How to Maximize the Benefits of Hybrid Work

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I was recently at a dinner party where, inevitably, we found ourselves talking about work. One guest raised his frustration with his company's hybrid work policy, saying he feels doubly taxed by the challenges of managing people in person and managing remote workers. "Sometimes it's just too much," he said.

The intricate steps of the return-to-work dance have not been easy to navigate. Managing work in the post pandemic era begs the question of whether to offer a hybrid option and, if you already have one, whether your hybrid option is working. It calls for nonprofit leaders to examine not just our personal style of interacting with others but also every aspect of how our organizations interface with our people. It requires us to evaluate the best modes of communication to match specific situations. It also demands that we develop a level of fluency in video etiquette and sensory patience around unexpected interruptions by technology glitches, partners, children, pets, and more.

Managed poorly, hybrid work can create the risk that you will lose talented people with valued institutional knowledge, managerial talents or prized technical skills. Managed well, hybrid work can allow you to operate with flexibility and effectiveness, two attributes that help nonprofits and teams thrive. Whether you are considering changing work location requirements for your organization for the first time or re-evaluating earlier venue decisions, continue reading for guidelines and practical tips to help you mitigate the risks of hybrid work.

How We Got Here

In the last five years, how and where we do our work has changed dramatically. Before the pandemic, most of us worked physically onsite at our employer's place of business. In the current employment ecosystem, a fully in-person work environment is associated with these benefits:

- Ease of personal and professional connection
- Ease of supervision and coaching
- Opportunity for in-person services

After plenty of early glitches and a steep learning curve, the pandemic drove an exodus for many nonprofit teams to a fully remote work environment, which is often associated with these benefits:

- Improved productivity
- More flexible schedules
- Stronger work/life balance
- Time/money savings on commuting
- Money saved on office space.

After sheltering in place restrictions eased, employers and employees grappled with the fact that work environments that had become increasingly digital. File rooms, office storage areas and even private workspaces—once commonplace in a modern office—became relics. Nonprofit teams faced uncertainty around whether it was essential to fully return to the physical workplace, as well as how to approach it without pulling the plug on the flexibility that teams came to appreciate during the pandemic.

News outlets have reported extensively on tensions about blanket “return to the office” mandates by large employers like Dell, Amazon, and the U.S. federal government. That’s because, in recent years, the concept of hybrid work has evolved from novel to customary. There’s even a definitional framework for discussing the different types of hybrid work, which includes:

- Flexible Hybrid: employees choose their hours and place of work each day, driven by the type of work and need for independence and focus
- Fixed Hybrid: specific days for in-office work and other days for remote
- Office First Hybrid: in-office with only a few remote days per month
- Remote First Hybrid: remote with only a few in office days per month that are sometimes labeled as Collaboration days
- Role-based Hybrid: team members schedule their locations depending on their team responsibilities.

Creating/Reviewing Your Hybrid Policy

If you are evaluating (or re-evaluating) the decision to be fully in-person, fully remote, or hybrid as a nonprofit team, we recommend that you first pause and reflect. Remind yourself that you are not alone; virtually every nonprofit leadership team is grappling with how, when, and where they should do their work. Ground yourself and your team in what has not changed in your workplace, such as:

- The relevance of your nonprofit’s mission
- The need for all staff to juggle many priorities, to collaborate, and to learn on the job
- The importance of strong, trusting relationships in your workplace
- The many challenges related to leading and supporting unique human beings.

Next, take a deep dive into your hybrid policy as employees at your nonprofit understand and experience it. Knowing the expectations of your employees helps shape a more effective policy. Use surveys, one-to-one interviews, or small focus groups to glean a clearer picture of what your employees think about hybrid work, as well as where they agree and disagree on issues.

Use the process to find out what their preferred communication tools and collaboration platforms are, and why.

Next, review performance expectations, metrics, and evaluation processes with a focus on how, when, and where these processes occur in your organizational workflow. Continue your journey and evaluate job roles. Not every role fits perfectly into a hybrid model. Review position duties to see if they align with what your employees do each day. Assess which activities can thrive remotely and which might need a physical office presence. Pay attention to the scope of positions, equipment and workspace responsibilities, and any time-of-day scheduling requirements for specific activities.

As you create or revise your policy, start working on a communication plan about the change. How, when, and where you roll out the new policy is as important as the policy itself. Resolve to be transparent about the process and clear about expectations for policy implementation. Will you consider changes as feedback is processed? Or do you want to test the policy for six months and then review feedback and consider changes? Remember that jobs are not static; the nature of work changes as staff leave and join the team, projects and priorities shift, workflows are re-jiggered, new systems adopted, and so forth. Expect that various things will change in your workplace. Adopt a schedule to revisit your policy in the near future so you can make practical adjustments along the way.

Check Your Tech

Nonprofit teams enjoy the double-edged blessing/curse of having many ways to communicate and share information. As your employees move between onsite and offsite work locations, the following steps can help you keep your team connected, your technology fresh, and your data secure:

- Find out which communication tools and collaboration platforms your employees prefer
- Assess your current IT options to discover what modes work well for what types of communication
- Identify any gaps or areas for upgrades to support seamless transitions for your employees between in person and remote work
- Invest in technology that will keep everyone connected and productive
- Make sure employees know and follow your protocols for data security and confidentiality wherever they sit

Suggestions for Managing in a Hybrid Environment

Whether you've managed people in a hybrid environment before or not, it is worth remembering that systems don't run the organization, people do. Use the most appropriate methods available to support employees in hybrid environments at every step along their employment journey. This can start at the beginning of the relationship by reviewing your hiring and assessment process. New hires are more likely to be the right fit for your hybrid workplace when you build these materials and activities into your search process:

- Detailed job descriptions that delineate the guidelines for hybrid work schedules
- Structured interviews with discussion of hybrid work policies and practices
- Multiple interview rounds including at least one in person interview, if possible
- Skills assessments including testing of a required job skill while online, if possible.

