HYBRID HEAVEN OR HELL?

THE JOURNEY TO HYBRID WORKING

A Poly paper in partnership with Worktech Academy

INTRODUCTION

As the world of work shifts on its axis, Poly is working with the research team at Worktech on a rolling program to create new thinking, define the main challenges and explore emerging opportunities around hybrid working. We would encourage our partners and customers to become involved in this work. The picture is changing quickly and in bringing people, spaces and technology together to form a new corporate canvas for hybrid work to unfold, there is much to discover. In this paper, we look at an essential component of long-term hybrid working — creating an effective hybrid culture and reaching a hybrid heaven rather than hell. While there has been a lot of focus on the impact of hybrid on the office space and design, culture has the potential to be the critical stumbling block on the road to hybrid — why is this and what can we do to navigate this challenge for long-term hybrid success?

THE CHALLENGE OF HYBRID CULTURE

Organizational culture can be described as the set of collective assumptions within an organization that guide attitudes, behaviors and ways of working. At its simplest, it has been summarized by Gallup as 'how we do things around here'.

Perhaps because of its potential complexity, culture has typically been tacit rather than explicitly stated, anchored in unspoken mindsets and social patterns, leading Ali Khan, chief operating officer of employee performance survey company Shape Global to describe it as 'what people do when no-one is looking'. A pre-pandemic article in the *Harvard Business Review* identified culture as 'more common for leaders seeking to build high-performing organizations to let it go unmanaged or relegate it to the HR function.'

This presented challenges even in a traditional office environment, when culture was essentially driven by presenteeism and rooted in a set of behaviors that were linked to the physical workplace. In a hybrid environment, these historic norms are no longer effective — culture simply can't be left to chance. A recent poll by Gartner revealed that 76 percent of HR leaders now feel that hybrid work challenges employees' connection to organizational culture. On the employee side, a Gartner survey of more than 3,900 hybrid/remote knowledge workers in December 2021 revealed that only one in four felt connected to their organization's culture.

This is important because there are strong links between effective organizational culture and desirable business outcomes. Research by Gallup recently found that companies with strong cultures outperform competitors by up to 33 percent. Employees at these companies are more likely to be engaged at work and less likely to feel burned out or be seeking alternative roles.

Some organizations have tried to force a wholesale return to the office to reconnect employees to the corporate culture. However, fewer and fewer employers are willing to risk the attrition that mandating people to return can result in; Accenture research indicates that a large majority of workers (83 percent) prefer a hybrid work model. Poly has been working with Worktech Academy to investigate the challenges around hybrid working, and these broader research trends were reflected in a New York roundtable with senior leaders in technology and design, all from large corporations (see Appendix).

One of the attendees explained: 'We don't have a hybrid culture today...it takes a lot of effort and intentionality.' In essence, this makes the development of an effective hybrid culture a critical component of successful hybrid working models. However, while the challenge is significant, so too is the opportunity. Bill Schaninger, a Senior Partner at McKinsey, recently pointed out that 'This is an unbelievable opportunity to remake culture. It's rare in a leader's lifetime to have such a clean drop for reshaping how you run the place.'

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REBUILDING CULTURE

A significant component of the effort around returning to the office has centered on repurposing workspace for more collaborative interactions. However, as the research shows, this may be putting the cart before the horse. According to US expert Kay Sargent, Director of Workplace at architecture practice HOK, 'Workplace can support and nurture your culture, but workplace shouldn't drive culture — culture should drive workplace.'

This view was reflected by a number of the New York roundtable participants; although the office was viewed as a key focal point for culture building, they were consciously reviewing their organizational culture with a hybrid future in mind. This group identified the need for a 'culture audit', evaluating essential aspects of their culture to work out what had worked — 'the keeps' — and what needed to evolve for hybrid success.

Precisely what this looked like varied from organization to organization, but the need for a clear view on culture was common to all. The end goal for the roundtable group was to 'rebuild the culture for hybrid working' based on 'relearning the expectations of work and where you work.' Achieving this kind of change requires a shared vision and direction that moves beyond the purely tactical to take a clear stand on what the hybrid culture is so that people know what they can rely on. This brings intentionality and purpose to the forefront when considering the future of work.

In outlining their central goal, a global head of workplace technology at a large financial institution said: 'We need to build a culture of being purposeful about why we come together.' This requires redesigning physical meetings around purpose and specific outcomes, being more intentional about encouraging people to build their networks, and developing clear evidence-based criteria for when people should come in and when they might work from home.

The need to set a clear vision places leadership front and center. As one roundtable participant observed: 'The CEO and C-Suite drive culture and need to communicate.' This has been echoed in similar conversations. According to Hilary Green, director of change management at Canadian financial service company Scotiabank, which has implemented a dynamic agile policy, 'Leaders are the glue — we've got to give them the tools to shape and implement culture, with a network of resources.'

