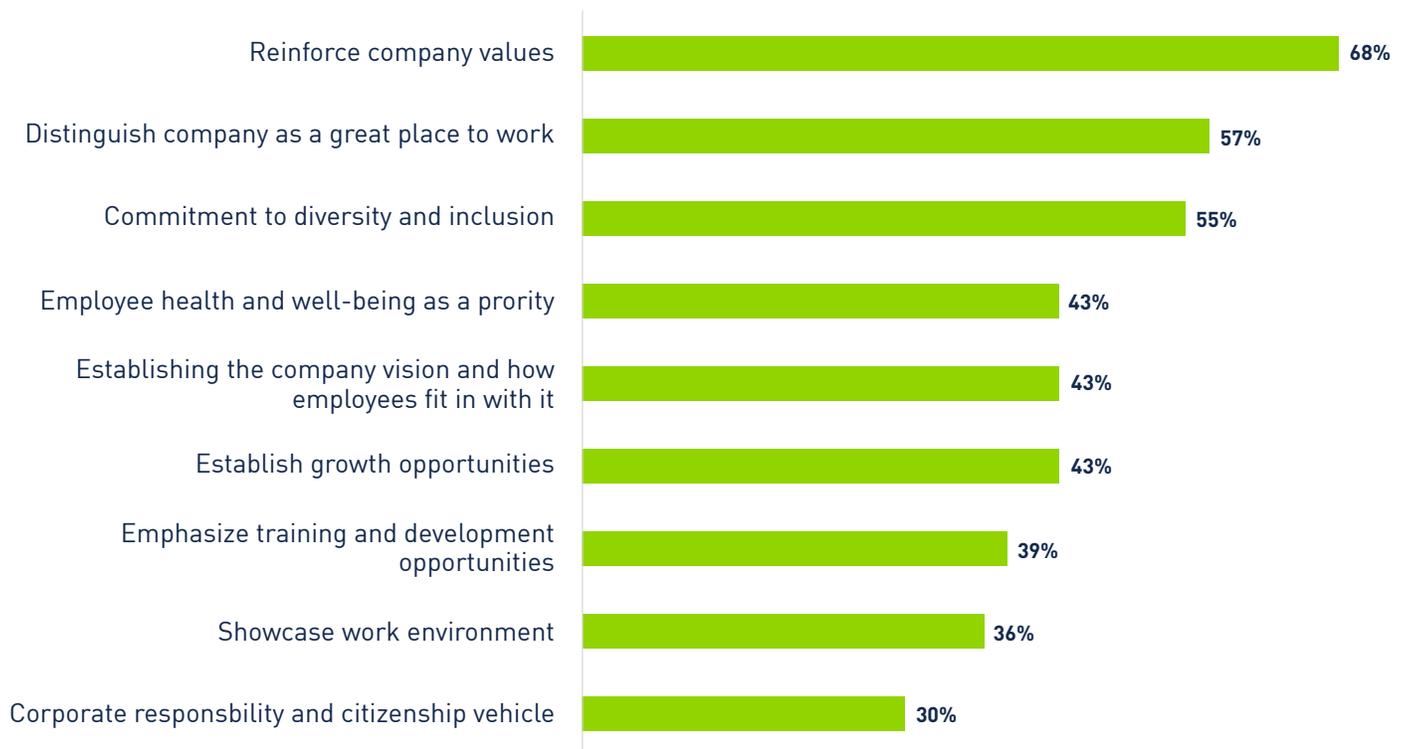
MEASURING CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE

### Candidate Feedback on Recruitment Experience

How often do you ask candidates to give feedback on their recruitment experience?

Respondents were asked how often they ask candidates to give feedback on their recruitment experience. In 2021, one-third (33%) of those surveyed do not ask for candidate feedback, almost identical to 2020 (32%). But 29% of respondents are consistently asking candidates to give feedback in 2021, up from 21% in 2020.

