Maintaining Morale, Equity, & Connection in Our Hybrid Workforce

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Introduction

Well before the onset of COVID-19, remote work was picking up steam across the country. And as we look toward the end of the pandemic and the future of work, it's likely the craze won't settle down anytime soon.

In fact, according to a recent Gartner survey, more than 80 percent of company leaders plan to allow employees to continue working remotely—at least part-time—even after the pandemic subsides.

But that doesn't mean, in any sense, that traditional offices are obsolete, far from it. With some groups of employees feeling strongly about remaining remote and others looking forward to returning to the office, HR leaders are feeling pressure on both sides of the aisle.

So what does this all really mean, you ask?

For many companies, it appears that the future most likely looks like a hybrid work environment. And in our webinar polling, 71% of HR leaders were planning to transition to this type of work.

Still, HR leaders have much to determine around the framework and execution of the hybrid workplace model, and organizational leaders have big decisions ahead of them.

Will employees be excited about coming back, or will they be fearful and unmotivated? What will the new office structure look like? How can leaders foster creativity, inclusivity, and collaboration within a dispersed workforce?

In this ebook, we'll look at the challenges of remote work and what HR and company leaders can do to maintain morale, equity, productivity, and connection within a hybrid workforce.

71%

Of HR leaders were planning to transition to a hybrid workplace.

80%

Of company leaders plan to allow employees to continue working remotely even after the pandemic subsides.

Current Challenges

As we test these new waters of hybrid work, certain challenges are being revealed.

The biggest challenges that companies have to be prepared for are:

Competing Preferences

Two groups forming in the employee ranks, and each feels strongly about their choice: those who can't wait to come back and those who are dreading it.

Employee Resistance

Nearly 30 percent of US workers are willing to quit if they have to return to an office full time (USA Today article reports).

Competition & Recruitment

Can you mandate going back? Sure. But as Namely's CEO, Larry Dunivan, says, "if you want to be an employer of choice and you have people who don't want to work in an office again, you'll probably lose them to a company that's more flexible."

Separate Work Populations

With groups of employees working from a range of different locations, there's a growing concern that cliques will form. How will that affect performance management? Merit discussions? Promotions?

Productivity

If the COVID-19 pandemic has proved anything, it's that employees can be productive when working from home. But is there work on par with in-office employees? And will their productivity rates change when some workers return to the office?

Connection & Morale

When the entire workforce is in one place, it's easy enough to host and plan events that foster connection between employees and keep their spirits high. But how does that change when some people are in the office and others are not? How do you maintain fairness across those efforts and ensure that remote workers don't feel left out?

Compliance

Different states have very different employment laws and regulations. When looking into a hybrid work environment, employers must also consider the location of remote workers, as the company must follow the employees' state's laws.

Maintaining Morale

Characterized by excitement, nervousness, and anticipation, the hybrid workplace model will require employees and their leaders to come together in navigating the uncertainty and challenges ahead of them.

As mentioned previously, some employees may look forward to the return, particularly because they miss the social component of working with colleagues. Yet, other employees may be uncomfortable or fearful given the unresolved nature of the pandemic. Both sentiments are valid and both must be taken into consideration to keep employees satisfied and engaged.

So how can HR leaders maintain morale with the mix of emotions associated with the transition to a hybrid workforce?

Let's take a look.

> **"If you're going to pack anything along for this ride, it better be morale, equity, and employee connection."**
>
> Kevin Yip
> **CO-FOUNDER & COO, BLUEBOARD**

Transparency & Collaboration

Moving to a hybrid model means there will be a change in how physical structures and office layouts will be used for collaboration. In-person meetings might be reserved for brainstorming sessions, introducing new projects, or team-building exercises, while remote days would be for work that can be performed individually. Reimagine your traditional office spaces and arrange them for more collaborative meeting spaces to maximize the time people spend in person.

Clearly communicate your company's goals and objectives for the hybrid workplace via all-hands meetings, 1:1s, or collateral materials that showcase your vision for the near future. Take the time to explain your expectations for feedback and cadence for checking in with your team. It's important to keep regular touchpoints to surface any employee concerns and proactively address them.

Social Interaction

The ways in which employees enjoy socializing have not changed, but the circumstances have. Given the structure of the hybrid environment, HR leaders must evolve their methods for bringing employees together to get to know each other, bond, and ultimately collaborate toward shared goals.

