



Employers Launch Hybrid Work Plans, Identify Early Obstacles

By Roy Maurer | May 19, 2021

As the coronavirus pandemic eases, organizations have begun to roll out their plans for returning employees to their worksites. While the details may vary, one thing is certain: The future for most white-collar employees is a blend of flexible in-office and remote work.

Companies' return-to-the-office announcements tend to allow most knowledge workers to split their time between showing up in person and continuing to work remotely. These plans will evolve, HR leaders say, as they identify complications and work through them.

After Labor Day on Sept. 6, insurer Prudential Financial expects most of its roughly 42,000 employees to work in the office half the time and wants to make sure employee scheduling is balanced through all five days of the workweek, limiting how many people can choose Mondays and Fridays at home.

Citigroup's CEO announced that most of the bank's 210,000 employees will be expected to be in the office three days a week at some point this year, along with other work-practice changes meant to support a healthier work/life balance. Internal video meetings will be banned on Fridays to ease "Zoom fatigue," for example, and scheduling meetings with colleagues outside of normal work hours will be curtailed.

Google is also planning a hybrid workweek for when its workforce returns to the office in September. Employees will work from the office about three days a week, and two days "wherever they work best," according to a company memo. When they do report to the office, Googlers will be introduced to a workplace that *The New York Times* referred to (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/30/technology/google-back-to-office-workers.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>) as "Ikea meets Lego." The company is designing mobile, rearrangeable "team pods" in place of rows of desks; technology-enhanced meeting rooms built for remote and in-person collaboration; and outdoor work areas under open-air tents in lieu of traditional offices.

"Leading organizations are recognizing the importance of still maintaining some form of in-person interaction, without the need to mandate a full return onsite," said Alexia Cambon, director of research in Gartner's HR practice. "Effective hybrid work means correcting the balance between one extreme of the spectrum—being fully co-located—and the other extreme— being fully distributed. Effective hybrid working means becoming intentional about how, where and when to collaborate across multiple modes of working."

Employees Have Been Heard

Although it may be easier to manage all employees returning to the office, or everyone staying remote, surveys consistently show that most workers want flexible remote-work options to continue after the pandemic has passed, and most managers say they're more open to flexible models for their teams than they were pre-pandemic.

About 60 percent of HR leaders surveyed by Gartner said they are planning for a hybrid work future, and only 1 percent said they expect all of their workers to return to work full time in the office.

About 20 percent of employers are in the process of launching a hybrid work model right now, according to Chicago management consulting firm West Monroe Partners. Another 48 percent said their programs would be ready by later this summer, and 25 percent indicated that they are planning to have a hybrid plan in place by the end of the year.

"The decision to bring people back to the office is driven by the willingness of employees to return, vaccination rates within the employee population and, more broadly, social-distancing policies as recommended by the government," said Dave Hilborn, managing director at West Monroe Partners. "A large percentage of our clients are thinking about a permanent hybrid model. That's because workers like to have the option to work remotely. It has been a very positive experience for most employees."

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At Prudential, the majority of employees indicated that they enjoyed working remotely but missed the collaboration that takes place in person. Prudential took that cue and has been repurposing much of its office space for meeting rooms, collaboration and open space.

The 68,000 salaried office workers at General Motors (GM) also were able to weigh in with their preferences. "One of the first things we did was ask our employees what the remote-work experience was like for them, and how did they want to continue to work in a post-pandemic environment," said Cyril George, global talent acquisition director for GM. "We got a lot of feedback. Most workers felt there was a lot of efficiency being gained from working remotely, and most wanted to keep work flexible."

Sodexo, a food services and facilities management company, is currently in the planning stages for what "may be a hybrid of traditional and current practices," but ultimately the future workplace model for its white-collar workers "will reflect conversations and collaboration with employees and their managers," said Stephanie Payne, chief human resources officer for Sodexo North America in Gaithersburg, Md. "Employee feedback is essential to creating our workplace culture and design. We routinely surveyed employees to gain insight during the pandemic, and we are continuing to encourage managers and employees to identify the best work schedule and solution as restrictions are lifted."

