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Introduction

HYBRID WORK— POWERED BY CHOICE

by Fran Katsoudas and Jeetu Patel

If all you're talking about when you talk about hybrid is whether people will work at the office or at home, you're missing the deeper conversation. When the pandemic shifted the world of work to remote in 2020, people had to learn to connect in new ways. They dialed in from home offices, couches, bedrooms, or even (the lucky ones) from beaches. And paradoxically, communicating from afar actually helped people get to know each other better.

Connecting from outside of the office brought new worlds into the world of work; people got to know each other's homes, families, pets. There was a level of intimacy

associated with calling from your personal space that drew people together in new and deeper ways. Employees got to know—and embrace—all aspects of their colleagues, not just the work personas they brought into the office.

If there is one thing that we want to retain from remote work lockdown, it is this: We don't want people going back to masking who they are at work. Getting hybrid right will be about embracing your people in their entirety. Companies must be willing to see who their employees are *and* who they want to be, and allow them to choose to work in the ways that best play to their strengths.

It has always been clear that every person's work needs and preferences are unique, but the traditional organizational structure has never recognized this. No one-size-fits-all model will allow every employee to flourish. Some people love working from home every day; others despise it. For most, there's a happy medium somewhere in the middle. And it is through embracing flexibility and different modes of working that companies will get the most out of their people and incur the greatest benefit for their business.

Tapping into this secret of choice will also attract the best talent. At a moment in time when there are more

people looking for jobs and more jobs in the market, employees have more choice than ever about not just who they work for but also how they work. They are going to be drawn to the companies that are offering flexibility and putting employees first.

Remote work began to chip away at the traditional, rigid organizational structure. Hybrid work can take this further, but in order to do it right, hybrid has to be different than remote. “Remote” connotes distance, barriers, separation. It focuses on where you’re working and emphasizes being apart from others. Hybrid must create an experience that isn’t diluted, that engenders inclusion for individuals no matter their location.

Before we can cross the bridge to the future of work, we must begin by seeing each employee as a whole person. Where this new conviction leads, technology can follow. By believing that hybrid can usher in a better and more productive experience than fully remote or fully in the office, we can make this new era manifest. But it must start with a mindset focused on people and driven by inclusion.

The hybrid workplace requires a rethinking of our spaces and a seamless experience between the physical and the virtual, and technology will be critical. Virtual communication technology has been well established for

a while, but virtual *collaboration* technology is just being truly born. Companies need platforms that will not just dial in a colleague but ensure that colleague's voice is heard, ideas are valued, experience is seamless, and opportunities are equal.

The real game-changer will come when we build the collaboration technology to enable serendipity in the virtual experience. The typical experience of virtual connection is transactional, agenda-driven. Figuring out how to build serendipitous interaction into the virtual world of hybrid work—time to wander and organically connect—will truly usher in an era of productivity and collaboration unlike anything experienced before.

The result of all this transformation will be a new world of work in which an employee's choice about how, where, or when they work doesn't have an impact on their career trajectory, contribution to the business, or opportunity for advancement. In the pre-hybrid era, there was a real fear of being left behind if you weren't in the office—fear of being granted flexible hours but being “mommy-tracked”; fear of being based at the satellite office but losing face time with the boss. Hybrid done right will ensure there won't be a two-tiered hierarchy in which those in the office have a leg up. It will be the work that is done that determines someone's merit, not where the work is being done.

The transition to hybrid work and a focus on the *what* instead of the *where* present a true chance for a revolution around inclusion not only *at* work but *through* work. Hybrid presents a way to democratize opportunity and reach talent wherever they may be. Right now there are 3 billion digital workers on the planet. Hybrid work provides the potential for us to use technology to ensure that that anyone, anywhere, speaking any language, at any socioeconomic level, can participate in a global economy. A person in a village in Bangladesh can—and should—be afforded the same opportunity as someone in the heart of Silicon Valley. And that has never been more achievable than it is now.

This is the real opportunity with hybrid work and the most exciting prospect for the transformation of work over the coming years. It isn't just for people to have the flexibility to work two days from home and three days in the office. It is the opportunity for talent itself to be democratized. People can pursue opportunities from anywhere, and companies can seek talent globally.

Hybrid Workplace: The Insights You Need from Harvard Business Review provides tools and ingredients for your own hybrid experiment, empowering you to begin the journey into this future of work. Each of the articles in this book looks at different facets of the new world of inclusion and choice that hybrid work can unlock.

Section 1, “Designing a Better Hybrid Workplace,” will help you understand the decisions you need to make—or remake—to ensure your hybrid policies are balancing institutional and individual needs. “Management and Culture in the Hybrid Workplace” looks at how approaches to team building and managing people must change in this new environment. And the final section, “Hybrid Meetings and Collaboration” explores how what we have thought of as “virtual communication” can and must evolve into hybrid collaboration.

We are now living in the age of the hybrid work experiment. For many, this experiment began many months ago, or longer, but we have a long way to go to get it right. If we follow some guiding principles—leaning into choice, inclusion, and opportunity—we have a real chance to redefine the future of work. It will take changing our habits, making new commitments to the work and to each other, and periodically pausing to see what’s working and what’s not. And then we innovate and adapt to improve, finding the solutions and configurations to make hybrid work work.



Section 1

DESIGNING A BETTER HYBRID WORKPLACE

1

HOW TO DO HYBRID RIGHT

by Lynda Gratton

By late February 2020, as the implications of Covid-19 were becoming clear, Hiroki Hiramatsu, the head of global HR at Fujitsu, realized that the company was in for a shock.

For years, flexible work arrangements had been on the agenda at Fujitsu, but little had actually changed. Most managers in the Japan offices still prized face-to-face interaction and long office hours—and according to an internal survey conducted not long before, more than 74% of all employees considered the office to be the best

place to work. But the pandemic, Hiramatsu foresaw, was about to turn everything upside down.

By the middle of March, the majority of Fujitsu's Japan-based employees—some 80,000—were working from home. And it didn't take long for them to appreciate the advantages of their new flexibility. By May, according to a follow-up survey, only 15% of Fujitsu employees considered the office to be the best place to work. Some 30% said the best place was their homes, and the remaining 55% favored a mix of home and office—a hybrid model.

As employees settled into their new routines, Hiramatsu recognized that something profound was happening. “We are not going back,” he told me in September 2020. “The two hours many people spend commuting is wasted—we can use that time for education, training, time with our family. We need many ideas about how to make remote work effective. We are embarking on a work-life shift.”

For 10 years, I've led the Future of Work Consortium, which has brought together more than 100 companies from across the world to research future trends, identify current good practice, and learn from emerging experiments. Since the pandemic I've focused our research on the extraordinary impact of Covid-19 on working arrangements. As part of that effort, I've talked extensively to executives, many of whom, like Hiramatsu, report that

they've detected a silver lining in our collective struggle to adapt to the pandemic. These executives told me that given the astonishing speed with which companies have adopted the technology of virtual work, and the extent to which most employees don't want to revert to past ways of working, they're seeing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reset work using a hybrid model—one that, if we can get it right, will allow us to make our work lives more purposeful, productive, agile, and flexible.

If leaders and managers want to make this transition successfully, however, they'll need to do something they're not accustomed to doing: Design hybrid work arrangements with individual human concerns in mind, not just institutional ones.

The Elements of Hybrid

Figuring out how to do this is far from straightforward. That's because to design hybrid work properly, you have to think about it along two axes: place and time.

Place is the axis that gets the most attention. Like Fujitsu's employees, millions of workers around the world this year have made a sudden shift from being place-constrained (working in the office) to being place-unconstrained (working anywhere). Perhaps less noticed

is the shift many have also made along the time axis, from being time-constrained (working synchronously with others) to being time-unconstrained (working asynchronously whenever they choose).

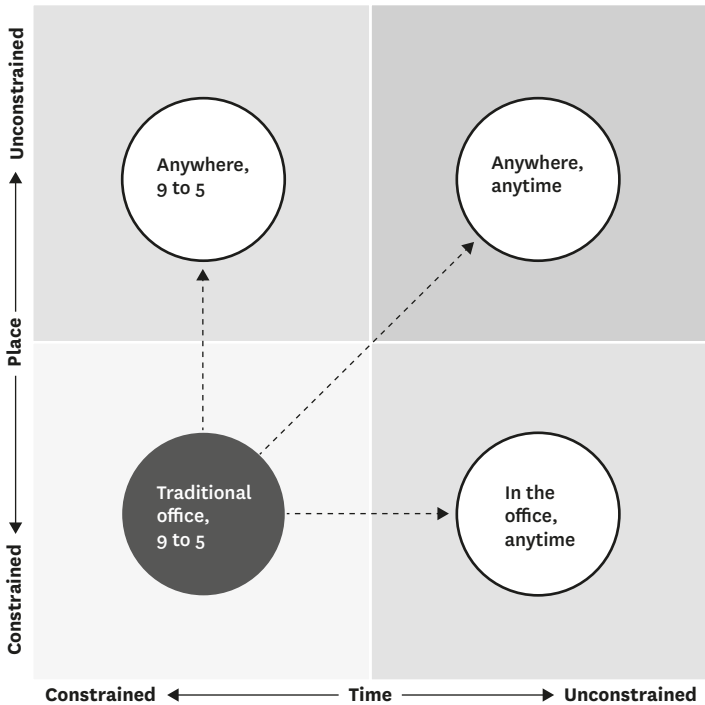
To help managers conceptualize the two-dimensional nature of this problem, I've long used a simple two-by-two matrix that's organized along those axes. Before Covid-19, most companies offered minimal flexibility along both dimensions. This put them in the lower-left quadrant, with employees working in the office during prescribed hours. Some firms had begun to venture into the lower-right quadrant, by allowing more-flexible hours; others were experimenting in the upper-left quadrant, by offering employees more flexibility in where they work, most often from home. Very few firms, however, were moving directly into the upper-right quadrant, which represents an anywhere, anytime model of working—the hybrid model.

But that's changing. Many companies have firmly set their sights on flexible working arrangements that can significantly boost productivity and employee satisfaction. Making that happen, I've learned in my research, will require that managers consider the challenge from four distinct perspectives: (1) jobs and tasks, (2) employee preferences, (3) projects and workflows, and (4) inclusion and fairness. Let's look at each in turn.

FIGURE 1-1

Work arrangements in place and time

Working in the office from 9 to 5 used to be the norm, with companies allowing limited flexibility in where or when employees worked. The pandemic has upended that model, as managers recognize that many employees can work productively anywhere, anytime.



1. Jobs and tasks

When thinking about jobs and tasks, start by understanding the critical drivers of productivity—energy, focus, coordination, and cooperation—for each. Next, consider how those drivers will be affected by changes in working arrangements along the axes of time and place.

To illustrate, let's consider a few kinds of jobs and tasks, their key drivers, and the time and place needs that each involves:

Strategic planner. A critical driver of productivity for this role is focus. Planners often need to work undisturbed for stretches of at least three hours in order to, for example, gather market information and develop business plans. The axis that best enables focus is time—specifically, asynchronous time. If planners are freed from the scheduled demands of others, place becomes less critical: They can perform their work either at home or in the office.

Team manager. Here the critical driver of productivity is coordination. Managers need to regularly communicate in-the-moment feedback with team members. They need to engage in conversation and debate, share best practices,

and mentor and coach those on their team. The axis most likely to encourage this aspect of productivity is once again time—but in this case, the time needs to be synchronous. If that can be arranged, then place again becomes less critical: Managers and employees can do their coordination tasks together in the office or from home, on platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

Product innovator. For this role, the critical driver is cooperation. But now the important axis is place. Innovation is stimulated by face-to-face contact with colleagues, associates, and clients, who generate ideas in all sorts of ways: by brainstorming in small groups, bumping into one another in the hallways, striking up conversations between meetings, attending group sessions. This kind of cooperation is fostered most effectively in a shared location—an office or a creative hub where employees have the chance to get to know one another and socialize. To that end, cooperative tasks must be synchronous and conducted in a shared space. Looking to the future, we can expect that the development of more-sophisticated cooperative technologies will render shared physical space less of an issue.

Marketing manager. Productivity in this role—indeed, in most roles—requires sustained energy. Both time and

place can play a role here. As we've learned during the pandemic, many people find being at home energizing, because they are freed from the burden of long commutes, they can take time out during the day to exercise and walk, they can eat more healthily, and they can spend more time with their families.

The challenge in designing hybrid work arrangements is not simply to optimize the benefits but also to minimize the downsides and understand the trade-offs. Working from home can boost energy, but it can also be isolating, in a way that hinders cooperation. Working on a synchronous schedule can improve coordination, but it can also introduce constant communications and interruptions that disrupt focus.

To combat these potential downsides, Hiramatsu and his team at Fujitsu have committed to creating an ecosystem of spaces that together make up what they call the borderless office. Depending on employees' or teams' specific drivers of productivity, these spaces can take several forms: hubs, which maximize cooperation; satellites, which facilitate coordination; and shared offices, which enable focus.

Fujitsu's hubs are designed with cross-functional cooperation and serendipitous encounters in mind. Located in the major cities, they are comfortable and welcoming

open-plan spaces, equipped with the advanced technologies necessary for brainstorming, team building, and the cocreation of new products. When Fujitsu employees want to work creatively with customers or partners, they invite them to a hub.

The company's satellites are spaces designed to facilitate coordination within and between teams that are working on shared projects. They contain meeting spaces where teams can come together, both in person and virtually, supported by secure networks and advanced videoconferencing facilities. These opportunities for coordination, especially face-to-face, address some of the isolation and loneliness that employees may suffer when working from home. Shared offices, which make up most of Fujitsu's ecosystem of spaces, are located all over Japan, often near or in urban or suburban train stations. They can be used as short stopovers when people are traveling to visit customers or as alternatives to working at home. They are designed to function as quiet spaces that employees can easily get to, thus minimizing commuting time. The productivity aim here is focus. The shared offices are equipped with desks and internet connections, allowing employees to work independently and undisturbed or to attend online meetings or engage in online learning.

2. Employee preferences

Our capacity to operate at peak productivity and performance varies dramatically according to our personal preferences. So in designing hybrid work, consider the preferences of your employees—and enable others to understand and accommodate those preferences.

