



Adapt to the new realities of your distributed workforce

Research on employee and employer attitudes to remote work, business travel and global mobility

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Introduction

Attitudes to work location have fundamentally changed since 2020. While most desk jobs would previously have been carried out in an office, this is no longer necessarily the case. And with the boundaries blurring between remote work, business travel and assignments, there are new challenges — and new opportunities — facing HR professionals.

For the past three years, Topia has been tracking shifts in attitudes and behaviors around work location — examining the perspectives of both employees and employers from the US and the UK. This year's survey shows that over half of employees report that they are now working away from an office setting more often than pre-2020.

With long- and short-term assignments back in earnest, as well as the return of business travel, this means that greater numbers of employees are working in a wider range of places than ever before.

New terminology has emerged to start to capture this altered reality for many knowledge workers. From various types of hybrid working practices, to 'workcations', 'hush trips' and 'bleisure', employees and HR teams are navigating new forms of work location flexibility on an unprecedented scale.



DISTRIBUTED WORK: KEY TERMS

Note: Distributed work terminology is evolving and definitions are not always clear. There may be crossover between these terms.

Hush Trip

A hush trip involves an employee going to a non-office, non-home work location in secret without using any Paid Time Off (PTO) or annual leave days. The employee works as usual during their working hours from their new location without informing their managers or HR, and they typically enjoy vacation activities in their free time. This practice creates an array of tax and compliance risks for the employee's company.

Workcation

A workcation refers to a scenario where an employee who goes on a business trip or assignment asks to stay in the location they've gone to and works remotely for a period of time after their official trip has ended. They continue to perform their work tasks during their usual working hours while enjoying leisure activities in their free time. In contrast to a hush trip, workcations usually occur with company knowledge and blur the boundaries between remote work and business travel.

Bleisure

Bleisure is a combination of business and leisure travel. It usually refers to the practice of extending a business trip with Paid Time Off (PTO) or annual leave days to include other vacation activities.

With the growing uptake of hybrid work and employees changing locations for projects, assignments or business trips, there are a host of associated risks that companies will need to manage. Luckily, our research suggests that employees are comfortable giving employers visibility into their working location. This can help HR teams mitigate these risks and streamline the management of their distributed workforce.

And, of course, the benefits to companies of enabling more flexibility around work location are significant, as a majority of employees are now seeking options to work from home or other non-office locations. Organizations that can offer this flexibility will be better positioned to attract and retain top talent.

Executive Summary



Employees cite offering work location flexibility as one of the most attractive features of an employer — suggesting it is key for talent acquisition and retention

43% of employees say the ability to work remotely from locations other than their office or home is an important aspect they look for in an employer, and 45% say the same about the ability to work from home. Benefits related to work location flexibility rank below only high pay and a focus on employee wellbeing in terms of the top most desirable employer traits.



Responses from HR professionals also highlight the role of work location flexibility in retaining employees — and talk about a range of additional benefits remote work brings

Tallying with the findings from the employee side, 48% of the HR professionals we surveyed say that offering remote work options — whether working from home or other non-office locations — helps their company retain existing employees. 34% also say it helps them hire in new locations. Nearly 50% of HR professionals say remote work reduces overhead costs. Overall, more than 90% of HR professionals say that remote work has helped their company in a whole range of ways.



International assignments are in high demand with employees, making global mobility another key factor in talent acquisition and retention

9 in 10 employees report that they are either interested in an assignment abroad or have actually already completed an assignment. 66% of employees believe that the chance to work in different locations internationally is critical to career growth and mobility, especially in senior roles. This is key for HR teams looking to improve talent acquisition and retention — especially bearing in mind that, according to our survey, 35% of employees are looking to change employers in 2023.



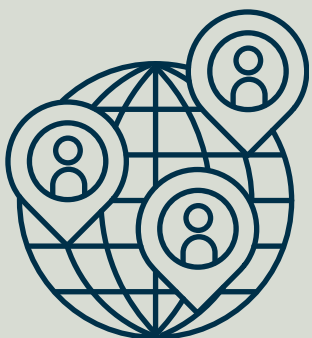
Business travel is back and significant numbers of employees want to travel for work trips — but there are new complexities as they want to tag on ‘workcations’

Business travel is back in earnest in 2023, with 92% of HR professionals expecting business travel to increase or stay the same in the next 12 months. However, with 73% of employees wanting the option to add a ‘workcation’ onto their business trip, the distinctions between business travel and remote work are blurring, making things more complicated for the HR and mobility teams managing their distributed workforces.



