

Press release
April 2021

Australian employee performance during the pandemic impressed 1 in 2 bosses **Robert Half survey**

- 51% of Australian business leaders say their employees' achievements during COVID-19 had exceeded expectations.
- 63% state productivity and collaboration had improved.
- 27% hold a negative perception of their employees' achievements while working remotely.
- Top workplace culture improvements for coming year are encouraging regular employee feedback (29%), continuing to offer remote work/work from home options (29%), and setting clear goals and offering rewards for staff (29%).

Sydney, 27 April 2021 – In 2020, ongoing change and uncertainty meant companies across all industries faced significant challenges to business performance. One year on, the signs of recovery are strong with figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showing economic activity increased 3.1% in the December 2020 quarter¹.

New independent research by specialised recruiter [Robert Half](#) suggests that the success of employees adapting to change may be the driving force behind business recovery and Australia's renewed economic strength. More than half (51%) of Australian business leaders say their employees' achievements during COVID-19 exceeded expectations. Meanwhile, only one-quarter (27%) hold a negative perception of their employees' achievements while working remotely and 22% state their expectations remained the same during the pandemic.

While the survey results suggest employee performance rose to the occasion of challenging circumstances, 82% of surveyed business leaders are concerned about retaining top employees in the coming year. This points to the need for businesses to invest in workplace culture initiatives in order to sustain employee engagement and motivation in the coming year while adapting to the next-normal of hybrid working in a recovering market.

Top 3 reasons why employees exceeded expectations

Among the Australian businesses that say their expectations have been exceeded, over six-in-ten (63%) think productivity and collaboration improved while almost half (46%) say deploying technology and maintaining collaboration was not as difficult as anticipated. More than four-in-ten (44%) managers also say their company was able to successfully maintain customer service levels.

The research reveals that Australian businesses may have previously underestimated their employees' ability to embrace change and digital agility. A 2019 Robert Half survey² found that the majority (87%) of Australian business leaders thought it would be challenging to train staff on new technology. Within this cohort, one-third (33%) thought resistance to change would be the primary barrier to achieving change.

Top 3 reasons why expectations were negatively impacted

Among the 27% of Australian businesses that say their expectations changed in a negative way during the pandemic, 54% say productivity and collaboration decreased, while 49% say maintaining

¹ ABS, [Key Economic Indicator](#), 2021

² [Resistance to change barrier to adapting to new technologies](#), Independent survey commissioned by Robert Half among 1,000 hiring managers in Australia.

relationships within teams working remotely was more difficult than expected. Over one-third (36%) also think customer service levels decreased.

Amongst respondents, CIOs have the most positive sentiment toward the performance of their employees during the pandemic. Merely 19% of Australian CIOs report a negative change in expectations, which is about half compared to CFOs (37%) and slightly less than general hiring managers (24%). By contrast, 59% of CIOs state their employee performance exceeded expectations – 20% greater than that of CFOs (39%) and again slightly ahead of general hiring managers (55%). These industry results suggest the pre-existing integration of tech and digital-first mindset lent themselves to the rapid remote-work shift and corresponding demand for greater agility in workflow.

Improving workplace culture a bridge to sustaining employee performance

As businesses move from adapting to change as a matter of necessity to channelling the changes of 2020 into new business opportunities and competitive advantage, the challenge will be maintaining employee engagement and employee productivity.

Managing corporate culture is a critical lever in driving employee morale and productivity and Australian business leaders understand they need to take action to uphold and develop a positive work culture, even more important for semi-remote workforces. The top three priorities to improve workplace culture amongst Australian businesses are encouraging regular employee feedback (29%), continuing to offer remote work/work from home options (29%) and setting clear goals and offering rewards for staff (29%).

“Necessity is the mother of invention, and the extraordinary transformation of Australian businesses – from in-office to remote, from retail to e-commerce, from sales to customer support – is a testament to Australian employees who rose to the challenge and not only adapted but embraced change and digital transformation to navigate businesses through immense uncertainty. However, employees also shouldered a lot of the weight of this transformation, including longer hours, fulfilling workloads of furloughed employees, blurring the lines of work and home – all with limited opportunities for travel and relaxation in between,” said **Nicole Gorton, Director at Robert Half Australia.**

“Looking ahead, businesses cannot normalise this crisis-level response without creating a negative workplace culture so they need to optimise their systems and processes, and, most importantly, support their staff to uphold employee motivation and sustain productivity.

“Firstly, as employees become increasingly empowered by new digital tools, businesses should further develop the capabilities of their (semi-)remote workforces to aid collaboration and innovation at home as readily as in the office. Secondly, businesses must support their team to develop the hybrid skills necessary to succeed in the post-pandemic marketplace. Alongside technical capabilities relevant to the role, transferable skills like adaptability, versatile communication skills, and empathy and emotional intelligence when working with remote and in-office teams are in high demand and will continue to contribute to an engaged and productive workforce,” **Gorton** concludes.

4 tips to successfully manage a productive team under remote or semi-remote arrangements

Make communication a top priority. To improve productivity when staff are working in various locations, it's crucial to keep communication lines open and set up processes for frequent sharing of information. Ensuring staff feel confident with technology, tools, and resources are key to managing a (semi-)remote team.

Encourage face-to-face interactions. Being limited to communicating via email and voice calls can cause staff to feel disconnected over a long period. Scheduling regular video meetings with the team can help drive productivity by making it easier to raise and respond to issues while sharing and discussing ideas more effectively with the help of visuals and body language.

Support work-life balance. When discussing the opportunities for remote work with individuals, focus on finding an arrangement that will give staff more flexibility, time, and control in their personal lives. Staff are more likely to be satisfied, loyal, and productive at work when they are empowered to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Avoid micromanaging. Staff need to feel they are trusted when working (semi-)remotely, otherwise they can lose their confidence and become less motivated. While it's important to schedule regular meetings and ensure staff know how to reach you at any time, know when too much is too much when checking in and asking questions.

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About the research

The annual study is developed by Robert Half and was conducted online in November 2020 by an independent research company, surveying 300 hiring managers, including 100 CFOs and 100 CIOs, from companies across Australia. This survey is part of the international workplace survey, a questionnaire about job trends, talent management, and trends in the workplace.

About Robert Half

Robert Half is the world's first and largest specialised recruitment consultancy and member of the S&P 500. Founded in 1948, the company has more than 300 offices worldwide providing contract, interim management, and permanent recruitment solutions for accounting and finance, financial services, technology, and business support professionals. Robert Half Australia has offices in Brisbane, Melbourne, Mount Waverley, Perth and Sydney. More information on roberthalf.com.au.

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