

A New Sense of Knowing One's Value and Personal Priorities

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The workplace is never going to return to how it was before COVID-19. And that's OK.

That's the mantra I want Arizona's business leaders to remember as they move forward from the pandemic.

As they repeat this mantra, I want them to realize that it's not just our mode of work — from in-office to hybrid and remote — that has changed. Workers have changed, too. More people are realizing they deserve better from their employers: greater trust, more flexibility in when and where they work, better pay, and good benefits.

For many people, the pandemic put into perspective the relative importance of work. It taught us what's truly important and taught us about loss. One's health — both mental and physical — and the health of one's family, including an appropriate work-life balance, are taking priority. Workers are realizing, or remembering, that they *have* value and *what* they value in their lives.

Since 2010, the African American labor force [in Arizona] has increased by more than 59,000 people, a growth rate of 49 percent compared to statewide labor force growth of only 16 percent. Today, nearly 180,000 African Americans in Arizona are participating in the labor force, a 68 percent rate compared to the statewide average rate of 60 percent. While African Americans in Arizona play a significant role in the economy and continue to have elevated rates of labor market participation, gaps in data and employment reporting can conceal the true number of people who want to work.

**Driving Local Investment in Black Arizonans,
Volume V, The State of Black Arizona**

This awakening has been particularly acute for workers of color, who were more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace before the pandemic and were also more likely to be personally impacted by COVID-19. A year into the pandemic in the U.S., Black, Hispanic and American Indian people all had higher death rates than white people, according to [The COVID Tracking Project at The Atlantic](#).

So, it's no wonder that employees of color are more interested in finding work that better aligns with their priorities and sense of self-worth. In the U.S., 66% of Hispanic respondents, 64% of Black respondents, and 63% of Asian respondents said they're interested in pursuing new employment opportunities, compared to 56% of white employees, according to a survey of thousands of knowledge workers by [Future Forum](#), an employee experience research wing of Slack.

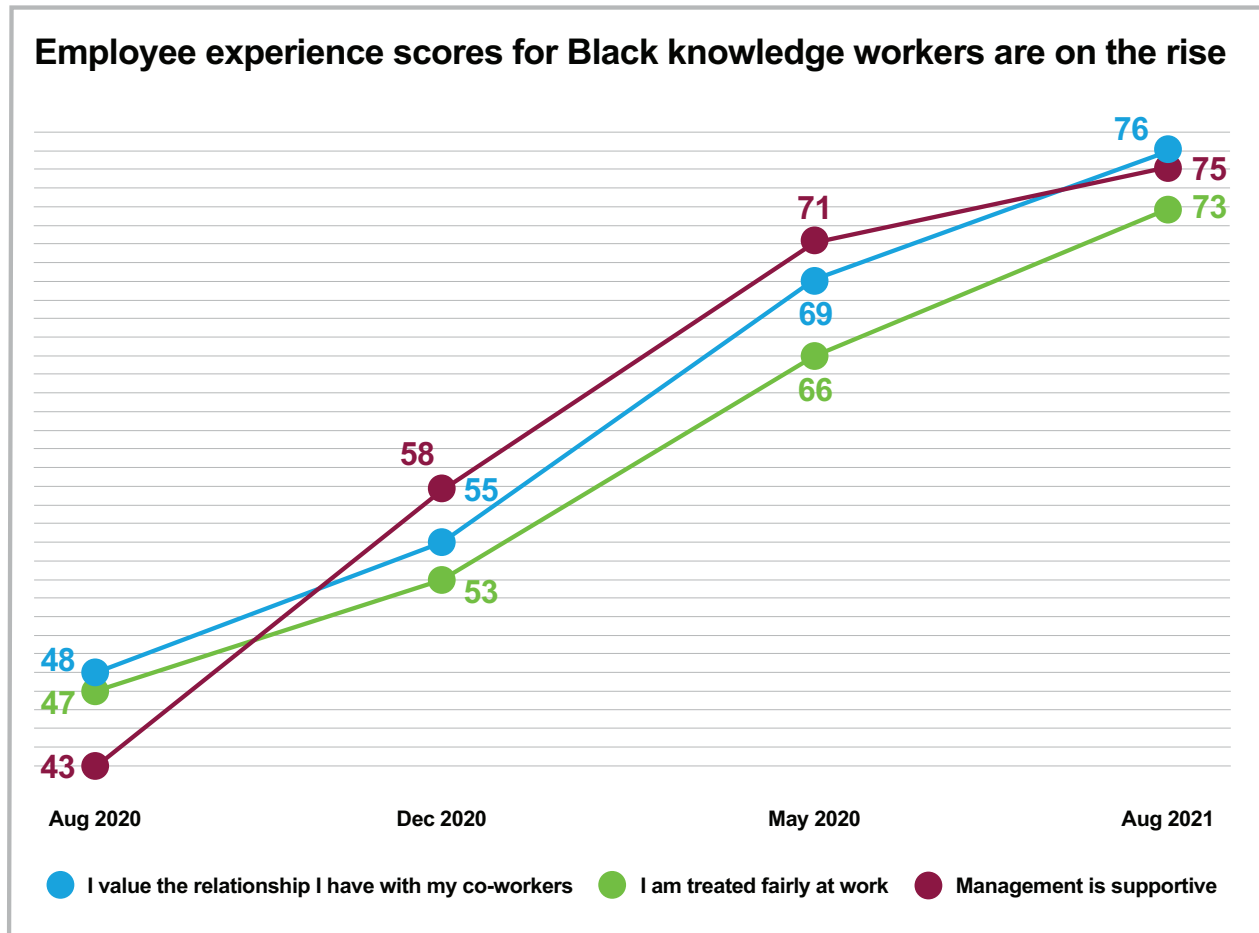
"Going virtual levels the playing field," says Dr. Ella Washington, organizational psychologist, faculty member at Georgetown's McDonough School of Business and founder of Ellavate Solutions. "When Covid and remote work first started, employers had to become much more transparent and communicate much more. Because everything is virtual, there's less of this informal chatter we had in person. So that's going to make anybody feel more like they belong, especially folks that are not usually in those conversations."

