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Optimizing hybrid work

Top 5 questions to ask when designing a hybrid work model



Between the Industrial Revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic, most changes seen in the workplace were incremental. However, the seismic shift to remote work that began in March 2020 gave leaders permission to shake free of traditional working norms and ask themselves: how will the pandemic change the way we work?

For many, the answer seems simple: we will evolve the way we work to be more flexible. We will adopt a hybrid work model, one that brings the best of in-person and remote work together, attracts and retains the best talent, and enables us to achieve our collective goals. The trouble is, making the transition to hybrid is more complex than it sounds.

A full 90% of employers are looking to design and adopt a hybrid work model in 2022.¹ If you are among them, you can begin to tackle this complex task by asking yourself the five key questions below. [➤](#)

Top 5 questions to ask when designing a hybrid work model



1

What are the specific business outcomes we want to achieve?

Align hybrid work vision to business strategy



2

Where, when, and how will work be done?

Get clear on decisions



3

How can technology accelerate our transformation?

Harness the power of technology



4

How can the employer-employee relationship be adapted so that every member of our workforce benefits?

Ensure something for everyone



5

Is our organization ready for the implications of a hybrid work model?

Don't underestimate the degree of change

1

What are the specific business outcomes we want to achieve?

Align hybrid work vision to business strategy

A hybrid model should be tied to a clear business strategy and designed to enable well-defined business outcomes. Bringing together a diverse coalition of leaders who understand the organization's path forward and are invested in its success will facilitate strategic alignment from the beginning. This group must be committed to the many challenging discussions, debates, and iterations required to get everyone on the same page about the new model—this commitment can make or break its success. While this coalition absolutely includes HR leadership, it should be the CEO and their entire C-suite driving this work together.

It's important that the hybrid work model is seen as linked to not only talent strategy but also to overall business strategy, with representation from across the business collaborating to determine how "going hybrid" will impact every part of the organization. For one of Deloitte's Financial Services clients looking to double the size of its workforce over five years, for example, its hybrid model vision anchored decisions around attracting talent, evaluating its real estate portfolio, designing office spaces, and upgrading technology to support this growth.

Keeping the strategic business objectives in mind, leadership should then align on the measures that will determine the hybrid model's success. The most successful organizations stay agile by holding fast to their purpose and foundational values, rather than concrete plans. Salesforce, for example, placed two of its core values, trust and equality, at the core of its design, leading to a hybrid model that emphasizes meeting business objectives and personal priorities over hours worked.²

There is no single approach to hybrid work. An organization's hybrid model should reflect its business strategy, the work being done, and its culture while also aligning to its desired employee experience and contributing to its talent value proposition. While the design should be fit for purpose, implementing a hybrid model will inevitably be a material change.



2

Where, when, and how will work be done?

Get clear on decisions

A recent Gartner survey found that 64% of respondents would only consider working in a new job if flexible work hours were offered, and 69% would be more likely to consider a new role if it allowed them to work from a location of their choice.³ With the majority of today's workforce considering flexibility to be the norm, a well-designed hybrid work model will allow for purposeful choices around where, when, and how work is done to drive business outcomes.

When deciding **WHERE** work will be done for a specific activity, task, or event, there are three primary options available:

- **In person (co-located):** This traditional option continues to be considered the best for collaboration, connection, celebration, and select critical tasks, such as IT hardware troubleshooting and maintenance. A significant number of roles are best performed in person due to the nature of the work, including those traditionally based in plant, field, or retail locations.
- **Virtual (remote):** An ideal option for independent and transactional activities such as deep-thinking desk work, online research, recurring meetings, and administrative tasks. Virtual is also a good fit for geographically distributed teams.
- **Hybrid (combination of co-located and remote):** This combination works best when looking to bring geographically dispersed audiences together, such as for employee onboarding and national/international meetings, conferences, and events.

These examples are meant to act as a guide. Not only do activities vary depending on the industry, the work being performed, and company culture, preferences also vary across the workforce. For example, some employees cite work-life balance, focus time, and collaboration as reasons to work in an office, while others cite those as reasons to stay home.⁴ When making decisions, be sure to solicit input from your workforce through focus groups, surveys, etc.

