WHITE PAPER

Operating at Scale in a New Hybrid Workplace
Summary of Roundtable, hosted by ATARC on December 15, 2021

During a recent roundtable discussion hosted by the Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC), participants from various Federal government agencies shared insights on the 'new normal' of operating in a hybrid work environment. There is much to consider as agencies begin to transition from working remotely to a more hybrid work model that allows for employees to split their time between working remotely and coming into the office. Roundtable participants shared what they believe the future of work will look like in a hybrid model, as well as current and anticipated challenges to both workplace culture and operations.

The Federal government recognizes that as a result of the pandemic, the needs of both the public and Federal employees have changed; and therefore, the way government operates must also change. President Biden's Administration issued a new President's Management Agenda (PMA) that focuses on three core priorities for ensuring a government built for all. One of the core priorities of the PMA is for the Federal government to model evolving work practices that reflect the changing needs of the workforce due to COVID.

Hybrid Workplace Challenges and Potential Solutions

Requirement of core hours, standard 9 to 5 work model to facilitate collaborative projects, and ensure employee engagement and workplace productivity	Drive to reduce eight-hour workday down to four hours, based on experience proving that productivity levels are not defined by the number of hours or work location
Reluctance to being seen on-camera during virtual meetings lowers effective communication and delivery, employee engagement and inclusivity	It is employer's responsibility to remove technical barriers preventing on-camera participation, and routinely check in with employees not on camera for their safety and wellbeing
Learning curve to conduct successful hybrid meetings, to level the playing field between in-person and remote participants	Employers need to develop a code of conduct for how to interact in a hybrid workplace to ensure that those participating remotely may interact fully
Hoteling as an office management practice may present logistical changes, increased demand for conference room management, and reduce personality and familiarity of a dedicated workspace	Hoteling can also improve contact tracing capability, consistency in workspace set-up, easier and cleaning and sanitizing
Challenges with capturing vaccine status data. Increased rates of applications for reasonable accommodations cause concern for the safety of managers	Leveraging AI and predictive data analytics technologies to build heat maps to better understand risks associated with illness and to quickly determine space needs and opportunities within existing buildings

In response to the PMA, roundtable participants shared their current realities and insights on how best to move forward after the pandemic. Agencies recognize that they are not returning to the same workforce or workplace as before March 2020. Employees are not the same, as new stressors and first-

hand experiences through the course of the pandemic have changed lives and personalities. As a result, responsibilities of the employer are evolving to meet the changing needs and expectations of a new workforce. Panelists suggest that agencies cannot continue to look to the past to determine

what will work in the future, rather employers must listen to their employees and respond accordingly.

Before the pandemic, many agencies were well on their way to operating in more modern and flexible modalities, such as creating open work spaces and setting core work hours between 9 AM to 3 PM when in-office work was expected. This flexibility allowed employees to enjoy more autonomy over their schedule and a better work-life balance, while not compromising productivity. However, some current conversations about returning to work after the pandemic harken back to the standard 9 to 5 work model by expecting the same standard of productivity defined by working eight hours in a cubicle. Some panelists believe that the eight-hour workday should be reconsidered and changed to as few as four hours per day, knowing from experience working remotely that productivity levels are not defined by the number of hours working per day or the location in which work is performed.

Panelists challenge the idea of the 'future of work', stating that this current remote work environment is the future of work. Instead of looking to the past to determine what the future of work will look like, panelists agree that listening to the needs of employees is the best way to determine how to set workplace standards and expectations. Agencies are hearing that the flexibility afforded by working remotely is greatly valued by their employees, and most are reluctant to return to working in an office full-time. Moreover, many employees do not see the necessity to return to in-person work full-time, since working remotely is both productive and flexible. Employers see the value in providing employees the flexibility to work remotely, but also believe that working in-office on collaborative projects is critically important to both employee engagement and workplace productivity. Panelists agree that employers should endeavor to compromise with employees and balance decisions with what makes for successful work.

There are distinct benefits to working remotely, but there are certain aspects of workplace culture that are lost when operating in an entirely remote environment. One example is the reluctance some people have to being seen on-camera during virtual meetings. Panelists lament that as the pandemic and virtual meetings continue, it has been a struggle to get employees back on-camera. While there are legitimate reasons for why an individual may need to keep their camera off, employers notice that many employees are adapting to the norms set by others in virtual meetings and are likely taking

advantage of the instantaneous privacy and low engagement offered by off-camera participation.