Ensuring compliance in distributed workforces continues to pose challenges and there has been a significant year-over-year increase in the proportion of HR professionals who have found employees working where they shouldn’t be

Nearly 50% of the HR professionals we surveyed say they have found employees working in a location they shouldn’t have been — an increase of 10% from last year’s survey. This is unlikely to even represent the full scale of the problem, as 78% of employees we surveyed worked outside of their state or country in the last 12 months and, of those, 67% did not report all of those days to HR.



Employees are pragmatic and don’t mind sharing their work location with their employer for compliance purposes

When asked if they were happy for their company to know their working location, the vast majority of employees were comfortable sharing their location at the country/state level (94%), city level (92%) and street level (79%) for compliance purposes. This goes some way to helping companies offer the work location flexibility their employees want while making sure they can stay compliant with tax, immigration and labor laws.

Attitudes to remote and distributed work



Talent vs. location

Many employers and employees are still looking for that sweet spot between home, hybrid and in-office work. Employees are emphatic that talent should win out over location and HR professionals know work location flexibility is a critical part of their talent strategy.

91%

of employees agree that they should be able to work from wherever they want as long as they get their work done

and...

76%

of HR professionals say remote, distributed or hybrid work approaches form a key part of their talent strategy



In line with previous years, the survey revealed huge support for more flexible approaches to work location from both employees and HR professionals. 91% of employees feel that they should be able to work from wherever they want as long as they get their work done. A majority of employees also believe that teams should be built around skills and talent rather than location, with 77% of employees agreeing that companies should focus on finding the right talent wherever it might be in the world.

Over 90% of HR professionals believe that remote work (this included either the ability to work from home, the ability to work from other locations or both) has helped their company, citing improved employee retention, greater diversity, increased productivity and cost savings as some of the main benefits.

TOP FIVE BENEFITS OF REMOTE WORK ACCORDING TO HR PROFESSIONALS

1. Reduction in overhead costs
2. Employee retention
3. Improved diversity
4. Increased productivity
5. Opportunity to hire talent in new locations