Another key element of designing a hybrid model is **WHEN** work will be done:

- **Fixed hours:** Employees are required to be present during defined working hours (e.g., 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.).
- **Core hours:** During pre-determined hours, employees are required to be available for meetings and collaboration (e.g., 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., Monday through Friday). The remaining hours can be worked when it best suits the employee and/or team.
- **Shortened workweek:** Productivity has been shown to improve when employees have to execute their work within a shortened number of days (e.g., a four-day workweek), either by decreasing the number of total hours worked or compressing the same number of hours into fewer days.⁵
- **Fully flexible:** Employees have the freedom to choose when they work.

2

Where, when, and how will work be done? (cont'd)

Get clear on decisions

Executing each of these options comes with a different level of complexity, with the shortened workweek and fully flexible options being arguably the most complex. However, more and more leaders are considering those options to help employees create more balance in their lives. Many will be looking to learn from pilots in other organizations and countries. In 2021, for example, Spain announced plans to roll out a three-year national pilot for a four-day workweek (or 32 hours total).⁶

Finally, defining **HOW** work will be done is critical to enabling the changes to where and when. This is a unique opportunity to evolve your organization and aspire to new and better business outcomes by doing things differently. These questions can help you determine how work will be done:

- How should work be designed to focus on the **right outcomes** as opposed to just the right activities? Are the tasks that are being performed helping us reach our desired outcomes?
- What new **behaviours and routines** do we need to adopt to work seamlessly across spaces? Are employees proactively planning where and when they work based on the work to be done?
- What new **skills and capabilities** (e.g., hybrid meeting planning and facilitation) will help us work in new ways?
- What are the [new ways of leading teams in a hybrid environment?](#)
- What **training, resources, and support** are needed to bridge any gaps in skills and capabilities and to facilitate effective decisions around where, when, and how work is done?
- What **digital workplace technologies** will best enable seamless transitions between remote and in-person work? Consider what software and hardware (both in-office and remote-office) will best support collaboration and wellness.
- How should the **physical office/facilities** be adapted? Consider how both company-owned spaces and home workspaces can be optimized.
- What **new policies** will foster and strengthen the new ways of working within the organization?
- Overall, how do we use this opportunity to **create a truly equitable and inclusive culture** within our organization?

Hybrid experiences don't need to be limited to your workforce. Throughout the decision-making process, design with your customers in mind by creating opportunities to elevate their experience through your hybrid model.

3

How can technology accelerate our transformation?

Harness the power of technology



True hybrid work means that no matter where employees are located, they can access one system and network, ensuring flexibility and mobility in real time, at any time. The importance of technology cannot be overstated. Investing in the right technology can promote more effective meetings, better collaboration, greater utilization of space, and an immersive digital work experience. Efforts should be made to:

- Deliberately design a digital workplace by focusing on the business outcomes you want to achieve. With an ever-growing selection of innovative technology to choose from, it can be easy to make the wrong investment. By aligning technology to outcomes, you'll be better equipped to drive intentional, meaningful, and measurable business results.
- Design a digital strategy that embeds and measures network effectiveness. This might mean updating in-office meeting room technology to support hybrid meetings (video conferencing software, increased bandwidth, etc.).
- Leverage collaboration tools that facilitate virtual meetings, break down silos, and enhance cross-functional collaboration (virtual whiteboards, breakout rooms, live polling functionality, etc.).
- Offer your employees effective at-work and at-home set-ups—and don't overlook additions such as extra monitors and wireless keyboards.
- Introduce space management and analytics applications such as desk-booking technology to support workspace design changes.
- Explore the latest technology. Virtual reality (VR) is one of the latest tools being used to enable hybrid work models. Immersed, for example, is a VR startup looking to reorient the way work happens by giving remote workers an instant home-office upgrade that can support up to five monitors from their computer without any additional hardware.

As with the introduction of any new technology, it's essential to dedicate resources to upskill and reskill your employees so they can work effectively in the new hybrid work environment.

4

How can the employer-employee relationship be adapted so that every member of our workforce benefits?

Ensure something for everyone



Hybrid work is most readily accessible to knowledge workers, but it's important that those with no option to work remotely also benefit from this. Defining the changes and benefits for everyone in your organization will enhance the work experience and can help lessen the divide between workers who can and cannot work remotely.