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However, while direction from the top is critical, there are multiple layers of culture within an organization. Edgar Schein, a renowned organization management theorist, has identified multiple categories of culture; underneath the overall organizational culture, there are sub-cultures (occupational groups within organizations) and micro-cultures (micro-systems within or outside organizations). This can mean that strict rules can fail at a team level.

Gallup argues that organizational culture for a hybrid model of work may be best suited to providing a framework with guiding principles within which teams can be supported to establish their own principles for communication. This action planning should be facilitated by managers and result in the group having a sense of ownership over their collective working lives.

This overall focus on culture is a key element in Adobe's hybrid strategy. With 11,000 employees joining during the pandemic, Noelle Via Borda, a senior program manager for workplace design at Adobe, set out their vision for hybrid success at Worktech's New York conference in September 2022. Built on a platform of talking to people, leaders and the business about 'how we should redesign the future', Adobe is overhauling its culture to support a distributed-first model of work.

With one in three of their people on a distributed team, cultural experiences are being redesigned to support this — for example, making sure to include remote participants in hospitality experiences or ensuring that all spaces in the office can support a hybrid experience.
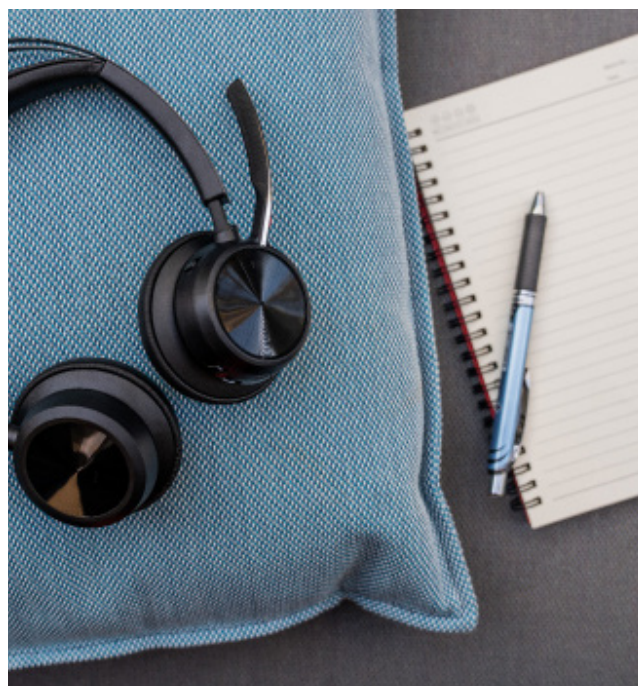
ENABLING CULTURE

The challenge around enabling a new hybrid culture was summed up during the roundtable by the following quote: 'We can't do hybrid in the spaces that we have now. We are trying to make old spaces work for new ways of working.' Organizations are now contemplating what to do with a sea of under-used desks. When it comes to collaboration, despite some experimentation in recent years, the workplace industry has a long history of essentially considering collaboration spaces from the perspective of 'small, medium and large' conference spaces.

While space cannot generate culture, as we discussed ealier, it can certainly support it. This makes taking a fresh look at the spaces and technologies that make up the office a crucial step in enabling hybrid culture. Several of the organizations represented at the roundtable were actively exploring new types of spaces as part of their hybrid culture shift.

This included ensuring that all meeting rooms were VC-enabled, extending video into social and breakout spaces, and building new types of collaboration typologies in recognition of the fact that one size does not fit all. There was also a strong interest in increasing flexibility and giving employees the facility to 'create their own use cases' to some degree. One had even been mid-design phase coming into the pandemic and had

had to 'throw it all out' to ensure that the future office was suitable for new needs.

This shift is underscored by Poly's research into different workplace personas, which highlights the fact that different employees are likely to be doing similar categories of activities across different locations and spaces. Poly's research found that, pre-pandemic, individual desks took up an average of 65 percent of office space. In response to hybrid work, this is expected to fall to about 40 percent. The key question is what the remainder of the space needs to be. This requires careful consideration in designing the right environments to support those activities to drive successful outcomes, build connection and support the development of an effective hybrid culture.

The right spaces need to be supported with the right technology. One of the roundtable participants noted that only 15 percent of their meeting spaces had been VC-enabled pre-pandemic and this was the first priority in terms of ongoing technology investment. While digital equity in synchronous meetings is critical, where teams are physically meeting less frequently and may be distributed across different time zones, consideration also needs to be given to asynchronous communication.

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TAKING A FRESH LOOK AT THE SPACES AND TECHNOLOGIES THAT MAKE UP THE OFFICE IS A **CRUCIAL STEP IN ENABLING HYBRID CULTURE.**

This would include artefacts that can be shared following a scheduled meeting such as collaboratively edited minutes, transcripts of video calls and recordings for those who weren't in the room. The latter requires excellent audio quality to be effective. Providing the tooling to succeed also extends into the home environment. Not all home workers have had the opportunity to set up a good quality home office environment which should include ergonomic furniture, a monitor if needed, and good AV kit so that people are not disadvantaged when dialing into on-site meetings.

