THE JOURNEY TO HYBRID WORKING

SIX THINGS FOR U.S. COMPANIES TO CONSIDER

A Poly report in partnership with Worktech Academy
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 would 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 landscape for hybrid work, there is much to discover.

In this whitepaper, which draws on recent research into the needs and preferences of US workers, we look specifically at six key things for US companies to consider on the journey to hybrid working. Hybrid is a complex new model which constitutes a fundamental challenge to how we will work in the future. This paper charts some of the pivotal dichotomies and decision points that employers will face en route to making a successful transition.
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HYBRID IS HAPPENING, AT LAST

More than two years on from the start of the global pandemic, the developing story around the future of work is all about hybrid. After an initial phase of speculation and conjecture about what hybrid working might look like — and some early experiments with mixed results — organizations are now getting down to serious strategy work to make hybrid happen as a long-term option, none more so than in the United States.

According to Microsoft’s latest Work Trends Index, launched in late March 2022, we are now passing the point of no return on the journey to hybrid working. The Index is based on a large-scale study of 31,000 people in 31 countries, with an additional analysis of productivity signals in Microsoft 365 and labor trends on LinkedIn. It reports that 38 percent of the workforce are now hybrid workers (an increase of seven points on 2021) and that more than half of all workers (53 percent) are likely to consider transitioning to hybrid this year.

This means we have reached an inflection point in how we should view hybrid working, not as a coming thing but as an increasingly permanent fixture. Other studies suggest a similar picture. Poly’s Global Segmentation Research 2021, for example, showed how work locations are set to be more flexible with more work from home, more use of coworking spaces and less time in the office.

So, there is a growing consensus that hybrid is here, but there is also a general understanding that making the new model work will not be easy. There are many moving parts and some organizations are struggling to implement the right strategic approach. According to research by Poly, six out of ten firms believe they will lose new and existing talent if they do not figure out hybrid work, but less than half of all organizations are fully prepared with a strategy for hybrid working and 37 percent are only prepared in the short term.

Here we highlight six things for US companies to consider on the journey to hybrid in order to achieve a successful transition.
It is important to acknowledge at the outset the different and diametrically opposed positions that large employers have taken in response to hybrid working. Hybrid sits on a spectrum. Some companies are ‘hardly hybrid’ while others are ‘hyper hybrid’. Most US firms sit somewhere in the middle and are constantly shifting their position.

If you work in finance or law, it’s quite possible you have already been mandated to return to the office full-time. These employers are ‘resolute returners’ worried about the impact of remote work on culture, collaboration and training. They’re keen to get back to the over-the-shoulder mentoring of junior staff by senior partners. Big US banks have led the charge on this approach.

But if you work in technology or life sciences, it’s likely that you’ve been given more freedom to work the way you choose. These employers are ‘autonomy champions’ who are learning to trust their people to make the right decisions on how best to get work done. US companies in software and social media have been the early movers on giving more autonomy.

Between the returners and the option-givers, there are many different permutations. Sometimes different divisions of the same company will display opposing hybrid traits. The challenge is in providing the right tools, setting and support that can adapt to highly populated offices at one end of the spectrum and highly distributed teams at the other. But getting the formula right is likely to bring huge benefits in terms of meeting business objectives in a fast-changing environment. Implemented properly, hybrid working can give American companies greater agility and resilience in volatile markets as well as improve talent attraction and retention.
As workplaces become more flexible and our ability to work from anywhere more commonplace, the traditional idea of workplace ‘presence’ is shifting. The implementation of hybrid working has seen a tension arise between physical and digital presence in the workplace – particularly around the equality of experience.

Before COVID-19, most work activities were based on co-location in physical space. In many cases, career advancement and building professional networks were generally considered to depend entirely on physical presence in the workplace for a mandated period – in plain sight of managers and senior leadership. In a recent survey by Poly of over 2,500 corporate decision-makers, 60 percent agreed that if employees are not in the office, they will not build the relationships they need to progress in their careers.

For digital or remote employees to compete against physical presenteeism they must be constantly available to their teammates and leaders, otherwise, they are perceived as being absent. And when they are available to collaborate in hybrid meetings, digital participants are often met with a second-class experience whereby their audio or visual presence in the meeting is overshadowed in the physical space by poor meeting room infrastructure.

