



Engaging Hybrid, Virtual and Dispersed Workers and Teams

Introduction

One of the biggest legacies from the Covid-19 pandemic has been the accelerated change in working practices across almost all industries, job professions and global locations. The term “hybrid working” has become part of our vocabulary, a key Google search term and, in cases, a reason why we have stayed or left our job. Hybrid working is not new, even though some commentators seem to think it is. It was in our midst long before the pandemic hit yet, in most cases, it was ad hoc and informal in our approach to it. Home working was a day of admin catch up, not a day full of communication on video platforms.

But now in this post-pandemic world, many job roles and functions have been accelerated by pandemic lockdowns into a “hybrid first” working style expectation by current employees and applicants. Attempts to force workers into the office for the majority or all of their time has been often met with resistance and has soured organisation cultures and engagement levels. Before the pandemic I remember writing, like others, “future of work” blogs as we approached 2020, imagining what the world would be like in 2030. Little did we know that some of what we were writing about, such as flexible working and communication technology advancements, would be accelerated into being by 2021 rather than a slow evolution over a decade which would allow our “unwritten cultural norms” to adjust to new technology use, just like the noughties introduced smartphones into

our lives where we learned new cultural norms as upgrades were made to our phones.

Well, here we are with hybrid working as a long-term activity for most of us, whether it is welcome or not. At Tap’d our recent observations, discussions with HR professionals and business leaders and research have highlighted to us that the substantial change our workplaces are undergoing will not be successful without support and input from organisation leaders. If we rely on happenstance to get us through then there is risk that employee engagement will fall, the loss of our best talent, leading to potential decreases in productivity and declining market positions. Indeed, a study by Toscano and Zappalà in 2021 showed that engagement level, along with hindrance stress, were the biggest predictors of intention to leave virtual working during the pandemic. We need to understand the drivers of changing engagement levels in our hybrid working teams.

For this reason, we at Tap’d, decided to create this report that brings together understanding of the shifting external cultural and political forces and observed changing employee expectations with employee engagement theories and some of the latest post-Covid research on engagement to try and help the reader understand why we are seeing some of the behaviours and reactions to hybrid working today. By doing this we hope to germinate new thinking and ideas that might enhance what organisations are trying to achieve around engaging hybrid, virtual and dispersed teams.

In this post-pandemic world, many job roles and functions have been accelerated by pandemic lockdowns into a “hybrid first” working style expectation by current employees and applicants.

Defining hybrid work

Before we get too involved in the detail of the drivers of engagement in hybrid teams, it is always good to define what exactly we are talking about.

The earliest use of hybrid working as a term was most probably by Susan Halford in 2005 when she researched the different spaces that people could work from including those “people work both from home and from an organisational workplace, using virtual technologies to connect the two spaces”, yet often used remote time as catch up on admin, only receiving a few phone calls during the day. Yet it was not until the Covid-19 pandemic that hybrid working became a highly popular term. Until the pandemic we often used the term “virtual” to encapsulate fully remote individuals and academia used “teleworking” for their studies. In addition, the term “dispersed team” accurately describes when a team is not together all the time and the locations and number in each different location can shift over time. A recent label that has also come to the fore is that of the “digital nomad” - someone who only needs technology to work and therefore can potentially work anywhere where there is power and connectivity.

I like this as it goes beyond the traditional concepts of “home” and “office”, as in recent months I have had work calls with various locations from garden offices to public houses to a walk in the woods to the back of a campervan. Oh, and occasionally someone in an office as well.

For the sake of this report, we will use the term “hybrid working” as this is the most popular in commentary at the moment and technically covers those who spend anything from one day to 364 days a year in the office.

However, the vast majority of this report applies to virtual and dispersed teams as well.







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Defining employee engagement

Employee engagement is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. There is no one definition or set of measures that universally defines employee engagement. In fact, first of all we need to separate out work engagement from employee engagement. Work engagement refers to the relationship of the employee with his or her work, whereas employee engagement may also include the relationship with the organisation.

