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Hybrid How-Tos: Managing An 'Enormous, Fundamental Shift'

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The twin issues facing workplaces going forward are trust and tech, and few scenarios showcase that more than a meeting.

Technology and trust. One functional and rational, the other one of the most fundamental human emotions, something that bonds us together. Those are the two things needed to make the hybrid office work.

While workplaces begin adjusting to hybrid office arrangements, corporations and managers need to begin adjusting their expectations and get ready for an “enormous, fundamental shift,” said Gartner Chief of Research Brian Kropp, who specializes in human resources.

According to surveys among larger corporations conducted by the research and consulting firm, the hybridization of work is taking place across nearly every company; just 5% plan to be remote, and another 5% will be fully in person, leaving the vast majority of corporate America, and those working within it, to figure out how to rethink how work works.

This isn't just a question of making sure everyone can join videoconferences or keep their online calendar up to date. It will change how managers interact with talent, how work gets evaluated, and whether talent stays or leaves.

According to conversation designer and executive coach Daniel Stillman, author of the book *Good Talk*, managers need to work with stakeholders to design a new work environment and come to terms with whether they trust their employees or need to babysit them all the time.

“Don't let constraints, like having a large office, make you cling to the old ways instead of trying something new,” Stillman said. “The best talent has higher expectations now. If you believe your team needs to be babysat, you haven't hired people smarter than you, or the problems you're solving aren't worth solving.”

The twin issues facing workplaces going forward are trust and tech, and few scenarios showcase that more than a meeting. While the pandemic work-from-home shift pushed many to embrace and utilize Zoom more than they'd ever done in the past, a simple video chat solution is far from enough.

It's a daunting task to run a hybrid meeting, said Karin M. Reed, founder of Speaker Dynamics and co-author of the book *Suddenly Virtual: Making Remote Meetings Work*. She suggested leaders start with focus and preparation and bring back agendas and more organized discussions to make sure everyone can follow and contribute.

“Success in hybrid world is about trust and communication,” Reed said. “A mindset shift is needed to make these hybrid meetings work. There needs to be a level of awareness for those leading and attending meetings, and practices like uploading transcriptions and video of meetings can be useful.”

Presence is key, especially for those who are remote, and requires investment in better meeting technology. Reed suggested giving remote workers good webcams, and mics and audio gear that allows them to be heard and seen clearly in an office meeting room, which itself should be fitted out with better AV components.

“Managers need to get comfortable with technology,” said Scott Dust, a management professor at the Farmer School of Business, Miami University, and the chief research officer at Cloverleaf. “This goes beyond simply understanding how to use Zoom or the like.”



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Meeting rooms need to be upgraded to make sure remote team members can collaborate.

Managers need to become fluent in collaboration tools like Trello or Slack, said Dust, and start getting up to speed on the myriad tools out there that will help them manage a hybrid workforce, including those that allow them and their teams to track who will be where, and who's working at home or in the office at all times.

Many organizations, however, can be stubborn and slow to adopt new tech, Stillman said. So many teams and organizations have defaulted to video chat tools during the past year because they think it's the best solution, but many of these solutions were designed years ago as more one-to-one or one-to-team tools, not for hybrid collaboration. Others have been resistant to other tools, such as online whiteboards, due to fear of cybersecurity and safety. It's important to adopt these technologies as part of a larger push to make hybrid meetings more productive and useful.

“Managers need to design work so smaller groups of people can be trusted to get to results without having to have 12-plus people on a call listening in and wasting time,” Stillman said.

But tech upgrades will pale in comparison to the trust challenge. Gartner's Kropp said that as hybrid models evolve, the job of a manager will evolve from more task-based management to encouraging talent and helping employees manage their work and relationships with teammates, more like a guidance counselor, especially as work and life outside work blur.

Kropp said Gartner research on this switch, from traditional manager to a more empathetic, emotional leader, will present a significant challenge. Gartner researchers believe up to 30% of current managers don't have the skills and capabilities right now to evolve into this new role, and roughly a quarter simply don't want to try. This suggests significant investments in training are required, as well as investment in recruiting, and a chance to promote more nontraditional leaders.

Many of a manager's day-to-day tasks may need to pivot. They'll be evaluating the same skills and performance, but now they'll be evaluating how well someone manages a presentation when the audience is both in-person and virtual. Dust also argues that in a hybrid environment, companies won't have the luxury of bungling the onboarding experience for new hires.

“They need to be even more purposeful,” he said. “Everyone on their team needs to spend, at minimum, 30 minutes, understanding who they are, their role and how they work. This is in addition to the training-centered onboarding experiences.”

The hybrid switch will take years, not months, to master, so companies need to embrace a flexible, and learn-as-you-go approach.

“A lot of companies think they need to create specific policies for hybrid, but that's inherently inflexible,” Kropp said. “You need to create a set of philosophies, a Ten Commandments, a Bill of Rights, whatever metaphor makes sense, to communicate to managers how the company is thinking about the problem.”

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