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Insights

Hybrid hiccups

Moving to distributed work in the public sector

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"Remember when we used to go to work five days a week, 9 to 5, and spend an hour in the car getting there and back?"

"Yikes. I don't know how we did that for so long. Why did we ever do that?"

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, this might've seemed like lines from a science fiction story. Now, you may hear this conversation in real life—and maybe in your own organization. COVID-19 and the forced shift to remote work has shaken society out of norms that lasted for more than a century.

In 1905, Henry Ford essentially standardized the 40-hour workweek in the United States, saying "It's high time to rid ourselves of the notion that leisure for workmen is either lost time or a class privilege."[1] What the Ford Motor Company did then, the pandemic has done today by encouraging telework, hybrid work, and much greater flexibility in scheduling. It's transforming how we think about work and productivity.

For decades, most changes to the workplace were incremental. Rarely if ever have we seen organizations and governments *both* embrace a sea change such as widespread distributed work with such speed. Because of this revolution, we now have a rare opportunity to *intentionally* remake our work systems to serve everyone better and adopt a 'Distributed by Design' approach.

Of course, knowing this is the easy part. *Doing* it— as many managers and team leaders are learning firsthand, right now—is complex and fraught with

challenges. With the latest surge of Omicron, it has become apparent that we may deal with variants for years to come as COVID-19 becomes endemic. This gives us even more reason to put robust hybrid structures in place to move seamlessly between fully remote and hybrid models as the situation demands. In the sections that follow, we'll touch upon questions that are likely on leaders' minds concerning hybrid and distributed work and explore ways to address them.

"For several generations, we've organized our lives around our work. Our jobs have determined where we make our homes, when we see our families and what we can squeeze in during our downtime. It might be time to start planning our work around our lives."

— *Adam Grant, organizational psychologist at the Wharton School of Business*

Work

Rethinking how it gets done

How do I maximize productivity in a hybrid environment?

In a hybrid work environment—comprising employees who work remotely for all or part of their schedules as well as those who continue to report to the office or a third location—we have to completely reimagine what *productivity* really means.

Two common concepts involved in productivity are *efficiency* (work done in a way that optimizes resources) and *effectiveness* (work done in a way that optimizes outcomes). While organizations spend untold millions each year to increase efficiency and effectiveness, significantly less is typically spent to improve a third factor, *employee engagement*, which can amplify both dramatically (figure 1).

Research has demonstrated that employees become more efficient and effective when they're more engaged with the work they do.[2] Investments in the workforce experience can make work better for employees—and employees better at their work.

FIGURE 1

Employee engagement helps boost employee efficiency and effectiveness, thereby increasing productivity

Efficiency
Are we doing the right things in the right way?

Effectiveness
Are we producing the right results?

Sustained productivity

Engagement
Are we empowering our workforce and sustaining their well-being?

Source: Alexander Braier et al., *Designing adaptive workplaces*, Deloitte Insights, February 10, 2021.

Organizations launching hybrid work schedules should remember that flexibility is one of the most important success factors in a great work experience. Here are some other strategies that they can explore:

- **Gain insight into virtual networks.** Hybrid and virtual work can seem difficult to measure. Organization network analysis can provide insights into productivity and well-being by examining *how* people work.

- **Establish team norms for higher productivity.** Team norms and behaviors can be optimized for virtual work through policies and procedures that enhance the understanding, capacity, and commitment of workers in both remote and onsite locations.

- **Use asynchronous collaboration.** Real-time collaboration is a valuable resource in virtual environments; use it sparingly. Create efficient habits by learning to collaborate *asynchronously*, allowing employees to exchange information and ideas as their schedules permit rather than in real time.

- **Make desired work outcomes visible and understandable to the team.** Make tacit knowledge *explicit*. Bring knowledge and conversations into centralized, virtual locations.

- **Use the right tech.** Make sure workers have broadband access and the right mix of digital platforms and technologies needed to connect, collaborate, and deliver value anywhere.

- **Reimagine the role of supervisors.** Changing employees' relationship with their

supervisors can be one of the most significant drivers of productivity. Start by reimagining supervisors as "performance leaders" and incorporating good leadership principles into their management training.

- **Create digital work environments to accelerate efficiency gains.** Many organizations have begun preparing for remote and hybrid work by automating manual workflows. Digitally based work environments can help scale these gains.

THE US PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE'S WORK FROM ANYWHERE PROGRAM

"Work from anywhere" is an emerging form of remote work that gives employees the flexibility to choose where they live. The US Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) has been a trailblazer for this approach. Its Work from Anywhere (WFA) program, launched in 2012, allows most of its employees to live anywhere in the continental United States so long as they're willing to pay out of pocket for periodic travel back to headquarters. In 2013, a year after it instituted the program, the USPTO ranked highest on the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government.[3]

USPTO found that WFA employees were not only happier but also more productive. Output increased by 4.4% while the agency's smaller physical footprint resulted in savings of US$38.2 million.[4] By 2019, USPTO had 11,000 out of 13,000 employees working remotely at least one day a week. This allowed it to move seamlessly to fully remote work in March 2020, when the pandemic struck.[5]

Why is now the right time to fundamentally redesign work?

The pandemic resulted in the largest work experiment in modern history. But today, it's clear the changes haven't been limited to work from home. Most agencies have begun to embrace a *digital-first* way of working, meaning that where work is done matters less than *how* it's done.[6] In fact, the appropriate work location often is *determined* by the tasks involved (figure 2).

During the pandemic, most traditional field work—such as health inspections, court hearings, and home visits by social workers—*had* to be performed virtually, using digital tools and technologies, and with varying degrees of success. Some social workers even reported an improvement in the quality of conversations held in virtual settings with fewer distractions.

While such changes were dictated by emergency circumstances, agencies now can be far more methodical in deciding where, how, and when work is done (figure 3). Organizations should reflect on their current work processes and ask themselves: *Is there a better way?*

Most agencies have begun to embrace a digital-first way of working, meaning that where work is done matters less than how it's done.

