Driving Inclusion in a Hybrid Work Environment

> Organizations must commit to sustaining and improving inclusion as they continue to refine their hybrid policies. Executive leaders can use this research to learn how to foster inclusion in a hybrid environment.

Overview

Key Findings

- Hybrid work is here to stay, but new inequalities may emerge as employees are more dispersed and returning to work in different ways.

- To maintain productivity and engagement in a hybrid work environment, organizations must focus on seeking out new ways to collaborate through an innovative and inclusive lens.

- Underrepresented employees face proximity bias as they are more likely to choose remote work. It can limit their access to growth opportunities and visibility among senior leaders.

- The hybrid work environment poses new challenges for organizations in effectively fostering inclusion. Addressing the diversity and inclusion (D&I) challenges specific to hybrid work can help organizations reaffirm their commitment to D&I.

Recommendations

To drive inclusion in a hybrid work environment, executive leaders responsible for talent should:

- Ensure the inclusion efforts reach everyone in the organization, as individual experiences can vary greatly in a hybrid work environment.

- Demonstrate care by investing in hybrid opportunities that foster belonging and encourage connectedness.

- Review and rethink business and talent processes by partnering with other leaders to reassess how the organization can be inclusive in a hybrid work environment.

- Reinforce the importance and practice of inclusion by giving managers and leaders tools that help them translate and visualize what inclusion looks like in a hybrid setting.

- Learn about the new employee experience and create needed social connections by using employee resource groups (ERGs) to give employees a space for expression.

Analysis

This research is adapted from 4 Ways to Foster Inclusion in a Remote Work Environment.

As organizations prepare for the next phase of hybrid work, many executive leaders are shifting their efforts to understand and manage employee experience and expectations in a hybrid work environment. An important question for organizations to answer is how to sustain an inclusive culture with employees moving between on-site and remote work.

Inclusion refers to employees' feelings of psychological safety, trust and belonging. It is especially important given that a hybrid workplace can accelerate old challenges, such as inadequate resources being allocated to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts, and can also create new challenges like proximity bias which might lead leaders to falsely assume people are more productive when they are physically close by. [1] Executive leaders must center inclusion as a focus among the leadership team and work toward building an inclusive culture when developing hybrid policies. Executive leaders should consider the following tactics to successfully enable inclusion in a hybrid work environment.

1. Create opportunities to support belonging. Employees need to feel that people and the organization care about them. Gartner's Inclusion Index [2] shows that belonging has a large impact on employee perceptions of overall inclusion and engagement. In a traditional work environment, managers and employees could demonstrate care through in-person social interactions, such as stopping by a colleague's cubicle to say hello, scheduling a coffee chat with a friend or reconnecting with the team through a work-sponsored social event. However, in a hybrid work environment, demonstrating care is far more challenging as the workforce is scattered. To support belonging, executive leaders should:

- Simulate social interactions that naturally occur on-site by holding hybrid events that encourage connectedness. They need to be a mix of both virtual team events and in-person hybrid events — such as coffee chats, happy hours and engagement sessions — which are relatively easy ways to encourage a group of any size to convene and bond with one another. Organizations can leverage the lessons learned during remote work and plan collaborations through virtual mediums to ensure everyone is placed equally and not missing out on critical on-site conversations.

2. **Reassess how the organization can be inclusive in a hybrid environment**. Executive leaders must work with HR leaders to examine how the shift to hybrid work is impacting their employees. They should also collaborate with D&I leaders to review and rethink business and talent processes and ensure they are inclusive in a hybrid work environment, reaffirming their organizational commitment to inclusion. Specifically, executive leaders should:

- Partner with the heads of D&I and HR and other leaders to reassess how the organization can further support inclusion internally and externally. Review benefits, resources and other offerings to accommodate employees with diverse needs. Working parents, employees with caregiving responsibilities, employees with disabilities and other talent segments may require new or different support as they work from home or on-site.

- Collaborate with the learning and development teams to provide equal learning opportunities by maintaining a balance of virtual and face-to-face training opportunities. This will help create an equitable and inclusive learning culture.

- Partner with the head of HR, communications leaders and other senior leaders on the need to (re)communicate the organization's commitment to inclusion. Consider "pushing" or highlighting available resources to employees, managers and leaders to help them foster inclusion in a hybrid setting. Communicate the importance of transparency to employees, managers and leaders to avoid potential miscommunication.

3. Leverage ERGs to understand the new employee experience and create social connections. Given that 93% of organizations have ERGs, executive leaders should work with ERG leaders and members to understand how employees are experiencing their new work environment. [3] While ERGs are traditionally set up to connect employees with shared identities, they can also be used to engage nonmembers by providing support and guidance on emerging challenges and creating opportunities for social connection among employees feeling isolated by the transition to hybrid work. Executive leaders, in particular, should:

- Work with ERGs that have the greatest potential to reveal critical insights into the new employee experience. Deploy pulse surveys or focus groups among different groups of employees to learn about their experience in the hybrid work environment. Questions should focus on their ability to be productive in the hybrid work environment, the required accommodations for differently abled employees and "must have" organizational support. Inputs collected can help executive leaders develop a real-time understanding of the employee experience and identify and invest in the right solutions.

