The Future of Hybrid Offices

The future of work arrived out of nowhere, on the back of a once-in-a-century pandemic. Companies were forced to rapidly and radically adapt, and 'Work From Home' for office-based team members was adapted out of necessity. Now companies continue to consider and adapt to the best options for their teams going forward. Many may opt for a hybrid model that incorporates both in-office and work from home options for team members. While more challenging than either a fully distributed work force or a full office only team, it may be the best option for teams going forward.

For now, with the pandemic still active, some modifications to your current work environment are mandated. And some may want to use this time to test some of the hybrid options. We've captured some thoughts from recent articles. Consider creating a leadership task force focused on creating options, plans and trials, and share this information with them.

MIT's Sloan School of Management launched a pilot program pre-COVID and learned about running a successful hybrid team. Their key features/learnings:

Wednesday was in-the-office-if-you-possibly-can-be day for core hours 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The team had people who come to the office every day and people who asked to be wholly remote.

Productivity, efficiency, innovation, and creativity flourished. People save one to two hours a day of commuting time, and they spend some of that time doing work, so more productivity and less stress for the team.

They found team members who say they are able to collaborate more virtually, particularly people with a tendency to be a little quieter. They seemed to find their voice.

Their advice – this only works if you can shift from managing by looking over people's shoulders to managing by defining outcomes—coaching people, giving them tools and resources, and really trusting people to get their work done.

From Forbes magazine. Leaders should look to implement a hybrid approach that blends office space for collaboration and connection with working from home for individual work. Remote work should be offered in support of better work-life balance. However, working from home every day can decrease personal connection to colleagues who were once part of our everyday life.

Hybrid work enables employees to do both. Companies with a strong hybrid culture will need to focus on developing a digital culture to include experiences for remote employees and allow individuals and teams to complement those with in-person events. An effective hybrid work strategy can be fully supported with planning and technology to keep employees connected, whether they choose to be in the office or remote.

That means rethinking office space. Assigned desks may not make sense if employees are coming in a few days each week to connect and collaborate. Instead, consider reducing the desk footprint, adding more collaborative seating spaces and two-person pods in addition to small group seating and traditional conference rooms, as well as 'phone booths' for private conversations.

Consider a desk-booking system, or design and develop office schedules to decide who will be in the office when. This way, individuals and teams who collaborate frequently will go into the office on specific days to maximize in-person collaboration opportunities.

Additionally, lean on technology to provide a communications experience that can be adjusted to fit any situation. While remote, employees stay connected to one another as they have been for months, through chat, voice and video collaboration. For those in the office, it's easier to transition from one workspace to another with lighter laptops and mobile devices, making it imperative for companies to consider the right hardware choices as they build for flexibility.

A company's HQ can create a physical embodiment of the company's brand and values. Those who often support the success of brand development are the creatives, who may have a harder time working remotely long term. This kind of work relies on brainstorming with others and thrives on the connection to a company's people.

Technology, culture and company branding can thrive in a hybrid work model, creating a more well-rounded and productive workforce that ebbs and flows with the natural cycles of work and life.

From the BBC - What hybrid work might look like. Hybrid work tends to include more freedom around when to work as well as where. It generally grants more autonomy to employees to fit work around the rest of their lives, rather than structuring other parts of a weekday around hours logged in an office. Ideally, it's the best of both worlds: structure and sociability on one hand, and independence and flexibility on the other.

A common procedure of existing hybrid companies, accelerated since the pandemic started, is to designate certain days for in-office meetings and collaboration, and remote days for work involving individual focus. Physical presence might be required for orientations, team-building and project kick-offs, but not necessarily for other work. "We try to use home working days less for video sessions and more for the tasks that require concentration. A task that may take several hours in the office may be completed in just an hour or two at home," says Baruch Silverman, founder of personal finance website The Smart Investor. His LA based company went hybrid in June. The company aims for sharing and synchronization on days when employees come into the office.

Search engine optimization agency NOVOS moved to We Membership, "where employees can work from home most of the time but are allocated each a monthly budget to spend on booking workspace," NOVOS CEO Antonio Wedral explains. Pre-pandemic, most employees were based in London, but recent hires have been as far away as Poland. Staff can use the We Membership credits at any eligible location. "This has worked very well so far, with many enjoying seeing everyone again, the flexibility, and it is much cheaper than a physical office that we wouldn't be using properly now anyway," says Wedral.

