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How should leaders manage hybrid working relationships?

Karin SANDERS

Andrew DHAENENS

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How should leaders manage hybrid working relationships?

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Organisations and their leaders need to adapt to new ways of working and hybrid work relationships, write UNSW Business School's Karin Sanders, Andrew Dhaenens and Patrick Sharry

Coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic, organisations are questioning traditional working arrangements. Following a long period of working from home and trying new forms of leadership, managers are faced with the challenge of how to best organise work when conditions return to 'normal'. Do employees want to go back to their original rhythms, being mainly 'in the office' and working 9 to 5 again, or do employees view working from home as an acquired right? What do we really know about the current preferences of managers and employees with respect to hybrid working arrangements?

Undoubtedly, the pandemic has upended established ways of working in organisations. Managers have had to face a new reality of trusting their employees more, despite not always knowing who was working, where, and when. Highly controlling managers have had to admit that their employees can handle the responsibility of organising work in their own way (or drop out if they could not personally relinquish this control).

For many organisations, the switch to remote working has not been so bad, maintaining positivity and productivity after some initial challenges and resistance to remote meetings. Alongside many technical possibilities, both employees and organisations are experiencing positive upsides of working in different ways.

WHAT DO EMPLOYEES REALLY WANT?

Overall, many employees indicate they have enjoyed the benefits of working from home, including less travel times and easier transfers between their work to their personal lives.

For others, it continues to be a notable challenge to combine work, household, and family. For example, people with smaller living spaces notice that working and living at the same table has its limitations. On the other hand, many employees acknowledge the value of working onsite in terms of connection and collaboration.

We can expect some employees and managers will be relieved by the 'new normal' and returns to the office. Many leaders may falsely assume that because they often want to return to traditional working arrangements, their employees will share the same expectations.

However, it seems that most others will want lasting changes. A short survey from UNSW Sydney, for example, indicates that only three percent of all employees want to return to the traditional form of work of nine to five, five days a week. Employees globally share similar sentiments, with a World Economic Forum survey of 12,500 workers across 29 countries finding two-thirds want to work flexibly post-covid while almost a third were prepared to quit their job if they were forced

to go back to the office full time. Collectively, employees seem to want to continue to work flexibly, and perhaps be present at work a few days a week, but certainly not all five.

HOW ORGANISATIONS SHOULD APPROACH HYBRID WORKING

Some key questions are pressing. How will these considerations be balanced, and how can employees participate in setting up these new working arrangements? What do we actually know about the specific expectations and preferences of different groups of employees?

Instead of starting from assumptions, managers should research preferences and offer employees the space to indicate their preferences and concerns. After all, it may be that employees will return to previous ideas around desired working arrangements in the coming months. That is why (scientific) research is needed, and managers should take the time to follow the preferences of their employees.

Here, we consider some important factors of managing hybrid working arrangements for different groups of employees (factoring in the likes of gender, age, and caring responsibilities) and the relationships that exist between the preferences for hybrid forms of work and employee outcomes (such as wellbeing, performance, and turnover).

When answering these questions, it is important to note that sufficient opportunities should remain for building a constructive culture, attracting the best people, optimising workspaces for the best employee outcomes in terms of productivity and wellbeing, and maximising opportunities for employees to learn both formally and informally from each other.

In this sense, the current changes in the work environment offer a 'once in a generation opportunity' for researchers to understand the influence of rapid changes on people's preferences. Collecting longitudinal data offers researchers the opportunity to develop insights and new theories. To answer these and other related questions, UNSW Business School in Sydney, Australia has established a new research and knowledge centre under the name Hybrid Work Leadership, led by the School of Management & Governance's Dr Andrew Dhaenens and Professor Karin Sanders.

HOW FRASERS PROPERTY GROUP IS APPROACHING HYBRID WORK

We are already working with Frasers Property, an international real estate group, which aims to maintain its leading position in the market and understands the importance of rigorous research to support its choices and strategy – especially when it comes to setting up new working arrangements (such as hybrid and flexible work) that actually meet the needs of employees and managers.

Although there were seemingly limited variations in employee work locations and work patterns before COVID-19, we have observed some significant shifts in preferences alongside new differences across employees. Some differences can be attributed to gender, living situations and caring responsibilities, but this does not represent the complete picture. For instance, some

employees with caring responsibilities express a clear preference to go back to the office full-time, whereas others still prefer more days at home.

In the coming months, we will monitor employee expectations and preferences at Frasers Property, and we will know more about their relationships, learning activities and how management messages are understood. As a result, we are able to advise senior management about the best ways to manage their employees in the future. As an emerging applied and translational research lab, we are open to help other organisations who want to better understand the preferences and best working practices for their employees.

Dr Karin Sanders is a Professor and Dr Andrew Dhaenens is a Lecturer in the School of Management & Governance at UNSW Business School, and Patrick Sharry is Program Director and Adjunct Associate Professor at AGSM @ UNSW Business School.

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