C-Suite:
Redesigning Work for a Hybrid Future

Dispel seven myths about where and how work drives results
Updated August 2021
Every so often, something seismic happens to the way we work

The pandemic created a sudden shift — with lasting impact.
It’s time to banish any remaining hybrid workplace myths

The way we have adapted to working during the pandemic has shattered antiquated assumptions about work design. Executive leaders now have a unique opportunity to break from a location-centric model of work designed around industrial-era constraints, and to redesign work around a human-centric model to secure digital-era talent and deliver business outcomes.

Human-centric work design, characterized by flexibility and empathy, makes employees feel more empowered, and increases their productivity and engagement. It also enables organizations to be more responsive to customer demand, more resilient to disruptions and more productive. It can also reduce a range of costs — from real estate and travel to employee attrition.

In short, the human-centric approach can be a win-win for employees and organizations, but it requires executives to commit to leveraging a hybrid workforce strategy. For many, that means shedding some old assumptions and dispelling myths about what hybrid work models mean and do.

7 myths about hybrid workforce models

01. Pretty soon, work will go back to normal
02. Employees are less productive when remote
03. Serendipity is the best driver of innovation
04. Our jobs just can’t be done remotely
05. We need in-person contact to sustain our culture
06. Hybrid workforce models hurt DEI
07. A hybrid workforce model duplicates our IT infrastructure

Alexia Cambon, Director, Research
Graham Waller, Distinguished VP Analyst
Executives have three options for the way forward:

**Option No. 1.** Reject the hybrid environment and force a return to the traditional location-centric model and work schedule (Monday through Friday, 9 to 5, in many countries or first, second and third shifts). This incurs the risk of employees leaving for more flexibility elsewhere.

**Option No. 2.** Accept the hybrid environment, but decline to evolve the work model — continue virtualizing site-centric practices (such as meetings), as was common during the pandemic. This incurs the risk of exacerbating worker fatigue.

**Option No. 3.** Reinvent work around a human-centric design for the new hybrid environment that ensures performance, innovation and equity — getting it right requires experimentation, learning and iterating.

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**Myth**

**Pretty soon, work will go back to normal**

Prepandemic, organizations operated primarily in an in-person environment, designed around locations. During the pandemic, organizations rallied quickly to virtualize this design to remain productive remotely. Some leaders still believe things will revert, but the pandemic demonstrated that many of our work assumptions are archaic and unnecessarily limiting, and now beg for reinvention.

**Reality**

**Hybrid workforce strategies are here to stay**

Executives who reimagine where, when and by whom work gets done are in a better position to generate both business outcomes and talent outcomes: a win-win for organizations and employees. But first, you have to pick your journey forward — and acknowledge the risks of not adopting a hybrid working model.
Hybrid working environment is the future; knowledge workers are especially at risk if you revert to the past

Option 1
If you were to go back here, you could lose up to 39% of your workforce.

Option 2
If you were to continue doing this, fatigue levels would keep rising.

Option 3
Create a new model based on the hybrid environment that:
• Reduces fatigue by 44% pts
• Increases intent to stay by 45% pts
• Boosts performance by 28% pts

n = 75 HR leaders; 2,410 hybrid/remote knowledge workers
Source: 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work HR Leader Survey; 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work Employee Survey
**Myth**

Employees are less productive when remote

Many executives and managers doubt the productivity of employees who are remote from a central work location. What they’re really saying, though, is that they need to see employees to make sure they are being productive.

**Reality**

Employees thrive when given radical flexibility

Data shows radical flexibility (not monitoring of productivity inputs) is what drives performance — but it requires a culture of trust, empathy and empowerment. It also means managers must focus on work outcomes, rather than activity metrics.
Shifting to intentional human-centric design is what drives productivity and engagement

**Office-Centric Design**
An On-Site Model for an On-Site World
“Location is the stable pillar we design work around.”

- **Provide Consistent Work Experiences**
  Work design principle: Equality of experiences

- **Enable Serendipitous Collaboration**
  Work design principle: Innovation by chance

- **Drive Visibility-Based Management**
  Work design principle: Performance by inputs

**Human-Centric Design**
A Hybrid Model for a Hybrid World
“The individual is the stable pillar”

- **Provide Flexible Work Experiences**
  Work design principle: Equality of opportunity

- **Enable Intentional Collaboration**
  Work design principle: Innovation by design

- **Drive Empathy-Based Management**
  Work design principle: Performance by outcome

Source: Gartner
Myth

Serendipity is the best driver of innovation

More distributed teams cannot count on chance encounters in the hallway to spark conversation. Some believe this lack of "water cooler moments" comprises innovation, but this overreliance on serendipity was already being questioned as a prepandemic source of innovation.

