

MAKING HYBRID WORK HUMAN

A PLAYBOOK FOR BUILDING
SUSTAINABLE HYBRID MODELS



WRITTEN BY

**ECONOMIST
IMPACT**

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Making hybrid work human is a multi-phased research programme, conducted by Economist Impact and sponsored by Google Workspace, studying the sustainable future of emerging models of work. Building on phase 1 and 2 of the research, as well as additional expert interviews and literature reviews, this final piece of the programme presents actionable insights and recommendations for organisations to build human-centric, sustainable hybrid work models.

We would like to thank the following experts for their time and insights:

- **Ada Choi**, head of occupier research, APAC, and head of data intelligence and management, APAC, CBRE
- **Anne-Laure Fayard**, ERA chaired professor in social innovation, NOVA School of Business and Economics
- **Anita Williams Woolley**, associate professor of organisational behaviour and theory, Tepper School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University
- **Brian Kropp**, group vice president and chief of HR research, Gartner
- **David Ulrich**, Rensis Likert professor, Ross School of Business, University of Michigan; partner, The RBL Group
- **Federica Saliola**, lead economist in the social protection and jobs global practice, Work Bank
- **Harriet Molyneux**, managing director, HSM Advisory
- **Jon Messenger**, team leader of the working conditions group, International Labour Organization
- **Jodi Oakman**, associate professor of ergonomics, safety and health, La Trobe University
- **Manish Kashyap**, global president, advisory and transaction services, CBRE
- **Nicholas A Bloom**, William Eberle professor, Department of Economics, Stanford University
- **Prithwiraj Choudhury**, associate professor of technology and management, Harvard Business School
- **Dr Sandhya Karpe**, leader of the Human Capital Centre, The Conference Board of Asia

This report was produced by a team of Economist Impact researchers, editors and designers including:

Yuxin Lin, project manager
Lavanya Sayal, researcher
Wade Islan, researcher
Sudhir Vadaketh, writer
Amanda Simms, copy editor
Marina da Silva, designer

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MAKING HYBRID HUMAN IS KEY TO ITS SUCCESS

Hybrid work¹ is here to stay. Location- and time-flexible work arrangements have increased dramatically since the pandemic's onset. Economist Impact's global survey of knowledge workers in Phase 2 of the *Making hybrid work human* programme reveals that the majority of organisations will likely persist with the pandemic-inspired hybrid work models even once normality resides. More than three-quarters of survey respondents expect flexible work models to become standard practice within the next three years and a similar share are confident that their organisations will implement them successfully.

However, hybrid work is still in its infancy and numerous challenges remain. Uneven, divergent sentiments exist among knowledge workers with regard to its benefits and challenges. Views often depend on an individual's lived experience with hybrid work, which is in turn influenced by factors such as generation, family status, corporate seniority and the ability to work remotely (see **Box 1**).

To reap the benefits of hybrid work, it is important for organisations to adopt a **human-centric** approach, putting employees at the centre of corporate policymaking and implementation. There are three reasons why this kind of approach is necessary.

First, despite the reported presence of benefits to individual well-being and work performance, hybrid work models disrupt the traditional ways that individuals communicate and collaborate, posing a threat to workplace relations. Therefore, retaining and reinforcing human connection is essential to implementing hybrid work in a sustainable way.

The majority of our survey respondents agree that: the lack of face-to-face supervision creates a sense of distrust among managers and employees; and they often feel disconnected from their organisation and co-workers.

Second, the emerging fault lines between different segments of employees as they adapt to hybrid work further exacerbates the threat

posed to workplace relations. Organisations must strike a balance between the desire for firm-wide standards and the importance of tailoring policies to meet the needs of specific groups. Failure to do so risks undermining employees' loyalty and organisational cohesion.

On this front, consideration should be given to the fact that frontline workers are more likely to feel a negative impact from limited social interactions with their co-workers on their mental health compared with non-frontline workers. And they are also more likely to feel stressed by the increased monitoring associated with flexible work.

While Gen Z/Millennials are more likely to feel stressed by the increased monitoring associated with flexible work, Baby Boomers and Gen X are more likely to report a negative impact on productivity and work-life boundaries.

The third reason why a human-centric approach is necessary is that there is an evident gap between senior managers and lower-level employees in their relative perceptions and experiences of hybrid work.

Our survey reveals that, compared with senior managers, lower-level employees are more likely to feel that they are treated relatively unfairly by flexible work models and disconnected from their organisation and co-workers. Lower-level employees are also less likely to experience increases in location and time flexibility and more likely to report that their organisation's technology stack is not very supportive.

All this suggests that senior executives must bear specific responsibilities in the hybrid work transition, including: recognising that more junior employees may have vastly different experiences of hybrid work than they do; ensuring that the voices of all employees are heard; and striving to be inclusive in their decision-making and policy implementation.