Imagine, for example, two strategic planners who hold the same job at the same company, with focus as a critical driver of performance. One of them, Jorge, is 40. He and his family live some distance from his office, requiring him to commute an hour each day to and from work. He has a well-equipped home office, and his children are at school during the day—so, not surprisingly, Jorge feels he is most productive and focused when he can skip the commute and stay home alone to work. He prefers to go into the office only once or twice a week, to meet with his team.

Lillian's situation is very different. She's 28. She lives in the center of town and shares a small apartment with three other people. Because of her living situation, she can't work for long stretches of time at home without being disturbed. To focus, she prefers to be in the office, which is not far from where she lives.

Jorge and Lillian differ in another way: tenure with the company. This, too, affects their preferences. Jorge has

been with the firm for eight years and has established a strong network, so time in the office is less crucial for his learning or development. Lillian, on the other hand, is new to her role and is keen to be mentored and coached, activities that demand time with others in the office.

Companies on the hybrid journey are finding ways to take their employees' perspective. Many, like one of the technology companies in the Future of Work Consortium, are providing managers with simple diagnostic survey tools to better understand their teams' personal preferences, work contexts, and key tasks—tools that allow them to learn, for example, where their team members feel most energized, whether they have a well-functioning home office, and what their needs are for cooperation, coordination, and focus.

Equinor, a Norwegian energy company, has recently taken an ingenious approach to understanding its employees: It surveyed them about their preferences and developed nine composite “personas,” with guidelines for hybrid work arrangements tailored to each one. One of the personas is described like this: “Anna” is a sector manager in Oslo who has been with the company for 20 years. She has three teenagers at home and a 40-minute bicycle commute into the office. Before Covid-19, she worked every other week from home, primarily to focus. But when her teenagers are doing remote schooling in

the house, she is often distracted when working from home. When her kids are back at school, she hopes to spend two days a week at home, doing focused work, and three days in the office, collaborating with her team.

As managers seek to identify the hybrid arrangements that are best for their teams, they should consider, for example, how they would respond to an “Anna”: How would her circumstances and preferences affect her capacity to collaborate with others? More broadly, managers must consider the implications of coordinating a variety of personas across virtual teams. What are the risks to the safety, security, and effectiveness of operations? How will changes affect collaboration, leadership, and culture? What might the overall effects be when it comes to taxes, compliance, and external reputation?

3. Projects and workflows

To make hybrid a success, you have to consider how work gets done. An executive who manages Jorge and Lillian, the hypothetical strategic planners mentioned above, must not only consider their needs and preferences but also coordinate the work they do with that of the others on their team—and with other functions and consumers of their work. That kind of coordination was relatively

straightforward when team members all worked in the same place at the same time. But in the era of hybrid work it has grown significantly more complex. I've observed executives tackling this in two ways.

One is to significantly boost the use of technology to coordinate activities as employees move to more-flexible work arrangements. Consider the case of Jonas, an Equinor employee. Jonas works as an inspection engineer in the Kollsnes plant, which processes gas from fields in the North Sea. After the pandemic hit, the plant's managers made it possible for Jonas and his team to carry out some inspection tasks from home by supplying them with state-of-the-art video and digital tools. These include, for example, robotic devices that move around the plant recording detailed in-the-moment visual data, which is then streamed back to all the team members for analysis. As a result of these changes, Jonas and his colleagues can now conduct very effective remote field-safety inspections.

Managers at Fujitsu, for their part, use a range of digital tools to categorize and visualize the types of work their teams are performing as they experiment with new arrangements on the axes of time and place. That, in turn, has enabled them to better assess individual and team workloads, analyze remote working conditions, and confirm work projections. Team leaders are also able to understand employee working patterns by studying detailed

movement data and examining space utilization and floor density data. This allows Fujitsu managers to design the right arrangements for their workflows and projects.

Other companies are using this moment as an opportunity to reimagine workflows. New hybrid arrangements should never replicate existing bad practices—as was the case when companies began automating work processes, decades ago. Instead of redesigning their workflows to take advantage of what the new technologies made possible, many companies simply layered them onto existing processes, inadvertently replicating their flaws, idiosyncrasies, and workarounds. It often was only years later, after many painful rounds of reengineering, that companies really began making the most of those new technologies.

Companies designing hybrid arrangements need to work hard to get workflows right the first time. Leaders at one of the retail banks in our Future of Work Consortium analyzed and reimaged workflows by asking three crucial questions:

Are any team tasks redundant? When executives at the bank asked themselves that question, they realized that in their new hybrid model they had retained too many traditional meetings. By eliminating some and making others (such as status updates) asynchronous, they boosted productivity.

Can any tasks be automated or reassigned to people outside the team? In many new hybrid arrangements, the bank executives realized, the simple answer was yes. Take the process for opening an account with a new high-net-worth customer. Before Covid-19, everybody assumed that this required face-to-face meetings and client signatures. But now, thanks to the redesigned process introduced during the pandemic, bank managers and customers alike recognize the ease and value of remote sign-up.

Can we reimagine a new purpose for our place of work? Here, too, the answer turned out to be yes. To make their hybrid model work successfully, the bank executives decided to reconfigure their existing office space in ways that would encourage cooperation and creativity, and they invested more in tools to enable people to work effectively and collaboratively at home.

4. Inclusion and fairness

As you develop new hybrid practices and processes, pay particular attention to questions of inclusion and fairness. This is vitally important. Research tells us that feelings

of unfairness in the workplace can hurt productivity, increase burnout, reduce collaboration, and decrease retention.

In the past, when companies began experimenting with flexible approaches to work, they typically allowed individual managers to drive the process on an ad hoc basis. As a result, different departments and teams were afforded varying degrees of flexibility and freedom, which inevitably gave rise to accusations of unfairness. And many employees, of course, had time- and place-dependent jobs that made hybrid arrangements either impossible or far from optimal. They often felt treated unfairly.

Brit Insurance has done admirable work on inclusion and fairness. As the company's CEO, Matthew Wilson, and its chief engagement officer, Lorraine Denny, began the design and implementation of new ways of working, early in 2020, they made a bold choice. Rather than involving "the usual suspects" in the design process, they randomly chose employees from offices in the United States, Bermuda, and London—amounting to 10% of the workforce, from receptionists to senior underwriters—to participate.

During the following six months, teams of six employees—each drawn from multiple divisions, levels, and generational cohorts—worked together virtually

across Brit Insurance. They began with diagnostic tools that helped them profile and share their own working capabilities and preferences. Then they embarked on a series of learning modules designed to create deeper insights into how they could work together to better serve one another's needs and those of the company as a whole. Finally, they engaged in a half-day virtual "hackathon," during which they came up with ideas and pitched them to the CEO. The result was what they called the Brit Playbook, which described some of the new ways they would now all work together.

Selina Millstam, the vice president and head of talent management at Ericsson, a Swedish multinational, conducted a similarly inclusive effort in 2020. Every new work arrangement, she and the executive team decided, would have to be rooted in the company culture, important aspects of which were "a speak-up environment," "empathy," and "cooperation and collaboration."

To ensure that this would be the case, Millstam and her team engaged employees in "jams" that were conducted virtually during a 72-hour period and supported by a team of facilitators, who subsequently analyzed the conversational threads. One of these jams, launched in late April 2020, played a crucial role in giving Ericsson employees a platform to talk about how hybrid ways of working during the pandemic might affect the company

culture. More than 17,000 people from 132 countries participated in this virtual conversation. Participants made some 28,000 comments, addressing how working during the pandemic had created both challenges (such as lack of social contact) and benefits (such as increased productivity through reduced distraction).

This jam and others like it helped Ericsson's senior leaders develop a more nuanced understanding of the issues and priorities they need to take into account as they design hybrid work arrangements. Change, they realized, is bound to create feelings of unfairness and inequity, and the best way to address that problem is to ensure that as many employees as possible are involved in the design process. They need to have their voices heard, to hear from others, and to know that the changes being made are not just the result of individual managers' whims and sensibilities.

. . .

So how can you propel your firm toward an anywhere, anytime model? Start by identifying key jobs and tasks, determine what the drivers of productivity and performance are for each, and think about the arrangements that would serve them best. Engage employees in the process, using a combination of surveys, personas, and interviews to understand what they really want and need. This will differ significantly from company to company,

so don't take shortcuts. Think expansively and creatively, with an eye toward eliminating duplication and unproductive elements in your current work arrangements. Communicate broadly so that at every stage of your journey everybody understands how hybrid arrangements will enhance rather than deplete their productivity. Train leaders in the management of hybrid teams, and invest in the tools of coordination that will help your teams align their schedules.

Finally, ask yourself whether your new hybrid arrangements, whatever they are, accentuate your company's values and support its culture. Carefully and thoughtfully take stock: In the changes you've made, have you created a foundation for the future that everybody in the company will find engaging, fair, inspiring, and meaningful?



TAKEAWAYS

Leaders and employees are embracing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reset the workplace using a hybrid model. To make this transition successfully, we must design hybrid work arrangements with individual human concerns in mind, not just institutional ones.

- ✓ Companies must take four perspectives into account: jobs and tasks, employee preferences, projects and workflows, and inclusion and fairness.
- ✓ Leaders must conceptualize new work arrangements along two axes: *place* (where people work) and *time* (when people work).
- ✓ To propel your firm toward an anywhere, anytime model, start by identifying key jobs and tasks, determine what the drivers of productivity and performance are for each, and think about the arrangements that would serve them best.
- ✓ Engage employees in the process, using a combination of surveys, personas, and interviews to understand what they really want and need.

Adapted from "How to Do Hybrid Right" in Harvard Business Review, May–June 2021 (reprint #R2103C).

2

THE OFFICE WON'T BE THE SAME, AND THAT'S A GOOD THING

by Jim Keane and Todd Heiser

By all indications the future of work is hybrid, but getting hybrid right will be hard. Deciding who works from the office and how often is a complex issue, and it will be different for every organization. If not done well it could threaten culture, collaboration, and innovation. Conversely, a well-executed hybrid workplace can be a magnet that brings people together and helps us work better than ever before.

The organizations that will win know that workplaces designed for people and the resilience of their organizations will help them move forward, learn, and remain competitive. This will involve piloting new spaces, for example, repurposing a café into a high-energy social and collaboration space that better supports new hybrid work patterns.

As architects and office-furniture designers serving the world's largest organizations, we recommend leaders think through four design approaches as you consider your hybrid strategy.

Braid the Digital and Physical Experience

Bridging the gap between in-person and remote participants is hard, and hybrid work means there will inevitably be someone who is remote, regardless of how well teams coordinate their in-office days. Remote colleagues can feel frustrated and unable to participate equally, becoming less engaged. This is especially true for creative and innovative work, such as brainstorming, which often use analog whiteboards or other physical products that are difficult for people on the other side of the camera to fully experience.

The solution is to integrate physical spaces and technology with three key concepts in mind: equity, engagement, and ease.

For example, currently, many conference rooms consist of a long table with a monitor at the end. In-person attendees sit around the table while remote participants are featured in a grid of tiny boxes, often on the same screen as any shared content.

One way to create more equity is to give each participant their own screen, placing monitors on rolling carts that can easily be moved around. Teams can pull a remote colleague into a breakout session or up to the table. Many software systems now let you split people and content onto separate displays.

To be fully engaged, people need clear sightlines to one another and to the content. Designing for employee engagement in digital-to-physical space means thinking like a movie director—lights, camera, audio, content. Some solutions we're seeing are angled or mobile tables, additional lighting, extra speakers, in-room microphones, and easy-to-move markerboards and displays.

In addition, research tells us more people will connect to a meeting on their individual devices as well as the technology in the room.¹ Ample power supplies, whiteboards, and a variety of software solutions will contribute to an

easier, more seamless hybrid collaboration experience for people.

Flip Enclosed and Open Spaces

It is time to rethink the open plan. For decades, individual workstations have become more open with ever-increasing density, while meetings are held in enclosed conference rooms. As people return to the office, these spaces will begin to shift. Meetings will happen more often in open spaces with movable boundaries, and individual focus work will happen in enclosed spaces like pods or small enclaves.

Open collaboration spaces are inherently more flexible because they don't require fixed features in their design, so they can morph and change as new work patterns emerge. Innovation, problem-solving, and co-creation often use agile approaches—for example, quick stand-up meetings that require visible, persistent content can be hosted in open spaces, defined by flexible furniture, easy-to-access tech, and other design elements.

Meanwhile, individual spaces will need more enclosure to provide the different levels of visual and acoustic privacy that people have come to expect while working at home. Video calls will happen everywhere, so enclosures—

screens, panels, pods—will give people places to focus and mitigate disruptions.

Shift from Fixed to Fluid

Buildings are built for permanence. Meanwhile, the pace of business and change continues to accelerate. We can see the tensions between slow and fast emerge in the rise of pop-ups and coworking models with demand for shorter lease terms. Most companies that have real estate are asking, how much space do we need?

The hybrid future solves for a more fluid workplace that can flex as needs change. Not only does this accelerate innovation and advance the culture of the organization, it can ensure real estate is always optimized. At Steelcase, we've optimized our own space by designing an open area that supports hybrid meetings in the morning, becomes the café at lunch, hosts a town hall in the afternoon, and can be rented for an evening event.

Balance “We” and “Me” Work

The pandemic has caused us to rethink the purpose and meaning of the office and many leaders have come to the

conclusion that the office is a place for collaborative work. A Gensler Research Institute study, conducted amid the height of the pandemic, shows full-time work-from-home employees saw a drop of 37% in average collaboration time.² Leaders are rightfully focused on boosting collaboration, and, as a result, Steelcase research shows that nearly two-thirds of leaders want to increase spaces for both in-person and hybrid forms of collaboration.³

But collaboration is not just about group work; it actually requires solitude too. Effective collaboration happens when there's an ebb and flow of people coming together to work as a team and then moving apart to focus individually, process their ideas, and follow up on assigned tasks. Too much together time without enough individual focus time can result in groupthink, so it's important that the pendulum not swing too far by designing offices that are all about the "we" and not balance the need for "me" spaces.

The jury is still out on whether working from home is more productive or not, but in the past year, employees report higher levels of productivity when their home allows them to work without interruption.⁴ We must provide places with appropriate privacy at the office, too, and employees should be able to easily move from one type of work to another without trekking across campus or getting hung up with complicated technology.