FIGURE 2

## Where work gets done needs to be determined based on the nature of tasks

Archetypal activity type	Onsite	Partly onsite and offsite	Offsite
Providing in-person service and assistance	✓		
Facilities maintenance and security	✓		
Networking and relationship-building		✓	
Ideation and cocreation (brainstorming)		✓	
Training, coaching, and professional development		✓	
Attending conferences and seminars		✓	
Deep work (i.e., work that requires intense focus)			✓
Periodic touchpoints with teams and leaders			✓
Online customer support			✓
Computer-based work			✓
Administrative tasks			✓

Source: Deloitte analysis.

FIGURE 3

The critical degrees of choice impacting how work models can be rearchitected

■ **Onsite and standard hours**
Work is completed in organization premises/offices during predetermined time periods stipulated by the organization

■ **Location and time-agnostic**
Work is completed anywhere the worker is located, in dynamic time, driven by the employee's preferences

■ **Structured and task-based**
Teams are organized in a formal hierarchical structure performing specific tasks and activities to achieve objectives

■ **Networked and autonomous**
Networks of teams form around specific missions to drive outcomes, relying on social/knowledge networks and collective intelligence to achieve objectives
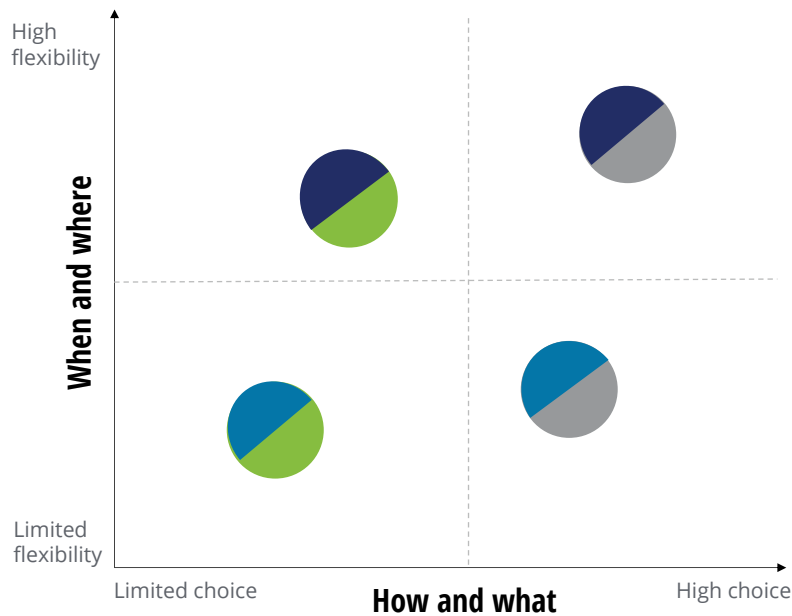
Source: Deloitte analysis.

One way to approach this is to think in terms of *problems* rather than *places*. In modern organizations, work increasingly is focused on cross-functional teams assembled from a variety of units. These teams are formed to address specific problems—launching a new service, optimizing a process, analyzing data and trends, understanding customer needs, and so forth.[7] The transition to project-based work creates new opportunities to tap external talent for specific engagements, or to use internal "talent marketplaces" that allow employees to move easily between departments to meet emerging demands. The Canadian government's Talent Cloud is one example of such arrangements.[8]

Earlier cross-functional teams typically were colocated in the same physical building; digital technology makes this unnecessary. We can build a digital "workplace" around a specific issue or problem and unite the required workers and resources in a virtual space. These teams then work with digital tools and platforms, using physical places as needed without being defined by them.

THE UK GOVERNMENT DIGITAL SERVICE'S ASYNCHRONOUS WORKWEEK

Early on during the pandemic, the United Kingdom's Government Digital Service (GDS) piloted a week of asynchronous work for its Gov.UK Pay team. The team would work the same number of hours as always, but members could work at any time they preferred. There were no meetings (since these would force people to do things at a specific time) and no emails (since these can restrict the flow of information to a few people and don't allow users to opt out).

Instead, the team used collaborative tools such as Slack, Trello, and Google Docs to communicate, assign tasks, and share updates. It scheduled two optional social meetings every day to encourage connection without work-related talk. Most participants found the system gave them more time to focus on work and made it easier to concentrate on specific tasks. But challenges emerged as well; planning became more difficult, and some team members felt less engaged. The team also learned that asynchronous working wasn't a good way of dealing with *urgent* work—direct communication is better for a quicker response.

The lesson is that an "either/or" model is unlikely to be optimal. Organizations should decide where to draw the line between synchronous and asynchronous work.[9]

To optimize how and where work is performed:

- **Define the virtual workplace by the challenges it must address,** rather than by its shared resources.

- **Improve human-machine collaboration.** Seek new ways to integrate teams of humans and technology in a hybrid environment. Identify manual business processes that can be automated to promote virtual work and process efficiency.

- **Analyze and categorize tasks.** Analyze and categorize the tasks workers perform to determine which must be done in a specific place and which can be done anywhere.

- **Maintain flexibility.** The best solutions are likely to be a combination of the digital and the physical. Set up periodic in-person meetings to allow team members to get to know one another socially and strengthen their working relationships.

How can we pursue our mission and keep up with evolving customer needs in a hybrid setting?

Digital solutions have been central to the pandemic response. Government agencies were forced to develop new solutions and service models, sometimes in a matter of days. From telework and telehealth to virtual courtrooms and online licensing, governments are entering a new phase of contact-free citizen experiences.

