

A Vision For Return To Work – Federal Hybrid Workforce

Highlights from the September 29, 2021 Roundtable hosted by ATARC in partnership with Zoom for Government

At the Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC) roundtable, hosted in partnership with Zoom for Government on the future of work, participants from a number of government agencies provided insights into the challenges and opportunities of the evolving work environment post-pandemic. Participants discussed the benefits and challenges of a virtual and hybrid work environment, the challenges of ensuring equity and inclusion are maintained in a virtual workplace, and shared insight into the future of the workplace post-pandemic.

Benefits of a Hybrid Work Environment

Many participants emphasized the benefits of maintaining a hybrid workplace as some employees return to the office. Some employees would prefer to continue working remotely some or all of the time instead of returning to work in-person, which requires the review or creation of work policies that enable virtual or hybrid work schedules where feasible.

At the same time, due to the nature of their work, some employees must be physically present in the workplace most or all of the time. While this highlights the challenge of equitably accommodating both remote and in-person employees, many organizations believe the benefits of a hybrid approach are substantial enough to pursue the hybrid work environment as the future of work:

Benefits of Hybrid Work Environment

- ❖ Ability to hire employees in a broader geographic area, rather than just those who reside near the employer
- ❖ Reduction of commuting time and costs due to videoconferencing and telework technologies
- ❖ Opportunity for employees to collaborate remotely with others who they would not normally communicate with in a traditional work setting
- ❖ Ability to involve both on-site and off-site personnel in meetings
- ❖ Opportunity to recruit top talent outside the organization's jurisdiction
- ❖ Potential for reduced rent and property acquisition costs as more employees work remotely

Challenges of Virtual and Hybrid Work Places

While the participants agreed that there are many benefits to a virtual or hybrid work environment for both employees and an organization, there are challenges to this workplace dynamic that primarily affect how personal connections are made at work. Participants discussed ways to encourage collaboration in a virtual work environment and methods to continue building the efficiencies gained through teleworking.

Panelists agreed that virtual meetings bring efficiencies to the workplace. A meeting that once took an hour can now be conducted in thirty minutes, but care should be taken to preserve the human touch in a virtual environment. Panel participants noted that while the use of Zoom and other videoconferencing tools can boost meeting efficiency, virtual meetings can begin to feel depersonalized if no time is set aside for informal or personal interaction among participants. One suggestion to foster employee interaction is to allow five minutes or so at the start of every virtual meeting for informal conversation among meeting participants as they would in a traditional in-person meeting.

Diversity and Equity in the Hybrid Workspace

The issue of diversity and inclusion in a virtual workplace concerned a number of participants. To support these important organizational goals, panelists agreed that attention should be given to ensure those working remotely are included in office culture and dynamics and vice versa. Panelists expressed concern that as the transition is made into the hybrid workplace that a productive sense of collaboration and true inclusion is maintained among all employees regardless of where they work.

Prior to the pandemic, some participants noted, virtual meeting participants were almost an afterthought to those attending in-person and not viewed as active meeting participants. Going forward it is important to make all participants feel valued and heard. Advancements in technology can allow for better engagement of virtual participants. One method to ensure virtual participants can better see and hear in-person participants is with a camera that automatically moves to the person talking in the room. Using artificial intelligence technology, remote participants see the in-person participants as individuals on their screen. This allows remote meeting attendees to better see facial expressions and other nuances of a meeting they otherwise would miss.

Panelists also discussed the importance and challenge of digital equity, specifically in instances where employees lack the necessary connectivity or computer equipment to telecommute effectively. To account for this inequity, some organizations are looking to provide stipends or other funding to ensure that employees have access to high-speed internet. Panelists mentioned that they must also contend with the challenges and logistics of hourly employees working remotely. Future policies must account for the amount of time an employee spends working, including traveling to and from work if they are to work remotely.

In discussing the hybrid work model, panelists agree that there are times in everyone's lives when work is better achieved when they have the flexibility to work from home, but there are also times when employees must be on site to conduct their work. When developing hybrid workplace policies, organizations should take an individualized approach.

A hybrid work environment opens the door for increased diversity. Employees now have the ability to live anywhere, as before they would be required to live in close proximity to their employer. Living close to an employer may be out of reach for many people due to prohibitive housing costs in the organization's locale. Virtual work options allow organizations to offer equality of opportunity to those who cannot live in certain geographical areas.

The Future of the Workplace

In envisioning a future virtual hybrid workplace, all agreed that decisions should be made collaboratively with the input of employees and other stakeholders. Decisions on the future of work should not be made by any one entity at the top, but instead by everybody working together.

Focus groups were cited as a powerful method of obtaining employee feedback. This forum allows employees to discuss their experience working in a hybrid work environment and to offer potential solutions that may influence policy. Engaging with workers unions was also seen as an important part of building workplace policies in the wake of the pandemic.

When implementing new hybrid work policies, panelists believe that flexibility should be given to supervisors and team leaders to best adapt the policy to the needs of individual employees. This flexibility extends to all areas of the workplace including how workspaces are configured, how supervisors manage employees, and how and when work is conducted. Panel participants said that within the next two to five years, the structure of workspaces is likely to undergo a

major shift. Panelists agree that a traditional office setting may not be conducive to a productive hybrid work environment. As a result, office workspaces may be configured to encourage better collaboration.

Changes to supervisory culture may also evolve in the future hybrid work environment. Supervisors will not be able to traditionally manage by walking around the office to ensure productivity and to evaluate the wellbeing of their employees. New systems will have to be created to help supervisors understand how their employees are not only performing but also how they are doing emotionally.

Panelists stated that a hybrid work environment is capable of creating a more motivated workforce that are more engaged in their work. Flexibility empowers employees by enabling them to work, within certain limits, the way they want to work and enabling them to work more productively as a result. Traditional workplace policies that were written for in-office work such as dress code and core hours of the workplace are now seen as in many cases unduly restrictive in the new hybrid work era. With no specific hours in which work needs to be done, there is greater ability for employees to do their work at a time that best suits them rather than by adhering to the traditional nine-to-five timeframe.

While many organizations and leaders are leaning into this vision for the future workplace, some groups still want to maintain traditional workplace policies. This adherence to old policies can present challenges to reshaping the workplace. Panelists agree on the importance to review pre-pandemic policies to understand what policies make sense in a new hybrid work environment, and which ones were written to legislate past cultural preferences. Reviewing all policies is seen as a major next step in reshaping of the workplace.

Reshaping workplace culture is a long-term process that will continue to evolve for years to come. This process is not a singular moment to strive for; rather the objective is to keep evolving and make progress moving forward. Participants are taking what they learned while working remotely and are incorporating these best practices into new policies in order to improve the new post-pandemic work environment.

How Zoom for Government Can Help

With solutions for meetings, chat, phone, webinar, and rooms that work on any device, Zoom helps you manage a hybrid workforce by ensuring seamless communication and collaboration between remote and in-office workers. Learn more [here](#).