



## Summary Insights: Keeping Employees Engaged in the Hybrid Work Environment

**RFG Perspective:** As companies begin their transition to a Return to Office (RTO) work environment, executives must develop a strategy to blend remote work with in-office work, using a business model that satisfies corporate and personal needs. Certainly, many companies will not return to a traditional office setting – as it existed before the pandemic’s onset in March 2020 -- for many reasons:

- Many workers will continue to work remotely throughout 2022
- Many workers are resistant to returning to the traditional office, for reasons of work/life balance, childcare commitments, and reducing commute times to and from the office.
- Employees and managers have accepted blended work environments as a reasonable mode of operation, after working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022).
- Some workers and managers plan to return to the office (RTO) full-time – or return to the office part-time for team meetings and to gain increased visibility within the organization.

Many businesses are already on the path to this blended workstyle, which retains two-way communications for employees working remotely; more comprehensive support for enterprise applications – and a new management mindset that understands, and accepts, that the workplace has been forever changed by the pandemic.

Business and IT executives must accept this new reality – if they have not done so already – and they must “reinvent” a new hybrid workplace, building on the work-from-anywhere/work-from-home (WFH/WFA) changes.

### INTRODUCTION

The workplace, as we knew it, was forever changed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020 and 2021, many employees and managers worked remotely, due to lockdowns, quarantines and regulatory restrictions that were related to COVID-19. These restrictions were aimed at reducing the transmission of the virus from person-to-person.

From the pandemic’s start in March, 2020, the focus was on supporting workers who suddenly found themselves working at home – often surrounded by family, including small children and pets that famously interrupted online team meetings. The switchover to remote work happened very quickly – often within two weeks’ time. Many companies responded by fielding



faster network connections (VPN), by updating access to applications (VDI), by funding better links to cloud services, and by ensuring employees' remote access to business-critical data.

Beginning in 2020, new workstyles have emerged in a New Normal world, often blending office-based work with remote work – and supporting a variety of workstyles adopted by the workforce. The virus itself keeps mutating, causing surges that occurred at different times at different places throughout the world. Travel slowed to a near-standstill in 2020-2021, then picked up steam in 2021-2022.

Now, in 2022, businesses want more workers to return to using their corporate offices – at least some of the time. But many employees prefer to work remotely, due to savings in time and money that would otherwise be spent on commuting to the office – or due to perceived productivity gains by working alone, at home or in “hub” workplaces close to home.

The reality is that most office workplaces are not configured for a mixed WFH/RTO environment, because work will be performed differently than when everyone was assumed to be in the office all of the time. However, in 2022, employees are continuing to use video meeting applications to communicate with both office and remote teams. Although some companies have high-performance Wi-Fi systems in their offices, these networks may not be robust enough to support the added workload. As a result of increased network traffic, voice calls from mobile phones and desktops could still be impacted.

Additionally, supporting flexible office work arrangements means that employees will be asked to utilize hoteling or hot desking – and there is an expectation that more conference spaces for informal meetings may be needed. Pre-pandemic office layouts were not designed to support mixed-use workstyles. Accordingly, some offices will require technology upgrades, while office staff will need to adapt to the new working rules, signaling a major cultural shift since 2019.

## **Defining Best Practices for the Hybrid Workplace**

Business executives must examine, and update, their best practices for workforce enablement, covering many scenarios for work-at-home, work in the central-site offices – or a hybrid workstyle that combines support for both workstyles.



The goal is this: System response times should be reasonable – providing sub-second response time for applications that are hosted in the central office or on the Cloud, especially for video conferencing applications. Software applications must be updated to provide good performance for both local and remote workers – and that will require increased networking connectivity to many other systems.

Some recent studies on the matter have shown that a ratio of three days of working at home and two days in the office is an effective and productive hybrid workstyle. Others may find some variation will work best for them, depending on corporate culture and geography. Whatever the mix is, executives will need to develop a set of best practices to make their blend of WFH and RTO most productive for their organization.

### **The Panel:**

If traditional offices are destined to change in 2022, what will they look like?

The Robert Frances Group hosted a videoconference on Jan. 26, 2022, for the purpose of discussing the hybrid workplace model – and the changes ahead for the workforce, for managers and even for the physical office spaces that will be the “mother ship” that companies utilized before 2019 -- and are trying to re-shape in 2022. Panelists included:

- Dr. Miriam Lacey, Professor of Executive Programs at Pepperdine University in Los Angeles.
- Amy Zimmerman, Chief People Officer, Relay Payments, a fintech company in Atlanta, Georgia
- Glenn Llopis, President and CEO of the GLG Group in Irvine, California

RFG 100 video conference panelists think that we are already on the path to this blended workstyle, which includes the following attributes:

- Supporting two-way communications for those who are working remotely
- Providing more comprehensive support for enterprise applications – and
- Leveraging a new management mindset that understands, and accepts, that the workplace has been forever changed by the pandemic.



- Providing technical and business support for multi-generational employees, including Baby Boomers, GenX, Millennials and Gen z.
- Ensuring flexibility in the workplace, by supporting both remote work AND in-office work.
- Ensuring end-to-end security to thwart cyberattacks and ransomware attacks that could stop the business – temporarily or for extended periods.

