

Seven ways to keep your workforce happy and engaged in a post-pandemic world.



Navigating the Complexities of Hybrid Working

By Stephanie Noland and Tracy Reznik

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, technology took center stage. Organizations were forced to pivot quickly so their employees could operate from home. Did everyone have a laptop, the right VPN or security access, and strong enough WiFi for video meetings? It was a challenge for IT departments to provide those needs for their employee base so quickly, but the pandemic also allowed leaders to pivot their focus toward employee needs such as well-being and productivity.

As we move into the next phase of work, organizations are grappling with a new management challenge: how to handle the new *hybrid* work model that blends in-office and remote work. And as they do, their employees — many of whom don't want to return to the office — are filled with anxiety over “What's next?”

It's a complex problem, but one that doesn't have to be difficult. Telecommuting existed long before COVID-19, and while the term “hybrid working environment” might be fresh and at the forefront of organizational conversations, the model of work isn't much different

than what organizations previously practiced. Before the pandemic, many companies operated in a hybrid environment without formalized processes. Employees often worked across multiple buildings or from home when necessary — whether it was to care for a sick child, meet a contractor, or take a “break” from the office. The pandemic simply accelerated our ability to do remote work *well*, while challenging the popular misconception among management that working from home was unproductive and wasteful.

For nearly two-thirds of American workers (63 percent),¹ the pandemic resulted in a titanic shift in professional priorities. Flexibility has become table stakes — a deal-breaker as companies navigate the tricky waters of requiring workers to come back to the office. How should leaders and senior management address the complexities as they map out or evolve their organization's new protocols for blending in-person and remote work?

The answer involves evolving your working model with a keen focus on employee engagement. Engagement is an elusive term that many struggle to define because it isn't just one thing — it has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. At its core, employee engagement is “the emotional attachment employees feel toward their place of work, job role, position within the company, colleagues and culture and the effect this attachment has on well-being and productivity.”² An engaged employee is one who gives their discretionary time back to the company, whereas a satisfied employee will deliver what is expected of them and no more.

The distinction between “satisfied” and “engaged” pays dividends, too: “engaged employees are 44 percent more effective than happy employees” and “every five-point increase in engagement level leads to a three percent increase in revenue.”³

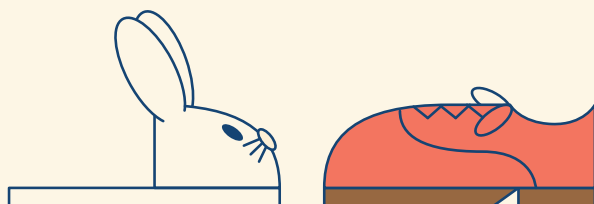
With employee priorities changing, what it takes for employees to be engaged — and remain engaged — is also changing. To give employees the flexibility they crave while still maintaining your company's operations and achieving goals, leaders need to refocus their thinking around three key areas to nurture employee engagement — *choices*, *community*, and *consideration* — and implement seven simple strategies.

Choices

1. PROVIDE WORK LOCATION FLEXIBILITY

Work location flexibility might be the hottest topic of 2021 as companies consider their return-to-office approach, as this is the primary change creating anxiety amongst employee groups. A few years ago, flexibility wasn't even on the radar of employee priorities, but now 50 percent of respondents to a LinkedIn Workforce Confidence Index survey cited flexibility of hours and work location as most important to them.⁴

While some companies are embracing a fully remote work environment and others are trying to return to pre-pandemic norms, the ultimate answer for most companies will be somewhere in between. And the norms will likely evolve even further as the world moves on from the pandemic.



The “right” answer for your company and employees should be driven by balancing your culture with the optimal ways in which you can engage your workforce, whether in person or remote.

For department or functional leaders, it is important that you also have a way to measure and monitor your team's engagement, performance, and/or productivity, no matter where they sit. These will be the indicators you'll need to rely on to determine if your current working model is *working*.