The office we return to must offer people a better experience than what they have at home, and that means giving employees the right mix of spaces for the types of work that need to get done. Organizations that choose a wait-and-see approach risk frustrating their employees who find that the old office doesn't support the new ways they work—jeopardizing the competitive advantages of bringing people together. People whose organizations move forward and create workplaces that adapt, flex, and thrive will attract and retain the best talent and benefit from innovation and growth. The future office will be a competitive advantage for organizations that take advantage of this moment in time.

When we're all back in the office, it won't be the same, and that's a good thing.



TAKEAWAYS

A well-executed hybrid workplace, designed for people and for the resilience of the organization, will help companies move forward, learn, and remain competitive. The following four design approaches will help you develop an effective hybrid strategy.

- ✓ Braid the physical and digital experiences together. Integrate physical spaces and technology with equity, engagement, and ease in mind.
- ✓ Flip open and enclosed spaces. Meetings will be more likely to happen in open spaces with moveable boundaries, while individual work will be in enclosed pods or enclaves.
- ✓ Shift from a fixed workspace to a fluid workspace that can flex as needs change. This will accelerate innovation and advance organizational culture while keeping real estate optimized.
- ✓ Don't let an emphasis on group work and collaboration overshadow the need for focused work. Allow employees move between "we" and "me" time easily.

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Adapted from "4 Strategies for Building a Hybrid Workplace That Works" on hbr.org, July 22, 2021 (reprint #H06H1Q).

3

TO MAKE HYBRID WORK, SOLICIT EMPLOYEES' INPUT

by Sue Bingham

The hybrid workforce will introduce flexibility that millions of people never had before the pandemic. The three-days-in-the-office, two-days-remote work-week is already popular. This hybrid work model covers *place*, but companies need to start paying more attention to *process* and, most important, *people*. No matter the hybrid work configurations they end up favoring, employers must get serious about adapting to employees' needs by soliciting their input along the way.

The business case is clear: At a time when competition for talent is great, creating an organizational structure that *doesn't* include the employees' preferences can result in turnover, as employees leave for greater opportunity and engagement, and difficulty attracting ideal candidates. More and more, employee relationships and feedback are critical to organizations' success. Companies that lend support to workers' entire employee life experience—offering flexibility, building deeper employer-employee connections, and creating a shared purpose—see better employee well-being and produce 21% more high performers, according to Gartner research.¹ Despite the benefits, some organizations will struggle with engaging all employees in such essential feedback and decision-making.

Yet it can be done. It starts with the company expecting its leaders to 1) know their work teams and the work performed, 2) understand how the team impacts other areas of the organization, and 3) run their piece of the operation as a small company that can flex to meet customers' needs. Involvement in all major decisions (which can simply mean input and feedback) creates the feeling of value that causes people to remain with an organization. It's not a nice-to-do; it's a must-do.

It's also essential for employers to embrace a variety of hybrid work options; more than ever, it is becoming

widely recognized that one size doesn't fit all. With the hybrid workforce among us, we'll start to see businesses testing out their own systems that work best for their cultures. Time will tell which businesses will succeed with their hybrid structures and which won't, and because we as a society tend to look toward successful companies to emulate their processes, market and business trends will focus continued attention on the success of a given approach.

Why Managers Should Start Input-Soliciting Conversations

With workers having so many options in terms of workplaces, they're unlikely to stay employed long at an organization that doesn't value their opinions. Although it's idealistic for managers to try to meet each person's individual needs, leaders who have more flexibility to work with their teams (versus merely executing a corporate edict) are better equipped to increase retention. Of course, top leadership needs to understand the value of employee feedback for managers to be so empowered.

Recently, I spoke with the president of a large company who had established a 50/50 policy—half remote and half

in-office work—with the positive intention of blending organizational requirements with the workforce’s desire for flexibility. The approach had encountered a few hiccups. For example, one staff member was needed in the office but declined to come in because it was a scheduled remote workday. This, of course, is unacceptable—tantamount to saying, “it’s not my job.” So expectations needed to be clarified. Another issue was that newer employees hired during the pandemic weren’t advancing as fast in performance as employees who were onboarded in person.

Fortunately, this leader values employee input and is open to using it to improve the policy. When talking, we discussed the possibility of having new people work full-time on-site for the first month or two—whatever worked best. In the end, the company leader decided that the 50/50 policy was a great start and should be viewed as an evolving situation using clear expectations combined with feedback and suggestions from the workforce.

Those stipulations of recurring feedback and clear expectations are key to a policy’s success. If you’re a manager who needs to facilitate closer employee-employer collaboration around hybrid work policies, start with these steps for establishing schedules and making ongoing adjustments:

1. Learn your team members' circumstances for flourishing.

The adage to “keep a professional distance from your employees” is anathema to creating a great culture. Research has established that relationships with bosses and supervisors are essential to employees' job satisfaction and, as a result, well-being.² Supervisors can't afford to fall short in cultivating this relationship when steering a team through the transition toward flexibility; they must plug in to ensure that employees are engaged.

A connected manager knows team members on a personal basis and understands the individual circumstances under which they work best and thrive as a person and a worker.

To uncover employees' motivations, managers might ask:

- What are your goals for the near term and long term of your career? What could stand in your way?
- What makes you feel valued at work?
- What do you wish you could spend less time doing?

- What businesses processes could we update to create efficiency?
- What tools or processes help you feel included and engaged?

To uncover employees' needs, managers might ask:

- Where do you feel you are the most productive: at the office headquarters, in a “third place” like a coffee shop with your coworkers, working from home, or when working across a combination of locations?
- What work schedules best support your overall well-being?
- What tools do you need to perform your job well?

Asking these questions and listening carefully to the answers can reveal hints about employees' current levels of engagement and policy changes that could support or detract from that.

2. Ensure clarity on business needs, then schedule accordingly.

Before making any changes, ensure that the entire team is clear on the business needs for meeting customer ex-

pectations. Once those overarching business parameters are set, the team can then establish flexibility within them. Note that while creating clarity, employees adjust their performance positively or negatively to match leaders' expectations of them—a phenomenon known as the Pygmalion effect. With this, it's important to approach all conversations with an eye toward building a climate of success.

To uncover needs for productivity and collaboration, you might ask:

- Are the team's benchmarks, goals, and deadlines clear?
- Do you understand what's expected of you and what constitutes successful performance?
- How often do you communicate across teams or with customers? During what hours do you most often overlap?

To get to the heart of individual preferences, you might ask:

- Do you have any questions about your role in realizing the company's vision?
- What helps you focus? What distracts you?

- What methods of communication work best for you when working within the team? Across teams? With customers or external stakeholders?

With a broad understanding of the team's purpose and how it fits with the rest of the organization, a manager should be able to engage the team in finding a workable schedule that supports the company's objectives for collaboration and productivity in combination with individual preferences.

3. Seek insights into how well the schedule is working.

With a hybrid schedule and policy in place, managers should facilitate periodic team discussions on what aspects of the schedule are working and not working. Research has found that some managers actively disregard employees' ideas because they identify heavily with the status quo, but it's important that leaders encourage recurring feedback and embrace policies as adjustable to meet the organization's needs.³

For example, supervisors could assemble the team once a month and ask questions such as:

- What benefits have you seen from the hybrid policy?
- What difficulties have you encountered?
- Should we make any adjustments over the next quarter in how we collaborate?

It's important to view the current state as an experiment that can be changed over time as circumstances change. If you receive rave reviews about your policy during the first quarter, don't just set it and forget it. Continue to set follow-ups to ensure that your places, people, and policies are all aligned around the business's goals and individuals' needs as much as possible.

The days of top-down control and one-size-fits-all management have not only become dated, but also pose a threat to an organization's survival in a future that rewards speed and flexibility. Ensure you maintain that flexibility by starting the conversation now and nurturing it to maintain employee engagement through every business change.



TAKEAWAYS

As employers establish their hybrid-work plans, they must get serious about adapting to employees' needs. To get the input you need from your employees, use the following approaches:

- ✓ Learn your team members' circumstances for flourishing. Ask questions that will uncover their motivations and needs to ensure that they thrive and stay engaged.
- ✓ Ensure clarity on business needs, then make a schedule accordingly. Ask questions that will uncover your employees' productivity and collaboration needs.
- ✓ Seek insights into how well the schedule is working. Ask questions around the benefits and difficulties of your hybrid policies, and what adjustments should be made.
- ✓ Remember that your hybrid workplace is an experiment. Continue to follow up to ensure that your places, people, and policies are all aligned around

the business's goals and individuals' needs as much as possible.

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Adapted from "To Make Hybrid Work, Solicit Employees' Input" on hbr.org, July 29, 2021 (reprint #H06HTQ).

4

DON'T LOSE THE DEMOCRATIZING EFFECT OF REMOTE WORK

by Joan C. Williams, Rachel M. Korn, and Mikayla Boginsky

A silver lining of the pandemic was the democratization of access to remote work. Before the pandemic, remote work was typically limited to highly paid professionals. But during the pandemic, we learned that remote work is possible in many lower-ranked jobs: in administrative roles, government jobs, or any desk job or phone job or internet job.

Unfortunately, we hear persistent reports that all too many employers are rescinding the right to remote work for lower-paid employees even as they create “anywhere jobs” for more highly paid employees. On our helpline at the Center for WorkLife law, we’ve heard from employees who have worked remotely very successfully for more than a year only to be ordered abruptly back to work. Some have concrete evidence of increased productivity.

Lower-Level Employees Are Penalized

Creating a new caste system in which elites have anywhere jobs and non-elites are shackled to the office full-time is a recipe for high attrition among employees who often have a lot of firm-specific knowledge that is valuable to their employers.

Lower-paid workers are much more likely than higher-paid workers to live further from the office in many expensive cities, making for long commutes that make remote work highly desirable. Lower-paid workers also are much less likely to rely on nannies and childcare centers. Instead, many tag-team: Mom works one shift, and dad works a different shift. Such families have three to six times the national divorce rate because parents rarely see each other.¹ The opportunity to exchange that extra

hour or two of commuting time for family time is surely important to many employees and would foster their loyalty to companies that get this right.

Unintended Racial Effects

In this moment of reckoning, companies are becoming increasingly attuned to unintended racial effects. But among employees who have been working remote, white employees are seven times more likely than Black employees to report being interested in returning to on-site work (21% versus 3%).²

A big reason is that Black workers face a more negative in-person workplace environment: When working from home, 64% reported being better able to manage stress, and 50% reported an increase in feelings of belonging at their organization.³ As a friend told me, “I know the pandemic is awful, but remote work has been a silver lining for me. It’s exhausting, having to deal with white people day after day. This is just such a welcome break.” The water cooler is great for some, not others.

Another racial dimension to consider: Although Black and Latinx employees make up approximately 30% of the labor force, they represent 50% of people who left or lost a job in the past month in order to care for children,

according to the most recent census household pulse survey.⁴

People of color have also faced much more severe consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous Americans are about three times more likely than white Americans to be hospitalized, and twice as likely to die from Covid-19.⁵ For this reason, Black and Latinx parents are less enthusiastic about returning to in-person schooling—and on-site work.⁶ If you don't want to push people of color out of your workforce, be generous with access to remote work.

Driving Women Out

Women have dropped out of the workforce at alarming rates due to the pandemic, causing women's labor force participation to hit the lowest point since the 1980s.⁷ One major cause is childcare: Mothers had to drop out of the workforce due to a lack of consistent childcare during the pandemic.⁸

Of course, permanent remote work will require childcare. But we're hearing persistent reports of employees being called back into work with only two days' notice. This leaves no time to arrange for childcare, which may be much more difficult to arrange now than before the pandemic. Up to 4.5 million childcare slots may have been lost perma-

nently due to the pandemic.⁹ This exacerbates an already acute problem: Even before the pandemic, most people in the United States lived in childcare deserts (with only one childcare spot available for every three or more children). Even if parents are able to find care, they may not be able to afford it: Costs have risen 40% since the beginning of the pandemic.¹⁰ It only makes sense to give people ample time to set up alternative child—and elder—care arrangements.

Make Sure You're on the Right Side of the Future of Work

Employers should follow five simple steps to set up a hybrid workplace that ensures historically excluded groups won't see setbacks:

Step 1: Set your target return date, and give employees plenty of notice.

Make sure to give employees at least 45 days' notice to prepare for their return. Employees may need to make or revise child- or eldercare arrangements, or to request and set up accommodations. Plenty of advance warning also gives employers a chance to make sure they are complying with all safety laws and recommendations, and it

gives HR staff time to review accommodation requests. When you have chosen your date, let employees know with a thoughtfully crafted return-to-work announcement in which you also share your safety plan.

Step 2: Recognize that some workers have a legal right to remote work.

The shift to remote work has been great for many employees with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act entitles disabled employees to reasonable accommodations that do not impose an undue hardship on their employers. This means that employers who abruptly ordered everyone back to work are likely to get sued. Even if you were not accommodating an employee with a disability before the pandemic, the fact that that person has been working remotely for over a year can serve as evidence that a permanent accommodation does not present an undue hardship to the employer.

Other workers may also have rights to continue remote work. Employees who are pregnant or breastfeeding may be legally entitled to workplace accommodations, too, under federal and/or state laws.

An organization's abrupt order of all workers back to on-site work also risks a legal challenge if the order has

a disproportionate impact on women—and that's a lot of organizations. The ACLU sued South Carolina alleging exactly that.¹¹

Step 3: Create a hybrid model policy that works for your organization.

Start by asking employees what they want. You may be surprised to learn how many employees are unwilling or unable to return to the office full-time. Exploring what your workers want—and the barriers they are facing—may lead to a discovery that you can actually deliver many of the things they are looking for and keep you from losing top performers.

Hybrid work (where some employees are remote and some work in-person) is different from having all employees either remote or in-person. There are many different formats to consider:

- Each employee works some days in the office.
- Some employees are always remote, while some are always in person.
- Employees can change work schedules depending on seasonal or external demands.

Think about what the hybrid format you are choosing means for your company and whether you want to have the same format across the organization or leave it up to departments or teams. This may mean you need to re-consider the size and setup of your office.

Step 4: Take action to avoid on-site favoritism.

On-site favoritism is when employees who work on site get more advancement opportunities than employees who don't. If more women and people of color choose hybrid schedules, and more men and white people choose to be fully on-site, the results are predictable. Research shows that on-site favoritism will predictably happen unless organizations take steps to ensure it doesn't.¹² Here's how:

Keep track of who gets career-enhancing assignments. In many organizations, assignments are handled informally today. Research shows that has not worked out well. Even pre-pandemic, 85% to 90% of white men in our studies of a variety of industries reported access to the glamour work, but only 43% to 50% of Black women.¹³ Other women and people of color fell in between but, all in all, it's not a pretty picture.