If we look at the vast extent of literature that has been written on employee engagement, there are currently three typical ways of defining employee engagement and one important theory to consider:




-  **the theory of psychological meaningfulness by Kahn (1990)**
-  **engagement as a positive antithesis of burnout by Maslach et al., (2001)**
-  **the Job Demands-Resources (JDR) model by Demerouti et al (2001)**
-  **State Work Engagement model by Bakker et al (2008)**

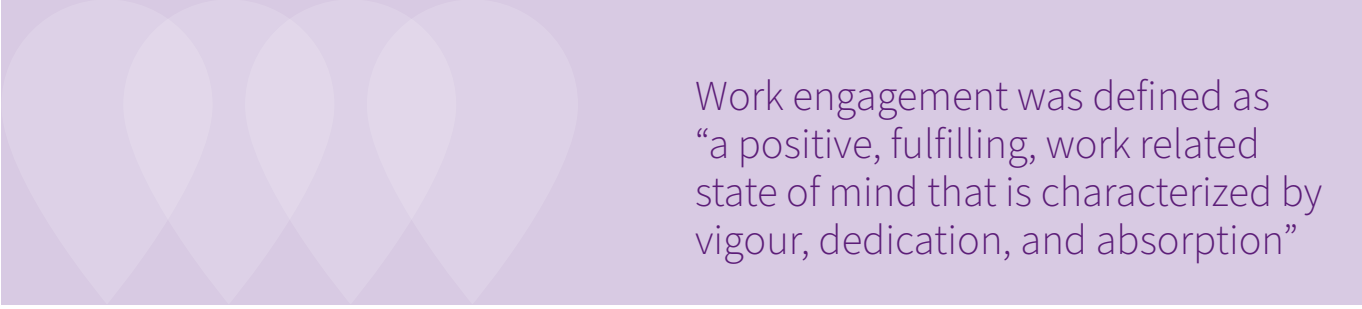
An overview of each is below. Remember, it is easy to simply look at employee engagement as a virtuous thing for organisations to do, however we need to recognise that the reason employee engagement as a business concept came about was mainly due to academic research which showed that a workforce that is engaged, motivated and aligned to the organisation's vision is more productive. Once this was realised and seized upon, large engagement corporations arose in the 1990's who claimed that, by measured engagement quantifiably, and by improving the "engagement score", this led to increased revenue for the organisation and its stakeholders. Hence, it's continued importance to Boards

and Excos of businesses. This report will not explore this "dark side of engagement". It will focus primarily on the betterment of the hybrid working conditions for the employee as the primary driver with its subsequent organisational benefits, but it is always useful to challenge yourself on how your engagement activities might be seen as coercive by colleagues whenever you plan your engagement strategies.

ENGAGEMENT THEORY 1: THE THEORY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANINGFULNESS BY KAHN (1990)

William Kahn is recognised as one of the first to bring the term "employee engagement" into our vocabulary. His research at a camp and architecture firm examined the "moments in which people bring themselves into or remove themselves from particular task behaviors". Pulling on the work of Goffman (1961), who suggested that people's attachment to and detachment from their roles varies, Kahn introduced the terms of personal engagement and personal disengagement to describe how people bring-in or leave-out their selves in work. He reasoned from his research that there were three areas that could be investigated to determine a level of personal engagement:

-  **psychological meaningfulness – How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into work?**
-  **psychological safety - Being able to express one's true self without the fear of negative consequences to one's self image, status or career**
-  **psychological availability – How available and what resources do I have to psychologically commit to my work?**



Work engagement was defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption”

ENGAGEMENT THEORY 2: ENGAGEMENT AS A POSITIVE ANTITHESIS OF BURNOUT BY MASLACH ET AL., (2001)

A different way to view engagement is to define what it is not. Burnout is about the erosion of engagement with one’s job so therefore the antithesis of burnout must be engagement. Maslach and Leiter (1997) stated that engagement is characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy – the direct opposites of three burnout dimensions they identified. They argued that in the case of burnout (and therefore lowering engagement), energy turns into exhaustion, involvement turns into cynicism, and efficacy turns into ineffectiveness.

Maslach et al (2001) went on to identify six areas of work life that could lead to burnout or engagement. These were:

- 📍 sustainable workload
- 📍 feelings of choice and control
- 📍 appropriate rewards and recognition
- 📍 community and social support
- 📍 perceived fairness
- 📍 meaningful and valued work

