INTRODUCTION

As the world of work shifts on its axis, Poly is working with the research team at Worktech on a rolling program to create new thinking, define the main challenges and explore emerging opportunities around hybrid working. We encourage our partners and customers to become involved in this work. The picture is changing quickly and in bringing people, spaces and technology together to form a new corporate canvas for hybrid work to unfold, there is much to discover. In this paper, we look at one of the key building blocks of the hybrid model — a successful and effective return to office (RTO). Why are so many companies around the world struggling with this, and what can be done to create a more seamless workplace re-entry for employees on the journey to hybrid?
RELUCTANCE TO RETURN

One of the most important pieces in the puzzle that is hybrid work is the return to office (RTO). Without bringing people back to the workplace in a timely and significant way, even if office attendance forms a new pattern without precedent before the global pandemic, a successful hybrid working model has no basis to develop. It could fail with a workforce that can only be described as remote.

True flexibility comes from a mix of working modes. RTO is an essential part of that mix. The reasons for an effective return to the office are well rehearsed — more face-to-face collaboration is widely understood to bring key benefits in terms of learning, productivity and wellbeing as well as speed of innovation. Some employees also benefit from enhanced focus and privacy in the workplace. But many organizations around the world are struggling to bring their people back on a regular basis — especially larger ones.

According to a spring 2022 survey of 160 major employers conducted by The Partnership for New York City, more than three quarters of firms are set to implement a hybrid model but the larger the company, the slower the pace of RTO. The picture is similar in Europe where a CBRE survey of 130 firms revealed that small firms with fewer than 100 employees were moving much faster to repopulate their offices than larger ones. The phenomenon of 'The Reluctant Returner' has been identified in a report by designers Unispace. This report surveyed 3,000 employees and 2,750 employers in nine European countries and concluded that nearly two-thirds of all workers (64 percent) are unwilling to go back to the workplace for a variety of reasons including safety fears, uneasiness about managing care arrangements, commuting times, loss of productivity and inability to focus. The Netherlands is the least reluctant to return (56 percent of workers don’t want to go back); workers in Ireland are the most reluctant (83 percent).

At the Worktech Munich 2022 conference, the workplace head of one of Germany’s largest life science companies summed up the situation by explaining how his organisation does not just have competitors in the life science sector — ‘the competitors are also the airport lounge, Starbucks and the home office’. Poly’s own research into workstyle personas backs up this picture: office collaborator roles are down 11 percent in 2022 (to just 16 percent of the workforce) while remote collaborator roles are up by 21 percent (to 36 percent of the workforce).

So what can be done to address a reluctance to return? Much focus is on implementing flexible and future-proof technology solutions in the workplace, and this is vitally important. But in parallel with technical infrastructure that can dynamically enable hybrid work, could cultural issues related to HR policies, place-making and organizational design play an equally significant role?
TRUE FLEXIBILITY COMES FROM A MIX OF WORKING MODES.
Poly has been working with Worktech to investigate the issues around RTO in relation to embedding hybrid work as a permanent fixture in organizations. Our research included a roundtable with senior leaders in technology and design (see appendix) from large employers where we were able to discuss key areas in depth.

What we learnt from this exchange was revealing. Poly brought four major challenges of hybrid working to the table: changing employee expectations; lack of meeting equity between remote workers and hybrid workers who are onsite; conference rooms not equipped for video conferencing; and increased IT management complexity.

All four issues were deemed to be important, but while the latter two technology challenges were regarded as relatively manageable with the right plan and the right partners, the challenges around employee expectations and meeting equity were seen as less straightforward and therefore harder to resolve. In essence, we were told that the problems around RTO are as much cultural as they are technical.

The senior leaders in our roundtable explained what is happening inside their own organizations. They spoke of siloed company structures not being equipped for the type of cross-disciplinary thinking and decision-making that would create a more enticing RTO — ‘guerrilla tactics’ were sometimes required to work around these barriers and get things done.