In a Poly survey of more than 4,000 US workers, more than two-thirds of employees (68 percent) agreed that their employer is more likely to account for or encourage different perspectives when people are physically present in the office. Poly’s Hybrid Performance Review of the US workforce further revealed that nearly three-quarters of employees (72 percent) think that their employers could be doing more to create a uniform experience between those in the office and those working remotely.

There is a vital opportunity now for organizations to invest in their culture and technology to bridge the experience gap between physical and digital presence. While digital collaboration tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams have played a significant role in making hybrid collaboration possible, investment in the right hardware technology such as speakers, headsets and cameras will be critical.
At the start of a prolonged global health crisis, corporate attention pivoted toward supporting the mental and physical wellbeing of employees. Now, as the immediate dangers of COVID-19 subside, employees’ perception of their organization caring about their wellbeing has dropped to the lowest percentage in nearly a decade, according to new survey results from Gallup based on 15,000 US employees.

Hybrid working has offered many opportunities to protect and support employee wellbeing through flexible hours and improving work-life balance. But it has also eroded the boundaries of ‘traditional’ working hours. The absence of guidelines has created a culture whereby the employee is ‘always on’.

Results from Poly’s own survey found that half of organizations (49 percent) do not take steps to prevent people from feeling like they need to be always on. Almost half of the respondents commented that there is an unhealthy culture of overworking at their company, and two-thirds (67 percent) said that ‘the move from the traditional 9-5 towards anytime working means that we have a moral duty to protect our employees from working too much’.

Microsoft data clearly shows an increase in the working day and a rise in after-hours work. The average user of Microsoft Teams, for example, has spent 252 percent more time in online meetings than before the pandemic in February 2020. The challenge is to balance well-being with the expectation of digital employees to be constantly available.

More generally, organizations will need to clearly outline their expectations regarding the etiquette of communication in a hybrid world of work where time and place is increasingly blurred and there is an absence of cultural norms. This will involve greater investment in digital tools to schedule work times, as well as a greater focus on culture, trust and cooperation — a new etiquette of behavior that means the needs of both office-based and remote participants in the workplace.
Hybrid working not only reshapes time and place – it also redraws the rules of collaboration between office-based and remote workers. Traditional collaboration in the office building was typically formal, scheduled and synchronous — happening at the same time with everyone physically present in meetings, workshops and so on. The hybrid model is set to increase asynchronous collaboration which occurs more informally at different times across different time zones with a mix of physically present and remote participants. This type of ad hoc collaboration will require special planning and protocols to be effective.

Everyone knows from experience that some of the most fruitful collaborative exchanges happen at the fringes of the formal meeting — whether that meeting is in-person or hybrid. Informal conversations over coffee or lunch can be highly productive, so how can video and audio technology expand its repertoire to bring people together in an informal ‘social space’ (rather than a formal meeting) when they are not co-located?

Innovation in this area, whether always-on video or spatial audio, will be critical.

A further tension arises between routine collaborative tasks such as reporting, which can be formally organized, and creative tasks such as developing new ideas and products, which can often rely on iteration, improvisation and informality to succeed. Mapped against the shifting balance between synchronous and asynchronous activity, this dichotomy exposes the need for careful understanding of how different employees behave and perform in the workplace.

Poly’s work in developing personas over several years has revealed insights into six different collaborative workstyles — the ‘office communicator’, for example, requires only a third of the communication devices needed by the ‘connected executive’ and operates at a lower intensity of communication over fewer work settings. When it comes to collaboration, knowing your workforce is the mantra.
5. SILOED V. UNIFIED SERVICES

While organizations traditionally operated in operational silos, the complexity and gravity of hybrid working have forced workplace decision-makers from IT, HR and real estate departments to come together to take ownership of the entire process. It cannot just be an IT issue but a business decision driven by the company’s most senior leaders and involving all the key departments working in unison.

The roles of IT, HR and real estate are now entering a period of flux, and new job titles such as Chief Experience Officer (CXO) or Chief Happiness Officer are entering the lexicon. Hybrid working sets a new priority for all decision-makers within IT, HR and real estate as they need to collaborate closely to promote team efficiency and collaboration and maximize fairness and equality across all work channels.

