



MANAGING HYBRID TEAMS IN A NEW ERA OF WORK AN EMPLOYER'S GUIDE

With the changes to working practices effected by the Covid-19 pandemic set to reverberate for a long time to come, we can safely assume that at least, for the foreseeable, the future of work for many will be 'hybrid'.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY HYBRID WORKING PRACTICES?

In simple terms, a hybrid working model involves a combination of remote, semi-remote and entirely office-based employees, potentially working to different scheduled hours. This structure might vary on a day-to-day basis, and if we are in the office, we may be working alongside different colleagues at any given time.

The amount of flexibility within a hybrid working model will differ between organisations. Some may decide to leave it up to employees to decide how and where they work best, while others will have clearer parameters within which they will require employees to work, such as core hours they must be working or certain days they will be required to be onsite.

This guide has been written in order to support managers and leaders with their understanding of some of the potential challenges of working in a hybrid environment and provide some practical suggestions for ways in which these can be mitigated to help you develop an inclusive and productive working environment for all.

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WHAT ARE SOME OF THE POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES OF EMBRACING HYBRID WORKING PRACTICES?

While the workplace is often seen as a 'hub' that keeps teams connected, a number of organisations have been successfully operating in a hybrid working model for many years, and this way of working was becoming more popular even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the consequences of the pandemic has been that the progression of this trend has accelerated. It's therefore likely that many organisations, rather than choosing to remain fully remote or returning to 100% workplace capacity in the months ahead, will elect to find a middle ground that, if managed correctly, could prove to be a highly beneficial way of working. Some of these benefits include:

Increased focus and productivity

The modern working world is becoming ever more conducive to varied and diverse learning and working styles, and through embracing hybrid working practices, employers are acknowledging that employees may find certain styles better for productivity than others. Some may find the hub of an office and the ability to discuss problems with team members in person helps them, others may prefer the opportunity for deep-thinking and working in isolation that a remote environment can provide. By giving employees the flexibility to choose depending on how they work best, you are potentially facilitating greater focus and productivity at your organisation.

Improved work-life balance and reduced stress

The stress of a busy commute and late returns home could be mitigated, at least partially, by a hybrid working model. By splitting their time between home and the office, your workforce could be given more flexibility to design their lives with the wellbeing in mind of themselves and any dependants.

Increased engagement and autonomy

By giving your workforce greater autonomy regarding their working practices and showing your trust in their ability to manage their own working styles, you are more likely to retain their loyalty and cultivate a manager/employee relationship that's based on mutual respect.

A strong EVP that attracts top talent

The benefits of an adeptly managed hybrid working model are a strong element of an employer offering that can be promoted as part of your employee value proposition (EVP). The flexibility offered by hybrid working should be reinforced at all your brand touchpoints during the recruitment process, from your recruitment microsite to your video testimonials. By offering a comprehensive glance of life at your organisation, you are allowing candidates to decide whether they are a good fit and making it more likely that you will be able to retain them.

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WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGING TEAMS WITHIN A HYBRID WORKING MODEL, AND HOW CAN THEY BE OVERCOME?

As a larger number of organisations than before transition to more flexible ways of working, they will face challenges around how to make this move as sustainable and productive as possible. However, these obstacles can be overcome by implementing clear processes that are easy to follow, building a feeling of psychological safety into your team, accepting that we are all navigating a new path, and acknowledging that trial and error will be an integral element of this new era of work. Some challenges you might encounter include the following:

SUCCESSFULLY MAINTAINING YOUR COMPANY CULTURE

If your business has traditionally been built on a vibrant, social culture that is based mainly on person-to-person interaction, establishing a working model where teams are working in different geographical locations and to different schedules can present a considerable obstacle.

However, it's important to remember that culture does not exist in the walls of our workplaces alone. It exists amongst the people in your team, and now more than ever, they have the ability to build strong and meaningful connections with each other, wherever they might be.