The downsides of this lack of participation are many, including a lack of non-verbal cueing that is important to effective communication and delivery, low employee engagement and inclusivity, and not having a pulse on the emotional or physical wellbeing of employees. Roundtable participants agree that employers are responsible for setting expectations for on-camera participation in meetings, and to routinely reach out to employees who do not appear on camera to ensure their safety and wellbeing. Moreover, if there are technical barriers preventing on-camera participation, it is the employer's responsibility to educate employees on technology features and provide them with job aids to ensure a productive remote work experience.

As more agencies transition to a hybrid work environment, agencies will be challenged with ensuring that both in-person and remote participants are equipped for productive and collaborative work. While agencies understand how to hold face-to-face meetings, and now after two years of working remotely, know how to conduct remote meetings, there is a learning curve that agencies must overcome to conduct successful hybrid meetings. In current hybrid meetings, in-person participants tend to hold an advantage over those calling in. It is easy for remote participants to lose track of the conversation and misunderstand context as people talk over one another and technology fails. Roundtable participants believe that moving forward, employers need to develop a code of conduct for how to interact in a hybrid workplace to ensure that those participating remotely may interact fully. New technology, yet to be adopted, shows promise for fully collaborative and inclusive hybrid meetings.

Another tenant of hybrid work is the concept of hoteling. Hoteling is an office management practice that allows employees to reserve a workspace in their office instead of being assigned a dedicated desk or office to work from. Hoteling allows employers to downsize office space and save resources. It also allows agencies to efficiently operate a hybrid work structure by offering both in-office and remote work options. The potential for a collaborative work environment can be found in a hoteling model, but there are operational and logistical aspects that must be considered.

In addition to the challenges of holding hybrid meetings as previously mentioned, employers need to be aware of logistical changes and an increased demand for conference room management. Simple components like ensuring correct computer cables and television remotes are accessible in conference rooms can go a long way to guaranteeing hybrid meetings are productive and successful. With check-in technology, employees can be confident that conference rooms are set up correctly before starting a meeting. With the same conference room reservation technology, employers are also able to include contact tracing, which helps to connect the needs and requirements of human resources with facility operations.

While employees would not necessarily use the same desk with each hoteling reservation, employers try to be as consistent as possible in the setup and operation of a hybrid hoteling workplace. For instance, some agencies represented on the panel are in the process of transitioning to a hoteling model and are making sure that all desks have sit-to-stand capability. With an open work environment, employees are assured that cleaning and sanitizing a shared workspace is easier and faster than a closed, private office. Roundtable participants noted that hoteling could take away from the personality and familiarity that a dedicated desk space provides to employees, and that employers should be cognizant of this change to workplace culture. They also noted that as more conversations about moving to a hybrid workplace occur, hoteling must be a part of these discussions. Most hybrid workplace planning that panelists are a part of do not currently involve hoteling.

As working in a hybrid model becomes the norm, efficient and welcoming hybrid workplaces will become critical for recruitment and retention efforts. People will expect to have these options, while also feeling included and engaged by their employer and team. While employers cannot and will not make all employees happy, the goal should be on the success of the work. Employers are still trying to predict what hybrid solutions will work for most people, so it is imperative for employers to keep a pulse on employee preferences once they settle into a true hybrid work environment. This feedback will influence agency plans for real estate as well as workplace policies.

When discussing the challenges in transitioning back to more in-person work, roundtable conversation shifted slightly to how

agencies are utilizing technology to capture vaccine status among Federal employees, among other challenges agencies are facing with the vaccine mandate. The use of technology is being leveraged by many agencies to capture vaccine status among Federal employees. Other types of licenses and certifications have been captured in this way in the past, but this is the first time this technology is being used to capture vaccination status, contact tracing information, and health attestations.

Some agencies represented on the panel struggle with capturing this information from field employees due to higher rates of applications for reasonable accommodations. Once the enforcement period begins, agencies will begin to accept or deny reasonable accommodation requests. Participants shared concern for the safety of managers once reasonable accommodations are denied to some employees. Those with approved reasonable accommodations will be subject to routine testing, and the results will need to be captured. Agencies are also monitoring the rate of retirement in response to the vaccine mandate. Panelists acknowledged that this is one area where future planning is difficult.

As agencies begin to transition in earnest to a hybrid model, some panelists suggest leveraging technology to aid in decision making. Artificial intelligence and predictive and data analytics can build heat maps to better understand risks associated with illness and to quickly determine space needs and opportunities within existing buildings. Roundtable participants also noted that according to audio visual experts, technology will be improving quickly to enable fully operational hybrid work environments. Since most agencies currently do not have the ideal technology, employers should manage people's expectations and current judgements of what hybrid work can look like.

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