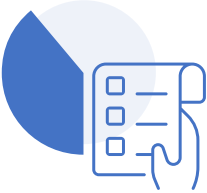
The shift to hybrid can be sustained only if made human-centric. Fostering this

centricity requires sustained, diligent efforts by organisations. To help in this journey, Economist Impact has designed a “Toolkit for building human-centric hybrid work models” (see **Figure 1** on page 7). The numerous practices

and initiatives here are derived from the three main pillars of success: building a culture of trust, transparency, empathy and inclusiveness; recalibrating management mindset and practices; and investing in workplace “hardware”.

Box 1. Persona Analysis

Economist Impact conducted cluster analysis on the Phase 2 survey results and identified four primary groups of knowledge workers*. These groups hold overlapping but divergent ideas about the value and shape of hybrid work models, and represent essentialised versions of some of the different perspectives around flexible work that business leaders can expect to encounter. Across all four personas, there is a general belief that flexible work holds promise for workers and organisations. Yet their differences highlight the challenges that business leaders will face in creating effective policies for all employees.




39%
THE PRAGMATISTS

While optimistic about hybrid work, the pragmatists place extra emphasis on this model's hurdles.

- Particularly concerned with blurred work-life boundaries
- Feel their firm's flexible work policies are yet to successfully incorporate employee input
- More likely to think that flexible work policies at their workplaces are unfair
- Report at higher rates that their organisations have not provided sufficient technology training for remote work

Demographic: skews towards Asia-Pacific and workers with less location and/or time flexibility



24%
THE EVANGELISTS

The most optimistic about hybrid work, the evangelists are typically very satisfied with their organisation's flexible work policies

- Largely feel that flexible work has a positive impact on employees
- More likely to report that their firm's flexible work policies have successfully incorporated employee input
- The most satisfied with their firm's remote work technology, and report sufficient training has been provided
- Report little-to-no improvement is required to make hybrid work sustainable

Demographic: skews towards women and non-frontline workers, and the most likely to be fully remote




23%
THE FAIR-MINDED

Most concerned about employee well-being, fairness and inclusion, the fair-minded also emphasise organisational improvement of culture and norms.

- Report an overall positive impact of flexible work on employee well-being, fairness and inclusion
- Believe that considerable improvement is required to improve communication, collaboration and the culture of trust at the workplace
- Hope for greater location and time flexibility
- More likely to have considered switching employers because of their current flexible work policies

Demographic: skews towards Latin America, Gen Z and Millennials, and more junior employees; more likely to be parents or caregivers



13%
THE UNDECIDED

This cohort isn't yet sure how they feel about flexible work, and are the least confident about the future of hybrid work.

- More likely to be working at firms that have not yet issued a policy around hybrid work
- Much more likely to be frontline workers, and report at higher rates that limited social interactions have affected their mental health
- Report technology challenges at higher rates, saying that their firm's technology provisions do not support their ability to connect, collaborate and communicate remotely

Demographic: skews towards Asia-Pacific and Europe, and frontline workers

*Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF TRUST, TRANSPARENCY, EMPATHY AND INCLUSIVENESS

A human-centric organisational culture is required to successfully establish and implement hybrid work models. The cornerstones of this culture are trust, transparency, empathy and inclusiveness. At first glance, these are qualities that modern organisations already seek to promote in their bid for corporate success. Yet this drive to cultivate each has been given added impetus by the onset of hybrid work, which, by its very nature, demands rethinking these aspects.

Trust

Trust is an important element in organisational culture. The consequences of a culture of distrust are significant, including diminished productivity, morale and motivation.²

The importance of trust grows with hybrid work, which fundamentally relies on trust-based models. The relative lack of “face-time” in hybrid models means that colleagues have

fewer opportunities to observe one another and managers have less (direct) control over their teams. Workers have fewer shared sidebar conversations that build rapport and interpersonal trust, and there is less access to situational cues to understand colleagues’ efforts and outputs.

There are two main relationships for which trust is paramount in hybrid work. The first is between co-workers. The basis of successful flexible work is that employees must trust their peers and teammates to meet goals and targets regardless of their locations and work hours.³

The second is between supervisors and subordinates. Supervisors trust their subordinates to achieve set goals while granting them the autonomy to decide their work schedules. Employees, meanwhile, trust their supervisors and leaders with their well-being and career growth.



“Managers can feel very uncomfortable or vulnerable when they don’t see the people that they’re managing,” says Anita Woolley, an associate professor of organisational behaviour and theory at the Tepper School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University. “It’s a matter of wanting to have tangible evidence of what’s happening...building a culture of trust from the perspective of hybrid work is critical.”⁴

There is a long way to go. Seventy-three percent of our survey respondents say at least some improvement is needed to build a culture of trust between managers and employees in their organisation.