To ensure your organisational culture is powerful enough to be felt and perpetuated by your entire workforce, consider revisiting the ways in which your teams are recognised and rewarded and evaluating how they need to work together going forward. This will help to identify elements that are important in building a strong sense of unity and drive high performance.

Ideas to consider include:

- Ask your team to pinpoint the cultural signs or activities that they really value, that make them feel part of a team and perform at their best, so that they are feeding back into your organisational culture and helping to shape and sustain it.
- It's about connection as well as celebration. Set up opportunities for regular, informal communication such as holding virtual team coffee breaks and lunch dates.
- During team meetings – virtual or otherwise – in addition to summarising and celebrating successes from the week, ask team members to identify other instances during the week where they observed good work from other team members which may have gone unnoticed. This will help ensure that your workers feel 'seen', wherever they may be.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A STRUCTURE OR ROUTINE

Structure and routine increases both efficiency and productivity because they help people feel in control and confident in their ability to perform. When your team are all together in an office, you may work in a structured way whilst also having the ability to be much more fluid in your routine. In a hybrid model, those working remotely could miss out on important activities that happen on an ad hoc basis.

It's important, therefore, to embed a consistent schedule that clearly explains key activities, where people are, and what they need to do.

Ways you can facilitate this include:

- Develop clear plans with your team regarding how a typical day, week and month should look (i.e. activities on specific days, time allotted to key activities).
- Work with your team to create individual daily or weekly action plans and agendas.
- Set regular hours when everyone is expected to be online and available for calls or meetings.
- Ensure everyone has access to each other's calendar and that they are maintained so that people can check whether they are available to talk.
- Identify which tasks absolutely must happen in the office, and which can be more easily done from home – schedules can be planned accordingly.

ENSURING COMMUNICATION IS EFFECTIVE

For organisations making use of a hybrid working model, opportunities to connect with people become less informal and need to be more structured. It will be important to build a clear strategy for how your team will effectively engage with you and their colleagues regardless of their location, so that they feel consistently involved and up to date.

Tips for keeping communication clear and consistent include:

- Taking time to consider what method of communication works best for the message – for example, what can be delivered via a straightforward email, what requires a video or a phone call, and what might benefit from an in-person or group meeting. Be consistent with your chosen method of communication to avoid overwhelming your team with messages from different channels and to avoid your communications being missed.
- Ensure meetings are an effective use of time – your team may find themselves on back-to-back video calls for much of the day when working in a hybrid model which can leave them little time to do their job and a feeling of fatigue. Be mindful of scheduling multiple meetings one after the other, and establish clear objectives, desired outcomes and an agenda for every meeting. Send these out prior to the meeting to give your team time to prepare.

- Acknowledge communication styles and preferences in your team – consider that although some may be more extroverted and others more introverted, everyone has something valuable to say and should feel empowered to contribute.
- Ensure that the communication between you and your teams is not all one way i.e. just you 'talking at them'. Provide lots of opportunities for questions and interaction.
- Remember that increased fluidity regarding working hours and locations may lead to people feeling overwhelmed, or an expectation that they have to be available at all times. Encourage your teams to make it clear when they are not available for calls and discourage them from replying to emails outside of stipulated work hours.
- Try to connect as a team, or as individuals, over other subjects rather than focusing solely on work all the time.

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MANAGING ONGOING PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Historically, upskilling has been mainly confined to workplace environments, where things can be explained and practiced in-person. This also facilitates the opportunity for more junior members of the team to learn from seeing more senior members of the team at work. The implementation of a hybrid working model presents the concern that these practices will be impacted if people are not in close physical proximity and additional effort is not made to ensure development opportunities are still available. In addition, working effectively in a hybrid model may require some people to develop new skills or refocus existing ones.