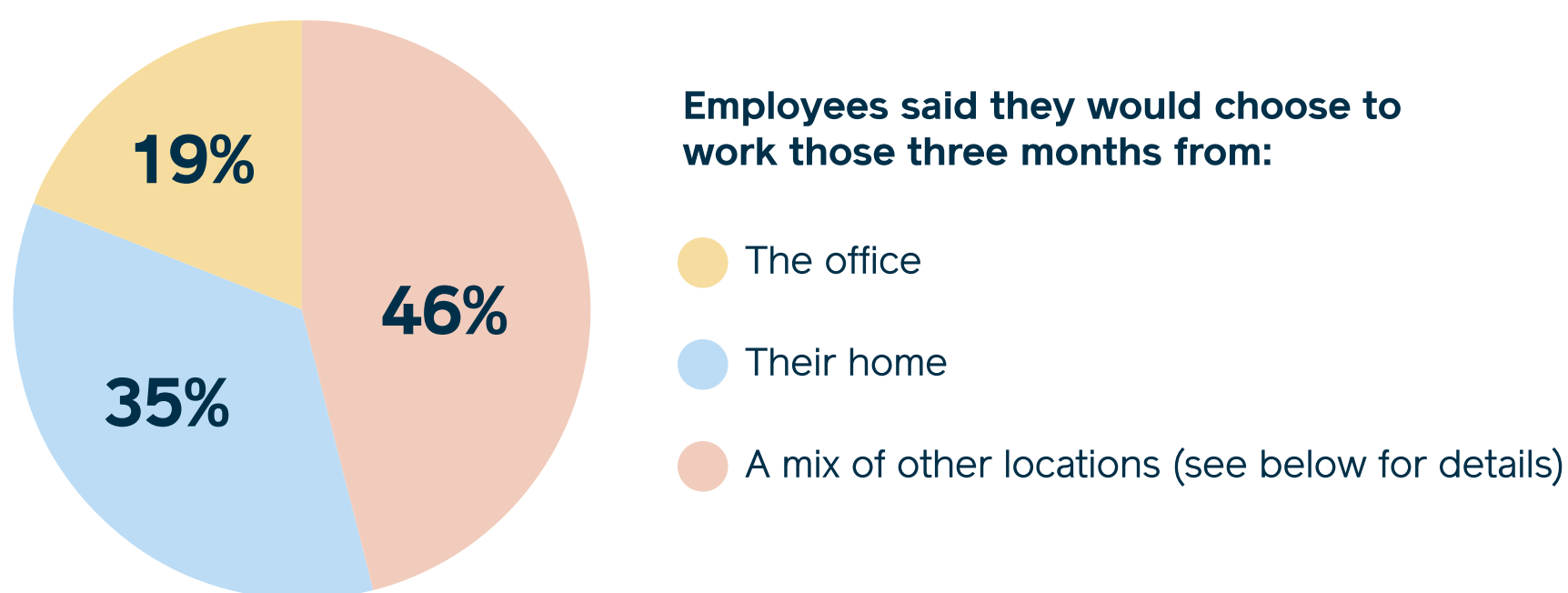
DISTRIBUTED WORK: KEY TERMS

Remote Work

For some, remote work includes work that takes place in any location other than an office — including someone's home. For others, remote work typically means working somewhere other than one's office or home. In our next section, we run through some of the survey findings that delineated what types of remote work options employees would consider and be most interested in.

Employee demand for remote work

We asked employees where they would choose to work from if their employer gave them the opportunity to work from anywhere for three months.



Demand for remote and distributed work is high among employees across the board. When asked if their employer allowed them to work from anywhere for up to three months out of a year, where they would choose to work from, less than one-fifth of employees said they would choose to work from a designated office. 35% stated that they would prefer to work from home for the three months (the single most selected option), and 46% chose one of a multitude of other hybrid options, including:

- Mixing working at home, in the office and in another country or state
- Working remotely within the same country but from somewhere other than their home or office
- Working remotely from another country
- Working remotely from multiple countries
- Working remotely from a location within their state but from somewhere other than their home or office (for US respondents)
- Working remotely from another state (for US respondents)
- Working remotely from multiple states (for US respondents)



With 81% of respondents saying they'd work from somewhere other than an office, and with such a wide array of remote work types, companies that want to offer work location flexibility need to consider how to effectively manage the potential for complexity.



DID YOU KNOW?

Employees in the 18-22 age range had most interest in working from an office compared to other age brackets.

Given the option to work from anywhere for three months, 25% of employees aged 18-22 would choose to work from the office.

HR views on the remote and hybrid workforce

The most common company approach to work location is some type of hybrid model.

So far, we know that HR professionals and employees see the benefits of greater flexibility in work location, but what is the current approach for most companies day-to-day? With some companies mandating a return-to-office while others have decided to go (or remain) fully remote, we asked HR professionals about their own company's approach to workforce location. The data suggests that the most common model is some type of hybrid setup, with 71% of HR professionals reporting that their companies have work location arrangements other than primarily in a designated office.

71%

of HR professionals report that their company's approach to workforce location is some version of a hybrid or remote arrangement, with only 29% overall saying that all employees were back in the office as their primary work location.



DID YOU KNOW?

There was a significant regional difference when we asked HR professionals to describe their current approach to where their workforces are located.

Hybrid/remote work approaches are more common in the UK than in the US. 43% of HR professionals in the US say that their employees are working in the office as their primary work location versus only 14% of HR professionals in the UK saying the same.

Work location flexibility and the employee experience

Work location flexibility is key to attracting talent and creating a great employee experience.

Employees not only believe in having work location flexibility, they are prepared to switch employers to get it. Moreover, many are actively planning to do just that. When asked what attracts employees to an employer, following high salary and a focus on employee wellbeing, the ability to work from home or remotely are the next two most important factors. Employees rate work location flexibility higher than opportunities for professional development and company reputation. Nearly all employees feel it is important for their employer to offer flexibility in working arrangements (94%).

35%

of employees
changed employers
in the past year

and...

35%

of employees plan to
change employers
this year.

Critically, 35% of employees changed employers in the last year, and 35% are looking to change employers this year. Both of these figures have increased since last year, indicating that the Great Resignation may be far from over. It is clear from the data that besides salary and growth opportunities, offering work location flexibility will be key to retaining employees in 2023 and beyond.

TOP FIVE FACTORS THAT PROMPTED EMPLOYEES TO LEAVE THEIR LAST EMPLOYER AND/OR ARE PROMPTING THEM TO CONSIDER LEAVING THEIR CURRENT EMPLOYER

- 1 Seeking better salary/benefits
- 2 Lack of opportunity to grow professionally
- 3 Wanting more flexibility to work from home on my schedule
- 4 Wanting more flexibility to work remotely from a location or locations other than my home or a designated office
- 5 Career change

Work Location

HR professionals reported seeing this trend too, with 56% agreeing that they have lost people due to mandating a return to the office. Perhaps this is why 76% of HR professionals say that remote, hybrid or distributed work is a key part of their talent strategy.