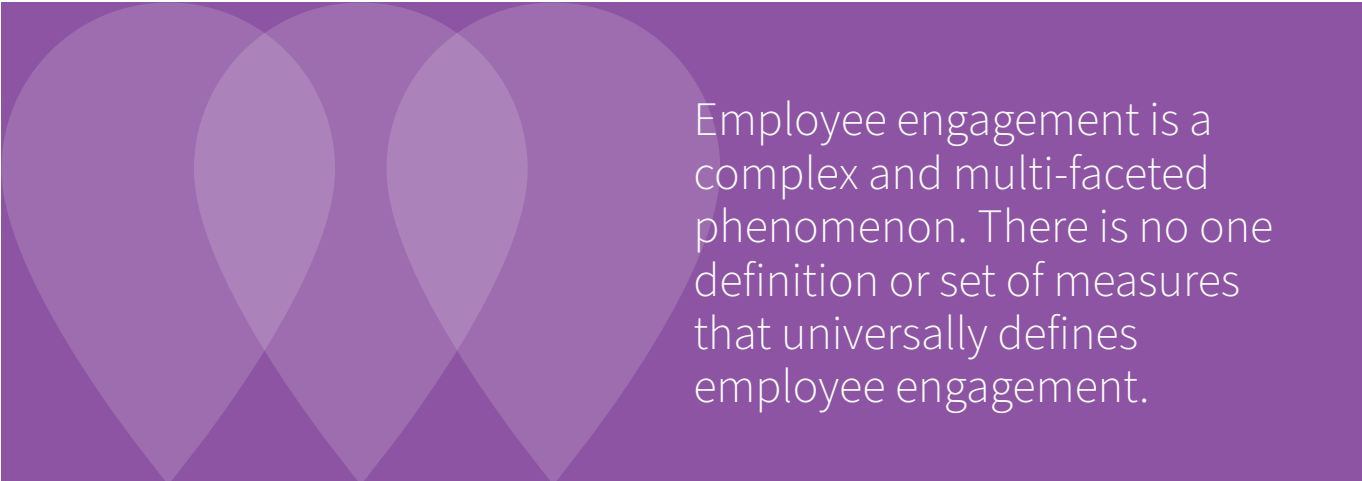
Similar work going on at the same time by Schaufeli et al (2002), found that work engagement was defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption”.

- 📍 **Vigour is characterised by “high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one’s work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties” (the opposite of exhaustion).**
- 📍 **Dedication refers to “being strongly involved in one’s work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge” (the opposite of cynicism).**
- 📍 **Absorption is characterised by “being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one’s work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work”. (Sometimes known as “flow”).**

ENGAGEMENT THEORY 3: THE JOB DEMANDS-RESOURCES (JDR) MODEL BY DEMEROUTI ET AL (2001)

This is a personal favourite theory and those who know us at Tap’d will have probably heard us mention it.

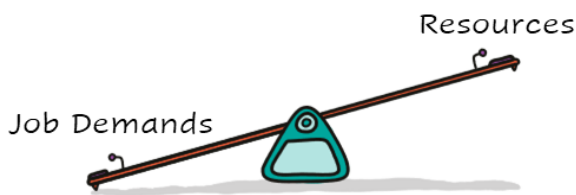
The job demands-resources (JD-R) model proposes that



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aspects of work can be categorised into 2 broad areas, job demands and job resources, that are differentially related to specific outcomes. Job demands are primarily related to the exhaustion component of burnout, whereas (lack of) job resources are primarily related to disengagement.



Job demands refers to physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or mental effort and that are thus associated with certain physiological and psychological costs (e.g., physical workload, time pressure, shift work, etc).

Job resources refers to physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals, reduce job demands, or stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (e.g., feedback, rewards, job control, participation, job security, supervisor support, etc).

Imagine job demands and job resources as two ends of a see-saw. At a minimum they need to balance. Ideally job resources should be greater. If this happens, the chance of burnout is minimised and work engagement possibility is greater. The attraction to this engagement model is that it is great for coaching and team workshops as it is visual and therefore easily understood. If you can get your people to assess their own job demands-resources see-saw then they can articulate barriers to engagement and spot possible burnout scenarios.

ENGAGEMENT THEORY 4: STATE WORK ENGAGEMENT MODEL BY BAKKER ET AL (2008)

The above definitions of employee engagement have a tendency to make us think that an employee is either engaged or not engaged over a period of time. However, few people recall having high levels of vigour, dedication and

absorption ALL at the same time when engaged. Therefore, engagement fluctuation happens within all of us. Bakker et al (2008) said that our level of engagement can change often depending on the “state” we and our surroundings are in.

They defined state work engagement as a “rather momentary and transient experience that fluctuates within individuals within short periods of time (i.e., from minute to minute or from hour to hour, perhaps from day to day)”. Their model identified factors that could vary the level of state work engagement:

- ◆ **The level of recovery you have between periods of work**
- ◆ **The job resources you have in your role – autonomy, team climate, supervisor behaviour**
- ◆ **Your personal job resources – self-efficacy, self-esteem, optimism, positive affect, energy**
- ◆ **The demands of the job on the day**

The research also found that employees who faced high job demands and who were at the same time highly recovered in the morning experienced the highest level of state work engagement during the day. The authors concluded from this finding that recovery turns high job demands into challenges, which further enhances the experience of state work engagement on a specific day.

