

Cracking the hybrid work culture conundrum: how to create a strong culture across a workforce you may never even see

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to look at how workplaces can create a healthy corporate culture as a hybrid way of working comes into force. The pandemic has made many businesses rethink their corporate culture strategy, and this study addresses how to regain and sustain a positive long-term culture. This is done by exploring aspects of pre-pandemic work life, how businesses can continue this going forward, and additional ways to ensure employees are fulfilled – all while providing a safe environment to work in.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The author analyses pre-pandemic working culture, impartial report findings, third-party research, and her deep understanding and domain expertise in human resources (HR) to guide the reader in identifying key components of an effective corporate culture during this fast-paced, disruptive era. The study provides background context and offers three main ways on how to successfully achieve this.*

Findings – *The findings from this study demonstrate three main ways in which HR leaders can enhance the working environment and how this can have multiple positive business outcomes. Driving and living core values from the most senior positions all the way through the workforce, changing values which are no longer fit for purpose, creating new workplace networking opportunities and recognising colleague contributions, especially during times of uncertainty, are all critical components of long-term culture success. The findings demonstrate how this is not only beneficial for a business but for the workforce too – helping retain important talent and also attracting new employees.*

Originality/value – *The study fulfils an identified need to analyse and inform on forward-looking corporate culture trends and challenges amid the pandemic.*

Keywords *Human resource management, Culture, Employee engagement, Leadership, Organisation development*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

1. Introduction

Company culture is something many businesses have invested significant amounts of time and effort into crafting to successfully attract and retain workforce talent, and this has often been used as a competitive differentiator. But the power of company culture was put to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic – with 2021 research even estimating the cost of poor working culture to the UK economy to be £20.2bn (BreatheHR, 2021). With many workers across the UK either returning to the office or adjusting to the world of hybrid work, businesses must urgently look to rebuild and tailor their strong pre-pandemic organisational culture for today's scattered and highly varied workforces.

A price waterhouse coopers (PwC) global survey of culture found that 69% of senior leaders felt it was their strong corporate culture that drove business success during

this testing period (PwC, 2021). As more and more employees tentatively returned to offices across the UK and businesses continue to find their feet with new hybrid working models, one of the key questions being faced by many business leaders is how best to reinstate or even rebuild the all-important culture that is so critical to business success and colleague well-being.

Organisations across all sectors have for many years invested significant time and money in creating the perfect culture as a key differentiator to attract and retain the very best talent – but there is no doubt, COVID-19 disruption and lockdowns have severely tested workplace cultures everywhere over the past 18 months. Businesses with a strong sense of identity were able to lean into this during the most turbulent periods, yet the real challenge was maintaining that sense of culture as the weeks of closed offices rolled into many months.

Trying to now navigate the way forward with restrictions relatively relaxed and more offices opening their doors to workforces brings new challenges. Businesses will need to recreate an inclusive environment that is comfortable for everyone, based on their needs – whether remote, in-office or hybrid.

2. Corporate culture underpins innovation and success

Now many offices have tentatively reopened, grabbing a coffee and having a catch up with a colleague in the office has never felt better, and while we all learned an awful lot about remote working and technology over the past 18 months, the missed collaboration between teams in face-to-face meetings has arguably impacted morale and in some cases, productivity.

We know people work best when they feel fully included and aligned to a common goal. A strong workplace culture bolsters creativity, innovation, teamwork, better decision-making and promotes trust and ownership – leading to colleagues feeling happier and more rewarded. Now, as we emerge from the pandemic and with hybrid working marked out as the future, there is a golden opportunity to listen to employees and get this right.

3. Back to basics – or time for a post-pandemic rethink?

At BGL Insurance, we put a lot of thought into developing new ways to maintain that sense of connection during the pandemic, and while our cultural foundations powered us through, much has changed for our colleagues, customers and communities. With over 2,000 colleagues across four locations in the UK, successfully recapturing this essence of our strong business-wide culture and ensuring it is still fit for purpose has been a major focus.