Where are employees really working?

Despite high confidence from HR that employees will self-report all days spent working outside their country or state, only a fraction of workers are actually doing so. No wonder, then, that more HR professionals than ever are finding employees in locations they shouldn't be.

With both employees and HR professionals seeing the benefits of work location flexibility and demand for remote and hybrid work remaining high, increasing numbers of employees are regularly working outside a designated office. While we've highlighted the benefits this can bring — particularly in relation to employee acquisition and retention — having a more distributed workforce does come with risks that need to be managed.

Of employees surveyed, more than 4 in 5 said they had worked outside of their state or country in the last 12 months. Of those, 67% did not report all of those days to HR. This poses a serious challenge for HR professionals, as this lack of visibility potentially opens up the company to tax, immigration and labor law risks. Companies don't want to accidentally trigger Permanent Establishment or fall foul of Schengen Compliance. There are also complications related to effectively managing state-to-state or international payroll withholding obligations. Visibility of the location of distributed workers is crucial as non-compliance with key regulations and legislation can lead to fines, penalties, reputational damage, legal fees and more.



DID YOU KNOW?

Employees in the 55-64 year age range were the least likely to report days worked outside of their state or country.

39% of 55-64 year olds who had worked outside of their state or country had not reported *any* of those days at all to HR.

In spite of this, 94% of HR professionals feel confident that they know where their employees are working, and 86% are confident that employees will self-report 100% of the time they spend working in another state or country.

Given the discrepancy between employer confidence and actual employee behavior, it's no surprise that nearly half of the HR professionals we surveyed said they found employees working where they shouldn't be. And this risk is likely to grow, with over half of HR professionals expecting more remote work requests from their employees in the next 12 months.

86%

of HR professionals feel confident that employees will self-report 100% of the time spent working in another state or country...

78%

of employees worked outside of their state or country in the last 12 months, however, of those...

67%

did not report all those days to HR.



It is not surprising, then, that

1 in 2

HR professionals found employees working in places they shouldn't be.



Location sharing and managing distributed workforces

Employees are very comfortable with their employer knowing their location for compliance purposes.

As stated earlier, 78% of employees worked outside of their state or country during the last 12 months, and of those employees, 67% did not correctly report all days to HR. Luckily, employees are also open to the idea of companies knowing where they are working for compliance purposes. The vast majority of employees are comfortable with their location being known to their employer at both the country/state level (94%) and the city level (92%). 79% of respondents are also comfortable with their company knowing where they are down to the street level. This indicates that although employees often don't self-report days spent working outside of their state or country, they would be happy for their employer to know their location at a very granular level.

Given the relatively low levels of employee self-reporting contrasted with the high tolerance for their location being shared with their employer, technology stands to play a key role in helping companies run a globally distributed workforce in a compliant way now and into the future.

We asked employees how comfortable they were sharing their work location to varying levels of granularity with their employers for compliance purposes. The results were as follows —————>

94%**What country/state I am in****92%****What city I am in****79%****What street I am on**



DID YOU KNOW?

There was no difference between the US and UK respondents' comfort level in sharing their location with their employer.

Shifting attitudes to work location flexibility over the past three years have led employers and employees on a journey to discover the optimal balance between in-person, hybrid, distributed, and remote work models. The results of this study would suggest that we are yet to see a complete settling of work location patterns with trends continuing to change and evolve, shaped by employee demands, business requirements, and advancements in technology.

At a time when many employees are changing or looking to change employers, it is clear that the demand for remote and hybrid work is high and is a key factor in employee acquisition and retention. HR and global mobility teams, therefore, play a key role in agile talent planning as well as managing all associated risks of a dispersed workforce.

Fortunately, our research suggests that because employees are comfortable with their employer knowing their location to a very specific level, better use of technology could easily help mitigate these risks and streamline the management of distributed employees.

Attitudes to global mobility



What employees say about international work experiences

The demand for international experiences is high among employees, with 9 in 10 saying that they would consider an assignment abroad or they have completed one in the past.

This is good news, as mobility programs boast a number of benefits to businesses and employees alike, including enriched employee experiences, improved talent acquisition, and better employee retention.

