



OPEN MINDS

Executive Briefing

Managing Teams In The “Hybrid” Next Normal By Monica E. Oss, Chief Executive Officer

I’m conflicted about where businesses will end up on the issue of remote work. When I’m asked the question, how many employees will return to working in their offices full time a year from now, I’m not sure of the answer because there are many factors in play.

On one hand, if performance was unaffected by working remotely, it would not be prudent for businesses to allow employees to return to the office from a strictly financial perspective. Having remote workers is so much less expensive. Employees pay for space, for bandwidth, for phones—and they can work more as commuting time is cut out. And we know that much tactical and transactional work can be done perfectly well through technology—and probably should have been moved to remote models long before the pandemic hit. But both tradition and the need for a different model of supervision (one that is driven by metrics and outcomes) likely prevented that from happening sooner.

But I think that we’ll see more people returning to working in offices than predicted for a number of reasons. It’s hard to do strategic development work remotely—strategy, brainstorming, creative work, and the like just don’t produce great results on a video platform. Another area that doesn’t “gel” in virtual settings is negotiating (of almost any type) and developing atypical collaborations. The human factors are not matched by the technology.

And then there is the issue of building relationships, team building, and trust building. “Zoom meetings” provide only a pale mimic of the real human interactions needed to build long-term relationships.

And finally, we have team member sanity. I don’t know about you, but even though I have a lovely home, I miss the change in view; the separation of work and home; and the impromptu meetings with colleagues that come with an office.

I do think that post-pandemic, employers are going to get rid of lots of office space—and it will be a perk limited to the “most valuable” to have a private office space of any type. At least for now, employees will likely be fine with that. And 80% of all employees have expressed their support for remote work and 81% said they were satisfied with their own productivity. However teamwork appears to be a challenge—61% of people report that teams are siloed because they use different tools. And 70% of people often ping colleagues for information, while 48% report losing time searching for information (see 2021 Remote Work Report). And even for employers committed to returning to an office-based environment, that new environment will be a hybrid environment that differentiates between transactional work and creative work. So every manager is going to need to learn to manage the new hybrid workforce.

To improve their competencies in managing hybrid teams, executives need to think about how to address the three types of “distance” that need to be crossed for remote collaboration (see *How to Collaborate Effectively If Your Team Is Remote*)—physical distance (place and time), operational distance (team size, bandwidth, and skill levels), and affinity distance (values, trust, and interdependency). Some of our Elite members weighed in on how they are addressing each of these issues.

Physical distance

Managing the physical reality of distance is the most obvious challenge in remote work. We aren't in the same room. "Zoom fatigue" is no joke and in the case of multistate operations, juggling time zones when scheduling meetings adds a layer of complexity. The bigger challenge for many teams, however, is the lack of informal communication—not having the ability to walk down the hall and ask a colleague a question or get some quick help.

Michael Owen, J.D., SPHR, Chief Human Resources Officer and General Counsel at Easter Seals New Jersey said, "Our challenge is going to be to try to figure out how to integrate some kind of physical connectivity into remoteness. For example, I've said to people, 'I'm going to be in the office on Mondays and Thursdays' because I think that's going to work well for anybody who would like to meet in person or have lunch and connect in person."

On the flip side, Julie E. Swiderski, Executive Director, Mental and Behavioral Health at Children's

Managing Hybrid Teams – The New Realities



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To overcome this, many provider organizations that have gone paperless have equipped their clinical professionals with the ability to operate in a mobile environment (with tablets, cell phones, and laptops). And some management teams are leveraging online chat tools so people can chime in with questions without "email overload."

Wisconsin talked about how remote work has actually helped to overcome the distance barrier. She said, "Like many organizations, our teams pivoted quickly to a virtual environment. From providers to leaders to patient care staff, everyone on our team has adjusted their normal work style to provide access to mental health services for kids and families during the pandemic. Because we have

staff across the state, this new normal has actually allowed us to have more routine touchpoints with teams that are separated by hundreds of miles. We have received appreciative comments from employees about the flexibility of this new way of doing business and expect to support a hybrid environment for the majority of teams moving forward.”

Operational distance

Operational distance is barriers to effective collaboration and synchronization of work. In remote work, this type of distance becomes a challenge when workplaces simply try to replicate in-person office workflows and processes online with more synchronous work like calls and meetings, rather than asynchronous work. Excessive dependence on meetings to get things done can be wearisome and inefficient. One creative solution I heard about is for managers to have virtual “office hours” and invite their direct reports to “stick their head in” for quick questions during designated times.

One of the keys to breaking down operational distance is a change in mindset for managers, emphasized Mr. Owen. He said, “One of the challenges for our industry for a long time has been operating in the grey as a manager and not just following the rulebook or the regulations. A lot of managers have not really known what effectiveness looks like, they’ve just known what compliance looks like, or attendance looks like. Instead they need to ask what outcomes team members need to achieve and how can they achieve them. Managers have to move from a command and control model to more of a trust based model that evaluates employees on the basis of how effective they are. We need that perfect balance of flexibility and effectiveness.”

Affinity distance

Managing human relationships—within the team and with customers—is the last piece of managing the distance of remote work. Trust and relationships are hard to foster when the nuances of in-person

interaction are absent. Team members have to over-communicate to compensate, and be available for each other. The pressure to be responsive, to meet deadlines, and to deliver what is promised is greater than ever. And one executive I know made a couple of interesting points. While many employees were nervous at the start of the pandemic about the distractions of working from home (from children running across the room to puppies jumping on the keyboard), once people accepted the realities and knew they could make accommodations, remote work actually helped to “humanize relationships” and connect better with people in their natural settings. And in the mostly in-office work scenarios that prevailed pre-pandemic, remote workers felt less included (if ten people were around a conference table and one team member was remote, it was hard for that individual to participate fully) but everyone going remote has helped to level the playing field.

Ms. Swiderski said, “We have learned a lot about how to be successful in a virtual environment including taking time to catch up with each other about non-work topics; using icebreakers as a means to engage the whole team at the start of a meeting; encouraging teammates to keep their cameras on to stay engaged; using the chat function to aid in large group discussions; and sending shout-outs and congratulatory comments through our employee recognition platform. We are hopeful that a hybrid model will get us the best of both worlds—continued flexibility with the ability to touch base in person from time to time to foster and support strong relationships across the team.”

Why does this matter? Because the nature of service delivery and the nature of staffing have changed during the pandemic. Every specialty provider organization is grappling with how to staff the integrated seamless service system that consumers want—providing options for virtual, office-based face-to-face, and home-based face-to-face options. This will require the development of their own “hybrid” staffing model.