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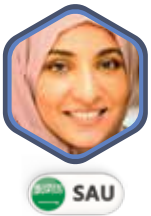HEALTHCARE
STRATEGIC
COMMUNITY

WHITE PAPER

New Ways of Working in the New Normal Post-COVID-19

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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INTRODUCTION
Hybrid In-person Teams in the New Normal

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis and today's disruptive world has resulted in a new normal in all organizations regardless of industry. New ways of working have evolved to include both virtual and in-person management models (hybrid) have proven essential and valuable, enabling critical initiatives for the organizations and communities they serve.
This white paper shares real-world ideas for leading hybrid virtual and in-person teams to enable their organization's effectiveness in the new normal.

LEADING HYBRID IN-PERSON AND VIRTUAL TEAMS
What are Hybrid Virtual and In-person Teams?

A hybrid team is comprised of members in organizations who work some of the time virtually while working in the office part-time or have some members that work remotely but collaborate in person when they are in the office. Virtual teams include geographically dispersed teams, distributed teams, or remote teams, where a group of people collaborates using technology (e.g., e-mail, instant messaging, file sharing, video conferencing, etc.). Members of virtual teams rarely, if ever, meet in person. [1] However, most teams are transitioning to a hybrid virtual and in-person team as a more effective model, leveraging the benefits of in-person presence and interaction with the benefits of virtual geographically distributed teams.

The Hybrid In-person and Virtual Workplace Combination is the New Normal

The number of people working remotely has been increasing for years. However, the global pandemic accelerated the shift to a virtual workplace. This change prompted organizations and individuals to rethink where, when, and how people work. For some individuals, this means no longer spending time commuting to and from an office five days a week. Working in a virtual world is nothing new for many project managers and project team members, especially those involved in global projects. However, for others, this way of working is brand new.
In recent months (April 2022), there has been a shift with pent-up demand from organizations across multiple industries to return to work with in-person teams as much of the population has been vaccinated, especially in healthcare, where physicians, nurses, and frontline caregivers remain in-person. For programs and projects that require onsite engagement – the new normal is a combination of in-person working sessions and virtual – resulting in a hybrid workplace.
Table 1 contains the results of two surveys. The initial survey [2] was conducted by the Project Management Institute (PMI) in March 2022 in one of its regional areas. The second survey [3] was conducted by Bayt.com and market research company You.gov. It asked professionals in UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq their preferences for work location. These two surveys provide some insight into global and cultural differences.

Table 1 - Preferences for Work Location

Preference	United States of America	The Middle East and North Africa (MENA)
In-person	42%	31%
Hybrid	31%	53%
Virtual Only	27%	15%

[1] https://bit.ly/39nyTfQ

[2] PMI – Project Management Institute, San Diego – March 2022 Survey

[3] https://bityli.com/itcftS

Benefits of Virtual Teams

Virtual teams provide remote workers with many benefits. The primary benefit of working in a virtual team is increased work/life balance because of personal flexibility. Some additional benefits include:

- Save both time and money because no longer have a commute;
- Can work in a comfortable area;
- Reduced stress and anxiety;
- Improved health;
- Ability to travel and/or relocate;
- Reduced office politics;
- Expanded talent pool for remote workers (i.e., employees can be recruited from across the nation or even globally);
- Promote "green" initiatives; reduces air pollution with the reduction of driving;
- Accelerating the rate of digital adoption and new ways of working, which for many organizations has improved their employee value proposition and ability to attract/retain talent.

Challenges of Leading Virtual-only Teams

Leading a virtual team is more complex than leading a traditional team because of the lack of face-to-face contact, geographical dispersion, and often asynchronous nature of communication. Motivating team members and managing team dynamics are more difficult in a virtual team. The virtual team leader must be prepared to address the challenges identified below.

Challenge #1: Poor Communication

Some of the members of virtual teams may lack effective communication skills. As a result, the virtual team leader has to spend time coaching these individuals. Furthermore, the tendency toward needing meetings for all discussions and the impersonal nature hinders the ability to focus on outcomes and decision-making in suitable timeframes.

Recommendation #1: Establish and implement communication guidelines wich:
- Set expectations when team members should be online
- Utilize real-time instant messaging and chat (i.e., MS Teams, Slack, etc.)
- Explain how to communicate (e.g., synchronous communication – use when you want a prompt answer; asynchronous communication – use when response time is not critical)
- Encourage team members to respond to e-mails within 24 hours
- Create an out-of-office message to let your team members and stakeholders know your availability
- Clarify when a meeting is required and when it is not. Implement tight and reduced timeframes to ensure there is a break from the 'back-to-back' scenarios that often occur (e.g., transition from 1-hour meetings to 45 minutes).

Benefits of Hybrid Teams – Both In-person & Virtual

- Leadership is increasing in-person presence onsite to increase strategic alignment and results;
- Onsite team members can more fully engage with in-person staff and management;
- For Healthcare, many programs and projects require onsite working sessions and implementations;
- Organizational culture, team cohesion, morale, and social interactions are more established with onsite teams;
- Virtual teams are still engaged onsite. In-person teams use conference room audio/video systems;
- Flexibility and benefits from both in-person and virtual teams are retained, resulting in higher outcomes and increased teamwork effectiveness;
- Employee satisfaction is increased by having both options available for staff.

