# Creating A Hybrid Work Policy? Be Intentional And Inclusive

By **Manar Morales** (September 20, 2022)

As we approach the beginning of our third fall with COVID-19, most experts agree that this virus is here to stay, and we must learn to live with it moving forward.

Offices have reopened and employees are returning, in most cases intermittently. Now is the perfect time to reinvent your workplace, while continuing to be agile and prepared for whatever the future brings.

It's time to take the best of who you were in person, blend it with the best of who you were when you were 100% virtual, and create a hybrid workplace that will take your organization successfully into the future.

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The No. 1 question I'm asked by leaders is: Are we going back to the way things were pre-pandemic? My answer is always the same.

I believe that the same way 9/11 forever changed the way we travel, COVID-19 will forever change the way we work.

The pandemic taught us a lot about the benefits of flexible working, and most peoples' expectations for the future of work have changed forever.

Recent research from the Microsoft Corp. 2022 Work Trend Index showed that "hybrid work is up seven points year-over-year (to 38%), and 53% of people are likely to consider transitioning to hybrid in the year ahead."[1] It's clear that your employees will demand hybrid working options or find them elsewhere.

The good news is a hybrid workplace is good for your organization as well. This new way of working is the future of work, and it must be developed with a long-term approach that is intentional, inclusive and iterative.

## Be Intentional: Hybrid Must Be a Strategic Priority

As you begin to onboard your new hires this fall, you may be wondering if your team is prepared and ready to succeed in a new hybrid environment. Remember, you can't just drop your hybrid policy into a co-location model and expect it to stick.

As with any other strategic priority your organization may have, hybrid working must be purposefully engrained in everything you do. Hybrid doesn't work by default — it works by design.

Your workplace will be different. This is not just a policy change; it's a culture change. As many law firms are already experiencing, policies will not bring people back, experiences will.

We are hearing from a lot of firms that despite what your policy is saying, people are not coming back at the levels that firms are requesting. When you are recreating your hybrid workplace, you must be sure to intentionally align your principles, purpose, practices, policies and people.

Start by revisiting your principles and make sure that you have developed your unique business case for your hybrid workplace.

Determine the main principles on which your organization is built, then outline how the benefits of your hybrid workplace — increased productivity, diversity, business continuity, engagement, recruiting, retention and advancement — support these principles.

You also must intentionally ground your policy in a sense of purpose.

Ask yourself: What does a hybrid environment make possible for you as an organization? For example, have you seen a greater level of inclusion? Have you seen a positive impact on retention and recruitment? Have you seen a greater level of engagement or productivity?

You'll need to revisit your organizational practices to make sure they are in line with your revised principles and purpose and reflect the best of who you are as an organization. You must be intentional about learning new behaviors and practices, as well as unlearning old behaviors.

In my experience, most teams cite the fear of the loss of the five C's — culture, control, collaboration, connection and contribution — as their biggest concern with flexibility.[2]

You'll want to continuously ask yourself and your team: How might we build connection? How might we improve collaboration? Can we leverage opportunities for development?

How might we improve communication? What are our expectations for meetings? How might we enable contribution? How do we talk about boundaries? Listen to your colleagues and communicate openly about the challenges along the way.

Today's employees want the autonomy to decide when and where to work within your organizational framework.

Your new hybrid working policy should include clear, flexible working guidelines that allow employees to meet their differing needs while maintaining a fair structure and equitable system. While one size does not fit all, it's important to be intentional and transparent about what is expected.

As I have told our members, clarity is kind. Vagueness masked as flexibility is not. Don't leave your colleagues guessing about what is expected of them.

It's clear that policies are not going to bring your people back into the office, but experiences are. Make sure that all your people — leaders in particular — are on board and aligned with your new principles, purpose, practices and policy.

Your new hybrid culture will only thrive if everyone has bought into the new way of working and everyone has an opportunity to succeed.

Remember that your people are the essence of your culture. Culture is not dependent on location — culture is defined by relationships between people.

**Be Inclusive: You'll Need to Level the Playing Field**

At the Diversity & Flexibility Alliance, we have been studying the intersection between

diversity and flexibility for more than a decade.