You should also expect your work location model to evolve just as the pandemic itself is evolving. Don't be afraid to try new things — just enter changes with plenty of advance notice to your workforce, clear communications, and creating a path by which employees can provide feedback.

2. REEVALUATE BENEFITS OFFERINGS

The pandemic made all four of the main workplace generations reevaluate priorities of their work and life balance. In addition to work location flexibility, employees are placing more priority on physical and mental health, workplace safety, and company values over traditional benefits like money, perks, and titles.⁵

So what does this mean for your company's benefits and compensation package? It's time to reevaluate and balance spend or savings with levers your company is pursuing in other aspects, such as your real estate plan.

Employees now desire higher degrees of “choices” so each employee can tailor their work experience to what provides value for them. The working parent may desire childcare reimbursement while a single individual may prefer gym membership reimbursement; they both may desire increased access to mental health support to combat the quadrupling rate of adults reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression⁵ — now standing at four in 10 adults. Flexible benefits programs where employees can choose how they prioritize among things like base pay, paid time off, learning opportunities, wellness benefits, and more can help you optimize benefits spend at the same time you maximize employee engagement.

Community

3. REIMAGINE HOW YOU EXPRESS COMPANY CULTURE

Culture is about more than being in a physical office; it's based on your company values — the foundational principles that guide how you operate. Company values generally haven't changed from the pandemic, but how we express those values may have.

For example, companies often have “innovation” as a core value. In practice during “normal” years, this may look like cross-department teams locked in

a conference room with Post-it Notes and markers in a variety of shapes, colors, and sizes. In the strictly remote world, we couldn't do that, but instead had to adapt to online platforms and renditions of "Pat, you're speaking on mute." And, in the hybrid environment, exhibiting the core value of innovation may evolve to starting the conversation online and determining the *right time* to come together in the conference room with Post-its.

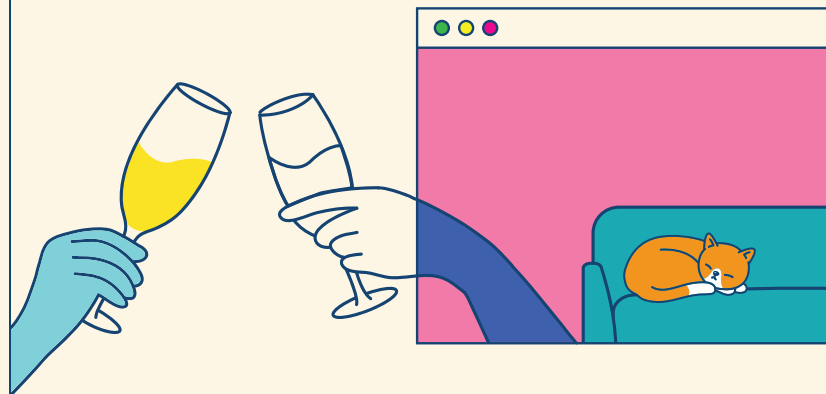
Additionally, to promote culture virtually, you must be clear about what your culture is — not only on paper (inclusive of purpose, vision, core values, and behavior statements) but also the anecdotes that get passed throughout the company. This informal culture is often more powerful than the words on your website or the posters on the walls. For the informal culture to match the formal words, the values and behaviors must be in alignment — walk the walk and talk the talk. This alignment makes it critical to perpetuate a positive culture in *any* environment — remote or in person.

4. CREATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Creating social connections in the workplace can help push organizations over the line from satisfied to engaged, and carries more importance than ever as we all emerge from pandemic isolation. Gallup's Q12 employee engagement survey relies on the question "Do you have a best friend at work?" to measure social connection. And while this is one of the most controversial Q12 questions, the statistics show that employees who answer this in the positive are 37 percent more likely to report that someone at work encourages their development, 28 percent more likely to report that someone at work has talked to them about their progress in the last six months, and 27 percent more likely to report that their opinions seem to count at work.⁶

The pandemic gave us all a unique opportunity to deepen relationships with our coworkers (and even our bosses). Before virtual backgrounds were all the rage, we often got a peek at an individual's home, their pets, their artwork, or books behind them and if we were lucky, we met the people they live with (lovingly badged their "coworkers" if they made a surprise appearance on screen). This professional intimacy has deepened our relationships and created authentic individual connections, even if we went months without seeing someone in person.

