



# 5 Steps to More Hopeful (and Productive) Employees

As a small business owner, you are constantly juggling the needs of employees and customers as you work through the challenges of today and position your business for success for years to come. If you are like the vast majority (94%) of small and medium businesses (SMB), you and your employees have felt the impact resulting from the pandemic, according to [BluePrint Research Group](#).

The good news: You survived the initial crisis!

Now it's time to create a longer-term plan for your business to grow and thrive. While operational processes and customer experiences are crucial, you must first focus on your biggest asset — your employees. Without an empowered, engaged and focused workforce, it's challenging to build the loyal customer base that's key to your business success.

## **Your business benefits when employees are engaged**

Having an unengaged workforce with low morale can cost your company sales, profits, and productivity. However, an engaged workforce grows your company. [Gallup](#) found that companies in the top 25% of employee engagement saw 20% higher sales, 21% higher profitability, and 17% higher productivity.

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Other benefits included:

- 40% fewer product defects
- 40% lower absenteeism
- 700% fewer safety issues
- 24%- 59% less turnover across all organizations

With Gallup also reporting that 85% of employees globally are unengaged at work, companies with engaged workforces clearly are at a competitive advantage.

### How Are Your Employees Doing?

Your employees are not the only ones struggling in these difficult times. **McKinsey & Company** reported that employees' across industries are experiencing challenges during the pandemic:

- Anxiety over layoffs/furloughs
- Burnout
- Mental health
- Childcare/homeschooling responsibilities
- Health of loved ones
- Financial insecurity

With all these challenges, it's not surprising that employees' mental health is being affected. **Boston University School of Public Health** determined that the number of U.S. adults experiencing depression has tripled during the pandemic.

**69% of workers felt that the era of COVID-19 is the most stressful time in their professional career, with 62% losing one hour a day in productivity due to the stress and 32% losing more than two hours daily.**

Pandemic-related stress affects both mental health and productivity. **Mental health provider Ginger** reported that 69% of workers felt that the era of COVID-19 is the most stressful time in their professional career, with 62% losing one hour a day in productivity due to the stress and 32% losing more than two hours daily. While the causes for the stress vary based on personal circumstance, **AP-NORC/SAP** found that parents of school-age children were 20% more likely to point to balancing work with other responsibilities than workers without children. Workers over 50 may be worried about losing their job, with **Legal & General** finding that 4.8 million older workers are concerned about job stability.

All of these negative feelings are most certainly accompanied by a looming feeling of despair, which is the loss of hope. While we often use the word "hope" casually, the definition is "a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen." Due to the pandemic and social distancing requirements, many events and celebrations — concerts, vacations, weddings, and graduations — have been cancelled. On a professional front many plans, such as opening new locations, expanding product lines, and conducting trainings, are no longer



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happening either due to restrictions, lower demand, or budget considerations. After experiencing several months of cancelled plans and disappointment, many people find themselves not making any more plans or even having expectations — which results in hopelessness. The really good news: Hope is an essential component of success, and it's a skill that every employee can learn.

### **Anxiety interferes with work**

Your first instinct may be to build up morale by offering expensive rewards programs or perks. These can be beneficial, but first ask yourself: How are your employees feeling? Are they looking forward to the future both in their personal lives and in their careers? Without feelings of optimism and all that comes with it, these programs won't be enough. Before the pandemic, the **Anxiety and Depression Association of America** found that 72% of those surveyed reported daily stress that interferes with their everyday life. The study also reported that anxiety interfered with the following:

- Workplace performance (56%)
- Relationships with co-workers (51%)
- Quality of work (50%)
- Relationships with superiors (43%)

However, hope is not simply good for morale and employee engagement, but it is crucial to business success. Research from the **International Journal of Scientific and Research Publication** shows that companies that have employees with higher levels of hope are more profitable and have higher retention rates and greater levels of employee



satisfaction and commitment. Companies must proactively work to create an environment of hope to realize these benefits.

### **Hope Improves Workplace Effectiveness and Productivity**

During a **recent podcast**, Tom Welchman, a partner in McKinsey's London office, said there is a risk of people feeling hopelessness and a lack of control as we move forward.

“It will be helpful for leaders to foster a strong sense of agency where possible, delegating control and making sure that we are creating personal ownership at the front lines, so people feel like, although the global situation may be out of their control, they have some control over how they spend their time on a daily basis. That links very closely to intrinsic motivation,” says Welchman.

Creating a hopeful workplace also has direct productivity impacts. A **Boston University study** found that hope actually accounts for 14% of productivity in the workplace — more than intelligence, optimism, or self-efficacy. While that may seem to be a small number, a 14% increase or decrease in employee productivity can make a distinct difference in your bottom line. It is important to understand that hope is more than an emotion or personality trait — it's a skill that employers can teach and employees can learn.

Hope starts at the top of the organization chart. Employees whose leaders make them feel enthusiastic about the future are 69% more likely to be engaged at work, according to a **Gallup survey**. Leaders must then consistently model the skill themselves in their approach to the business overall as well as in individual interactions with employees and customers. Gallup also found that the most commonly identified traits of effective leaders during the pandemic are stability, trust, compassion and hope. Let's focus on hope for the purpose of this paper.

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Because hope is something that you can't build with a single program or initiative, you must consciously make decisions with processes, communications and interactions that create a hopeful workplace and workforce.



### 1. Encourage goal setting.

For many people, the pandemic has taken away many future plans like work promotions, travel, and celebrations which can quickly translate into feeling both a loss of control and a loss of hope. By empowering employees to take charge of the things in their life and career that they can control, people have something they can look forward to.

If your company does not have a formal career goal-setting process, now is a great time to add this type of exercise for all employees.