Arizona State chief information officer J.R. Sloane reports the state has added 266 online services since July 2020.[10] In the United Kingdom, government departments had delivered 69 new digital services by the end of May 2020, with 46 more in development.[11]

Online and hybrid channels have ensured better access for customers while improving their experiences. New South Wales' digital driver's license service, for instance, not only makes it

easier to update an address or renew a license but also allows participation through a new mobile app that was adopted by 36% of the state's citizens in its first year.[12]

To meet evolving constituent needs in hybrid environments:

- **Use human-centered design** and **journey mapping** to identify opportunities for more tailored and integrated services.

- **Assess current service delivery models** to determine whether online service or other additional channels should be provided to meet the needs of a more virtual customer base.

- **Shift from a government-centric to a citizen-centric lens.** Tailor government standards and processes around citizen needs, not government silos.

From telework and telehealth to virtual courtrooms and online licensing, governments are entering a new phase of contact-free citizen experiences.

- **Focus on seamless service delivery** that is personalized, frictionless, and anticipatory.

- **Build the infrastructure for seamless service delivery.** Truly seamless services generally are built on a digital platform and employ unique digital identities that give a 360-degree view of the customer. Cloud computing can be used to provide scalability and agility in administrative processes.

- **Employ agencywide data management and analytics** to simplify, streamline, and enhance service provision and develop new services to better meet constituents' evolving needs.

- **Adopt artificial intelligence and automation as they become available and useful.** From automating manual tasks to deploying virtual assistants powered by artificial intelligence, agencies can use these tools to provide faster service and reduce human workloads.

- **Provide infrastructural support for remote workers.** At a minimum, remote employees must have the bandwidth and digital tools they need to conduct normal business activities.

- **Develop open, digitally savvy talent networks.** Support human-machine collaboration to augment the workforce and provide better service delivery. Train the workforce to encourage a digital mindset.

- **Adopt and adapt services and programs based on their effectiveness.** Periodically evaluate the benefits and limitations of virtual service models and seek ways to improve them. For example, the introduction of virtual courts has demonstrated benefits—speedier processes and greater access, convenience, and participation—as well as shortcomings such as technological glitches and reduced access to body-language cues. As a result, some courts have adopted "hybrid trials," in which parts of the process such as jury selection are conducted remotely while actual trials take place in the courtroom with masks and distancing.[13]

Workforce
Redesigning work for those at the center of it

How do I boost workforce engagement and morale in geographically dispersed or asynchronous teams?

A pause: That's what the shock of the pandemic gave society. Today, many people are pausing to think about the role of work in their lives. Old norms have been disrupted and many have experienced a fundamental shift in their preferences and priorities. Call it the great reset or, in some cases, the great resignation. This pause has serious implications for workforce engagement.

How can organizations boost workforce engagement in this new environment? Four areas are often key:

BELONGING

Belonging—the feeling of connection with a group or community—is a key factor in making workers feel engaged. Research suggests that this workplace sense of "belonging" can lead to a 56% increase in job performance, a 50% reduction in turnover risk, and a 75% decrease in employee sick days.[14] In hybrid work arrangements, however, many organizations have seen their employees' sense of belonging begin to fall; to some extent, they've disengaged.[15] To restore this feeling of belonging, organizations should focus on three things:

- **Comfort:** Create a work environment that treats employees fairly and allows them to be their authentic selves at work.

- **Connection:** Help workers identify with their teams and feel a sense of community.

- **Contribution:** Appreciate and reward workers for their individual contributions and help them identify with the organization's purpose, mission, and values.

> "From an astronaut to an accountant, we're all pulling on the same rope, in the same direction, trying to achieve the same thing."
>
> — *Robert Gibbs, associate administrator for NASA's Mission Support Directorate*

WELL-BEING

The pandemic highlighted the importance of employee well-being and mental health. Almost 68% of US federal workers felt increased stress during the pandemic; the 2021 Deloitte Global Millennial and Gen Z Survey found that 41% of millennials and 46% of Gen Zers feel anxious or stressed all or most of the time.[16]

Ensuring that your organization's culture *supports* workers and helps them thrive in an uncertain environment can have a direct impact on engagement and morale. Invest in workforce well-being and help with access to education, resources, and training—and try to destigmatize conversations concerning mental health.

According to the US Office of Personnel Management, federal employees who telework have higher engagement scores than their colleagues who work at the office. Surveyed employees who work remotely at least three or four days a week had an engagement score of *76%*.[18]

"We can't think that downtime is always bad. Downtime and recharging are absolutely critical if we're going to be innovative; if we're going to be productive."

— *Anil Arora, chief statistician at Statistics Canada*

Flexibility also should involve *how* work is done. Research from the United Kingdom suggests that workers who reported higher levels of autonomy in their work or workplace culture are happier with their jobs.[19] The remote-only workforce has become accustomed to a degree of autonomy that could be threatened by a return to the office or a hybrid schedule. To the extent possible, employees should be given the flexibility to customize their work schedule and environment. Managers should help them feel a sense of control and ownership over their work by holding them accountable without micromanaging.