Knowing that engagement therefore can change frequently means that we cannot assume that hybrid workers stay engaged when we are not present with them. Just because they look and sound engaged in the office environment does not mean that they stay engaged when working remotely. For this reason, we must ensure our engagement activities penetrate the environments of our colleagues when we are not physically with them. This is why engaging a hybrid workforce differs from a physically present workforce. As employers and managers, we need to identify areas of concern and opportunity and act in a sustainable way to have an engaged hybrid workforce. This is why, as we will see, the line manager is key to hybrid working engagement success.

Factors effecting the acceleration towards hybrid work

There are many factors that are affecting the drive and desire towards or away from hybrid working.

As employers we need to consider the potential motivators and demotivators from all angles if we are going to successfully have an engaged hybrid workforce. Below is a list of possible factors that were identified through our research. This list is by no means exhaustive and an interesting activity might be to see if you could add any other factors to this list that you might see as specific to your organisation.

ORGANISATION-CENTRIC FACTORS

- 📍 The suitability of the job to hybrid working
- 📍 Change to expected/inferred productivity levels
- 📍 Cost savings and/or investment levels
- 📍 Effect on corporate and team cultures
- 📍 The ability/desire for leadership to adapt to different working environments
- 📍 Relationship with line manager (transactional vs transformational)

EMPLOYEE-CENTRIC FACTORS

- 📍 The personal reassessment of work-life values
- 📍 Changes to commuting patterns
- 📍 Outside of work personal time (family, hobbies etc)
- 📍 Changed levels of work autonomy
- 📍 Flexibility of working hours
- 📍 Level of interaction with colleagues
- 📍 Level of personal resilience to differing working environments
- 📍 Core personality traits
- 📍 Ability to learn and types of learning available

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

- 📍 The rising cost of living
- 📍 Pandemic routines that have become habitual
- 📍 The advancement of communication technology

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Considerations for engaging a hybrid workforce

There are many considerations that need to be taken into account when adapting your organisation towards a hybrid working culture. Any adaptation will affect employee engagement in some way.

As we have seen above, employee engagement is affected by a wide-ranging number of factors, both external and internal to the individual. Through our research into engaging hybrid teams, we have been able to cluster our observations into themes of the most impactful factors you can influence to create the best engaging performance cultures for your hybrid teams:

- ◆ **The role of the leader in engaging hybrid teams**
- ◆ **The impact of wellbeing on hybrid working**
- ◆ **Creating healthy cultures within hybrid teams**
- ◆ **Recognising performance and high performers in hybrid environments**
- ◆ **Structural changes to the organisation**

Within each of these areas we will summarise our observations and research from the commercial and academic world and highlight some thoughts and questions you could consider on how you are approaching these engagement topic areas within your organisation.


THE ROLE OF THE LEADER IN ENGAGING HYBRID TEAMS

The addition of a hybrid working style into organisations directly increases the level of managerial complexity of that organisation. In addition to the existing workflow coordination challenges line managers have managed in the past, managers now have the added challenge of coordinating people who can't be counted on to be physically present at predictable times. Understanding that this is extra workload for the line manager is important to help us understand that there will be managers who might not have or may need

refreshing or “dialling up” the behaviours needed for them to create engaged individuals within the hybrid team.

This idea of “individuals” within the team is critical for the manager to acknowledge as part of the transition to being an effective hybrid team leader. With a physically present team, the manager could “get away with” a more hands-off style of leadership, with the physically present co-workers being able to spot emotional needs and to jump on these and support their colleagues. With a hybrid team, there is less natural physical connection between co-workers. The line manager therefore needs to up their game in their ability to spot changing emotional needs, motivation levels and possible signs of burnout. Such skills as empathetic listening, coaching and enhancing their emotional intelligence skills will benefit both the engagement level of the individual and also build the confidence the manager has in their own leadership. As an organisation, we need to support and develop our line managers and not expect that they will adapt or gain these skills through chance.

The work by Bakker et al around State Work Engagement is relevant here. With the hybrid worker being in an external environment for much of their time there can be a tendency for external events to affect the “in the moment” level of engagement that they are experiencing. When workers are physically present, the organisation can, if it wants to, have a strong input into the stable environment that the employee works in. This “leakage” of work and non-work motivators and stressors across the work/non-work border can affect motivation levels and therefore engagement. The line manager needs to understand that the team member's level of motivation and therefore levels of engagement and performance is more susceptible to change in a hybrid working environment. Regular check-ins can help the line manager spot these changes and can give space for informal conversations. Using informal chat functions to check in at the start and end of the day can be a great time for informal discussions and for spotting changes in behaviour. Line managers could also have a “surgery time” each week; an hour when they are free from formal meetings, when team members can request a quick informal video chat with any concerns that they have and/or the line manager initiates informal chats with team members.