Reality

The key is to create intentional opportunities to collaborate

Leaders must hardwire intentionality into collaboration as a key team norm in order to drive innovation, especially in the hybrid environment. Providing access to four different modes of collaboration (see next page) is critical to innovation.
Progressive organizations will invest in providing access to all four modes of working

Hybrid work environments offer employees and teams more access to all four modes of collaboration — and gives them the flexibility to choose when and how they leverage each mode to maximize their contribution.

While we may work together when co-located, we often work alone even when seated together. We don’t need to be in the same place to work together. And working alone — where our mindspace is protected from physical and mental distraction — is critical to our productivity and creativity.

In hybrid working environments, teams can engineer opportunities to collaborate more intentionally. Those that do collaborate intentionally have a stronger awareness of how, where and when to use each of the four hybrid collaboration modes.

Source: Gartner
Myth

Our jobs just can't be done remotely

Some executives insist their employees cannot work remotely, but that’s often a default position rather than a thoughtful business decision. Location flexibility is a key component of hybrid work models so it needs more purposeful consideration.

Reality

Hybrid workforce models look beyond roles

By mapping employees’ activities, you can spot opportunities for flexibility even when location isn’t flexible. Most jobs fall somewhere on a spectrum between fully portable and fully nonportable. Assembly-line work, for example, includes almost all nonportable tasks. Surgeons, in contrast, perform a mix of nonportable tasks (e.g., the surgery itself) and highly portable tasks (e.g., notes and paperwork).

Knowledge Workers Aren’t the Only Ones Who Value Flexibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where You Work</th>
<th>Importance to Employees</th>
<th>What Organizations Offer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When You Work</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Much You Work</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What You Work On</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who You Work With</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 5,000 employees worldwide; 77 HR Leaders
Source: 2021 Gartner EVP Employee Survey; 2021 Gartner EVP Benchmarking Survey
### Sample flexibility options for employees who aren’t knowledge workers

**Illustrative**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Retail Employee</th>
<th>On-Site Essential Personnel</th>
<th>IT Field Technician</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility Options</td>
<td>• Provide employees the choice to schedule and trade their own hours</td>
<td>• Provide employees transparency into the types of projects available to them</td>
<td>• Adjust scheduling as needed (i.e., four 10-hour days, not five 8-hour days)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provide tenured employees options for what areas they work in and who they work with</td>
<td>• Allow employees to share their workstyle preference</td>
<td>• Provide employees options of which peers they work with on-site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Allow employees to work at different locations</td>
<td>• Provide employees choice of when they can start and end each workday</td>
<td>• Authorize remote work when not on-site</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gartner
Myth

We need in-person contact to sustain our culture

Many executive leaders fear that limited in-person contact in a hybrid workforce model will dilute corporate culture. Yet culture should always adapt. Even before the pandemic, many cultures lacked future fitness and were missing key attributes for digital success, such as agility, speed and autonomy in decision making.

Reality

Hybrid workforce models offer a critical opportunity to reinforce culture

Employees don’t magically imbibe culture simply by entering a physical workplace. And so far, more remote and hybrid employees report higher culture satisfaction than on-site employees. Success requires intentional culture change and role modeling, whether employees are remote or not.

Culture Is Viewed Positively by More Remote and Hybrid Than In-Office Employees

Q: “Does Your Organization’s Culture Have a Positive Impact, Negative Impact or No Impact Either Way on Your Job?”

Source: 2020 Gartner Improving Employee Engagement Survey (September 2020)

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% because of rounding.
Think differently

Think first about the cultural norms and values you want to promote and the behaviors that reinforce them.

Then work on how to promote those behaviors in a hybrid model to create a shared purpose and deeper connections with and among full-time employees.

As mentioned (in Myth No. 3), many leaders fear, for example, that innovation can only thrive in a physical workplace where ad hoc and in-person brainstorming takes place or when employee teams collaborate with nontraditional (e.g., gig) workers.

In a hybrid working model, ensure that innovation thrives by orchestrating it:

- **Create intentional collision opportunities.** Foster virtual gatherings that pull in employees from diverse business units or from outside the organization. Intentional matchmaking connects people who realistically would never interact in the real world.