FLEXIBILITY

Research suggests that 79% of workers want flexibility in when and where they work, and more than half would give up a future salary increase for that flexibility.[17] Obviously, these priorities can affect employee engagement and morale.
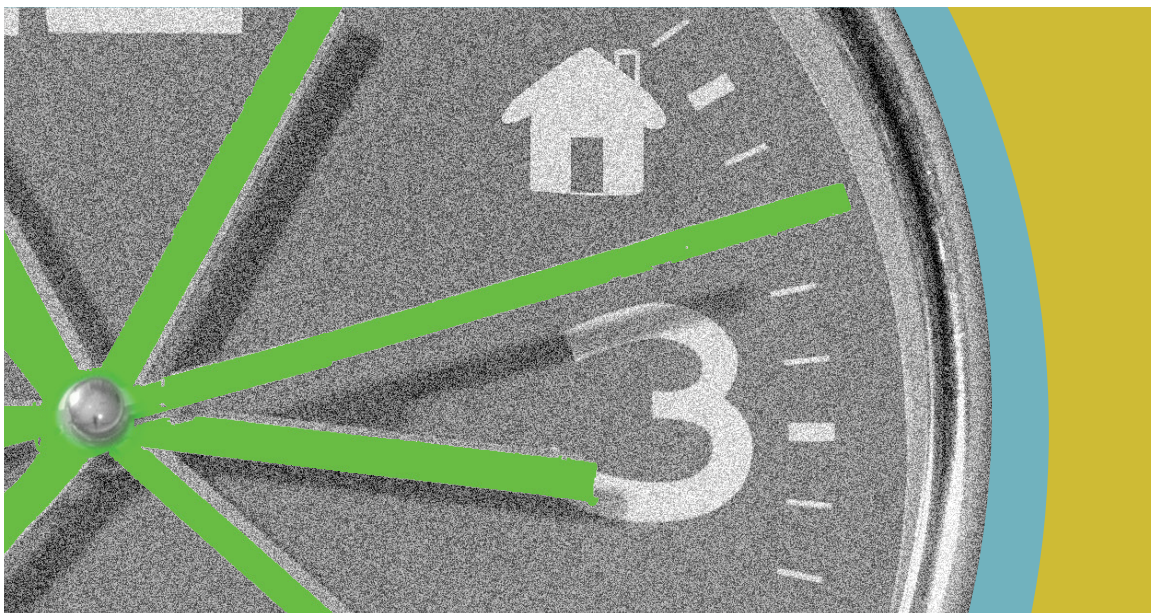
PURPOSE

Most who work in government derive a sense of purpose and pride in public service from their jobs. Helping others and serving constituents can be highly satisfying. In the 2020 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, about 75% of respondents said their work gave them a sense of personal accomplishment, up 3% from the previous year.[20] This could reflect their commitment to keeping government services going through the COVID-19 crisis.

Use this moment of change. Awaken your workers' sense of purpose by reminding them they're part of the larger mission, no matter where they work. Seeing the real-world impact of their work—whether it's helping someone apply for benefits or processing new patent applications—can be a powerful motivator. Use metrics and visual dashboards to allow workers to *see* the difference they're making. Recognize team and individual accomplishments on various forums, from newsletters and emails to virtual meetings and townhall events.

This sense of *purpose* can unite geographically separated teams—and make the difference between a disengaged workforce and a flourishing one.

How do I create opportunities for socialization, networking, and mentorship in a hybrid environment?

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that social connection is important for us to thrive not just as human beings but also as professionals in our work. The sudden shift to remote work succeeded largely because existing social ties and relationships within organizations helped sustain our productivity. Making sure that this social

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EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AT DHS

Despite the pandemic, the US Department of Homeland Security has been steadily improving its engagement scores in the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

A number of initiatives have contributed to greater engagement, from emergency and backup childcare to more direct communication from leaders. According to DHS chief human capital officer Angela Bailey, "The COVID-19 pandemic brought into stark reality just how critical our employee and family readiness efforts are, especially those dedicated to ensuring we address mental health needs. Integrating our employee and family readiness efforts with our leadership development programs and our inclusive diversity initiatives has driven a more meaningful and holistic employee engagement strategy at DHS."[21]

With its focus on employee well-being and resilience, DHS also is considering adopting wearable technology to help workers in high-stress or dangerous roles manage their physical and mental health. The goal is to "not only promote intervention action when necessary, but preemptively and in real-time optimize DHS personnel performance and resilience."[22]

Research shows that our professional and personal networks have shrunk by close to 16%—or by more than 200 people—during the pandemic.

capital *continues* to thrive in a hybrid environment will likely be critical.

So how do you build it? One of the things many workers missed while teleworking during the pandemic were "watercooler" conversations—the informal chatter with colleagues that occurs spontaneously in most office settings. Given that some employees in a hybrid workplace will rarely see each other in person, are there other ways to foster

connections? Here's what organizations can do:

• **Bring people together in person for the moments that matter.** There's no perfect substitute for in-person interaction, so create events for real-world meetings—brainstorming sessions, townhalls, or informal gatherings for holidays or to celebrate successes—to create opportunities for connection (see sidebar, "Moments that matter: The five Cs guiding 'in-office' time").

"I think we could engineer serendipitous encounters over the web. Organizations just have to update and be a little bit more innovative. If we can put men in space, we can figure this problem out."

— *Brandy Aven, associate professor of organizational theory at Carnegie Mellon University*

MOMENTS THAT MATTER: THE FIVE Cs GUIDING "IN-OFFICE" TIME

• **Connection:** In-person events promote interpersonal relationships that are important for engagement and trust, and can promote spontaneous interactions inspiring big ideas. Examples include team meetings, office-wide events, employee orientation, and career one-on-ones.

• **Creation:** There are certain situations where face-to-face human interaction is the most effective way to unleash creativity and achieve breakthrough results. Examples include sessions for brainstorming, strategy sessions, idea generation, storyboarding solutions and presentations, and innovation/creative process.

• **Convening:** Periodically bringing people together at various levels such as teams, business units, or organization-wide can promote cultural unity and sense of belonging. Examples include project launches, quarterly or year-end meetings, and periodic community of practice meetings.

• **Critical tasks:** Some essential activities may need to occur in-person, such as face-to-face customer service or to repair or replace physical equipment. Examples include walk-in customer service centers, technology and equipment maintenence, and facility cleaning and replairs.

• **Celebration:** In-person celebrations and parties are a great way to promote social bonding and networking. Examples include employee birthdays, holidays, announcements for expectant parents, promotions or other career and development milestones, award ceremonies, talent shows/concerts, retirement ceremonies, etc.