Transparency

While trust is the glue that holds an organisation together, transparency enables trust. In general, transparency enables organisations to operate in a way that creates openness between managers and employees and among co-workers.⁵ Implemented properly, greater transparency promotes trust between managers and employees, helps improve morale and lowers job-related stress, while increasing employee happiness and boosting performance.⁶

The shift to a hybrid model could disrupt regular communication and information sharing channels and workflows, hence creating uncertainties for workers. And the lack of transparent policies and clear communication can result in increased employee anxiety.⁷

Transparency in the hybrid workplace therefore implies that all employees should have easy and equal access to company information, policies and plans. Individuals should be able to easily share information or feedback with each other. There must

also be sufficient transparency in policy- and decision-making processes. Finally, improving access to remote work resources and information is an important aspect of transparency in hybrid models.⁸

“Employees want clarity about work. A major contributor to burn out is not knowing how you’re doing and what results you’re producing,” says Ms Woolley.⁹

Empathy

Empathy is another key enabler of trust and an important element of a human-centric organisational culture. Its importance to organisational performance has grown dramatically over recent decades. Not long ago some might have said that emotional intelligence is a soft skill that is nice to have. Today it is considered essential—especially with the hybrid work revolution.¹⁰

Different employees face different challenges as they adapt to new hybrid work arrangements. As a result, it is important—particularly for managers and leaders—to be empathetic and recognise these varying experiences.

“Managers will need to be empowered to craft appropriate solutions to the unique problems of each employee. This will require a greater investment of their time and effort,” says Sandhya Karpe, leader of the Human Capital Centre at The Conference Board of Asia.¹¹

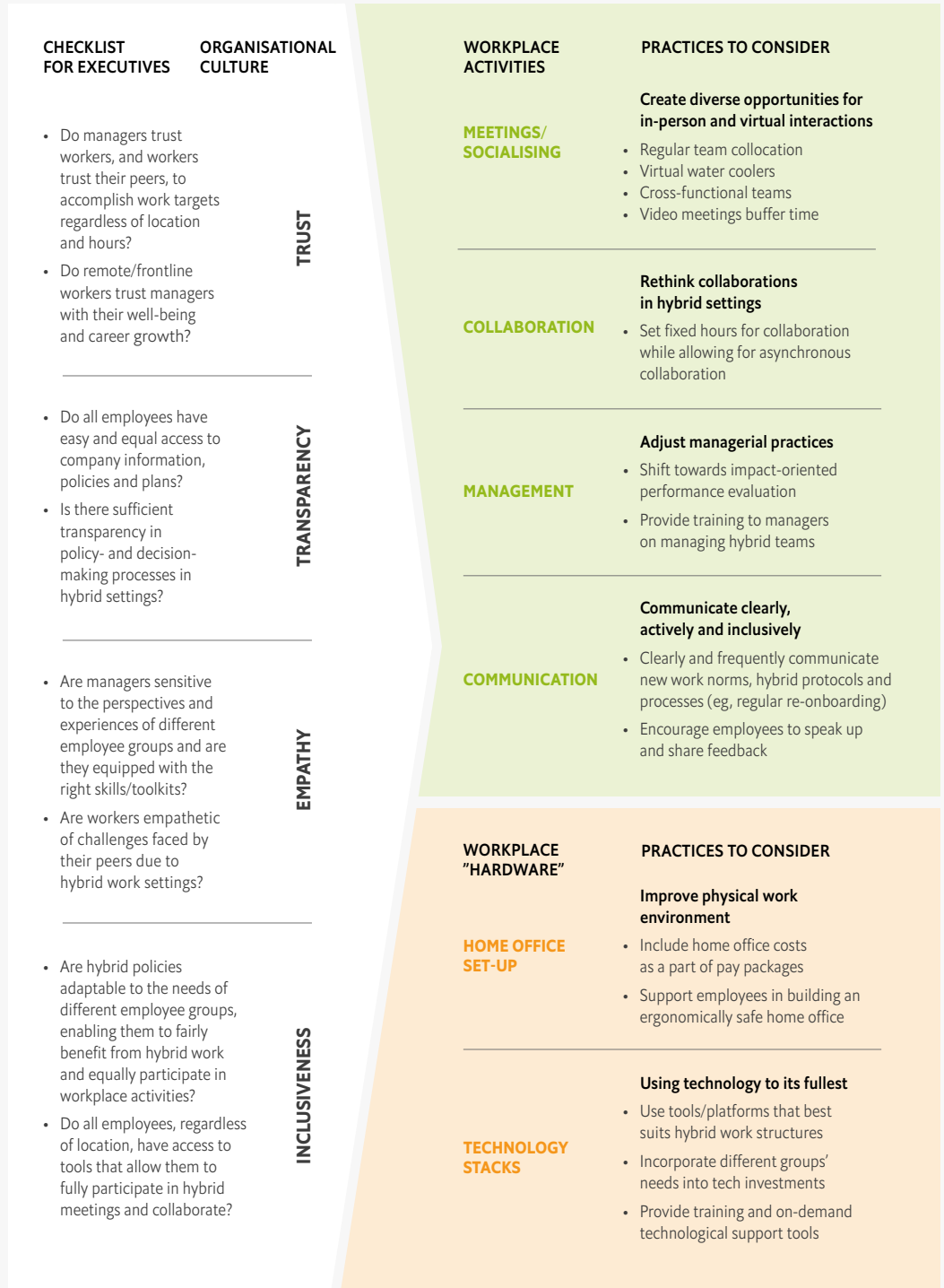
Being empathetic in a hybrid workplace means that an individual—either a manager or a worker—understands the unique challenges facing others as they adapt their homes and lives around hybrid work. It necessarily involves acknowledging that every individual’s needs, responsibilities and levels of adaptability are unique.¹²