Asking for a candidate's opinion on the process inevitably gives you more insight into key areas to work on, and more importantly, gives candidates a voice. Providing the opportunity to give feedback may even improve their perception of the experience. Eliciting feedback from candidates at crucial stages of the hiring process can reveal the strengths and weaknesses of that process, which is the first step toward improving it.[5]

There are two key areas in which to set up candidate touchpoints. After candidates have applied, send them a short survey about the application experience. This feedback solicitation should be conducted immediately after the application experience while it is still top of mind and before a candidate knows if they will progress in the interview process. The second area is hiring manager performance at each stage of the process. The candidate feedback may show that the breakdown in communication lies with a certain hiring manager.[6]

FREQUENCY OF MEASURING CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE

	2021	2020
Always	29%	21%
Sometimes	38%	47%
Never or almost never	33%	32%
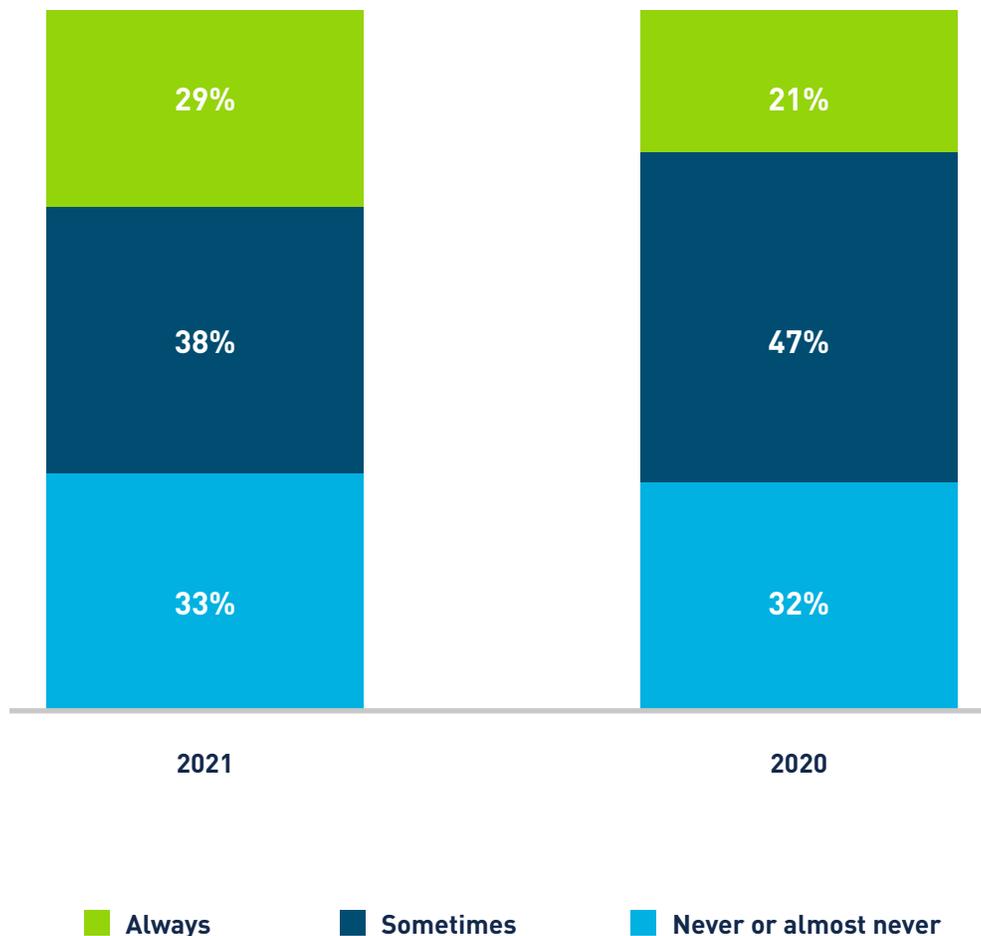
## Candidate Feedback after Face-to-Face Interviews

How often do you give feedback to candidates you reject after face-to-face interviews/assessments?

Study participants were asked if they give feedback to candidates they reject after face-to-face interviews. The proportions of giving feedback to candidates and requesting it from them are similar. Less than one-third (29%) of participants make it a consistent practice, though that percentage is up from 21% in 2020. Further, the percentage of respondents who never give feedback was down 8 percentage points to 31%.

There are several good reasons to answer inquiries from rejected interviewees. First and foremost, it can create goodwill between the candidate and the company. Applicants have a megaphone for their reactions to how they are treated. Leave them in the dark after they've worked hard to shine at an interview and an employer may have to battle criticism about their company on social media. Instead, provide constructive feedback, and develop mutual respect between the candidate and the company.

