

## Considering a Hybrid Work Model

The pandemic has resulted in thousands of employees working from their kitchen tables or living rooms rather than the office or other workplaces. However, as more Americans receive a COVID-19 vaccination and organizations develop or update their return-to-work plans, some employees may still be eager to continue working remotely, even if just for a few days each week.

This article provides an overview of hybrid workplaces, the work model's advantages and challenges, and tips for accommodating distributed employees.

### Overview of Hybrid Workplaces

Work flexibility is consistently cited as a post-pandemic trend and some employers are already introducing hybrid work models in their reopening plans. In fact, a Mercer survey found that 73% of employers plan to implement a hybrid work environment. By definition, a hybrid workplace is a flexible model designed to support a distributed workforce of both on-site and remote employees.

In some form, a majority of organizations are opting for either all-remote or hybrid remote arrangements. In the following workplace models, employees are allowed to make their workday flexible outside of set days or hours:

- **Flex remote** means employees are on-site on set days. Flex remote is likely to be a popular model to provide employees the flexibility to be on-site some days and work the other days remotely.
- **Core hours** means employees are available during designated times. Employers designate a block of time when employees are present, available for meetings or working at the same time. That model helps hybrid teams intentionally collaborate, which is especially helpful if employees are located in different time zones.
- **Custom scheduling** may be an option for employees who want to request a specific hybrid work schedule. To support this, employers or managers may ask employees to fill out a form with their desired work schedule and locations.



These are a few examples, but the practical application of a hybrid model may be a combination of several arrangements. Employers may also consider whether certain departments or roles need to work on-site or can be just as effective working remotely. Every organization will be different, and the working model will need to be what's best for both employers and overall employee experience.

## Location Considerations for Hybrid Workplaces

It's equally important to consider what's critical for businesses when it comes to the physical workplace(s). Employers may consider a large headquarters or one to two main offices. Depending on the business, it may make sense to create multiple proportionately sized offices or small regional workplaces. Employees can travel to regional hubs rather than a central headquarters location that may be farther away. If a permanent office isn't necessary for business, employers could consider renting flex space for periodic collaboration. Keep in mind the focus of flex space for a remote workforce is in-person collaboration, not connectivity. Hybrid workplaces can look very different based on the organization's priority of factors, including the ability to access talent, individual and team productivity, and the cost of real estate.

## Advantages of Hybrid Workplaces

Despite remote work being forced upon some organizations during the pandemic, a long-term approach for a hybrid workplace offers several benefits to both remote workforces and employers. Advantages of hybrid workplaces can include the following:

Wider talent pool as a result of removed geographical limits

- Increased employee productivity
- Stronger employee engagement
- Better collaboration
- Greater schedule flexibility
- Healthy work-life balance

If the timing on leases and other workplace contracts works out, employers could also realize reduced operation costs. It's essential to evaluate if any office locations or expenses are redundant or underutilized.

## Challenges of Hybrid Workplaces

Like any new initiative or strategy, a hybrid workplace also has its shortcomings. Challenges of hybrid workplaces include the following:

- Potential for different time zones due to geographically dispersed teams
- Communication misunderstandings due to availability of visual cues
- Lack of real-time collaboration
- Shortage of team-building opportunities and events
- Loss of belonging and shared purpose
- Cybersecurity and reliance on IT infrastructure

Employers can reduce the prevalence or impact of such challenges by being intentional about decisions and trade-offs. They must be empathic and listen to individual employee needs while also being creative when developing connected and effective workplace solutions.

## Strategies for Hybrid Workplaces

Taking hybrid workplace advantages and challenges into consideration, employers can develop their ideal hybrid workplace and bring that idea to life in a return-to-work plan. The process may involve making an organizational culture shift, which may also reshape organizational goals and objectives.

Most organizations have norms in place for on-site employees but can also adapt a mirroring set of standards for those working remotely. It's important for employers to accommodate all employees, but also to create practices that treat all employees fairly. To best accommodate a distributed workplace, consider the following tips:

- **Formalize hybrid work processes.** For hybrid work processes to be effective, employers should establish clear expectations and communicate them often and openly. It's especially important to formalize technology and other remote-specific policies or guidelines. If employers are accommodating custom schedules, a formal remote or hybrid schedule request process will streamline the process for managers and HR professionals.
- **Be transparent about remote and hybrid work expectations and decisions.** There are a variety of reasons why some employees may be expected to work on-site while others are granted the opportunity to work remotely. Being transparent about decisions can facilitate a friendly and open environment for distant teams to effectively collaborate.
- **Plan meetings to be friendly to all employees.** Remote employees attending a meeting via a conference line or video platform can be just as active as those sitting in the conference room chairs. At the beginning of a meeting, leaders should introduce participants joining remotely and ensure that all participants have a chance to share their thoughts or ideas.
- **Create an open chat.** Chat tools can facilitate dialogue for both remote and on-site employees. Channels can be created for efficient work-related communication—or even to replace water cooler conversations and help build camaraderie within teams.
- **Ask for and listen to feedback.** It's equally important to elicit employee feedback and concerns to optimize return-to-work plans or working arrangements.



A thoughtful hybrid workplace approach combines the best aspects of an organization's on-site and remote workplaces.

## **Conclusion**

Hybrid workplaces can help maintain a great work-life balance for employees and an employee-centric work environment for employers and organizational leaders. In general, employers should prioritize employee engagement and well-being in workplace strategies and plans.

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