JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

How to Manage the New Hybrid Workplace

Many employees won't go back to the office full-time. That's going to require a massive rethinking on the part of bosses.

By *Alexandra Samuel*
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Here are two things we can be sure of as people start to return to offices.

First, remote work is here to stay.

And second, it shouldn't look anything like the improvised approach that was hastily thrown together in the face of a global pandemic.

Survey after survey has shown that most knowledge workers are eager to keep working remotely, at least part of the time. But these hybrid arrangements will require a massive rethinking on the part of bosses—both in terms of individual schedules and a vision for the organization as a whole. No longer will they be able to manage remote workers like they're office employees whose desks happen to be really far apart. Nor can they treat office days as the "real" workdays and write off the time that workers spend at home.

Instead, bosses need to ask themselves a question that most have never had to consider: How do I manage a workplace in which office days and home days are used for the work that is best suited to each setting?

Here's how to do it:

Set clear guidelines for 'office required' and 'office optional' circumstances

Bosses need to start by making a list of the types of work and meetings that substantially benefit from in-person interaction. Project kickoffs or performance reviews, for instance, are always better face-to-face; most people also find it more effective to do brainstorming or troubleshooting meetings in person, since the back-and-forth can produce ideas and solutions that might not arise if you're only communicating on screen. And as a general rule, any difficult conversation is best handled in person.

But there are plenty of meetings that can be done as effectively—or even more effectively—as video calls. Daily or weekly status meetings, for instance, or any meeting where you are jointly looking at a screen. Every workplace may be different, and every boss has to figure out the rules that make the most sense.
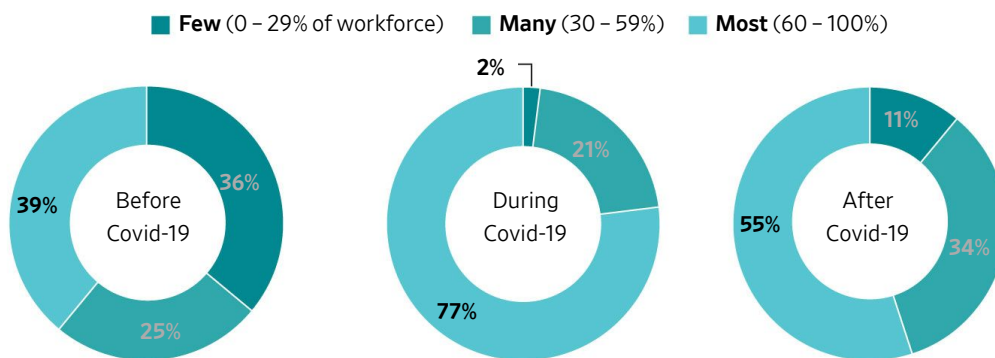
Consider office weeks as well as office days

Sometimes a full week (or two) at the office is much more useful than a day or two. It may pay to bring everyone together in the office for a week or two at the beginning of each project or quarter so that you can connect and get on the same page for the next big challenge.

I work on an annual project for a client that brings me to its office for a full week of on-site work, about four weeks before our project launches. That way the final sprint of collaboration and quality assurance goes much faster, because I can work hand-in-hand with the report designer and turn around new drafts every few hours, instead of waiting for cycles of feedback via email.

Home or Office

Employers' views have changed on what percentage of their workforce can telecommute at least one day a week.

■ **Few** (0 – 29% of workforce)   ■ **Many** (30 – 59%)   ■ **Most** (60 – 100%)

Before Covid-19: 36%, 25%, 39%

During Covid-19: 2%, 21%, 77%

After Covid-19: 11%, 34%, 55%

PwC survey of 120 U.S. executives conducted May 29—June 4, 2020

Rotate teams, not employees

When you're working out a plan for your team, you need to think like the conductor of an orchestra. Each employee may have an individual best-case scenario for remote work, but it's your job to think about how to harmonize the whole. As with an orchestra, that requires thinking about who needs to play together—and then organizing their schedules so they're in the office on the same days.

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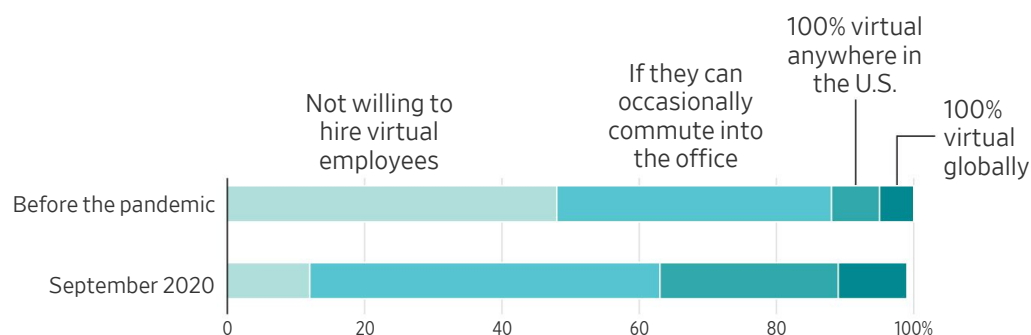
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That means rotating entire departments and teams in and out of the office at the same time. Maybe you want the entire sales department in the office on Mondays, so everyone starts the week on the same page and it's easy to book team meetings. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are when the sales teams focusing on big corporate accounts could work from home, while those who focus on small and medium-size accounts stay at the office. Thursdays and Fridays, those teams flip. Spending time in the office together also will help build trust and

communication so that these employees can work together more effectively when they aren't in the office.