Creating a positive link also populates your pipeline for future hires. Employers should consider giving feedback only to interviewees who finish in second, third or fourth place. Beyond that is mostly negative commentary, which has legal implications. Further, not all interviewed applicants will ask for personalized insights, which would reduce the amount of feedback required.[7]

CANDIDATE FEEDBACK AFTER FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

2021	2020
Always: 29%	Always: 21%
Sometimes: 40%	Sometimes: 40%
Never or almost never: 31%	Never or almost never: 39%

Legend: Always ■ | Sometimes ■ | Never or almost never ■
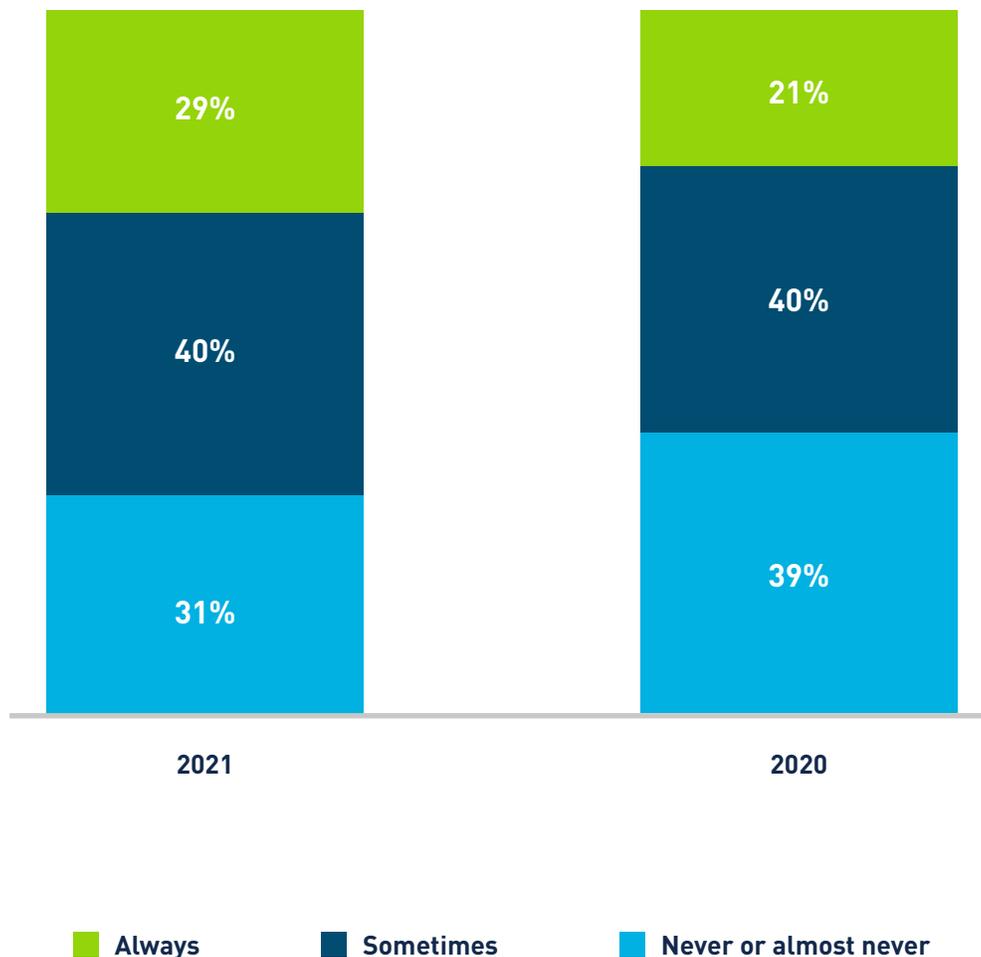
Plans for Employer Brand

Which of the following are part of your plans to improve your employer brand? Please select all that apply.

Study participants were asked to identify the areas they are focusing on in hopes of elevating their employer brand. They were shown a list of 15 factors and asked to select those they are planning to use.

