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The next return-to-office challenge: Avoiding 'hybrid hell'

Flexible workplaces will bring new challenges for managers

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Bloomberg

In their [return-to-office plans](#), employers are increasingly opting for flexible or [hybrid options](#) that allow employees to shuffle between the office and [working from home](#).

Managing that hybrid workforce might be just as tricky to figure out as the sudden shift to remote work was 13 months ago.

“A lot of people are under the illusion that since they’ve been operating remotely, they can easily transition to a hybrid workforce,” said Kristine Woolsey, an associate director at Boston Consulting Group. “That simply isn’t true.”

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[JPMorgan](#) and [Citigroup](#) said in recent memos that many roles in their companies will allow for hybrid work. The published guidelines for Mayor Bill de Blasio’s plan to return 80,000 city workers to offices next month—meant as a [symbol of economic reopening](#)—include provisions for flexible schedules and allow telework in some instances.

About 65% of companies are considering adopting a hybrid work policy long term, according to a [survey last month](#) by Boston Consulting Group, on behalf of Zoom.

Employers are fretting, however, about how to manage a workforce spread across several locations. The largest concern is that remote workers will miss opportunities.

“Most professionals learn their job through an apprenticeship model, which is almost impossible to replicate in the Zoom world,” JPMorgan CEO Jamie Dimon wrote this week in a letter to shareholders.

Some things are easier when everyone is out of the office and on a more level playing field—even with the acknowledgment that comfort with working from home can vary significantly by employee.

“We’ve learned an eight-person Zoom meeting can work fine,” said Harry Ritter, CEO of Flatiron District-based mental health care startup Alma. “An eight-person meeting with four people on Zoom and four in a room may work significantly less well.”

Employers such as Alma want to give employees flexibility without falling into “hybrid hell,” as described by Ritter, in which communication and planning challenges mean no one benefits from having options.

Reworking the workplace

Woolsey said many corporations are newly training managers on how to best incorporate remote and office workers. Office spaces are shifting to embrace adaptability, noted Carlos Martínez, a principal with architecture firm Gensler.

That means individual desks take a backseat to adjustable common spaces, with seating and tables that can be collapsed and wheeled away. Meeting rooms are being equipped with new videoconferencing equipment designed to be more responsive than a simple monitor and webcam. One example is the virtual whiteboard—a large touch-screen monitor that can be edited either in the room or by smartphone and laptop.

“A lot of this stuff was at the fringes and maybe too expensive before this, but demand is driving innovation,” Martínez said.

The adjustments may also mean less office space overall. Office square footage available for sublease in Manhattan reached a two-decade high of 22 million in the first quarter of this year, according to real estate firm Savills.

Some employers are shifting to smaller offices and coworking locations that offer shorter commutes for employees.

“They are saying, ‘There is no more central office. We’re going to have eight locations you can choose from around the city,’” said Anna Squires Levine, chief commercial officer for Industrious, a provider of coworking space.

Getting back

Yext, a publicly traded software company with 1,300 employees, this week opened its [newly built headquarters](#) in the Meatpacking District. About 60 employees came in Tuesday out of the roughly 300 the office can accommodate while social distancing.

Those employees do not have assigned desks. Before work they receive a designated workspace after checking in on an app, which also includes a state-mandated symptoms quiz for Covid-19.

“We want to offer flexibility: ‘I’m coming in one day, two days,’” said John Houfe, vice president of real estate at Yext. “I may say I want to come in today and then change my mind in the morning. That’s all good.”

Houfe spoke on a Zoom call from a conference room in the roughly 140,000-square-foot office, using an AI-enabled camera that automatically shifted to his voice and movements to

keep him on-screen.

“Every room, every private office, there is the ability to connect on Zoom and remotely collaborate,” Houfe said. “But what we really want to get back to is a couple of people sitting with me, having a conversation.”

Inline Play

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