- > Conduct a short training session on how to set both personal and career goals, and then have each employee work with their manager to review their goals on a regular basis.

- > Consider offering samples of both career and personal goals for employees to use for inspiration.
- > Create a worksheet employees can use to craft their goals, and then have both their manager and themselves sign the goal sheet for accountability.

By including optional personal goals into the process, you help your employees feel control over their whole life — and it lets them know that work is only a small part of their life.



### 2. Build self-efficacy in employees.

Although creating a goal is a solid step toward creating hope, the next step is creating a plan.

Employees need to believe that they can take the steps needed to achieve a goal. This is referred to as **self-efficacy**. By setting time aside during the workday for employees to create a step-by-step plan for both their personal and career goals, you are empowering them to take actionable steps.

Businesses that help employees with personalized and meaningful plans are more likely to build hope than those taking a one-size fits all approach. Instead of this being a one-time activity related to the pandemic, this should be built into your new post-pandemic processes. Revise your annual performance review process to include goal setting as a requirement for both personal and professional goals. By updating your policies, employees will see the importance of this exercise.





### 3. Focus on stress management.

Your employees are experiencing higher levels of stress than they did before the pandemic. With 37% of employees working more hours since the pandemic began, it's not surprising that **FlexJobs** found that 40% are experiencing pandemic-related burnout. For many employees, the stress is directly related to returning to a physical office building — Forrester reported that **50% of employees are afraid to go to work.**

By providing resources and tools to help employees cope, you can help them manage their stress, which improves their overall well-being as well as workplace productivity. Consider the following:

- **Offer a Zoom webinar with a yoga or meditation coach.** A recent **NYC School of Medicine study** found that yoga reduced anxiety in 53% of people with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. According to **Harvard Health**, yoga helps anxiety because it modulates stress response systems, which then decreases physiological arousal, lowering heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration rate.
- **Have walking challenges that utilize exercise trackers and offer fun prizes, to keep everyone moving.** The **Mayo Clinic** says that walking 30 minutes a day 3 to 5 days a week can significantly improve anxiety and depression, but even 10- to 15-minute walks can make a difference. Because most employees can walk for exercise — no equipment, low impact, and easy to get started — it's a good option to encourage for all employees.
- **Launch a contest, with prizes, for employees to set their own exercise goal.** Goals could include running their first 5K or exercising 5 times a week for 2 months straight. With many people feeling there is little to look forward to

right now, prizes and friendly competition can be a welcome relief and great motivator.

- **Offer supplemental insurance.** The **National Endowment for Financial Education** reported that 9 in 10 Americans felt anxious about money due to the pandemic, with 41% worried about having enough in emergency savings, 29% concerned about income fluctuations, and 28% concerned about paying mortgage, rent, or utility bills. Supplemental insurance benefits fill in gaps from health insurance to cover additional costs resulting from major health issues, such as cancer and critical illnesses.

**9 in 10 Americans felt anxious about money** due to the pandemic, with **41%** worried about having enough in emergency savings.

- **Offer increased flexibility.** With many employees now homeschooling or virtual schooling kids at home, offering increased flexibility about when work gets done, such as making up for lost hours in the evening or weekend, can reduce stress. Otherwise, companies may lose valuable employees. The **AP-NORC/SAP** study found that due to increased responsibilities 28% of workers have had to cut back on hours, 25% have considered quitting their job, and 20% have taken leave as a result of the pandemic.
- **Provide extra personal days to employees.** With additional stress and responsibilities, having an extra day off to either recharge or catch up on household responsibilities can help reduce stress and burnout. Extra time also shows employees that the company understands the high levels of stress they have been dealing with in recent months.



#### 4. Create positivity in the workforce.

Because positivity and hope are intrinsically linked, look for ways to increase positive interactions at your workplace. The idea is simple: more positive interactions lead employees to be more hopeful.

Consider starting an employee recognition program where customers and employees can nominate employees for good work. Even an informal program, such as a box (virtual or physical) to publicly thank other employees goes a long way. Because feedback from supervisors sets the tone of the environment, provide training to managers on positive communication and feedback.

Think of ways to break up the monotony and daily routine.

- > Consider adding a joke of the day to employee newsletters or writing an inspirational quote on a whiteboard near the entrance every morning.
- > Have managers write a handwritten note to each of their employees thanking them for their hard work and dedication during the challenging times this past year.
- > Schedule a 15-minute meeting each week where employees can share something positive that has happened, either personal or work related.



#### 5. Plan for the future.

With many events cancelled and extra work piling up due to the pandemic, the company internal calendar likely looks pretty bare, which gives employees less to look forward to.

- > Look for socializing opportunities that provide fun and keep everyone safe, such as company picnics at parks with families
- > bringing their own food, group social-distanced walks, and virtual happy hours.
- > When weather permits have meetings outside or bring healthy snacks to enjoy as a surprise.
- > Schedule activities during the workday to help employees have something to look forward to, such as a group walk or bike ride.

It's easy to overlook how important it is to build a positive and hopeful environment as a way to grow your business. However, your employees are the ones on the front lines serving customers and interacting with each other. When employees feel positive and hopeful about their future — both career and personal — your business benefits through happier customers, happier employees and stats show you have a higher probability of increased sales.



**Dr. Elizabeth Lombardo** has partnered with Combined Insurance to help bring you this and future webinars to help your business succeed. She is a licensed practicing psychologist with a Ph.D. in Psychology and a Master's degree in Physical Therapy, and she is the authority on how to crush your inner critic so that you can live a life of purpose, fulfillment and True Success™. She has participated in over 100 national media interviews and is an executive coach who focuses on building resiliency and remaining positive.



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