With empathy, individuals have greater sensitivity in their people-to-people interactions in the absence of in-person time. This allows employees, managers and leaders to pick up on other’s feelings and reactions, connect with people on an emotional level and create a safe environment for individuals to share their concerns and limitations.

Research indicates that businesses with team leaders that look to understand the unique experiences of each team member have happier, more engaged employees.¹³

“Managers will need to be empowered to craft appropriate solutions to the unique problems of each employee. This will require a greater investment of their time and effort.”

Figure 1. Toolkit for building human-centric hybrid work models



However, 75% of our survey respondents say that the leadership in their organisations need to improve their understanding of employee perspectives and experiences.

Inclusiveness

Inclusiveness means embracing all employees—their unique backgrounds, experiences and challenges—and enabling them to make meaningful contributions.¹⁴

Equitable employers outpace their competitors by respecting the unique needs, perspectives and potential of all their team members. As a result, diverse and inclusive workplaces earn deeper trust and more commitment from their employees.¹⁵

In a hybrid workplace, inclusiveness should extend to frontline employees, remote workers, caregivers, women, sick employees, quarantined employees and employees with disabilities,

among other groups. Inclusiveness means taking into account their needs when formulating work policies, ensuring their fair participation in decision-making processes, and providing access to benefits from hybrid work.

Among other things, it requires managers to review benefits, work-from-home resources and other offerings to ensure they continue to accommodate employees with diverse needs as they navigate office and work-from-home schedules.¹⁶

“Flexible time is the minimum that can be offered to in-person workers—those who are either unable to telework because of the nature of their positions, or alternatively prefer not to do so,” says Jon Messenger, team leader of the working conditions group at the International Labour Organization. “To the extent you can, offer at least time flexibility. Allow them to choose shift schedules, or give them the choice to work at different times.”¹⁷



RECALIBRATING MANAGEMENT MINDSET AND PRACTICES

From management's perspective, hybrid work should not be seen just as an expected evolution in the history of work, but rather as representing a fundamentally new and different work paradigm. It creates novel challenges, which employers must address with new mindsets and organisational practices, including interaction and socialisation platforms, and collaborative workflows and management styles. Clear, active and inclusive communication is more important than ever in a hybrid work environment.

Creating diverse opportunities for in-person and virtual interactions

When designing and implementing hybrid work, it is important for employers to rethink the functions of traditional venues and platforms, where most employee interactions used to occur, while exploring new opportunities for them to connect.

"An organisation where the thinking behind building organisational culture is that 'There should be a coffee lounge for people to interact' will not survive the hybrid test," says Ms Woolley. "Such an organisation will struggle to effectively translate in-person culture into the online environment."¹⁸

It is thus important that organisations look to adopt new platforms that are purposely built for fostering connections in the online environment. These typically enable employees to organise themselves into small groups, play games with their teams, participate in informal discussions and just generally build meaningful relations in a hybrid work environment.¹⁹

Regular team collocation

As hybrid workers spend a lot of time working separately and remotely, regular team collocation (either in the office or off-site) creates opportunities for them to interact and collaborate in person with colleagues, including those who can't work remotely. This helps to foster interpersonal bonds within a team, cultivating deeper trust and empathy than is possible virtually.

There is no one-size-fits-all 'in-person' schedule that is guaranteed to work. Depending on organisation type, team function and employee needs, managers need to tailor suitable work schedules for their respective teams.

