



Red River

GUIDE TO A HYBRID

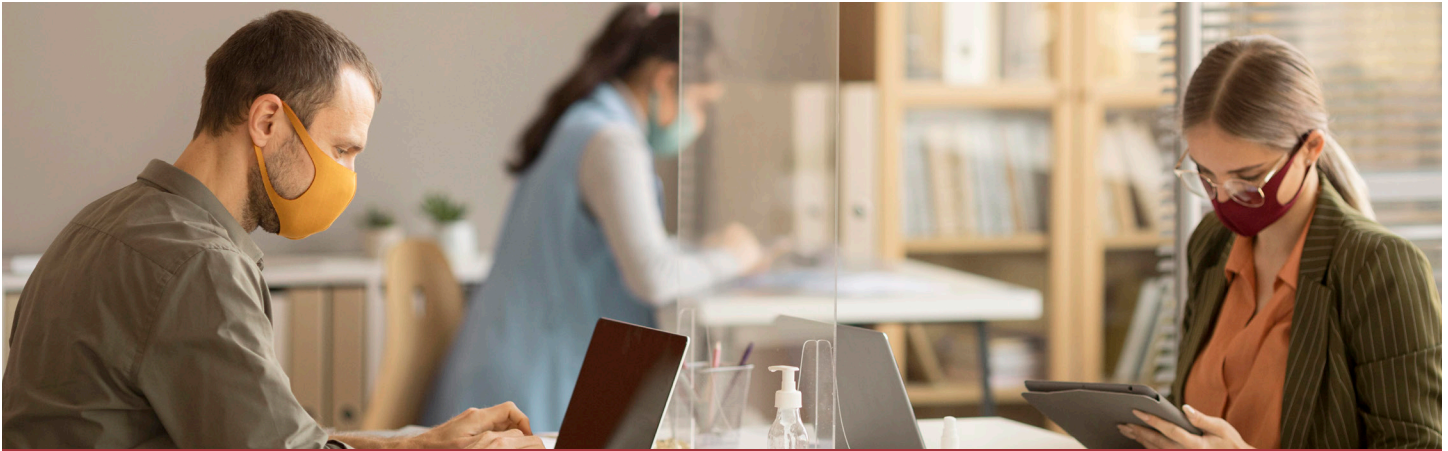
WORK ENVIRONMENT



55 percent of employees would prefer to spend the majority of their time out of the office — but 68 percent of executives would prefer employees to be in the office at least three days a week. How can these differing needs be reconciled?

Moving into 2021, it's likely that many companies are going to switch to a hybrid work model. Employees are reluctant to return to the office, but realistically, some things need to be handled in-person, and much of the in-office infrastructure is already there.

For most organizations, transitioning to a hybrid workforce isn't going to be as much of a challenge as they anticipate. With the right technology and the right processes, a hybrid infrastructure can provide the best of both worlds.



THE RISE OF THE HYBRID WORKFORCE

The COVID-19 pandemic caused businesses across the globe to transition to a model of employees working from home. Organizations had to quickly build a technological infrastructure that could support these operations — under the idea that they would just be temporary. A year and a half later, many employees now have fully kitted work-from-home offices and have developed their own schedules and their own processes.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has waned, employers have sought to get employees back to the office. But that's proven to be harder than initially anticipated. Not only are employees now used to being in charge of their own labor and working in the comfort of their own homes, but also, many of them have found themselves without childcare or with other hurdles that would preclude them from getting to the office.

This isn't the disaster that it might seem. Remote workers cost companies less; they work from their own homes and don't consume company resources. With more remote employees, companies can reduce their brick-and-mortar infrastructure and companies can reach out beyond geographic boundaries to find and procure the best talent.

At the same time, most employers do want to take advantage of in-office personnel. In some situations, face-to-face communication and collaboration can't be beat. In people-oriented businesses, employees may need to meet and connect with clients in person. In highly active businesses, it may be necessary to have low latency, in-person communications.

