

## A Bright Future for the Remote Workplace

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Pre-pandemic, the movement toward remote work was happening gradually over time with the development of new communications technologies and virtual collaboration tools. Some companies were accommodating on a limited basis teams with members in different locations, and workers who needed to work from home for personal reasons, while others were intentionally pursuing remote capabilities as part of a new, more efficient business model. And then came COVID.

When contemplating the future of remote work, at IMSA Search Global Partners, we can't help but divide time into pre- and post-pandemic "time zones." What existed pre-coronavirus is no longer, and 2020 has propelled us into a new paradigm. Five days in the office will no longer be the norm. For workers around the world, remote work is now the new normal, and we, along with our clients, are wondering if, when, and how working in person will return.

### Hybrid Will Be The New Normal

Remote? In person? While Covid-19 forced a radical shift from in person to remote work, recent surveys of company leaders suggest a hybrid model is more likely the future. According to a Harvard Business Review Analytic Services Survey conducted in May 2020, among 1,080 business leaders globally, 78% expect the amount of remote work to increase post-pandemic. In a November 2020 McKinsey survey of 800 global corporate executives, 38% expect remote employees to work two or more days a week away from the office, up from the 22% who said so pre-pandemic.

Companies are already planning for this hybrid new normal. A few high profile examples: Facebook is planning a 50% remote workforce over the next 5-10 years. J.P. Morgan is planning for its employees to work from home one or two weeks a month, or two days a week, according to their line of business. Twitter, Microsoft and Shopify are also planning for some permanent work from home.

Why? Because it works. 61% of respondents in HBR Analytics Services Survey indicated the quality of remote work was on-par or superior to work done in person. In another HBR study, knowledge workers (those whose jobs require the handling of information) studied in 2013 and again during the pandemic in 2020, reported less time spent in large meetings, more time interacting with customers, and a significant drop in work reported as "tiresome."

From the employees' perspective, most feel greater control over their time and tasks, and are happy about their improved quality of life. Plus, employers are realizing savings from lower travel costs and anticipating savings from less office space.

### Safeguarding an Agile Mindset

Certainly, the success of the hybrid workplace depends upon collaborative tools and platforms that enable dynamic work locations and asynchronous collaboration. Organizations emphasizing agile principles and capabilities are finding new ways of working remotely which maintain the benefits of in person team interaction, specifically on-the-spot ideating, co-creating, and problem solving. A Gallup Study from September 2020, found that employees in agile teams are intentional about recreating rituals which build trust and maximize effectiveness. In the absence of in person communication and feedback, mentorship and relationship building require particular effort, especially on the part of management.

Agile organizations promote frequent engagement with customers. According to Gallup, more frequent customer interaction leads to quicker solutions which, in turn, builds emotional connection and results in greater revenue. Given the uncertain economic outlook, operating with an agile ethos and the ability to adjust to change quickly is crucial to future success.

### Ask the Right Questions, Build the Right Plan

While there is great optimism, particularly among knowledge workers and the highly educated, there are some jobs, some functions, and some tasks that work better in person. Some industries require activities be done in a particular site with particular equipment: lab research, medical procedures, manufacturing, and teaching to name a few. Onboarding, innovative brainstorming, mentoring, and new client relationship building also benefit from face-to-face. And, importantly, employees miss the social interaction – where is the virtual office water cooler?

As companies gear up for the hybrid model, it will be critical to contemplate the challenges of remote and develop strategies and plans accordingly. Some may find the solution in thinking about what activities, rather than what roles can be done remotely, as is being suggested at McKinsey right now. The companies most likely to flourish are those with deliberate and strategic digital workplace plans – including objectives, strategies, and assessments, which enable and support remote teams. From investment in cloud and storage infrastructure and expanding available collaboration tools – e.g. Zoom, Slack, Miro, Shape, Kanban, Google docs – to thinking differently about meetings and training, planning is essential.

Executive search firms are already in conversation with clients to identify prospects who can lead through and beyond the pandemic – visionaries who understand how to bridge the gap between remote and in person, and who can motivate teams to succeed during significant transition. According to IMSA Search Global Partners President, Monika Ciesielska, "Finding the right person to deliver on client goals is paramount. What's unique today is we are able to see in real time how a candidate can perform through a period of upheaval."

Right now leaders need to ask the right questions: When should employees work together and when can they work independently? What technology and tools do they need to more effectively collaborate? What else do they need to be productive remotely? What systems are in place and what training do they need? What should the office space look like and how will we ensure safety? What risks exist and what security protocols need adjusting? How do we promote employee engagement? How do we safeguard mental health?

To build a strong hybrid workplace, ready to thrive today and into the future, leadership focused on instilling an agile mindset, building trust and accountability, and creating the right workplace environment to support and engage employees is now more important than ever before.