Challenge #2: Language Barriers

This challenge is not just a matter of different languages but other factors such as proficiency and interpretation. If English is chosen as the language of choice to use in teleconferences, team members who are non-native speakers may become overwhelmed trying to keep up with the conversation or feel anxious when it is their turn to speak. Even native speakers of one language may experience problems because of differences in dialects and local accents.

Recommendation #2: For hybrid teams, use simple language with team members and, when possible, use visuals to help people grasp what you are trying to communicate. Remind team members to be respectful and supportive. Some other options are to provide language training or hire a translator.

Challenge #3: Cultural Differences

Working on a virtual team with international team members means that some of your colleagues are from different countries. They have distinct customs, celebrate different holidays, and may have different days off than other team members.

Recommendation #3: When leading a virtual team, the most important thing to remember is to provide an inclusive experience for everyone. Spend time with your team learning about their cultural norms and customs, and use this to inform your shared ways of working.

Challenge #4: Different Time Zones for National and Global Teams

Managing a virtual team across different time zones can be very challenging despite of its advantages. [4] Teammates are sleeping when you want to collaborate and vice versa. As the number of time zones increases across the virtual team, the greater the probability of conducting a meeting at a time that will be inconvenient to one or more team members.

Recommendation #4: Keep a shared calendar up to date, so you will know the time zone for each member of the hybrid in-person and virtual team. Use time zone management tools to get the times right before scheduling a meeting.

[4] https://bit.ly/3yCarBI

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Challenge #5: Poor Team Bonding Leading to Low Performance

The virtual workplace does not provide team members with opportunities (e.g., water cooler, break room, waiting for an elevator, etc.) to meet and interact.

Recommendation #5: Conduct some hybrid and virtual team-building activities to help members feel seen and heard. Taking time to help your in-person teams connecting with virtual teams to get to know each other and build trust is an investment that pays dividends in team cohesion and performance. For instance, have your in-person team host virtual fun coffee chats, birthday celebrations, and award recognitions.

Challenge #6: Lack of Personal Connection and Social Interaction

Remote employees are more likely to feel alienated or disconnected when compared to employees that work onsite. In addition, some members of your virtual team may be suffering both mentally and physically from the global pandemic.

Recommendation #6: In a hybrid model – meet in person and virtually with the entire team at least once a week to see how everything is going. Meet with each team member on an individual basis once a month to assess feelings of loneliness, isolation, etc. Host virtual coffee chats or virtual happy hours. Celebrate team and individual accomplishments and awards. Host birthday and holiday celebrations both remotely and with in-person teams.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL CHALLENGES FACED BY VIRTUAL PMS

Goleman (1998) defined Emotional intelligence as "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships." [5]

With the prevalence of virtual working, our previous methods of building and maintaining relationships and sources of motivation may need to be adjusted.

For project management roles with a high degree of stakeholder interaction, a limited ability to physically interact is a challenge. Virtual meetings and collaboration tools help to a degree but are no substitute for the ability to read body language or ensure mental presence and focus. This is part of the reasons that 'hybrid' working (a blend of virtual and physical as opposed to one over the other) has become the new 'normal' for many organizations and teams.

Even though motivation is very subjective for each individual, the workplace has been and will continue to be a significant source of social contact among coworkers. Interacting online through team activities has helped alleviate some of the missing connections during COVID-19 and will continue to do so as virtual and hybrid ways of work become increasingly prevalent.

WORK/LIFE BALANCE CHALLENGES

Given that most benefits of virtual working are within the sphere of work/life balance, there have also been challenges resulting from a blurring of the lines between work and personal life and extended periods of isolation from others. Remote work comes with many advantages. There is a challenge in balancing work life and personal life. Remote employees sometimes have difficulty maintaining business hours, causing an overlap of professional and personal life, creating an imbalance and unexpected turbulence in mental health and family life. Remote employees often share their workspace with family members leading to multiple distractions and less productivity.

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Another major challenge of remote work is burnout, which can be described as ongoing stress, exhaustion, and negativity resulting in mental and physical issues. To some extent, the the long period of virtual working, particularly for knowledge-based roles such as Project Management has exacerbated burn out, and as a result, reduced motivation has been a result of:

- A perception or expectation of being always available, online, throughout the working day;
- Meeting overload, often back-to-back, in order to find time to engage and discuss with colleagues;
- Reduced physical activity and social interaction.

Some of how this can be managed involve:

- Scheduling breaks in amongst the day, which is used to physically move away from work to have a break and/or do something of enjoyment;
- Reduce the number of meetings and duration to allow for time to think, process, and complete required activities throughout the day, through leveraging other collaboration and communication tools and being purposeful in which are scheduled and attended, and for what reasons;
- Adopting the concept of a 'social contract' or shared 'ways of working,' which define the project or team's ways of working and accepted behaviors and norms. As an example, this could include no scheduling of meetings before or after a certain time in the morning/evening, and spending each fortnight on team bonding activities.

SUMMARY

Based on the survey results shared and observed trends, most organizations and employees are opting to move towards a hybrid work model that combines the benefits of both remote and in-person while alleviating some of the challenges. Strategic alignment and organizational culture are enabled much more successfully in hybrid models – where in-person meetings or events are hosted while remotely allowing employees to participate from across a region, nation, or even world. Employee satisfaction and engagement are significantly increased, which leads to higher performance and productivity.

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