Overall, 41% plan to use employee recognition programs to improve their employer brand, likely in response to the circumstances of the pandemic. While a significant segment of the workforce was expected to become remote in 2020, the explosion of remote working as a direct result of COVID-19 could not have been predicted. Remote working, particularly with the sudden and unexpected transition, can lead to feelings of isolation and a sense of invisibility. Employees also feel pressure, either self-inflicted or from management, to prove to peers and managers that they are productive. Being recognized through formal programs reassures remote workers that their efforts are seen and appreciated.[8]

The next most anticipated area to boost employer brand is using more social media. Over one-third (37%) of respondents indicated they plan more social media usage, though that was down significantly from 2020, when 65% planned to use more social media. Social media usage was way up during the pandemic.[8] Many of those who planned more social media usage have already accomplished their plans and are more focused on maintaining the higher level of usage already established in 2020.

There were two other areas that significantly changed in anticipated use between 2020 and 2021. Both involve the incorporation of employees into employer brand plans. Plans for the greater use of employees as brand advocates was indicated by about one-third (32%) of respondents, down from 52% in 2020. Expansion into employee retention was selected by just over one-quarter (27%) of respondents. The decline in intent to increase use of employees in these areas does not signal less use of them for employer brand plan improvement, but suggests the growth in use is leveling off.

PLANS TO IMPROVE EMPLOYER BRAND

| Factor	2021	2020
Employee recognition programs	1%	26%
More social networking usage	37%	65%
Sharing responsibility with marketing department	34%	42%
Increased use of videos	32%	35%
Greater use of employees as brand advocates	32%	52%
Consistently monitoring employer review sites	32%	29%
Review and update your EVP*	29%	
Establish metrics measuring employer brand success	29%	29%
Increased knowledge base of employer brand best practices	27%	32%
Expansion into employee retention	27%	39%
Expanded campus recruting	22%	26%
Dedicated resources	17%	13%
Make HR primary owner of employer brand	12%	6%
Increased budget	10%	6%
Dedicated budget	5%	10%

2021
2020

No data available for 2020.

Anticipated Investment in Employer Brand

How do you anticipate the investment in your employer brand will change 24 months from now?

Companies will continue to invest in their employer brands. Nearly one-half (48%) of participants anticipate a greater investment, though the percentage that will increase more 24 months into the future fell from 74% in 2020. Nearly one-half (45%) of respondents plan no change in their anticipated investment, either holding steady from 2020 increases or reacting to budget constraints as their companies emerge from the pandemic.

ANTICIPATED INVESTMENT IN EMPLOYER BRAND

2021
- 5%
- 3%
- 45%
- 45%
- 3%

2020
- 3%
- 10%
- 13%
- 71%
- 3%
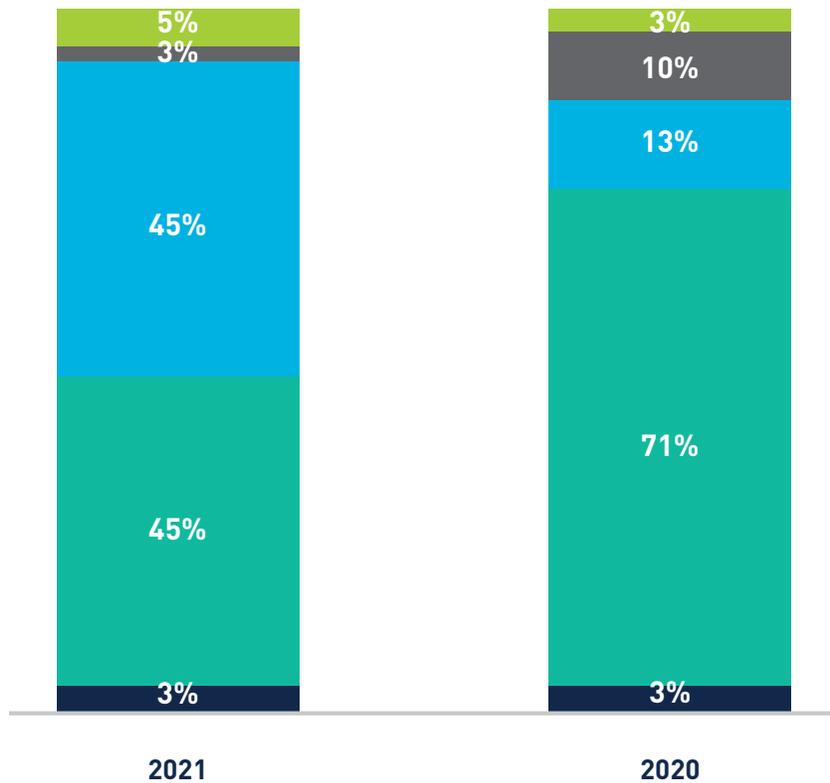
Legend:
- Much less investment
- No Change
- Much more investment
- Less investment
- More investment