Their collective experience suggested that the return to the office currently lacks a compelling narrative that can win over employees. There is little conviction and even less celebration about RTO. Short-term gimmicks like free coffee and doughnuts have largely run their course. Most employers accept they need to magnetize their workforces rather than mandate an office return, but are stumped as to what to do next.

There has been considerable investment in office redesign which plays up the social and collaborative aspects of the office. One roundtable participant compared the office experience to that of a prestigious festival explaining that they ‘sell themselves on the total experience and on the heritage of the amazing acts playing there.’ In a similar way, ‘the office needs to host great experiences every single day.’

If we accept that office buildings by themselves are not attractors and that there should be more focus on curation or programming of workspace, what cultural steps can organizations take to bring their people back to the office as part of a hybrid model? Here are some ideas related to people, spaces and technology.
PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

Technology leaders participating in our roundtable spoke of how employee attitudes and expectations have changed due to the impact of the pandemic. After two years organizing their own workspaces at home, people are now more sensitive to environmental conditions such as sound interruptions or poor air quality in the office. This echoes Poly’s own research which suggests that nearly seven out of ten office workers now accept that 9-5 has been replaced by anytime working and four out of ten are prone to ‘noise rage’ if colleagues are too loud.

Employees became used to making more autonomous decisions in lockdown and many now resent and resist being mandated back to the office. They need a powerful reason to attend — travel to a central workplace can be expensive compared to staying local so there is a requirement to ‘earn the commute’ and make it worth their while. Too many companies overlook this aspect in issuing blanket new back-to-work policies.

Employers also need to look more closely at the composition and interactions of their workforce, and at their life stages. Demographics are particularly important. Younger cohorts wishing to meet peers in the workplace, as well as build a professional network, are more likely to be open to RTO than older colleagues already with a family and well-established networks who have got comfortable in their home office.

It is also important to examine different job functions for their fit to a remote or hybrid model. Some people have clearer reasons to be back in the office than others. Some workers might deal better with remote connection. Lynda Gratton, organisational theorist and Professor of Management Practice at London Business School, has identified four key drivers of productivity — cooperation, coordination, energy and focus — and matched job roles to varying levels of office attendance.

A manager coordinating a team will relish the type of face-to-face interactions and in-moment feedback that a shared office provides, as will a product innovator driving projects through cooperation with colleagues, associates and clients. However, a strategic planner requiring extended focus will probably benefit more from periods outside the office, while a marketing manager dependent on maintaining levels of sustained energy might be best suited to a mix of onsite and at-home work.

At Boston Consulting Group, associate director Kristi Woolsey has similarly created archetypes for different types of worker. An ‘anchored operator’ is someone who needs to be physically present in the workplace to do their job — a security guard, trader or lab scientist for example — and there is little scope for remote work. At the other end of the spectrum, a ‘pattern specialist’ (such as a call centre worker with a script) can be 100 percent remote. A ‘creative collaborator’ might want to be in the office at least three days a week, whereas a ‘focused contributor’ (such as a finance worker doing the company books) might spend more time at home.

Segmenting workforce roles and functions can help organizations take more local and granular decisions about RTO in a way that makes sense to their own people. Poly’s own persona segmentation research has identified the preferences and behaviors around six different workstyles. This resource not only makes a useful contribution to putting people right at the center of the hybrid model but can also help to fundamentally shape RTO strategy as part of a more flexible approach.
EMPLOYERS NEED TO LOOK CLOSELY AT THE COMPOSITION AND INTERACTIONS OF THEIR WORKFORCE, AND AT THEIR LIFE STAGES.
A large part of the RTO effort by organizations around the world has been centered on redesigning and repurposing workspaces for the hybrid era. This is an acknowledgement that the traditional office no longer fits the demands of a more flexible workforce for lower densities, better amenities and more opportunities for face-to-face interaction as well as video calling and remote collaboration facilities.