- **Teach employees to use formal and informal networks.** The existence of groups within or across business units isn’t always obvious. Teach employees about the networks that exist and how to access them.

This same type of intentionality should apply to all aspects of the desired behaviors and culture.
Myth

Hybrid workforce models hurt DEI

Concerns that employees feel disconnected from their colleagues in remote work environments can feed fears that a hybrid model, in which colleagues are physically separated by design, will undermine diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and create disparities between work conditions.

Reality

Aim for equality of opportunity — fairness not sameness

The imperative is to facilitate flexibility while ensuring that all employees have an equal opportunity to participate. A fully on-site return is actually a risk to DEI. This type of sustainable DEI approach will make you an employer of choice for diverse candidates — whether you deploy a hybrid workforce strategy or not.

Knowledge workers with a disability are more likely to feel respected in a hybrid environment than when on-site

Women Feel Increased Safety In Hybrid Work

51% of women who weren’t working remotely before, but have been since the pandemic, say their level of safety has increased

n = 254 employees who identify as female
Source: 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work Employee Survey

n = 2,410 hybrid/remote knowledge workers
Source: 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work Employee Survey
Think differently

Devote discrete attention to diversity, equity and inclusion.

With a hybrid workforce, organizations certainly need to be committed and intentional about DEI initiatives — but so will they in more traditional workforce models.

The good news is that employees provided with flexible work options say they are more likely to bring their authentic selves to the organization, which improves their engagement and performance.

Commit to ensuring that inclusion strategies large and small work to remove any barriers to equitable advancement. For example:

- **Develop good everyday work habits**, e.g., ensure everyone is heard in a virtual meeting.
- **Review how work is assigned**, e.g., don’t preserve certain clients only for in-person sales calls.
- **Listen to employees**. Pulse employee groups about their work experience, and ask what they need from the organization to feel connected and heard. Leverage employee resource groups (ERGs) to ensure everyone has a voice, and identify new practices, from flexible work schedules to additional hardware or software for differing needs.
A hybrid workforce model duplicates our IT infrastructure

Nearly 70% of infrastructure and operations (I&O) employees view the enterprise’s priorities of speed and agility as being at odds with infrastructure’s mandates for reliability and efficiency. But this reflects a legacy mindset that will significantly constrain infrastructure speed and agility.

Reality

Resilient organizations continuously reengineer their IT strategies and infrastructures anyway

Resilient, future-fit organizations need “Everywhere Enterprise” strategies — which go beyond enabling a workforce with mobile devices and remote access alone.

Everywhere Enterprises use technology, team structures, processes, skills and tools to empower dispersed workforces, harness distributed infrastructures and serve ubiquitous customer bases.

Requirements gathering by IT

| Who are the users and what is their job function? | • Executives or mission-critical employees  
• Users with intense data analysis needs  
• Users with “normal” requirements |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| What kind of device is being used and who owns it? | • PC vs. mobile devices  
• Organization vs. user-owned  
• Phone/tablet  
• PC-class |
| What kind of applications and data do users need to access to and are they located on-premises or in the cloud? | • Browser-based on-premises  
• Windows-based on-premises  
• Browser-based cloud  
• Windows-based cloud |
| Where in the world is a user located? | • Verify user’s policy complies with all local labor and privacy laws |

Source: Gartner
Think differently

Embrace best practices for serving "everywhere" needs.

To serve the “everywhere” needs of a hybrid workforce, you’ll need to deliver consistent and secure network access for all employees (traditional and nontraditional), regardless of where they work. CIOs will need to work with other business leaders to help define the requirements.

Best practices for designing and deploying the right systems include:

- **Define requirements.** Establish the specifics of who needs what, including minimum download and upload speeds, and negotiate coverage to include as many employees as possible.

- **Optimize performance.** Deploy solutions that distribute traffic across the network and prevent backlogs that come from routing everything through the on-site data center. Enhance network uptime for employees whose local broadband provider doesn’t provide enough coverage.

- **Invest in cloud-based services.** Cloud providers deliver reliable service regardless of worker location, while allowing enterprises to quickly shift capacity in response to disruption.
Conclusion

Going back to the work model that prevailed before the pandemic is a step backward. And your organization can’t be resilient without rethinking strategies like hybrid workforce models.

Start by dispelling the myths that stand between you and your ability to capture this competitive opportunity. Then pursue a coordinated strategy in which you experiment, learn and iterate implementation across six fronts to make hybrid working a win-win for your employees and your organization.

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