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services, production, and other factors like government intersect. So it's not surprising that there are many competing theories within that field. Adam Smith, for example, is known as the father of free trade, while John Maynard Keynes advocated for government spending when economies were in a slump. Modern economists such as Alan Greenspan have also put a stamp on notions of how and why economic systems function.

One consistent critique of the study of economics is that it too often cannot fully consider the variability of human behavior. When "x" happens in an economy, "y" isn't always the result, partially because people don't always make decisions rationally or linearly. Take recent discussions of the probability of a recession: Many economists believed (or still believe) it's a sure thing. But others have begun to shift that point of view. Some are closely watching wage growth: While there are still lots of jobs open, competition for some of those jobs is up, which gives employers more flexibility.

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KEY CHANNEL PARTNER OF THE MONTH



PAYROLL

March Economic Outlook: What 2023's First Quarter Might Tell Us About the Rest of the Year

Several little stories may help you piece together what's going on—and what's coming—this year.

Quick takeaways

- **Jobs, housing, and wealth are going through a redistribution cycle.** That happens regularly in economies. The reshuffling immediately impacts housing markets and certain sectors' job strength. It may have broad market implications for the future, but only time will tell.
- **Economists often have competing theories about what's happening now—and what will happen next.** (They're real people, after all.) But their theories don't always hold up against unpredictable human behavior.

Time flies when you're having fun ... or watching the zigzag of 2023's economic readout. Nearly three months in, a few pieces of the puzzle are stitching together for a picture that's still incomplete but offers some trends and insights worth noting. Let's recap, and try to make the outlook come into focus, even just a little bit.

Jobs Plus Housing Equals Redistribution in Real Time.

In last month's economic outlook, we talked about the juxtaposition of lots of tech layoffs but strong employment numbers, a contradiction that continued in February. The job losses you're reading about hint at something that happens all the time: redistribution. Also important to consider: As a total share of the employment market, the tech sector is relatively small—just 2%. Those companies added a lot of staff during COVID shutdowns. But service industries—which shed jobs en masse during shutdowns? They make up a whopping 36% of overall private-sector payrolls. Those service companies have been trying (and struggling) to ramp back up to meet increased demand, especially over the last year. They're not firing; they're hiring—a lot. And the jobs added aren't just front-office or front-line: Nearly every company needs people with skills like information technology, and many prefer to have talent on staff. That is redistribution at work, in real time—and it's a trend that will probably continue in 2023. For example, take housing and its connection to recent tech layoffs. Housing markets up and down the West Coast are taking a hard hit. What else is central to places like San Francisco and Seattle? Tech, of course. Those puzzle pieces of jobs and housing will likely keep moving this year in ways that might feel contradictory. That's neither good nor bad—but to be expected.

Your wallet: Are there any redistributions you need to make in your financial plan? For example, maybe an emergency expense set you back on debt repayment. Or, perhaps you want to funnel more funds into retirement savings but need to cut elsewhere to do so. Learn tricks to getting the most out of your paycheck.

Economics has lots of theories. Reality is more complicated.

Officially (and simplistically), the field of economics studies how resources, goods and

Should Employers Stop Requiring Vaccines Once the Pandemic Emergencies End?



Companies in some sectors, such as health care, may feel legally compelled to maintain vaccine requirements even after the pandemic's public health and national emergencies end on May 11. But some employers may choose to drop the requirements because—as Susan Wiltsie, an attorney with Hunton Andrews Kurth in Washington, D.C., noted—vaccines are not as effective at preventing the spread of COVID-19 as public health officials originally predicted. In addition, a pending Supreme Court case may make it more difficult for employers to defend themselves against religious discrimination claims. There also may be pushback from employees if businesses try to maintain the requirements. Other employers may continue to require or encourage vaccination to help keep their workforces safe and healthy, Wiltsie said.