Ways of ensuring personal development is maintained include:

- In light of the new ways of working and changes to performance objectives, you should empower your team to take time to reflect on their current skillset and potential areas where they need to develop.
- Work with each individual to evaluate their assessment and develop a structured plan for them to address their development needs through formal learning, coaching/mentoring and on-the-job experience.
- Review performance objectives in line with new working arrangements to ensure they are realistic, achievable and give a clear view of expectations and what good will look like. Assign meaningful performance indicators to build confidence over time and help your team to develop structured performance plans going forward.
- Identify common areas for development across the whole team and explore options to address them, such as running a (potentially virtual) lunch and learn session with the team, or setting individuals a weekly challenge of focusing on a given area and then holding a team session to share learning.
- Consider how your team's success is recognised and rewarded. With different employees in different locations consider uniting everyone on a virtual platform once a month to highlight various successes and ensure individual performance is being recognised and acknowledged to the wider team.

WHAT ARE THE KEY PRINCIPLES TO ADHERE TO IN ORDER TO MAKE HYBRID WORKING SUCCESSFUL, AND WHAT ARE SOME PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REINFORCING THESE?

Considering the challenges of a hybrid model previously highlighted, the points below outline some key principles to help you to get the best from a team that may change shape on a daily basis in terms of where people are working.

IRRESPECTIVE OF LOCATION, THE WELLBEING OF YOUR TEAMS SHOULD BE A TOP PRIORITY

It's crucial that employees are able to work in an environment that reinforces healthy working practices. Ensure that you're facilitating opportunities for all members of your workforce to proactively check in with each other in order to identify when someone may be struggling, accounting for the fact that they may be in different locations.

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Ensure you are consistently and visibly demonstrating healthy working practices by:

- Vocalising and regularly reinforcing the importance of looking after one's wellbeing, including the need to take regular breaks, actively stopping for lunch, sticking to work hours and getting regular exercise.
- Putting reminders in your diary to check in with all team members regularly whether they are onsite or working remotely. Where possible, make sure that you see them face-to-face for a check in at least once a month.
- Being aware of unconscious biases that could lead you to assume how someone is feeling or coping. Ensure you always ask, don't assume, when checking in with members of your team.

INCLUSION, TRUST AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY ARE KEY TO PRODUCTIVITY

For employees to engage with a task or a project, they must feel responsible for its success and know that they are trusted to make it happen. To ensure this happens, set clear expectations regarding performance but reinforce the fact that it is not only accepted, but expected to share challenges that can then be addressed collectively to find solutions.

Processes you could put in place to facilitate this include:

- Creating shared goals for your team to bring people together in pursuit of a shared purpose.
- Ensuring team meetings provide the opportunity for all members to participate irrespective of location.

- Setting clear individual goals and expectations and trusting the person to get on with the work from wherever he or she is, checking in periodically. Trust and a sense of autonomy is a strong motivator that will drive engagement from your team.
- Assigning clear roles and responsibilities for team members and outlining how working together can make them even more successful.
- Ensuring that all team members have equal access to opportunities, irrespective of where they are working.

AN ONGOING DIALOGUE WITH YOUR TEAM WILL HELP WORKING PRACTICES EVOLVE AND IMPROVE

For many of us, this hybrid way of working will be completely uncharted territory. It is therefore vital that your team feels safe trying new things and making suggestions for improvements, allowing the hybrid model to continually evolve as needed. Employees should have the opportunity from the beginning to identify challenges, expectations and the support they will need to make hybrid working a success for them.

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Suggestions for garnering and incorporating feedback include:

- Setting the foundation from the beginning by planning a session with your team to communicate expectations and agree how best to work together, ensuring everyone in the team will have the opportunity to contribute from wherever they are.
- Documenting the outcomes of the session and using this to create a charter for the team outlining agreed ways of working and your commitment to each other.
- On an ongoing basis, review the outcomes of these ways of working with your team. Share key performance and activity data with them and invite feedback regarding what has been successful and what needs to change to enable the continued enhancement and evolution of your working model.

If you have any questions about hiring in the current climate, please contact your **Hays consultant**, or visit our **Inspire Me in the New Era of Work Hub**. We will be updating this site regularly with new guides, blogs and information to support you.

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