How Should We Return to Work? The Future of the Hybrid Workforce

Before the world reopens, decisions should be made about who returns to the office and who doesn’t. Read on for a few considerations.

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The end to our global health crisis journey may be nearing, and now employers face a dilemma: Should they stay at home or go back to work? To their surprise, many employers have found that remote workers can be just as productive from home as they were in the office. Certainly, a full return to work will be necessary for many firms. But the experience with remote work has many employers reconsidering the future of where to place their workforce.

The future is hybrid

This finding comes from one of the most intensive studies on the future of remote work, conducted late last year by McKinsey & Co. Its analysis of 800 occupations in nine countries found that professional occupations are most likely to retain some mix of remote and in-person work. Some of the findings are predictable, such as the suitability of remote work for tasks that are performed autonomously and require little interaction with others. Occupations in finance, insurance, professional services and information technology

often show little to no productivity loss from remote work.

By contrast, those tasks most suited to in-person work include mentoring, coaching, training, problem-solving and others that require giving advice and feedback. For occupations in these segments, the personal touch is still best suited for the office.

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These findings offer a general template for employers to consider when deciding on the future of their workforce. But there are still many questions employers will need to pose before deciding where to place their employees. The central question for the hybrid workforce is what balance should be struck between in-person and remote work for individuals and groups.

The findings from McKinsey & Co. provide a bird's-eye occupational view of suitability for remote work. The implication is that some occupations can work remotely while others require the office. The fact is that each position will likely require some combination of remote versus in-person placement.

Costs and benefits

At our firm, I found the productivity of remote work to be surprising and certainly desirable. But over time I realized that some members of our team were losing their perspective of how their individual work related to our overall strategy. If they were working in the office, their frequent physical interaction with senior management would have provided this perspective.

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We solved this problem by scheduling regular, informal videoconferencing get-togethers. This somewhat solved the problem, but the return to normal will likely require a transition to in-person meet-ups. Actual physical interaction with the team provides the best way to communicate strategy and ensure that each member of the team knows how their work aligns with that strategy.

A closer look

Many employers are recognizing that each position involves different types of activities – some suitable for remote work and some not. Many of us are conducting an activity analysis for each position to determine how to manage the hybrid workforce. This analysis will guide us as we make the key decisions for the hybrid workforce: How much office space should we downsize? When do we bring in the remote workers? Who works mostly in the office? Should workers have the office option even when they could work remotely without any productivity loss?

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For many of us, the hybrid workforce will be one of the most profound and lasting influences of the global crisis. Even when we can safely return to work, many of us will decide to keep at least some employees at home some of the time. Now we must begin the rigorous work of deciding how the hybrid workforce works best for us.

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