HR needs to have a fundamental understanding of the workforce to inform what spaces and technologies are required to make employees feel comfortable, safe and productive. Real estate and HR teams need to work with full transparency on office lease requirements and the new structure and personas of the hybrid workforce, while digital teams need to underpin all decisions to ensure flexible work is effective. Collecting data on how different people within the hybrid workforce behave, alongside the technologies they use and the spaces they occupy, will form part of a new holistic approach to hybrid.

A survey conducted by Poly highlighted that more than three-quarters of decision-makers (77 percent) agreed that the pandemic had forced their organization to get smarter about how they use space, people and technology. Hybrid is about work as a continuum of the behavioral, physical and digital, so facilities, IT executives and HR teams need to work from the same playbook. Is it time to replace these departments with a single unified service department for employee experience?
6. MONOCENTRIC V. POLYCENTRIC

Many of the dichotomies and decision points discussed in this paper relate to the way that offices are set to be repurposed. No longer the dominant channel for working, the office is now viewed as one of several options for employees in a hybrid ecosystem of work encompassing a range of both physical and virtual settings. One can describe this transition in working life as moving from a monocentric model (having a single center) to a polycentric one (with several centers).

Polycentricity is evident in a range of fields, from chemistry to city planning. The polycentric city connects several urban nodes, such as London which has grown organically out of many towns and villages. Compare that with a monocentric North American grid city planned with a single downtown central business district. Already, the future value of the monocultural central business district is being questioned as developers eye up the desirability of more mixed-use districts and campuses. In the hybrid era, the polycentric approach, with its large and complicated web of interdependent relationships, will increasingly challenge the traditional monocentric corporate HQ.

Polycentric working asks organizations to think very carefully about the support infrastructure that will be required to ensure that hybrid working is a success: home internet, remote diagnostics and a myriad of end-user tech options will be part of the story. A rethink will be needed on how employee support is organized and some reallocation of budgets from real estate to IT.

Above all, polycentric working implies a richer and more expansive set of values and relationships. This vision is mirrored in Poly’s ‘all together’ approach to providing the technologies, innovations and services that enable work to be democratized for people wherever they are located. Work equity will be central to seizing the opportunities of the hybrid model.
CONCLUSION

This paper has set out six things to consider on the journey to hybrid working. In summary, first it is important for US organizations to examine where they plan to sit along the spectrum of hybrid working — are they ‘hardly hybrid’ mandating a return to the office for all, or ‘hyper hybrid’ advocating greater flexibility and choice?

Second, they should reassess what ‘presence’ means in the workplace and ensure that employees have the digital tools to feel ‘connected’ in the broadest sense when working remotely. Third, organizations should balance the ‘always-on’ aspect of the hybrid model against the need to protect employee wellbeing and guard against overwork — building culture is important here and a new digital etiquette should be set in the absence of established cultural norms.

Fourth, there should also be a drive to facilitate collaboration in a way that expands the repertoire from the formal routine and synchronous meetings of the traditional office to collaboration that is informal, creative and asynchronous across time zones.

Fifth, it is important to ensure that company HR, IT and real estate functions can work more closely together and share a holistic vision on hybrid – this may entail some ‘rewiring’ of the organization. The sixth consideration on the journey to hybrid involves taking a polycentric rather than a monocentric approach to organizing work, accepting that there are now several centers for working, not just one, and there should be a rethink of the end-user support infrastructure.

Figuring out how to address the various dichotomies and decision points identified in this paper is part of the journey to hybrid working that US companies are now undertaking. According to a recent survey of more than 4,000 American office workers by Poly, less than three in ten (27 percent) say their company has created new collaboration spaces with video conferencing equipment and fewer still (23 percent) say their company has refitted meeting room spaces with video capabilities for hybrid work.

Poly has been studying workstyle evolution for nearly a decade and has identified six distinct workstyles – often referred to as personas – which make up 92 percent of a typical enterprise. There is much work to do, and Poly intends to provide insights and solutions to help you chart your course every step of the way.

Learn how to achieve Meeting Equality across your organization, so all meeting participants can be heard with greater clarity and seen with equal power, no matter where they work.

Selected Research Sources: Microsoft, Work Trend Index, March 2022; Gallop, Survey of employee wellbeing, March 2022; Poly, Global Segmentation Research Study, 2021; Poly, Recruit, Retain and Grow, March 2022; Poly, The Hybrid Performance Review, May 2022
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