Prithwiraj Choudhury, an associate professor of technology and management at Harvard Business School, suggests a "75/25" model. He believes that for 75% of the time workers should be given the freedom to work from anywhere, but they should be physically collocated with their team for the remainder. The specifics around the 25% collocation time, he suggests, should be decided on by teams (rather than organisations or workers) so that the entire team can be present together. This in-person time should be used for counselling and mentoring sessions and social purposes. Additionally, each team should decide on whether to have more or less collocation time, based on team composition, tasks and the project.²⁰

Sharing a similar view on collocation, Nicholas Bloom, a professor of economics at Stanford University, suggests that organisations should mandate specific in-person days of the week—an important measure to avoid presenteeism bias. In partnership with employees, he says, organisations should come up with a structure to decide when they want to work remotely or in-person. For example, companies can make Wednesday an in-person meeting day. He suggests a blended approach of first collecting individual preferences; and then mandating in-person and remote days at the team or organisational level.²¹

Yet deciding on schedules is only part of the challenge with regular collocation under a hybrid framework. Organisations also need to fundamentally rethink what exactly employees will be doing when they are together.

Prior to the pandemic, many perceived offices as the "true" place of work, around which remote or flexible workers would revolve.

That is an increasingly outdated view, with many now believing that the office's primary

function is as a space for stimulating human connections. “The office should feed social purposes and focus work should be done at home,” says Federica Saliola, lead economist at The World Bank.²²

Virtual socialisation and connection

Complementing regular collocation is enhanced virtual socialisation and connection. The best ways of achieving this have become clearer over the past few years, as different kinds of workers have garnered experience in remote work, feeding our collective understanding of virtual work life.

First, to make up for the lack of casual in-person interactions, organisations can set up virtual water coolers or hallways, which can help hybrid workers connect across teams. Employees across functions and different levels of seniority who may not know each other are brought together periodically. Group assignments can be made by either an HR officer or algorithm. As the

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Anne-Laure Fayard, professor in social innovation,
NOVA School of Business and Economics

purpose of these gatherings is solely to broaden organisational ties, they can be designed with an explicitly social objective.²³

To be effective, they will have to entice both in-person and remote employees. In this way, they can improve inclusiveness.

“My research on virtual water coolers shows that under some conditions, such as repeated interactions, even five weeks is a good enough time for these informal sessions to improve a person’s productivity through an improved sense of belongingness,” says Mr Choudhury.²⁴

Organisations can also enhance virtual socialisation by setting buffer times before and after video meetings. Part of the reason

many workers experience video call fatigue is the fact that they tend to be run in a clinical, rapidfire way. Video conferencing strips away the opportunity for in-person interactions before and after meetings. These random, casual side conversations can help build empathy and strengthen team camaraderie. Thus teams may want to institute a 10-15 minute buffer before and/or after calls, which can help co-workers connect informally.

“Not being able to interpret people’s body language well during video calls and not being able to stay after the meeting to chat can lead to a huge disconnect,” says Anne-Laure Fayard, a professor in social innovation, NOVA School of Business and Economics. “It is a lost opportunity to develop informal connections. Often a lot of interesting things happen before and after the meeting.”²⁵

Similarly, another way of fostering intra-organisational interactions is through creating cross-functional teams. Our survey respondents identified “having regular cross-team meetings/events” as one of the top five practices to preserve workplace connections under hybrid work models.

These teams can help to break the silos that sometimes naturally emerge through hybrid work arrangements, thereby boosting transparency and improving both employee productivity and engagement. Creating an affinity to a team with a broader purpose can improve cohesion and collaboration across the organisation.²⁶

Organisations can establish cross-functional and -regional teams that take responsibility for various aspects of the organisation’s cultural health.²⁷

Rethinking forms of collaboration

The combination of hybrid schedules, increased flexibility and distributed teams, if not managed well, can lead to collaboration failures and productivity losses. To mitigate this risk, organisations can improve collaboration in a hybrid work setting in two ways: by setting fixed collaboration hours and facilitating asynchronous collaboration.

Setting fixed collaboration hours

Having designated times for collaboration relieves workers of a lot of anxiety, especially those with household responsibilities. More than a third of our survey respondents



selected regular set hours for collaboration within teams as one of the most effective practices to preserve workplace connections and relations under hybrid models.

Perhaps cognisant of this worker need, companies such as Zillow have established “core work hours”, for example from 10am to 2pm, when all meetings must occur, so working parents do not face penalties for being unavailable during school pick-ups and drop-offs.²⁸

This also allows workers to then have designated focus time on their calendars, which not only boosts productivity but also relieves stress and improves mental well-being. All this will feed the belief among workers that their managers are being empathetic towards them.

Asynchronous collaboration

Hybrid settings allow for location and time flexibility. Asynchronous collaboration, which allows team members to collaborate without having to work on the same task simultaneously, can further extend this flexibility.

Teams can craft schedules that allow members to disconnect for set hours to concentrate, and to fit their natural energy rhythms, which can boost productivity. Enabling asynchronous

workflows thereby increases efficiency and decreases dysfunction.²⁹

Asynchronous collaboration also helps improve equity between different groups of hybrid workers, fostering a sense of inclusiveness. For example, it provides flexibility to employees such as childcare providers. It also removes time zone bias, enabling global team members to be on an equal footing.³⁰

Finally, embracing a balance of synchronous and asynchronous collaborations and creating a culture where breaks are encouraged will help counter online fatigue. Over two-thirds of our survey respondents think that there are currently too many virtual meetings.

