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The Official Journal of the Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management
香港人力資源管理學會會刊



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Creating Equitable Hybrid Work Strategies

By Dr Alexander Lovell, O.C. Tanner, Director, Research and Assessment

- As companies implement hybrid work strategies, O.C. Tanner research indicates the key to success is providing opportunities and experiences that unite employees around a common purpose.
- Hybrid work should look beyond a return to work to a broad spectrum of future-forward work opportunities.

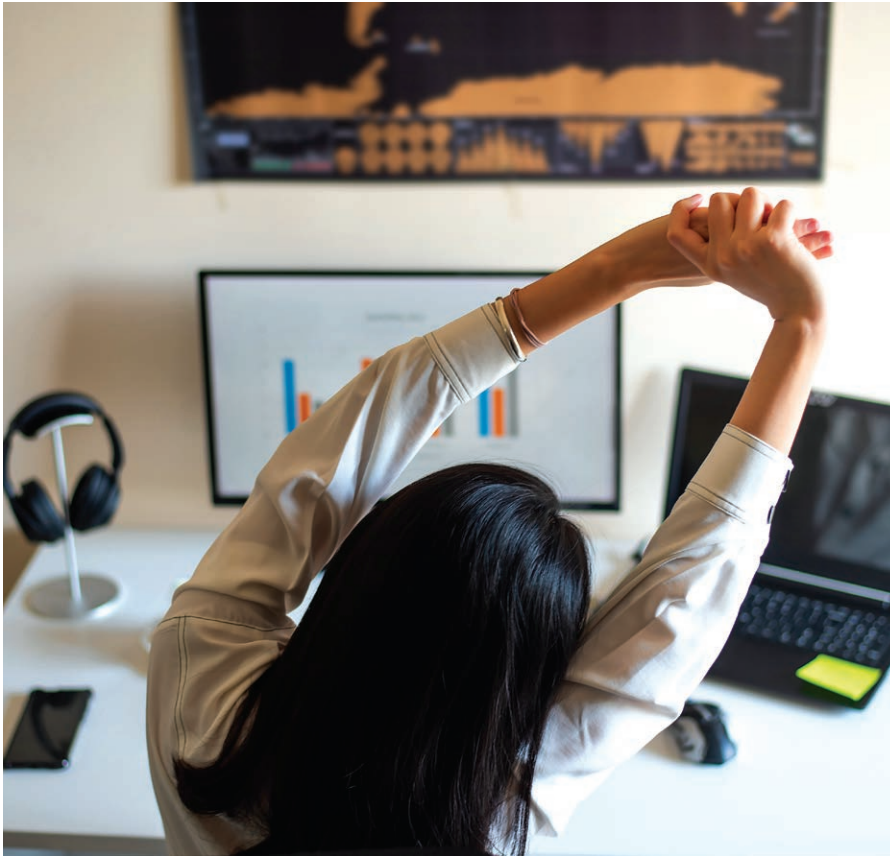
While the concept of hybrid work arrangements has been around for a number of years, COVID-19 has turbocharged its prevalence several years ahead of where it would have been otherwise. Yet many companies are grappling with how to make hybrid models work – from identifying how many days employees can work remotely, to reorganising the office to promote collaboration, to crafting sustainable culture-building initiatives.

Around the world, COVID-19-related social distancing requirements have

separated staff at all levels from their workplaces and workplace support systems. O. C. Tanner's *Rethink: Global Culture Report* found that 45% of the employees reported a significant decrease in the number of people they regularly work with. Furthermore, 57% of the respondents reported a substantial decline in their social activities outside of work, and one in three reported a significant disconnection from their leaders.

But disconnection is not limited to remote employees; essential

workers that were required to continue working onsite experienced the immediate loss of connection to co-workers who moved to remote work. This disconnection has a significant effect on individual, team, and organisational outcomes. For example, research revealed that weak connections led to an 83% decrease in sense of wellbeing, an 80% decline in feeling united with co-workers in pursuit of common organisational goals, a 67% drop in the ability to cope with stressful situations, and an alarming 664% increase in the probability of experiencing burnout.



The rising popularity of hybrid work

As employees and employers both adapt to a rapidly changing business environment, the popularity of hybrid working has increased dramatically. A *Business Times* future of work study found that 88% of the respondents across the Asia-Pacific region now prefer a hybrid work structure. Pre-pandemic estimates suggested that about 18% of the employees in Hong Kong were working remotely at least one day during the week. But it goes further than a mere policy change, 88% of the employees are looking for greater ownership in when and how they work.

