

5 Components of Optimal Hybrid Work

Bruce E. Roselle

As my client companies are continuing to determine what the future should be regarding the work from home or work from the office question, the primary considerations revolve around productivity, cost, and retention of talent. Most are leaning toward a hybrid of flexible time at the office and home.

It seems that, due to the pandemic lockdowns when professionals were working primarily from home, flexibility and freedom are now keenly important to current and potential employees. Consequently, this has become a key concern for employers when seeking to attract and retain talent.

The top reasons employees give for wanting a hybrid work schedule are usually these:

Flexible schedules

Being able to choose when they work in a 24-hour day to maximize their productive energy and handle other life responsibilities is highly desirable to most. This does not mean, and should not mean, that they work constantly, with no clear differentiation between work and personal time. Rather, it means that work will likely be completed in a much more individualized manner. As increasing numbers of companies adopt hybrid working approaches, flexibility in where and when people work will become the norm, and therefore the expectation of most workers.

Reduced commuting time, expense

For many people, commuting to and from the office during morning and evening rush hours can be the most stressful parts of the day. A hybrid model, working at times from home and other times from the office, as well as choosing commute times to the office that are outside the times of most traffic, will greatly reduce the stress of commuting. It will likely also save money, with gas prices ever increasing, due to reduced mileage on the family car or reduced costs for parking or train and bus options.

Reduced wardrobe wear and tear

Being able to wear lounge pants, shorts, or jeans when working from home helps save money on replacement clothing over the course of the year. Saving the clothes that need to be laundered and dry-cleaned for in-office hours helps protect the budget. And eating lunch at home, rather than near the office, is an additional savings.

The optimal arrangement. The question top of mind for employers is how to best arrange the working structure for their employees going forward, now that they have tasted working from home and found that it has several advantages. What I hear and read from organizations is that most are seeking to create a structure that continues to keep employees protected from COVID variations, utilizes office space for at least a couple of days a week, ensures that the work is getting done on a timely basis, and appeals to their top talent.

There appears to be a good level of agreement that the optimal arrangement going forward should include some or all these components:

1. **Flexible schedule for in-office time.** Working from home fulltime, as we discovered during the pandemic lockdowns, is not optimal for psychological health. Too many people working from home reported feeling disconnected and isolated, as well as finding it difficult to create boundaries between work and home duties. Consequently, a hybrid of home and office work that is worked out flexibly will likely contribute to higher levels of productivity than just home or just office work time.
2. **Technology for a seamless home experience.** Organizations should budget for home office supplies, furniture, and equipment to ensure an enterprise-grade network technology experience. There is nothing more frustrating than a network that cuts out, distorts the audio, freezes the visual, or reboots during an important Teams or Zoom meeting. This could include an internal audit of how employees use their in-home technology, what works well for them, and what training could help create a more seamless experience. This also means that internal IT leaders must provide adequate access to the network/cloud applications and ensure security.
3. **Regular manager check-ins.** Employees need to feel connected, and one way to do that is to make sure that manager-employee touch-base meetings continue to be scheduled weekly or biweekly. This can be in-person when both are in the office, or virtually.
4. **Virtual meeting recharge.** Even before the pandemic when employees worked 100 percent at the office, many reported needing a break from the relentless time pressure of back-to-back meetings. This gets multiplied when the meetings are continuous and virtual, with no chance to focus farther away than the computer screen or to walk down the hall to get to the next meeting. Smart employers and employees will work out margin between meetings, as well as breaks during the day to recharge.
5. **Support for employee health and engagement.** Encourage employees to get involved in fitness programs, take stress management seriously, and self-monitor their addictive tendencies like alcohol use and over-eating. Continuing to offer happy hours, holiday parties, and social gatherings in-person or virtual to build camaraderie can help health and engagement, too.