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Executives and workplace experts share how they plan to build hybrid models that keep employees engaged, productive, and happy

Adrian Granzella Larssen 2 hours ago

Setting up multiple screens for remote workers to join meetings can help them feel included. Thomas Barwick/Getty Images

- **On a team with both remote and in-office employees, the people working from home can feel excluded.**

- **For a hybrid model to work, remote workers must be granted the same opportunities as in person.**

- **Ensuring audio and video quality, holding Slack brainstorms, and utilizing a buddy system can help.**

Before COVID-19, all but three of moped-sharing company Revel's more than 250 employees worked in person.

Now, the team is split: Operations employees work in person in warehouses and in the field, while the customer experience and corporate staff work remotely.

Eventually, CEO and cofounder Frank Reig said, the company hopes to bring at least 75% of the staff back into the office. But as he and many other leaders navigating this sort of hybrid workplace approach have realized, creating a culture where everyone can thrive — no matter their location — may be easier said than done.

Frank Reig. Frank Reig

"The biggest challenge with having a hybrid model is ensuring that remote employees have the same opportunities as their in-person counterparts," Reig told Insider.

Nathalie Weiss and Eden Brachot, design strategists at Ark, a consulting studio that works with companies like Google, Samsung, and UPS to navigate organizational transformation and workplace design, said that they're currently helping clients think through how a hybrid approach is going to work culturally — whether a company is split between remote workers and in-office workers, like Revel, or decides to allow all workers to split their time between the office and working from home.

Specifically, they've been helping companies answer employee engagement questions like, "How do we ensure the employees that work from home have equitable access to resources and collaborative opportunities?" or, "How do we reinforce our culture and the social aspects of our company?"

Nathalie Weiss. Nathalie Weiss

They noted that organizations will need some trial and error before figuring out which solutions are the best fit. But in the meantime, here are some best practices to get you started.

Eden Brachot. Eden Brachot

Think remote-first

Mariel Davis, cofounder and chief marketing officer of Spokn, an internal podcasting platform that helps companies build great culture, told Insider that the biggest mistake companies make when pivoting to a hybrid model is privileging the office as the "default culture HQ."

"Remote employees can feel like second-class citizens, because often they are: They lack influence, they can't access all the information they need to succeed in their jobs, they're cut off from important informal networks, and they can feel

Mariel Davis. Mariel Davis

isolated because they don't 'get' the implicit cultural norms established by in-office staff," Davis, who's led hybrid teams of up to 200 employees, said.

To combat this, consider approaching everything you do as remote-first. That means "you need to plan discussions for remote participation," Marc Boscher, CEO of Unito, a SaaS startup with 65 employees that plans to ask all employees to spend at least two days per week in the office post-COVID-19, told Insider. "You need to ensure the environment is well suited for audio and video quality."

When you start with a remote mindset, he added, you're far more likely to end up with both groups of employees feeling heard and enjoying their work experience.

Part of this also means offering the same quality of individual experience for foundational aspects of your culture, Boscher said. For example, the team at Unito buys gifts for birthdays and work anniversaries.
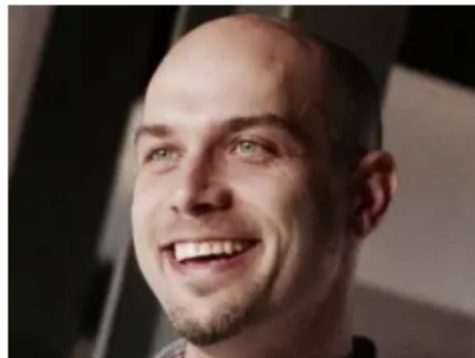
Marc Boscher. Marc Boscher

"With this hybrid model, we've made sure that people at home get their gifts delivered, that a call is organized in advance for birthdays, that we watch people open their gifts together, and that we celebrate them as a group in our all-hands meetings," he said. "Whether you're in the office or at home, this experience follows the same pattern."

Reevaluate your meeting approach

Mallory Blair, CEO and cofounder of Small Girls PR, a communications firm headquartered in New York and Los Angeles, agreed that it's often tempting to try to replicate the rhythms of office life, such as book a conference room and dial in a couple of colleagues into a phone or TV. But that can make it hard for those who are remote to keep up with the in-person conversation.

So rather than holding meetings for one-off brainstorms, Blair said, starting a temporary Slack channel, which she called "Slackstorms," has been a productive alternative for her team. These involve creating a temporary channel for a dedicated group, pinning the

Mallory Blair. Mallory Blair

meeting brief to the top of the channel, and setting an auto-generated deadline reminder so people can contribute on their own time.

