

MANAGING HYBRID WORK



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

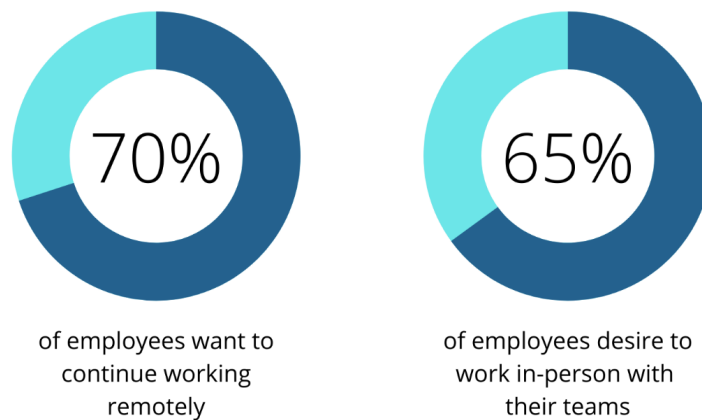
Overcoming the Challenges and Capitalizing on the Opportunities of Hybrid Work	1
Closing the Gaps in “Remote” Work Arrangements	2
Closing the Gaps in “In-Office” Work Arrangements	4
The Post Pandemic Future of Work	5

Overcoming the Challenges and Capitalizing on the Opportunities of Hybrid Work

As we return to a new normal post-pandemic, organizational and individual work arrangements will have to be designed to take into account that employees will range from not wanting to give up their autonomy of working from home to those who will want to come rushing back to the physical office. However, a large swath of the workforce will be somewhere in the middle. They would like to mix and match the benefits of working remotely and the advantages of coming to physical offices. A recent Microsoft report highlights the tension companies face as 70% of employees want to continue working remotely work, while 65% of employees desire to work in-person with their teams.¹ This presents an opportunity for companies to reimagine the future of work as a hybrid of remote and in-office arrangements.

To meet the needs of all employees in a new normal of extreme flexibility, companies will need to overcome and bridge four gaps – including culture, work process, socialization and personal needs – to enhance remote as well as in-office work arrangements (see Figure 1).

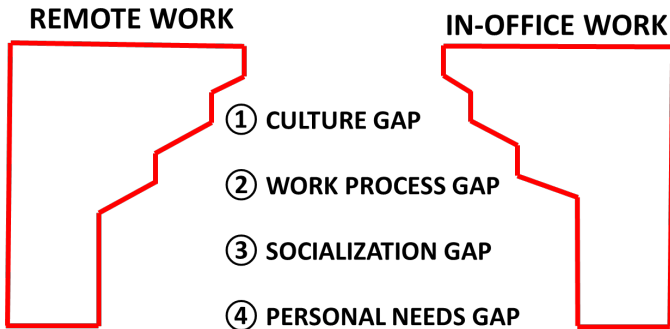
Hybrid Work: Employees Want Best of Both Worlds



Source: Microsoft (2021)

¹ Microsoft. (2021, March 22). 2021 Work Trend Index: The Next Great Disruption is Hybrid Work – Are We Ready?. www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work.

Figure 1



Closing the Gaps in “Remote” Work Arrangements

1. The Culture Gap

With remote work arrangements, one of the main traps for maintaining culture and employee harmony is the “in-group” vs. “out-group” syndrome. If a certain group of employees chooses to come into the office on a more regular basis and another set chooses to regularly work from home, then the organization runs a higher risk of the “in-group” versus “out-group” schism. Those working together in the office can exchange information that the “out-group” may not be privy to.

There are several ways to mitigate the culture gap with remote employees. One way is to rotate who comes to the office and who works from home. If a rotation cannot be established, then care must be taken to avoid the formation of “in-group” versus “out-group.” Another way to avoid groups and cliques from forming is to make sure even those who come to the office attend the team or group meetings online from their workspaces rather than as a group in a meeting room.

2. The Work Process Gap

For “remote” and “in-office” employees, work should be visible and transparent. The fear of missing out when an employee is not in an office is genuine. If a remote employee is part of a team or group, then managers must ensure that the work that is being done by those who are in the physical offices is explicitly explicated for them to see and synchronize with. Short meetings to synchronize the work of those in the office with those who are choosing to be remote can also facilitate more work transparency.

In a team meeting, where both remote and in-office employees are present, the meeting facilitator (and that role can be rotated amongst team members) should ensure that the achievements and accomplishments of both virtual and in-office employees are highlighted. Identifying the point of “work” conflicts – delay in one’s output and its impact on others’ work or divergent viewpoints - should be another key aspect of the meetings.

Working remotely does not equate to all hands on the deck synchronous (Zoom) meetings throughout the day. Desynchronizing work into components that can be accomplished asynchronously by individuals separately before synchronizing to resolve work conflicts may be the antidote to Zoom fatigue. Blocking out time for asynchronous work should be encouraged and respected. Short synchronous meetings can be a powerful part of work, as part of the asynchronous-synchronous rhythm, whereby asynchronous work is dominant.

3. The Socialization Gap

Explicit and separate time for socialization and bonding is as important (if not more) for employees working remotely. To mitigate this risk, arrange for socialization at the team level, whereby a virtual meeting is dedicated specifically to team-building events.