Our open-access toolkits at www.biasinterrupters.org provide everything you need to keep metrics to see

whether your organization has equal access to career-enhancing work. First, it includes a survey to send around to find out who is doing the office housework, undervalued work that makes you a good organizational citizen but isn't recognized when it comes time for promotions or performance evaluations. Our pre-pandemic survey found that women were 29% more likely than white men to report having to do office housework.¹⁴ Second, it includes a meeting protocol so that your managers get together to create a typology of what constitutes a career-enhancing work in their department.

Have managers keep track of who is getting the glamour work. Look for patterns to see whether those who work on site are being favored over those who aren't. While you're at it, look for demographic patterns, too—alas, you'll probably find them. If you do, you need to either train your managers to avoid bias, change the system, or both. If you don't, becoming a hybrid workplace will just reinforce existing racial and gender hierarchies.

Step 5: Rethink meetings.

Meetings with a hybrid team can be tricky. Instead of trying to hold meetings with some employees around a

table and others calling in, consider holding meetings as all-remote or all in-person. That way, nobody has the upper hand—and you won't miss out on hearing insights from your remote workers. If you don't take any actions, the same problems that would come up for women and people of color in meetings before the pandemic—getting interrupted, getting floor time, or even being invited to the meeting—are likely to be exacerbated for your remote workers.

While you're at it, pay attention to your meeting schedule. If meetings are taking place in the evenings or at the school drop-off time, that can make it difficult or impossible for parents and caregivers to attend. Consider setting up “core hours” where all team members are expected to be available, and make an effort to schedule meetings during those times. And don't forget to account for remote employees who may be working in different time zones.

Switching to hybrid work is going to require thoughtful and careful planning, but it's an opportunity to shape the future of work. If employers do things right, they will democratize access to remote work and equalize access to career-enhancing opportunities at their organizations—and they can expect to see better retention of top talent as a result.



TAKEAWAYS

Mishandling the transition to hybrid work threatens to reinforce social inequalities and jeopardize companies' diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. To avoid these pitfalls:

- ✓ Set your target return date, and give employees plenty of notice to allow them to plan and request accommodations.
- ✓ Recognize that some workers have a legal right to continue to work remotely.
- ✓ Think about what the hybrid format you are choosing means for your company and whether you want to have the same format across the organization or leave it up to departments or teams.
- ✓ Take action to avoid on-site favoritism; otherwise becoming a hybrid workplace may reinforce existing racial and gender hierarchies.
- ✓ Rethink meetings. Consider holding meetings as all-remote or all in-person, and hold them during “core hours.”

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Section 2

MANAGEMENT AND CULTURE IN THE HYBRID WORKPLACE

5

MANAGERS IN A HYBRID WORLD MUST PRIORITIZE EMPATHY

by Brian Kropp, Alexia Cambon, and Sara Clark

The implications of how Covid-19 has changed how people will work from now on are becoming clear. To better understand the impact of the pandemic on the future of work, we surveyed 3,049 knowledge workers and their managers across on-site, remote, and hybrid work contexts, as well as 75 HR leaders, including 20 leaders from midsize companies. Except where indicated, our findings come from these 2021 surveys.

Managers used to be selected and promoted largely based on their ability to manage and evaluate the performance of employees who could carry out a particular set of tasks. Within the last five years, HR executives started to hire and develop managers who were poised to be great coaches and teachers. But the assumption that coaching should be the primary function of management has been tested since the pandemic began. Three disruptive, transformative trends are challenging traditional definitions of the manager role:

Normalization of remote work. As both employees and managers have become more distributed, their relationships to one another have also become more asynchronous. Gartner estimates that in more than 70% of manager-employee relationships, either the manager or the employee will be working remotely at least some of the time. This means that employees and their managers will be less likely to be working on the same things at the same time. Managers will have dramatically less visibility into the realities of their employees' day-to-day and will begin to focus more on their outputs and less on the processes used to produce them.

Acceleration in use of technology to manage employees. More than one in four companies have invested in new tech-

nology to monitor their remote employees during the pandemic. Companies have been buying scheduling software, AI-enabled expense-report auditing tools, and even technologies to replace manager feedback using AI. While companies have been focused on how technology can automate employee tasks, it can just as effectively replace the tasks of managers. At the extreme, by 2024, new technologies have the potential to replace as much as 69% of the tasks historically done by managers, such as assigning work and nudging productivity.¹

Employees' changing expectations. As companies have expanded the support they offer to their employees in areas like mental health and childcare during the pandemic, the relationships between employees and their managers have started to shift to be more emotional and supportive. Knowledge workers now expect their managers to be part of their support system to help them improve their life experience, rather than just their employee experience.

When managerial tasks are replaced by technology, managers aren't needed to manage workflows. When interactions become primarily virtual, managers can no longer rely on what they see to manage performance, and when relationships become more emotional, they can no longer limit the relationship to the sphere of work. These

three trends have culminated in a new era of management where it's less important to see what employees are doing and more important to understand how they feel.

Radical flexibility requires empathetic managers.

To be successful in this new environment, managers must lead with empathy. In a 2021 Gartner survey of 4,787 global employees assessing the evolving role of management, only 47% of managers are prepared for this future role. The most effective managers of the future will be those who build fundamentally different relationships with their employees.

Empathy is nothing new. It's a common term in the philosophy of good leadership, but it has yet to be a top management priority. The empathic manager is someone who can contextualize performance and behavior—who transcends simply understanding the facts of work and proactively asks questions and seeks information to place themselves in their direct reports' contexts.

Empathy requires developing high levels of trust and care and a culture of acceptance within teams. This is a lot to ask of any individual: that they ask questions that produce vulnerable answers without compromising trust, diagnose the root cause of an employee's behavior without making

assumptions, and demonstrate the social-emotional intelligence necessary to imagine another's feelings.

Empathy isn't easy, but it's worth it. In fact, in that same survey, 85% of HR leaders at midsize companies agreed that it's more important now for managers to demonstrate empathy than it was before the pandemic. Further Gartner analysis shows that managers who display high levels of empathy have three times the impact on their employees' performance of those who display low levels of empathy. Employees at organizations with high levels of empathy-based management are more than twice as likely to agree that their work environment is inclusive.

Creating a new workforce of empathic managers is especially difficult for midsize companies. While larger companies can earmark billions of dollars for learning and development for massive workforce transformation, smaller companies are more fiscally constrained and don't have the same resources. Midsize companies also often don't have the scale to create a managerial class within their workforce—they need managers to be both managers *and* doers.

Midsize companies need to find solutions to develop more empathic managers without massive investments and continue to have those managers work rather than just manage. This will require organizations and their HR

functions to develop their managers' skills, awaken their mindsets to manage in new ways, and create the capacity across the organization to enable this shift. Here's how to adopt a holistic strategy that invests in all three of those strategies.

Develop empathy skills through vulnerable conversation practice.

Asking managers to lead with empathy can be intimidating. Many managers understand empathy conceptually but aren't sure how to use it as a management tool: *Are these questions too personal? How do I create a trusting relationship with my direct reports? Is caring acceptable at work? How do I talk about social justice?* It goes against deeply ingrained assumptions that we should keep work and life separate. Managers need opportunities to practice—and, crucially, room to make mistakes—in order to learn to lead with empathy. Unfortunately, only 52% of 31 learning and development leaders polled in May 2020 reported that they were increasing their focus on soft skills.

To build empathy, Zillow creates cohorts of managers across the organization who engage in rotating one-on-

one conversations with their peers to troubleshoot current managerial challenges. These conversations offer frequent, psychologically safe opportunities to engage in vulnerable conversations focused on how managers can commit to specific actions to care for themselves, as well as support the well-being of their team. Managers are able to practice their empathy with their peers, asking specific questions to understand their challenges and articulating their own circumstances in response to probes. Importantly, these types of conversations offer managers the opportunity to fail—and in a safe space—which is an opportunity rarely given to figures of authority. They also help managers feel less isolated by practicing empathy with peers, who are less likely to pass judgment.

Empower a new manager mindset by creating a network of support.

According to our 2021 survey of 4,787 global employees, 75% of HR leaders from midsize companies agree that managers' roles have expanded, yet roles and teams are not structured to support well-being.

Goodway Group, a fully remote company since 2007, knows that the best business results and purpose for

work happen within teams and that distributed teams face greater challenges in communication and shared visibility. Goodway created a dedicated role, the team success partner, whose responsibilities include fostering trust and psychological safety and supporting team health. Managers work with team success partners to respond to the unique challenges distributed employees are facing; this includes facilitating remote psychologically safe remote conversations and supporting new team member assimilation.

Managers' motivation to be empathic increases when they have a support system that makes it clear that the burden isn't theirs alone and when organizations invest in roles designed to support them.

Create manager capacity for empathy by optimizing reporting lines.

Managers are already overburdened by the demands of the evolving work environment, and actions that drive empathy are time consuming. While 70% of midsize HR leaders agree managers are overwhelmed by their responsibilities, only 16% of midsize organizations have redefined the manager role to reduce the number of responsibilities on their plate.

Recognizing the pressure on managers to maintain team connectedness in a remote environment, leaders at Urgently, a digital roadside assistance company, rebalanced their managers' workloads. When managers have a team size they can handle, they're able to dedicate time to fostering deeper connections and responding with empathy. Moving to a hybrid environment creates complexity; one key part of the solution is to help managers prioritize their workload to focus on fewer, higher-impact relationships with individuals and teams.

Organizations that equip managers to be empathic by holistically addressing the three common barriers—skill, mindset, and capacity—will achieve outsized returns on performance in the post-Covid-19 world.



TAKEAWAYS

The normalization of remote work, the use of technology to manage employees, and changing employee expectations are challenging traditional definitions of the manager role. We are in a new era of management where it's less important to see what employees are doing and more important to understand how they feel.

- ✓ Organizations and their HR functions must learn to develop their managers' empathy skills, awaken their mindsets to manage in new ways, and create these capacities across the organization.
- ✓ Create a network of support for your managers. Their motivation to be empathetic increases when they have a support system that makes it clear that the burden isn't theirs alone.
- ✓ Optimize reporting lines, and help managers prioritize their workload. When managers have a team size they can handle, they're able to dedicate time to focusing on fewer, higher-impact relationships.

NOTES

1. "Gartner Predicts 69% of Routine Work Currently Done by Managers Will Be Fully Automated by 2024," Gartner Research, January 23, 2020, <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-01-23-gartner-predicts-69-of-routine-work-currently-done-b>.

Adapted from "What Does It Mean to Be a Manager Today" on hbr.org, April 15, 2021 (reprint #H06A6E).

6

MANAGING HYBRID POWER DYNAMICS

by Mark Mortensen and Martine Haas

Hybridity promises organizations the benefits of remote working (increased flexibility, reduced carbon footprint, labor-cost optimization, and increased employee satisfaction) alongside the critical strengths of traditional, colocated work (smoother coordination, informal networking, stronger cultural socialization, greater creativity, and face-to-face collaboration). But hybridity is also inextricably tied to power—it creates power differentials within teams that can damage relationships, impede effective collaboration, and ultimately

reduce performance. To lead effectively in a hybrid environment, managers must recognize and actively manage the two distinct sources of power that can impede—or facilitate—hybrid work: *hybridity positioning* and *hybridity competence*.

How Hybridity Positioning Affects Power

First, hybridity means that, due to where they're positioned, employees have different access to resources and different levels of visibility—both key sources of power and influence.

Resource access differs depending on whether the employee is located in the office or outside of it. Employees in the office have ready and quick access to technology and infrastructure to support their work. They tend to have faster and easier access to information, and that information tends to be more current and broad (including informal water-cooler conversations), which provides them with an edge when it comes to the rapid changes of today's environment. Being in the office also provides access to the emotional and task-based social support provided by peers.

In contrast, employees who work remotely often find their weaker technological setup and infrastructure (slow

connections, inability to access certain resources from home, a less sophisticated home office setup) make it more difficult to demonstrate their competence. Not being present for informal interactions leaves remote workers feeling out of the loop and last to know. Being remote may also lead employees to feel more isolated and lacking the relationships and connections that provide social support.

Visibility level, or being seen by those in power, is also shaped by an employee's location—especially their location relative to their boss and senior managers. Working in the same space as the boss increases the likelihood that employees' efforts and actions will be recognized and top of mind. Employees who are seen in the hallways are likely to come to mind when it's time to staff an important new project, and their actions on that project are likely to be recognized, resulting in credit for a job well done.¹ Even if the boss is working remotely, when an employee is based in the office, it increases the likelihood that their actions will be seen by others and reported to the boss indirectly. When working remotely, no one sees the late nights or early mornings or how hard employees are working to deliver on their obligations. Credit for a collective output is likely to be unevenly attributed, with most going to those who are in the office and more visible.

Taking these two dimensions of hybridity positioning together, we can understand how hybridity affects each

employee in a team or work group by thinking in terms of where the employee and manager are situated.

How Hybridity Competence Affects Power

Not all individuals are equally skilled at operating within a hybrid environment. The ability to effectively navigate in a hybrid environment is itself a skill and therefore a source of power. Hybridity requires employees to be ambidextrous—able to balance between and navigate across both worlds—in a way that fully colocated and fully remote working don't.

Employees who are strong at relationship building, both face-to-face and virtually, have an advantage in hybrid environments, as do those who are willing to ask for, find, and claim the resources they may not have easy access to. Employees with good network and political awareness are able to recognize advantageous positions and situations, and those who establish strong relationships that can transcend the gap between face-to-face and remote working can use informal connections to replace missing information. Hybrid environments reward employees who think and act adaptably and flexibly, who are able to organize and coordinate across a complex and

dynamic environment, and who are able to establish and provide evidence of their own trustworthiness when working in a context of low visibility.

On the other hand, employees who are less effective at building relationships in either in-person or remote environments may find themselves struggling to work with collaborators who do work that way. Those who are less skilled at coordinating work within such a complex system may find they're constantly out of sync with colleagues and managers.

Hybridity competence is a separate source of power from hybridity positioning. Someone in a disadvantaged position may still be able to work very effectively if they have high hybridity competence, while someone in an advantaged position may still be ineffective if they have low hybridity competence.