Besides, there are always employees who don't thrive in a remote environment — employees who do feel best coming in and doing their work from 9-to-5 at a desk that's setup for them.

When appropriately managed, a hybrid workforce is a mutually beneficial one. Employees are able to work from home as needed to preserve their own efficiency and lifestyles, while employers are able to request employees in-office as needed for the purposes of productivity. This may also be a necessity, as employees have shown a willingness to simply quit working for employers who don't provide remote, work-from-home options.

PROCESSES AND CHALLENGES FOR A HYBRID WORKFORCE

Understandably, there are some major challenges with a hybrid workforce. Largely, a hybrid workforce is more complex to manage than either an in-person or fully remote workforce due to the inherent flexibility and unpredictability of the system.

With a remote workforce, everyone is on an equal playing field. No one is in the office, and everyone knows how to connect to people and where to collaborate. With an in-person workforce, everything is extremely visible; employees know where everyone is and how to connect with them.

Hybrid workforces need to compensate for the fact that employees may be in-office or at home. This requires detailed processes for communication and collaboration, as well as more complex scheduling systems. Companies need to be prepared to answer questions, such as:

- What is the appropriate process for in-office or out-of-office communication?
- Are teams scheduled in a way that they are in-office at the same time? Can they appropriately communicate?
- How accessible are team leads to their team members? Do their hours overlap — are they even in the same time zone?
- Will all employees be hybrid? Or will some employees have the option of being fully remote or fully in-person?

With the right processes, these issues become second nature. Core to this is that there must be consistent processes that manage the communication infrastructure of the business. Having a singular technology platform that governs all communication — such as MS Teams — can reduce the necessity for employees to “guess” as to how they’re supposed to connect with people. Likewise, consolidating data through an online platform can reduce the chances of missing or lost documentation.

Employers will need to decide right away whether they’re going to stagger in-office employees (have employees working in the office at different, scheduled times) or offer flex-time to employees (allow employees to schedule themselves out of the office when they need to). They will also need to develop processes for ensuring that employees who need to frequently work together, or employees who are in the same departments, are able to effectively work together.



BUILDING A PHYSICAL HYBRID INFRASTRUCTURE

Many organizations downsized office space during COVID. But other organizations remained in their old offices, waiting for the world to go back to “normal.” Realistically, businesses that adopt a hybrid infrastructure are best served by reducing their physical infrastructure.

But this comes with a question: Do employees maintain their own spaces? Do employees still have their own offices?

For most companies, an office plan that is more fluid and open will make more sense. Rather than employees having individual desks, they can have virtualized workstations that they can pull up anywhere. Rather than working in a single office or cubicle, there can instead be “hot desks” that anyone can drop into and work at.

Building a physical hybrid infrastructure starts with the understanding that employees are going to be there on a flexible basis. They don’t need to reside in specific offices or specific desks, because they will be performing the majority of their work on the cloud or on a virtualized server. In truth, this is even better for the organization, because it makes the offices more fluid and dynamic, and reduces overhead and infrastructure cost.



MEASURING MILESTONES VS. HOURS FOR EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY

When companies first started operating with remote employees, they found it very difficult to track productivity and efficiency. Most remote employees wouldn't work for eight or nine hours a day. Instead, they would work five, six or even fewer hours – and employers found this discouraging.

Studies have shown that, in fact, most employees only work three to four productive hours in the office – and that most employees are more efficient and productive in their own homes. For many organizations, a switch to remote work or hybrid work will demand a different way of rating how people work. A milestone or project basis, for instance, puts the onus on the employee to manage their own time, rather than demanding specific working hours.

It can be difficult, if not impossible, for employees to work in solid eight-hour chunks when they are working from home or on the road. But that doesn't mean that working this way isn't more efficient or effective for them. It does require a major transition into the way that employers measure "work completed" – and this is one of the major process shifts that an organization will often have to undergo.