Now is the time to not only reinvigorate workplace cultures again but also redefine what this should look like in the wake of so much change. Businesses will need to ensure this New Look workplace culture is in the best interests of everyone involved, both protecting what worked well before the pandemic and evolving to meet the needs of a changing workforce amid continued uncertainty over changing restrictions.

Here are three key ingredients to the successful long-term development of a strong culture and colleague connection:

3.1 Live your company culture

Having strongly embedded values that your organisation lives by, reinforced by a set of core behaviours and ways of working, are the foundations of a strong corporate culture. These establish who we are and what we are like to deal with.

In times of crisis, a team's raw culture becomes exposed. Certainly, during those initial few months of lockdown, we saw our values – united, creative, authentic and ambitious – shine through. Those businesses that simply pay lip service to cultural values are likely to have

struggled more throughout this challenging period, and there is likely to be a sustained, knock-on effect for this.

As we navigate new ways of working, it is important to bear in mind that every interaction with your team is an opportunity to reinforce these values, and these common behaviours should be driven from the top down. Yet businesses should not be afraid to change long-standing values if they are no longer fit for purpose, relevant or accurately reflect your colleague population.

If this rethink results in greater working flexibility for employees, it is beneficial. Many employees value benefits and flexibility over a larger pay package and with the pandemic causing so much disruption, this will continue to be a focus area. Having a hybrid working model in place is favourable for your workforce, with 89% of surveyed workers desiring this moving forward ([Globenewswire, 2021](#)).

3.2 Redefine your “water cooler” moments because connectivity is king

Lockdown taught us that a culture is more than just an office building, as we witnessed new online communities and support groups popping up. While culture is not simply a building, it does help to create those all-important connections and a sense of belonging. It is, therefore, vital that businesses encourage colleagues to use office space effectively when possible, re-establishing valuable connections and workplace contacts. The “water cooler” moments we all missed during the lockdowns are set to return, and it is beneficial for colleagues to understand how best to use their space and perhaps create or engineer networking opportunities.

When redefining how office space is used, it also presents an opportunity to clarify expectations and ensure everyone is on the same page. Encouraging employees to voice what change they would like to see in the workplace is important for the future of office working. Do not be afraid to treat this phase as a “test and learn” process – there is always room for innovation and improvement. It might not be right first time, but through listening to colleagues and taking on board feedback, it should allow you to quickly achieve success in the new hybrid working environment.

3.3 Want to make colleagues feel valued? Recognise their contributions, understand their well-being

People who feel appreciated and valued by the company they work for deliver better results. It is, therefore, more important than ever that businesses take the time to reward and recognise colleagues for their contributions. Even a simple “thank you” goes a long way!

Make sure the ways in which you approach recognition are adapted for hybrid working. These moments can now also be taken as opportunities for colleagues to come together and celebrate success. This will once again help increase colleague connections while also boosting the passion for a shared purpose.

It is important to acknowledge how challenging this year has been on people for a whole host of reasons and as we all prepare for another uncertain winter, any company that fails to show empathy is simply getting it wrong. Regularly checking in on colleagues and reminding people of the well-being services available could make a major difference. It is even crucial to understand which situations need greater compassion. For example, booking annual leave is the same process for all employees at every level, but someone booking maternity leave may require more of a human touch.

At BGL Insurance, one of our core values is being authentic. This is more important than ever right now in the way companies engage with both colleagues and customers.

4. Build a first-class culture today and reap the long-term rewards

Many businesses have now worked remotely for a long time amid the pandemic, and it is important to be honest about the challenges this disruption posed to company culture when preparing the workforce for potential future changes. In doing so, leaders can actively look for ways to mitigate the impact and consciously set good precedents so everyone in the company – even those new starters just coming on board – know it is acceptable to call things out and question them.

Getting this right can make all the difference between retaining or losing the talent that we work so hard to find and nurture – and can even make your business stand out with an established reputation of having a strong corporate culture.

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