"Beyond granting team members a break from staring at themselves, the Slack brainstorm is inclusive for those who are remote as well as in-office, letting everyone contribute ideas at their own pace, without the pressure — or time commitment — of a rapid-fire meeting where things might be lost by those dialing in who aren't live in the room," she said.

If you're hosting more traditional meetings, Brachot and Weiss of Ark recommended upgrading your conference rooms to better accommodate remote attendees, such as adding two screens in each room — one for those calling in and the other for sharing a presentation — and adding multiple cameras to a room.

"If the individuals in the room are huddled around the table sketching, for example, an overhead camera will help those not in the room see what the group is working on and contribute to the conversation," the pair wrote in an email to Insider.

Opt for writing over talking

"When employees are in the office together, information flows occur in organic, subtle patterns," Akhila Satish, CEO of Meseekna, a consultancy that helps leaders and teams improve decision-making, told Insider. "Remote employees may feel out of these loops and may start to depend on separate group chats or scheduled phone calls just with the remote team."

The problem with this, she explained, is that with different avenues of communication, news within the company or updates from upper management can get misinterpreted.


Akhila Satish. Akhila Satish

"My advice would be to figure out a way to try and keep all employees on the same information level," she said.

Bolt, a checkout experience platform with more than 170 employees, has managed to do this by staying true to a core value of writing over talking. CEO Ryan Breslow told Insider this philosophy creates a result-oriented mindset, removes the influence of the loudest voices in the room, reduces conflict, and fosters collaboration and transparency.

In meetings, for example, all participants have to submit their issues, updates, and feedback in writing prior to the meeting. "This allows others to read the submissions, make comments, and ask questions ahead of the meeting," Breslow said. "This massively increases information flow, and allows for consensus to be reached before the meeting even begins."
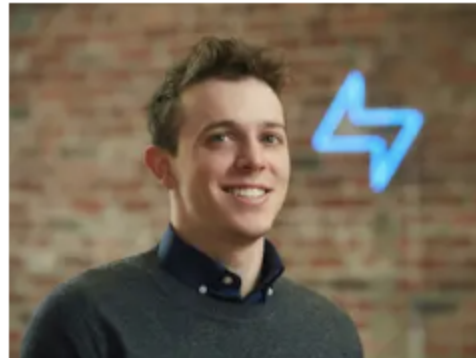
Ryan Breslow. Ryan Breslow

The team also uses company-wide project management tools, and meeting owners are responsible for ensuring that action items are created and shared on a public board post-meeting.

Build bridges between remote and in-office employees

Beyond formal meetings, look for ways to ensure that colleagues in different work environments have frequent opportunities to connect informally.

Satish recommended utilizing a buddy system of check-ins between one remote worker and one in-office employee so that "everyone will have a pulse on what's going on remotely or in person," she said.

Boscher said the Unito team has introduced new aspects of culture to help team bonding, including weekly Zoom happy hours on Fridays and executive open office hours where anyone can jump into a Zoom room and speak with members of the leadership team each week. They've also started using Donut, a Slackbot that randomly pairs together two employees for a coffee chat.

You can also use storytelling to create social bonds between employees who don't work in the same location, Davis said, by using podcasts, video, or Slack.

"Have old-timers record their memory of their first day on the job, invite new hires to reveal a hidden talent, have executives tell the story of their 'favorite failure,' or individual contributors describe the story behind their biggest win so far," she said.

Once it's safe to do so, consider bringing everyone together in person. Pre-pandemic, Blair's company was in the habit of flying out the colleagues on one coast to be together with those on the other for company bonding and leadership exercises.

"Once it's safe to do so, we anticipate returning to this one to two times per year cadence for all teams being all hands together," she said. The benefits, she added, outweigh the costs: creating shared memories and a heightened sense of belonging, "both of which make an individual's time at work more meaningful."

Boscher said that while he has no doubt that his team can maintain a strong culture with employees working remote several days a week, having a regular office presence makes this easier. "Having facetime, spontaneous interactions, and simply being around your coworkers really helps foster collaboration and makes relationships feel more real," he said.

Adjust course as needed

Finally, don't be afraid to make changes as you go along, getting regular feedback from your employees on pain points.

"Don't just assume your attempts at making people feel connected have done the trick immediately," Satish said. "The teams that have successfully navigated a hybrid workforce have taken the time to figure out what works and what doesn't for their unique situation," she added.