Ensuring effective hybrid work

While flexible work is a significant part of the hybrid work equation, it is not the sole factor. The O. C. Tanner research found that four essential aspects constitute an effective hybrid experience – career development, no matter where an employee works; flexibility, both in terms of the number of days in-office and working remotely and

workspace while in the office; clear and consistent expectations for working hours/availability for work; and opportunities for in-person social connection with co-workers. Organisations that prioritised these aspects of hybrid work experience disproportionate results: a 388% increase in highly engaged employees, a 39% decrease in employee burnout, a 549% increase in innovation, and a 27% decrease in employees' likelihood of attrition.

Meanwhile, workforces prioritise two types of flexibility – the number of days working from home and flexibility in the work environment. The O.C. Tanner research showed that staff overwhelmingly find some tasks easier to perform in the office versus at home, or vice versa. Instead of issuing arbitrary policies and guidelines, in conjunction with employees, companies can try tailoring flexible work policies that match the in-office or work from home process it requires.

Demonstrating commitment to all employees

Despite numerous global surveys indicating that workforces are on board with a hybrid approach, many still worry about the effects it might have on their careers. As companies reopen their offices, employees may feel a divide between those choosing to return to the physical workplace and those who would prefer to stay at home. This raises questions of workplace bias. Among the most common concerns is less visibility in the office. The less time staff are seen at work and communicating with co-workers, especially managers, the less likely they feel they will be part of a level playing field. For instance, whether employees working in-office have an advantage when it comes to participating in company culture initiatives or receiving in-person recognition and promotion opportunities. Company leaders, especially the HR function, need to consider bias when it comes to remote workers, and set people up for success, regardless of location.

To redress negative career opportunity perceptions, expanding access to formal leadership development programmes is a positive start. Formal leadership development programmes can be supplemented by robust informal efforts, such as mentoring and networking. Connect non-hybrid employees and leaders with hybrid ones, and ensure that networking opportunities are offered both in-person and virtually. The *Rethink: Global Culture Report* findings showed that, when organisations focus on career development for hybrid workers, employee engagement increased by 115%, their sense of opportunities by 167% and their sense of success by 152%.

Clear expectations of working hours

As more companies adopt the hybrid working model, workforce management is another key element of getting the hybrid approach right. Organisations need to set clear guidelines for what tasks need to be done in the office and remotely. This calls for a regular assessment of workloads and working hours. Identifying presenteeism is much harder when employees are working remotely. In conversations O.C Tanner had with staff, availability for work and the associated perception of laziness were top of mind. Employees went to great lengths to overcompensate when at home by demonstrating that they were always available, often at the expense of appropriate boundaries between work and personal life. Further research indicated that this behaviour came at a significant cost to engagement (a 33% decrease) and absenteeism (a 12% increase).

Leaders and their teams need to work together to establish appropriate availability and expectations regarding work, especially if this involves work

outside regular hours. When working hour expectations were clear, engagement increased by 96%, favourable perception of the direct leader or manager rose by 121%, and there was a 52% improvement in employee wellbeing. Training managers on how to manage maintaining healthy boundaries can create stronger working relationships and reduce the negative effects of presenteeism.

Opportunities for connection

Ensuring strong connections among employees is critical to the success of a hybrid programme. Regardless of location, companies that are implementing a hybrid model should look for ways to project their corporate culture across channels so that everyone feels like a valued member of the team. The role of the office has shifted. In the hybrid world, the office has transformed into a cultural incubator which facilitates experiences between staff and leaders, staff and organisational purpose, and staff and culture. With

the office as the facilitation hub, the focus is squarely on connecting shared values, interactions, stories, and memories. These cultural experiences encourage greater engagement, inclusion, and employee net promoter score.

Reinforcing hybrid experiences with recognition

Underpinning the hybrid experience is ensuring that employees feel valued for what they do on a regular basis. Recognition is a powerful tool, particularly when the organisation seeks to connect staff to purpose, accomplishment, and one another. Implementing a new recognition programme or refreshing an existing one is a valuable complement to a robust hybrid strategy. Rolling out an equitable and effective hybrid workplace plan also requires the ability to shift gears quickly if necessary. As companies develop their hybrid work strategies, don't worry if all the pieces don't fall into place. Organisations all need to start somewhere – it is high time to be creative. [LUMA](#)