- Identify ERGs that are best-positioned to support new or emerging employee needs. For example, ERGs for working parents may be able to offer support and guidance to employees who are planning to return to work after a long remote stint. Encourage these ERGs to provide collaboration opportunities with virtual lunches or webinars where they share tips and best practices on how to balance caregiving and work responsibilities, identify nonobvious benefits for employees to use and share ways to flex work schedules. For ERGs with experience in community outreach, ask them to share both virtual and in-person volunteering opportunities or simple ways employees can give to and help those in need.

- Leverage ERGs to facilitate much needed connection in a hybrid environment where employees might be in different locations. Encourage ERG members to market and brand upcoming meetings and events to nonmembers. Beyond increasing awareness of different identities, these meetings and events may be one of the few opportunities for employees to meet their co-workers in more informal settings as they transition from remote to hybrid or plan to stay remote.

4. Equip managers and leaders with tools for inclusion. Employees are increasingly relying on their managers and leaders for direction and guidance on how to work and succeed in a hybrid environment. Executive leaders must reinforce the importance and practice of inclusion, helping managers and leaders translate and visualize what inclusion looks like in a hybrid setting. Specifically, executive leaders should:

- Ground their efforts by first sharing their organization's inclusive leadership behaviors and providing tangible examples of how they can be demonstrated in a hybrid work environment. Use our five inclusive leadership behaviors as a potential starting point (see Table 1).

Table 1: Inclusive Leadership Behaviors in a Hybrid Work Setting
(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Inclusive Behavior	Ways Managers Can Demonstrate Inclusive Behaviors
Supporting Team Growth	■ Allow team members to make (some) decisions on how they will manage hybrid work. Ask them to share their ideas for how to conduct virtual or in-person check-ins, connect and socialize with the team, contribute to team meetings and maintain overall productivity.
Fostering Team Accountability	■ Brainstorm how to assess performance in a hybrid setting, and communicate the new approach to team members while asking for their input and feedback.
Network Management	■ Encourage team members to leverage ERGs (e.g., working parent/caregiver ERGs) or affinity groups, and connect them to other internal and external sources that provide additional support and guidance.
Interpersonal Integrity	■ Communicate the importance of greater transparency and open communication in a hybrid work setting.
Productive Conflict	■ Give team members tips to manage in-office days and communicate effectively with teammates across geographies using virtual tools.

Source: Gartner

- Continue to contextualize how inclusive behaviors apply to a hybrid setting by reflecting on typical manager activities such as leading team meetings, conducting check-ins and delegating work. Provide simple tactics on how managers can be more inclusive as they conduct those same activities but in a hybrid work environment.

- Remind managers of the importance of building trust, belonging and psychological safety. Share simple tactics on how managers can continue to build these critical elements of inclusion (see Table 2).

Table 2: Tactics for Building Inclusion in a Hybrid Work Setting

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Element of Inclusion	What Managers Can Do
Trust	■ Create transparency on team goals, individual goals and work schedules. ■ Set expectations for how the team will work together in a hybrid work environment (e.g., how project check-ins will run, how work handoffs will occur). ■ Determine protocols for team communication for consistent communication (e.g., ask quick questions via chat, provide formal project updates via email).
Belonging	■ Create engagement opportunities for the team. ■ Schedule regular virtual and in-person check-ins. ■ Understand what inclusion means to your employees in your hybrid workplace by collecting data and opinions through employee surveys. ■ Grow intentional social connections by creating opportunities for employees to showcase their life beyond work while allowing them to share what they feel comfortable revealing.
Psychological Safety	■ Communicate the importance of productive conflict — specifically, that employees should seek to address and not avoid issues. ■ Practice team learning by selecting a topic or skill the team agrees they collectively need to improve upon and asking team members to teach others with you, as the manager, while providing teaching and facilitation support.

Source: Gartner

Evidence

[1] What Is Proximity Bias and How Can Managers Prevent It?, Harvard Business Review.

[2] Integrate DEI Competencies in Leadership

[3] **2023 Gartner Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Functional Benchmarking Survey.** This survey is a global survey of 153 DEI leaders and was conducted from 6 February through 20 March 2023. The survey captured information to understand DEI leaders' backgrounds and priorities, how they are managing their functions, partnerships with other functions and other benchmarking data about DEI functions.

Recommended by the Authors

4 Actions HR Can Take to Drive Inclusion in a Hybrid World

Address Disparities to Advance Racially Underrepresented Talent in a Hybrid Work Environment

How to Drive Employee Connection in a Distributed Workforce

How CHROs Can Embed Inclusion Into Culture Strategy

Document Revision History

Driving Inclusion in a Remote Work Environment - 18 June 2020

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