Prioritize connection

After the global experiment in home and hybrid working, leaders need to reassess the costs and benefits – and put renewed emphasis on creating a sense of connection between team members

Writing Suzanne de Janasz, Joy Schneer & Nick Beutell

The lure of working from home remains strong. Despite the rising tide of CEOs demanding that employees return to the office, some remote workers refuse. They cite special circumstances, play the game (clocking in before returning home), or find another company that will let them work remotely. They are steadfast in their resolve to hold onto a good thing.

But is it a good thing? There has been plenty of discussion about the convenience, autonomy, flexibility and cost savings for employees, but the conversation has mostly ignored the downsides of working from home (WFH). Tradeoffs exist: the lack of social support, face-to-face interaction and spontaneous conversations can result in loneliness, isolation, and decreased wellbeing for some.

Research evidence also suggests that home workers are less likely to be promoted. Even in the hybrid arrangement, for which promotions and opportunities may match in-person work, some employees don't seem to get the best of both worlds.

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"When my employer mandated two to three days of in-office work, I was excited," one professional told us. "I missed chats, lunches and happy hours with my colleagues. But there I was, sitting in a random office (not officially mine as we were hotdesking), having meeting after meeting on Zoom. What was the point of coming in?"

This highlights two important fallacies. First, a return to the office does not mean a return to normal. It is not business as usual, even when employees have supposedly returned to the office. As one person whose company ended the WFH option told us, "You could roll a bowling ball down the hallway and still not hit anyone."

Secondly, based on our research, WFH is not a panacea for the challenges of working life, as it has sometimes been presented. Not only do remote workers experience isolation and loneliness, but absent supportive relationships, such as a supervisor (who can buffer unaccommodating policies or culture) or colleagues (who can step in should a worker need to address unexpected situations), they can also experience blurred and conflicting work and family domains, or work/family conflict.

As for the companies who employ these workers, it has become clear that we need to review the cost-benefit analysis of WFH, considering the advantages (such as decreased office rent, attractiveness to workers) and disadvantages (reduced engagement and productivity of lonely, isolated, and unwell employees).

Our research suggests it's time to rethink virtual and hybrid policies, starting with a more thoughtful approach to the appropriateness of WFH for the business as well as for employees – as opposed to enforcing a choice that sounds good, but really isn't.

What works for employees and the business
We gathered data from 136 Airbnb hosts to empirically examine if gig/remote work cures some problems while creating others. The findings were clear: while hosts may have found the autonomy, flexibility and independence they were looking for, they were also experiencing significant downsides such as greater isolation, loneliness and declining wellbeing.

For organizations considering a change in policy (from or to WFH, hybrid, or in-person), we suggest the following three principles.

