How hybrid work is reinventing management

April 11 2024, by Olga Kokshagina and Sabrina Schneider

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When it arrived en masse for the COVID pandemic, remote working was hailed as an arrangement that boosted work-life balance and slashed commuter-related misery and pollution. But it would appear its golden days are over.

Back to the office

Investment banker [Goldman Sachs now requires employees to be at the office five days a week](#), while [Google has recently requested workers to factor in office attendance in their performance review](#). Many companies have also adopted hybrid work policies that require staff to be in the office a minimum number of days. Even Zoom—an ambassador of remote working if there ever was one—now demands employees who live within [50 miles of its buildings to show up at least twice a week](#). The company has cited concerns about a lack of trust between employees who don't know each other or a lack of creativity in online settings.

Carrots at the workplace

For want of constraining policies, employers are resorting to various tactics to lure workers back, from financial incentives like [return-to-office bonuses](#) to tapping into their "fear of missing out" (FOMO), as seen with Bolt sharing [office and party photos on Slack](#).

Such efforts come as overall office occupancy rates have remained rather stagnant over the last years. According to the 2023 Global Survey of Working Arrangements (G-SWA), only [67% of full-time employees work five days per week on-site](#).

But is that such a bad thing? Research yields conflicting results on the impact of remote work on productivity: basing themselves on [standard efficiency measures](#), some [studies](#) show diminished productivity while others report [heightened job satisfaction and efficiency](#) thanks to [less commuting time and more caregiving opportunities](#). In France, national research found that more remote-working opportunities could boost productivity by [around 10%](#).

Autonomy and/or control?

Understanding tensions that may arise from working from home is crucial if companies are to work out which formula—full-time office presence, remote working or hybrid solutions—is best suited to them.

Our research, conducted with 30 managers from various organizations in France, Germany and Denmark pre- and post-COVID-19, examines how organizations navigate the complexities of online work and adjust their work practices accordingly. One response is the *autonomy paradox*, which was introduced in 2013 but gained more importance with hybrid work.

When grappling with the autonomy paradox, managers face the conundrum of whether to grant employees autonomy or to supervise them more closely. One option is to introduce high levels of autonomy, where managers empower employees to self-manage their output. For example, a provider of home nursing services in Holland, Buutzorg, created a trust-based, self-management system by allowing employees to access its IT platform to share knowledge, enter and compare their performance in a transparent manner.

Alternatively, employees may perform better when more closely managed. As one of the managers interviewed for our study stated:

"It is also about a standard that has been established. In the early years of digitalization, everybody expected you to react quickly [to any attempts to reach you]. I remember that I was disappointed when I did not reach someone on a Sunday afternoon. That has changed."

We have identified several other tensions such as dealing with the challenges of information overload and transparency versus increasing information availability and efficiency gains in handling data and

information, the increased possibility of connecting with others online against a backdrop of loneliness. All of these tensions are more pronounced in hybrid work environments.

Adopting more fluid approaches

As hybrid work becomes more common, not only will these tensions appear more frequently and the number of individuals affected by them increase, but the nature of these tensions will also become more complex and interwoven. In light of this, we can expect coping mechanisms to shift from prescriptive rules to ongoing guidance allowing us to question the meaning of our job and be ready to regularly shake up our routine.

Take the car-sharing platform BlaBlaCar. On 1 June 2022, the company unveiled its new [Paris headquarters](link) and remote-working policy. More than a quarter of the firm's employees decided to work remotely full time, tapping into a dedicated budget to organize their own office space and to travel to the company's headquarters once a month. The remaining employees benefit from a hybrid solution, spending one to five days a week in the office space, designed to become ["a living space where to exchange, a key element of social cohesion"](link) (Muriel Havas, head of facilities).

Addressing these tensions demands a balanced approach. At an individual level, employees can refine their work habits, like scheduling breaks and managing online connectivity. Organizations, on their part, need to develop flexible frameworks that enable staff to creatively manage these challenges. This requires a shift from rigid policies and norms to more fluid and flexible approaches that empower employees to navigate paradoxes innovatively.

Overcoming the back-to-work debate

Given how differently individuals can respond to such tensions, effective coping mechanisms involve personalized support systems tailored to individual needs, including mentorship programs and flexible work policies. Managers must assess and enhance their team members' readiness to engage with digital technologies critically. For example, a French IT company Atos supported their employees in developing digital mindset through a voluntary upskill program. The program called the Digital Transformation Factory upskilling certification program was open to everyone from data scientists and highly skilled engineers to people in traditionally non-technical functions—70,000 people initially completed it.

Our findings suggest that the real issue isn't whether to return to physical offices or not. Instead, we should concentrate on creating work environments tailored to each individual's capability to navigate the complex challenges of hybrid work and their readiness to embrace these challenges. Consider an employee who thrives when given the freedom to choose their work location and hours—a reality which, on the surface, proves right to the managerial approach promoting worker autonomy. However, this same freedom can lead to a paradox where too much choice leads the employee to be overwhelmed and suffer from a lack of structure. A tailored solution could be a digital platform that allows the employee to set preferred working hours and locations, while also providing suggested schedules and check-ins to offer structure.

Managers need to assess and enhance their team members' paradox mindset and ability to deal with digital technologies. This implies not only providing the necessary tools and technologies but also ensuring that employees are prepared and supported to handle the complexities and contradictions these tools might bring up.

Citation: How hybrid work is reinventing management (2024, April 11) retrieved 20 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2024-04-hybrid-reinventing.html