Implementing a New Hybrid Work Policy? Make Sure Your Four P's Are Aligned

By Manar Morales

We must take the best of both worlds and build an intentional and inclusive hybrid culture where everyone can thrive.

As companies and law firms begin to emerge from the pandemic, many are looking to the future and reimagining their workplace. While we're still facing the myriad of challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities for a brighter — and more flexible — future are emerging.

We're reading daily about the *Great Resignation*, associated with employee burnout and dissatisfaction coupled with a desire for more family time and work-life control. At the Diversity & Flexibility Alliance, we believe, however, this could be the time for the *Great Retention* for organizations that play their cards right. We actually can change the narrative and hold onto our talent in ways that would not have been possible prior to COVID.

So now leaders have a choice: Do you want to be part of the Great Resignation or the Great Retention?

While a recent Microsoft study has shown that at least 73% of employees want a flexible work option moving forward, the same study shows that 67% also want some kind of in-person option as well (see "The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work — Are We Ready?" Microsoft, March 2021). It's clear that retaining your employees in the workplace of the future will require offering a hybrid approach to working.

The pandemic has accelerated the conversations around flexibility and allowed us to imagine how to integrate flexibility more fully into our organizational cultures. While the pandemic drastically changed how people work, it also gave us a glimpse of just how successful a flexible workplace could be post-pandemic when structures and thoughtful support systems are in place.

We're now facing a critical juncture where we have a unique opportunity to take what we have learned, overcome the challenges of the past two years, and build a workplace of the future. We've seen the benefits and the challenges of being both 100% at home and 100% in the office. Now we must take the best of both of these worlds and build an intentional and inclusive hybrid culture where everyone can thrive.

Are Your Four P's Aligned?

When organizations are ready to develop their new hybrid working initiatives, it is essential to ensure that their four P's — their Principles, Policies, Practices, and People — are all aligned. These four P's will be the pillars that sustain the new way of working and must be positioned to support each other. The process of developing the new initiative will be iterative and organizational leaders will most likely need to periodically assess and adjust the course of each of these pillars to maintain alignment.

Principles

The first step in the development of your new hybrid working initiative will be to identify your organization's unique principles. As law firms and companies have begun to re-open their office doors many leaders are desperate to unveil their new hybrid working policy right away. We encourage organizations to slow down, take their time to gather information, and lay the foundation for a successful policy rollout. It's important to first identify your principles and then be intentional about building the policy to reflect those principles.

To gather insights, we recommend creating a committee of employees tasked with developing the new hybrid working policy. This committee will begin by establishing the organization's unique business case for flexibility and developing the **principles** on which the policy will be formed. The principles also must incorporate the key mindset shifts that need to happen for a hybrid policy to be successful.

It's critical to identify why it is important for your employees to think about a new and different way of working. While all individuals will have personal preferences for the future of work, the conversation needs to move away from personal preferences to why it also makes sense from a business perspective. The committee should ask themselves: *What's the business model of the future that works for our organization?*

When creating your new initiative, you'll want to bring a wide group of people into the conversation to create a shared vision that represents the entire employee population. If one of your organization's most important principles is maintaining diversity, equity, and inclusion, then it will be critical to ensure that the new hybrid policy is flexible to support everyone.

Even beyond the pandemic, it will be necessary to incorporate and acknowledge a variety of perspectives and experiences. For example, not everyone experiences in-person interactions or virtual interactions in the same way. In fact, some individuals have said that Zoom has become the "great equalizer," and that video calls effectively level the playing field for underrepresented groups. Your new policy and practices will need to reflect the subtleties of your principles.

While some leaders have expressed fears of losing the 5 Cs — collaboration, connection, communication, contribution, and culture — with continued virtual work, an initiative can be purposefully designed to prioritize these principles. If one of your organization's most important principles is culture, you'll need to define what culture means to you and then intentionally design hybrid practices that support it. Remember, culture is not dependent on location, but rather it is based on your shared values and relationships. For example,

if a key aspect of your culture is mentorship, some ways to support mentoring in a hybrid working environment include scheduling debrief time after client meetings, creating formal mentoring programs, providing technology tools to help team collaboration, and offering a budget to foster virtual and in-person meetings. By creating structures to promote your culture, you will actually be able to enhance your culture in a hybrid working environment.

Policies

For a new policy to thrive, the organization's principles must support a culture that embraces hybrid working. If that shift in culture has not taken place, the policy will fall flat. It's not enough to hand out a paper policy and hope employees and management take note of it.

While some leaders may have positive intent, leaving flexibility too flexible can have its downfalls. We have heard many leaders say, "we trust our people," and they intentionally leave the flex initiative vague and unwritten. We always warn our members that when you leave a flex policy too vague you open yourselves up to "pockets of acceptance and pockets of resistance." The firm's flex culture becomes "leader-specific." That is, if a supervisor approves of flexible working, then that team can use the policy, however in teams where the leader prefers everyone be in the office,

employees may be afraid to take advantage of the policy, which can lead to dissatisfaction and attrition.