# EFFECT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EMPLOYER BRAND

Long-Term Impact on Importance of Employer Brand

What will the long-term impact on the importance of the employer brand be given the COVID-19 pandemic?

Over three-quarters (77%) of study respondents felt their employer brand is going to become more important in the long-term given the pandemic, though that is down from 87% in 2020. How companies have responded to the pandemic will have a lasting effect on a company's culture, reputation, and ability to attract, recruit and retain talent today and in the future.[12]

Organizations' actions in protecting their employees during the pandemic will affect their ability to both attract new talent and retain top talent because it indicates not only what the employee experience might be like, but also provides a window into the organization's values. The way employers will be assessed and their employer brands verified is through policies that addressed how the company supported employees. Those policies encompassed who were furloughed or temporarily laid off, what was the balance of employee financial wellbeing to that of the organization, how was employees' health and safety ensured, and how did the company support employees working from home and keep them engaged and productive.[9]

EFFECT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EMPLOYER BRAND

2021: Less important (Net) 5% | Neutral 18% | More important 62% | Much more important 15%

2020: Neutral 0% / 13% | More important 61% | Much more important 26%

Legend: Much more important | More important | Neutral | Less important (Net)
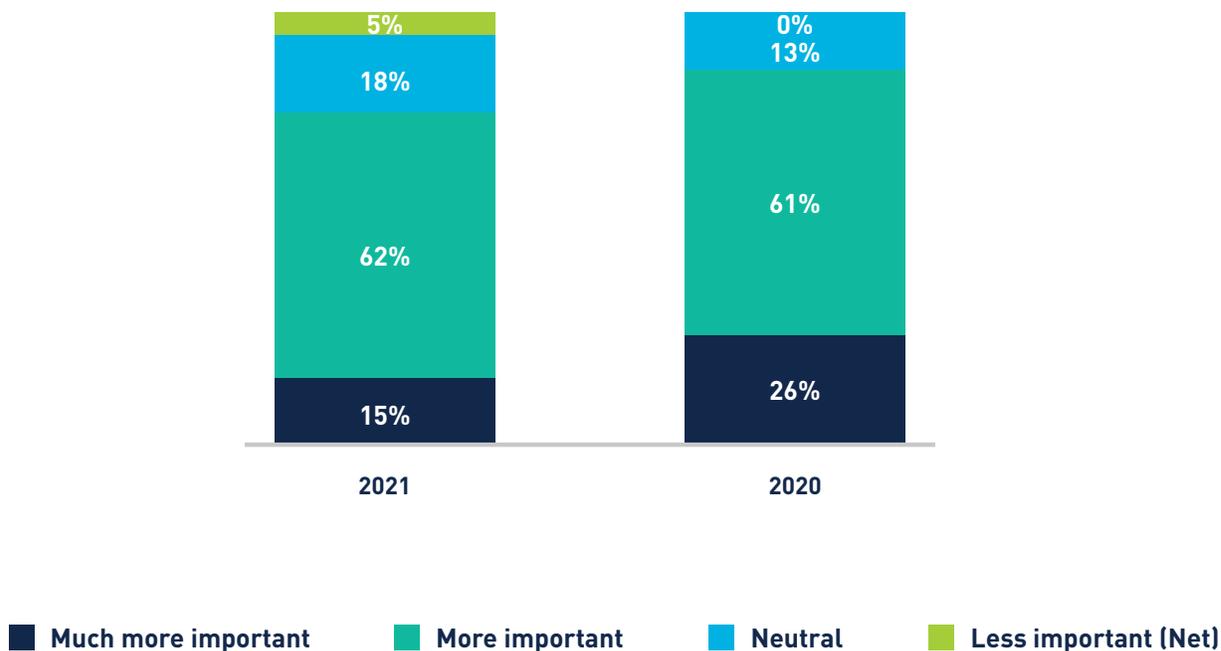
Ways Companies Have Adjusted Employer Brand
In what ways has your company adjusted its employer brand in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Respondents were asked to select all the ways their companies have adjusted their employer brands in response to the pandemic. Overall, 72% of respondents adjusted their employer brand in some way. Nearly two-thirds (61%) of those adjusting it have actively promoted the ways the company has responded to protect employees. Into the second quarter of 2021, organizations continue measures designed to protect employees from potential infection. Working from home, rotating employees at the office, social distancing and numerous sanitation practices have been put into place to protect employees. Images of these practices are a key element of how companies convey how they care for their employees.