Other than exclusive socialization and bonding activities, every “work” meeting should devote five to 10 minutes to socialization and resocialization. Team members should be encouraged to speak about what is on their minds and what is going on in their lives. Starting with those who are virtual first will ensure that their voice is heard and signal that they are as important as those who are present. Managers can increase social connectedness by actively and frequently scheduling individual check-ins with team members who are mostly virtual.

4. The Personal Needs Gap

Employees often assume that you have to be in the office to be promoted and rewarded,² which is the last thing you want the organization to think and feel.

To avoid this gap, the organization needs to relate performance to objective measures related to output performance rather than process (number of hours worked). Leaders must also ensure that remote employees are treated equally compared to those who come into the office.³

The other concern is a remote employee may be missing out on a crucial mentorship opportunity by not going into an office. If one was in the office, she could knock on the boss’s door to ask for advice or feedback.

To mitigate this gap, managers should explicitly provide mentorship opportunities to those who are virtual. Leaders should walk the virtual hallways to proactively have conversations with remote employees, while also providing open-door office hours for those physically present.

Breaks and other personal considerations of remote employees need to be accommodated positively. One way to address this is through managerial guidance and encouragement. For example, virtual employees can be empowered to block off time on their calendars to meet their personal needs.

Similarly, these four gaps need to be simultaneously addressed for “physical workspaces” by reimagining the role of the physical workspace in other ways, which will be essential as hybrid work becomes the new normal for many organizations.

2 Mortensen, M. & Haas, M. (2021, February). Making the Hybrid Workplace Fair. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2021/02/making-the-hybrid-workplace-fair>

3 Grimstead, S. (2021, April 27). How to Make the Hybrid Workplace Fair For All. Fast Company. www.fastcompany.com/90627909/how-to-make-the-hybrid-workplace-fair-for-all

Closing the Gaps in “In-Office” Work Arrangements

1. The Culture Gap

Physical offices will take on new purposes in the post-pandemic world. One important purpose will be the physical manifestation of the culture of the organization. While being remote, we have realized that it is workplace culture that is missing in daily routines. Being in physical space allowed us to see the “performative actions” of others and emulate them, and collectively gather to recognize for the achievements and accomplishments of employees.

Whenever employees come in, they can hear about the workplace culture from senior executives, and how employees can exemplify the culture and recognize those who have demonstrated this. Of course, this could also be a webcast to remote employees so that they hear the culture message and see the culture rewarded. Live learning events, such as talks and demonstrations, may also be a great use of office spaces to reinforce culture packaged with extending skills. A whole week may be devoted to a thematic learning experience, with the same talks and demonstrations being repeated, so that employees – when they choose to come in on a rotating basis – may get the opportunity for similar learning experiences. These experiences and events may be livestreamed for those who do not want to come in (for life reasons) and those who are remote (far from work campuses and buildings).

2. The Work Process Gap

A subtle but critical reason for why we liked our offices was to hear others’ ideas and be inspired to think creatively. The small talk at the watercoolers and the break rooms were the places where the social talk often led to this. It is such a serendipitous collision of ideas that is often the spark for innovation. When reimagining the workplace, it is this collision of ideas that may have to be systematically designed into the space. Remember those whiteboards with Post-it notes we once so relied on? Well, those are the very “spaces” for ideas that may need to be highlighted. When employees do go into the office, they can look at the Post-it notes to read what others are thinking and doing, and maybe even leave their own thoughts out there.

Once in a while, when the entire team chooses to come in at the same time (or is encouraged to), physical spaces can also be used for team-building exercises. Seeing others during the team exercise performance may also create empathy for others and recognition of others.

3. The Socialization Gap

If there is one thing we have learned during the pandemic is that we are humans with a need for being with others. Offices should be designed to encourage the moments of being together.

Workplaces are much more than places to work. The design of physical workspaces can drive more mindful work, better socialization and overall employee satisfaction.

Open-air spaces may be used for “around the campfire” type of activities to share and learn about each other outside of work while at the office. Deliberate activities focused on just sharing each other’s life contexts may go a long way in reinforcing the culture and being cognizant of others’ constraints and situations.

Even when the team does not come to the office all at once, whoever is at work together should be encouraged to get together to share where they are in life and engage in sharing their outside-of-work interests.

4. The Personal Needs Gap

No matter how much we love our homes and the flexibility of working from home, there is a need for some to feel like they are going to work – not the act of working, but rather a physical location of work. A change of location can often prompt a work mindset or offer a new perspective. Physical work environments can be designed to give employees these thinking spaces (both location-wise and timewise) to be more thoughtful and creative about their work. Getting away from home may also give employees to restore some work-life balance, without life intruding in the thoughtful part of work.

The design of the workplace will go hand in hand with why people may want to come to the workplace and why they should come to the workplace (when they choose to). Correspondingly, cubicles of the past may be less important than the “open spaces” in the office building. Atriums and lawns may be the places where employees congregate for the socially distanced fun part of work. Monolithic office campuses, buildings or floors may also

give way to satellite offices where groups and teams who are most closely tied to the performance of work can come together on chosen times and days.

The Post Pandemic Future of Work

In a post-pandemic world, we have to reach a new normal where the work design is more mindful and cognizant of employees’ mental health.

Beyond time, the location of work is increasingly the choice of the employee, not the company. Hybrid work arrangements are here to stay. To attract talent, companies will need to not only accommodate an employee’s choice but also enhance the experience and productivity of that choice, whether it’s working remotely or in an office.

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