When Employers Might Choose to Keep Vaccine Requirements

Rules from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services still require Medicare- and Medicaid-certified providers and suppliers to have mandatory vaccination policies. The final Occupational Safety and Health Administration rule for managing COVID-19 in health care is undergoing White House review and isn't expected to include a vaccine requirement. Depending on the workplace, maintaining vaccine requirements may be a good idea, she added. Employers that might continue to require vaccination, depending on state and local laws, could include child care facilities and businesses in the restaurant and hospitality sectors, said Robin Shea, an attorney with Constangy, Brooks, Smith & Prophete in Winston-Salem, N.C. However, Michael Shimada, an attorney with Baker McKenzie in Palo Alto, Calif., cautioned that some states have outlawed public-sector mandates.

Requests for Religious Accommodation Have Been Common

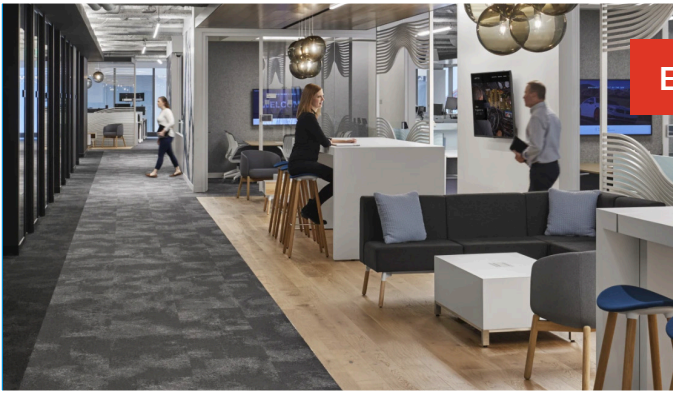
Exceptions to vaccine requirements must be made for employees with reasonable religious- or disability-based accommodation requests, so long as they don't result in an undue hardship. Shea said relatively few employees have sought disability-related accommodations, but many more have asked for religious accommodations. Distinguishing between valid and invalid disability accommodation requests is straightforward because the employer can obtain medical documentation in response to the requests, Wiltsie said. But “weeding out illegitimate religious accommodation requests is extremely difficult,” she said, noting that even employers that followed the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's religious accommodation guidance to the letter have been sued.

The Changing Nature of Exceptions to Mandates

Courts may or may not be receptive to claims that vaccine mandates were unlawful. The nature of what constitutes a reasonable exception to a vaccine requirement may be changing, based on what is now known about vaccines and the Supreme Court possibly making the standard for employers' defense against religious accommodation requests more stringent. When defending an accommodation denial case under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, an employer currently must establish that granting the request would impose a significant difficulty or expense for disability accommodations or more than a de minimis cost for religious accommodations. Although these standards are both referred to as “undue hardship,” the standard for showing an undue hardship currently is much higher for disability accommodations than for religious accommodations. When employers began implementing vaccine requirements immediately after vaccines became available, the understanding from public health officials was that most vaccinated employees would not get COVID-19 or would not carry a sufficient level of the virus to transmit it to others, Wiltsie said. In addition, COVID-19 treatments have improved significantly since the pandemic's onset. Wiltsie said that cases originating from early in the pandemic will be the easiest for employers to defend. No matter when the decision was made to deny a religious accommodation request, the de minimis cost burden is relatively easy to satisfy, she noted. This may change if the Supreme Court decides this year to change the applicable standard for denying religious accommodation requests.

The court is considering whether to change the “undue hardship” standard in religious accommodation cases brought under Title VII from the de minimis cost standard to the more stringent “significant difficulty or expense” standard that applies in ADA accommodation cases. The high court is widely expected to switch to applying the latter standard to religious accommodation requests, Shimada said. If the Supreme Court does, employers will find it more difficult to justify denying an employee's religious accommodation request, he noted. As for constitutional challenges against employers for denying religious exemptions, the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on March 14 ruled that a company wasn't a state actor when it sold products to the federal government and imposed a vaccine mandate because the government required it to do so as a federal contractor.

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EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

7 Workspace Updates to Maximize Productivity

Will employees ever love the office?