Clarity is your friend here. It is essential to create a hybrid working policy that is supported by a consistent culture that embraces flexibility across the entire organization. All employees should understand the policy and feel comfortable implementing it into their schedules.

A best practice is to make your policy available to all employees regardless of position and title. Limiting your policy to a select few — attorneys only for example — is outdated and signals to prospective employees that your organization does not value inclusion of its business professionals. While not every aspect of your new policy will be appropriate to all positions, in an inclusive organization all employees should be able to benefit from some form of flexibility, based on their position. We strongly recommend that your hybrid working policy be holistic and not only include remote work but encompass various forms of flexibility, such as reduced hours, shifting hours, job sharing, compressed work week, extended telecommuting, and sabbatical options. This way, all employees can utilize your hybrid working policy. For example, receptionists might not be able to work remotely, but they might be able to shift their hours or job share.

Practices

Once your policy is written, it will need to be operationalized, supported with infrastructure, and embedded in tactical day-to-day **practices**.

If your hybrid working policy requires employees to return to the office building, you'll need to make sure that there is a "*Return on Experience (ROE)*" — providing an in-office environment that enables them to have a different experience than they would otherwise. For example, host department lunches/programs to foster connections, hold retreats to build relationships, and include junior employees in client meetings to facilitate on-the-job learning.

When aligning your daily practices with your principles, you may need to shift the way in which things have historically been done. If connection and collaboration are two of your main principles, then ask yourself and your team: *How might we shift the way that we work to maintain collaboration and connection in a hybrid workplace?* It's helpful to use open-ended design thinking questions to creatively formulate how your organization might imagine a better future using a hybrid model.

Two important aspects of your day-to-day hybrid working practices will be measuring their impact and reinforcing their importance. By tracking your initiative, it will help you see what's working and what needs to be adjusted. You can gather the data required to measure and monitor your results in numerous ways — conduct surveys, review utilization reports, assess performance evaluations, and look at workload, productivity, attrition, and promotion data to get a general sense of successes and challenges. Make sure to dig deeper by conducting focus groups, as well as stay and exit interviews, to better understand employee experiences. In addition to regularly collecting this information, it is imperative to instill leader, manager, and individual accountability. This will allow you to make improvements and connect results to important business metrics, including recruiting, retention, development, advancement, engagement, productivity, profitability, and diversity, to see your initiative's greater impact. Communicate successes so they lead to a ripple effect across your organization and help you gain greater buy-in regarding hybrid work.

These day-to-day practices are going to make or break your hybrid working initiative. Your process should be iterative, and your firm should be open and transparent about gathering insights from your teams, tweaking your practices, and continuously striving for improvement.

It will also be helpful to identify different types of technology to incorporate into your day-to-day practices. Technology can help to bridge the gap between employees who are virtual and on-site. Ask yourself these key questions: *Are the people who are remote having the same experience as those in the office building? How might we use technology to enhance everyone's experience?*

People

Author and Leadership Coach Fred Kofman said, "to change a culture, leaders have to change the message people receive about what they must do to fit in." It's important that leaders completely buy into and value the new way of working and then communicate to colleagues their full support. Organizations that fail to achieve leader buy-in will fail in a hybrid workplace. Employees should not be receiving the unconscious message that if they work remotely, they are somehow less committed to their job.

For some leaders, this new hybrid working initiative will require a complete shift in mindset. Resistant leaders should be given the opportunity to voice their concerns and should be provided with the business case for why the new policy supports the organization's principles. Leaders must understand that flexibility is not a trade-off for performance and that some behaviors will need to be learned. Leaders should also be trained so they are fully prepared to set their teams up for success

in a hybrid world. Training should include ways to manage hybrid teams effectively, give feedback in a hybrid environment, and build learning collaboration and connection with hybrid teams.

Individuals may also need to shift their mindset beyond what their personal are needs and consider what the needs are of their client (internal or external), their team, and their firm. Individuals who successfully found ways to connect and collaborate with their teams during the pandemic were those who approached the challenge with creativity, innovation, and intentionality. Individuals also should receive training on how to succeed in a hybrid working environment, including maintaining visibility, providing client service, building internal and external relationships, and optimizing learning.

In the hybrid workplace of the future, employees are expecting *autonomy* — each individual can be given the autonomy to decide where they work best — within the organization's guard rails. The hybrid working model is not an easy one and the rules of engagement must change, but if implemented correctly it can reap countless benefits. While some organizations have traditionally been slow to adapt to new ways of working, this moment in time provides us with a huge opportunity to create an environment where everyone can thrive. Remember, it's your choice. Will your organization be part of the Great Resignation or the Great Retention? ✚

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