



AMA RESEARCH

Implications of the 2020 Pandemic: MANAGING THROUGH UNCERTAINTY



American Management Association

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Introduction

What was the most-used phrase of 2020? Perhaps it was “You’re on Mute” or “Can you see my screen?” Another likely candidate is the acronym VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous), as in “this is a VUCA world we live in today.” This acronym developed in military intelligence circles several decades ago, but 2020 was likely the year of its widest usage, because it so accurately describes life and work during a pandemic. Of these four characteristics (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity), uncertainty may be the most challenging to experience. Whereas ambiguity is a difference of interpretation regarding information, uncertainty means not knowing, not being able to get all of the relevant facts, not having the information.

COVID has generated uncertainty in so many facets of our lives. Specialists are still researching exactly how it spreads and how long immunity can last. Guidelines regarding how to safeguard your health are constantly changing. Consequently, the pandemic has generated organizational uncertainty. There were doubts as to whether or not we would be able to successfully work remotely. For how long? What would happen to teamwork and motivation? When will we return to co-located working? Will our work environment be different?

Research in psychology and anthropology suggests that most of us are very uncomfortable with uncertainty. Given that 2020 was a year of pronounced and prolonged uncertainty, many observers assumed that organizations and employees would perform poorly in this pandemic. American Management Association (AMA) conducted a survey whose results disprove such predictions. While almost every organization has been disrupted by the pandemic, many employees report an increased capacity to manage and direct themselves; an increased ability to think creatively and innovate; and a sustained sense of connection to their organization and its mission.

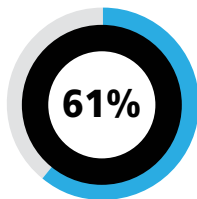
In this study, participants were asked to assess their own performance during the pandemic, as well as their organization’s overall performance. Participants were AMA Members and other AMA customers who were geographically distributed throughout the United States.



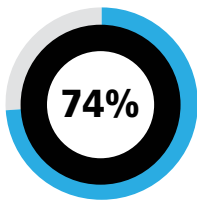
KEY FINDING 1:

Employees Have Become More Self-Directed and Self-Managing

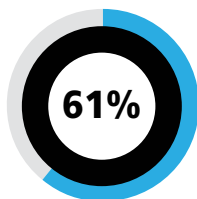
Participants responded to items designed to understand their capability to function autonomously while working remotely. Their responses suggest that employees have quickly and effectively adapted to the need to take more initiative:



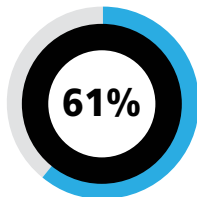
of participants indicated that, since the beginning of the pandemic, they have taken on additional roles and/or responsibilities.



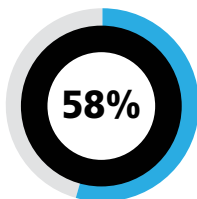
agreed that they have become more flexible and more agile regarding their work.



agreed that working remotely has enabled them to be more productive because they can better manage time and workflow.



agreed that working remotely has been a valuable opportunity to become more self-directed.



agreed that working remotely has provided valuable opportunities to take more initiative.

KEY FINDING 2:

Employees Are More Creative and Innovative

Participants responded to items designed to understand the effect of the pandemic and working remotely on their ability to think creatively and innovate.



63% agreed that working during the pandemic has inspired them to take more initiative and find innovative solutions to solving problems.



65% agreed that they and their colleagues have become more nimble and more agile.



67% agreed that they and their colleagues have become more innovative.



KEY FINDING 3:

Employees Feel Connected to Teams and Organizational Mission

Survey participants responded to items designed to understand the effect of the pandemic and remote working on intrinsic motivators, such as their feelings of commitment to their organization's mission and their ability to work effectively in teams:



37% indicated that remote work did not negatively affect their ability to feel connected to colleagues and teams (23.3% of respondents were neutral).



32% indicated that lacking face-to-face interactions with colleagues did not negatively affect their awareness of work across the organization (21.9% of respondents were neutral).



27% indicated that working remotely did not negatively impact their sense of connection to their organization and its mission (28.0% of respondents were neutral).



36% indicated that working remotely *has led to more frequent interactions* among managers, direct reports and teams (33.4% of respondents were neutral).



35% indicated that working remotely did not reinforce "silos" and other divisions within their organization (37.3% of respondents were neutral).



Implications of Findings

Given social scientific data suggesting that people have an aversion to uncertainty, these survey results may be surprising. For example, remote work has not had the overwhelmingly negative impact on team cohesion that many had expected in the early months of the pandemic. Rather, team work may not have been impacted at all; and, in some instances, communication among managers, individual contributors, and teams has become more deliberate and has thus improved. Likewise, in recent years, accepted wisdom has asserted that random, spontaneous in-person encounters and impromptu water-cooler conversations are the life-blood of creativity and innovation. Yet, participants in this survey report increased creativity and innovation, although their interactions with colleagues now must be deliberately conducted in writing (emails and texts) or scheduled (phone calls and virtual meetings).

In a similar way, early-pandemic concerns about individuals' ability to manage their time and achieve results, without the direct supervision common to co-located work, are not supported by these results. Such concerns may have reflected an assumption that most employees are motivated by what some researchers label a "control orientation" (meaning employees are motivated by externally reinforced standards). Participant responses suggest that they have developed a greater autonomy orientation during the pandemic (meaning they are motivated by an internal satisfaction with a sense of self-efficacy and achieving results). It appears that employees feel more empowered to be self-directed, even in the face of the uncertainty generated by the pandemic and related economic challenges.



Conclusion

Here are the top 5 must-have skills professionals need during times of change and uncertainty:

- Having a positive approach to managing change
- Approaching new challenges with agility and innovation
- Building strong relationships
- Managing a hybrid or remote team
- Demonstrating strong project management skills

2021 has begun with continued uncertainty. For instance, researchers are still learning how the COVID virus mutates. There is also uncertainty about people's behavior. Even when individuals can be effectively vaccinated against COVID, will they fully return to the consumer choices they were making before the pandemic? Or, will they continue to forego some types of activities and will some industries, such as those associated with entertainment, be permanently changed?

Questions about behavior change also involve the way individuals work. As these survey results suggest, employees are becoming more self-directed, more autonomous; they are becoming more agile; they are figuring out how to collaborate creatively without the familiar tools and patterns of co-located work. The behavior changes raise the question: After an extended period of self-management and self-direction, what will employees need to stay engaged once they return to the office? What will organizations need to change regarding management styles and supervision? How will organizations shift to a greater focus on results? The behavior changes suggested by this study are largely positive. Organizations need to be ready to leverage these new strengths in the weeks and months to come.

Anticipating organizations' need to leverage positive changes in employee ability and behavior, AMA asked survey participants to identify the capabilities that are most critical to succeeding in this new work environment.

AMA is committed to providing opportunities for individuals at all levels of the organization to capitalize on the strengths they have developed during the pandemic, and to develop the capabilities and skills essential to thriving in these VUCA times. As organizations re-define the approach they take to developing their talent, they can trust AMA to provide them with options that drive behavior change and have a positive lasting impact.

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