Start by taking a pulse on employee sentiment around social activities by implementing engagement surveys. This will help you gauge where employees are at in regards to gathering and meeting up in person. Try to craft an optimal office experience that meets the needs of employees whether in person or remotely.

It's critical to provide access to tools and platforms that help dispersed employees engage, interact, and build relationships.

For instance, at Blueboard we reward employees with their choice of an experiential reward (like 5-star facials, a day on the golf course, or a snorkeling trip to Key West). Employees can't wait to talk about their adventures, which helps to connect coworkers through shared experiences.

The Namely platform also encourages employees to appreciate each other on its social newsfeed— a surefire way to spread positivity and unity. You can also incorporate employee games and contests within your meetups and meetings to bring everyone closer together.

Support & Flexibility

The pandemic has made it challenging for employees to self-regulate their time, leading to burnout, anxiety, exhaustion—and longer working hours. In fact, one study conducted by Microsoft revealed that time spent on calls has more than doubled and the average meeting time has increased by 10 minutes, climbing from 35 to 45 minutes. Due to this blurred work-life balance, 54 percent of workers feel overworked and 39 percent feel exhausted.

54%

Of workers feel overworked.

Support & Flexibility

HR leaders can support employees and help combat these challenges by establishing no meeting days, extra holidays, mental health days, or company-wide days off to encourage wellbeing and give employees time to recharge.

Flexibility will also be a key factor in retaining and engaging employees, not just an additional perk. Allowing them to work from home or come into the office a few days a week is an option that provides work-life balance and stability for many employees. Flexible working environments also make accommodations for employees' doctor appointments, childcare, or other personal obligations that need to be managed during the workday.

> "Flexibility isn't going to just be a perk that you consider offering. It's going to be mandatory if you want to compete with other companies for top talent."

Larry Dunivan
CEO, NAMELY

Creating Connection

With some employees physically in the office and others working remotely, there is bound to be a gap in connectivity within the hybrid workplace.

So how can you keep your employees connected—regardless of where they are located?

Let's start with technology.

Technology

To solve the gap in connectivity, organizations must rethink and adopt new engagement strategies—especially technologically driven ones. Implementing tools, resources, and platforms that allow for celebration and interaction will help your employees relate to one another better and regularly stay connected. **Encouraging employees to celebrate key milestones, team wins, or meeting their goals will also foster team cohesion and establish a more positive norm.** More best practices for planning recognition programs that celebrate teams in a meaningful way are here on the Blueboard resources page and blog.

Manager Training

Managers should also be thoroughly trained for the hybrid workforce. **Now more than ever, they need to be aware of what's going on with their teams,** learn how to adjust to their changing needs, and keep employees connected.

Employees should be able to turn to their manager for any questions or concerns around the operation of the hybrid workplace model.

Embody Company Values

Every company has core values, but the question is whether your company actually lives by them. Without clearly defining and embodying your company's mission, your employees won't have a purpose they can feel attached to. Being definitive and **emphasizing your company's mission and values will enable your employees to feel like they are connected to each other and the longer term vision for the organization.** In this new hybrid world, revisit your mission and ask yourself if it's still relevant and reflective of what your company stands for.

Fostering Inclusion & Belonging

To foster inclusion and belonging in the workplace, companies need to prioritize equity for all employees. The key to doing so is by being sensitive and understanding that every employees' needs are different.

With the transition to remote and hybrid environments, it's never been more important for company leaders to sit down and reassess the programs and policies they have in place. How have employees' needs changed, and how can your company support them? Asking yourself questions like these will enable you to be proactive and prioritize equity for your entire workforce.

So how can you foster inclusion and belonging in the hybrid workplace?

In case you're not sure, we've got you covered.

Align HR & Leadership

When HR and executive teams are not aligned, it can be detrimental to company culture. Conversations between these groups about inclusion and belonging need to be constant and ongoing. Especially in a hybrid workforce, HR and company leaders need to be united and communicate openly with the rest of the company.

Establish ERGs

If your company doesn't have them already, you should establish Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). ERGs are employee-led interest groups that raise awareness of issues facing people of a specific demographic, race, religion, or sexual identity.