Engaging groups of workers based on the types of tasks they perform can help you understand the ways flexibility could be embedded in their day-to-day activities. Focusing on placing strict guardrails around where, when, and how they can work will certainly limit perceived employee flexibility. Instead, work on building an employer-employee relationship that promotes ongoing dialogue and collaborative decision-making, positioning employees as partners in the organization. These are powerful ways to make every group feel valued, which in turn can help you attract more diverse talent.

Most importantly, organizations should not feel obliged to maintain a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, if the nature of the business demands in-person work (e.g., manufacturing), holding all employees to the same standard in an effort to maintain fairness may have unintended consequences on knowledge workers.

Instead, equip leaders to manage the differences across their teams and offer flexibility where it makes sense.

Of course, offering everyone some level of flexibility will be challenging and may require thinking outside the box given the constraints of some roles. Instacart, for example, has done this effectively by not only offering its knowledge workers a highly flexible hybrid work model, but also giving its in-person shoppers—their gig workers—the ability to choose both when they work and how often they work. When making the upfront decisions around where, when, and how work is done, think about how you can offer flexibility across these dimensions in a way that allows everyone to benefit.

When we challenge our traditional beliefs and get creative with the use of technology, it's amazing how much work can, in fact, be done in a hybrid model. Maintenance workers, for example, have a traditionally fully on-site role, but they can be offered the flexibility to complete certain tasks, such as reporting, remotely. This also underscores the importance of engaging the full workforce in planning the move to a hybrid work model.

5

Is our organization ready for the implications of a hybrid work model?

Don't underestimate the degree of change



The effects of a hybrid work model will span the entire organization, with impacts on HR policy and processes, technology, real estate, finance, payroll, tax, risk, compliance, and legal, to name a few areas. Customer-facing organizations can also think about how it will affect the customer experience. As previously mentioned, kicking off hybrid model planning with a diverse group of leaders is a great first step and will help ensure all these impacts are considered.

Functional areas should also be involved throughout the design and implementation stages. Deloitte's hybrid model was implemented by a cross-functional team, with functional area leaders owning and delivering on each stream of work. This approach drove ownership within the business, allowing hybrid efforts to become embedded and prioritized within existing work plans while also driving benefits through collaboration across workstreams.

As you experience the many implications to your business introduced by this process, the degree of change becomes increasingly clear. A shift to hybrid work is a transformational change that requires employees to adopt new behaviours and learn new skills while the organization develops the supporting infrastructure. It's important to emphasize that hybrid model success starts and stops with leaders. Leaders must be engaged along the way and empowered to model the new working norms they want across the workforce. Managers can also lead by example and support their employees through the change, redefining productivity by focusing on outcomes over activities and trusting their teams to deliver regardless of where or when their work is being done.

Final thoughts

As your organization embarks on this transformation, it's best to stay agile and prepare to evolve along with your business, workforce, and customers. Continually taking the pulse of your stakeholders will help you track progress, evaluate the effectiveness of the hybrid work model and its impact on the employee experience, and identify opportunities to improve and evolve.

The urge to revert to pre-pandemic norms is understandable, but those who rise to the challenge of rethinking how work is done will undoubtedly reap the benefits. In most cases, the result will be a type of a hybrid work model, which, when done well, can build workforce agility, strengthen employer-employee trust, and attract top talent looking for flexible work. For others, a customized virtual-first or in-person model may better suit the organization's strategy, culture, and goals.

A hybrid work model isn't for everyone and the risks, such as the potential impact on company culture and the degree of leadership alignment required, need to be proactively identified and mitigated to drive sustainable change.

Ultimately, this is a unique time that we are all navigating together, and we will continue to learn from one another as we go. We can expect to continue to see changes in the world of work as we move past the pandemic. For now, let's start by answering the five key questions that will change the way we work.

Endnotes

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Contact

Kathleen McEwan

Senior Manager, Organization Transformation
kmcewan@deloitte.ca

Contributors

Stephen Harrington

Partner, Workforce Strategy Leader

Lacey McCaslin

Senior Consultant, Organization Transformation

Karen Pastakia

Partner, Ontario Marketplace Leader

Kathy Woods

Partner, Future-Ready Organization Leader

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