

14.4 Building and Maintaining Connection in Hybrid Workplaces



Many employees want a combination of working in the office and working remotely. One of the reasons that they want to continue going to the office is because they value the social connections that come from working alongside colleagues in person. This is something that they have missed while working remotely during the pandemic. An important part of the planning for a flexible workplace is accounting for the need for interpersonal connection.

Fine-Tuning Your Communication and Coaching Skills

Collaborating effectively can be challenging at the best of times, even when everyone is in the same room. Often, the same people speak up and the same people remain quiet in meetings. Being intentional about including everyone in a hybrid meeting is an opportunity to create better meetings, improve collaboration, and foster a stronger sense of teamwork.

A way to do this is to co-create a team agreement, the set of norms that everyone agrees to follow during meetings or when collaborating within project teams. This might include:

- Establishing meeting-free days and regular standing meeting days and times.
- Asking employees to share how they work and collaborate best. When do they need dedicated time for focused, individual work and when will they need to interact with colleagues? What has worked during the pandemic and what has not?
- As you may have done with customer service guidelines, agree on when emails will be responded to internally and when you and your employees are available for “open office” time – times when anyone can call or email to ask a work-related question or just check in with each other.
- Agree on virtual “office hours” and what is an acceptable time to send emails (and when is not).

Creating Virtual “Water Cooler” Moments That Foster Positive Connection

Research shows that social capital – the informal workplace interactions that can lead to benefits because of “who you know” and who you have access to – also contributes to lower absenteeism, lower turnover, and increased productivity. You can create these “water cooler” moments with a little creativity:

- Utilize technology, workplace social networking sites and communication tools such as Yammer, MS Teams, or Slack. Set up channels for fun non-work topics like favorite Netflix series, a book club, or pet pictures and animal videos.
- Set up regular midweek virtual coffee chats or teatime, virtual happy hours on Friday afternoons, or plan to take a cooking lesson or art class as a team online.
- Encourage employees to connect with people outside of their team or who they don’t normally work with. Create a fun challenge: how many new people can you meet in a month?

Supporting Mental Wellness When Working Remotely

Human connection is an important part of our overall health and wellbeing. The topic of mental health in the workplace was already gaining in importance prior to the pandemic. During the pandemic we saw an increase in reported mental health challenges across Canada and worldwide.

Additionally, burnout has become more prevalent in workplaces as the line between the office and home has blurred. Just because people can work all hours of the day doesn’t mean that they should.

As you build your hybrid workplan consider the following:

- **Normalize the topic of mental health**

Don’t wait until someone is struggling with a mental health issue before you broach the subject. Talk about overall wellbeing – both physical and mental health (they are connected) – on a regular basis. Include a standing wellness agenda item to your team meetings and check in with employees individually about their workload, stress, and self-care for the workplace.

- **Model healthy behaviour**

Employees take their cues from their manager. If you work through lunch breaks and send emails on the weekend and evenings, they likely will, too. They may feel that it is expected of them. Brain science shows that even a 5-minute break can help to reduce stress. Encourage your employees to take their breaks and to log off at the end of the day. And make sure that they use their allotted annual vacation time.

- **Care Time**

Many employees (and managers, too) still think that they can only use sick days (paid or not) for physical illness. Be clear with your employees that they can take time off work if they are experiencing mental health challenges. Taking a day or two as needed can help to reduce the chance that an employee will need to take a short- or long-term disability leave due to mental illness later.

Sources:

¹*Emerald insight. (2016, October 10). How intra-organizational social capital influences employee performance. Retrieve from How intra-organizational social capital influences employee performance | Emerald Insight*
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²*Statistics Canada. (2020, May 27). Canadians' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Retrieve from: The Daily — Canadians' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic - statcan.gc.ca*
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