

ARTICLE

The work anywhere paradox: Love it or hate it, how leaders can optimize it

As leaders continue to grapple with fast-changing working expectations and conditions, they will need to continuously reconsider both sides of five paradoxes about ways of working.



Every company is grappling with the future of work and return-to-office scenarios. Few are settled. With the Delta and other COVID-19 variants spreading, we remain in a prolonged period of uncertainty and vacillation for all leaders whose employees can work remotely.

A number of recent surveys describing the amount of pay or benefits workers are willing to give up in order to stay remote—or at least hybrid—show how strongly many feel about preserving their flexibility. Many prominent CEOs have declared that they expect workers back in the office; others are saying they will offer flexibility and fully remote or hybrid options for the foreseeable future. There are disconnections between the expectations of executives and workers, between people in different regions, in different workplace cultures, and even within individuals themselves.

We strongly believe that the hybrid model is the future of work. But, for leaders, it is also the most challenging of all possibilities to navigate. Getting hybrid right will require pausing and thinking about building on the gains of the past 18 months rather than trying to recreate a past that is no longer viable, and it will require leaders to be agile and thoughtful in addressing five particular aspects of work that have undergone fundamental reassessment: inclusion, communication, career development, productivity, and innovation.

Leaders who create new paradigms for how we work can create thriving cultures with high engagement and performance, a critical advantage in an exploding war for talent. In what follows, we describe each of the five paradoxes and offer insights from leaders that are confronting them.

There are three basic options for the future of work:

Full return to the office. Having seen remote work as a situation to endure in the pandemic, many CEOs now have a message for their staff: enough.¹ These leaders believe that to build the culture, engagement, collaboration, teamwork, commitment, and performance they desire, their employees must occupy the same physical workspace. Many financial services and some tech CEOs have taken this stand. Mike de Vere, CEO of Zest AI, epitomizes it: “We believe that we will be our best selves the more that we are together.”²

Full remote, work anywhere. Proponents of this scenario include Spotify, Slack, Facebook, Twitter, and many other tech-oriented companies. Their rationale is simple: flexibility and choice are attractive to most workers. During lockdowns, leaders learned that productivity could be higher, engagement more inclusive, participation more democratic, and bottom lines more cost effective, particularly because many organizations have reduced or will reduce their office footprint. Some all-remote companies, such as Dropbox, are investing real estate savings into getting employees together more frequently: picking up the tab for informal get-togethers and encouraging trips to see each other.

Hybrid. This is the option leaders most often envision—indeed, recent surveys we have conducted show that 90% of executives expect some version of hybrid. We believe that the hybrid approach is the only way to stay agile and inclusive. Mary Barra, the CEO of General Motors, has a simple philosophy: “Work appropriately.” Many companies have outlined working options that depend on role, circumstance, or what some (including the real estate firm JLL) are calling workplace “personas,” based on the idea that there is no one-size-fits-all policy and all work situations need to fit individual needs and circumstances.³

1 Chip Cutter, “The boss wants you back in the office. Like, now.” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2021, wsj.com.

2 Katherine Bindley, “Five days in the office? For these startups, the future of work is old school,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2021, wsj.com.

3 “Why hybrid workplace pilots are taking off,” JLL, August 16, 2021, us.jll.com.

Inclusion: Personalize vs harmonize

Virtual communication knocks down barriers based on location, silos, or cliques in the organization.

The prevailing view is that hybrid work, given that it is partly remote, and inclusivity are at odds, and that an organization's culture will erode in a distributed work environment. People who work remotely may feel excluded from key office-based activities. Those who are newer or less well known may not get included in meetings and may feel left out or disconnected from their colleagues. Or, if someone is not already on an event's invite list, or a "go-to" person on a topic, he or she may find it difficult to build and maintain connections with everyone.

Such concerns can create or exacerbate disparities in access between the haves and have nots—categories most leaders don't want to have in their organization, but which most employees feel exist for various reasons. When some people in a meeting are in person and others are on a video call, the dynamics must be managed very carefully; one best practice is to have everyone get on the video call from their device, even if in the same room, so that everyone appears to be an equal presence. "When everyone has the same small box on the screen, everyone has an equal seat at the table, literally," Barbara Messing, employee experience officer at Roblox, the online gaming company, told *The New York Times*.⁴ In this case, the user experience is harmonized and inclusive across different locations. Roblox is also staying remote two days a week and letting people work wherever they want for two months a year—creating a harmonized, consistent policy that can be personalized to individual needs.