Respond, don't react Gather and analyze data to make an informed decision and enforce new policies with measures that make sense, as opposed to those that invite gamesmanship. Data might include answers to questions such as: what is the nature of work processes? How are products/
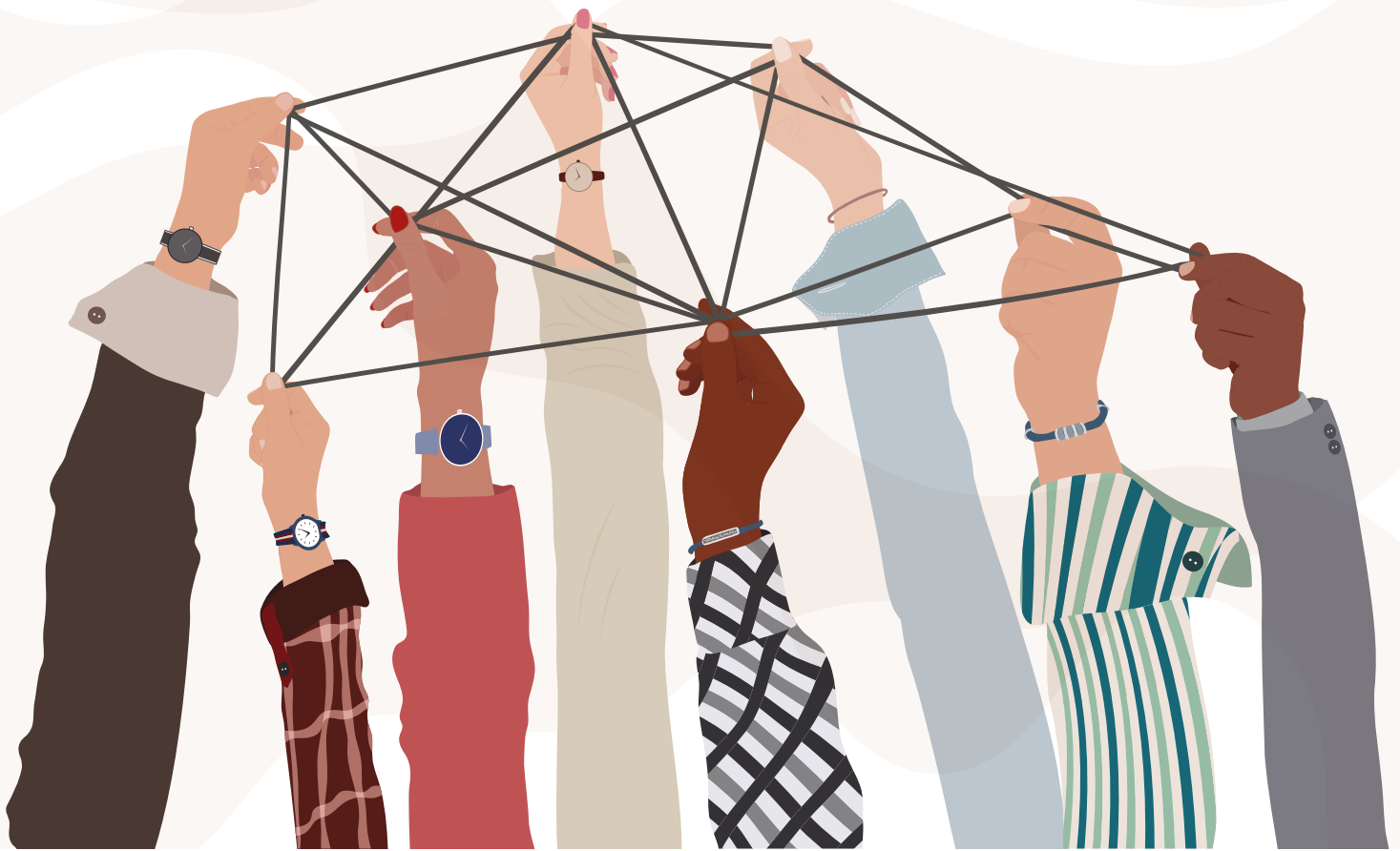
services delivered? Where are employees located? How much of a burden is there for working from a particular location? Is there appropriate space in the office for workers to return? Will employees have the resources they need to be productive? What is the appetite for, and satisfaction with, the WFH policy? What metrics would highlight differences in performance as well as employee wellbeing? Would a change in policy differentially affect certain groups, such as parents, or those with limited mobility? When only some jobs can be performed remotely, will this create inequity within the organization? Will valued employees need additional support (e.g. childcare or relocation assistance) for in-person requirements, especially those with family responsibilities? Are there trends in the yearly employee satisfaction surveys that uncover growing disengagement or feelings of isolation?

Ultimately, mandates should be supported by data, and HR policies should align with how and where employees work most effectively. Moreover, if mandates are differentially enforced and in-office

Evidence also suggests that home workers are less likely to be promoted, even in hybrid arrangements

employees are not getting the benefits of social connection, the policy is undermined.

Out with the old New ways of working may require new ways of meeting that balance cost savings with employees' psychological needs. Social interaction is important for connection and trust, but it should be authentic. Rather than requiring employees to come in for meetings filled with 'administrivia', use face-to-face gatherings to build connection and enable creative, innovative problem-solving. And if WFH works, build in bimonthly or quarterly summits at interesting locations.

We spoke to the chief executive of a mid-cap firm in the educational publishing sector whose employees (fewer than 20) and consultants (up to 250) had been hired from around the world. When she noticed signs of employee Zoom fatigue such as muting, leaving video off, and avoiding conflict, she organized a three-day working summit/retreat at a resort town for her staff. It was preceded by a planned weekend of golf, swimming, meals and ▶

in a near-complete virtual environment. Their interpersonal skills are deficient and they avoid conflict.

Organizations need to support employees' interpersonal skill-building to ensure they're able to work effectively when interacting and collaborating with colleagues, regardless of work mode. Leaders can ensure that soft-skill capability is specified in job descriptions and gauged during interviews, while also supplementing these skills (e.g. emotional intelligence, team collaboration, conflict management) with appropriate training – and not just computer-based learning.

To address and support employees' mental health, make conversations about loneliness, isolation, and mental health 'okay' by having senior leaders (and other employees) speak or write about their personal experiences and share these in regular company-wide communications.

Organizations might also provide access to mental health apps (such as Live Happy or Headspace). For example, at the start of the pandemic, one of our academic institutions provided employees with free access to Burnalong, offering online physical and mental health programs. While the focus in 2020 was on the loss of opportunities for physical exercise, mental wellbeing is generally now a bigger concern. Of course, mere access to an app doesn't have an impact unless employees use it, but – as with weight management, smoking cessation, and psychological counseling programs – free access may entice a subset of employees to engage, benefiting both themselves and the organization. By shifting from "Find help yourself" to "Here's what we offer all employees," organizations may encourage more WFH and hybrid workers to take up the offer.

