

COVID-19 = W³

"How the Pandemic is Transforming
Women, the Workforce, and the Workplace"

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As a full-time working mom with a partner that works outside of the home, I am drowning, while simultaneously afraid that my colleagues will find out and think less of my work performance. So I overcompensate and push myself even harder at work while my duties at home with a cooped-up preschooler and breastfed baby are more demanding and important than ever. I worry constantly about my children's development, my reliance on screen time to get anything done, and their lack of social interaction. I'm pulled in so many opposing directions, and my physical health is suffering. To other working mamas out there, you are definitely not alone.¹

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One of the many voices needing to be heard

¹ Anonymous comment on "Out of Office: A Survey of Our New Work Lives." *nytimes.com*, 20 August 2020.

Overview & Key Findings

The Research

I designed the largest survey done to-date on the impact of COVID-19 on working mothers to investigate the highly-charged concerns I was hearing from senior company executives, fellow HR leaders, and a large cohort of women in the workforce. While there are no shortage of obstacles for any demographic in 2020, I started with the one I know the most about. I collected feedback from 550 working women (including 510 mothers) from cities across the nation using multiple social and professional networks. The insights that are found in this study are applicable to a much broader community of people, but it is important to acknowledge that there are deeper and more complex challenges not fully represented in my findings (e.g. single mothers, those with children with special needs, women in marginalized groups). Future surveys could and should address other cohorts of people to have a more holistic view on how COVID-19 has shaped the full workforce.

The Approach

I created a 50-question survey and received feedback from women in a variety of industries, though over 60% hail from: Financial Services, Healthcare, Education, Consulting, and Technology.

I supplemented the quantitative insights by conducting a series of 1:1 interviews and focus groups to qualitatively probe more deeply. I then did a thorough analysis to evaluate the results. Interestingly, all of the high-level trends remained consistent when I reviewed the data after each 100 responses; the messages remained the same, but the volume kept getting louder.

The Findings

I am humbled to share the key findings from my survey:

- 1 COVID-19 is driving uncertainty and unsustainable adjustments for working mothers and the companies that employ them**
- 2 Women are making high-impact and unprecedented decisions now, despite an uncertain future**
- 3 Employers need to reset and reconfigure people strategies; the “new normal” will soon give way to a reimagined future for women, the workforce and the workplace**

Key Participant Demographics



1. Covid-19 is driving uncertainty and unsustainable adjustments for working mothers and the companies that employ them

What You Need To Know:

- **Bad Timing:** We are well beyond the initial expected duration of remote work and school closures
- **Miscalculation:** Women made short-term decisions based on original timing
- **Initial Personal Strategy:** Women created the illusion they were balancing it all to reduce career risk
- **Real Timing:** Disruption duration will now be *at least* 15-18 months
- **Systemic Challenges:** Schools, childcare, and even home internet needs out of sync with current workforce demands
- **Social Distancing Time Thief:** Simple tasks (e.g. grocery shopping) are consuming hours vs. minutes
- **Regressive Childcare Tax:** Hiring of private nannies eating away at personal earnings and savings

Companies Should Consider:

- **Workspace:** Assess clumsy adjustments being made to the home as the new workspace
- **Culture:** Rethink large historical investments in face-to-face events (e.g. town halls, annual trips, off-sites, etc.)
- **Connectivity, Performance, and Loyalty:** Clarify what this looks like in a virtual work world

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work for employers that will reopen in 2021 or later

65 %

observed impact to their marriage (2/3 negative)

3/4

experienced disruption to their childcare or schools

80 %

isolated from close family members

ASSESSMENT OF WELLNESS DIMENSIONS

The surveyed women rated their well-being across 10 wellness dimensions pre-COVID and today on a scale from 1-5 (very poor to very good). Average scores are shown below. The biggest negative impacts seen were social (friends and work), emotional (anxiety and stress), and job security. The one dimension that increased was physical exercise due to the reduced commute and more time at home.

Dimension (Rated on 1-5 scale)	Pre-Covid	Today	Impact
Social - friends	4.1	3.0	-1.1
Emotional - anxiety	3.6	2.5	-1.0
Emotional - stress	3.3	2.3	-1.0
Social - work	4.1	3.0	-1.0
Career - job security	4.3	3.6	-0.7
Financial - stability	4.2	3.7	-0.6
Social - community / neighborhood	3.6	3.2	-0.4
Physical - food / healthy eating	3.6	3.4	-0.2
Physical - health	3.8	3.7	-0.1
Physical - exercise	3.4	3.5	0.1

COVID-19 & LOSS

20 %

personally or their spouse / partner tested positive for Covid

11 %

lost a loved one to Covid-19

23 %

lost a loved one to something else

TRAUMA & GRIEF

64 %

didn't have the time, space, or ability to process the trauma and grief they have experienced

TOP 10 STRESSORS

1. Childcare / school
2. Lack of "normalcy"
3. Children's wellbeing
4. Performance at work
5. Lack of social interactions
6. Personal health and wellbeing
7. Finances
8. Marriage
9. Family conflicts
10. Home office environment

2. Women are making high-impact and unprecedented decisions now, despite an uncertain future

What You Need to Know:

- **Tipping Point:** Work, childcare, and home loads are at their peak
- **Environment:** Office space is invading home space
- **Children's Wellbeing:** Social, emotional, and mental development are under assault
- **BLM and Social Justice:** Suggest we need a better way now
- **New Inner Voice:** Women are feeling the imbalance and starting to listen, redefine their purpose, and take action
- **Time for a fundamental shift:** Women are making massive changes to prioritize children, families, and communities
- **New Blueprints for Success:** Women are taking control of work days, work hours, and career conversations