There was also increased emphasis on the employer brand for one-half (50%) of participants vs. only 7% who indicated less emphasis. With the long-term impact of the employer brand becoming more important, greater emphasis on it during the pandemic is consistent. The pandemic drove changes to the employer brand and shined a spotlight on it.

Those who have adjusted it most often focused internally, with more emphasis on the brand with the current workforce, according to 46% of respondents. Messages of reassurance and company priorities as they pertain to the welfare of employees have been more prevalently incorporated into the employer brand.

WAYS COMPANIES HAVE ADJUSTED EMPLOYER BRAND

Actively promoted ways company has responded to protect employees	61%
Increased emphasis on employer brand	50%
Less emphasis on employer brand	7%
More emphasis on employer brand with current workforce	46%
Less use of employee brand for recruiting	7%
Have not adjusted employer brand	28%
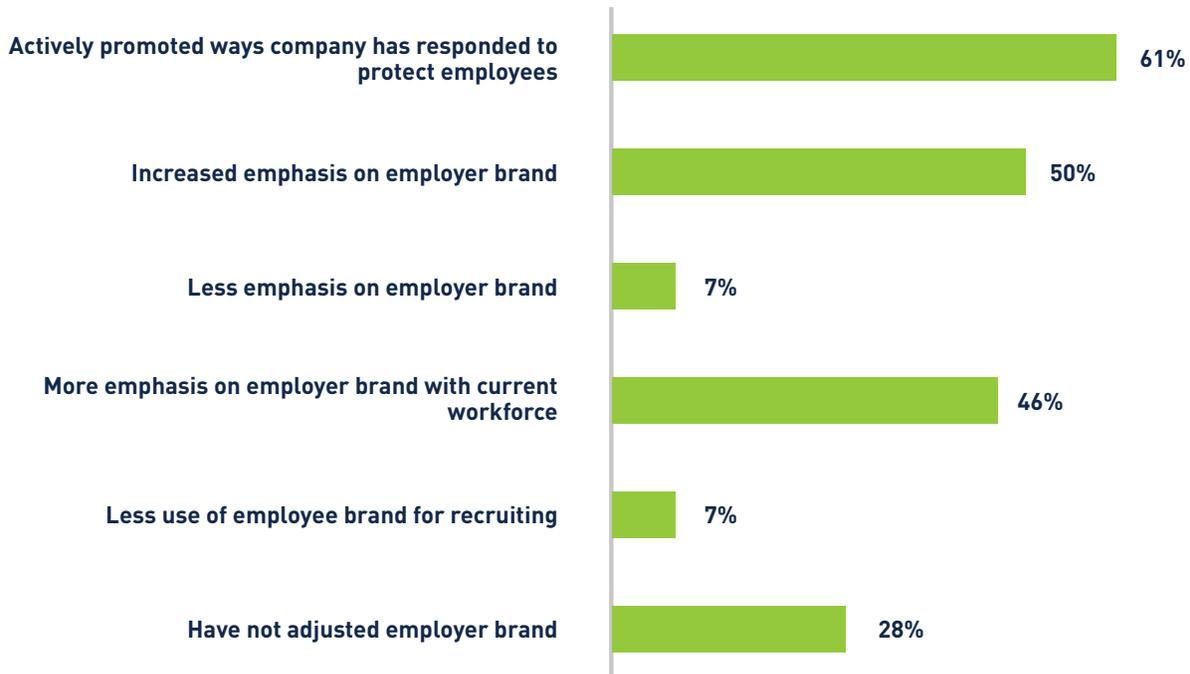
How has the importance of diversity and inclusion messaging changed as part of your employer brand over the last 12 months?