One leading organization on the integration of new space and technology is Accenture, which hosted the Worktech's New York 2022 conference from their One Manhattan West office. Opening for occupation in October 2021, the goal of the design was to pilot new innovative technologies and spaces. It has the largest concentration of VC-enabled Microsoft Teams rooms in any workplace with additional mobile screens to enable rich collaboration experiences for both remote participants and those in the room.

At Accenture, an employee app allows people to reserve space, view schedules, use indoor navigation and see which of their colleagues are in the office; the company is a leader in the use of Virtual Reality technology. At the conference, the workplace team also shared some of their upcoming innovations including a digital concierge, the use of robots to deliver some workplace services and continuing investment in the metaverse.

EMBEDDING CULTURE

Culture change is much like any change within an organization; it needs to be carefully managed if it is to succeed. The roundtable group identified change management as a core building block to embedding cultural change — 'everyone needs to buy into it.'

Embedding cultural change therefore extends beyond the senior leadership team, with people managers a crucial part of the puzzle — 'senior people need to be in the workplace — they need to set the culture.' This hasn't always been straightforward. Gallup's analysis found that hybrid managers often feel less connected to their company culture than either fully remote or on-site managers. The focus during the pandemic tended to be on individual contributors; now, managers at team level need support in creating

an equitable work environment for their teams in a wholly new paradigm of work.

Change has historically been a particularly tricky area when it comes to technology. Although it has been front and central over the last two years, one participant noted that the traditional approach to launching a new tool was to 'send out an email from IT with some instructions — and then you never hear about it again.'

In a recent survey by Sharp, only 47 percent of office workers said that they had received training on how to use new technology. Given that organizational investment in technology has risen significantly — and that it's critical to ensuring that people stay connected in a hybrid setting — failure to adequately manage the change experience can significantly hamper adoption and result in a poor in-office experience.

In addition to traditional change management tools, forward-thinking organizations are also developing new methods of support which are much higher-touch and more hospitality-led. More than one roundtable attendee was either piloting or rolling out an approach that drew on the introduction of community managers or hosts to ensure that when people do come back into the office, they have a positive experience.

Use cases included 'repositioning' people back into the right spaces so that they understood how to use a new environment after a major design change or hiring graduate digital natives to support the broader employee population with technology adoption and trouble shooting. This is in line with broader trends in workplace. Adobe, for example, uses welcome ambassadors to support the return to the office and Metlife has developed a similar program with community ambassadors.

CONCLUSION

This whitepaper has set out some of the key steps and considerations in creating a hybrid organizational culture. Culture is potentially the most significant challenge in maintaining a long-term hybrid model, and Poly and Worktech Academy's research highlights the importance of approaching it with intentionality.

A key finding is that creating a new culture is likely to require both a top-down and bottom-up approach. While the roundtable attendees rightly identified leadership as having a critical role in culture setting, the research also indicates that a rigid set of granular rules might fail — particularly in organizations where employees feel like they finally have some autonomy over their working lives. This means that modelling and support from leaders and senior managers need to be balanced with a level of empowerment for teams to work out their own ways of successfully managing hybrid work.

You can't leave hybrid culture to chance. This requires organizations to take stock of their culture to define their core cultural values and clearly frame what that means in a hybrid world. This should include a level of intentionality and purpose when it comes to framing the reasons for people to come together — what do people need to achieve and where does physical presence add value? This needs to be clearly communicated across the organization to enable people at all levels to buy in to the shared vision.

Once the culture has been defined, then the space and technology provision can be shaped around it to help enable culture building. One size does not fit all, and this should be closely tied to purpose with new technology-enabled spatial typologies that support the tasks that people will be attending the workplace to do. Careful consideration should equally be given to what people have access to at home. During the pandemic there may have been an element of making do, but ensuring that people are not disadvantaged under a long-term hybrid working model will rely on digital equity and the ability for people working remotely to be clearly seen and heard in mixed meetings.

Change needs to be embedded using change programs and tools that extend beyond traditional approaches to include blended digital tools (not everyone will be in to see physical artefacts) as well as new support mechanisms such as community ambassadors. Like any change, developing a hybrid culture is more a journey than an end point and this was emphasized in the roundtable conversation. It requires a test-and-learn approach which includes gathering data about what's working — and what isn't — and iterating accordingly.

As organizations seek to enable and embed hybrid working, Poly intends to provide insights and solutions to help you chart your course.

Learn how to achieve Meeting Equality across your organization, so all meeting participants can be heard with greater clarity and seen with equal power, no matter where they work.