If your working groups tend to change from one project to the next, set the expectations that specific workdays may need to change when people change projects—but be sensitive to the fact that people may need to change their child-care or other logistical arrangements when their workdays change.

Hiring

Employers have become more willing to consider hiring employees who will work virtually at least part of the time.

The Conference Board online survey of 330 human capital executives, conducted Sept. 2020

Encourage focused workdays at home

To turn remote work into a real asset, encourage your team members to block off big chunks of their schedule on at-home days, so that they can do focused work without the kinds of interruptions that are typical in an office. (Of course, this assumes the employee is more able to work from home with relatively few distractions.)

Normalize online communication

The more you use digital-collaboration and communication tools like Slack, Google Docs and Asana, the easier it is to be location-agnostic. By keeping draft documents and task lists online instead of on a whiteboard, you ensure that everyone can stay in the loop, whether sitting next to each other or thousands of miles apart.

Encourage satellite collaboration

Just as an office is a source of constant interruption for individual work, an office is a source of interruption for focused group work and collaboration. There's a reason organizations use off-site meetings for deep dives into strategic planning: When you get outside the office you have more space to think, to connect and to build trust.

So encourage your team members to integrate mini off-sites into their own plans. Perhaps there are two or three employees who are part of a project team, and happen to live closer to one another than to the office. If they take one of their remote mornings to work together at a coffee shop or at one person's home, they'll

have a chance to work on their shared project without interruptions—and without a commute.

Find out about your employees' individual circumstances

Syncing team schedules isn't the only place where you need to think about each employee's particular situation. Remote workdays might be enormously productive for an employee on the days she has the house to herself, and enormously distracting on the days her partner or children are at home. An employee might find that his productivity increases when he spends the majority of his days at home, but that he gets blue from social isolation. The better you understand how each employee benefits from remote work, as well as where each employee struggles, the better you can craft a hybrid plan that works for that employee and the overall team.

Make flexibility fair

It's easy for young employees to feel disgruntled if they see that the boss accommodates work-from-home arrangements for parents, but not for people who want flexibility to look after pets or take time for creative pursuits. It isn't your job to judge whether a person's desire for flexibility is reasonable; each employee should be able to negotiate their own balance of work-from-home and office time based on the demands of the job, not the demands of home.

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What managerial problems and solutions do you see emerging from a hybrid workforce? Join the conversation below.

While you should consider individual circumstances in determining the specific schedule that works for a particular employee, baseline expectations of flexibility should apply to *all* employees, and any constraints should be based on roles, not lifestyles. It's perfectly reasonable that your storefront employees may need to be 100% on-site, while back-office employees can spend some time working from home. But it isn't OK to provide more off-site time to people with children than to people with dogs.

Beware the always-at-the-office worker

If you have some employees who are at the office full time, you run the risk of a two-tier system in which partially remote workers feel like they're outsiders.

When senior managers spend every day at the office, while midlevel employees divide their time between the office and home, it's easy for those midlevel workers to start worrying they're out of the loop. If people who spend more time at the office have more information on client news or business happenings, or rise more quickly up the corporate ladder by cultivating their relationships with other senior staff, it may create the perception that full-time office work is a necessary ingredient to career advancement. That's a recipe for losing out on the

productivity benefits that come from a hybrid workforce, and depriving you of the opportunity to recruit remote talent—because who wants to be a remote employee in an organization where all the action happens at headquarters?

One solution is to try to set some minimum and maximum parameters for how people divide their time between home and office so that people remain similarly connected. Also, make the playing field level. If you're holding a meeting in which even one participant is dialing in from home, make the entire meeting remote—with everyone sitting at their respective desks and connecting through video—so nobody feels like they're missing out on side conversations, and so that there's no pressure to come into the office anytime there's a meeting on the calendar.

While it may feel counterintuitive to nudge employees to spend less time at the office, that's only because you're looking at the office through an old lens. We've learned a lot in the past year, and the success of a hybrid model depends on valuing *both* in-office and at-home days for the unique benefits they offer. When you can honestly and wholeheartedly encourage an employee to spend some time working remotely—because you've seen the benefits it yields to the worker and the company—you'll know you've found a plan that works for your team.

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