Tailored, Flexible Approaches

The makeup of hybrid models differs across organizations. At Google, employees will be able to return to their desks on a rotation schedule that assigns people to come into the office on a specific day to ensure that no one is there on the same day as their immediate neighbors. They can also apply to work from anywhere up to four weeks per year with manager approval, to provide more flexibility for summer and holiday travel.

Professional services firm PwC will have three options for its 55,000 workers in the U.S.—remote, flex (a combination of in-office, at client sites or remote) and in-person.

"We recognize the needs and preferences of our people vary across the firm, which is why we are shifting to a hybrid work model where we will take what we've learned from the past year and combine it with what we miss about being in person," said PwC Chief People Officer Mike Fenlon. "When we return to the office, PwCers will work with their teams to formulate schedules that work best for them depending on their personal situation and so that no one feels that they are being put in a situation that makes them uncomfortable."

A small number of employees who provide in-person support or require access to onsite technology will work in the office four or five days a week, Fenlon said. "There will also be groups who are primarily remote but who will come into the office periodically for connectivity and collaboration. Most PwCers will likely fall into the flex model and will balance remote work and work in the office or at client sites."

Payne said that leadership at Sodexo is exploring several workspace systems and hybrid work schedules to meet the needs of the business and expectations of employees and managers. "We realize that we must offer employees something that they don't currently have at home and give them a reason to come into the office," she said. "Some options we're considering include accommodations for

open floor plans and creative seating arrangements to align with social distancing guidelines. We've made several investments in technology, including a shift to Microsoft Teams to enhance collaboration and sharing, apps that route calls to employees' computers and mobile phones, and lighting systems that disinfect offices."

The leadership at GM brainstormed various hybrid work scenarios before concluding that "however good the plan was, it couldn't fit everyone's needs," George said.

So "Work Appropriately" was born, a decentralized decision-making framework that's best summed up as a culture change, not a policy to adhere to, he said. It's a play off the company's famously simplified dress code "Dress Appropriately," which replaced a 10-page dress code policy about a decade ago.

"Leadership decided to put the trust in the employees and their managers in terms of deciding what works best for them based on their roles and situation," George said. "The flexibility allows leaders to lead and treat employees like adults who know best how to do their work. I can see there is a huge amount of accountability being fostered."

Cambon added that giving employees more autonomy allows them to design the work patterns that make them most productive.

"Rejecting a one-size-fits-all approach is the first step to higher inclusivity in work design, for it establishes that no one individual is the same, so no one work design should be, either," she said.

New Problems in New World of Work

A major transformation in the way work is done will bring many complications for organizations, from grappling with scheduling and how best to repurpose physical space to rethinking inclusion and performance management. Maintaining company culture in an evolving, hybrid environment was cited as the biggest obstacle to overcome, according to the West Monroe research.

Hilborn said the research also found that many companies haven't yet spent that much time thinking about a formal return-to-the-office program. Pressing issues to consider include tracking vaccinations; managing employee expectations about when to work where; the timing of phased, hybrid adoption; and providing access to the right technology and IT support for workers shuttling between the office and working from anywhere.

"The main challenge is what will happen to company culture," Hilborn said. "One client is worried about how collaboration will happen going forward. They are looking at ways to better align the mechanisms in their culture, like rewards, communications and performance management to shape new behaviors in a hybrid environment."

Open communication between managers and teams is essential, Sodexo's Payne said. "We are encouraging frequent online interaction. Additionally, our performance review tool allows employees and managers to have regular touch points to gauge employee progress and stakeholder feedback. But keeping people motivated is particularly challenging remotely—so our managers are looking for ways to keep connected safely, ranging from outdoor meetings, walking meetings or virtual lunches."

Hilborn said that people miss the social connection of an in-person environment. "That's why it's important to build social cohesion in a hybrid model. Organizations need to be very intentional about bringing people into the office together for culture-building, team-planning, training and collaboration. Not just to do what they did before, sitting in their cubicles or offices."

GM has already held dozens of workshops for managers outlining its Work Appropriately initiative. "There's a huge amount of change management under way," George said. "Different managers are more or less comfortable with remote work. It's easier to require everyone to comply with a concrete policy, but this takes more sensitivity in knowing that we will not have the answers to all the questions people will have. HR doesn't have all the answers, and we need to be agile in being comfortable with that lack of surety and willing to take that particular risk as we make this change."

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