Three Steps to Optimising Your Firm's Hybrid Work Strategy

You need a strong process to reconcile the needs and wants of your various stakeholders.

When the pandemic started, who knew that returning to the office would be so fraught? It raises a flurry of questions: Do all employees need flexibility? What could hybrid work end up costing us? Should remote working decisions be left with individual managers? If people stop coming to the office, will our culture go the way of the dodo?

Answering these complex questions is made all the more challenging by the fact that decision makers are pulled between competing priorities – often embodied in multiple different stakeholders. All this, in a context that involves more uncertainty than ever before.

Hybridity refers to work configurations that include employees working in the same physical space and others working remotely. I have found that assessing hybrid working options involves, in fact, three different discussions, each focused around a different objective. These conversations are about productivity, staffing and culture, respectively. No wonder the situation feels so tricky.

A conversation about productivity

It remains unclear exactly what the net effect of hybridity is on employees' and teams' abilities to collaborate effectively. According to one argument, colocation allows for rapid transfer of information and unparalleled collaborative work. Alternatively,

another argument says that productivity is equivalent or even optimised when employees can decide their own schedules, free of geographic and temporal constraints.

This conversation is about how your organisation can optimally deliver on its commitments within a given hybridity format.

A conversation about staffing

After working from home for more than a year, most employees have new preferences and expectations as to how they should be allowed to work. Organisations unwilling to offer significant flexibility to current and future employees may struggle attracting and retaining them. As a result, hybrid work is fast becoming a new battle ground in the war for talent.

This conversation is about ensuring that your company doesn't fall behind in a competitive talent market that's increasingly global and virtual.

A conversation about culture

Historically, many firms have relied on face time and apprenticeship to inculcate their guiding values, beliefs and norms. After all, much of a company's culture (beyond its official value statement) is often tacitly understood or even subconscious.

Visit INSEAD Knowledge
http://knowledge.insead.edu

Communicating these intangibles via technology remains a significant challenge for many organisations.

In addition, some organisations are witnessing a fracture between employees who learned the culture through first-hand experience and newcomers who have never had the same exposure. In pandemic regions, many employees hired in the last year have never been in the office. Will this be a lost generation, or will this be the pivot?

This conversation is about how best to ensure the continuity of the social fabric that defines your organisation.

Even before Covid-19, challenges existed

These conversations on productivity, staffing and culture each focus on a different hybridity-related challenge and when discussing hybridity, it is critical to differentiate between them. What complicates matters is that every leader tends to have a deeply held predilection for one of them – and these were in place well before Covid.

Productivity-focused leaders are convinced that what matters is *what* you produce at the end of the day and that success comes from optimising workflows and processes. People-focused leaders argue that *who* works for you is most critical and that with the right people, all is possible. Culture-focused leaders believe that success arises from *how* you work – that secret sauce that sets you apart from the competition.

While discussions over hybridity brought these tensions between performance, staffing and culture to the fore, they have always existed. This makes them deeply rooted and often difficult to reconcile, particularly when they require comparing very different objectives – like trying to decide on a trade-off between output quantity and long-term employee engagement.

Now what?

As you try to sort your hybridity strategy, it is essential to keep the arguments clear, comparable and minimally affected by individual motivations. This is a challenge, particularly in a group setting. Yet hybridity remains a collective problem-solving task.

The good news is that years of research, notably on negotiations, have shed light on how to best tackle decision making among multiple, divided stakeholders. Here are three steps based on that research.

Step 1: Surface and appreciate differences

Leaders must recognise that each conversation is an important piece of the hybridity equation. Here's how to identify what stakeholders care about:

1. **Collect data:** Create a short survey to ask each stakeholder their top priorities in terms of hybrid work. Gathering opinions **independently and anonymously** tends to provide the most accurate responses. Do pay attention to response rates though, to make sure you're not hearing only from the zealots.

2. **Visualise:** Help decision makers form a broader picture through a visual tool. Use a board to list all priorities uncovered in the first step, then get stakeholders to rate the importance of each by placing numbered sticky notes to show their preference. Alternatively, use polling software for this exercise.

3. **Make sense of the data collectively:** Discuss as a group what the data tell you about your collective priorities. For example, one stakeholder might prioritise flexibility as a way to attract talent, another might push for in-person interactions to drive innovation. A third might campaign for face time to reinforce the company culture.

Then start thinking in terms of trade-offs, while remembering that majority rule rarely leads to the best decision. Sometimes, a resolution will naturally surface based on the data. If that fails, don't hesitate to employ a more structured approach to avoid biases (one excellent tool is the **Matrix of Change**). At this stage, you don't need to agree on the right hybridity solution, but on what the data say you care about.

Step 2: Focus on integrative solutions

Now it's time to look at the solutions. The ideal scenario, of course, would be to find one that satisfies every party. But should this likely require an unreasonable amount of time, you may want to consider the research on **multiple equivalent simultaneous offers** (MESOs).

MESOs involve bundling potentially competing elements into a few alternatives that have the same overall value to the group. In other words, it's about crafting solutions that are split 30/30/40 (or similar) across competing elements. Focusing people on that process is less likely to be contentious and more likely to lead to greater overall value.

Step 3: Revisit

In this uncertain world, nothing stays the same for very long. Any hybrid work policy you devise is likely to require tweaks as circumstances evolve. Don't worry if you don't get it right the first time.

Your best strategy is to use a process that entails planned re-evaluation and reassessment. Once you are familiar with the process, you only need to look at areas where priorities or options might have changed. Set aside a few minutes to assess if these changes influence your conclusions. If so, revise them.

The frequency of these re-evaluations depends on the volatility of the conditions surrounding your market, labour pool and culture. The more volatile they are, the more often you should check that your policy remains a good fit.

In the end, this three-step strategy doesn't dictate what your company's approach to hybrid working should be – such solutions must be tailored. However, taking a process-based approach does increase the odds that you'll find the best balance between the needs of your customers, your staff and your organisation.

*This is an adaptation of an **article** published in Harvard Business Review.*

__Mark Mortensen__ is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. He is the director of __Designing and Leading Collaboration in a New World Order__, an INSEAD Go-Live programme, and the co-director of __Developing Emerging Leaders__, an online INSEAD Executive Education programme.

INSEAD Knowledge is now on __LinkedIn__. Join the conversation today.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on __Twitter__ and __Facebook__.

Find article at
https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/three-steps-to-optimising-your-firms-hybrid-work-strategy-17391

Download the Knowledge app for free

Visit INSEAD Knowledge
http://knowledge.insead.edu