## **The Poll:**

A real-time poll of conference participants showed the following results:

- 73% said the new workplace was more productive than traditional offices
- 47% said the work culture has improved, compared to traditional offices
- 40% said work hours and deadlines are more flexible in hybrid workplaces
- 27% pointed to teaming challenges, saying they were worse than in traditional offices
- 27% reported that more turnover was taking place in the workforce.
- 20% said it takes longer now to resolve work issues than in traditional offices.

## **Analysis:**

The year 2022 is an inflection point for hybrid work, involving a mix of work-at-home with return-to-office workstyles. There are no right or wrong answers here. There will be many variations and permutations on the workstyles that companies develop this year. But one thing is certain: the new office environment is not the same as the old one – and executives cannot assume that office work will return to a “normal” state, circa 2019.

RFG 100 panelists presented their views about setting corporate priorities for emerging work patterns, including the following:

- Evolve your organization’s work culture – and “curate it” for the New Normal
- Clarify your organization’s business policies, even if they change later this year
- Adopt networking and security standards that support consistent access to applications and data across the entire organization
- Protect against cyberattacks and ransomware by ensuring end-to-end security



- Consider leveraging cloud-based applications that can scale, as demand for online resources increases
- Ensure multi-factor authorization (MFA), so that employees can logon securely, regardless of location – to accurately track who is accessing applications and data

## Suggested Solutions for Improving Employee Engagement

The RFG 100 panel discussed approaches to make the new workstyles better. Among them were these:

**Virtual Water Cooler:** Having a “virtual water cooler” that will allow employees to meet on an informal basis, whether they are working at-home, or in the office. This could leverage existing at-a-distance solutions, such as Zoom, Cisco WebEx, Microsoft Teams or Skype – although the invitation to meet could arrive via email or Slack. The prime purpose is to increase workforce cohesion – and to create an analog for water-cooler or coffee-room conversations that support company culture and socialization. Managers should ensure that informal discussions, perhaps over coffee, salad, or sandwiches, can take place – including both in-office and remote employees and managers.

**A New Kind of Mentorship:** Here, the demographics of the company’s employees and managers come into play. The traditional mentor-mentee relationship will likely have to be adjusted. Younger staffers and new hires have felt the effects of the pandemic more sharply than others, because they are new to the company, they may be less experienced, and they didn’t already have established work relationships before work-from-home began. Finding ways to reduce feelings of isolation among young staffers and new hires will strengthen employee retention. The entire work landscape changed in 2020 when remote work became the norm – reducing the social “glue” for close collaboration with longtime in-office staffers and managers.

**Curate a Culture:** Panelists emphasized the importance of “being intentional and leveraging your values” – and then focusing on it. In other words, the corporate culture of what is acceptable and approved as corporate values is changing, given the way that business itself has changed since 2019. Key ingredients: defining a management strategy for shaping a new office culture, and programming management practices to meet the strategy’s goals. Defining the company’s values is a good start – and not being afraid to make changes. Follow-through is equally important: Do what you say you will do. As one panelist in the event said: “Have a high



say-to-do ratio”. Employees will build up trust when they see an organization “deliver” consistently on its stated promises for its personnel.

**Acknowledge the Need for Flexibility.** If work-at-home (WFH) or work-from-anywhere proved anything, it is that flexibility in daily work routines is vital for addressing employee stress levels. Organizations must acknowledge the scheduling conflicts caused by childcare (drop-offs and pickups) – and employee needs to drive or leave their home office at some point during the day. There is no way around that, if working parents are to be motivated to stay with the company.

## SUMMARY

Executives must rethink priorities for the New Normal Office. Many strategies are possible. But they will all have something in common: Each organization must tackle this challenge in its own way. For example, providing links that will allow remote workers to replay key videos, and to access new directives, will help address the flexibility challenge.

The new level of flexibility and constant use of digital networking will likely require major upgrades to most enterprises’ existing infrastructures. However, one important benefit will be broader coverage across time-zones, more and better intra-company iterations, and better employee to remote communications with clients and colleagues.

**RFG POV:** We believe that a host of pandemic-related workplace changes are still ahead in 2022. A wholesale “rethink” of the corporate workplace is already underway, given changing employee influences brought about by work-from-anywhere/work-from-home (WFA/WFH) policies that were first launched when the pandemic arrived in March, 2020.

Management must acknowledge the degree to which their organization’s workforce has changed in the last three years, with the emphasis on flexibility that sprang from work-from-home (WFH) remote offices. Those changes, prompted by the pandemic, will make traditional offices/workplaces seem a bit dated, and less effective, if companies try to reinstate it. Business and IT executives need to invest in this RTO transformation – or they will see an increase in resignations as employees seek workplaces that support remote work.

*Additional relevant research and consulting services are available. Interested readers should contact Client Services to arrange further discussion or interview with Cal Braunstein, CEO and*



*Executive Director of Research. Jean S. Bozman, president of Cloud Architects llc, co-authored this report.*