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PERSPECTIVES

REBOOTING CORPORATE CULTURE FOR THE HYBRID WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

BY **JEN FARTHING**

> SAI360

The hybrid work model is here to stay, but is your corporate culture equipped for the new challenges it presents? There is no escaping that remote work has transformed from a rushed contingency plan into a cornerstone of current and future business models, but there is a significant disconnect between leadership and employees. Leaders tend to see remote work as a necessary evil and are three times more likely than their employees to prefer a full return to the office. Additionally, 76 percent of employees do not want to go back to the office full-time. Ever. In the middle of 'the Great Resignation', this means leaders that want to capture and retain talent need to evolve company

culture to embrace a distributed workforce rather than merely tolerating it.

Challenges in defining and upholding culture

Rebooting corporate culture comes with a host of challenges, including defining what that culture is. With a distributed workforce, the typical image of culture as what goes on within the office during working hours is no longer valid. While free snacks and a game room may have been key to company culture in the past, we must broaden definitions to account for the lack of daily in-person interaction and focus more on how the organisation fulfils its



goals and supports employees as they work toward those goals.

Codes of conduct are core elements of any corporate culture, but more leaders are finding out that remote work has driven a need for more explicit rules that address distributed teams. You would

never expect an employee to turn up at the office in pyjamas, yet many people appear comfortable attending online meetings looking like they have just rolled out of bed. In more disturbing developments, one in four employees has experienced sexual harassment during remote work. Shoring up the

code of conduct to cover both in-person and remote or hybrid workers fairly is key to building a strong culture.

Leaders and employees alike share a worry that in-person workers will have access to more recognition, mentorship and advancement opportunities than their remote and hybrid peers. What can your organisation do to ensure equity in the distributed workforce? Personal identity comes into play here as well, with employees from marginalised groups feeling more included when working remotely, while white employees say they feel a diminished sense of inclusion. This means employees of colour are more likely to stay remote, making it essential to ensure remote and hybrid employees receive equal opportunity to prevent potential backsliding on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

Finding a balance in flexibility

Although companies must address concerns that remote or hybrid employees may get left behind, they must also consider how to offer in-office employees greater flexibility. Measures like offering flexible arrival and departure times or a compressed work week are smart ways to lessen the rigidity of in-person work while still reaping the benefits for the organisation and the employees.

Find out where you are today, and let employees lead

Developing a hybrid-friendly corporate culture starts with re-examining core values and evaluating how well those values are reflected in your current

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hybrid model. Some organisations with more extensive experience in remote working will find that only a few tweaks are needed to bring values and policies into alignment, while others will need to rebuild the culture brick by brick.

Employees are undoubtedly the most valuable resource when it comes to evaluating culture. They see how leadership's claims are reflected in day-to-day operations and are typically willing to reveal pain points and provide suggestions when they feel their voices will be heard. It may seem counterintuitive to hand over the reins to employees to any extent but listening carefully is the only way to get a sense

of how your policies and attitudes are helping or harming your cultural development.

Core considerations to start transformation

When laying plans to reboot your corporate culture, there are several high-impact touchstones leadership must consider. Communications policies are often a strong indicator of a company's culture and the way they value their distributed workers.

One study from the UK showed that in 2020, people who worked from home were putting in an average of six hours of unpaid overtime per week, compared to the 3.6 hours worked by those in-office — and an overload of emails was a major contributor. Workers are demanding flexibility, but some companies take this to mean working out of hours or always being available. Leaders must consider what communication requirements are for employees and set balanced boundaries and expectations to ensure remote workers can 'shut off' like their in-office peers can at the end of the day.

To promote inclusion, hybrid and remote workers need a feedback system that allows their questions and concerns to be heard. Offering dedicated, secure channels for reporting fosters a 'speak-up' approach that encourages greater inclusion in the overall culture.

A third key consideration is how in-office employees are encouraged to interact when they cannot establish relationships with peers in

person. Many companies have cultivated a more collaborative culture by creating opportunities for in-house employees to meet and greet their remote colleagues, such as online trivia nights or company-wide online spaces that allow for social interaction without the need to connect through external social media.

Shoring up security

As essential as employee sentiment is in building culture, you must also consider how the culture addresses cyber security. IT risks are a threat to every company, but when workers are using devices or home networks to access organisational information outside the office, additional care must be taken to build cyber security awareness into company culture.

If a new employee, remote or in-office, receives a phishing text claiming to be from the chief executive, will they know what to do based on what they learned during onboarding? Just one misstep can lead to costly data breaches and hacks, so it is crucial to ensure remote and hybrid workers get cyber security training that addresses remote risks, and that in-office employees get training of the same calibre. Security training works best when employees can engage in interactive, scenario-based training that encourages them to speak up when they see something wrong or out of place.

Culture takes concentrated effort

Organisations that fail to develop a corporate culture that organically extends to remote workers will continue losing talent to competitors that value, respect and recognise the differences between in-office work and remote positions. It is not enough to offer remote flexibility, it must be built into the company culture from the ground up, in a way that maximises their ability to contribute, collaborate and advance. Leaders who listen and make changes according to employee feedback are best positioned to remain leaders in the ongoing remote work revolution. **RC**



Jen Farthing

Senior Vice President, Learning
SAI360

T: +1 (678) 992 0262

E: jennifer.farthing@sai360.com