Three Ways Technology Can Make The Hybrid Environment "Work" For Your Organization

by George Taylor

(NAPS)—You may well remember the frustrations that defined the "old days" of work—the hustle to get to your desk on time, the inevitable dread of sitting in traffic or navigating public transportation to get home, the feeling of guilt asking if you could work from home to attend a child's school event or meet a repairperson.

For those haunted by these flashbacks, the good news is that the 9-to-5, full week in office is now a bygone era for many. The switch to fully remote work in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that workers can succeed beyond office walls. Much of this stemmed from their willingness to leverage videoconferencing and other non-traditional tools to remain productive while enjoying their newfound professional flexibility.

It's become increasingly clear that a hybrid work model, in which workers alternate between the office and remote locations, is probably here to stay. While some employees have mastered the virtual world, others long for the in-person engagement and familiarity they've lost in recent months. In fact, Barco, a global developer and provider of visualization and collaboration technologies, found that 90 percent of employees prefer hybrid work in place of a fully remote or on-site schedule. And even among the 56 percent who are eager to return to the office, the feeling is that the environment likely will be much different from the one they left in March 2020.

While businesses understand the growing popularity of hybrid work, effectively transitioning to the new model can feel daunting. With more employees returning to the office—potentially on a limited basis as part of the evolving hybrid work model—the mentality and habits they've acquired during the last year-plus will only elevate expectations. Even on campus, workers still wish to maintain a similar level of control over their workday, including a seamless, personalized and video-driven meeting experience. Likewise, remote employees demand unwavering and equal access to meetings and materials, and don't want to fall behind or feel "less than" while away from the physical room.

Faced with dueling demands, organizational and IT leaders are under pressure to deliver guidelines and tools that give all employees the flexibility and freedom they desire without compromising company culture, efficacy or overall success.

So how can businesses have it all? How can they accommodate the differing needs of office and remote employees while also future-proofing their operations and fueling growth?

For business and IT decision-makers, now is the time to begin envisioning the future of their meetings. The transition to hybrid likely will require a re-evaluation of meeting technologies and spaces to uphold their teams' productivity and connectivity from anywhere.

The hybrid office may present some challenges, but the right technology can help make it work.

Reimagine Collaborative Spaces

Before 2020, many organizations shifted their office layout from more traditional meeting rooms to smaller huddle and breakout spaces, citing employees' desires for more casual gathering areas. Now, as returning employees resume face-to-face interaction—while ensuring appropriate distancing—businesses are likely to revert to more spacious meeting environments. And since not all meeting participants will be physically at the table, strong and seamless connectivity takes greater importance.

Unified communication and collaboration (UC&C) platforms have upheld remote work during the last year-plus, and employees' reliance on them will continue in the hybrid environment. For businesses, maximizing UC&C functionality is a must. Barco's ClickShare Conference, for example, allows users to immediately, seamlessly and wirelessly connect laptops with all UC&C (including Zoom, Teams and WebEx), effortlessly toggle between platforms and activate all meeting room components. Hosts can simply walk in, boot up and connect with meeting participants—it's the difference between activating meetings within seven seconds instead of seven minutes.

Take Stock of Your "Who" and "Where"

One of the few certainties around hybrid work is that nothing is truly certain, and the conditions governing a return to work are dynamic. In response to these evolving considerations, businesses' hybrid work plans should be flexible enough to ensure that employees have the right tools and guidelines to remain nimble, collaborative and productive wherever and however they choose to work.

The pandemic shift has shown that activities once deemed essential to hold in person can proceed from afar. Customer relations functions have gone hybrid, and sales presentations and demonstrations now take place across video-enabled platforms. As health, budget and travel limitations take precedent, such non-traditional engagement may become a permanent reality. As a result, businesses will need to adapt and meet their employees where they are. This can include everything from enhancing AV capabilities in customer conference centers to providing those leading such calls from home with state-of-the-art cameras, microphones and backdrops to ensure optimal quality.

Level the Playing Field

As my team and I at Barco discussed our hybrid plans, one concern emerged more frequently than others: ensuring that those who chose to work remotely did not feel excluded or removed from critical conversations. While there's no way to replicate the personal connection of the office, technology can bridge gaps and keep remote workers feeling confident, comfortable and capable of contributing.

Videoconferencing has been—and will remain—the heart of hybrid collaboration. To empower more effective and productive video-driven hybrid meetings, businesses also can create more on-site space for virtual conferencing. Most people remember the exclusivity video-enabled conference rooms maintained in the "old days," and the battles with colleagues to reserve them (not to mention the technical challenges of connecting to and working within them if you were lucky enough to land one). Now, as workers have become familiar with holding meetings on laptops, every on-site space can become a video room available and accessible to anyone.

IT and business leaders also should consider how technology can replicate the feel of the on-site meeting for virtual attendees. Before the pandemic, remote meeting participants often struggled to view featured content and whiteboard notes, or have their voice heard at all. Now, with collaborative technology, they can see, hear and participate as if they were at the table. Barco's ClickShare Conference, for instance, offers virtual blackboarding, annotating and polling to extend knowledge share.

The transition to hybrid work marks an excellent occasion for businesses to consider and potentially implement long overdue changes. As Barco's research also found, technology that accommodates more flexible work is now an expectation among employees, and a potential differentiator in retaining and attracting top talent.

Hybrid work will look different for every industry, company and team. However, those who embrace the hybrid workplace, and make the operational and technological improvements to support their workers, stand the best chance to thrive in the new-look working world.

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