SELECTED RESEARCH SOURCES

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WORKTECH Academy research, Condeco Conversations, 2021. Interview with Ali Khan, chief operating officer of Shape Global

WORKTECH Academy research, Condeco Conversations, 2021. Interview with Hilary Green, ScotiaBank

WORKTECH Academy research, Condeco Conversations, 2021. Interview with Kay Sargent, HOK Architects

NEW YORK ROUNDTABLE ATTENDEES

Managing Director - Intelligent & Digital Workplaces – Accenture

Global AV & Workplace solutions – Apollo

Managing Director, Global Head of Facilities and Real Estate – Blackstone

Global Head of TSG Workplace and Real Estate Technology Experience – BNYM

Managing Director - Global Head of Collaboration & Records Management Services – Credit Suisse

Bank User Solutions Transformation – Credit Suisse

Chief People Officer – Hines

Workplace Strategy Leader – Meta

Executive Director, Enterprise Tech & Services – Morgan Stanley

Workplace Technology Solution Architect – Pfizer

Global Workplace Solution Delivery – Pfizer

Senior Manager, Workplace Strategy – Seagen

Head of Real Estate, Workplace & Security – Softbank Capital

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Part of HP's portfolio of hybrid work solutions, Poly creates premium audio and video products so you can have your best meeting — anywhere, anytime, every time. With Poly, you'll do more than just show up, you'll stand out.
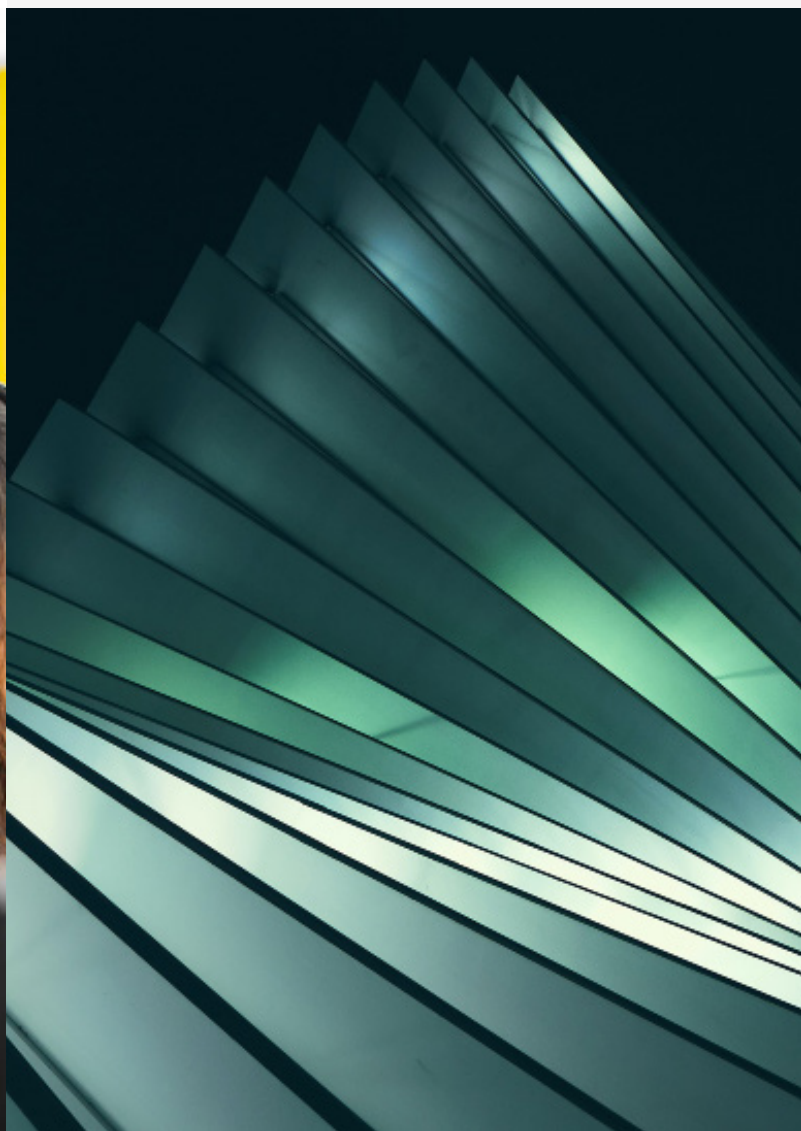
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ABOUT WORKTECH ACADEMY

WORKTECH Academy is the leading global platform and member network exploring how we'll work tomorrow. We look at innovation in the world of work and workplace through five key streams: people, place, technology, design and culture. We engage with our powerful network of over 10,000 individual members and more than 70 corporate, design and technology organisations around the world to deliver content on the latest trends, research and best practice in work and workplace. Poly is a Corporate Member of WORKTECH Academy.

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