By starting ERGs, your employees can feel a sense of inclusivity and belonging. ERGs serve as a safe haven for those with perspectives and experiences that are diverse compared to the company as a whole. Members of ERGs can share experiences, host events, and serve as a unified voice at your company. These groups can also give you feedback and guidance for your company's policies and programs during the transition to a hybrid workforce.

Effectively Communicate

From the CEO to individual team members, an inclusive workplace requires effective communication. When making the transition to a hybrid environment, **you need to keep lines of communication open and constantly ask employees for feedback.** When it comes to inclusivity and equity, clearly explain your programs and ask employees how you can further support them.

Having clear communication channels is especially helpful once you've established a hybrid workforce. Communicating via teleconferencing tools will keep both employees who are in the office and at home connected. This will enable them to collaborate and feel a sense of belonging— no matter where they are located.

Remaining Equitable

So we've covered morale, connection, inclusion, and belonging—but what about equity?

Here are some ways your company can remain equitable when it comes to recognition, promotions, and raises in a hybrid workplace.

Culture of Recognition

Cultivating a culture of recognition and celebration becomes increasingly important within a hybrid workplace model. This may look like spot recognition, bonuses, rewards, or publicly highlighting employees' efforts at company all hands.

Value-based recognition is especially powerful because it can either be peer-nominated, or manager-nominated—showing employees that people see and value their contributions across the board. The advantage of value awards is that the measuring stick is the same for everyone which keeps the process of giving them out equitable. From hourly employees to the CEO, fully remote or in the office, anyone can bring your company values to life and create an impact across your broader organization.

NAME DIANE F. | COMPANY UNIT 4 | EXPERIENCE FAMILY COOKING CLASS

"I love to cook and my family loves to eat; much of our social time is focused around food. It was a great way to spend the evening and to connect as a family – not something we do enough of."

Rewards that are exciting to share, like Blueboard experiences, help build a culture of recognition.

Performance Management

Given the nature of a dispersed workforce, unconscious bias must be taken into account—especially because humans tend to favor in-person relationships that can lead to deeper personal connections. Make sure your managers are equipped to avoid bias and remain equitable when making decisions around salary increases, transfers, or promotions when managing a hybrid workforce.

Performance Management

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to productivity in a hybrid work environment. Keep in mind that managers will not physically be able to see their remote employees working late or overtime. These factors should all be considered when evaluating performance.

Listen carefully, lead with empathy, and have frequent feedback conversations to lay a foundation for inclusive and equitable performance management conversations.

Career Development Sessions

When it comes to recognition and compensation, managers need to know how to advocate for their team members and help them grow. In addition to performance reviews, managers should have frequent conversations with their employees about career development. By reflecting on these sessions and overall performance, managers can remain equitable when giving recognition, promotions, and raises—whether employees are physically in the office or not.

Conclusion

Prioritizing employee morale, equity, and connection are all ingredients for a successful return to work plan. When formulating your plan, listen to your employees, know what resources are available for you, and begin experimenting with the most meaningful strategies for your organization.

As the conversation around the hybrid workplace continues to evolve, make sure you give yourself and your employees some grace—this is, after all, uncharted territory.

About Namely

Distinguished by its intense commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, HR technology leader Namely is an employer of choice that helps mid-sized employers and their employees thrive. Delivering and streamlining the complexities of recruiting, onboarding, time & attendance, performance management, benefits administration, compliance, payroll and analytics from a single platform, Namely also offers Managed Payroll and Benefits services. The company further differentiates the client experience through personalized service and easy-to-use applications.

Learn more at **Namely.com** and follow us **@NamelyHR.**

About Blueboard

Blueboard is the world's leading experiential rewards company. Our experience delivery platform makes it easy for companies to give meaningful employee rewards, incentives, and gifts—from one-of-a-kind to once-in-a-lifetime experiences (think skydiving, dining through Michelin stars, learning to blow glass, or chasing the Northern Lights). We partner with hundreds of Best Places to Work around the globe including Abbott's diabetes care business, Mixpanel, Segment, Glassdoor, Shake Shack, and Ubisoft to celebrate their top people in a more meaningful way. From helping people. connect with family and friends, to escaping the everyday, Blueboard employee rewards are the best way to inspire and care for your top people.

Learn more at **Blueboard.com** and follow us **@BlueboardInc.**