More generally, leaders with remote workers are far less likely to spot the cues that let them know they need to reach out to someone—cues that are much easier to notice in in-person interactions, formal or informal. This is why it is critical to be proactive and anticipate potential challenges, checking in on remote team members in particular to ensure they feel included, as well as designing meetings and other team events inclusively, with different dial-in locations and device considerations in mind.

People like to belong to a group, and being remote when others are in person can raise the question of what group one belongs to. Yet, with proactive leadership, out of sight does not need to mean out of mind. We have seen that with dedicated efforts, a hybrid work policy, harmonized across the organization but flexible for personal preferences, can actually be more inclusive. The major advantage of remote work based on our many conversations with executives since the pandemic is that they have been able to more easily and quickly assemble the right people to solve any problem. As one executive put it, "Collaboration increased across geographically dispersed teams." Since geography no longer applies, people in many different locations can hop on a video call as easily as convening a meeting when everyone is in the same place. Many organizations are upgrading their conference room video systems to better allow for hybrid meetings. "Virtual communication knocks down barriers based on location, silos, or cliques in the organization," one CHRO said. Other organizations, such as Pfizer and Ford, are experimenting with virtual reality and holographic meetings to create a sense of togetherness in remote and hybrid settings.

⁴ Claire Cain Miller, "Do chance meetings at the office boost innovation? There's no evidence of it," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2021, nyt.com.

Optimize inclusion

- Get to know team members as people, including their aspirations, preferences, and needs. On a broader scale, understand various employee personas to appreciate the breadth of needs across the organization.
- Create flexibility to meet diverse individual and persona-based needs: one size does not fit all, so messaging and engagement must be harmonized into a cohesive strategy, while legitimizing personalized options.
- Reach out to remote as well as in-person colleagues on a regular cadence to stay up-to-date on their needs and challenges. Even the most senior executives can make time to spontaneously check in with video or phone calls, texts, emails, and/or messaging apps—personalized to individual preferences.
- Digitize work processes and explore new tools: adoption of and training on multiple platforms and technologies maximizes opportunities for inclusion and ensures everyone has tools appropriate for their needs.
- Connect actions to organizational purpose to guide post-pandemic decision making and sensitivities. A unified purpose drives a sense of belonging and inclusion across the organization.

Communication: Informational vs intimate

Most leaders have communicated more transparently, frequently, broadly, and with more empathy since the beginning of the pandemic, yet have had to balance people's desire for information with the information overload many people have felt.

In some ways, meetings large and small have become more intimate than ever before. As one CHRO put it, "The pandemic humanized people and brought everyone together spiritually, if not in person. There was a renewed spirit of caring. People got used to hearing kids in the background of meetings. Some had to reschedule [calls] because they were busy setting up their children's virtual schooling. There was an increased level of transparency of life at home, yet it was a difficult balancing act, and many did calls from a closet or a similarly less-than-optimal environment."

Many managers have stepped up and become the connective tissue for their people, as another executive explained: "Because of the situation and the need to bring together teams, communication at a managerial level has really increased and it's driven engagement scores and sustained them at some of the highest levels they've ever been."

In addition, many CEOs and executives have become more transparent. "What we really established is trust," Pfizer's head of vaccine research Kathrin Jansen noted in an interview, "trust that we could bring everything up. That we could be transparent. That we don't hide anything. We had very open exchanges."⁵ A CEO we know decided to share pre-recorded videos on a regular basis and to his surprise found that this medium allowed him to be more clear, consistent, focused, and effective in communicating messages about strategy, culture, and plans for the business than any format he had tried before. He plans to continue this. Executives have been more open about health and safety but also about culture, engagement, and business performance. Many companies have increased their use of surveys, and pulse data input from the workforce has increased as well.