Nicholas Bloom, a Stanford University economics professor with expertise in remote work, believes that once the pandemic subsides, working from home two days a week will be optimal for balancing collaborative and quiet work, while benefitting from the reduced stress of less commuting.

From Inc. Magazine. The most effective remote and hybrid teams are the ones committed to going beyond collaboration. A "we will go higher together" attitude toward the mission and with one another, matched by distinct co-elevating practices that enhance performance.

Agility. Agile management replaces annual planning and long, painful meetings with weekly or monthly sprints. In these sprints, teams focus on one or two projects at a time. Every critical functional area of the business knows what the outcomes are for the week. Every team does daily standups called scrums, in which everyone answers three questions: What have I done? What are the challenges I need help with? What am I doing next? Quick, effective decision-making becomes the norm, just as it has become the norm during the pandemic. Let's make sure it sticks.

A high-return practice: Adopt weekly or monthly sprints. Agree as a team what to prioritize, and assess as a team if things are off track. Shift the focus from process to delivering on customer value. The right decisions are the ones made at the level where things get done.

Co-Creation. Using the psychological safety of Zoom breakout rooms, leaders can foster more risk-taking to replace monotonous report-outs. Too many big discussions about process innovation or identifying new markets become one-way affairs, with leaders asking and answering all the questions. Don't think of yourself as the center of your team. Your job is to ask the smart questions, and to

break the team into smaller groups so everyone's voice can be heard and their insights extracted into breakthrough innovation.

A high-return practice: Move all meetings toward collaborative problem-solving. Make heavy use of video breakout rooms, because people are conflict-averse and won't share openly in a big room. Commit at least 50 percent of your time to collaborative problem-solving.

Empathy. It has become harder to maintain our professional faces after so many hours peering into our colleagues' homes, watching kids crawling across laps, and hearing one another's struggles. Academics such as Brené Brown at the University of Houston have long advocated the power of vulnerability and empathy. Finally, the whole world is accepting it.

A high-return practice: Avoid diving into meetings transactionally, as you might have done before. Start with a conversation that gets people relaxed and empathetic to one another, going deeper than that superficial small talk you'd normally make in the hallway. Have everyone do a "personal-professional check-in" or "sweet-and-sour," to share something they are struggling with.

Accountability. The first question many leaders ask me is, "How do I make sure remote workers are being productive?" What they're really asking is, "How do I know they're not in the other room on a yoga break?" Being a great leader means establishing clear outcomes and a vision for what winning looks like. If you've given your people clear outcomes and set them up with project sprints and they're meeting their goals, who gives a damn whether they're doing yoga in the afternoon?

A high-return practice: After team members share their plans or reports in a meeting, break them up into small groups to "bulletproof" one another's work by pointing out one risk that the individual might guard against, one innovative idea to consider, and one act of generosity that the group could offer by way of help. If you make space for people to be of service to one another, you get more risk-taking and more crazy ideas that lead to innovation.

Generosity. "How can I help?" I have heard those words more than ever during the pandemic. There's a real commitment to taking care of people and helping with their projects and ideas. This is crucial to driving higher employee engagement. In our research, remote teams who are left unattended suffer a roughly 50 percent reduction in productivity.

A high-return practice: Leaders can embed generosity by routinely asking whoever makes a report or does a presentation, "What can any of us do to be of service?" This kind of help is best offered during the bulletproofing process in the breakout rooms. In the big room, it would fall flat. There's a real commitment to taking care of people and helping with their projects and ideas. This is crucial to driving higher employee engagement.

Candor. Elon Musk has said that his friends tell him how good things are, while "my best friends tell me what sucks." I get why: Entrepreneurs are strongly opinionated and often shut down candor from their team. That's wrongheaded. Fear of honest talk leads to longer cycle times and slower decision-making.

A high-return practice: Candor breaks are the best way to discover what's being held back. Pause the meeting when it feels right and ask the team, "What's not being said?" Or, again, divide into small-group sessions midway to ask that same question.

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