Asynchronous collaboration cannot happen without technology that makes context and information sharing more durable across time and space. Its successful implementation requires organisations to take into account different responsibilities and needs among employees and adopt appropriate technological tools that can best support the process in hybrid work environments.

“So many tasks can be achieved asynchronously if workers are trusted and given the right tools,” says Ms Woolley. “A lot of meetings where people are just giving status updates don’t

necessarily need to happen. Instead, using a task tracking tool—even a digital checklist—can easily solve this problem.”³¹

Adjusting managerial practices

The manager-subordinate relationship is different in a hybrid work set-up than in a traditional workplace. There are several reasons for this, but perhaps the most important is that without the same amount of in-person connection, it becomes trickier to assess the other person's actions, thoughts and intentions.

Over the course of the past two years, employees everywhere have collectively sought more empathy and understanding from their managers as they cope with the realities of flexible work. Yet it is just as important for organisations to equip their managers with the right training. The brave new world of hybrid work can be daunting for both managers and subordinates.

Thus when it comes to adjusting managerial practices, organisations should focus primarily on two things: reorienting towards impact-based performance evaluations; and providing leadership and managerial training.

Shifting towards impact-oriented performance evaluation

The tension between evaluating a worker based on their process (eg, hours spent working) versus their output is an old one. “Face time” has long been an important (unofficial) metric in many work cultures. The current hybrid work revolution has brought all this to the fore, as increased location and time flexibility makes it more difficult to observe individuals' work processes. Some managers have resorted to more intensive electronic monitoring.

The reality is that management by observation leads to an inaccurate assessment of performance. ‘Time spent at desk’ or ‘number of hours online’

does not always translate to productivity. It can also amplify presenteeism biases, which can ultimately lead to the demise of hybrid models.³²

“Monitoring productivity is absolutely counterproductive. How many meetings one attends, how many hours one works, how many emails one sends out...all of those are irrelevant,” says Mr Choudhury.³³ Even worse, monitoring can also harm the supervisor-subordinate relationship, suggests Mr Messenger. “Electronic monitoring is the ultimate invasion of trust and, in fact, counter-productive.”³⁴

Seventy-three percent of our survey respondents say that at least some improvement is needed in their organisation to improve performance evaluation approaches. Multiple experts interviewed for this study suggested organisations shift to a value-based system from a process-oriented approach. “There is a need to shift the focus from ‘outputs’, ie, hours spent or reports generated to ‘outcomes’ or real value created. The latter of course is much harder to measure,” says Ms Karpe.³⁵

This can be achieved by setting clear objectives and expectations, establishing concrete deliverables and time frames, and agreeing upon an action plan in sufficient detail. All this can help workers feel responsible and accountable. Managers can use their one-on-one check-ins (in-person or virtual) to provide real-time guidance and support. All this will help boost transparency and foster trust with employees.

“Give workers time sovereignty in exchange for concrete results,” says Mr Messenger. “Then let them be.”³⁶

Providing leadership/managerial training

If organisations require a new form of management to deal with the realities of a hybrid workplace, then it follows that managers must be equipped with the right skills and toolkits to perform those roles.

A lack of managerial training can contribute to distrust in a hybrid workplace. Many supervisors haven't been trained to manage hybrid teams, causing them to fall into the trap of over-monitoring employees, which tends to backfire.³⁷

This may explain why half of our survey respondents feel stressed because of the increased monitoring associated with flexible work.

“So many tasks can be achieved asynchronously if workers are trusted and given the right tools.”

In line with that, 77% of respondents say that within their organisation at least some improvement is needed on training for managers that covers how to manage hybrid teams.

Managers in a hybrid set-up need to be sensitive and empathetic about varying challenges faced by their employees—a quality that may not come naturally to some. Many managers currently are under-trained, under-experienced and forced into a stressful new hybrid reality. “Managers need to be trained in not just managing employees who telework, but managing employees who are not used to teleworking,” says Mr Messenger.³⁸

Offering workshops on remote managerial skills will be helpful. So will cultivating emotional intelligence. “A manager's role will have to shift from a task manager to that of a counsellor—now they will need to be a manager of people, feelings and relationships,” says Brian Kropp, group vice president and chief of HR research at Gartner.³⁹

Communicating clearly, actively and inclusively

With fewer in-person interactions in a hybrid workplace, clear, active and inclusive communication assumes greater importance and is instrumental in increasing transparency; building trust among employees, managers and leaders; and facilitating seamless collaboration.

Clear communication

To ensure hybrid work's success, according to our survey respondents, the three most important organisational and managerial practices are: clear communication regarding job responsibilities; clear expectations regarding work hours; and clear guidelines for in-person and remote-work coordination.

