

The future of the office: How to maintain a sense of team in a hybrid environment

After almost a year of working from home, many of us have become attached to the flexibility that remote work offers. With the vaccine promising us new hope and a road map outlining when life will return to some sort of normal, many companies have stepped up their plan for return to the office.

As people have become more flexible with working arrangements, so too have companies, with many expecting to have some form of 'hybrid' approach to the office with employees working both remotely and on site.

Just Eat for Business spoke to a number of senior management professionals and 57% said their employees would continue to work from home for three days a week, while a small majority (4%) said their team would work from home for one day a week.

With that said, one question remains – how will companies maintain a sense of team when people are working in multiple locations?

Getting to know your team again

We've been working from home for over 12 months now, so naturally we will have lost touch with our colleagues. For some new starters, they might have never even met their teammates in person, so forming those bonds again is really important when re-establishing your company culture.

One thing everyone can bond over is good food. When we are back in the office, try organising team breakfasts or lunches so everyone can catch up, reconnect and feel appreciated. For those who are working from home, make sure to include them by sending them treats and getting them to dial in so everyone is involved.

Socials will also be vital in getting the team to bond again – we've all missed the after work drinks and have certainly had enough of zoom quizzes! So, when organising socials, make sure to consider solutions for both in the office and at home.

We have organised hundreds of company socials, with the most popular ideas being cupcake decorating, cocktail making and cheese sampling, all of which can be easily replicated virtually or in person. What's important here is to give people a space to connect and share some downtime without having to discuss work.

Recreating the water cooler moments when hybrid

When working remotely, it's difficult to see if someone is having a rough day. Before the pandemic, work was filled with casual interactions between colleagues, like grabbing a coffee in the kitchen first thing or throwing around ideas over the water cooler. These interactions were responsible for ensuring employee synergy and happiness.

When we head back into the office, interactions like this will pick up again, but we must not forget those who are working at home.

Relevant processes will need to be put in place so that in-office interactions are replicated in both locations. No meetings should be exclusively in-office, and should, by default, have a virtual option available so no one is left out.

For the new starters, it's really important for them to feel connected to management and the wider team. Something fun to introduce might be randomising coffee breaks for employees for both in the office and at home as

this will help newcomers meet more people and encourage 'water cooler' moments to take place.

How to avoid exclusion

With employees in multiple locations, it's natural for some to feel excluded or left out. In order to prevent this, clear communication will be needed to ensure those working at home know what's going on in the office and vice versa.

Bridging the gap from remote work to the hybrid model will require small process changes, like remembering to write things down for absent team members, or more complex behavioural changes to help other team members feel more included.

Transitioning to a hybrid working model will mean organisations will need to find ways to document the knowledge-sharing process by making it accessible across multiple platforms. Taking a step back and considering the experiences of both in-office and remote workers will help in creating these systems.

Supporting employees

Although we've all wanted life to return to normal for some time, heading back to the office will be daunting. Seeing colleagues for the first time in months will be overwhelming for some, so it's important that companies take employees' mental health into consideration.

According to our research, 63% of respondents are concerned about going back to the office.

If you think your employees are anxious about going back, share your support with them and encourage colleagues to communicate with each other so no one is struggling alone.

Encourage your team to be kind to themselves, take the time to exercise and have downtime away from work. Why not give mindfulness a try? There are plenty of free resources online that can be shared with your team. Encourage people to start slow by booking in 10 minutes a day to check in with themselves.

Adjusting to the new working environment will be difficult to begin with, but by reconnecting with your team, communicating clearly and supporting each other, you will be able to create an ever stronger sense of culture than before the pandemic.

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