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In addition, an important theory of the common unconscious practice of line managers is that of the “in-group” and “out-group” that the manager develops with individuals in their team over time. This well-researched area, but often overlooked by organisations, involves the manager developing a viewpoint towards favoured people in the team that is different to unfavoured. This is then reinforced by subsequent actions of the manager, such as giving more interesting tasks and development activities to the favoured “in-group” and distancing themselves from the unfavoured “out-group”. This management behaviour occurs due to the perceived level of hard work, loyalty and trustworthiness of the team member. The impact on hybrid teams is that those individuals that the line manager physically interacts with on a more regular basis will often result in a more visible and therefore more favoured view of their level of hard work, loyalty and trustworthiness compared to those hybrid workers who are more remote and not seen. This two-tiered practice is seen to a degree in all teams but if left unchecked, especially in the more vulnerable hybrid working environment, can cause members of the “out-group” to feel less engaged and to deselect themselves from the organisation. It is imperative that team leaders regularly reflect on their behaviours to ensure any aspect of in and out groups are minimised and challenge where they exist to ensure team-wide engagement. Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995) is a good article that looks at the role of leader-member exchange and in and out groups in organisations.

Managers also can support individuals in the team get a grip with the transition to hybrid working. Using job descriptions, or getting the employee to diarise the chunks of work they do can be a useful way of breaking the job role into the two categories of “time to share” (i.e., collaborate) and “time to think” (i.e., concentrate on productive singular work). This can help the employee decide when they should be in the physical office collaborating and engaging in social interaction and when it is best to work by themselves. This gives a feeling of more autonomy in your role and will lead to a more positive mental state, engagement and productivity. Note though, that the “time to think” singular work activity does not have to be done at home. It can still be in the office, in the local café, a more local office, at home, etc. It is down to the preference

of the individual’s personality that could then dictate the preferred environment for the non-collaborative work. As part of hybrid working becoming more popular, we are seeing the rise of the “digital nomad” who works wherever there is an internet connection and power.


Therefore, the critical role of the manager in engaging their hybrid team is to help each individual understand the best working pattern for them, negotiate this behavioural pattern and then to use heightened emotional intelligence skills and behaviour to ensure they know how their team members are feeling on any given day and having the compassion to support and help them resolve any issues.

THE IMPACT OF WELLBEING ON HYBRID WORKING

Before the pandemic hit globally at the start of 2020, wellbeing initiatives were already on the rise. Quite often, they were linked to defined tangible reward benefits such as cycle purchase schemes, gym membership discounts and even the “bowl of fruit” in the office and other tangible offerings to improve your wellbeing. Mental health first aiders were emerging in more progressive companies.

One of the direct effects of the pandemic was to focus senior leaders of organisations on mental wellbeing as a core business issue when lockdowns produced sudden changes to work behaviour with many becoming isolated from work colleagues, some having to protect themselves from others with restrictive clothing or physical barriers to prevent infections, and others having to take on new responsibilities such as home schooling. This focus was initially reactive to protect people from harm from increased stress and anxiety levels. However, as we have seen many workers now permanently being more physically removed from the workplace in the long-term as we exit the pandemic, this focus on wellbeing has shifted towards a performance focus to drive sustainable engagement for now and the future.

From a mental health perspective, there is a direct link between wellbeing and engagement. One of the definitions of engagement is derived as being the opposite of burnout.



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Hybrid working has led to an enhanced blurring of the work/non-work boundary with our workplace often being part of our home. Research by Sue Clark into work-family boundaries found that a number of factors can dictate how well we can cope with lessening boundaries between work and non-work. This includes our own personality type and others in the household and the needs others have of the worker. Home stressors can quickly leak into the work environment and without identification and support can lead to burnout. With the lower frequency of physical connection that hybrid working provides, it makes identifying the first signs of burnout harder to spot. Those organisations who proactively create support mechanisms and train line managers in compassion and empathetic observation have the best chance of spotting burnout. In addition, involving employees in proactive education around concepts in positive psychology such as reframing and resilience can help self-identification of the first signs of burnout.


This self-disclosing by employees who are struggling can only happen if the organisation has a high level of psychological safety. The term psychological safety was made popular by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson. She defined it as “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.” Establishing a climate of psychological safety allows space for people to speak up and share their ideas and their feelings. When an organisation does not have psychological safety, it can be seen as being weak or being a failure if you admit to struggling in your job. Psychological safety requires line managers and organisations to create trusting environments. This includes valuing ideas and feedback equally for all employees, focusing on positive discussion and asking for questions and input from all, raising self-awareness and promoting a compassionate environment that revolves around team success. It takes time to create trusting environments, but unfortunately, they can be eroded very quickly if words do not match the actions of those in influential positions.