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Head of vaccine research, Pfizer

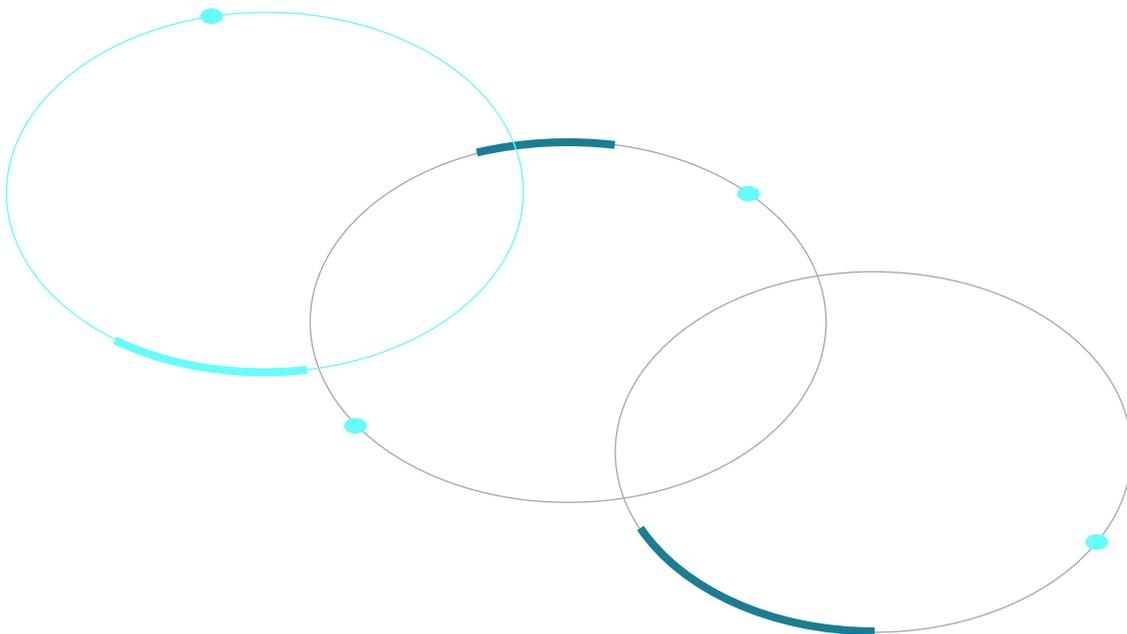
⁵ Ruth Reader, "Pfizer's CEO: Three key decisions helped it develop a COVID-19 vaccine in record time," *Fast Company*, March 10, 2021, [fastcompany.com](https://www.fastcompany.com).

However, at the same time, much of communication as a whole has become less intimate and less connected since pandemic safety measures limited in-person interaction. For leaders, there is a balancing act between the quantity and frequency of communication with the quality and personal nature of in-person interactions. In one recent survey about what people seek from returning to the office, for example, 63% said they seek in-person collaboration, 62% said socializing with colleagues and clients, and 44% said reviving in-person meetings.⁶

The question for leaders is how to continue to be transparent in their broader communications and in how they seek input while at the same time creating an environment that supports intimate, personal, and sensitive interactions for those who seek close connection and support, all while some are in the office and some are at home.

Optimize communication

- Communicate early and often, even if you do not have all the answers. Transparently share the rationale behind leadership decisions to promote understanding, resilience, and loyalty, even when information is incomplete or still evolving.
- Seek organizational input and engagement more frequently via one-on-one engagement, pulse surveys, and virtual interactions.
- Leverage the full diversity of communication mediums within the organization, including videos, emails, Slack/messaging apps, podcasts, and others to role model inclusive information sharing.
- Listen actively and openly to show sincere responsiveness to concerns and foster psychological safe spaces for more personal and intimate discussions.
- Share your own feelings, concerns, and anxieties to model an open, caring culture.



⁶ "Why do (some) people want to return to the office? Here's what a LinkedIn poll reveals," Advisory Board, June 24, 2021, advisory.com.

Career development: Proximate vs networked

A recent survey by The Conference Board shows Millennials are more likely to question the wisdom of returning to the office than other generations: 55% did so, compared to 45% of Generation X and 36% of Baby Boomers.

One aspect of conventional wisdom that is also reflected in data is that working remotely can circumscribe one's career opportunities. The lack of proximity to senior leaders can limit mentoring, networking, and being spontaneously pulled into meetings or team assignments. We have heard this concern expressed from HR and business leaders as "lost opportunities to network, find mentors, get coaching and learn close-up from more experienced workers." It has been a particularly well-documented issue for working women, 70% of whom worry their career growth may be limited by working from home. An even higher share of people of color have the same concern.⁷ In general, 47% of workers said that advancing faster in their career was the reason they would want to return to the office.

