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**Preparing Manufacturing for a New-Normal Hybrid Workplace**

October 2021 | Written by Marcus Barber

If there's a single constant in manufacturing, it is change. Mostly that change is steady, and constant and we can plan for it - new industry regulations, changing technology for production, shifting customer demands and so on. And then there's change that is slightly more surprising seen in developments that have been years in the making and yet perhaps hidden from view until it is ready for launch. The recent 'fossil fuel free' steel produced in Sweden is one such example.

The current workplace buzz is around the idea of a 'hybrid' workforce and surprisingly to me, this comes as a 'surprise' to many.

The Hybrid workforce refers to the idea of your staff working from the office location on some days, and likely from home on others. This purported new model of working is, in reality, nothing new at all but what is new is the sheer scale of demand. Workplace flexibility, job sharing, sales staff working out of their cars, satellite offices, '3rd Place' work zones, Wi-Fi enabled laptops, return to work models and more are all part of the idea of a hybrid workplace. The reality is that 'office workers' working anywhere but in an office is far from new.

Hybrid Everywhere

Let's talk about scale and what it means for how you will be nudged, cajoled or willingly embrace a Hybrid Workforce and some key steps to make it successful.

If you have seen any of my presentations on workplace design and employee engagement, you'll know that for over a decade I've been encouraging a work from home flexibility for the *majority* of your office staff. Now through this enforced adjustment, businesses of all types have discovered that:

* people working from home can be productive, and
* in many cases productivity has gone up

And now this social experiment means that polite requests and outright demands to work from home are the new normal.

Embracing a Hybrid Future

In the strategic futures realm, the question that emerges is 'if that, then what?'. For Manufacturers the question becomes 'if we now know our staff can work from home effectively (that), what do we need to do to ensure that it works for them and works for us?' (what).

Which leads to some specific operational and strategic questions:

* What does it mean for us to have part of our workforce off site?
* How do we manage them?
* How do we ensure staff are productive, engaged, supported, and connected to their colleagues?
* What risks exist and what are the benefits?

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Hybrid Pushback

What I find rather interesting are the calls for a return to the office as if something has been broken. That call can only come from one direction - the direction of people who prefer to work in an office surrounded by people. The fascinating part of that call is that it ignores the decades of challenges faced by people who prefer to NOT work surrounded by people. Some suggest that in Australia, it is likely to be a slight MAJORITY of your office staff who have that preference. The appalling 'rats in a maze' Open Office design platforms may well have something to do with that - noisy, busy, distracting, intrusive. For some.

In Queensland a few years ago on behalf of a Human Resources industry client I presented to around 150 HR directors from across Brisbane discussing the workplace of the future. I asked how many people worked from home at least part of their week or month (All), how many enabled their top management to do the same (almost all), middle management (some), and everyday workforce (few). I then asked why they did not allow the everyday workforce to work from home? Key response: 'trust'.

Which stepped them straight into my observation that the issue of trust rests on the flawed management model based on the Josiah Wedgwood Pottery factory model developed in the 1760s. That model saw an unskilled workforce brought into a centralised setting, where an 'overseer' would literally stand behind the worker giving instructions on how to perform a task and then eventually, to stand behind them to ensure that task was being done effectively.

Today will call that 'overseer' role 'management'. Simply put, despite all other advances in manufacturing techniques and raw materials and design, we have not matured our management of people beyond that developed in a 1760s pottery factory.

Hybrid Effectiveness

For Hybrid to be effective you're likely to need a 'bellows' approach - breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out. Hybrid means for some, they're full time in the office, for others, full time at home, and others are a mix of a few days in a few days out.

And that model requires flexibility of thinking at the senior manager level, at the Human Resources design model and in the supporting platforms gained through your IT department. This little anomaly has shown such moves are (with some angst) doable and ultimately effective. But for 'Hybrid' to become the norm, what it needs most is an upskilling of Line Managers and team leaders who have gotten comfortable with 'overseeing' staff based on close physical proximity. And imagine if they were a manager who insisted on forcing workers to travel one or two hours each way EVERY DAY in a stressful travel environment. I don't know about you but an hour or two in bumper-to-bumper traffic or 50 minutes crammed into a steel can on wheels standing up does nothing for my readiness to concentrate on work.

There's a couple of steps here you might like to try:

* Let people work from home as much as they want
* Track performance consistently. Your staff will show you how suited they are
* Bring your people together frequently to maintain connection
* Train your line managers and those 'overseer' positions in what I refer to as Objectives Based Management, (also a session I run for middle manager positions.)

It is at the 'overseer' lever that you will gain the biggest shift in performance. Your staff can be trusted. You just need a model that catches up with the 21stC

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Hybrid Impact

You'll want to track not only work output (quality and timeliness) but also psycho-social factors. How well does your staff member feel about working from home? What must you do to keep them feeling they are part of the team? How do you ensure your online video chats are about connections, not just workflows? What should people do when they come together in the same location now that it is less usual?

You'll need to pay attention to what Occupational Hygienists call 'suitability of conditions' in terms of a home office set up. Work from home, for a number of non-work reasons, may be unsuitable so do not force people to work from home if they prefer not to and you do not need to.

By updating your Objectives Based Management skill sets for line managers you will see a major shift towards productive output and away from activity orientated tasking. That's where your true impact will be.



Your HR department will need to appreciate that a hybrid workplace may open up doors to remote workers who could be anywhere in the State, Country or world and give you access to skill sets you thought were in short supply. Your CEO or CFO will need to start thinking about costs related to Office space rental.

Calls by some for workers to return en masse to city office locations are to my mind, delusional. That is not going to happen. Vast expanses of office spaces will go unrented and eventually be converted into other uses. Workers don’t like driving two hours every day in slow moving traffic. Workers don’t like cramming into train carriages, trams, and buses. Workers *do* like the flexibility of starting tasks and ending them as needed and many, many enjoy the ability to settle into a quiet space and concentrate on what you want them to do without the distractions around them. For many (not all) this enforced work from home has been a gift.

Your current office rents are a direct negative cost to your bottom line, not only in potentially unneeded footprint, but also a negative drain on true productivity. It is the outcome you achieve, not the activity by which you achieve it, that matters most.

Hybrid is a new normal. It's going to be a lot better than the old one

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Looking Up Feeling Good

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