> ## "Mastering the hybrid workweek also isn't just about the days you come in, but how effectively you use them."
>
> — *Tsedal Neeley, a professor at Harvard Business School*

- **Create virtual "watercooler" opportunities.** Provide time for workers to engage in casual conversations not strictly related to work. Allocate time in the margins—before or after large meetings—and group people into random breakout rooms to network. This can lead to "facilitated" spontaneous encounters that mimic the dynamics of a hallway chat. Some organizations also foster connection by pairing random colleagues for virtual coffee chats.[23]

- **Encourage employees to make the most of their connections on in-person days.** Hybrid work doesn't have to mean the end of in-person socialization, but it does call for a more strategic approach, such as coordinating schedules and activities to ensure face time with colleagues and stakeholders.

- **Ask workers how they'd like to connect.** True social connection happens organically. Some workers might enjoy a virtual happy hour, while others might prefer an outdoor activity. Focus on the things that work best for your team and consult workers for their ideas and support. The United Kingdom's Standard Chartered Bank, for example, held an internal "watercooler challenge" to crowdsource ideas on how workers could stay connected socially while working virtually.[24]

- **Provide mentorship and access.** Informal interactions with an organization's leaders can influence career outcomes, even in a virtual setting.[25] Prioritize mentorship through virtual or hybrid programs or provide informal access to leaders through virtual coffee chats and Q&A sessions. During the pandemic, mentors at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center began holding formal catchup meetings, spending time to help interns understand the purpose of their work and validating their comfort with various projects.[26]

The forced shift to virtual work increased physical distance between workers. But in some ways, the pets, families, shared struggles, and personal spaces visible in the background of Zoom calls helped them learn more about one another and brought them closer together. Hybrid work can build on that connection while restoring in-person interactions.

How can I advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in a hybrid work environment?

The pandemic-induced shift to remote work served as an equalizing force for many in the workforce. Suddenly, everyone had the same space on videoconference screens, irrespective of their titles, and meetings became more accessible. Many workers, especially those with diverse physical abilities, found that remote work improved their productivity and increased their feelings of acceptance by their teams.

But a return to work in a hybrid model complicates things, with some workers in the office and others working remotely. Without an accompanying culture change, hybrid work can create a "two-tier" workforce, with primarily remote workers feeling like they may miss out on career- and relationship-building opportunities.

How can agencies mitigate some of these challenges? Here's what they can consider:

- **Provide "psychological safety."**
  Psychological safety refers to an individual or group's perceptions of the consequences of risk-taking.[27] It lets team members feel they can speak up without being judged and gives them the confidence to take risks, voice unconventional ideas, and engage in constructive conflict in the pursuit of common goals. One important role of psychological safety is to help dispel workers' fear of failure when negotiating new digital problems or online social interactions.[28]

- **Make performance check-ins count.** Train managers to use check-ins to understand and address any problems team members may be having with the remote environment. Encourage team members to speak up and express their needs.

- **Focus on outcomes and bias in evaluations.** Provide managers with project management tools to better understand their team's work and emphasize outcomes in performance evaluations. Educate them on how to identify and avoid "proximity bias," in which the convenience of engaging with those immediately around you outweighs the effort needed to include those working remotely. Use data robustly to tease out hidden biases in promotions, career advancement, and opportunities.

- **Foster a culture of inclusion.** Train leaders on inclusive leadership traits and hold managers accountable for promoting an inclusive team environment and demonstrating behaviors that show support for remote workers.

- **Integrate equity into working norms.** Adopt equitable meeting practices, such as having everyone log into a virtual call regardless of location and documenting their meeting notes. Encourage virtual "watercooler" banter with tools such as Teams Chat to equalize access to informal information.

- **Provide resources and opportunities for remote workers.** Offer remote workers stipends and reimbursements for home office equipment and technology (e.g., desks, chairs, internet connections), or simply procure them directly. Provide coworking spaces for those whose home environments aren't conducive to remote work. Offer additional opportunities for visibility and support, such as mentoring, when inequities are apparent.

- **Create forums for employees to seek career advancement or development opportunities.** Hybrid or virtual environments can expand access to training, rotation programs, and other development opportunities to a wider range of employees. For example, NASA has an internal talent marketplace tool that employees can use to find rotational and detailed assignments. According to Jane Datta, NASA's chief human capital officer, "In this time of the pandemic where

"**Management can be deliberate about creating greater inclusivity. Even the breakout groups in Zoom are ways of doing that, I can put you together with people that you wouldn't normally meet. But it needs to be intentional."**

— *Abby Snay, deputy secretary for Future of Work at California Labor and Workforce Development Agency*

ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVITY AT 18F

The US federal government's 18F digital unit calls itself "thoughtfully inclusive of everyone involved." This means adopting the philosophy that a distributed team is fully engaged only when *all members* are engaged. 18F attributes the success of its distributed teams to inclusivity, proactive communication, and documentation.

One element of 18F's focus is accessibility. For example, how can someone with a visual disability experience a video meeting? How can we make communication effective among *all* people? By asking such questions, the team at 18F explored remote-friendly strategies and tools to improve accessibility. These included the sharing of meeting notes and transcripts, live-event captioning services, and video relay calls for deaf and hard-of-hearing workers.[31]

most of us are virtual, the utilization of [the talent marketplace] has really increased significantly, and we've seen a lot more movement of people [with] different types of assignments that are hosted in different locations. It's really contributing to a positive employee-development process."[29]

- **Survey team members.** Bolster existing programs by adding approaches suggested by survey respondents, such as formal

sponsorships, mentorships, and learning and development opportunities tied to career progression.[30]

- **Offer options and clear choices.** Another way to tackle inequities is to provide the workforce with options for different career paths that are partially or entirely remote. Clearly articulate the implications of each in terms of compensation and promotion expectations. In this way, people can take ownership of the choices they make and be aware of the potential impact.

- **Be transparent with workers.** Track and monitor metrics related to inequities, particularly those concerning performance evaluations and promotions. Ask the workforce to share problems and take meaningful action, communicating freely. A continuous improvement mindset toward challenges can foster a more equitable hybrid workplace.