In terms of assignment length, there was high interest in both long- and short-term assignments — as well as employees who were open to both.

44%

of employees are open to long-term assignments abroad in the coming year.

41%

of employees are open to short-term assignments abroad in the coming year.

9 in 10

of employees we surveyed said they would consider an assignment abroad or they have already completed one in the past.

These figures demonstrate the power of international assignments to capture employee interest and this, in turn, can help maintain high motivation. It's worth noting that employees based in the UK are, on average, even more likely to express interest in global mobility.

Global mobility and employee acquisition and retention

International experiences can help employees take their careers to the next level — and prevent them from giving their notice.

Employees are interested in global mobility for a number of reasons, but a key motivating factor is the value of international work experience as a catalyst for career growth.

66%

of employees believe that the chance to work in different locations internationally is critical to career growth and mobility, especially in senior roles.

For employees working in more senior roles or those who may find themselves in a rut, international work experience can help improve morale and increase motivation. Mobility programs, therefore, can act as a mitigating force against employee attrition.



DID YOU KNOW?

The belief that the chance to work in different locations internationally is critical to career growth and mobility, especially in senior roles is even higher in the UK, at 71%.

This is important because, while many believe the Great Resignation is over, of the employees we surveyed, 35% said they moved to new employers in the past year, and another 35% are actively seeking new employment in the coming year. These are alarming numbers for organizations seeking to retain and engage their core talent. How can global mobility help? Well, when asked what attracts employees to an employer, over a quarter cite opportunities for international travel or international project experiences. Global mobility programs are a great way to offer the kind of professional growth so many employees are seeking, helping companies safeguard against employee resignation.



Attitudes to business travel



The return of business travel

More business travel, coupled with the conflation of different types of employee movement, stands to complicate matters for HR teams.

Business travel has been on the rise over the past year, and these findings show that the trend is likely to continue for a significant proportion of organizations. For companies, this means the return of all the typical compliance issues they have always had to deal with for traveling employees alongside some new challenges as the lines between business travel, remote and distributed work continue to blur.



Employee comfort with business travel

Employees are comfortable traveling for work — and want to do so.

Despite all the disruption business travel has faced over the past three years, our findings show that employees are confident about taking work trips and, in fact, most are eager to do so. 77% of employees say they are comfortable traveling domestically for work, while 74% say they are comfortable taking international business trips.

77%

of employees say that they are comfortable traveling domestically for work...

and..

74%

say they are comfortable taking international business trips.

In addition, the majority of employees actively want to take work trips. Interestingly, there was almost no difference in the desire to travel domestically vs. internationally, with 68% of workers wanting to travel domestically for work in the coming year and 67% wanting to travel internationally.

Business travel and talent acquisition and retention

As in-person conferences, meetings and projects resume and companies seek to build face-to-face connections, organizations will likely be pleased to see the high levels of comfort and interest in business travel.

Business travel is back, and 92% of HR professionals expect levels of business travel to either stay the same or increase in 2023. And there are potentially additional benefits as 66% of employees believe that the chance to work in different locations internationally is critical to career growth. Companies that can offer these opportunities are likely to be better placed to attract and retain the best employees.



When does a business trip become remote work?

Boundaries between remote work and business travel are becoming fuzzier, which can cause issues if not managed effectively.

For companies anticipating increased business travel, there are some new complexities to navigate as 73% of employees want the option to add a 'workcation' onto their work trip. This typically means they want to remain in the location they've traveled to for an extended period of time but not as PTO or annual leave, working their normal hours but from wherever they've gone to. In these cases, the boundaries between business travel and remote work can start to collapse and this means that HR teams need to be mindful of any compliance issues that may arise.



73%

of employees want the option to add a 'workcation' onto their business trip.

If companies want to offer their employees the flexibility to work from the location they've traveled to for longer stretches, they need to be able to properly assess the tax and immigration implications to ensure they remain compliant. This may mean more involvement for global mobility, HR and immigration teams in work previously handled primarily by travel professionals. The business may also need mechanisms to determine whether their employees have stayed in the locations they've traveled to for the agreed amount of time and returned when they were meant to.

Understanding employee location

The vast majority of employees are happy for their employer to know their location for compliance purposes.

As we noted earlier, our findings suggest that, on the whole, employees are pragmatic and understand that if they want more location flexibility, this may mean their company needs ways to check where they are — whether for compliance or duty of care purposes. Given that nearly 50% of the HR professionals we surveyed found employees working where they shouldn't, the need for transparency as to where work is taking place is more critical than ever.