Onboarding is the next element in building a successful hybrid work environment. You generally have about 44 days for a new employee to decide whether they want to stay with you long term. We recommend that you onboard your new hybrid-based employees in person, if possible. If you can't, don't overwhelm an enthusiastic new hire with endless Zoom orientation sessions. Pay attention to meeting cadence and the organization of content within your orientation. Try to match the pace and length of your meetings to the content you are providing.

When addressing technically dense material, schedule smaller chunks of time with intermittent breaks. It often helps to schedule longer sessions for training activities that require hands-on engagement. It is also important to plan several timeslots that are less structured in format to provide an opportunity for a new employee to get to know colleagues and learn more about your nonprofit's culture and core values.

As you develop longer-term working relationships with hybrid employees, continue to pay attention to the quality and quantity of your time together. For instance, if you operate with an open-door policy when employees are onsite, consider having a "stop by the office" policy when employees are online.

Share your calendar and encourage employees to make impromptu online video conferencing calls when your schedule is open, and do the same with them. For regularly scheduled gatherings, practice holding mindful meetings. We all know how quickly eyes can glaze over, especially in online meetings. Make thoughtful choices about which meetings are online or in person. Routine weekly one-to-ones or team check-ins are often well-suited to online platforms. Deeper dive collaboration meetings and brainstorming sessions may be better in person.

In addition to content and location, be aware of employee scheduling restraints. In addition, prepare agendas for your meetings and engage in some realistic planning to make sure that the agendas can be completed. Don’t be afraid to switch things up on occasion by gamifying some of the tasks for your online meetings or starting with a thought-provoking quotation.

Finally, wherever your meeting is held and whatever the content of the meeting is, understand that employees are not just relating to you and each other. They are also in a relationship with your nonprofit, and sometimes team members in a hybrid environment can feel a little disconnected from the big picture. A shared commitment to the vision, mission, and values of your nonprofit is very likely the main reason they are there. Knowing and honoring this, it is helpful to hold space in your meetings for discussions about where the organization is headed and how the work of your employees supports that vision and mission.

One of the most important skills for successful managers in any type of workplace is our ability to listen. Active listening means fully concentrating on a speaker, understanding their message, providing feedback, and retaining information. This allows us to effectively grasp the needs, concerns, and perspectives of our team members, fostering better communication and building trust.

Active listening is not just hearing words but also actively engaging with the speaker to avoid misunderstandings and build a stronger relationship. While this is equally important in online and in person settings, in a hybrid work environment, employees are likely to “chat” using Slack, Teams Chat, Chat on ZoomWorkplace or an equivalent feature on other platforms. These chat spaces often operate as a virtual office for your organization;the place where employees spend a significant portion of their working hours. They likely engage with you in the thread of a chat conversation not because of your unavailability for a phone call or in person meeting but rather because they *choose to digitally chat instead of* a phone call, video conference call, or in person meeting.

Consider developing an active “chat listening” toolkit that runs in parallel to those you use in person and includes:

- focusing on fully reading messages
- taking time to understand the sender’s meaning
- asking clarifying questions
- paraphrasing key points to confirm understanding
- using empathetic language, and
- paying attention to the tone and emotional cues conveyed through emojis and punctuation.

Our advice is similar for video conferencing calls:

Minimize distractions: Turn off device-based notifications, close unnecessary tabs, and find a quiet space to minimize interruptions.

Maintain eye contact: Look directly at the camera to simulate in-person eye contact.

Use positive body language: Sit up straight, nod occasionally, track the speaker, and use facial expressions to convey interest.

Ask clarifying questions: Respond with thoughtful questions to ensure comprehension and encourage further explanation.

Paraphrase and summarize: Repeat key points in your own words to confirm understanding and show you’re actively listening.

Take notes: Jot down important details to remember key information from the conversation.

Avoid interrupting: Let the speaker finish their thoughts before responding.

Stay present and engaged: Focus solely on the conversation, avoiding multitasking or checking other devices.

Acknowledge feelings: Validate the speaker's emotions by expressing empathy or understanding.

Regardless of workflow location, the most valuable resource in any nonprofit is its people. Make time and take time to know them. This can be a little more challenging in hybrid work settings, but it is not impossible. In fact, it is essential and it starts with trust. A recent blog post from The Center for Leadership Studies states that "When employees trust their colleagues and leaders, it fosters ethical decision-making, promotes loyalty, and increases the willingness to remain with a company. Trust also plays a vital role in reducing stress levels and hostility in the work environment. Additionally, trust helps overcome resistance to change. Developing and nurturing trust within the workplace is essential for a healthy and productive work environment."

It is no surprise that the top recommendation we can make for managing in a hybrid work environment is to always work to cultivate trust by being a trusting leader. Trust the talented humans who bring your mission to life; you won't regret it.

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