We've seen flexibility work as a driver of diversity and research shows that women, people of color, the LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities prefer flexible schedules.

In fact, Slack Technologies Inc.'s Future Forum research shows that 88% of Asian Americans, 83% of Black Americans and 81% of Hispanic or Latino Americans prefer hybrid or fully remote work.[3]

Additionally, Slack's research shows that 60% of working mothers want to work outside of the office three to five days per week.

In recent years, it's become increasingly evident that everyone wants and needs flexible working options to be most successful, so your hybrid workplace must be available to all.

When part of your team is working from home and part is in the office you have the challenge of making sure that there is not an "in" group and an "out" group. It's important to level the playing field so that those individuals who join a meeting virtually are seen as engaged participants, and not just spectators.

For example, you can encourage participants to utilize the chat function on Zoom, intentionally call on virtual attendees to join the discussion, and begin and end your virtual meetings with choreographed team building and networking exercises.

Proximity bias can creep into everything you do if you are not prepared to identify and fight it. It's important to create systems and practices that make meetings and work allocation equitable to those working virtually.

Data from Microsoft's 2022 Work Trends Index shows that 38% of hybrid workers are finding it challenging to know when to come into the office and 43% of hybrid workers don't feel included.[4] However, only 27% of organizations have created new hybrid meeting etiquette guidelines to ensure that everyone is included.

By designing an intentional hybrid working policy and set of best practices, you'll be better equipped to avoid and interrupt bias moving forward.

Diversity, equity and inclusion must be part of your business case for flexibility, and you'll need to outline how your new initiative is going to drive inclusion. The two priorities must go hand in hand.

It's important to identify and highlight opportunities for inclusion in your new hybrid model. For example, the in-person workplace was not always the most inclusive place when it came to mentoring and serendipitous interactions.

Many women and people of color found that they were not the recipients of these types of networking benefits. If you can intentionally choreograph connections and opportunities for mentoring both virtually and in person, you'll have the opportunity to reach more individuals and create richer experiences for all.

When it comes to onboarding and integrating your new hires, there may be more opportunities to introduce individuals to those in other offices at a much faster rate through virtual meetings than if you had to wait for in-person meetings and travel.

**Be Iterative: The Goal Is to Continuously Improve**

This is all new for many organizations, and we need to approach it with an always-improving mindset. It's going to take time to adjust to this new hybrid working environment.

My recommendation is to focus on managing your new workplace and continuously measure and track its success while being open to adjustments as you go along.

While your principles and purpose will most likely remain unchanged, your practices, policies and people will need to evolve and transform as you learn what's working and what's not. Commit to an iterative process and remain pliable so that you can adjust as needed.

Create clear rules of engagement and encourage input from all employees. Meetings may need to be more purposeful and meaningful in a hybrid environment.

Make sure everyone knows when a meeting is to be in person and when it's OK to dial in virtually. Provide clear expectations for cameras on, active participation and engagement, as well as executive presence during meetings.

Some organizations have created team agreements that help them determine how they are going to connect and collaborate moving forward. Transparency helps to create a healthy culture and leaves the door open for change and improvement as necessary.

As you evolve through this iterative process, don't forget to leverage technology and training whenever possible. Give your people the skills, the resources and the tools to seamlessly connect both in person and virtually.

As an inclusive leader you'll want to ask your colleagues to provide input about what technology or systems are working and what are not. Continue to seek feedback from all those in your organization and be open to making necessary adjustments.

The goal is to create a holistic work culture where you recruit and retain the best people and provide them with enough autonomy over when and where they work to reach their fullest potential.

If your firm approaches this new phase of workplace evolution intentionally, inclusively and iteratively, you'll be poised to smoothly navigate any bumps in the road ahead and lead your industry into the future.

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[1] https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/great-expectations-making-hybrid-work-work.

[2] I explain more about the fear of losing the 5C's in this 2021 Harvard Business Review

article: https://hbr.org/2021/06/5-myths-about-flexible-work.

[3] https://futureforum.com/pulse-survey/.

[4] https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/great-expectations-making-hybrid-work-work.