The Managerial Challenge

While employees need to ensure that they're visible to their managers and can access the resources they need for their work, managers similarly need to make sure they stay informed about what their employees are doing and facilitate their access to those resources.

Managers who are colocated with their employees have more information about what and how those employees are doing. Managers who are remote from their employees may feel like they're operating in the dark. Incomplete information is nothing new, but hybridity's real threat is to fairness. Here are four ways managers can actively manage the structurally inevitable differences in power that arise in a hybrid environment and their effects.

Track and communicate. Create an accurate map of your team's "hybridity configuration": who is working where, and when. Once you've mapped this out, you need to have a conversation with them to surface the challenges they and you face and discuss what you can do to overcome them. Always bear in mind that your employees' resource access depends on their location, and their visibility depends on their location relative to you.

Making this task more complex is that hybridity is itself dynamic—a result of variations both across employees ("Martine works in the office, Mark works from home") and for individual employees ("I work in the office MWF and at home TT"). This makes hybridity a moving target. It requires ongoing systematic tracking, codifying, and visualizing to help both managers and employees stay aware of the configuration of hybridity in a given work group and manage the resulting power dynamics.

Design. While some level of power imbalance is structurally inevitable in a hybrid team or work group, when necessary and possible, managers should intervene to redistribute power through shifting access to resources and/or visibility levels.

At the same time, policies and procedures should be re-visited regularly to ensure they don't provide an unfair advantage based on hybridity—for example, KPIs that don't align with resource accessibility or evaluations that don't account for differences in visibility levels.

Educate. Many of these issues arise not solely from hybridity itself but from a lack of awareness of the power imbalances it creates. To effectively manage in hybrid environments, managers must promote awareness of the issues and educate employees (and themselves) on how to avoid bias.

Particularly important is establishing a culture of psychological safety and (individual/collective) trust. This will increase the likelihood of employees speaking up and asking for resources when they need them, as well as their confidence that their efforts will be recognized.

Monitor. With this understanding in mind, it's important that managers keep an eye out for key intervention moments. Through our discussions with executives, we've

identified a number of key opportunities to address the potential challenges of hybridity for power dynamics within their teams:

- Performance reviews and evaluations. Managers must remain acutely aware of how hybridity creates an imbalance in their teams with respect to employees' access to resources and visibility levels, as well as the information that they hold about their employees. Reviews present an opportunity for managers and employees to examine and discuss imbalances and how to address them going forward.
- Team launches. Hybrid teams start with team members who are not on the same footing. Team launches are an opportunity for managers and team members to recognize, acknowledge, and discuss power differences and to decide how collectively to manage them.
- Onboarding. How can managers bring people into the organization when not everyone can physically come to the office? How can they put their new remote hires on a comparable footing to those who are brought into a face-to-face office environment? Hybridity's impacts on group dynamics need to be

incorporated into onboarding sessions and discussions to ensure new employees recognize the importance of consciously managing hybridity-based sources of power.

For companies to reap the many benefits of hybrid working, managers must be aware of the power dynamics at play. It's critical that they develop an understanding of hybridity positioning and hybridity competence and take steps to level the playing field for their teams.



TAKEAWAYS

Leaders must understand the power differentials that are created within hybrid teams, and they must take steps to level the playing field. An individual's location relative to that of their team members matters, as do their skills in relationship building. The following four strategies can help manage these structurally inevitable differences in power.

- ✓ Track and communicate. Create an accurate map of who is working where, and when, then have a conversation with your team members to surface

challenges and discuss what you can do to overcome them.

- ✓ Design. While some level of power imbalance is structurally inevitable in a hybrid team, managers should intervene when necessary and possible to redistribute power equitably by shifting access to resources and/or visibility levels.
- ✓ Educate. Promote awareness of these issues, and educate employees and managers on how to avoid bias.
- ✓ Monitor. Keep an eye out for key intervention moments including performance reviews, team launches, and onboarding.

NOTES

1. Pamela J. Hinds and Diane E. Bailey, “Out of Sight, Out of Sync: Understanding Conflict in Distributed Teams,” *Organization Science*, November 2003, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262407033_Out_of_Sight_Out_of_Sync_Understanding_Conflict_in_Distributed_Teams.

Adapted from “Making the Hybrid Workplace Fair” on hbr.org, February 24, 2021 (reprint #H067B7).

7

WHAT PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY LOOKS LIKE IN A HYBRID WORKPLACE

by Amy C. Edmondson and Mark Mortensen

Since the pandemic changed the landscape of work, much attention has been given to the more visible aspects of WFH, including the challenges of managing people from a distance. But a far less visible factor may dramatically influence the effectiveness of hybrid workplaces. As suggested by the above quotes, sorting out future work arrangements, and attending to employees' inevitable anxieties about those arrangements, will require

managers to rethink and expand one of strongest proven predictors of team effectiveness: psychological safety.

How New Forms of Work Affect Psychological Safety

Psychological safety—the belief that one can speak up without risk of punishment or humiliation—has been well established as a critical driver of high-quality decision-making, healthy group dynamics and interpersonal relationships, greater innovation, and more effective execution in organizations.¹ Simple as it may be to understand, Amy’s work has shown how hard it is to establish and maintain psychological safety even in the most straightforward, factual, and critical contexts—for example, ensuring that operating room staff speak up to avoid a wrong-side surgery or that a CEO is corrected before sharing inaccurate data in a public meeting (both are real-life psychological safety failure examples reported in interviews). Unfortunately, WFH and hybrid working makes psychological safety anything but straightforward.

When it comes to psychological safety, managers have traditionally focused on enabling candor and dissent with respect to work content. The problem is, as the boundary between work and life becomes increasingly blurry,

managers must make staffing, scheduling, and coordination decisions that take into account employees' personal circumstances—a categorically different domain.

For one employee, the decision of when to work from home may be driven by a need to spend time with a widowed parent or to help a child struggling at school. For another, it may be influenced by undisclosed health issues (something Covid-19 brought into stark relief) or a non-work passion, as was the case with a young professional who trained as an Olympic-level athlete on the side. It's worth noting that we've both heard from employees who feel marginalized, penalized, or excluded from this dialogue around work-life balance because they're single or have no children, often being told they're lucky they don't have to deal with those challenges. Having psychologically safe discussions around work-life balance issues is challenging because these topics are more likely to touch on deep-seated aspects of employees' identity, values, and choices. This makes them both more personal and riskier from legal and ethical standpoints with respect to bias.

We Can't Just Keep Doing What We're Doing

In the past, we've approached “work” and “non-work” discussions as separable, allowing managers to keep the

latter off the table. Over the past year, however, many managers have found that previously off-limits topics like childcare, health-risk comfort levels, or challenges faced by spouses or other family members are increasingly required for joint (manager and employee) decisions about how to structure and schedule hybrid work.

While it may be tempting to think we can re-separate the two once we return to the office, the shift to a higher proportion of WFH means that's neither a realistic nor a sustainable long-term solution. Organizations that don't update their approach going forward will find themselves trying to optimize extremely complicated scheduling and coordination challenges with incomplete—if not incorrect—information. Keep in mind that hybrid working arrangements present a parallel increase in managerial complexity; managers face the same workflow coordination challenges they've managed in the past, now with the added challenge of coordinating among people who can't be counted on to be present at predictable times.

Strategies for Managers

Let's start with the fact that the reasons why managers have avoided seeking personal details remain just as relevant and critical today as they've always been. Sharing

personal information carries real and significant risks, given legal restrictions related to asking personal questions, the potential for bias, and a desire to respect employee privacy. The solution thus cannot be to demand greater disclosure of personal details. Instead, managers must create an environment that encourages employees to share aspects of their personal situations as relevant to their work scheduling or location and/or to trust employees to make the right choices for themselves and their families, balanced against the needs of their teams. Management's responsibility is to expand the domain of which work-life issues are safe to raise. Psychological safety is needed today to enable productive conversations in new, challenging (and potentially fraught) territory.

Obviously, simply saying “just trust me” won't work. Instead, we suggest a series of five steps to create a culture of psychological safety that extends beyond work content to include broader aspects of employees' experiences.

Step 1: Set the scene.

Trite as it sounds, the first step is having a discussion with your team to help them recognize not only their challenges, but yours as well. The objective of this discussion is to share ownership of the problem.

We suggest framing this as a need for the group to problem-solve to develop new ways to work effectively. Clarify what's at stake. Employees must understand that getting the work done (for customers, for the mission, for their careers) matters just as much as it always has, but that it won't be done exactly as it was in the past—they'll need to play a (creative and responsible) role in that. As a group, you and your employees must come to recognize that everyone must be clear and transparent about the needs of the work and of the team and jointly own responsibility for succeeding, despite the many hurdles that lie ahead.

Step 2: Lead the way.

Words are cheap, and when it comes to psychological safety, there are far too many stories of managers who demand candor of their employees—particularly around mistakes or other potentially embarrassing topics—without demonstrating candor themselves or without protecting it when others do share.

The best way to show you're serious is to expose your own vulnerability by sharing your own WFH/hybrid work personal challenges and constraints. Remember, managers

have to go first in taking these kinds of risks. Be vulnerable and humble about not having a clear plan, and be open about how you're thinking about managing your own challenges. If you're not willing to be candid with your employees, why should they be candid with you?

Step 3: Take baby steps.

Don't expect your employees to share their most personal and risky challenges right away. It takes time to build trust, and even if you have a healthy culture of psychological safety established around work, remember that this is a new domain, and speaking up about buggy code is different than sharing struggles at home.

Start by making small disclosures yourself, and then make sure to welcome others' disclosures to help your employees build confidence that sharing is not penalized.

Step 4: Share positive examples.

Don't assume that your employees will immediately have access to all the information you have supporting the benefits of sharing these challenges and needs.

Put your marketing hat on and market psychological safety by sharing your conviction that increased transparency is happening and is helping the team design new arrangements that serve both individual needs and organizational goals. The goal here isn't to share information that was disclosed to you privately but rather to explain that disclosure has allowed you to collaboratively come up with solutions that were better not just for the team but also for the employees. This needs to be done with tact and skill to avoid creating pressure to conform—the goal here is to provide employees with the evidence they need to buy in voluntarily.

Step 5: Be a watchdog.

Most people recognize that psychological safety takes time to build but moments to destroy. The default is for people to hold back, to fail to share even their most relevant thoughts at work if they're not sure they'll be well received. If they do take the risk of speaking up but get shot down, they—and everyone else—will be less likely to do it the next time.

As a team leader, you need to be vigilant and push back when you notice in-office employees make seemingly innocent comments like “We want to see more of you” or

“We could really use you,” which may leave WFH employees feeling they’re letting their teammates down. This is a really hard thing to do and requires skill. The idea isn’t to become thought police or punish those who genuinely do miss seeing their colleagues or need their help, but rather to help employees frame these remarks in a more positive and understanding way—for example, “We miss your thoughtful perspective, and understand you face constraints. Let us know if there is any way we can help. . . .” Be open about your intentions to be inclusive and helpful so that people don’t see requests for their presence as a rebuke. At the same time, be ready to firmly censure those who inappropriately take advantage of shared personal information.

. . . .

It’s important that managers view (and discuss) these conversations as a work in progress. As with all group dynamics, they’re emergent processes that develop and shift over time. This is a first step; the journey ahead comes without a road map and will have to be navigated iteratively. You may overstep and need to correct, but it’s better to err on the side of trying and testing the waters than assuming topics are off limits. View this as a learning or problem-solving undertaking that may never reach a steady state. The more you maintain that perspective—rather than

declaring victory and moving on—the more successful you and your team will be at developing and maintaining true, expanded psychological safety.



TAKEAWAYS

Psychological safety—the belief that one can speak up without risk of punishment or humiliation—is a critical driver of team effectiveness. To create a culture of psychological safety in the hybrid workplace, managers need to engender trust that extends beyond the work context to include broader aspects of employees' personal circumstances.

- ✓ Set the scene. Clarify what's at stake by starting a group discussion with your team around developing new ways to work effectively.
- ✓ Lead the way. Expose your own vulnerability by sharing your own WFH/hybrid work challenges and constraints.
- ✓ Take baby steps. Don't expect your employees to share their most personal and risky challenges right away.

- ✓ Share positive examples. Share your conviction that increased transparency is happening and is helping the team design new arrangements that serve both individual needs and organizational goals.
- ✓ Be a watchdog. Be vigilant and push back when you notice employees making comments that erode psychological safety.

NOTES

1. Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018).

Adapted from “What Psychological Safety Looks Like in a Hybrid Workplace” on hbr.org, April 19, 2021 (reprint #H06AWX).

BREAKING FREE FROM A 9-TO-5 CULTURE

by Rebecca Zucker

A synchronous work is now essential to being part of a modern digital economy, staying competitive in the war for talent, and building a globally distributed workforce. Employees are increasingly working asynchronously, completing tasks on their own schedules, which may be different from those of their colleagues.

Tsedal Neeley, a Harvard Business School professor and author of the book *Remote Work Revolution*, told me, “Companies have to profoundly rethink what it means to be part of a modern work structure. This idea of 9-to-5 or

face-time culture is actually not helpful for a digitally advanced economy.” She highlighted that underlying face-time culture is the need to monitor or see people in order to feel like work is advancing. However, this assumption that being productive requires seeing people do the work is not only limiting but also fallacious, as technology and automation are increasingly used to get work done and are inherently not as observable. Asynchronous work, she says, is “a completely new mindset in line with a digital economy.” (Incidentally, Professor Neeley and I could not find a time to connect live to discuss this article, so we communicated asynchronously.)

Likewise, Jay D’Aprile, Executive Vice President at Slayton Search Partners, an executive search firm, said of asynchronous work, “It’s just the way it’s going to be in the future, and I think that companies that don’t accept that are going to be disadvantaged in the war for talent because employees have choices and are looking for that. The war for talent is over, and the talent’s won.” D’Aprile and his team also work asynchronously. He said, “I trust my people. They don’t have to tell me when they come and go. I trust them to get the work done. . . . If I need them, I can always text them. They set their own schedules. I start at 5 a.m., but I don’t expect them to.”

Michael Montano, Head of Engineering at Twitter shared, “We’re definitely seeing this kind of demand from

our employees and an expectation for greater flexibility and choice in how they work, where they work, and when they work. On top of that, we're building this global, distributed workforce, so we're seeing this necessity to work asynchronously. And I think how we embrace that is through a combination of tooling, technology, but also very much through culture.”

