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“Future of Work” Survey Shows Employees Centered in Reopening

More than 100 Massachusetts-based companies reflect employee priorities of flexibility in their reopening plans

Boston, MA –A recent survey conducted by the Massachusetts Competitive Partnership (MACP), and its business association collaborators, shows employee retention, satisfaction and overall employee sentiments as top factors influencing employer return to work plans.

Of the companies surveyed, 85% of their employees were still working either fully or partially remote with projections for this number to decrease to 58% as vaccination rates increase and employees begin to feel more comfortable with returning to on-site work.

“This survey reflects how seriously employers are considering their employees wishes in returning to the office. We have learned a lot through the pandemic and one of the most important takeaways is that return-to-work does not have to mean “return-to-status quo”, said Jeffrey M. Leiden, M.D., Ph.D., Executive Chairman of Vertex Pharmaceuticals, who also chairs the MACP Board of Directors. “Over the last year, many businesses have experienced high-productivity and sustained, if not enhanced, employee and customer experiences. It is clear that both employers and employees wish to capitalize on the flexibility achieved in planning for the future.”

The fourth collaborative survey, led by MACP, included respondents from the Massachusetts Technology Leadership Council (MassTLC), the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce (GBCC), NAIOP Massachusetts – The Commercial Real Estate Development Association, the Middlesex 3 Coalition, the Massachusetts Business Roundtable (MBR), and the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation (MTF). The Harvard Kennedy School’s Hannah Riley Bowles and Northeastern University’s Alicia Sasser Modestino provided consultation in survey design, data collection, and preliminary analysis.

MassTLC CEO Tom Hopcroft continued to play an important role in the survey, coordinating responses from businesses across the technology sector. “These results further our collective understanding of what the future of work will look like – it is certainly not a one-size-fits-all approach,” remarked Hopcroft. “Access to talent has always been a key factor in technology companies choosing to locate in Massachusetts. It is no surprise that employees’ preferences are significantly influencing longer-term business decisions.”

The decisions businesses are making now will have implications for commercial real estate, airline travel, and public transit. With 82% of companies planning to offer increased remote or

hybrid work options, 36% of companies are considering reducing their physical footprint in Massachusetts.

“This survey affirms what we are seeing in the market as companies renew leases,” said Tamara Small, CEO of NAIOP Massachusetts, The Commercial Real Estate Development Association.

“The data illustrates that employers will expect the majority of their workforce to be onsite in some capacity within the next nine months. As these hybrid models are implemented and offices are redefined, we anticipate employers will continue to see the importance of in-person work environments, particularly for idea generation, company culture, collaboration, and mentorship.”

Business travel continues to lag behind pre-pandemic levels with no sign of returning soon with companies projecting that only 73% of pre-pandemic business air travel will resume by the end of 2022. As for public transit, 65% of companies representing over 80,000 employees anticipate employee dependency on public transit to return to or only decrease modestly compared to pre-pandemic levels.

This survey showed a shift in companies thinking about physical relocation with companies considering out-of-state real estate options falling from 38% in December 2020 to just 5% in May 2021. However, when it comes to hiring practices more companies are considering hiring from outside of Massachusetts (53%). This reinforces the employee-centric approach companies are taking to redesigning onsite work requirements. If employees do not need to be in the office to be successful, they can choose to live in other lower cost states creating the potential for short-and long-term job loss for the Commonwealth.

“It is still too early to fully measure the impact the sustained conversion to remote/hybrid work will have, but what this survey demonstrates is that there will be considerable implications for policy makers as employers reconfigure office space and reopen to employees,” said Jay Ash, President and CEO of MACP and former Secretary of Housing and Economic Development.

“What keeps me up at night is the impact these changes will have on where companies decide to do business and create new jobs. Talent has always been at the core of Massachusetts’ success. If companies do not need to be in Massachusetts to get the best and brightest and barriers to exit have been lowered, we may see significant, unanticipated negative economic impact.”

Other key findings from the survey include:

- The majority of companies (51%) anticipate that Friday will have the largest percent of employees working remotely.
- The majority of companies are projecting that Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday will have the most on-site activity with over 50% of companies expecting 51-100% of their employees returning to the office.
- Employers estimate that 83% of employees are willing to be vaccinated.

- Paid time off is the most frequently cited employer-provided support for employees receiving a vaccine – information on registration, booking appointments and general eligibility were listed as other top supports offered.
- 60% of employers report concern over side effects/safety of vaccine as top reason why employees may choose not to be vaccinated.
- 54% of employers report that it is somewhat or extremely unlikely that they will mandate vaccinations.

“MACP and its partners are doing a service for the state by surfacing this information,” said Hannah Riley Bowles, Harvard Kennedy School Senior Lecturer and Co-Director of the HKS Center for Public Leadership and HKS Women and Public Policy Program. “As Massachusetts workers and employers coordinate their way toward a new normal, it is heartening to see high optimism about vaccination rates, innovations in work practices to retain talent and enhance productivity, and increasing predictability in the evolving shift toward more hybrid remote/on-site work arrangements.”

The survey was conducted from April 12 to May 10 of 2021, with 110 companies representing 113,505 employees in Massachusetts participating. The majority of the surveyed employers, 57%, are headquartered in the Boston/Cambridge area, with another 35% located in suburban areas within 495, and 6% outside of 495.

About MACP

The Massachusetts Competitive Partnership is a non-profit, non-partisan, 501(c)(4) public policy group comprised of chief executive officers of some of the Commonwealth's largest businesses. The Partnership's goals are to promote job growth and competitiveness in the Commonwealth by working in collaboration with public officials and business and civic leaders in Massachusetts. MACP's mission is to promote job stabilization and growth across the full spectrum of business and within all geographic regions of the Commonwealth.