Clear communication of new work norms, hybrid protocols and processes can help improve transparency and combat distrust. Leaders in a hybrid environment should be as explicit as possible when assigning items—such as documents, deliverables and deadlines—so as to improve efficiency and trust.

Active communication

There are several ways in which a more active communication strategy can deliver benefits to a hybrid workplace. For instance, a greater frequency and variety in how workers communicate (email, chat, video, face-to-face) can create an environment of psychological safety.^{40,41}

Some 36% of our survey respondents believe that weekly (or more frequent) catch-ups within teams is one of the most effective practices to preserve workplace connections and relations under hybrid models.

All this also involves an understanding of each team member's working styles, including the level of autonomy they are comfortable with, the method of engagement they prefer, and the periods during the day when they are most effective or creative.



Meanwhile, the transition to hybrid has provided organisations with an opportunity to engage in regular re-onboarding. Because of the sweeping changes across organisations during the pandemic—such as new workers and drastic shifts in roles—it is necessary for firms to get all employees up to speed with the organisation's procedures, as well as to acquaint them with the company culture and workplace.

Regular re-onboarding can also boost the employees' sense of belongingness, and improve employee retention and productivity.⁴² A third of our survey respondents believe that regular updates on overall organisation projects and achievements is one of the most effective practices to preserve workplace connections and relations under hybrid models.

Celebrating small moments—including growth, adaptability and resilience milestones—can help to make up for the lost opportunities for managers/employees to provide spontaneous feedback in a traditional work environment, for example complimenting each other after meetings, in the hall or over drinks.

Many workers receive assignments, deliver them on time, and hear back only when their managers need more work done. Active communication demands that managers do more. For instance, it is important to point

out to the broader team (whether over group messages or on a team video chat) when a remote team member has done a good job. This can make them feel recognised and build a sense of belonging.⁴³

Inclusive communication

Being inclusive in communication methods is all the more important in a hybrid work environment, where different individuals will face unique challenges while interacting with their colleagues.

It is important that leaders share important information via email or other digital communication channels so that virtual workers are never left out. This includes not just information applicable to individual teams, but also broader corporate materials. Managers should clearly and consistently convey messages on company news, FAQs, policy changes and training resources.⁴⁴

Digitising workflows through online documents that are easily accessible to all office and remote workers will help to maintain an inclusive workplace and enhance transparency.

Communication is, of course, a two-way street. Maintaining open communication lines can encourage workers to speak up. This can help leaders understand their teams better and cater policies to their needs.

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Jon Messenger, team leader of the working conditions group,
International Labour Organization

INVESTING IN WORKPLACE “HARDWARE”

When it comes to installing the right “hardware” for successfully implementing hybrid work, organisations need to think beyond traditional office space and video conferencing. According to our survey, “new technologies that allow for time and location flexibility” is the most important condition needed to achieve the long-term success of hybrid work models.

By proactively investing in employees’ home office spaces and providing them with the necessary technological tools and training, organisations can not only boost productivity, but also employee well-being and connection, and ultimately organisational cohesion.

Improving physical work environment at home

One of the most basic but important things employers can do is to make sure that their workers have a decent home office set-up.

Investing in hybrid workers’ physical work environment at home not only benefits their well-being and productivity, but also ensures a level playing field between on-site and off-site employees.

Nearly 80% of our survey respondents agree that employees who have suitable home office spaces are at an advantage, while 72% believe that their organisations need to increase investment in employees’ home offices.

“Tech resources, home office set-ups and remote technologies should be part of the employment/pay packages,” says Ms Fayard. “Wi-Fi, for example, costs a fortune in the US—employees need to be supported.”⁴⁵

This is especially true for younger workers and junior employees, who often lack the means to build an ergonomically safe home office without employer support.

“Junior employees are more likely to live in small spaces where they feel confined... which is not an optimal work environment,” says Mr Messenger.⁴⁶

Fulfilling technology’s potential

To fulfil technology’s potential, organisations must consider not only which technology tools to invest in, but also how to use the tools and make them accessible to all employees. Accessibility, in particular, is essential to implementing a human-centric, sustainable hybrid work model.

Companies should be creative in how they use tools and platforms to support collaboration and socialisation; successful platforms won’t necessarily try to recreate the in-person experience, but instead find ways to take advantage of hybrid work structures.

Using technology to best support activities in the hybrid workplace

Video conferencing has become so ubiquitous over the past few years that each individual worker probably has strong feelings about what format works best for them.