So how does an organization shift its culture to break out of the traditional 9-to-5 and move to an asynchronous way of working? Here are several strategies to follow:

Start at the Top

Whether you are looking to shift to an asynchronous way of working at the team, department, or company level, it needs to start with the leadership of that entity. Not only does it require senior leadership buy-in, but these leaders also need to walk the talk and model working asynchronously. Michael Montano from Twitter said, “I think Jack [Dorsey] was very intentional, as was the rest of the leadership team, around thinking about how we are going to embrace this trend, knowing that to serve our customers around the world, we're going to build this distributed workforce. Knowing that the best talent is going to expect this flexibility of choice in how they work. So, we started

to really model that ourselves and start to try that out ourselves. And that's something we did in our leadership team, as well as what I'm doing with the engineering leadership team.”

Conversely, a lack of support from the top can impede or altogether kill this cultural shift. In their book *Overload*, professors Erin Kelly and Phyllis Moen chronicle a dual-agenda work redesign experiment called STAR (an acronym for Support. Transform. Achieve. Results.) with a division of an IT firm that they ran in collaboration with Jody Thompson and Cali Ressler from Culture Rx, who pioneered the Results Only Work Environment (ROWE).¹ STAR was designed to benefit both the organization and the participating employees. Employees were given the freedom to determine how, where, and notably *when* they did their work. Within six months, they saw significant improvements in key outcomes such as reduced burnout, increased job satisfaction, and increased engagement and retention, with no negative impact on productivity. However, the IT firm was later acquired, and new management, considered to be “old school,” re-imposed a more rigid 9-to-5 work schedule and on-site work policy, ultimately shutting down the STAR initiative.

Focus on Outcomes

Identifying clear goals and outcomes will allow employees working asynchronously to focus on the desired results as opposed to when, where, or how the work is done. Ellen Taaffe, a leadership professor at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, was president of a boutique brand and product research development firm, now called Ravel, when she engaged CultureRx to help her firm transition to ROWE. She said, "It was a shift to go from 'Here's all the work to be done' to 'Here's the outcomes we want.' So, it became very outcomes-based, which is what helped us to deliver in a stronger way. In many companies, you're so busy doing the work without being as clear on the outcome that's needed, or how will the client use it—it really helped us to be very focused."

Likewise, focusing on outcomes will enable employees to be more efficient, aligned, and empowered. Michael Montano of Twitter shared, "One of the most important things in terms of making an asynchronous culture work is, how are you creating clarity of purpose and goals in the company? How are you cascading that down so that you're not having this dependency on the centralization of leadership, where you then get the benefits of teams that are distributed, can coordinate amongst themselves,

can understand what's important, and go and deliver on it and really focus on leveraging their creativity versus spending their time trying to gain all that in meetings.”

Clarify What Needs to Be Synchronous

Distinguish which tasks and activities are better conducted synchronously. These tend to be things like project kick-off meetings to set roles, responsibilities, expectations, and deadlines, as well as client meetings (and, potentially, prep for these meetings). At my own leadership firm, given the limited time the partners have together, we reserve partner meetings for topics that require more in-depth discussion and debate or involve higher-stakes decisions to be made. Anything that doesn't fall into these categories, such as status updates or straightforward questions on various topics, are posted on the appropriate Slack channel for others to read and respond at their convenience.

In addition, higher-touch activities such as conducting one-on-ones, providing others with coaching, feedback, and mentoring, as well as some onboarding activities, should also be conducted live. And with so many people now working remotely and feeling less connected to their

colleagues, fundamental activities like team building are important to schedule synchronously.

Challenge Existing Norms and Assumptions

A work culture is full of unwritten rules and unexamined assumptions of how, where, and when things get done that often go unquestioned. Newer employees, who are not yet fully indoctrinated into the organization's culture, may be able to more easily observe these and reflect these back to the team. Likewise, an outside facilitator can help the team surface, articulate, and challenge these existing rules and assumptions so the team lets go of them. This is recommended since the team leader is a key part of the current system and may find it challenging to question elements of the status quo, even if they support working asynchronously.

These unwritten rules may include what is considered an acceptable response time, what topics require a meeting, the standard length of meetings and how those meetings are run, how long people take for lunch (or if they take lunch), by what time people are at their desk working, how available someone is outside of standard work hours, etc. Our often unexamined assumptions are how

we make meaning of what happens when people behave outside these norms—that “if I can’t see you working, then you must not be working,” “If I log off at 3 p.m., then I’ll be letting others down if someone needs something,” “she’s working a lot of hours, so she must be getting a lot done,” or “he’s not responding as quickly as I’d like, so he must not be that committed.”

Taaffe said about her prior firm, “There was an expectation of what time you got to the office. And honestly, we had to learn to work asynchronously because it was hard. Even those of us who really were strong proponents of this had to let go of certain things. I remember feeling guilty about doing something in the middle of the day, even though I was getting my work done.”

Make Clear Agreements and Hold Each Other Accountable

In discussing new ways of working, team members can conceive of how they’d ideally like to construct their day and still get things done. This will likely be different for many people. Identify dependencies for various workstreams and stakeholder needs. How will these be met? Make clear agreements around several elements, such as

the use of various technologies and when these technologies are shut off, acceptable response times, and how urgent issues should be handled, etc. Agreements should also be made around new norms, such as, “We don’t judge each other’s commitment by our response times.” Kelly said, “I have a close collaborator who accepted no meetings from 4 to 5 p.m. every day. She would always get me an answer, but it would be during that 4 to 5 p.m. window. And there were very few things that were actually urgent enough that I needed it before 5 p.m. I knew how to reach her if I needed, but she was attending to, and fully engaging with, her work in the other hours.”

Holding people accountable to these agreements is equally important. This involves calling out what Thompson and Ressler call “sludge.” Sludge consists of all the off-hand comments and questions that work against shifting to the new culture, such as “Ah, I see you’re working bankers’ hours today?” or “Where were you at 3 p.m.? I tried to reach you.” Thompson and Ressler recommend replying to these types of comments with a simple, “Is there something you need?” This quickly refocuses the conversation on the relevant tasks or goals to be accomplished—versus where, when, or how they are being accomplished. At the IT firm Kelly and Moen worked with, employees practiced handling sludge using role plays.

Experiment, Assess, and Adjust

Making the shift to asynchronous work is not a “one-and-done” event, but an iterative process that will likely need adjustments and fine tuning over time to successfully make the change. Anxiety around such a shift is normal but starting it as an experiment can help win over people who are more resistant and turn them into promoters, once they experience positive outcomes, both personally and professionally. Start small by experimenting with new behaviors and see what works, what doesn’t, and how it feels. You might go food shopping at 2 p.m. or start your workday at 11 a.m. or try working only in the evening if you are a night owl. There will be some people who have an easier time adjusting than others. Taaffe shared that one team member had a particularly hard time breaking out of the 9-to-5 norm, so his teammates challenged him to go see an afternoon movie.

After a month of experimenting with asynchronous work, Taaffe’s team reconvened to report back, evaluate their progress, and make necessary adjustments. She said, “You’ve got to keep coming back to it and assessing how are you doing and figure out how you solve for the pain points.” These included properly anticipat-

ing and planning for inputs needed from others on certain projects to move forward with subsequent parts of the work. She said, “Some things we could figure out ahead of time, but some we figured out over time . . . it just took a little bit of time and then, it was just very energizing.”

Keep an Eye on Inclusion

Asynchronous work comes with both advantages and challenges with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion. On the plus side, Neeley said, “Asynchronous work, and in particular, flexible work, where you can get talent from anywhere without asking people to move, is incredibly important for the purpose of diversity. . . . We have many more pipelines from which to hire people, and from an equity and inclusion standpoint, people will feel happier when they’re not extracted from their home communities, if they can remain there and still be productive at your organizations.”

The task will be for leaders to be thoughtful and intentional with respect to inclusion. Neeley continued by saying, “The challenge is going to be all about making sure that we develop the muscles for inclusive cultures,

inclusive leadership of a distributed environment. So how we measure performance, how we coach people, how we ensure that people build networks that help them understand not only the organization but also how to grow and lead within that system. All of that has to be facilitated, and we just need to be better and stronger managers and leaders to do that.” Creating this awareness and offering trainings for managers and leaders on inclusive leadership can help set up the shift to asynchronous work for greater success.

The future of work points to more asynchronous ways of working, with multiple benefits for both employees and organizations. Using the above strategies can help make the shift from the traditional 9-to-5 a smoother and more productive process.



TAKEAWAYS

Asynchronous work is now essential to being part of a modern digital economy, staying competitive in the war for talent, and building a globally distributed workforce. Use these seven strategies to help make the transition a smoother and more productive process:

- ✓ Start at the top. Senior leadership must demonstrate their buy-in and model working asynchronously.
- ✓ Focus on outcomes. Identify clear work goals rather than measuring when, where, or how the work is done.
- ✓ Clarify what needs to be synchronous. Distinguish which tasks and activities are better conducted synchronously.
- ✓ Challenge existing norms and assumptions. Surface, articulate, and challenge unwritten rules, then help your team let go of them.
- ✓ Make clear agreements and hold each other accountable. Agree on norms around issues such as technologies used, acceptable response times, and how urgent issues should be handled.
- ✓ Experiment, assess, and adjust. The shift to asynchronous work is not a “one-and-done” event.
- ✓ Keep an eye on inclusion. Attracting talent from anywhere can increase diversity, but leaders must continue to focus on fostering an inclusive environment.

NOTES

1. Rebecca Zucker, “The Overload Antidote: How to Engage Your Team in Work Redesign,” *Forbes*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccazucker/2020/08/25/the-overload-antidote-how-to-engage-your-team-in-work-redesign/?sh=8e64df7589c6>.

Adapted from “Breaking Free from a ‘9 to 5’ Culture” on hbr.org, July 27, 2021 (reprint #H06HIP).

9

HOW TO HAVE TOUGH CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HYBRID WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

by Liane Davey

Do you dread conversations with your team about hybrid working arrangements? Do you need to tell one of your direct reports that your agreed-upon approach isn't working? Fostering a safe and constructive dialogue with an employee about where and when they'll be working can be challenging. Ironically, some of the

mistakes you might make will stem from your desire to be a kind and caring manager. Here are some of the pitfalls to watch out for during these conversations along with strategies to help you feel more confident about how to approach them.

Pitfalls to Watch For

First, make sure you're clear on the organization's rules. Start by checking in on the decisions being made for your organization overall. Is your company keeping its full real estate footprint or encouraging hoteling arrangements to reduce office space? Is there an official policy on number of days required in the office? Are flex hours allowed? You don't want to inadvertently run afoul of the company's official guidelines, so start there before talking to your own team.

Second, don't get too wrapped up in finding a solution that everyone sees as fair. Fairness is a tricky business because different jobs require different arrangements. Consider each person's role and how those responsibilities suit different approaches. An administrative assistant might need to be in the office to accomplish a majority of their tasks, whereas a proposal writer could do the lion's share of their work from anywhere.

Some team members will think your policy is unfair if it's not the same for everyone, whereas others will think a policy is unfair if it *doesn't* account for differences in roles and responsibilities. There's no single definition of "fair." Just be clear on which definition you're using, and be transparent about *why* that's the one you're using.

Another risk is that you'll attempt to create an optimal solution for each individual only to suboptimize the situation for the overall team. In addition to what's right for the organization and what's best for an individual's job, it's also important to consider which working arrangement is in the best interest of the team. How does one person's role interact with others in the group, and what return-to-work plan would be in the best interests of supporting collaboration, encouraging camaraderie, and fostering the positive culture you're looking for? As a manager, you're not just responsible for developing strong individuals—you're also responsible for the strength of your team.

Working Toward a Trial Plan

Now that you're aware of the pitfalls, you can work toward a plan. Develop a set of guiding principles that each individual arrangement must work within. You can use these principles to set the boundaries about what's important

to you as the leader, while leaving room for people to create personalized arrangements that work for them. For example, you might have a guiding principle that states, “The customer comes first,” so that every proposed arrangement will be evaluated first on its impact on your customer. You could have a principle that says, “Time together matters,” which stipulates that there’s one day a week when everyone on the team will be in the office at the same time. You could use, “Find time to focus,” and have everyone block three half-days a week for uninterrupted working time in the environment that’s most conducive to their productivity. Starting the conversation with these guiding principles will provide helpful boundaries while allowing your team members some latitude in building a plan that works for them.

Once you’re clear on what’s nonnegotiable from your perspective, share your principles and schedule a time to speak with each person individually. In preparation, ask everyone to think about what’s important to them and what some options for their personal return-to-the-office might be. This heads-up is important because you want team members to feel prepared to communicate their wishes effectively. If you spring the conversation on them when they’re not expecting it, they might not be clear on what they want or confident about how to frame their

request. Don't catch people off guard on such an important topic.

When you meet to talk about each person's wishes, start by asking if they have any questions about the guiding principles. Be clear about what's cast in stone and where there are opportunities for creative solutions. Next, avoid the tendency to jump straight to, "So, when would you like to come into the office?" and instead ask them to share their version of a positive working arrangement. You might frame it as, "I'm interested in how you're thinking about your return to work. What are the criteria that are important to you?" This is a great technique for any contentious discussion, not just the return to work. If both parties understand the factors that are important to one another before jumping into potential solutions, you'll avoid suggesting ideas that might be met with instant resistance, and you'll zero in on appealing answers much more efficiently. I think of this like doing algebra: Once you've identified each other's equations, you can solve for the unknowns in a way that satisfies both.

With both of your criteria on the table, you can work toward a trial arrangement. Remember to be as flexible as possible within your criteria. For example, if one of the administrative assistants on the team would really like to work from home sometimes, maybe there's a way to form

a team of assistants who cover for each other on office tasks so that each could have one or two days per week at home to work through emails and other tasks that could be done more efficiently without the interruptions of the office. Be creative. Embrace the art of the possible.

Revisiting and Reworking the Trial Plan

At this stage, you might feel relieved to have a plan and keen to move on. But there's one more important step. Once you've found a solution that seems workable, agree on a date when you'll revisit the plan. For example, you might decide on a quick check-in after the first couple of weeks and a formal evaluation after six weeks. That way, you can both relax knowing that you'll do everything in your control to make the plan work, but that there's a chance to alter it if it's not working.