- **Hold inclusive virtual meetings.** Before scheduling a meeting, consider if the objective could be accomplished without a meeting or at least reduced by using virtual tools. Also be mindful of who must attend to minimize meeting burnout. (See sidebar, "Cheat sheet for inclusive virtual meetings" for tips on how to engage remote participants in an effective and inclusive way.)

"A lot of the job announcements will say, 'location to be determined' or 'working schedule to be determined.' What that really means is that's going to be a negotiation between the potential employee and us over where they want to live. What schedule do they want to work, and how best can we make that work for everybody?"

— *Angela Bailey, CHCO at DHS*

CHEAT SHEET: INCLUSIVE VIRTUAL MEETINGS

- **Focus on remote:** Be intentional about focusing on remote team members' needs and actively including them; don't make them an afterthought. Make it a habit to include a virtual meeting link in all meetings and actively engage remote participants. Consider having them lead meetings.

- **Have facilitators:** Especially for larger meetings, have at least one designated facilitator of the meeting and someone who can manage technical issues/navigate tools. During the meeting, a facilitator should be intentional about engaging remote team members and monitoring the chat, as well as making sure to pause after asking a question to wait for responses.

- **Engage all virtually:** Use tools like virtual whiteboards and annotation, polls, chat, and emojis to engage all participants, not just those who are remote. Set meeting norms that empower remote participants to engage. Dedicate facilitated Q&A time that intentionally makes space for remote participants to voice questions. Be sure to also be inclusive and address accessibility needs.

- **Use the right tools:** Make sure that both the onsite and remote team members have access to needed hardware and software (e.g., collaborative whiteboards, shared notetaking, etc.). Invest in tools and practice norms that enhance the audio experience (e.g., headsets for remote workers, defaulting to mute, etc.).

- **Use video mindfully:** Have remote workers go on camera and show them onscreen to the onsite team. Make sure remote workers can at least see the key meeting facilitator(s). Consider having even the onsite workers log on to the virtual meeting with the sound off so everyone can be seen equally.

- **Ask for feedback:** Pulse meeting participants for feedback on their experience and keep improving. Train teams on leading practices and lessons learned, building off what they have already learned about virtual meetings during the pandemic (e.g., being prepared with an agenda and clear objectives, using virtual meeting tools, etc.).

How should I adapt my organization's processes for hiring, onboarding, and knowledge transfer to serve the needs of a distributed workforce equitably?

HIRING

The move to remote work during the pandemic forced most organizations to adapt their processes so that they could hire workers with little or no in-person contact. Now, as parts of the workforce return to the office, agencies must decide which pieces of the hiring process to keep and which to abandon. Here's what they can consider for the hybrid environment:

- **Continue virtual hiring.** Virtual hiring practices adopted during the pandemic streamlined processes while widening the talent pool. Consider maintaining these efficiencies in a hybrid model by retaining the virtual elements of the recruitment process, such as virtual job fairs and events. These are accessible to more candidates and can promote greater equity. For example, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) streamlined its hiring and careers website to allow candidates to start the recruitment process directly with VHA, rather than US Jobs, and also launched a text-to-recruit app so candidates could begin conversations with recruiters.[32] In Canada, the Canadian Revenue Agency's Virtual Hiring Project tackled more than 20 specific challenges

related to virtual hiring, spanning technology, security, safety, standardized tests, and staffing.[33]

• **Seek geographically distributed talent.** A wider talent pool often offers access to more skilled and diverse candidates. This can be a real opportunity for government agencies that struggle to fill certain positions when their searches are limited to a single geographic area. The US Department of Homeland Security is considering whether some positions could be entirely virtual, and if it should widen its recruitment efforts beyond the Washington, D.C. metro area.[34]
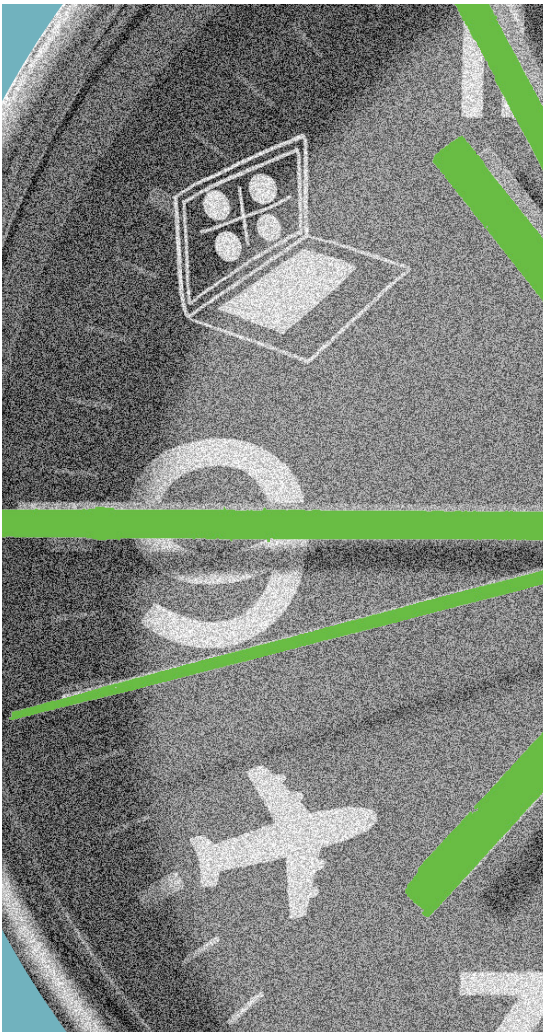
Missouri is opening up its state IT positions to remote workers who don't live in the Jefferson City area. During the pandemic, Missouri moved about 17,000 employees to remote work. As a result of the positive experience, the state has become more comfortable with the idea of broadening the areas from which it hires staff.[35]

ONBOARDING AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Onboarding is a critical step in the employee journey, and one that can determine how quickly and easily new workers assimilate into the workforce and their new roles. Yet much of the workplace knowledge that's a part of onboarding is tacit and resides in people's heads. How can organizations unlock and share the collective intelligence of their workforce? This was a concern even before the pandemic, and it's only become more intense in the hybrid workplace. Here are some steps they can take:

• **Help new hires build essential relationships.** Many aspects of onboarding, such as training, can be accomplished remotely with videos and online resources. It's harder to communicate the implicit, unspoken norms and knowledge gleaned through observation and routine interactions. New hires may not need to meet everyone they work with in person, but frequent in-person interactions with an "onboarding buddy" or manager can help them learn organizational context and culture. This is especially true for workers onboarded virtually during the pandemic.