With the rise of hybrid and virtual working there has been a concern around physical wellbeing, that is, of sedentary physical behaviour and injuries from poor posture when not in the office. Office furniture is designed with health and

safety legislation requirements built in. When hybrid working, we can be working at the dining table, on the sofa, on the end of the bed, etc. With no regular checking process, this can be a risk for the business through absence and injury. If we physically feel unfit for work then we will most likely start disengaging from work. Proactive organisations are promoting activity within the workplace. Smith et al. (2022) have recently researched different areas of physical activity that could be employed during worktime including organisational play, gamification, workplace fun, industrial recreation and exercise and increased work breaks. Changing activity regularly can also promote better physical wellbeing. Kim et al. (2022) looked at “microbreaks”, showing a connection between regular microbreaks at work and subsequent increased engagement. A new innovation is the team-based activity app which gamifies your exercise with other work mates, which are emerging on to the marketplace with some organisations now promoting scheduled activity time within the working day alongside your other scheduled meetings. Ensure any initiatives include those with physical accessibility needs – the better ones do. Positive messages from organisation leaders are vital to encourage exercise and activity. If not, often we feel guilty for stepping away from our laptop as we are “not working”. Endorsing the understanding that activity is a key part of the holistic hybrid working job description could increase engagement and productivity and lower absence over the longer term.

CREATING HEALTHY CULTURES WITHIN HYBRID TEAMS

Patrick Lencioni’s “5 Dysfunctions of a Team” model is founded on having or lacking trust in your work team. The absence of trust can bring the cultural “house of cards” down within a team. Hybrid working adds a strain on to healthy internal team cultures due to restrictions it imposes on communication within the team environment. High team trust links to team engagement through the ideas of Demerouti et al and the Job Demands Resources model discussed earlier. Team trust and a sense of psychological safety within the team is seen as a resource within the JD-R model. We need our resources to match or better the demands on the job. Team culture and trust are therefore critical for hybrid teams



How do you create high levels of trust in a hybrid team where physically presence of the whole team is not a common reality?

to be engaged in a self-sufficient way.

As humans, we put a lot of store into body language as part of the communication process. Previous studies have shown about two-thirds of communication comes from our body language. If we cannot see the complete body language of our colleagues then we naturally fill in the missing parts in the communication process with assumptions. This can then introduce our own biases towards individuals or organisations that can skew the intended message into a different interpretation. This potentially erodes trust and team dysfunction results unless line managers have the skills to spot and address this.

In fact, the best way to avoid a lack of trust is actually to put the effort in upfront to create highly trusting teams with pots of goodwill to draw upon in cases of high pressure to give other team players the benefit of doubt. This is why, based on leader discussions, our research found some of the best teams through the pandemic were those where the manager had already created a highly trusting environment before the pandemic hit.


So, how do you create high levels of trust in a hybrid team where physically presence of the whole team is not a common reality? The good news is that there are no “new” skills needed to do this. The not-so-good news is that, as leaders, we need to work harder on aspects of team culture that often just happened organically in the past. Trust is built by a number of factors. Firstly, a shared mental model is needed so all the members of the team co-create what the team stands for and buys into a common purpose and way of working. This needs reinforcing by the team leader whenever possible and to call out behaviour that is not in line with this model. Secondly therefore, the line manager needs to visibly walk-the-talk and role model desired behaviours. The line manager needs to be authentic to their values and entwine this within the teams shared mental model. These two activities create a framework of known and accepted behaviour that can create the foundation of team trust that can be built upon as per Lencioni’s model.

Thirdly, is social connection. In a physically present team this

can often grow organically as there are ample opportunities to have ad hoc social connection moments in the informal time of walking from meeting to meeting, grabbing a coffee, lunch together, sitting next to each other, etc. Ad hoc social connection becomes a lot harder in a predominantly virtual environment within a hybrid team. An effective hybrid team will challenge the priority use of time within the team. Again, this might need support from the line manager. Social connection is eroded in the hybrid environment. The use of video connection connected to calendars has resulted in our days packed with formal meetings with little social gap in between. We turn off one call and go straight into another. Where is the social connection in the corridor between meetings? Did we have as many formal meetings in the past in a more physical environment? I recall working in an office environment in a physically present environment in the recent past where large meetings wouldn’t start before 10:00 and would not go on after about 3pm do to travel issues with the local motorway network, allowing for two to three hours of social connection and informal conversations outside of this time. In a virtual world we have started having formal meetings earlier and later as we know our people are “available”. Essentially, we have possibly slid into a more structured environment to the detriment of social connection.