As the agreed-upon date nears, ask everyone to consider their current working arrangement and to reflect on any issues or concerns with the plan and its implementation. For example, there's a difference between a problem with the plan (you thought it would work to have Sam join team meetings remotely, but despite Sam's best efforts, it's too clunky) and a problem with the implementation of the plan (Sam seems to be multitasking while dialed in to re-

mote meetings). Ask the employee to include an evaluation of *your* commitments and behavior as well. Prepare your own notes for the evaluation in the same way. You could organize it as follows.

FIGURE 9-1

Assessing Hybrid Work Arrangements

Use this tool to talk about what's working and what's not.

Implementation	We said that you'd prioritize Mondays as your in-office day. You've worked from home three out of six Mondays. The IT team would really like to have you in their Monday meetings in person.	We agreed you'd have a quick call with me each morning, and a few have been canceled. I don't feel like I have the context I need to be productive on my at-home days.
Issues		
Plan	We agreed to you sending me a daily update email, and I'm finding it's more detail than I need. Could we change the template for that email?	We have our one-on-ones on Fridays, but I feel like so many questions come up during the week that I wish I had discussed with you earlier. Could we move up our meeting?
	Employee	Person Manager

As you work through your respective reflections on the experiment so far, start with the issues with the plan itself rather than the issues with the implementation. Share any criteria or considerations you hadn't thought of when you formulated it, and then work through the concerns until you have a new option to try. Remember to be encouraging. This is new territory, and you shouldn't be surprised if the first solution doesn't end up being perfect. Keep iterating until you have the best solution for the organization, the team, and the individual. Again, agree in advance on when you'll next revisit the arrangements.

If the issue is not with the arrangement but instead with how one or both of you failed to live up to it, you need to acknowledge that. It's best for you to go first so you can model openness to the feedback. You could ask, "Were there any areas where I didn't set this up for success?" Alternatively, one of my favorite ways to ask for difficult feedback is by asking, "What did you love about how I managed this arrangement and what do you wish I had done differently?" For some reason, asking people what they *wish* was true softens the language enough for them to be candid about what they would like to be different.

Finally, if the employee committed to a return-to-work plan but didn't stick to it, that's a performance management issue. Do as you would with any performance issue. Clarify what your expectations were. Give feedback

about the behavior you observed. Share the implications of their behavior on the work, the team, or on you. Then ask the person what they will do differently from now on. If the problem persists, you might need to escalate the consequences and gradually reduce the latitude you're willing to give that person.

The only thing that's certain about the return to work is that there will be a lot of uncertainty. Not only will your team be working differently, but your customers, suppliers, and partners will be, too. Add to that the profound changes that many individuals have experienced while living through a global pandemic. Some people are more than eager to return to work, some are dreading it, and others are ambivalent. Engaging in these conversations calls for a little more preparation than normal. The investment will be worth it because you'll be more clear, more confident, and more compassionate when the time comes.



TAKEAWAYS

As a leader or manager in the hybrid workplace, you'll need to be prepared for conversations with your employees around when and where they will be working.

These discussions can be tricky, and they call for preparation.

- ✓ Start by making sure you're clear on your organization's rules. Don't get too wrapped up in finding a solution that everyone sees as fair; different jobs and roles require different amounts of in-office work.
- ✓ Work toward a trial plan. Develop a set of guiding principles that each individual arrangement must work within. Use these principles to set boundaries around what's important to you as a leader, while leaving room for people to create personalized arrangements.
- ✓ Agree on a date when you'll revisit the plan. Ahead of this date, ask employees to consider their current working arrangement and to reflect on any issues or concerns with the plan and its implementation.

Adapted from "How to Have Tough Conversations About Returning to the Office" on hbr.org, July 16, 2021 (reprint #H06GF3).



Section 3

HYBRID MEETINGS AND COLLABORATION

WHAT IT TAKES TO RUN A GREAT HYBRID MEETING

by Bob Frisch and Cary Greene

The hybrid workplace brings with it a dramatic change in how we meet. In our new normal, there's simply no going back to the world of "squawk boxes" on the conference room table, with those on the phone straining to hear, being "talked over" when trying to speak, or guessing what's on that PowerPoint slide on a screen only their colleagues in the room can see.

As Satya Nadella, Microsoft's CEO recently put it, "We want to ensure those joining remotely are always first-class participants."

But hybrid meetings are vastly more complex than meeting in-person or virtually. They are easy to do poorly and hard to do well—remote participants are only one slip-up away from losing that first-class status. Just as executives learned how to run great virtual meetings, they now need to learn how to conduct great hybrid meetings as well.

Drawing from our combined half-century of experience designing and facilitating meetings for executive teams and boards, we've assembled eight best practices to help make your hybrid meetings more effective:

1. Up your audio game.

While remote participants need to see who is talking and what's taking place in the meeting room, great audio is actually more critical. Yet while a lot of attention is paid to the visual aspects of meetings, audio is often overlooked until the last minute. Pre-Covid-19, we often heard remote participants say, "I'm sorry, can you get a little closer to the speakerphone and repeat what you just said?" Now, they expect to hear everything clearly—just as they can on Zoom.

To avoid a last-minute scramble caused by poor audio, make sure the room is equipped with enough high-quality

microphones so remote participants can hear. If you're in a hotel or other temporary meeting space and multiple microphones aren't a viable option, consider supplementing your audio input by having in-person attendees pass around a handheld microphone when speaking.

2. Explore a technology boost.

The pandemic accelerated the use and evolution of video-conference technology to enable virtual meetings from PCs, tablets, and phones. As providers invest heavily to better enable hybrid meetings, new features are being introduced to improve face-to-face communication among in-person and remote attendees.

For example, Zoom's Smart Gallery uses artificial intelligence to detect individual faces in a shared room and pull them into panes on the screen so remote participants can see them in the now-familiar gallery view. Microsoft is developing new types of meeting rooms optimized for the hybrid experience. You should investigate what technology upgrades might be accessible to help make your team's experience more immersive and authentic.

3. Consider video from the remote participant perspective.

As you design the meeting, continually ask yourself: What do remote participants need to see in order to fully engage? They should be able to see the faces of in-room attendees, shared presentations, physical documents handed out, content created during the meeting on whiteboards or flipcharts, etc.

It is tempting to just ask the in-person attendees to open their laptops and join a Zoom meeting (on mute), so remote participants can see everyone's faces and documents can be easily shared. Clients frequently suggest this type of "in-room virtual meeting." However, if the folks gathering in the room spend the meeting on their computers, they might as well have stayed in their homes or offices. The people meeting in person are—at least for the moment—so thrilled to finally be together again the last thing you want is for them to crouch over their individual laptops all day for the sake of the remote participants.

Especially in cases where cutting-edge video technology is unaffordable or unavailable, a little ingenuity can go a long way to create a high-quality video experience for everyone.

For example, for a two-day off-site at a Florida hotel with 10 in-person attendees and two remote participants (one

in Zurich and one in LA), we attached three webcams to laptops and used a fourth laptop to share what was on the main screen (usually a PowerPoint). We mounted two of the webcams on tripods, which faced the in-room attendees so remote participants could see who was speaking. We moved the third camera around to show a close-up view of presenters, flip charts, and wall charts throughout the session as needed. The four laptops joined the two used by our two remote executives for a total of six separate Zoom “participants” in the single Zoom meeting.

Post-meeting feedback confirmed that this setup allowed the remote participants to feel like they were an integral part of the meeting rather than distant observers.

4. Make remote participants full-sized.

Another way to give remote participants equal stature is to give them greater presence in the room. In addition to the main screen in the center, set up two additional large monitors—one on each side of the room—showing “life-size” panes of the remote participants for the duration of the meeting.

We find these large images help in-person attendees accept remote colleagues as full participants and provide a constant reminder to include them in the conversation.

Similarly, if possible the voices of remote participants should emanate from the same monitors as their faces—ceiling speakers tend to reinforce the artificiality of the situation.

5. Test the technology in advance.

Nothing kills a meeting's momentum like waiting to fix a glitch in the audio or video. Prior to an important meeting, test the audio-visual set up—both in-room and for the remote attendees. Schedule a 10–15 minute one-on-one dry run to get remote participants comfortable with what they will see and hear during the meeting, as well as to review any software features they'll likely be asked to use. It's well worth the brief time required.

6. Design meetings for all attendees.

Review each activity or exercise focusing specifically on how remote participants will engage. Consider what tools and techniques, digital or otherwise, can be used to maximize their interaction with the in-room attendees.

For example, if you need to poll the group, use a phone-based survey tool like Poll Everywhere to collect everyone's input in real time. This puts remote participants on

an equal footing, versus a show of hands or relying on verbal feedback. To capture meeting notes, use an online whiteboard (or focus a remote camera on a flip chart) so everyone can see what's being written as it happens.

Similarly, if the meeting design calls for in-room attendees to put dots or post-its on a wall chart, use a webcam to allow remote participants to read their peers' responses before placing their own, just as they could if they were physically present.

If the meeting design calls for putting people into breakout groups, the easiest solution is to include all the remote participants in a single group. While simpler, this sends them the wrong message by reinforcing their physical absence. It's likely worth the extra logistical and technical effort to integrate remote participants across several breakout groups to accentuate their equal status.

7. Provide strong facilitation.

Managing a hybrid meeting is harder than when the whole group is in person or on Zoom together. One person—a staff member, an outsider, or a meeting participant—should be assigned to guide the conversation and keep it on track.

Despite the effort you may put into meeting design and logistics, it remains far too easy for in-person attendees to dominate the discussion. A facilitator should draw the remote participants in, keep them engaged and ensure their voices are heard, not interrupted or talked over. At times, the facilitator may need to call on in-room or remote participants to ensure that all voices are heard.

8. Give each remote participant an in-room “avatar.”

There may be times when remote participants need a physical presence in the room. It could be as simple as a camera view being blocked. Maybe a microphone isn't working, or an attendee needs to be reminded to speak up. A post-it may need placement on a wall chart, or a poker chip placed on a table as part of a resource allocation exercise.

For these situations, each remote participant should have what we call an “in-room avatar”—a staff person (or fellow participant) who can be their physical presence in the meeting room as required. Whether via text, chat, or phone, they have a private line of communication constantly available throughout the meeting. Remote participants tell us that having confidential access to a single point-of-contact goes a long way to removing a sense of isolation or distance from those in the room itself. How

embarrassing is having a remote participant asking “Fred, can you please speak up. I can’t hear you” every time Fred speaks? How much better to have another person come up to Fred during a break and discretely remind him “Fred. Please speak louder. It’s really hard for Natasha to hear you from Zurich.”

. . .

Hybrid meetings will become a permanent part of how organizations function. These meetings bring added complexity at the same time that our collective Covid-driven year of meeting virtually raised expectations for remote participation. Fortunately, by leveraging technology and tools, being thoughtful in meeting design, and providing strong facilitation we can create hybrid meetings where all participants—whether in the room or an ocean away—feel engaged, valued, and equal.



TAKEAWAYS

Hybrid meetings are vastly more complex than meeting in person or virtually. The following strategies can help you run a great hybrid meeting.

- ✓ Treat audio as important as video. Test audio ahead of time and use quality microphones.
- ✓ Stay up-to-date on technology upgrades to video-conference platforms and hardware.
- ✓ Consider video from the remote participant perspective. Continually ask yourself what remote participants need to see in order to engage fully.
- ✓ Make remote participants full-sized to give them greater presence.
- ✓ Test the technology in advance. Review any software features with remote participants.
- ✓ Design meetings for all attendees. Review each activity or exercise focusing specifically on how remote participants will be able to engage and interact with in-room attendees.
- ✓ Provide strong facilitation. A facilitator should draw the remote participants in, keep them engaged, and ensure their voices are heard.
- ✓ Give each remote participant an in-room “avatar” to address moments when they need a physical presence in the room.

Adapted from “What It Takes to Run a Great Hybrid Meeting” on hbr.org, June 3, 2021 (reprint #H06DY4).

WHEN DO WE ACTUALLY NEED TO MEET IN PERSON?

by Rae Ringel

Three days in the office, two working from home? Or two weeks in the office, then two at home (or some other, more alluring remote locale)? Everyone in all the time, like in 2019? Some of these new arrangements are landing uneasily. To get beyond this stressful push and pull, we need to reframe the conversation and focus on what we're actually trying to achieve rather than where, precisely, we'll be sitting when we achieve it.

As Priya Parker notes in *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*, “Gatherings consume our days and help determine the kind of world we live in.” And so, to ensure that we go forward—not back—to the office, it’s critical that we reimagine a cornerstone of the modern workplace: how we meet.

It’s a confusing time. As you plot out your team’s work plan, here are six questions you should be asking.

1. Should this be a meeting?

If there’s anything we learned in 2020, it’s the value of time—and how draining it can be when the vast majority of our time seems to be spent in meetings. Without the ability to bump into one another near the coffee maker or pop by someone’s desk, we had to schedule every interaction. As a result, our transitions between meetings were spent frantically trying to find that next Zoom link.

Now that serendipitous in-person interactions are possible again, and now that we know how to do virtual work well, let’s think very carefully about whether time spent meeting might be better spent thinking, writing, or engaging in other projects. Less is more: The fewer meetings we have, the more the ones we have will count.

It all comes down to purpose. Ask yourself: Why are you meeting? Make sure the answer really makes sense. Do you really need to meet? Prioritize asynchronous work and use meetings to be creative and do something together, rather than simply share information.

Meetings for team members to provide progress reports, for example, where every individual has their segment but is relatively passive the rest of the time, may not be necessary. Here, the goals may be accomplished more efficiently in writing. On the other hand, brainstorming sessions, where people are building off of one another's ideas, benefit from the dynamics of a gathering.

2. Are my meeting goals relationship-based or task-based?

Task-based goals might include updating a board, briefing constituents, or planning an event. These goals can often be accomplished in a virtual meeting (if a meeting is deemed necessary at all).

Relationship-based goals, which involve strengthening or repairing connections among team members, are *usually* accomplished most effectively in person. People should be given difficult feedback face-to-face. Challenging group conversations should also take place in person,

where destructive and distracting parallel side chats can't overshadow the central discussion.

Why do I say “usually”? Because I have participated in a number of meaningful virtual meetings where participants bonded and opened up in ways that I doubt they would have in person. For some people, the screen creates a sense of psychological safety, and with it the freedom to share views and take risks.