Although managers and HR professionals are concerned about junior staff in a hybrid world, some young workers don't see it the same way. *The New York Times* told the story of a 33-year-old who quit his job as a web developer at a Midwestern insurance company after it told him he needed to return to the office as vaccination rates rose.⁸ He limited his job hunting to opportunities that offered fully remote work and soon started at a hiring and human resources company based in New York. A recent survey by The Conference Board shows Millennials are more likely to question the wisdom of returning to the office than other generations: 55% did so, compared to 45% of Generation X and 36% of Baby Boomers. The survey also showed that the lower the employee level, the more they question the need to return to the workplace.⁹ And according to a recent survey by Future Forum, the preference for remote or hybrid work is even more marked among Black employees: 97% of Black respondents in the United States said they preferred a fully remote or hybrid workplace, and only 3% of Black workers surveyed said they wanted to return fully in person, compared with 21% of white workers.¹⁰

However, many younger workers see the advantages of hybrid. As one explained, many new graduates, for example, are missing the experience of entering the workforce as young professionals and doing formerly straightforward things such as morning coffee runs and dressing up for work. Instead, they are "going to work" sitting at the same desk at which they took exams and attended their virtual college graduations. For these employees, hybrid work allows them to physically enter this new stage of life. Therefore, it is sometimes useful to leverage clusters of proximity where relevant, sponsoring various in-person get-togethers across diverse locations, as Dropbox does for its remote-first employees.

And we have also heard executives talk about career development advantages in remote work. As one sales leader in a financial services firm explained, many registered sales assistants are women and they've been able to engage with clients in a more face-to-face way because of Zoom: "Normally, a client would come in and go with the financial advisor and maybe they would say hello, but now assistants are being included in client meetings; one client broke down because they finally met after 20 years and [the assistant] had been so helpful. And more people have been given the opportunity to attend client meetings than normal because they no longer have to travel to get there."

7 Kweilin Ellingrud, Mekala Krishnan, Alexis Krivkovich, Kathryn Kukla, Ana Mendy, Nicole Robinson, Sandra Sancier-Sultan, and Lareina Yee, "Diverse employees are struggling the most during COVID-19—here's how companies can respond," McKinsey & Co., November 17, 2020, mckinsey.com.

8 Nelson D. Schwartz and Coral Murphy Marcos, "Return to office hits a snag: Young resisters," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2021, nyt.com.

9 The Conference Board, "Amid Higher Productivity, 43 Percent of US Workers Question Need to Return to Workplace," press release, July 1, 2021, conference-board.org.

10 Ruchika Tulshyan, "Return to office? Some women of color aren't ready," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2021, nyt.com.

Because it has been easier to pull together more diverse teams in terms of location and experience levels, companies have created opportunities for more junior team members and been able to promote diversity as team composition expanded beyond the “usual suspects.” Also, in a virtual world, mentors and coaches can be anywhere, which means that traditional mentoring programs suddenly have many more options to match people in ways that will be most beneficial. There is no evidence that mentoring and coaching needs to be in person to be effective. One company we know set up Zoom meetings wherein leaders from different regions took turns introducing their people to one another to expand familiarity and networking. Teams were quite innovative in using the technology to make it fun, entertaining, and personal, and so teams from different locations were really able to get to know each other.

However, many leaders will need to start by shifting their own mindsets toward the one advocated by L.J. Brock, CEO of Coinbase: “Your trajectory ... should be determined by your capabilities and your outputs, not by your location.”¹¹

Optimize career development

- Create forums for managers to come together to discuss talent development beyond the traditional boundaries. Focus on what the overall leadership team can do to promote development, regardless of where a person does or used to sit.
- Have regular check-ins with everyone on your team. Beyond task management and concerns about health, safety, and wellbeing, explore how people are connecting to the work and whether or not they have sufficient resources and support to develop their careers.
- Deliberately orchestrate networking connections between people who are not connected who can learn from each other or collaborate together. Leverage proximity where relevant, but also drive ample networking opportunities across geographies.
- Build “leader as coach” capabilities and skills. In a hybrid environment, all leaders need to raise their coaching and mentoring game. This means making time to make it a priority to get better at listening and providing developmental feedback inclusive across locations.
- Provide specific training on inclusively leading virtual or hybrid teams. This will be a core capability for leaders to master. It includes confidently leveraging a wide variety of virtual platforms and apps to engage with teams.