**The Great Executive-Employee Disconnect,
Future Forum by Slack, October 2021**

Expanded remote or hybrid work options are one potential strategy for staving off corporate brain drain, especially among employees of color. Future Forum reports 87% of Asian respondents, 81% of Black respondents, and 78% of Hispanic respondents want flexibility in where they work. That's compared to 75% of white respondents.

Furthermore, three metrics Future Forum uses to evaluate employee experience show that the expansion of remote work has had a drastic effect on workplace satisfaction among Black knowledge workers. Among Black respondents, each of these metrics — “I value the

relationship I have with my co-workers,” “I am treated fairly at work,” and “Management is supportive” — increased by more than 20 percentage points between August 2020 and August 2021.



Source: Future Forum Pulse, conducted July 28 to August 10, 2021. Number of respondents = USA only (5,339).

There are several reasons people of color prefer workplace flexibility. Inequities and cultural differences in child and elder care mean some people of color have added family obligations to address during regular working hours. In addition, people of color are often in the minority in offices, causing them to engage in uncomfortable code-switching. Similarly, people of color are more likely to experience microaggressions from their colleagues in a face-to-face setting, where informal conversations are more frequent. When workplace discussions must be more intentional and scheduled, microaggressions seem to be reduced (although they are

not eliminated) and employees of color are more likely to be included.

Arizona businesses should put several policies and practices into place as soon as possible to ensure more of their employees feel valued and respected. Although the following recommendations may seem obvious to some, many employers are still struggling to see how increasing workplace diversity, equity and inclusion can raise employee satisfaction and therefore improve their corporate bottom line:

- **Increase Transparency and Listening** — Don't keep your employees in the dark about decisions and/or a chosen decision-making process. It makes them feel excluded from the organization. Furthermore, listen to what your employees have to say about the organization; the employee who talks to customers every day is in a much better position to assess on-the-ground challenges than the CEO. Trends are identified from the bottom, not the top.
- **Embrace Flexibility** — Giving people flexibility when and where they work shows you trust them and better allows them to structure their work and personal lives.
- **Offer Benefits** — Offering benefits will make your employees less stressed about managing their health and long-term financial position. That makes them more satisfied and will help you retain talent.
- **Pay Livable Wages** — Livable wages are fundamental. You cannot build a diverse and inclusive team unless you're willing to pay people an amount that gives them security in their personal lives.
- **Demand More of Your Partners** — Business leaders have significant leverage over their partners. If you're able to ask for inclusion, equity and diversity from consultants, lawyers, or other contractors, do it. It could be as simple as asking for an associate of color or a woman to be staffed on your project.
- **Give People Responsibility** — An Arizona-based credit union gave \$10,000 to each of its employee resource groups. This grant created opportunities for staff to work with budgets and experiment with leadership. The COO told me these budget allocations ended up being the least expensive management training they could have pursued. Giving people responsibility helps them grow professionally and makes them feel part of the team.
- **Ask Only for What You Need in Hiring** — Creating a diverse and inclusive culture starts with expanding your talent pool. Every year that passes leads to more people of color with greater educational qualifications and on-the-job experience. So next time you post a job requiring a master's degree and 10-plus years of experience, ask yourself what that will mean for your talent pool. Consider what opportunities existed for people of color 12-to-15 years ago, when the candidate you're supposedly looking for would have been applying to advanced degree programs or entering the workforce. Does the role you're hiring for really need those qualifications?



Robin is the co-founder and principal of EmFluent, an executive performance consulting company that focuses on leadership strategy, talent optimization and sales arbitrage. Robin is also president and CEO of the Black Chamber of Arizona. Robin has spoken nationally and internationally on business development, strategy execution, talent optimization, sales arbitrage and mergers and acquisition.