We need to encourage a more flexible ad hoc approach to connection. There are many ways to try to build this in from time within meetings, creating changing sub teams for projects, to bringing the team together periodically to chat informally. Social connection is the glue within the team culture that reinforces emotional connection and positive mental states that builds trust. As Yuval Noah Harari wrote in his book “Sapiens”, one of the reasons humans gained an advantage versus other animals is that language gave humans the ability to gossip and gossip leads to a more contextual understanding between us, thus leading to a sense of identity of a team and therefore higher levels of community and trust. We must prioritise time for gossip within our hybrid teams. It sounds counter-intuitive with the pressure we are all under, yet it will make our hybrid teams more cohesive which will give them an advantage in times of pressure.

Be warned though, a recent study by Shockley et al. (2021)



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looking at levels of communication and burnout showed that low to medium levels of quality communication were seen as a resource and increased engagement, however high levels of communication, even of good quality, were seen of overwhelming and were seen as a demand (see the JD-R model from earlier) and therefore increased the chance of burnout, thus reducing engagement. If we are to build in more ad hoc communication we need to be ready to remove other forms of communication to minimise the chance of communication burnout.

Finally, recent work by Holtz et al. (2020) explored the emotional engagement of virtual teams, looking at “why” teams are effective and beyond the “what” of skills and talents. They found emotional management training for virtual team members increased both cognitive task performance and also affective team engagement. Their training focused not only on the emotions of communication but also the chronemics of spotting pauses and delays in communication as a way of understanding each other better. They showed that a deeper understanding of emotions led to what they called an emotional contagion mechanism, leading to shared emotions that became the “team property” and part of their unique engaging team culture. This led to higher team trust and team performance. Thus, working on a positive, emotionally sensitive environment for hybrid teams can lead to higher trust and performance payback.


RECOGNISING PERFORMANCE AND HIGH PERFORMERS IN HYBRID ENVIRONMENTS

One of the challenges for leaders managing hybrid teams is how to understand if team members are performing in their roles. The obvious way is to concentrate on output achieved versus the expectations that you as a leader had set. However, this focus purely on output can mask a multitude of pieces of information we need to understand who in the team is really performing and, more importantly, who in the team are displaying the “right behaviours” that fit with our organisation’s ambitions and culture and could possibly be untapped potential. We know that recognising effort rather

that they are appreciated and therefore engaged (Thinking versus Feeling in MBTI, for example). In addition, a focus on output as performance may inadvertently discourage “teaming” behaviour.

Furthermore, are the behaviours and personality traits we recruited for physical teams rather than hybrid teams the same? A typical trait we often recruit for is Conscientiousness – the ability to be diligent in our work. Recent research by Venkatesh et al (2021) showed that those who had high levels of Conscientiousness were more susceptible to burnout in a virtual and hybrid environment. In short, the lack of clarity, consistency and consequences in hybrid working environments meant that conscientious employees floundered in the ambiguity and resulted in working more hours to feed their perfectionism, leading to a higher chance of burnout. As we know, burnout is the opposite of engagement. Therefore, those who we sought out to recruit for performance in a physical environment may potentially be more susceptible to burnout and de-engage in a less structured hybrid environment. This leads to the observation that if we solely look at output for performance, our high potentials who are struggling in the hybrid way of working may be discounted from future advancement. A line manager needs to understand that the shift in the way of working can be easier for some personality types rather than others. Those who may have been solid high performers in the past physical environment might now become those who struggle without more support. Previously highly motivated team members may suffer from burnout and dis-engage before you notice.

So, how do we identify our high performers and keep performance high in a hybrid environment? If we think of the work of Daniel Pink and his bestselling book Drive, then two of his three facets for motivation, and therefore engagement, were Autonomy and Mastery. We have known for many years that getting people to work through a new challenge can engage them through the process of growing. Project teams, job rotation and job sharing are three ways we have attempted this. The hybrid environment potentially hampers the ability to learn informally between team members. Those line managers who structure on the job learning within their hybrid teams and give permission for space and time to do



Policies can give useful information to employees about the boundaries that they have to work within.

this creates the space for Mastery. Ensuring regular one-to-one time for development conversations so team members can demonstrate their personal growth is engaging and also provides the line manager with an assessment of the individuals potential to try larger, more complex roles. Thus, line managers actively creating learning activities can benefit motivation and engagement, improve visibility of the untapped talent within the team and consequently maximise performance of the team and reduce unwanted attrition in the team through falling engagement.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES TO THE ORGANISATION

This white paper concentrates on how to further engage our hybrid teams by understanding the emotions and behaviours of our people in a virtual working environment, concentrating on increasing motivation and commitment in individuals. However, just like Herzberg's work on motivation, we cannot forget that we need to get the "hygiene" factors in place as well as the "motivators". Without the hygiene factors, we can only aspire to get minimal motivation and engagement as the hygiene factors create distractions and demotivation.