¹¹ Ashley Stahl, “Does leaning into remote work mean leaning out of your career?” *Forbes*, August 12, 2021, forbes.com.

Productivity: Control vs empowerment

“Our people did not spend the day streaming movies, commiserating about the pain of life in isolation, or hiding in any way from their obligations. They worked harder and more effectively than at any time in our firm’s history.”

Richard Handler

Group CEO, Jeffries Financial

A big concern many leaders have with remote work is the loss of control that comes with the lack of visual line of sight to their workers. In the early days of COVID-19, we received numerous questions about how to manage performance virtually. Leaders were not getting past the old habits of tracking productivity by time spent in the office or visible activity. Now, the best leaders have started to focus more on output and outcome. One executive told us recently that his company discovered that “people need less supervision than we understood prior to the pandemic.” A commercial executive shared that they had “experienced a productivity increase across the board; some unproductive salespeople became more productive. Old paradigms were broken.”

Jeffries Financial Group CEO Richard Handler has stated publicly that record revenue proves you don’t have to force staff back to offices. “Our people did not spend the day streaming movies, commiserating about the pain of life in isolation, or hiding in any way from their obligations,” he wrote to investors this month. “They worked harder and more effectively than at any time in our firm’s history.”¹²

On the other hand, “We can’t be a great company working remotely,” said Greg D. Carmichael, Fifth Third’s chief executive and chairman. “We can get the job done, but it’s tough to flourish.” When his teams returned to the office, questions that once required chains of emails were resolved in minutes, he said, and projects saw more progress in a few weeks than they had in months.

It is evident that people have been getting more done with more autonomy and less time spent commuting. But what we have heard consistently from executives is that in the increasingly hybrid environment and across the organization there has been a stronger focus on key business priorities and more accountability—alongside a concern that in the longer run, productivity, effectiveness, collaboration, and innovation will falter.

A recent survey conducted by Heidrick & Struggles offers some support for hybrid work: 500 CEOs reported little difference in the share of employees applying their company’s cultural values in day-to-day work whether those employees were working mostly in person or hybrid—both were just around 75%.¹³ And one executive told us how his company had reinvented its entire go-to-market strategy based on lessons learned about productivity and customer preferences for more remote engagement.

As organizations have increasingly digitized their operations for the hybrid work environment, significantly more data is now available to leaders, such as times spent in meetings vs. “quiet” time, communication channels used, organizational collaboration patterns, working hours, and much more. Leaders can now monitor these patterns across the organization and use the new data as input for making policy decisions and adjusting as needed. In this way, leaders can still have visibility into their work dynamics—visibility that is more subtle and integrated into day-to-day workflows.

¹² Julia-Ambra Verlaine and David Benoit, “JPMorgan, Goldman call time on work-from-home. Their rivals are ready to pounce,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 2021, [wsj.com](https://www.wsj.com).

¹³ Rose Gailey, Ian Johnston, and Andrew LeSueur, *Aligning Culture with the Bottom Line: How Companies Can Accelerate Progress*, Heidrick & Struggles, on heidrick.com.

Optimize productivity

- Design fit-for-purpose solutions. Have leaders evaluate different types of work or tasks and take a fresh, hard look at what will be required for maximum effectiveness. The nature of the work should define the way of working. Some tasks are best done remotely; others are enhanced by in-person collaboration. Others benefit from the broad, dispersed team that hybrid enables.
- Reinvent performance management. Develop objective metrics to evaluate the performance of a task that are independent of where, when, or how the work gets done, and track the outputs with objective measures.
- Assess the tradeoffs. Does the time saved by not commuting and the reduced office footprint create more value than having people in offices all the time?
- Survey your people. See where they feel they can be most productive and consider how they can best measure that. What do they propose to maintain accountability? Design fit-for-person solutions as well as fit-for-purpose workflows.
- Leverage data analytics from your productivity apps to monitor work dynamics and integrate into decision-making processes.

Innovation: Spontaneous vs expansive

The innovation and creativity argument seems intuitive. “But,” one innovation scholar has said, “is that [spontaneous] conversation likely to be helpful for innovation, creativity, useful at all for what an organization hopes people would talk about? There, there is almost no data whatsoever.”