- **Resume and enhance in-person onboarding.** To the extent possible, conduct parts of onboarding in the office with other colleagues. This will give them a head start in building the relationships and networks that are essential to belonging, engagement, and well-being.

- **Focus on documentation for knowledge-sharing.** Making tacit knowledge explicit via transparent and accessible documentation can help new workers understand the organization and their roles in it quickly. For example, at GitLab—a company that has always been all-remote—all employees have access to a "handbook," a database of 5,000+ pages of searchable content that workers can add to and modify.[36]

- **Use technology to ensure equitable access to information.** Important documents and other knowledge should be made available to new workers in a searchable form to mitigate bottlenecks in information flow. Simple things such as making meeting recordings, transcripts, or notes available for workers to review in their own time can go a long way in breaking down barriers to knowledge transfer.

Workplace
Addressing issues around the new world of work

How should organizational culture and leadership evolve to keep pace with a changing work environment and society? How do we ensure our values and culture are sustained in a hybrid work setting?

Any organization's culture is the sum of its shared values, traditions, beliefs, attitudes and, most importantly, behaviors. The shift to remote and hybrid work requires a shift in culture too. Without thoughtful decisions about the practices and behaviors that support hybrid working models, organizations risk damaging or eroding their culture. In a recent Deloitte return-to-workplace survey, culture was the top concern cited, with 32% of respondents agreeing that they were worried about maintaining organizational culture in a postpandemic world.[37]

Thus, organizations need to *intentionally* curate and rebuild their culture in ways that reflects the new world of work. This applies to leadership as well; leaders will need new skills. To create the new culture:

- **Don't try to reverse the new openness.** The shared experience of the pandemic and its challenges tore down walls of "professionalism"; employees showed vulnerability, empathy, and

solidarity. Research suggests that such vulnerability can foster trust among peers.[38] Managers should resist returning to strict boundaries between the personal and professional. Instead, use this newfound closeness among employees to *strengthen* connections and trust.

- **Make experimentation part of your culture.** Use trial and error to determine what works best for your organization. Encourage experimentation and creativity. Learn from the successes and mistakes of others. Countless organizations are going through the same challenges; understanding emerging practices can make your own journey more successful and less painful.

Data from a global survey shows that 75% of executive leaders believe they are already operating within a culture of flexibility, yet only 57% of employees say that their organizational culture embraces flexible work.

- **Create an inclusive work environment and lead with empathy.** Leading distributed teams effectively in a hybrid work environment demands empathy and inclusive behaviors from leaders and managers. The pandemic has

exacerbated stress and burnout among workers, increasing the importance of empathetic leaders who make everyone on their teams feel included and heard.

The United Kingdom's Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has invested heavily in identifying the kinds of skills, such as emotional intelligence, that senior leaders need to create greater inclusion. It has trained more than 1,500 workers on building empathy and found that it helps employees open up and become more curious about one another.[39]

- **Listen to your workers, customers, and partners.** Hybrid work is evolving constantly, and your employees know best how it has affected them and their work. Smartly structured data collection, including surveys, focus groups, and townhalls, can elicit critical feedback from leadership, staff members, unions, customers, and other critical stakeholders. And remember that, as your work ecosystem moves to a more virtualized model, the needs of your customers and partners *also* may be changing. What are *their* plans? How have their work practices changed? What are the impacts on services you provide?

- **Educate your teams on the new rules of engagement.** The "normal" workday has changed and may look different for everyone in the organization. This can lead to confusion and inconsistent work habits. To establish a baseline level of uniformity, it's vital to invest

time in communicating new rules and expectations for hybrid work. Regular townhall meetings, online guidance, and Q&A sessions can help the workforce navigate the changes.

How can I adapt the physical workplace to meet the needs of hybrid work?

The new workplace is wherever work is done, whether it's at the office, at home, in a café, or a coworking space.[40]

Many agencies are rightsizing their office spaces based on the changing needs of the work and their workers. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA), for instance, is using survey instruments to better understand the office space needs of its component agencies in view of available telework options.[41] Based on such surveys, the agencies have begun modifying their office spaces to support collaboration, creativity, and a sense of community.

For the past few years, the UK government's estate and workplace planning strategy has involved moving civil servants out of central London to a series of regional hubs, cutting office costs and supporting more flexible, cross-departmental working practices. The Government Property Agency has opened four hubs so far, with 13 more in the planning and development stage. Survey responses from 26,000 government employees who teleworked during the pandemic have helped the agency better understand employee needs. The

> **"It's never a good idea just to impose. It's better to collaborate and make sure employees have a voice, because their health is at stake. Their mental well-being is at stake here."**
>
> — *George Scott, NASA deputy inspector general*

agency plans to update its workplace design to facilitate cross-departmental collaboration, with flexible workstations, modern IT and audio-visual tools, and meeting and workshop areas that can be reconfigured as requirements change.[42]

There are several ways in which government leaders can consider how the physical space adds value and invest in the footprint that is set up to support hybrid work:

- **Empower employees and teams to work where they're most productive**, while holding them accountable for results.

- **Tailor workplace policies and procedures to the types of work being done.** Not all jobs have the same needs or opportunities for telework.

