

Viewpoint: Takeaways from Mass. employers on new world of work

By JD Chesloff – President and CEO, Massachusetts Business Roundtable
10/20/2021

“We are living in a ‘take this job and shove it’ economy.” This is one of the more memorable comments from members of the Massachusetts Business Roundtable during a recent series of one-on-one meetings between Roundtable staff and over 60 business leaders in the commonwealth.

Almost unanimously, executives acknowledged the world has fundamentally changed. Over the past 18 months, employers have experienced a permanent shift in work environments, leading to changes in where and how people work. Employees are seeking increased flexibility around remote work, hybrid work, higher wages, new work supports and benefits, a lower cost of living, or a reevaluation of their lives.

While the Massachusetts economy has strong “sticking power,” increased mobility requires strategic attention for us to maintain our global competitiveness. Specifically, we need to consider how housing, workforce development, infrastructure and childcare — among other policy areas — influence the ability to attract and retain talent in Massachusetts today and also develop talent for the future, especially diverse talent.

Here are five key takeaways from conversations with members of the Massachusetts Business Roundtable that underscore the need to make strategic public investments to maintain Massachusetts’ competitiveness:

1. **The Competition for Talent is Fierce.** The war for talent is consistently the top issue expressed by Roundtable members. A number of factors are driving this shortage — the fallout from the “Big Quit,” as workers re-evaluate life priorities, the devastating loss of women in the workplace due in part to inadequate access to childcare, and increased volume of job hopping propelled by high demand in a tight labor market. As one member described, “the talent shortage is our most crushing challenge.”
2. **Business is Good, but the Economy is Uncertain.** While the pandemic has significantly hurt many industries and businesses of all sizes, business is still good for many others. That said, there are plenty of warning signs: the talent

shortage, threat of inflation, high costs of living and doing business, acceleration of digitization, digital divide—particularly in western Massachusetts and among underemployed jobseekers—the unpredictable future of Covid, and holes in the supply chain.

3. **Covid-19 has Wreaked Havoc on Return-to-Office Plans, but Innovation has Emerged.** Protocols and plans to bring employees back to the office in June were blown up by late July, and the anticipated reliance on hybrid work models continues to increase. As a result, companies are challenged with maintaining and building workplace culture and the recruitment, retention, and development of talent. A global health leader recently advised Roundtable members that “this is not a couple-of-months issue, this is a couple-of-years issue.” Despite these complexities, innovations have emerged such as new, inclusive hiring practices especially focused on women and people of color and conversion of unused office space to labs, further fueling growth in the life sciences industry.
4. **Mental Health and Caregiving Top the List of Employee Concerns.** The impact of remote work, greater isolation, and increased caregiving responsibilities have created new pressures on employees—or exacerbated existing ones—leading employers to be much more aware and responsive to the mental health and wellness needs of employees. “Leaders are going to have to be much more empathetic in how they drive their companies,” one Roundtable member said.
5. **DEI and CSR Remain Business Priorities.** In a competitive market for talent, Roundtable members are focusing on racial and social justice and corporate social responsibility as business imperatives. In addition to increased and targeted philanthropy, companies are investing in employment strategies to recruit diverse populations for open positions, provide work supports to help women return to the workplace, and enhance professional development for underrepresented groups to stay and be promoted in the workplace. To maintain this priority, one member noted that “the conscious effort driven by action in DEI has to continue. It has to be purposeful.”

The needs of employees and prospective workers remain at the core of all of these takeaways. As one member notes, “business will go to where the talent is.” We want to ensure that talent continues to be here.

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