Still, a few broad trends are becoming more apparent. Video conferencing is more efficient with smaller groups. One piece of research indicates that the efficiency of an online meeting is negatively correlated with the number of participants. (The highest efficiency occurs when there are two to five participants; the lowest when there are ten or above.)⁴⁷

Nevertheless, in practice it is inevitable that some large meetings will have to be conducted online. Mr Bloom contends that while it is not optimal to conduct large online meetings, there are tools that can help improve the experience. “One simple technology is to have a lot of cameras in conference rooms/meeting rooms interacting with artificial intelligence (AI). That means when anyone is talking, they always appear to be looking into the screen—eye contact is important.”⁴⁸

One vital part of traditional work that seems to be dissipating in the hybrid work setting is informal knowledge sharing. Distributed colleagues can’t tap one another on the shoulder to ask questions or get help. Hybrid workers tend to lose out on passive

knowledge-sharing moments and informal idea exchanges. Workplace knowledge is often not codified, even when it can be, and instead resides in people's heads.⁴⁹

One way to boost informal knowledge sharing is through central, easily accessible platforms that can emulate in-person interactions and encourage healthy discussions. Ms Fayard suggests "something similar to the Reddit model—a lot of learning takes place within online communities, and this, can be used in professional set up...this will, however, require facilitation supervision, which can create new roles."⁵⁰

Frontline workers who do not have the right to work remotely can feel unfairly treated in hybrid work models. By investing in automation, organisations can extend the option of flexible work to many frontline employees. For instance, many companies have deployed automation and AI in warehouses, grocery stores, call centres and manufacturing plants.

In a global survey of 800 senior executives in July 2020 by McKinsey, two-thirds of respondents said they were stepping up investment in automation and AI either somewhat or significantly.⁵¹

Mr Choudhury describes ongoing corporate efforts in this area: "Unilever, for example, is developing/testing a digital twin model. With AI and sophisticated sensors in factories, factory workers need not be present in manufacturing facilities and can work remotely. This model is also being tested in ERs [emergency rooms] in NY hospitals and has received positive results."⁵²

Making technology tools accessible to all employees

When it comes to accessibility, organisations need to pay attention to two components. The first is the need to closely examine the existing technology stack before, with employee

input, deciding on and investing in more. The second is the need for training and on-demand technological support for workers.

Companies need to make assessments of numerous technologies before they can decide on which ones best suit individual workers, and which are needed in the office to level the playing field for remote and in-person workers. A good first step is to examine existing technology patterns, for instance to identify where employees usually drop out or spend extra time completing a task. It pays to seek employee feedback. Often organisations introduce tools that are unnecessary and difficult to use. It is imperative that managers discuss tech needs with employees before making any assessments.⁵³

Yet selecting and investing in the right tools will be a wasted effort if adequate training is also not provided. Not all employees are tech-savvy. Many require training to use technological tools more effectively so as to optimise workflows in a hybrid environment.

Some 76% of our survey respondents say that their organisation needs to make at least some improvement in providing technical training programmes, while Baby Boomers are more likely to report that their organisations do not provide sufficient training for all workers to effectively use technology under remote work arrangements.

Organisations should consider, among other recommended practices, creating on-demand training tools and developing bite-sized information (eg, instruction manuals), which can solve a lot of angst among employees who are not tech-savvy. There is also value in having more in-depth materials easily available.

GitLab, for example, assembled a 5,000-page, open-source handbook so that new and existing employees could easily find answers to basic questions without having to wait for replies from its IT helpdesk.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

Much of the hype around hybrid work appears justified. Survey results and expert interviewees all indicate that the shift to flexible work models is rapid and broad-based, and is having clear impacts on everything from individual well-being to productivity.

Nevertheless it is important to remember that hybrid work is clearly still in its infancy, as each organisation tries to ascertain how to implement it amid conflicting evidence about its relative benefits and costs. Organisations must recognise that because individuals have unique work needs, there is no one-size-fits model, and thus the *how* to implement hybrid work is key to its long-term success.

Given all that, it follows that the shift to hybrid can be sustained only if hybrid models are human-centric. For organisations to succeed, they must pay more than just lip service to this notion of putting their people at the centre of hybrid work policymaking. The “Toolkit for building human-centric hybrid work models” (see Figure 1) is not meant as an easy plug-and-play fix, but rather as a guide with values and practices that need to be regularly revisited by teams engaging in flexible work.

Its three main pillars of success function together. The workplace activities (meeting/socialisation, collaboration, management and communication) and the workplace “hardware” (home office set-up and technology stacks) are meant to work in concert so as to foster the four elements of organisational culture: trust, transparency, empathy and inclusiveness.

Long before the pandemic, successful managers have strived to promote those four elements. Yet never before have they been so important. With colleagues working from different locations and at varying hours, any deficits in trust, transparency, empathy and inclusiveness will be much harder to mitigate, and much more potentially damaging to team morale and productivity.

It is thus of vital importance that organisations and managers regularly assess their hybrid work policies and practices within that framework. Are they human-centric? Are they helping to promote trust, transparency, empathy and inclusiveness?

Organisations that regularly answer in the affirmative will be the ones who lead us into our hybrid work future.



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