Many companies also embraced unique ways to engage and socialize with employees remotely, such as virtual happy hours and mail-to-home experience packages to enable everyone to learn to cook a special dish or paint a picture together. However, creative thinking needs to be applied to merge and evolve pre-pandemic and fully remote social connections, considering a multi-location working environment.



5. EVOLVE THE PHYSICAL SPACES AVAILABLE TO EMPLOYEES

In the prior world, a proper office chair with all the best ergonomics used to be a primary luxury at the office and something not many individuals invested in at home. However, after everyone realized the pandemic wasn't just a few weeks out of the office, home office comfort took off and, in many cases, now far surpasses what's available in the "real" office. A proliferation of comforts, wellness, and productivity enhancers include standing desks, treadmill desks, stability chairs, dual monitors, better headphones, and more. With all these modern comforts, it's not surprising that employees aren't jumping at returning to just a slab desk and that nice chair. You'll need to listen to employee feedback as to which physical space comforts reign supreme at your company to drive engagement, productivity, and wellness.

Reopening offices means we need to evolve the types of physical spaces available (private offices, assigned or hoteling desks, collaboration space, etc.), assess technology needs in those spaces, and provide guidelines to support multi-location working.

Zoom and the rapid evolution of all videoconferencing software revolutionized multi-location meeting execution, but as we adapt to using these technologies in physical spaces, you can expect a new wave of technologies to emerge. As employees return, IT will need to track usage of different spaces and technology (in addition to getting direct employee feedback), including frequency, duration, group size, and performance.

Consideration

6. REEVALUATE TEAM MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

One common concern from leadership about operating in a hybrid environment is how to demonstrate impact or productivity when not face to face. For many leaders, this feels complex but, again, it doesn't have to be. Consider the protocols you may have been using during the pandemic: having deeper conversations on expectations, more intentional check-ins with individuals, and blocking time to review individual or team performance or outcomes. These are some of the fundamental pillars of performance management.

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Performance expectations should be based on defined capabilities (for a role, staff level, or team). If you didn't measure progress against capabilities before, you should now because it's the right thing to do — not because we're now hybrid. Integrating monthly conversations about expectations will help measure performance, as you'll likely see progress — or not.

Think about your team's cadence for communication over the past year. It likely increased during the pandemic to make sure employees still felt connected. This practice should continue, as employees have gotten used to their leaders broadcasting company strategy updates or engaging in regular one-on-one meetings. “Employees are hungry for information and connection and have become dependent on both interpersonal and broadcast communications to maintain clarity. Leaders have turned to their mobile phones, tablets, and virtual settings to record company-wide messages. Employees value the realness of this approach, as these communications have been much more authentic, less produced, and more immediate.”⁷


7. LISTEN TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

Your organization's goals have likely shifted; make sure your employees understand what has changed and gather feedback about how they can adapt their roles to better meet organizational goals. “Employees who feel their voice is heard are 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered to perform their best work.”⁸ As employee priorities evolve, it's also important to talk to your employees about what has changed. Ask them about their professional goals, identify how they want to be communicated with, ask what motivates them — and then really listen to the answers. Once you have that information, it's important to use it.

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We need to change the stigma that you must be seen to be productive. We've disproved that adage during the pandemic, and we can stop saying that remote work is hard. Instead, it's just different. We can stop saying that there's a war on talent, and realize that it's up to us to engage, develop, and retain our top talent.

Even though our world seems to be getting more complex every day, how we work together doesn't need to be. If anything has been learned from the time working remotely during the pandemic, it's that to have empathy, assume positive intentions, and treat others with respect leads to outcomes that drive employee engagement. 

Stephanie Noland
stephanie.noland@jabian.com

Tracy Reznik
tracy.reznik@jabian.com