

# The Beehive: achieving balance in a hybrid culture

## Integrating different working models

By Joyce Gesing, Elke Hofmann and Dirk Mundorf

Over the past months, the pandemic has drawn a new dividing line – not between individual departments or branches, but a line that divides all teams within an organization into those who work from home and those who work in the office. Maintaining a healthy work culture means ensuring that this line does not become a potential weak point and ultimately, a fracture. The key instead is to unlock the creative potential concealed within this apparent polarity.

It is now widely acknowledged and accepted by organizations, politicians and employee representatives that working from home (home working) and working at the office (office working) are becoming established as permanent working practices, set to remain in place even after the pandemic fades away. Many companies are in the process of drawing up collective agreements that will continue to permit and regulate more flexible forms of working in the future. Some CHROs think it conceivable that between 50 and 60 percent of administrative work could eventually be carried out through flexible combinations of home and office working. Rules must be devised to ensure that this flexibility goes hand in hand with innovative working practices in production environments, too. To paraphrase one CHRO: One key reason for this is the need to ensure a kind of social justice. While knowledge work harmonizes very well with working from home, many jobs in

manufacturing or logistics still cannot be conducted exclusively from a remote PC, at home or anywhere else. The nature of the work is not the only factor – individual personalities and circumstances may also determine who prefers which working model. A lengthy commute mostly argues in favor of home working. Yet people who seek creative or face-to-face interactions with colleagues will probably be prepared to make the journey even so.

Ideally, companies will be able to cater to individual employees' needs. In doing so, it's important not to draw up rules that are overly rigid: Specific configurations should be left to the individual teams and managers to determine. While this delegates considerable responsibility to individual departments, it also allows greater flexibility. One CHRO reported about the possibility of individual team regulations in his company. This limits flexible working guidelines by the management team to the essentials: for example, that employees should generally spend two to three days a week in the office, which they may organize in the way that suits them best. Additionally, that key team events or project stages requiring employees to be present on site should be scheduled in the annual calendar. Everyone now has access to this calendar, so all employees can arrange their personal schedules around these events. In lockdown periods, the rules are of course more flexible: staff are able to work entirely from home, and group events also take place online.

### **Implications for managers**

For managers who have to coordinate teams that are working remotely, the learning curve is often a steep one. Trust now takes the place of time tracking. Regular direct contact and in-person “presence checks” are supplemented by empathy and sensitivity. The ability to motivate, inspire and use humor are especially crucial in digital collaboration. Just as important is the ability to sense when virtual collaboration is working well, and when in-person meetings are essential, as one CHRO emphasized. In her view, certain leadership qualities are becoming ever more important: empathy, trust, teamwork, and the ability to motivate.

A hybrid culture means allowing and facilitating different working practices both within teams and across different departments or business units. Managers and top executives need to demonstrate high levels of transparency and a willingness to communicate if they wish to ensure that these various practices become firmly embedded in the company and in the minds of its people.

The introduction of new management practices should be supported by appropriate processes and reinforcements – such as feedback processes, for example, or remuneration elements linked to behaviors that support the corporate culture. HR departments need to provide managers with the necessary methods and tools. At the same time, HR executives confirm the importance of ascertaining top managers' leadership competencies, because not all individuals are suited to this new world or able to adapt to the new situation.

### **Implications for workplace design**

Balancing home working and office working calls not just for new leadership qualities but also for different kinds of spaces and organizational strategies. Initial indications suggest that office space will be reduced by 30-40 percent over the long term. Whether or not office facilities are downsized depends to a large extent on each individual organization's context. One thing is certain: the design of office spaces will change. Flexible working, meeting spaces suitable for creative brainstorming, and technology for high-quality audio and video conferences, as well as software for simultaneous digital collaboration on shared outcomes, are all spreading like wildfire. They are part of the new normal.

In figurative terms, the office is becoming a beehive. Some bees are always or often in the hive; many are outside it, traveling about, bringing back nectar and pollen. But all of them are indispensable if the colony is to thrive. In the current situation, then, it is important to create space both for the different working models, but also for casual exchanges among colleagues. When this happens, home working and office working become mutually complementary, driving innovation, motivation and flexibility.

### **The right balance is key**

This hybrid culture is setting totally new challenges in terms of how work is organized, how employees and managers – who must increasingly operate as coaches – are empowered, and consequently for HR work and processes as well. The times when employees are physically present must be actively utilized – it should be clear why their presence adds value, and why it is worthwhile for them to make the journey. The mere transfer of information can, after all, be handled digitally. Tracking these changes and making the major adjustments required won't be a wasted effort, because our hybrid working world is set to outlive the pandemic – a

conclusion supported by various current developments suggesting that legislators, too, are increasingly recognizing the reality of the hybrid working world, and that appropriate changes to the law will follow. As they transform their corporate cultures, companies should therefore be pursuing target scenarios that are just as long-term as the strategies and measures deployed to achieve them.

Exactly how the demands of home working, office working or hybrid forms comprising both models can be kept in balance will vary from one organization to the next. One thing is certain: Even if one form of working dominates in a company, the beehive trend will still have its impacts. And this is by no means a bad thing. The term “hive mind” has traditionally been used to describe how a beehive works: the collective displays capabilities way beyond what a single bee could achieve on its own. Brought into the proper state of balance, different working models within a company are not a threat, but rather an opportunity for solidarity, effectiveness and adaptability.

Antje Staffa, Global Human Resources at Mast-Jägermeister SE, on the challenges arising from hybrid working:

*“New hybrid working practices are the future. They create added value for employees and the company, facilitating flexibility and new experiences in our working lives. So we need to support our employees and teams as they learn to use new tools, collaborate, acquire digital skills and develop flexible teamwork. Among other benefits, this helps us build cohesion both within our teams and in our relationships with our target customers.”*

Christian Sattlecker, Group Human Resources Director at Kelvion, on market changes due to COVID-19:

*“Markets are changing and, in many cases – in the travel, oil and gas sectors, for example – won’t be anything like they originally were once the pandemic is over. So we need to rethink our business models, at least in part. The past year’s experiences have made many employees more flexible, and there’s a greater openness to change. This is now helping us in our change processes. That said, we need to stay rigorously focused on remaining an attractive employer through all these changes and presenting talents with clear prospects for the future.”*

Bettina Karsch, Director Human Resources Europe at Vodafone, on how hybrid working models are impacting leadership:

*“Certain leadership qualities become even more important in a remote-working context: sensitivity, trust, collaboration, relationship building, but also the ability to lead and motivate others with a compelling vision.”*

Iris Prüfer, since February 1, 2021 Chief Human Resources Officer & Executive Vice President at Media-Saturn-Holding, on key components of the hybrid working culture at her previous company, Tengermann Twenty-One KG:

*“We expect our employees to be physically present two or three days a week, and make it possible for them to work remotely for the rest of the week. Team members should spend at least ten days a month in the project office. For important meetings, network events, workshops and training sessions, we also believe that people should be present in person.”*

Silvia Schwark, Vice President Human Resources at Vesuvius, on the different response phases at her organization during the pandemic:

*“Our first concern was for our staff, ensuring their safety and continuity of production. Then we facilitated working from home, as well as virtual assessments of personal performance and professional development. Finally, we asked ourselves what role offices and travel should play and how we should define and practice agility – we’re constantly refining our collaboration models.”*

*This article is part of our “What next, now that everything’s changed? HR and New Work” series, which reports core insights from our regular Zoom calls with HR leaders.*

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