COMPANY CULTURE AND THE HYBRID WORKFORCE

A principal concern among employers today is the loss of company culture to a hybrid workforce. A hybrid workforce naturally has fewer in-person interactions, which can alienate some and gradually lead to a loss of company knowledge.

But a hybrid workforce doesn't necessarily mean a distant workforce.

Employers can encourage teams to work together closely, can hold virtual seminars and events and also schedule days for team-building exercises in the office. Employers may need to work a little harder to ensure that employees work well together, but ultimately, will be able to do less micro-management throughout day-to-day operations.

Company culture is what informs the actions and attitude of employees even beyond what they are trained for. Company culture includes the mission statement and values of the organization; what employees are intended to prioritize and care about. And while it is easier to manage and monitor company culture in-person, a hybrid workforce can create employees who will truly advocate for the company of their own initiative.

The goal of a hybrid workplace is to create a digital environment that is able to successfully mimic the physical environment. This digital environment can additionally be dedicated to facilitating and spreading company culture. It may take some time for some companies to adjust, but there's nothing stopping companies from promoting their culture in a digital workspace.



TECHNOLOGY AND THE HYBRID WORKFORCE

While processes are important, at the end of the day, a company's hybrid infrastructure is going to either survive or fail on the basis of its technology.

Employees have always wanted to work from home. In the past, it just was not feasible; the technology wasn't there to make them as productive and efficient at home as they could be in the office. With advancements in video calling, screen sharing and virtualization technology, a remote environment can be just as fully featured as an in-person one.

But it does demand that remote employees, hybrid employees and in-person employees all have equal access to the same documents and tools.

Organizations can use SD-WAN technology to improve latency to critical applications, virtualization to ensure consistent working environments and complete cloud migration to improve overall accessibility of computer systems. VPNs can be used to improve security, while cloud-based antivirus solutions can further detect and mitigate risks.



To truly facilitate a hybrid workforce, employers need:

- **A consolidated communication and collaboration system.** Employees should never have to guess regarding how they should connect with someone or where their documents and files will be. The more consolidated and consistent the system is, the more efficient it is.
- **Complete accessibility and transparency.** Employees may need to connect to the organization's systems from anywhere. They will need to have complete access to their working documents, materials and colleagues regardless of where they are. The more open and transparent this system is, the better.
- **Consistent working environments.** Employees connecting from home, on the road or on-premises should all have close to identical working environments and working experiences. It's critical that employees not have to adjust to dramatically different functionality when they change their modes of working.
- **Advanced security technology and processes.** As employees start to connect from more locations, it becomes critical to enhance the security of the system as well as security and privacy training. Employees are going to need to ensure that their own work-from-home offices are as secure as their places of employment — and that their personal devices are as secure as their work devices.
- **An auditing system.** A shift toward a hybrid infrastructure is, for many, a radical change. Organizations need to have a system not only for implementing these changes, but also for regularly auditing whether the system is working or whether it has to be adjusted.

But there's a silver lining to the changes caused by the COVID pandemic. Moving into 2021, many companies have already created the foundation of a hybrid infrastructure. These infrastructures simply need to be improved and streamlined moving forward.



ESTABLISHING A HYBRID INFRASTRUCTURE

Many employers today are under immense pressure to facilitate work-from-home or remote operations. While it does require an upfront investment in new technology and new processes, it is likely going to be a necessity moving forward — and a substantial cost savings, once everything is said and done.

Companies interested in establishing a hybrid infrastructure need to first assess how their organization will schedule employees, how employees will interact with each other (and their teams) and how they will manage in-person communications such as interactions with clients. From there, the company will need to invest in the technology that's necessary to support these operations.

A managed services provider can help. With an MSP, you can audit your existing processes, find the best way to transition these processes to a hybrid environment and work toward the technological infrastructure that will give you the support you need.

Is your organization considering building a hybrid infrastructure? Connect with Red River today to find out more



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