Some experts have described a phenomenon known as the 'espresso office' — smaller but a lot more powerful. Leesman Index, which measures workplace use and behaviors, has suggested a formula of 'half the space but twice the experience'. Participants in our expert roundtable, however, suggested there was more focus on trying to enhance experience and build culture by design than on simply reducing office footprint.

A key problem, however, is that many organizations remain weak at identifying key aspects of their culture and communicating their values through the environment. Unlocking 'cultural content' within a company and using that as the basis for storytelling around RTO is an important challenge ahead. While some firms are struggling with this task, other organizations are rising to the challenge.
Toy company LEGO, for example, opened a new state-of-the-art HQ in Billund, Denmark, for 2,000 employees in April 2022. This has provided 55,000 sq m corporate campus designed specifically for the hybrid era with one third of space devoted to collaboration, one third to social space and one third to focus/desk space. Staff are required to attend this office at least three days a week but there are compelling reasons for doing so, not least because of a large central area known as the People House which offers fitness, games and arts and crafts facilities alongside a hotel for visitors.

Aspects of LEGO’s culture, based on its core values of ‘imagination, fun, creativity, caring, learning, and quality’, are explicitly woven into the design of its spaces. EY’s new Swedish headquarters does a similar thing — this is a global pilot for the professional service firm’s new ways of working but its physical environment mixes in local design references to Stockholm’s archipelagos, communicating a democratic Scandinavian ethos. Place plays a key role in building company culture and a successful RTO relies on getting that cultural expression right.
Alongside people and spaces, technology has a key role to play in animating the workplace and catalysing its interactions. This role extends from the use of workplace apps, which use prompts and nudges to bring the right people together in the right place at the right time, to the use of advanced and immersive AV systems to communicate company branding and culture.

Making the office a flagship for your brand and avoiding that sinking feeling of being confronted with rows of empty desks has become a central issue for senior leadership, which is now charged with breaking down company silos and bringing a more joined-up approach to RTO. The question is less about whether the C-suite can find the right skillsets within their organization than about whether they can reshuffle and unite the expertize pack so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Professional service firm Accenture has placed technology at the heart of its strategy to entice employees back to its newly renovated New York City offices located on the fringe of New York City’s central business district, Hudson Yards. Digital enablement forms the spine for the firm’s return to office approach, using digital screens, virtual reality rooms, and workplace apps to create a flexible and adaptable environment which allows employees to collaborate effectively across physical and virtual environments.

Technology repositions the office for the new era as an intelligent hub for remote as well as face-to-face collaboration — and as a responsive environment using sensors to provide real-time feedback on patterns of building use. But there is much work to do, for example, to ensure that meeting rooms in organizations are properly equipped for video conferencing.
A recent survey of more than 4,000 American office workers by Poly revealed that fewer than three in ten employers had either created new collaboration spaces with video conferencing equipment or refitted existing meeting room spaces for hybrid work. Lack of such video facilities is one reason employees cite as a drag on the rate of RTO. Meeting inequality between office-based and remote participants is another.

We are still on the foothills of technological change according to the technology leaders who joined our roundtable. The current state-of-the-art technology enabled organizations to keep running during the pandemic and lean into hybrid working. But new developments will swiftly start to come to the fore, driven not least by the growing presence in the workforce of the video-obsessed TikTok generation.

There is a drive, in the words of one roundtable participant, to ‘make video meetings less transactional’. This might involve extending video capabilities from meeting spaces to social spaces to capture those impromptu encounters and exchanges around the fringes of any gathering that are often more valuable and insightful than the meeting itself.

It might also involve the immersive and experimental qualities of the metaverse, which can offer a virtual space for avatars to inhabit. This is a novel mixed-reality way to achieve meeting equality between in-person and remote participants, as well as a face-saving solution for people who simply don’t like to see themselves on video. Meeting equality remains the biggest challenge on the work landscape, but there are things companies can do immediately to level the playing field in terms of equipment as well as the prospect of more radical solutions on the horizon.
WE ARE STILL ON THE FOOTHILLS OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE
CONCLUSION

Poly’s research with Worktech points to an inescapable conclusion: a reset for RTO. Bringing people back to the office is currently not working fast enough, nor is it far-reaching enough as part of a permanent hybrid model. Organizations are trying to tackle RTO at a functional, programmatic level when many of its biggest challenges speak directly to their underlying culture, structure and values.

