The Future of Hybrid Work
How To Do It Right in an Ever-Evolving Environment

While more and more companies return to office (RTO), the biggest mistake business leaders tend to make is to impose traditional thinking and pre-pandemic perspective on a post-pandemic reality of work. Gone are the days when work was defined by the four walls we are in from 9 to 5.

The general workforce was catapulted to various forms of alternative work arrangement at the height of the pandemic in 2020. Since then, there was a significant rise of remote work, virtual teams, and hybrid setup, which led to unparalleled level of flexibility for employers and employees alike.

Harvard Business School Professor, Tsedal Neeley (2021) argued that: *"All or nothing is easy, when all are in the office, or all are remote. But with hybrid work, it's a mix of in-office and remote, and we've entered a gray zone in which people are asking: 'What will permanent look like?' It's comfortable to think of our remote work environment as temporary; it's much more difficult to think about what long term should look like and how to do it right."*

Much has been said about hybrid work's pros and cons, but since we know that it is here to stay, the more relevant question is: How do we do it right?

HOW DO WE DO IT RIGHT?

Establish Trusting, Not Trucking Systems

Leaders' key objective is to optimize performance within their teams. Since productivity is quite difficult to measure, attendance at the office has been an easy way to gauge whether employees are showing up for work. But physical presence does not equate to productivity – especially now that workers tend to be more dispersed geographically than ever before.

In keeping up with the times, software companies have developed sophisticated systems able to track employees' activities – making sure they are not slacking off or wasting away company time. On the extreme, these surveillance systems run the risk of infringing on human rights.

A company in Netherlands, for example, was found to violate employees' privacy as they required cameras to be always on in their workers' homes (Marr, 2022). According to Harvard Business Review (2021): too frequent use of camera in virtual meetings brings about "zoom fatigue" or video call anxiety. This affects overall engagement and general wellbeing.

Hence, instead of monitoring whether work is done, it is more crucial to ask HOW work is done.

(1) Trusting systems aspire to establish norms, where leaders gather feedback from employees and align on the following:
- How often do employees want to be on camera?
- When is it required vs optional?
- If cameras aren't on, how can they demonstrate active participation and engagement?

(2) Trusting systems cultivate openness and communication. It allows for more frequent dialogue – not waiting for the next performance cycle to conduct coaching and mentoring. Interestingly, setting regular check-ins that do not talk about work, tends to get more work done (Indeed, 2022).

(3) Trusting systems ensure healthy practices that protect employees' well-being such as taking breaks and regularly getting up to move around. At the end of the day, employees care for the company that cares for them the most.
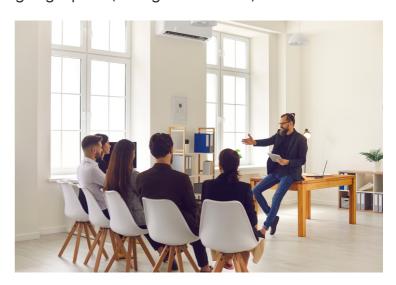
Create Opportunities for Organic Connection

Lockdowns during the pandemic have accelerated digitalization and enabled virtual teams, making it possible for people to remain productive despite the physical distance. While it ushered freedom and flexibility, it also affected employee interaction and sense of connection.

Chance encounters and random conversations while waiting in the cafeteria were replaced by structured zoom calls and virtual meeting rooms. To rekindle such connection, leaders have forced employees back into the office. Enabling communication and collaboration is one thing, but cultivating authentic interaction and connection is another.

A good balance between customizing and centralizing interaction guidelines will help deepen connection among employees across geographic (and generational) boundaries.

CENTRALIZATION

Establishing a clear set of norms and purpose for every meeting helps ensure fairness, transparency, and inclusivity. This may mean defining in which meetings it is expected to turn the video on or keep off, or which team activities must be done in-office and its frequency.

A healthy mix of both allows practical and personal interactions to flourish in the virtual workplace.

In fact, more than the virtual workplace, what leaders need to prepare for looking into the future, is the full and immersive collaboration in the other world called the "metaverse".

Google has defined this as a space that mirrors reality in a virtual setting where users can interact with a computer-generated environment with other users. While this concept is still new and evolving, it is happening at exponential speed.

In the Philippines, Globe was the first to setup what they called a "phygital" experience. Merging physical and digital worlds that "allows users to create their avatars, chat with each other, make video calls and participate in spontaneous interactive activities within the portal" (Manila Bulletin, 2022). The metaverse involves technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), among others.

What this has achieved is mirror the reality in the physical world and injected an element of levity and fun such that people do not feel that their interaction is contrived.

Here are some experiences that we can foresee happening in the metaverse:
- Company Events – anniversary, foundation day, kick-off, and sales conferences.
- Orientation / Onboarding – especially for those with regional and global scope and presence
- Virtual Company Tours – tour of headquarters, plant, etc.

Leaders must understand that the future of hybrid work is continuously evolving as new technology is introduced. One thing is for certain: giving employees a voice and actively listening to their needs and feedback is the best approach to engaging them.

CUSTOMIZATION

Gathering employees' preferred communication style and activities help increase the authenticity of these interactions. While some may enjoy virtual BYO (bring your own) drinks at happy hour, others may appreciate "lunch and learn" sessions within office hours.

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