90% of employers plan on requiring employees to return to the office for at least part of the week in 2023, according to a recent survey by HR Dive. But as workers have grown accustomed to their home offices — and as a focus on well-being and work-life balance continues to take center state among today's workforce — it's likely those employers will face some resistance. To ease that friction, employers may want to reconsider exactly what they're asking employees to return to. A hybrid work arrangement will likely be the most common for those heading back to the office this year, but the days of settling for harsh lighting and bad coffee are over. Still, offices may not need to undergo an HGTV-level renovation to create some added comfort and function. Leahy outlined seven considerations employers should keep in mind as they're revamping workspaces to suit today's employee. "There is definitely no one-size-fits-all, and understanding the culture and the mission of an organization is at the root of it all," she says.

1. OCCUPANCY

"One of the most important things for us as we're talking to clients is the strategy around occupancy," she says. "Are you creating guidelines around when people are coming in? There's almost an optimal density you want to create. You don't want people packed in — those days are gone — but the flip side is true; if you're one person in a space that's intended to be occupied by 20, that's not going to be comfortable either."

2. LAYOUT

"Understanding what the strategy is around [occupancy], we can help curate whether it is a one-to-one seating model or hoteling," says Leahy, referring to a system in which employees can use any available desk on any given day they're in the office, rather than be assigned a permanent seat. Private offices, she observes, are largely out of fashion in a post-COVID world.

3. DECOR

"Everyone is looking for spaces that are a little more reminiscent of home and hospitality," Leahy says, "so look for ways that you can bring in a little softness." Simple additions like area rugs and throw pillows can create some desired coziness, she suggests, and urges employers to consider lighting and wall colors as well.

4. INDIVIDUAL SPACE

"In more of a hybrid workforce, people are going to be more transient, and there's a lot of opportunity to switch up the type of individual work settings so that people have choice," Leahy says. "There are some nice enclosed nooks and alcoves, community tables, or library settings. Having dual monitors, height adjustable desks — people's needs aren't always the same. Being able to provide that variety shows you care and you're not trying to fit everyone into the same size box."

5. COMMUNITY SPACE

"Collaboration has been such a hot topic," says Leahy. "Having a more open environment that lets people quickly transition from individual work to learning and impromptu work is really valuable. Coffee points, cafes, little lunch nooks — all of those are the life and energy of the office space. There's a science around these open collaboration spaces, especially for the vast majority of our clients that are embracing hybrid work. Make a decision on whether technology is going to be included within it or not. It all goes back to the people who are connecting with one another, as well as connecting with participants on the other side of the screen."

6. NATURAL ELEMENTS

"Plants can go a long way," Leahy says. "Taking a lot of cues from exterior architecture — smaller plant groupings, indoor/outdoor courtyard-type spaces using warm flooring materials, even hanging plant life overhead. Lighting is another big one. When you are outside in nature, there are a lot of different light levels. You experience shadow, you experience brightness, so creating a space that has those highs and lows of lighting is a subtle way to bring in more of what you experience in the outdoors."

7. WELL-BEING AND BREAK SPACE

"Taking a look at a day in the life [of employees] and taking care in even the smallest little areas of a space — creating a wellness room or a mother's room that is not four drywall walls and a door with paint on it — adding surprise and delight into all of the spaces makes people feel very supported and cared for," says Leahy. "If you're a mother or somebody with a migraine and you go into one of these rooms, it really does feel like a respite. Even in the restrooms, it all matters."

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Top HR Trends to Watch in 2023

1. Hybrid work

90% of knowledge workers don't want to return to the office full time

2. Workplace Inclusion

With a 10% increase in diversity on executive teams, companies experienced an 8% increase in profitability

3. Employee Engagement

HR leaders are looking to tackle the fast-changing future with the human side.

4. Remote work

25% of all professional jobs in North America will be remote by the beginning of 2023.

5. HR technology

85% of the HR professionals surveyed said they plan to invest in or already have invested in AI-powered HR solutions.

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