Leaders should promote and provide adequate resources for employee resource groups (ERGs). These shared identity groups provide opportunities for belonging to a community, reducing feelings of isolation. Connecting with 'like' others can give employees important validation for their professional and personal experiences. When supported by realistic budgets to fund workshops or engage keynote speakers, employees are more likely to find their ERGs worthwhile.

Leading WFH and hybrid workers

Despite the experiences of the last four years, we see many leaders continuing to struggle with the challenges of leading teams through WFH and hybrid ways of working. To improve how things work for all, we point to the following four steps.

1 Honor individual preferences if possible
Leaders should ask employees about their

beach time. After a relaxed weekend together (which also included partners), the team spent three days on team building, project planning and management strategy.

Following the summit, the CEO noticed a considerable difference among the staff: a softness in speech, more empathetic listening, and more collaboration. Virtual work remained the norm, but face-to-face summits two to three times a year have helped maintain a more positive, collaborative culture. "The cost of the summits is well worth the investment. These face-to-face events help inject a sense of connection that strengthens the bond between staff so when stressful times arrive, we're better able to work together to get through them," she said.

Support employees' interpersonal skill-building and mental health needs Three years of pandemic stress and disconnectedness have stunted some employees' interpersonal skills. Many Gen Zs have spent their college and early work years

> Leaders should strive to support a working culture that fosters authentic connections

working preferences, and, where possible, meet them, on an individualized basis. While certain groups may tend to have a preference one way or another – such as parents, or neurodiverse workers – recognize that one's demographic characteristics do not guarantee that WFH is the solution. Recall that the massive migration to WFH, while initially a boon for many, was eventually shown to hurt women disproportionately: as our research shows, greater autonomy and flexibility may also mean greater isolation and work/family conflict.

2 **Encourage workers to engage in job crafting** Originally coined by Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton, job crafting refers to the changes employees can make in the tasks, relationships, and meaning of their job to better align with their values, needs and abilities. Doing so can result in higher performance, greater positivity, and increased work-related satisfaction and wellbeing. For example, employees can visit customers, engage with an ERG, or initiate efforts to evaluate a new product or service offering. This could empower them, increase their engagement, and enable them to prioritize elements of the recrafted job to feed their needs.

3 **Align behavior to organization culture** Actively work to ensure that your behaviors align with the articulated components of the organization's culture, and reward employees who do the same. We can't overstate the importance of culture and its impact on employee productivity and retention. The culture of a primarily remote organization will look and feel different from one in which daily in-person attendance is required. And if a change is made from WFH to hybrid or in-office, leaders should utilize tools to gauge changes in how employees experience the culture. Not long ago, one of us facilitated the initial Zoom meeting of a virtual team within a company that values creativity and innovation. We used a show-and-tell method at the kickoff, wherein each team member introduced themselves along with a chosen item from their home office, such as a framed photo, objet d'art, pet, or meaningful memento. Each member shared while listeners paid rapt attention, providing a strong foundation of trust and openness.

4 **(Re)focus on connection to reduce isolation and loneliness** Employees may feel that working in-office bears a cost that they pay in lost convenience. Leaders should maximize the pay-off by focusing on its value for building connection. If in-office work is needed, insist on overlapping workdays: not any two to three days, but specific ones to ensure people are in the office

IDEA IN BRIEF

Convenience versus connection
While a growing number of companies have mandated a return to the office, working from home remains hugely attractive to many employees, who value the convenience it offers. Yet it is not without downsides: the cost is paid in a loss of connection. Leaders need to refresh their cost-benefit analysis and build an approach that meets both employee preferences and business needs.

How to change policy well
To inform and manage any change in policy on working location, leaders should first ensure they have full data pertaining to the decision. Second, be clear about the rationale for office working, and structure office and face-to-face time to maximize connection. Third, support the development of employee's interpersonal skills, which may be deficient as a result of the pandemic, and their mental health.

together. Eschew the hotdesking or "grab the first desk you find" approach and arrange to co-locate people. Encourage a "no devices" policy for face-to-face meetings, encouraging people to look at each other when they are together.

The trade off
The WFH debate is a balancing act between the comfort of home and the need for human connection. While the freedom from commuting and formal attire is appealing, it can come with hidden costs like stalled promotions and feelings of isolation. As we step further away from emergency pandemic measures, it's time for a thoughtful reassessment of remote and hybrid work policies that truly consider the wellbeing of employees and the needs of the business. A change of working mode, such as returning to the office, has ripple effects: organizations must take measures to prioritize the humanity of WFH as well as in-person and hybrid workers.

Companies should make data-driven decisions that reflect actual work dynamics, employee needs, and employee satisfaction. Meetings should be meaningful and build real connections, and if WFH is effective, consider periodic in-person gatherings to keep the team spirit alive. Finally, support for interpersonal skills and mental health is crucial for maintaining a productive and engaged workforce. Leaders should strive to accommodate individual preferences and support a culture that fosters authentic connections as the company culture adapts to the new ways of working. ●

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