Tips to balancing the complexities of a hybrid workforce

By Sonia Tshabalala   23 May 2022

Hybrid working arrangements are set to be a part of the future of work as small and medium businesses (SMBs) try to strike the right balance between flexibility and productivity in their teams. Many SMBs hope they can get the best of both worlds: the cost-savings and flexibility of remote work while nurturing talent and building a strong culture by bringing people to the office for some of the time.

Image source: Yan Krukov from Pexels

But as much as businesses hope to reach an ideal middle ground by adopting a hybrid of remote and office work, getting the balance right is challenging. Indeed, it may be more difficult to get a hybrid working environment right than to opt for a purely remote or full-time in-office work model. The good news is that after two-and-a-half years of pandemic, we are developing a better understanding of the challenges of hybrid work and how to overcome them.

1. Stress and burnout

While flexible work is wonderful in theory, it can turn into a stressful compromise between employee and employer. As hybrid working models become more common, research shows workers report that hybrid is more taxing and emotionally draining than fully remote and full-time office-based work.

One of the major challenges of hybrid work is that people constantly need to switch context – one day, they're working from home, the next from the office. The lack of routine and structure can be stressful for some people. Many employees also tend to work longer hours or are always online because they feel the need to be present all the time. In addition, they don't completely escape the stress and traffic of commuting to work.

Success factor: The challenge of employee burnout can be addressed by providing decisive leadership and clear policies around hybrid working models. People should know when and where to report to the office, when they may work remotely, and which hours they need to be present or available. They should also be encouraged to unplug

outside working hours unless there is an emergency. Managers should constantly check in with their teams to ensure they're not feeling overwhelmed or isolated.

2. Inconsistent employee experiences

Today, most companies will have a mix of people who either work from the office, some who work from home and the office, and perhaps some who work completely remotely. Ensuring a consistent work experience for these groups of preferences can be complex, but failing to do so can cause resentment or disengagement in the work culture between those who work mostly remotely and those who work exclusively from the office.

Research shows that people who work in the office every day might have better access to management in some workplaces. This could result in them being more likely to receive promotions and recognition. Remote and hybrid workers might feel isolated and disengaged unless care is taken to include them in opportunities to network with colleagues and receive mentoring.

Without the right tools and processes in place, some colleagues may struggle to make their voices heard when there is a mix of office and remote team members in a meeting. They could even be excluded from important decisions and meetings. Conversely, those who are expected to be present in the office for more of their working week could begrudge the flexibility their remote and hybrid colleagues enjoy.

Success factor: Again, companies need to adopt policies that address the potential gap between remote and office work experiences. Policy guidance about who may work from home, how often and under which circumstances needs to be fair, clear and consistent. To ensure inclusion in a world of flexible work, companies should create opportunities for frequent face-to-face contact between remote and office teams. They also need to ensure they design outcome-based performance management metrics that are fair to all workforce segments. Another tip is to work closely with employees to ensure they are not disadvantaged by their remote work setup, such as helping them with mobile data or a comfortable desk.

3. Breakdowns in collaboration

Collaboration is complex when people work in a mix of remote and office-bound settings. Those who aren't in the office miss those watercooler moments when they would bond with their colleagues. It's also too easy for misunderstandings to creep in when relationships are largely built over Zoom or Teams. This can lead to breakdowns in communication and culture that inhibit team performance.

Success factor: Each company needs to provide guidelines about how office-bound, hybrid, and fully remote people will collaborate. They should guide how often people meet, which face-to-face events they should attend, and how remote colleagues can contribute to meetings with a mix of in-person and virtual attendees. It's important to find the right collaboration tools for the company's culture to streamline communication. Many organisations find

asynchronous collaboration tools – like instant messaging – invaluable, which give everyone a chance to share ideas, even if they're not confident enough to interject in a meeting.

Hybrid is the future of work

Hybrid work improves the lives of SMB owners and employees, but getting it right is far from easy. Innovative people companies will design flexible work strategies, transforming the way they acquire, engage, and manage their people to cater to the nuances of a world where work-from-home and work-from-the-office have their place.

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