- **Explore alternative workplace options** beyond the office *or* home, such as satellite offices, shared workplaces, and commercial sites. The US General Service Administration (GSA) has contracted with workspace companies to provide flexible coworking services for federal employees.[43]

- **Design and reconfigure spaces with employee engagement in mind**, to attract talent and create a human-centric environment. Establish guiding principles for the use of enclosures, daylight, and common versus private spaces to optimize employee engagement *and* the use of space. Work areas should be designed to promote the collaboration and engagement that are likely to be their primary purpose. Design considerations should also be made from a truly hybrid perspective keeping in mind the nature of both in-office and virtual work (figure 4).

- **Ensure that collaborative spaces promote creativity and innovation for in-person *and* virtual attendees.**

Dedicated office spaces equipped with interactive displays and videoconferencing software allow employees to connect and share ideas regardless of their geographical location.

- **Reduce the amount of vacant office space and establish multiuser "hoteling spaces."** The state of Michigan, for example, has created a central hoteling space any agency can use to provide flexible workspaces for its field workers.[44]

THE US AIR FORCE: BUILDING THE "OFFICE OF THE FUTURE"

A few months into pandemic-induced telework, the US Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center (AFIMSC) realized its mission could be accomplished while working from anywhere. This led its leaders to rethink the nature of work and prompted the launch of the "Office of the Future" (O2F) project. The center began remodeling its physical office environment to support flexibility, innovation, and greater collaboration. Its aim is to replace individual cubicles with modern work and collaborative spaces. When finished, the areas will feature open, café-style seating that allows employees to meet and collaborate with coworkers. Some cubicles will be converted into hoteling stations.

AFIMSC also is investing in smart technology systems to facilitate its work-from-anywhere model. The center has shared photographs and videos with its employees to help them understand the new office arrangements and solicited their feedback for improvements. Once O2F is implemented, AFIMSC plans to gather data to highlight how the hybrid model has saved it time, money, and resources and improved the overall employee experience.[46]

FIGURE 4

Hybrid workspace use and design considerations

	Colocated	**Virtual**
Space use	• Team-building events • All-hands meetings • Networking and socialization • Trust- and relationship-building events • Whiteboarding and cocreation/innovation • Client briefings and presentations • Cross-fertilization of ideas and best practices • New hire orientation	• Participating in status meetings • Asynchronous collaboration • Work that does not require interaction with customers, clients, or colleagues • Creating, editing, and reviewing documents • Work done primarily at a desk or online • Deep work (requiring distraction-free concentration) • Individual tasks not requiring collaboration
Design consideration	▼ Fewer dedicated, private cubes and offices ▲ More collaboration spaces and team rooms ▲ Workplace design that promotes creativity, collaboration, and problem solving	▲ Reliable, secure internet connection ▲ Workplace design promoting comfort, productivity ▲ Appropriate collaboration tools and technologies ▲ Supporting peripherals/devices as needed (e.g., monitor, external speaker, printer, whiteboard)

Source: Deloitte analysis.

• **Optimize home workspaces.** Many organizations are providing workers with an allowance and equipment to outfit their home workspaces to better support their work, whether it's ergonomic furniture or a second monitor. GSA is exploring a "home office in a box" concept and giving workers the option to furnish their home offices with the equipment needed to continue teleworking.[45]

How do I provide my workers with the tools and technologies needed to work effectively in the digital space?

The mass adoption of digital technology has created two additional workplaces operating in parallel with the physical office. First, there's the *personal* digital workplace, comprising the tools and technologies of the individual's personal environment; it's where employees work on the tasks for which they're solely responsible. In addition, there are *shared* digital workplaces, in which workers interact with teammates and the broader organization. While each worker has a single personal digital workplace, they can be involved in a number of shared digital spaces, one for each team or workgroup with which they interact.

Organizations must ensure that workers are able to do their best work in both types of digital workplace. Here's what agencies can consider:

• **Ensure seamless collaboration**, which is vital to the success of a hybrid work environment. Equip workers with the right

digital technologies—videoconferencing software, digital brainstorming and real-time whiteboarding applications, shared folders, and chat/messaging tools.

- **Build digital competence.** The tools aren't enough. Invest in helping teams build the competence they need to use digital tools and technologies effectively. This can be done through training sessions, video tutorials, and FAQ documents.

- **Think about how technology can support wellness.** Something as simple as autoscheduling routine emails for core work hours rather than nights and weekends can help workers enjoy their downtime more.

- **Identify long-term technology needs to sustain digital work in the future.** Assess your digital infrastructure and determine what upgrades might be needed, and when. Assess how needs may vary across teams depending on the nature of their jobs.

- **Understand the negative effects of the digital workplace and minimize them.** "Zoom fatigue" is a common problem in virtual office spaces. Use video sparingly and return sometimes to good old-fashioned voice-only phone calls; research suggests they can be more effective for problem-solving.[47]

- **Use apps and tools that help workers focus and establish boundaries in a distraction-filled digital workspace.** Studies show it takes an average 23 minutes to return to a task when our focus is interrupted by a notification or message.[48] Many calendar applications, for instance, can identify and schedule blocks of time for uninterrupted, focused work and silence notifications in these periods.

- **Ensure cybersecurity**, a particularly important consideration with a distributed, remote workforce. Limit teleconference and collaboration tools to vetted and centrally managed ones. Revisit policies on data-sharing, privacy, encryption, and file-sharing, and review leading practices for telework. Some organizations have invested in long-term solutions such as customized collaborative platforms. The US Navy, for example, has launched its own secure solution called Flank Speed and is moving more than 400,000 employees to the new platform.[49]

Looking ahead: Making hybrid *work*

Hybrid work can be hard to get right, but leadership can maximize its chances for success. The greatest success factor is *active and visible sponsorship from leaders*. When leaders are aligned around a common vision, they can convey a powerful message to drive change.

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Acknowledgments

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