As a recap, when asked if they were happy for their company to know where they were working from, the vast majority of employees were happy for their company to know their work location to country/state level (94%) and city level (92%). A very high percentage were also happy with their company knowing their work location to street level (79%).

Despite the collapse of many of the previous boundaries between business travel, remote work and broader mobility, companies that want to meet employee demand for work location flexibility will be able to do so in a compliant way if they implement tools and technologies to understand where their workforce is. And these findings show that they can do so knowing that they aren't likely to face significant backlash from their employees.

Conclusion

The findings from our latest survey of employees and HR professionals shed light on the evolving attitudes and practices surrounding distributed work in all its forms. Several crucial trends have emerged that will be of interest to HR and global mobility teams managing distributed workforces:

- Employees increasingly want work location flexibility and companies that can offer hybrid or flexible approaches stand to differentiate themselves from a talent acquisition and retention perspective. As well as the talent retention and attraction benefits which HR professionals themselves noted, supporting a more flexible distributed workforce also brings businesses other benefits, such as the ability to recruit a more diverse workforce.
- Moving beyond employees' day-to-day work location, there is high demand from workers for international assignments - both long- and short-term. The majority see international experiences as being critical to career growth, especially as they become more senior.
- Business travel is also back and a significant majority of employees want to travel for work again. They also want to do so in more flexible ways than ever before — for instance by tagging on additional time in the location they've been sent to and working from there.
- Whether it's due to remote/hybrid working arrangements, the return of short- and long-terms assignments or business travel, employees are working in a more diverse range of locations than ever before. However, for all the advantages, there are also new compliance challenges. As we've seen from previous years, employee self-reporting of their location when they are working out of country or state is low and this poses risks for companies that don't have mechanisms in place to manage this.
- Fortunately employees are very open to their company knowing where they are, so with the right tools and technologies in place, employers and their workforces can enjoy all the benefits of distributed work while mitigating the most serious risks.

In this era of evolving work patterns and the convergence of remote work, business travel, and global mobility, striking the right balance between employee preferences, compliance, and duty of care obligations will be critical in ensuring the continued success of distributed work programs.

The insights from this research provide valuable guidance for HR and mobility professionals as they navigate this ever-changing landscape, helping them optimize their strategies for the benefit of both employees and organizations alike. With this increase in complexity, the findings point to the importance of moving away from fragmented manual processes and towards technology-driven solutions to manage the increasingly distributed workforce more effectively.



Methodology

This research is part of an annual survey of employees and HR professionals from both the US and the UK. Its primary objectives are to:

- Understand attitudes to remote work, business travel and global mobility among employees and HR professionals
- Gain insights into employee behaviors when they do work away from a designated office — particularly regarding the reporting of their location to HR
- Find out about the key drivers of employee attrition to learn more about the role of work location flexibility on talent retention

This study was carried out by CITE Research on behalf of Topia. They have conducted two previous waves of research for us so that we can track trends and changes in attitudes and behaviors. Wave 1 was conducted in December 2021. Wave 2 was conducted in December 2022. This wave, Wave 3, was conducted in July 2023. This built on a prior study conducted by Topia in partnership with a different agency between February and March 2020.

The survey was distributed online to a diverse pool of 1,800 employees, 300 of whom were HR professionals. Respondents were aged 18 - 64, evenly split between the US and the UK. Eligibility criteria required respondents to be in full-time employment at an organization that operates internationally. They were also required to have indicated that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they typically worked in an office setting/desk job as opposed to any other type of work environment. Additional screening ensured that HR professionals specialized in human resources.

About Topia

Topia is the leader in global talent mobility. We empower companies to deploy, manage and engage employees anywhere in the world.

The Topia platform enables organizations to deliver mobility as part of a broader talent strategy encompassing all types of employee movement — remote and distributed workforces, business travel and more traditional relocations and assignments. This drives enhanced employee experiences and competitive advantage by ensuring the right people are in the right place at the right time while remaining compliant no matter where they are. The Topia platform automates the entire global talent mobility process, including scenario-based planning, expat payroll, tax and immigration compliance, reporting and more.

Topia powers global talent mobility programs for world-renowned brands such as Dell, Equinor and AXA. Topia is a global company and has raised over \$100M from NewView Capital (formerly New Enterprise Associates), Notion Capital and others.

Learn how Topia can help you by [requesting a demo](#) from our specialist team.

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