Policies can give useful information to employees about the boundaries that they have to work within. These do not have to be presented in a formal way as often these are seen as unreadable and "HR-speak". Most organisations have some form of intranet or central communication method and utilising this same conduit for the organisation's view on hybrid working approaches can be seen as approachable and supportive. Making hybrid working policies as flexible and concise as possible is often a good way to minimise push-back. Entwining hybrid working policies into existing flexible working and IT policies is a great way to avoid confusion. Giving as much responsibility to team leaders to have hybrid working conversations is a great way to promote engagement. Organisations need to ensure that line managers have the skills to have these conversations and have had practice on how to deal with difficult conversations if there is a difference between viewpoints. We also need to challenge out-dated beliefs of working patterns within our management teams.

Adapting health and safety policies to be more educational in their approach can also help with the design of the hybrid work environment as discussed above, and elaboration about working breaks within the day and expectations from the employer about vision fatigue and sedentary behaviour is also useful. A great idea could be short YouTube videos of employees sharing how they set up their own home. This can increase engagement in this often dry but important area. Recent work by Leroy et al (2021) researched the experiences of working from home during the pandemic, focusing on what they called the "interruption landscape". Their breakdown of interruptions into intrusions, distractions, taking breaks, multitasking and surprises allowed them to understand how each effected overall emotional exhaustion and the level of performance. Educating our people by helping them break down their own working environments and look to improve each "element" of interruption may help our hybrid teams create better home working environments to improve their overall engagement when not in the office-based environment.

Employee engagement is a complex area. Adding the swift change of how we accelerated towards hybrid working has to mean we look again at how we approach engagement of our people in their more remote roles. The final section summarises this extensive topic to try and help line managers and organisation leaders to identify areas to prioritise.

Conclusions

Employee engagement is critical to organisational performance. It is a complex area and is multi-faceted. Only a well thought through and planned set of activities will ensure that you maximise the possibility of employee engagement throughout your hybrid working teams. Based on our research we suggest an organisation could start applying the contents of this report through the following areas.



INDIVIDUAL-FOCUSED EDUCATION

Engagement starts with the individual. Putting responsibility into the hands of the employee to manage their own work environment is key for a dispersed and hybrid workforce. The best way to do this is to proactively educate all employees in aspects of wellbeing and work behaviours that will affect their engagement as a hybrid worker. This includes but is not limited to understanding what burnout is and how to spot it, activities you can do to raise self-awareness of motivation and engagement levels, how to design a remote workplace that is conducive to a positive mental attitude, how to evaluate your work and where best to do it and how communication effects

our approach to work.

HYBRID LEADER DEVELOPMENT

This is probably the “kingpin” of your hybrid team engagement strategy. Line managers make or break organisational culture. A dispersed or hybrid team puts less control over engagement with the central part of the organisation and relies more on the line manager to instigate good working practices to maintain high levels of engagement. Line managers should be provided with opportunities to develop their emotional intelligence, increase their understanding of employee engagement drivers and recognise opportunities where team members engagement can vary as a result of their actions.

REDEFINING COMMUNICATION PRIORITIES

A structural challenge in any organisation is to ensure the level of communication flowing around the organisation is appropriate for the different stakeholders within it. Regular feedback from employees can help understand if this is working for your organisation. Control of communication from central functions out to the business can avoid overload. Investment in appropriate technology, including online collaboration tools, for hybrid teams is critical but then training and development of the people on how to mix ad hoc with structured communication is strongly recommended. Too often we install new tech without taking the time to ensure it is being utilised for the positive beneficial reasons it was intended for.

TEAM FOCUSED COHESION ACTIVITIES

Bruce Tuckman’s team formation model of forming, storming, norming and performing tells us that we need to support our teams in understanding themselves to ensure they gel, engage and maximise their output. We have seen that hybrid teams perform better if they are developed around teaming behaviours and emotions as well as the technical side, creating emotional “team property”. Hybrid teams need support therefore through regular team development opportunities.

These need to be regular so that there is space for emotional bonding to take place, allowing ad hoc communication opportunity and to redefine the team's ways of working with the rapid levels of change our teams have to work in. Proactive team development keeps engagement levels high. Avoid waiting for "post-restructure" team events where engagement levels have already dropped. Equip your line managers with the skills to deliver small, agile team activities as well as more structured events.

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