3. How complex are my objectives?

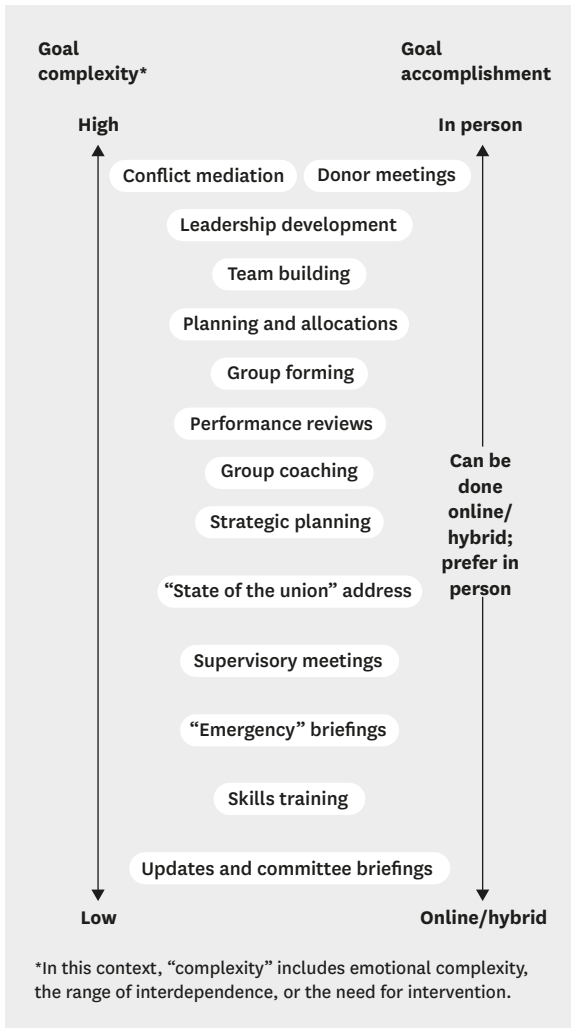
Sometimes complexity is a more helpful framework for determining what form a meeting should take. This includes emotional complexity and the level of interdependence that certain decisions or outcomes may require.

The chart below plots out goals according to their relative level of complexity. You may notice some correlation between relationship-based goals and complexity, but the overlap is not complete. Meetings to determine capital allocations or significant investments, for example, may land squarely in task-based territory. But if these discussions involve navigating interpersonal and other complexities, or carefully balancing competing priorities, they might best be navigated in person.

FIGURE 11-1

Do you need to meet in person?

Use this tool to gauge a goal's relative complexity.



At the same time, relationship-based goals can be relatively simple. One of my favorite unexpected pandemic-era success stories was my experience running a large real estate firm's Zoom holiday party. For the firm, Bernstein Management Corporation, this gathering is an opportunity to celebrate and acknowledge employees—as straightforward a goal as they come.

“If you asked me a year ago whether I would have considered hosting a virtual holiday party, I would have given an unequivocal ‘no’ and questioned the judgment of the person asking,” the firm's CEO, Joshua Bernstein, told me. “But in many ways, it worked out better. Every single participant was focused on the same conversation. There wasn't a bad seat in the house. Almost everyone expressed their surprise at how enjoyable the program was, and that element of surprise and newness ended up being part of the success.”

4. Could my meeting take an entirely different shape or form?

There's the room, there's Zoom, and there's hybrid. But there's also a world of possibilities that don't fall into any of those categories. Now that we have so many

more tools at our disposal, are there other ways that information could be imparted so that it's absorbed more effectively?

One of my clients has replaced her monthly all-hands staff meeting with a prerecorded video that staffers can watch or listen to on their own time—perhaps while they go for a jog or prepare dinner. If they miss something, they can rewind. This approach honors different types of learners; some of us actually retain information better when we're able to multitask. Companies that go this route can ask employees to watch the video by a certain date, then offer optional Q&A follow-up sessions on a platform like Slack or even WhatsApp.

When I work with clients virtually, we often assign a scribe to each breakout room. The scribe takes notes on the conversation in a Google doc. When we come back together, everyone takes a “gallery walk,” spending several minutes scrolling through the Google doc, reviewing what the other groups came up with, and annotating ideas they like. This circumvents a phenomenon known as “death by report back”: when representatives from each group drone on about the ins and outs of their conversations while others spend the whole time figuring out what they're going to say when it's finally their turn to speak.

5. What type of meeting will be most inclusive?

Before Covid, I was very clear that the cohort-based Executive Certificate in Facilitation program that I run at Georgetown University needed to happen in person, once a month, for four months in a row. The participating senior managers and executives would fly in from all over the world for three days at a time. The deep interpersonal connections forged among participants were critical to our success—after all, we were teaching them how to help other groups form trusting bonds. Although I’ve been facilitating remote workshops for over a decade, I doubted that this particular program could pivot.

I was wrong. In fact, one of the most significant advantages of the virtual format is that it’s been more inclusive. People from overseas or the West Coast have no jetlag to contend with. Those whose organizations are willing to cover their tuition but not their flights or hotels no longer face those financial obstacles. We had more mothers with young children participating than ever before.

This isn’t to say that we didn’t experience a real sense of loss from our inability to be together in person. But our program has many objectives and encompasses a broad swath of different activities, or “tasks.” Some of them, like

those that have a tactical focus on design and team development, can be extremely effective online.

Moving forward, we're planning to hold two of our four modules in person and two virtually. This is a different and, yes, more inclusive way of doing hybrid: Instead of having some people participate in person and some on screen, everyone will be on equal footing—maximizing each person's contribution and the benefits of each medium.

6. Does my facilitator have the skills and tech setup to pull off a hybrid gathering?

In the early days of office openings, there's a strong temptation to hold in-person meetings with a hybrid option for those working remotely. This can be an excellent solution when done well, allowing everyone to show up from the place where they feel most comfortable. But there are special skills involved in facilitating a hybrid meeting. Done incorrectly, you can end up sidelining and even alienating remote participants.

Skilled hybrid facilitators know how to make Zoom participants feel like full participants. They establish clear protocols for all participants to offer input. They make

direct eye contact not only with those in the room, but also with the camera.

Technology and preparation are also key. Pre-Covid, one of my colleagues showed up at a New York City hotel, energized for the fully in-person gathering she thought she was about to lead. Only when she arrived did she realize that a handful of participants would be joining online. She tried her best to improvise, but she'd designed a physically active program that involved moving around the room. It didn't immediately translate to a virtual environment—at least not with the technology available. By the end of the day, the in-person participants were fully engaged, but every single virtual participant's camera was off.

Until those running your meetings hone their skills in the art of hybrid facilitation and have the technology to support them, consider holding an entirely virtual meeting, even if many participants are Zooming in from the office.

Given all that we've overcome throughout the pandemic, it would be a shame if we didn't take advantage of every single hard-earned pearl of wisdom around work, life, and the nexus of the two. Let's harness our new perspectives on time, technology, and togetherness to rethink how we work—and specifically, how we gather.



TAKEAWAYS

The hybrid workplace provides us the opportunity to think carefully about which parts of work should be done in person, which should be virtual, and which can benefit from a mix. When you are planning a meeting, ask yourself these six questions:

- ✓ Should this be a meeting? Use meetings to be creative and do something together, rather than simply share information.
- ✓ Are my meeting goals relationship-based or task-based? Task-based goals can often be accomplished in a virtual meeting. Relationship-based goals are usually accomplished most effectively in person.
- ✓ How complex are my objectives? Complicated discussions involving competing priorities are likely better to navigate in person.
- ✓ Could my meeting take an entirely different shape or form? Consider asynchronous presentations and using other technological tools to impart

and share information effectively instead of meeting.

- ✓ What type of meeting will be most inclusive? The virtual format often promotes including participants who otherwise might not be able to join.
- ✓ Does my facilitator have the skills and tech setup to pull off a hybrid gathering? They must know how to make remote participants feel like full participants and establish clear protocols for all to offer input.

Adapted from “When Do We Actually Need to Meet in Person?” on hbr.org, July 26, 2021 (reprint #H06GZ0).

THE NEXT GENERATION OF OFFICE COMMUNICATION TECH

by Ethan Murray

Most knowledge workers are now familiar with mixed-reality tools such as Zoom, Teams, and Slack that enable them to meet in virtual locations. By merging real and virtual worlds to produce new environments, employees who relied on in-person office interactions in the beginning of 2020 soon learned to meet on virtual tropical islands, virtually “stand” in front of presentations beamed around the world, or maintain banter

and team spirit with timely GIFs and emojis mixed into their workday messages.

But these experiences are just the tip of the iceberg of mixed-reality offerings. Augmented reality technologies have become regular features in product offerings, along assembly lines, and even in surgeries. Now, new forms of mixed-reality technologies are creating mainstream virtual substitutes for offices, and redefining the future of work in the process.

These new mixed-reality applications can help companies cut costs and boost revenues. Many companies we work with are using them to shrink their real-world office footprints by about a third on average and energize far-flung employees, many of whom are already more productive while working from home with no commute.

Longer term, companies will use mixed reality to create conditions for remote collaboration and innovation that are as good as, or even better than, in person. Below are three key areas where we see early versions of what could be called multidimensional “collaboratories” that are improving knowledge worker productivity and collaboration.

Virtual Offices

Almost a decade before the pandemic struck, technology pioneers began using large-screen video “portals” to connect satellite offices into each other’s worlds through informal, always-on video feeds. As this technology evolved, major corporations began experimenting with virtual neighborhoods to keep their teams connected globally.

The reason: When distributed team members couldn’t see each other, they felt disconnected and isolated. A lack of serendipitous encounters hurt not only their morale but also their ability to collaborate and innovate.

Now teams in some of the world’s largest financial services companies and retailers meet in virtual offices using mixed-reality programs like Sneek and Pukkateam. These create a feeling of togetherness by showing colleagues in tiles with periodically updated snapshots, so team members know who is at their desk, on a call, or drinking a coffee and perhaps up for a chat.

With a mouse click, teammates can instantly turn a snapshot into a live video call, eliminating the burden of setting up videoconferences. Meanwhile, team chat messages with a steady flow of emojis, status updates (“gotta connect the kid to school!”), and GIF-supported

jokes keep the work atmosphere fun, friendly, and open. For teams that prefer not to display their actual images throughout the day, other programs like Sococo rely on avatars to bring employees together across continents in illustrated virtual offices complete with conference rooms, guest waiting areas, and pantries.

Virtual Focus Groups

Demand is also growing for artificial intelligence-powered virtual focus groups that permit companies to go beyond what's possible in physical conference rooms. Virtual environments created by platforms like Remesh enable companies to tap into the kinds of insights gleaned from small focus groups but at the scale of massive digital surveys, without the drawback of only capturing one-way feedback.

Companies use these platforms for market research. They collect and summarize the anonymized views of up to 1,000 participants on a topic or new product concept. Equipped with an artificial intelligence and upvoting engine that clusters and aggregates responses, facilitators can also react and adapt the discussion in real time to explore ideas as they arise.

Some companies find virtual focus groups also help to engage employees and improve workplace cultures. For example, one bank we worked with used virtual focus groups to understand and improve the state of inclusion and diversity across its entire organization. The mixed-reality format enabled the bank to conduct chats with a total of 1,200 employees divided into 60-person groups.

The anonymity and scale of the online platform let managers hear more voices, including those who typically would not speak up in person. More employees participated, as peers freely validated each other's observations. One participant said they had "never felt this listened to before." The quantifiable data, quotes, and revealing themes provided by the platform's artificial intelligence engine showed that inappropriate behavior was not isolated to pockets of the firm, convincing the bank's leadership team to commit to improve diversity and inclusion.

Virtual Collaboration

Finally, companies are turning to mixed-reality environments as a solution for running projects and brainstorming innovations. When the pandemic struck, many

companies were forced to freeze projects and research and development because they could not convene the people involved in person.

But some didn't miss a beat, turning to collaboration tools like online sticky notes, shared digital whiteboards, and live coediting of wikis, slides, and documents to bring people together. One bank we worked with this summer, for example, discovered that it could design and launch a new digital banking business line and product in a virtual workspace just as well, and in a fraction of the time, as it had one year earlier for another product, when it flew in people to brainstorm in person.

A major reason for this success was that the combination of video, voice, chat, and collaboration tools created more opportunities for all team members to contribute, rather than be drowned out by those with loud voices or a forceful presence—or if they simply missed the session because they couldn't fly in. With greater representation in the virtual room, teams were able to realize better and more holistic solutions in a way that just wasn't happening before.

More ideas were shared and reviewed simultaneously on multi-editor collaboration tools than if they all had to flow through a live facilitator at a whiteboard. And the outputs were instantly well formatted and digital, which meant they could immediately be used in reports

and documentation, as opposed to another cryptic white-board photo.

Mixed-Reality Realms

We are just starting to see what the future of mixed-reality work will look like. A year ago, nobody would have believed we would work from home at the scale we are now. Yet practically every large corporation we speak with today is asking for innovations to make virtual working sustainably productive.

This will drive the next wave of mixed reality, with solutions like artificial intelligence tools that can create optimal rotations of “serendipitous” encounters across teams and functions; affordable home smart boards and large multi-monitor displays that will move virtual collaboration from laptop screens to a more immersive full-size format; 3-D printers that will allow design teams to physically test prototypes around the world from their home offices; and for things that can’t be produced at home, fast crosstown home deliveries by drones of virtual happy hour supplies like wine and painting kits.

Like the grainy Skype calls of 2010 that predated today’s Zoom boom, mixed-reality technologies becoming popular today will likely be far surpassed in the near future.

Ten years from now, we will look at the current crop of virtual office, focus group, and collaboration tools with the same disdain we now have for crackly phone calls.



TAKEAWAYS

Mixed-reality tools such as Zoom, Teams, and Slack merge real and virtual worlds to create new environments. As these technologies advance, companies will use them to create conditions for remote collaboration and innovation that are as good as, or even better than, in-person offices.

- ✓ Many companies are already using advanced mixed reality tools to create “virtual offices” that improve morale and allow for serendipitous encounters.
- ✓ AI-powered virtual focus groups will allow for insights and two-way feedback at scale. Virtual focus groups are already helping companies engage employees and improve workplace cultures.
- ✓ Mixed-reality environments are creating solutions for running projects and brainstorming. The com-

bination of video, voice, chat, and collaboration tools are creating greater team member representation in the virtual room and leading to more holistic solutions.

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