A Happier Hybrid: Managing The Risks of Hybrid Work

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You likely worry about how hybrid work affects your nonprofit's employees.

Then you probably get pulled right into the day's crises or priority tasks.

Crafting a smart hybrid work approach that fits your nonprofit sounds daunting. But excluding digital security, the big challenges of hybrid work center around office culture, productivity, and collaboration. Simple actions can make a big difference to improve your work environment. Those actions can make your team happier and address risks around excessive turnover, inefficient work, and distraction from the mission.

Most organizations where staffs have the option to work from home allow them to spend two or three days a week there and report to the office for the other workdays, Nick Bloom, William D. Eberle Professor of Economics at Stanford University, said in a recent webinar on the anatomy of work hosted by technology provider Asana.

In-office work presents a strong opportunity for collaboration. Nonprofits should make the most of it with careful planning on in-office schedules that maximize teams' ability to work together.

Experts urge organizations to measure and incentivize the outcomes they want (for example, does your nonprofit want to serve 20% more clients this year?). That reduces pressure on employees to spend long hours online (or in the office) and lets them manage their time to achieve those goals.

Organizations should also communicate the expectation that employees take breaks from work, and nonprofit leaders should model this behavior to show that the organization really allows it.

On the Asana webinar, cognitive neuroscientist and productivity expert Dr. Sahar Yousef recommended that employees take "macro," "meso," and "micro" breaks to fully disengage from work. Macro breaks consist of a half-day or daylong break from work once a month – a day at the beach or a hike with your phone on Do Not Disturb. Meso breaks might be a weekly break of two to four hours where you fully disengage and take part in an activity that keeps your mind from wandering to work. And in "micro" breaks, you step away from work for a few minutes each day and walk the dog, chat with a friend, or play with your kids, untethered to your phone.

Hybrid work presents challenges for getting new employees connected to the organization's culture and maintaining that connection. *Risk Management Intelligence* recommends onboarding in person and holding key collaborative meetings in person where possible. And invest more time up front in the hiring and assessment process to make sure a new hire is the right fit for both employer and employee, RMI says.

Many employees who worked from home during the pandemic's early stages demonstrated higher productivity. But some teams found that productivity decreased. If that happened at your organization, identify the problem through an audit, Yousef advised. Do you need to communicate clearer expectations about the team's deliverables and deadlines? Do employees get so many instant messaging notifications they can't focus?

Working with distributed teams across different locations can present logistical challenges for collaboration and innovation. Consultancy McKinsey recommends that organizations commit to test how well their internal processes work in a hybrid environment and learn from the test. That might mean adapting to a new process relatively quickly. Among organizations that lead on productivity, 16 percent constantly tweak their processes as the environment changes, McKinsey found.

The best strategy to manage the risks of hybrid work is one your team has likely used in areas where it excels: set and reiterate clear expectations, try new things, and adapt quickly when your plan doesn't work as expected. If you apply this approach to hybrid work at your nonprofit, you should be able to spend more time on your mission, and learn something along the way.

Rachel Sams is Consultant and Staff Writer at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She enjoys a micro break in her backyard. She would love to discuss the biggest challenges your nonprofit faces with hybrid work at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.