5 Practices to Make Your Hybrid Workplace Inclusive

As pandemic restrictions ease, it's clear that one big change to the way we work is here to stay: hybrid working. However, these environments run the risk of creating new inequities and exacerbating those that already exist. For employers to ensure fairness, maximize performance, and maintain cultural cohesion in hybrid work arrangements, they need to consider these five practical dimensions of inclusion when designing hybrid policies and navigating new ways of working.

Recruitment and Remote Onboarding

With recruitment and onboarding practices shifting to virtual in the last year, many new hires had never met their future teams in person before accepting their jobs. Many HR decision-makers believe they will continue interviewing graduates virtually in the future. This approach has benefits: First, it reduces the cost of entry for graduates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who may not be able to relocate for a job. It also provides an opportunity to review existing onboarding practices and take into account the different experiences, backgrounds, and expectations new team members bring in.

To create a more consistent onboarding experience, we can take lessons from what we learned during the pandemic about how people best received information while at home. For example, universities that moved their teaching online found that chunking long lectures into approximately 15-minute bursts worked best. Firms can create a catalog of short videos that describe all aspects of onboarding, such as walkthroughs on how to set up technology and navigate processes. The employer can then bring together new joiners for a session where they ask questions about the videos in small

groups of five people or fewer. Together, the video catalog and intimate seminar set the scene for a consistent onboarding experience while catering to individual needs.

An important part of being successful at work is having the right setup and training to do your job. Remote workplaces increasing value on being technically capable and getting up and running when working from home has become an essential skill. For those who are less tech savvy, setting up a makeshift home office did not come naturally. Others may not have even been provided with the necessary equipment or have the means to purchase it — exposing an equity gap. Before the pandemic, an onsite IT technician would typically set up an employee's laptop, phone, and monitor; troubleshoot any network or software issues; and generally, be on hand for those prevalent "How do I do…?" questions. Giving people an option during onboarding to self-select their level of technological savviness can help employers determine and schedule remote IT assistance, so employees are provided for.

Furthermore, once in the role training may be inconsistent and dependent on the quality of one's manager. In an office, it's easier to pick up information and the ways of working via osmosis. Remote workers' learning curve could be steeper than those who go into the office frequently — and thus they might get labeled as less competent or productive than their onsite peers.

Companies can implement a buddy system, pairing new starters with a more experienced employee. This person becomes the go-to for the day-to-day informal questions and company information, which helps ensure that remote employees don't miss out on the informal learning those in the office benefit from.

Working Together

Physical distance can lead to psychological distance. It's much easier to check in on colleagues when sharing a physical space. Often, one glance is enough to tell if Sarah over in finance is having a bad day. Office exchanges with colleagues outside immediate working areas or departments have a positive effect on organizational functioning and can impact effective performance. These informal communications contribute to an organization's culture and functionality more than communication tools like email and instant messaging do.

One solution is to open the virtual office door. In the past, an open physical door signaled that it was okay to walk in and speak with your colleague. Without visible cues for how busy a colleague is, people might hesitate to reach out to them. When working remotely, make use of the trusty status bar. A message like "Open for chats!" along with a green status circle gives permission to bridge the distance gap. Companies can also develop a sense of place with virtual reality and virtual meeting rooms to create a sense of belonging and sharing. The virtual meeting technology space is burgeoning, giving employers more and more options for how to bring these rooms to life.

Resolving Conflict

Another inclusion impact of hybrid working is the potential for silent bullying. While one advantage of remote work is that it's somewhat easier to avoid the office bully, a downside is that it can also lead to more interpersonal conflict in general. When someone already feels marginalized, it may be harder for them to speak up. Losing those perspectives decreases the quality of a team's performance, particularly on high-complexity or creative tasks where alternatives and discussion can be pivotal.

Fostering an environment where all voices are heard requires increasing psychological safety so that your people feel they can speak up when there's interpersonal conflict. One way to do this is to show what healthy conflict looks like. Employees must feel they can have the necessary hard conversations in a productive and judgment-free zone. After all, engaging in civil debate is healthy! It shows that people within teams can hold conflicting viewpoints, and that that's okay.

Team Cohesion

Additionally, in times of economic uncertainty, employees are more likely to form in-groups, usually along some dimension of similarity. While the impact of these in-groups on belonging may be obvious, the business impacts are less so. Unfortunate side effects include exclusion from key conversations and reluctance to share information. These groups can even dictate who gets assigned key projects or accounts. Team members who return to the office while others work remotely might form a "group within a group" where those at home are less involved in resolving team issues and knowledge sharing and can be seen as less helpful than colleagues in the office.

One effective way to break up these in-groups is to ensure information flows smoothly and diffusely through an organization by identifying "weak ties." In social networks, ties are the relationships between different people, and their strength depends on the amount of time, intensity, and proximity between people. Strong ties, such as those between colleagues on the same team, form part of dense networks and are important for building intra-team cohesion. However, weak ties, such as acquaintances or casual contacts, should not be overlooked, as they're critical in diffusing information throughout organizations: They provide unique connections between two points, acting as a bridge between information silos.

Within teams, it's also important to ensure people don't fall into the fundamental attribution error, where personal or co-located workers' failures are attributed to the situation while the failures of those working from home are attributed to their dispositions. It's harder to understand the context of people who are far away, so encouraging people to provide an explanation for their actions can help others understand their situation and build stronger team cohesion.

Promotions

Proximity to managers has been shown to increase promotion rates when men report to other men. This may be caused by a perceived relationship between productivity and visibility, even though no such relationship has ever been established. In the end, it's the beliefs about productivity and performance that determine pay, promotions, and opportunities. In a post-pandemic world, we may well see unexplained gaps between those who work remotely and those who get onsite face time with the boss.

Productivity — and therefore performance — varies widely based on one's environment. For example, you really are more creative in the neighborhood coffee shop. Having plants in the workplace can improve attention and productivity levels. And working in a space with good ventilation and air quality improves performance.

In a hybrid working world, one's home environment will play a starring role in terms of output. Those with money and privilege likely have a dedicated home office, whereas others may be more likely to be in a shared apartment and work from a less-than-ideal space, like the kitchen counter. As the number of people working together in a space rises and the square footage per person decreases, a decline in productivity can be expected. This also causes another problem: the fight for Wi-Fi bandwidth. In an internal study of Microsoft employees, 59% reported having to use their phone as a hotspot in order to avoid connection disruptions. Whether children are in the working environment also impacts productivity. According to one study, 85% of women with childcare responsibilities reported that their caregiving responsibilities were making it somewhat or much more difficult to attend to work, as did 70% of men who were caregivers.

In a hybrid world, it's also natural to see shifting reward mechanisms, some of which can leave people out. How has who gets paid attention to and why changed? Traits that were perceived as valuable in an in-person office and subsequently rewarded may not be as effective virtually. For instance, having a greater willingness to communicate and feeling comfortable initiating social relationships may be harder to see in remote environments.

One way to keep an eye on the impact of shifting reward mechanisms is to audit who gets what and why — and make sure people know about it. This accomplishes two things. First, you'll start to see patterns emerging that favor one group over others. Second, drawing attention to the fact that this monitoring of who gets promoted is happening encourages managers to pay attention to their allocations.

As you craft your company's hybrid work plans and policies, be aware of the inequities hybrid work can create or make worse. Designing with these practical dimensions of inclusion in mind is critical for creating an equitable organization.

Written by Grace Lordan, Teresa Almeida, and Lindsay Kohler
Published by: Harvard Business Review