The Collaborative Office: Reconnecting the Remote Workforce

by Paul Browne and Barnaby Miller

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP ARTICLE | 2022

Executive Summary

Hybrid work is here to stay and the majority of the workforce now expects to perform at least part of their work remotely. The shift to hybrid work has resulted in an unexpected boost to the productivity of workers that organizations wish to maintain. However, there is concern that long-term hybrid working has negatively impacted worker engagement and is hindering collaborative innovation. In order to avoid siloing and increase knowledge sharing, businesses may want to consider reconfiguring their existing office spaces as open, inclusive, hyper-connected, collaborative hubs to reconnect and reengage their remote workers, harnessing the full innovative potential of their hybrid workforce.

INTRODUCTION

Business has evolved and so have workers

The world of business has always moved fast, but in the past three years it has accelerated to a whole new level, with five-year-plans being revised after five months and risk management policies under constant review. While the remote working strategy may have been deployed to support operational continuity throughout 2020, hybrid work has since become the preferred model. As of Q1 2022, 42% had a hybrid schedule, and 39% worked entirely from home,[i] with "fewer than three in 10 now preferring to work completely in-person." [ii] Workers now expect at least a proportion of the weekly workload to be completed remotely. While some organizations may be eager for a full-scale return to office as part of a transition back to more traditional management practices, there is the opportunity for businesses to harness additional operational benefits across the entire work from anywhere (WFA) landscape by reimagining the roles of on-site and remote.

"It is essential that we have reliable and productive ways to help employees still working out of the traditional office to continue to do business efficiently. We are working on better technologies and solutions to enable customers to work from anywhere and support their business needs in many categories."

– Nick Lombardi, Strategic Account Manager – Print, Promo & Apparel

A Space to Create

The need to foster innovation without disrupting these new boosts in productivity is made all the more challenging by the nature of hybrid work itself. Business leaders "face an atmosphere of ambiguity while managing in a hybrid environment. They have limited visibility into workloads and processes," and "have fewer opportunities for impromptu two-way conversations." [vii] This reduction in unscheduled interactions between management and colleagues has, for many organizations, increased issues of siloing and the division and compartmentalization of teams, leading to the "under-utilization of knowledge and blocking of cross-enterprise initiatives." [viii] A major aspect of the worker reengagement process will be to find new methods of locational task designation allowing management to create opportunities for 'human moments' that can reinforce a sense of belonging and team membership, and "organizations that fail to grasp the new intentionality required to define the role of the office risk missing out on the true benefits of hybrid work." [ix]

In order to reverse the reduction in knowledge sharing and cross-pollinated ideation, the need has never been greater for organizations to redefine their office spaces as reconnection points for teams. While the new hybrid worker may not wish to return to the office full-time, the majority feel that there are tangible on-site working benefits for collaboration. "61% of employees believe better collaboration would result in greater business growth opportunities." [x] Workers want to connect and create collaboratively, but in order to do so they will need both the space and the tools for innovation.

Interconnected Integration

Businesses may want to consider reconfiguration of their office spaces to be more open, supporting greater in-person collaborative innovation and interdepartmental knowledge sharing. However, while management continues its process of schedule adaptation for both solo and group work, these spaces may also seek to support virtual interactions with off-site colleagues in real-time. "Organizations should challenge themselves to look at the role of collaboration technology and ways that can help remote workers feel included in office discussions and create a richer experience for everybody." [xi] The deployment of hyper-connected tools can boost businesses' abilities to foster innovation, creating a hybrid collaborative space that "invigorates and promotes creativity, trust, and growth among teams" and gives workers "the chance to create better outcomes [and] optimize impact." [xii] A continued investment in evolving communication and conferencing tech, supporting unconstrained collaboration regardless of individual colleague location, may help further unlock the potential of hybrid teams.

CONCLUSION
Hyper-Connecting Hybridity

To support the increased level of productivity that remote and often siloed work has delivered, fostering collaboration in hybrid working landscape is important, and "54% of leaders are currently redesigning meeting spaces for hybrid work, or plan to in the year ahead." [xiii] This transformation of the traditional office space into an open and inclusive hub for knowledge sharing and ideation, further enhanced with hyper-connected collaborative tools, can help businesses to reconnect their remote workforce, unlocking the full innovative potential of the collaborative office.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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