Our belief is that implementing a successful RTO strategy depends on three essential realizations: first, it is all about the culture that drives your organization, not simply the IT infrastructure or design plan; second, a new corporate mindset will demand that the separate business units of IT, HR and facilities work together in a more holistic way; and third, there should be a new, more granular and sophisticated way of looking at the workforce beyond basic calculations of headcount.

One size does not fit all in the hybrid world. Our roundtable of technology and design leaders inside large firms emphasized that there is no right answer or perfect plan for all of this. We have entered an era of experiment in which the workplace is in ’a constant state of beta’. Pilot, test, evaluate and learn is the way to unlock the potential of hybrid working; as part of this, there should be co-innovation processes with employees and partners to ask new questions and find new answers.

What is crystal clear is that there should be a more compelling argument for RTO, one that ’inspires involvement’ and enables employees to ’earn the commute’. This will require organizations to break down company silos so they can share in creating a better, healthier, more productive workplace experience. Joined-up thinking — currently so hard to achieve given an absence of company-wide KPIs in some large firms — will contribute to making a ’destination office’ that can be a magnet for employees with a choice to work elsewhere.

To get RTO moving, companies can explore how better to ‘curate their own culture’ and communicate it effectively within the office environment. They can learn more about their own workforce and seek a closer fit between job roles and the different options within the hybrid model. They can remodel their spaces to readjust the proportion of collaboration, social and focus space — and to bring in wellness design features such as new amenities and biophilia.

They can also accelerate the pace of digital transformation and make sure that there is an end-to-end seamless technology experience for employees with video-enabled conferences rooms, a unified IT management system, and headsets and other high-quality equipment to ensure meeting equality.

Standing silently on the sidelines and just hoping people will come back to the office, or clumsily mandating their return, won’t work. There will be misaligned expectations, growing employee concerns and dysfunction across different parts of the organization.

For enterprise firms to really grasp the nettle of RTO, they should proactively develop a roadmap for hybrid success. This might reasonably include: a definition of leadership expectations around a joined-up approach to workplace experience; a commitment to supporting and driving cultural values; a checklist of enabling technologies for a mix of in-office and remote work; and an in-depth segmentation appraisal of workforce preferences, job roles and aptitudes for different levels of office attendance.

As part of this process, Poly intends to provide insights and solutions to help you chart your path on the journey to hybrid working.

Visit Poly.com for a Return to Office (RTO) tool kit designed to help IT Leaders plan, deploy, and adopt video and audio solutions that ensure hybrid workers can achieve meeting equality everywhere they work.
CBRE, How are office occupiers planning for the future? August 2021

Financial Times, The new frontiers of hybrid work take shape, Emma Jacobs quoting Kristi Woolsey of BCG, April 2021

Harvard Business Review, How to do hybrid right by Professor Lynda Gratton, May-June 2021

The Partnership for New York City employer survey, May 2022

Poly, Global Segmentation Research Study, 2022

Poly, Recruit, Retain and Grow, March 2022

Poly, Evolution of the Workplace report, October 2021

Unispace report, The Reluctant Returner, Nov 2021

WORKTECH Munich 2022, panel discussion with Christoph Rogge of Roche, May 2022

WORKTECH Academy Innovation Zone Case studies on LEGO Billund (May 2022) and EY Stockholm (July 2022)

Roundtable participants:

Technology Strategist, Fidelity International

Global Head of TSG Workplace and Real Estate Technology Experience, BNY Mellon

Founder and Global Creative Director, FreeState

Executive Director, Global Technology, Immersive Technology AR/VR, J.P.Morgan

Head of Workplace: Europe and Americas, Standard Chartered
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