Remarkably, the pandemic was not the only major event profoundly impacting North America in 2020. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others were catalysts for the movement in the United States that generated a renewed spotlight on systemic racism and its impact on recruiting processes. Because of this, many corporations began reexamining the role of diversity and inclusion in their employer brand.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of study respondents indicated that the importance of addressing D&I in employer brand messaging increased over the last 12 months, with most of the remainder stating no change.

Strong employer branding is vital to attract talent. Employers want employees to look at them as a company that hires people for their talent and their credentials, not for where they came from or how they look.

Customer acquisition and retention is also heavily affected by employer branding. Nowadays, customers prefer buying products from companies with strong missions and visions, as well as those considered equal and humane when it comes to their employees.[10]

HOW THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MESSAGING HAS CHANGED

■ Increased greatly   ■ Increased   ■ No change   ■ Decreased
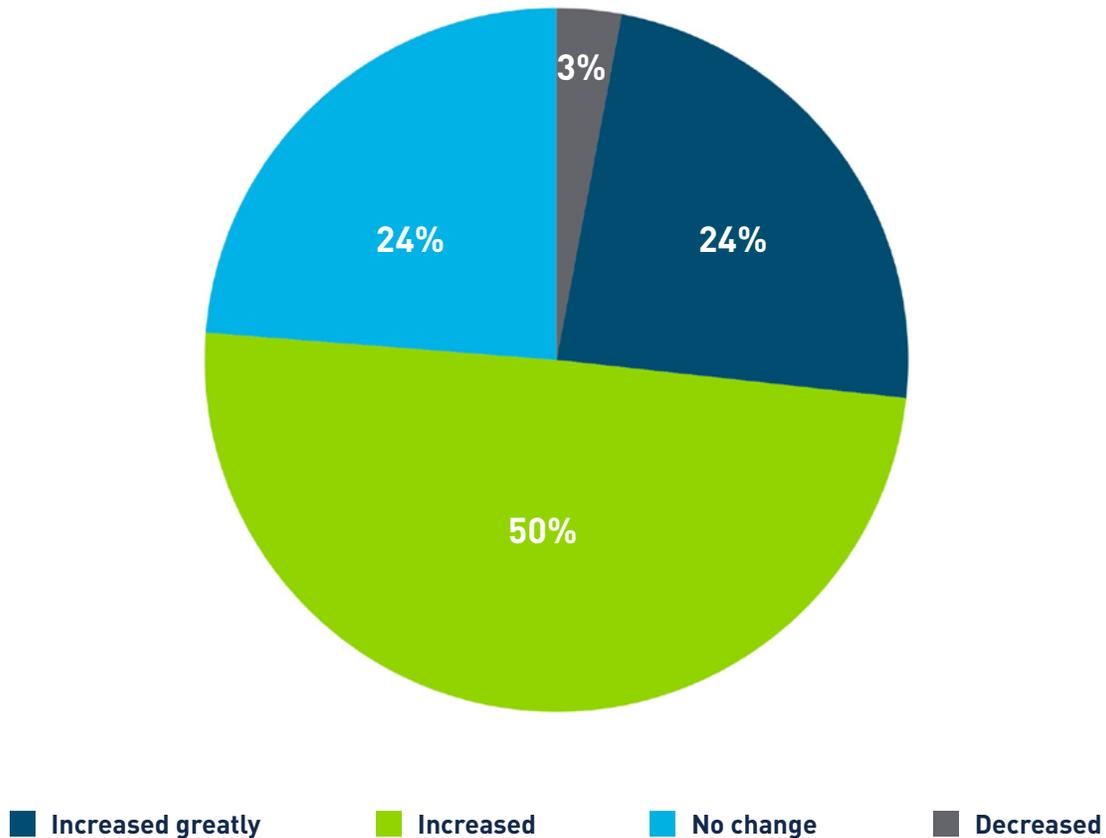
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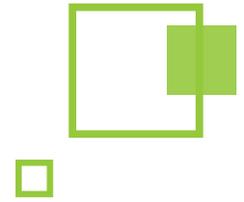
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