Making hybrid work

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June 2021

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Hybrid work could be either the greatest workplace innovation of our times, or a mess.

For those of us fortunate enough to have weathered the pandemic while working from home, it's no surprise that there's a lot of pent-up energy around returning to the office. Many now see a light at the end of the tunnel as some societies begin to open.

Companies have done a lot of analysis, soul-searching, and planning around what a return to the office would look like and have come up with well-intentioned ideas for a new, hybrid way of working. They're taking the best from both what they've learned during the pandemic and what they knew before to create something new. These various flavors of hybrid work involve innovative, flexible policies to help leaders and employees alike navigate the new environment. Many employers have also reconsidered their office's design, planning to surprise employees with new and innovative spaces upon their return.
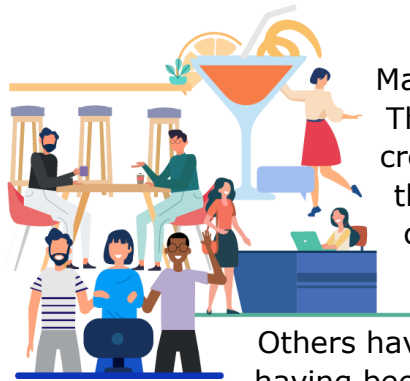
Many people and leaders are full of excitement about this. The past year has been rough, and they've missed the creative collisions in the cafeteria, the adventure of travel, the feeling of community in the office, the sight of customers, the happy hours – you name it.

Others have emerged from this year with a different perspective, having been given time back from the commute for exercise or the flexibility to meet family obligations. They are those who thrived on having fewer distractions at home and the ability to collaborate across boundaries in new ways. These are the ones who say, "I'm not going back to spending my precious time at airports."

Every company is going to have people at both ends of this spectrum, with many landing in between. All may be excited about what hybrid work has to offer, but for different reasons, and with varied expectations.

How will it play out?

Despite all of the planning, there's no way to know what the final outcome of hybrid working will be. For all the great plans, policies and new spaces, your company's hybrid in-person and virtual culture will ultimately be determined by the accumulation of your people's – specifically, your leaders'– decisions in critical moments every day. This can play out in multiple ways, but imagine the two extremes.

- First, a pure hybrid model. 50 percent of the workforce is at the office on the average day, and attendance is evenly distributed throughout the week. Some people are fully remote except for critical meetings, some are in the office almost all the time, and some are mixed, all based on personal preference. People get their work done when they want to, outside of some agreed-upon times spent together.

In this scenario, how do you avoid sub-cultures developing? Or, are you okay with having sub-cultures? How do you use offices in a way that isn't everyone searching for places to have Zoom meetings? What if some people don't feel comfortable traveling when the rest of the team wants to gather?
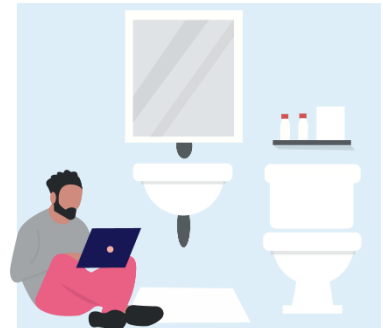
- Another possibility: the gravitational pull back to the office is strong. Leaders are the most eager to come back, and others follow. Hybrid becomes a rigid 3-2-2 model in which people are in the office Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and at home on Monday and Friday. Almost all collaboration takes place in the office, with more focused work time at home. In this scenario, what happens to the person who was promised flexibility, but now feels pressured to conform? Or to the remote employee who experienced a year of equal opportunity, and is now back to being a fly on the wall?
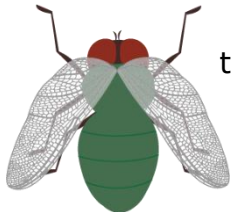
These two hypotheticals take us in very different directions of hybrid work – both of which bring significant challenges. This is before factoring in the complexity of personal beliefs towards vaccination, a geographically asymmetric vaccine rollout, the safety of at-risk groups, COVID-19 mutations, and what all this means for equity and inclusion. What is clear is that this transition will spur significant innovation and greatness, along with some crushed dreams and desires.

How do you make it work?

Leaders and teams need to be prepared not to perform perfectly, but rather, to be **intentionally adaptable**. In fact, it's safe to assume you won't get it right from the start. Instead, be intentional about how you approach the return to work, aware of your mindsets and actions in the moments that matter, and able to adjust quickly as things play out.

There are three key things for your organization to consider:

1. Hybrid leadership moments and mindsets:
   The amalgamation of your leaders' decisions in critical moments both big (how to structure a team strategy meeting) and small (taking part in the team coffee), will determine your company's hybrid workplace culture. How leaders balance these daily choices will have an outsized impact on productivity, belonging, and motivation.

   If moments are mission-critical, why not give leaders a taste before they are tossed into the chaos of reality? Simulating day-to-day experiences gives leaders a chance to explore the trade-offs, implications, and unintended consequences of their choices in a risk-free environment before implementing them in real life.

2. Intentional team conversations:
   Grounded in this more thoughtful context, leaders will need to identify individuals'

hybrid-work preferences and expectations, and get the team aligned on how to work together. What if you could help all of your teams define and experiment with what hybrid work would look like, and more importantly, converse on an ongoing basis? And what if you could access real-time data on your team's adaptivity, thus improving their efficiency and engagement?

Digital team tools are one solution to this issue. By leveraging tools that enable team leaders to have the right conversations with their teams, and that also provide you with data on how teams are working and adapting in real-time, you'll gain insight into what's working and what's not so you can take action and improve collaboration across the company.

3. Building capacity for more change:
When the pandemic hit, everyone experienced change at an unprecedented rate and scale, eventually arriving at a new sense of normal. Now, as some parts of the world open while others need to close, disruption has arrived once again. While most people have an increased capacity for change, many are also exhausted by it. When the pandemic hit, the mission was clear and unavoidable: transition to succeeding in a remote environment. But now, the target is murkier, and will continue to evolve.

This is the right time to help your leaders examine their relationships to change both individually and collectively, understand the power of mindset, and build more capability for what lies ahead. One way to do this is by leveraging assessments that help you evaluate your own and your team's relationship to change. The good news is this: through increased awareness and the right development, you can increase capacity for change both individually and collectively.

Hybrid work could be either the greatest workplace innovation of our times, or a mess. While there's optimism about what's ahead, now is the time to be **intentionally adaptable** in order to reap the potential of this transition. Help your leaders experiment with new realities and create modern systems that help them do the best work of their lives.

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