Companies Should Consider:

- **Management:** Train and model behavior to show managers how to create personal and genuine connections with staff
- **Social Justice:** Listen, take a stance, communicate and act with authenticity
- **Anticipate:** Proactively plan for employees' needs to regain the driver seat in career discussions

FRESH START

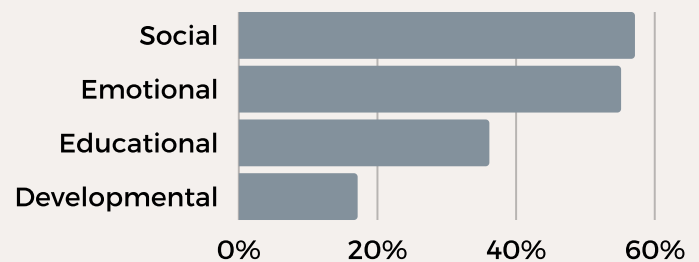
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are likely or very likely to leave their job by choice in the next 12 months:

- **60%** will look for a new FT role with better flexibility, benefits, and career opportunities
- **20%** will take a break from the workplace to care for children
- **10%** will look for a PT role
- **10%** will be self-employed or consult

IMPACT TO CHILDREN

Surveyed mothers have observed impacts to children of all ages with 80% of mothers observing at least one negative impact during the pandemic:



CHILDCARE CONCERNS

Over three-quarters of working mothers had and still have concerns regarding their childcare options. Key concerns include:

1. Fear of COVID-19 exposure
2. Daycare / school will be unable to remain open
3. Uncomfortable with someone coming into their home
4. Reduced income / unable to afford

SOCIAL JUSTICE

25 %

were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their employer's response to the BLM movement

50 %

reported their employer's response (or lack thereof) impacts their desire to stay at their organization

MANAGERS MISSED THE MARK

Top 3 Areas for Improvement:

1. Empathy
2. Authentic interest in how employees are feeling / doing
3. Ability to create a successful team dynamic remotely

3. Employers need to reset and reconfigure people strategies; the “new normal” will soon give way to a reimagined future for women, the workforce and the workplace

What You Should Know:

- **The Home as New Company Office:** Challenging the large legacy investment in office assets
- **Employee Loyalty:** More temporary and transactional as companies protect themselves as first priority
- **Complex Individual Employee Challenges:** Not subject to historical “one size fits all” HR solutions
- **Company Intentions and Efforts Fall Short:** Inadequate communication and follow-through
- **Reduced Employee Engagement:** Driving challenges to productivity
- **Job Hunting and Jumping Momentum:** Meaningful and growing as new COVID-related gaps in retention strategies reveal themselves

Companies Should Consider:

- **Define and Declare** how important is engagement, retention, and culture to corporate success
- **Design Customized Yet Scalable COVID-specific and Future HR Solutions** for flexibility, benefits, mental health services, and more
- **Retrain Front-line Managers** to deliver these customized solutions
- **Recognize Limits** as available solutions may still yield some gaps
- **Reimagine and Redesign Corporate Culture** to reflect the new reality and need for engagement, retention, and loyalty
- **The time is now** given 12-18 month large-scale change management cycle

45 %

don't have clarity on their role or responsibilities for 2020

65 %

don't know what is necessary to progress to the next level in their career

60 %

no, little, or moderate awareness about new COVID-19 company benefits

65 %

want employer to have better awareness, acknowledgement, training, and benefits for today's realities

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Engagement Level	Pre-Covid	Today	Change
A great deal	54%	32%	-18%
A lot	30%	26%	-4%
A moderate amount	12%	26%	+14%
A little	3%	12%	+9%
None	1%	4%	+3%

- Employee engagement was measured on a 1-5 scale.
- On average, *engagement decreased from 4.3 to 3.7 pre-COVID to today.*
- The unprecedented nature of 2020 has created a stress test on historical dimensions of employee engagement, and many organizations are missing the mark.

Parting Words

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This research process left me feeling certain that we are experiencing the single-largest personal and professional transformation in our lifetime.

The learnings from this work strongly suggest that employee connection and retention are now on the line like never before.

Companies that respond thoughtfully and effectively will create strategic advantage that will drive shifts in workforce perceptions and loyalty.

Companies that embrace the needed changes now will begin operating in the "future-state" today, while every other organization will be stuck playing catch-up.

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About the Author

About Me

My name is Ali Caravella. My experience includes former Global Head of HR, human capital consultant, a degree in Mathematics from Vanderbilt University, mom of two toddlers, wife, and the embodiment of the results of the largest study done to date on the impact of COVID-19 on working mothers in the United States. Triggered by this pandemic, I, like many other working mothers, have made significant adjustments to my personal and professional life.

COVID-19 Disruption

As a result of the pandemic, my role as a Global HR leader was turned upside-down, as my responsibilities turned into 70+ hour work weeks consumed with strategizing and executing monumental reorganizations and layoffs. Amidst the chaos, my husband and I both came down with COVID-19 for over a month and our children's preschool closed. We faced unprecedented familial disruption and had to do our best to manage our family's physical and mental health while also prioritizing and protecting our careers.

Multi-Front Personal Action

In the face of what felt like an emotional tsunami of potential helplessness, I began to make some major changes. Initially I prioritized my career and team due to the critical and urgent nature of my work, and then I turned my focus to launching a backyard neighborhood summer camp and building a charter for a pod preschool. Finally, I made the decision to walk away from my steady paycheck to go out on my own and dedicate all my professional time to working mothers and the companies who employ them. To kickstart my new career, I authored this research to help my fellow working mothers and companies struggling with the "new normal" navigate the greatest personal and professional disruption I've observed in my lifetime.