Perhaps executives’ most common concern about hybrid work has to do with innovation, creativity, brainstorming, and collaboration. We used to come together for “whiteboarding” sessions. We would “huddle” when we needed to ideate, innovate, explore, learn, debate, discuss, or decide strategy. We can’t do that when everyone is remote. “Innovation isn’t always a planned activity,” said Tim Cook, chief executive of Apple, about post-pandemic work. “It’s bumping into each other over the course of the day and advancing an idea you just had.” Jamie Dimon, chief executive of JPMorgan Chase, said working from home “doesn’t work for spontaneous idea generation; it doesn’t work for culture.”¹⁴

The innovation and creativity argument seems intuitive. “But,” one innovation scholar has said, “is that [spontaneous] conversation likely to be helpful for innovation, creativity, useful at all for what an organization hopes people would talk about? There, there is almost no data whatsoever.”¹⁵

Our client discussions echo that point. One executive recently said, “During the pandemic, we increased the speed of innovation by addressing new needs and promoting new thinking at a quicker pace.” Another added, “We removed red tape, flattened the hierarchy, and had SMEs come into the discussion to innovate and make decisions faster.” Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla captured this well in an interview about vaccine development: “The thing that scientists hate the most is bureaucracy. Innovation and bureaucracy are oil and water.” He explained that one of the first leadership strategies was to stop decisions going through multiple approval layers. “We had one meeting, we were all there, and we could all decide,” said Bourla. And of course, those meetings were virtual.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Dilts Marshall, “Working from home ‘doesn’t work for those who want to hustle’: JPMorgan CEO,” Reuters, May 4, 2021, reuters.com.

¹⁵ Claire Cain Miller, “Do chance meetings at the office boost innovation? There’s no evidence of it,” *The New York Times*, June 23, 2021, nyt.com.

At Zillow, nearly all employees will be remote, and people will come into the office as needed. Several times a year, teams will go to small offices set up for gathering. “The idea you can only be collaborative face-to-face is a bias,” said Chief People Officer Dan Spaulding. “And, I’d ask, ‘How much creativity and innovation have been driven out of the office because you weren’t in the insider group, you weren’t listened to, you didn’t go to the same places as the people in positions of power were gathering?’”¹⁶

Leaders who focus on the process, tools, and climate for creativity, regardless of whether people are in the same room, completely distributed, or hybrid, are those who will enable the most innovation.

