

Learnings from the Great Resignation: Hybrid without culture is not enough



South Africa's Government has ended the COVID-19 State of Disaster, but now that employees have experienced remote working, many don't want to return to the office, leading companies to opt for hybrid work. As a result of the pandemic, employees are more willing to leave a job should they be unhappy, prompting employers to ensure they cultivate an optimal working environment to retain top talent in 2022 and beyond. This boils down to balancing culture whilst navigating a new way of working to bolster employee happiness, productivity, and overall company growth.

According to the recently released Microsoft Trends in Work 2022 report, 43% of leaders say relationship-building is the greatest challenge in hybrid and remote work—but it's one worth prioritising as building social capital is crucial for organisational success. Employees who have thriving relationships with their immediate team members report better well-being than those with poor relationships (76% versus 57%). They also confirm higher productivity (50% versus 36%) and say that they are less likely to change employers in the year ahead (61% versus 39%). This research shows that many hybrid employees have been successful at maintaining their workplace relationships.

This is because remote work can increase the possibility for co-workers to feel disconnected and alienated from the company and fellow colleagues. Employees can forget that they're part of a team and they lose their sense of belonging. This is where culture comes in as it can maintain connection even while there is a physical separation. As such, hybrid has an advantage over purely remote working because it gives teams the best of both worlds. But with this shift, it is important for companies to ascertain how to cultivate culture in this new setting.

Culture can be found in structure

There's a saying in IT that the architecture of your software reflects the structure of your team or company. Culture is no different as it often exposes the people structures that are in place. So, if

companies change to hybrid work, the culture will adjust. The question is, will it be done intentionally and well?

There are a few small hacks leaders can use to ensure hybrid working encourages a culture of more interpersonal connection, rather than less.

The first is to look at how working days are structured and use in-office time to build relationships.

Don't treat at-home days as you would in-office days. There is no point in coming into the office to spend all day on Teams calls. Plan to spend time with the people who are in the office with you. Remote working days should be used for individual work and online meetings. Try to maximise the benefits of each way of working.

This way, time spent in the office to build strong relationships ensures that remote work happens easily. When teams work remotely, communications are usually text-based and can become very transactional. The assumed immediacy of Slack or Teams messaging means we can feel frustrated when responses aren't quick. In the office we can find out what is going on and see that they are in a meeting, dealing with a client crisis or just having the worst day ever. We can feel compassion, adjust our expectations, and move on. This isn't as easy when working remotely.

Our expectations of quick responses have a negative effect on personal relationships as team members can misconstrue that they are being ignored. Another challenge is that text messaging is easily misunderstood, and we often wait too long to ask for clarity. This leads to everything from overthinking, spending time on the wrong thing and general confusion, all leading to decreased productivity. All of this is why building relationships between co-workers is so important.

One of the greatest advantages of working in the office is it's good for collaboration and working through difficult problems. Human beings are better at this when they are together and have the benefits of non-verbal cues to understand what each other really means, not just what they say. The advantage of remote work is the chance to focus without humans distracting us all the time. Therefore, the work that is done in the office and at home needs to be carefully planned and structured to take advantage of the benefits of both whilst bolstering company culture.

Fairness is key to cultivate culture in a hybrid world

Another key consideration for moving towards a hybrid working model is addressing our natural biases. Hybrid working introduces the chance of proximity bias, which is when employees who are physically in-office are shown favouritism or given preferential treatment because managers literally believe that the people they can see are more valuable than the ones they can't.

This has an impact on those who work remotely more often than others, such as moms or team members living in different cities. This bias can change the trajectory of their careers. To mitigate this, it is vital that leaders and managers are educated on proximity bias and that people management structures are put in place to ensure employees aren't being discounted for working remotely. These can include

regular reviews and check-ins as well as clear and measurable KPIs.

Culture is found in a comfortable office

The last hack, and probably the easiest to get right is to make the office an easy, productive, and generally nice place to work. This can be practical such as providing employees with additional work screens, standing desks, crazy fast internet, generators for load shedding and comfortable chairs as well as perks like great coffee or work lunch. Art, wall murals or just some brightly coloured paint on the walls can change how we feel about our workspace. The cubical farms of the '90s are not going to bring anyone back. Look around your office and think – does this make me want to be here? If not, you need to make some changes.

Being in the office also provides the opportunity for fun team-building experiences as well as celebrations. The collective celebration of birthdays, getting married, receiving a master's degree or Tuesday-donut-day brings us together. Being in the office should remind us why we love to come to work. It's not just a place where we get our work done, it's a place to connect.

The advantages of both ways of working can be achieved in the hybrid model when we pay attention to the risks and benefits of both and maximise them.

Employees are becoming much clearer about what they expect from employers – flexibility and autonomy are high on that list, along with a good company culture. Hybrid working gives companies a chance to re-invigorate their cultures and create a place where people want to, and can, happily work and grow.