

# HANDLING THE SWITCH: Pandemic to Endemic, Home to Office

Enter the hybrid work model in a post-COVID world.

Almost three years into the reign of COVID-19, it appears this illness will not be eradicated any time soon. As the novel coronavirus transitions from a pandemic to endemic within humans, society is looking for pathways back to a sense of normality.

People are dining out again, visiting museums, going to the movies and traveling. Children have returned to school, and businesses and government entities have lifted mask mandates. With vaccines having thankfully reduced the virus's lethality, all these steps seem more reasonable than they did in 2020. And for many business leaders, so does the decision to invite the workforce back to the workplace.

Before COVID, telecommuting was an exciting new idea but widespread remote labor was mostly a pipe dream. Telecommuting was reserved for sick days and a select few remote employees. Then lockdown turned an interesting idea into a worldwide socioeconomic experiment: how would businesses fare if their workers could only work from home?

For the most part, both employees and employers adapted admirably; and today many workers consider full-time or part-time remote work a perfectly reasonable benefit at any job where they need not be physically present to create a product or work with customers. It falls to HR Executives to navigate these expectations and create a new paradigm where returning to the office is safe, reasonable and desirable for all involved.

## HYBRID: THE NEW NORMAL

The first thing to understand is that it may be the wrong move to insist on returning to the pre-COVID status quo. Having experienced the increased flexibility and convenience of working from home, most employees today prefer to continue telecommuting some or all of the time.

Of course, in-person co-working has benefits in terms of collaboration, socialization, teambuilding and more, so it may be too early to throw that concept out entirely. But while returning to the office wholesale may justify the price of that big space, the wiser option may be to adopt a more flexible "hybrid" model that mixes the benefits of both remote and in-office employment.

A hybrid attendance model allows workers to mix telecommuting with office attendance. Several require employees to spend a certain number of days a week or month in the office, while others keep the office open for meetings and elective visits but do not insist on attendance. The former option facilitates discipline and guarantees at least moderate face-to-face interaction, but requires more oversight in terms of scheduling. The latter is more relaxed but carries the risk of overcrowding smaller offices if everyone shows up at once.

From a morale and retention standpoint, this sort of attendance model is likely to attract qualified staff. Many such individuals have experienced the greater freedom of telecommuting and have seen that it does not reduce productivity. They will consider mandatory full-time attendance outmoded and coercive and seek employment with a more progressive company.

Employers also benefit from a much wider pool of applicants, as many excellent potential employees in other cities or even countries will be drawn to work for a company that does not require them to move - a company that also saves on offering moving services.

Even with its threat reduced, COVID remains a daily consideration, and a hybrid work model just makes more sense for preventing transmission. Fewer people in the office at any one time translates to both less chance of someone

FROM THE US



BY MARSHAL STERIO

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bringing the disease into a common space and, if they do, the fewer number of potential workers infected.

COVID-19 can still take the fully vaccinated out of commission for weeks or even months, torpedoing productivity for every person infected and risking disability for those afflicted with "Long COVID" symptoms. Imagine the cost in revenue if mandatory attendance means nearly every employee risks catching COVID in a matter of days. Now imagine the cost in human suffering. Choosing a hybrid model signifies choosing not only flexibility and convenience, but health and safety.

## CLEARING THE AIR

COVID safety is still a major concern for workforce executives whether their companies choose hybrid or mandatory attendance models. The novel coronavirus is transferred from host to host on airborne droplets, so the safest offices are those where best practices established during lockdown remain in effect, and where those droplets are scrubbed of any potential contaminants.

RESIGNATION

With the Biden administration pledging to improve airflow and ventilation in government buildings, the need for cleaner air should be obvious. Most heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems today cannot scrub the tiny particles that carry SARS-CoV-2. HR leaders are well advised to seek out medical-grade HVAC upgrades that can remove such particles from the air

Although the CDC has eased COVID guidelines, they have also ceded that the disease is "here to stay." Even with the cleanest air possible, employees should still be encouraged to practice social distancing and wear high-quality masks in the workplace whenever in close proximity.

This creates another advantage for hybrid offices, as fewer employees using a space have an easier time maintaining social distance. Offices can be reconfigured for more comfortable, spacious collaboration, with larger meeting and co-working areas and an end to the dreaded cubicle farm.

Finally, while vaccination is not legally mandatory, private employers should still support their workers in getting vaccinated, and encourage unvaccinated employees to work remotely.

HR leaders must now navigate various health and wellness considerations when preparing an office for the new normal of endemic COVID. By facing these problems with decisive confidence and a realistic outlook, this new normal can be comfortable, safe, and productive for employees and employers alike. ■

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