Optimize innovation

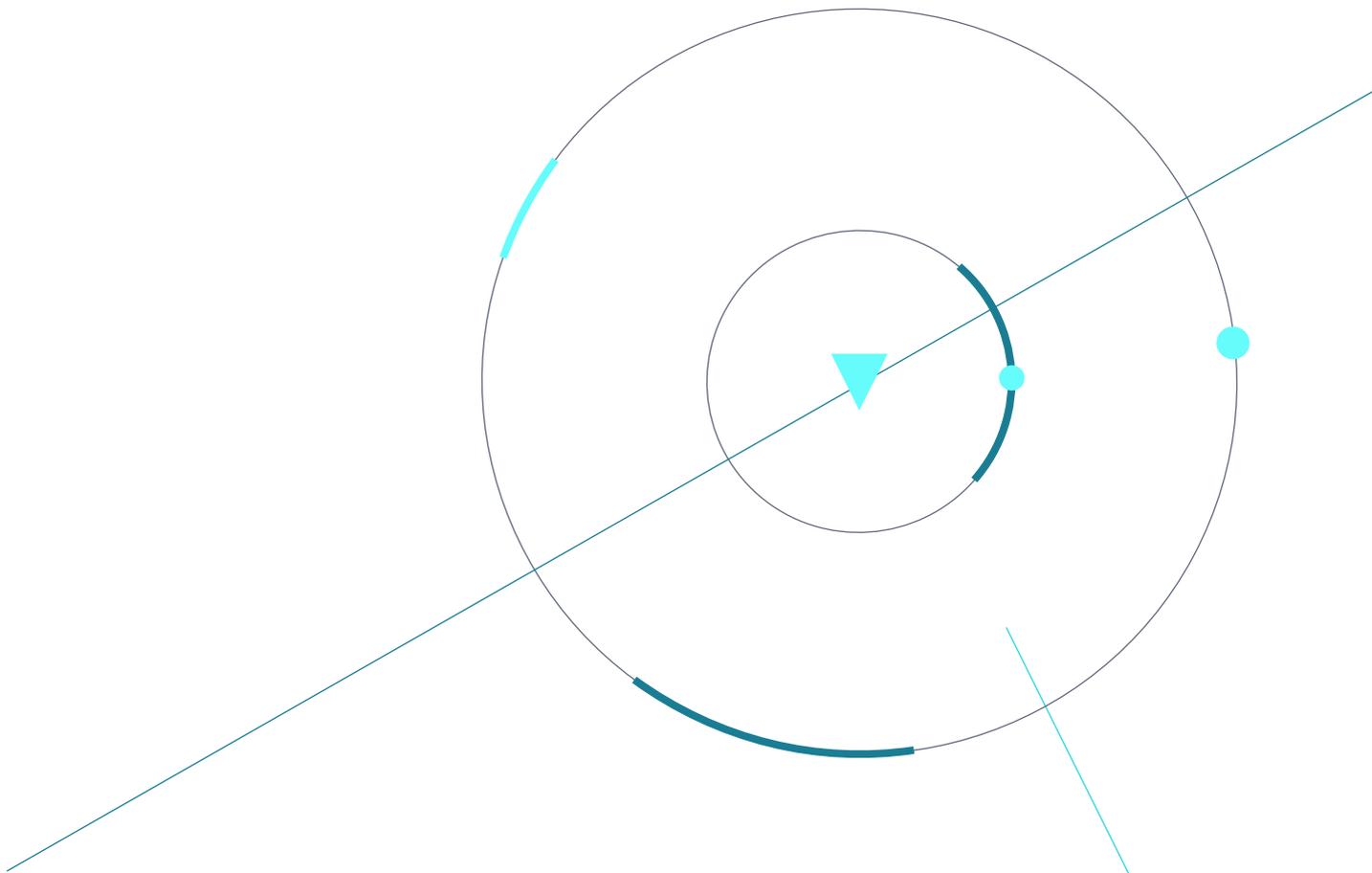
- Challenge old models and innovation assumptions. Take a fresh look at what work configurations, including remote ones, really stimulate creative disruption and design thinking.
- Design new innovation spaces and methods for in-person and virtual brainstorming. Share, piggyback, and expand perspectives on business, customer, and team needs in real time.
- Source ideas via virtual hackathons; commission dispersed teams to do design thinking and experiment with new team configurations that appeal to different creative styles.
- Digitize problem-solving processes and tools. Encourage adoption and training on multiple platforms and technologies to maximize digital dexterity—and the collaboration it supports—across the workforce.
- Encourage diversity of thought, talent, and teams both in terms of composition and tone of brainstorming sessions. Seek out contrarians to whom you have more access virtually. Intentionally use digital tools to ensure every innovation team is diverse.

¹⁶ Claire Cain Miller, “Do chance meetings at the office boost innovation? There’s no evidence of it,” *The New York Times*, June 23, 2021, nyt.com.

Optimize: Inclusive, agile, and digital strategies to address future-of-work paradoxes

One of the clear conclusions from our work over the past 18 months is that leading in a hybrid working environment is very difficult. The new workplace dynamics have ratcheted up the uncertainty and ambiguity in a world that was already complex. Yet the ability to lead hybrid teams is not only necessary for most leaders but will be a differentiating capability from now on.

Laszlo Bock, CEO of Humu, former head of people at Google, and member of Heidrick & Struggles' board, said, "The return to work is an example of what I call an "imprintable moment." When a bird is born, it bonds with the first creatures it sees and quickly adopts their traits and habits. Employees similarly "imprint" during key events like their first job interview or first day as a manager. The return to work is an imprintable moment that will set the tone for how employees view their workplace for years to come. This moment is even more important now given the high percentage of employees who were hired during the pandemic, and that many others are said to be thinking about quitting."¹⁷



¹⁷ Laszlo Bock, "Ex-Google HR chief: Why returning to the office could be a 'recipe for disaster,'" *Fast Company*, July 7, 2021, [fastcompany.com](https://www.fastcompany.com).

Inclusive cultures, agile leaders, and digital dexterity are more vital than ever. Among a continuum of options from work anywhere to a full return to the office, leaders will need to find their organization's optimal landing point, balance the paradoxes, and continuously learn and develop their chosen model with their teams. Leaders who take the time to do this well—continuously listen to their people, find the model that will support their organizational purpose and strategy, and think about building on gains rather than returning to the past—will retain the productivity, efficiency, and silo-busting, of remote work as well as the culture, collaboration, and innovation they have long prized.

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