HR's Guide to Employee Experience in a Hybrid Workforce

In a hybrid workplace, change management and your tech defines the employee experience

All eyes are on employee experience as companies move to hybrid work environments.

Last year, The Great Reshuffle came into focus and put the employee experience at the top of many corporate priorities this year. In January, the U.S. Labor Department shared that 4.3 million people quit their jobs, a level near the record set in November 2021. Contrast this with more than 11.3 million job openings, and organizations must emphasize culture and employee experience.

Two years into the pandemic, some companies are announcing new return-to-the-office plans. Still, the number of people going in (or the number of people in the office) will look extraordinarily different than before COVID. Adding to this People team pressure is the rise of hybrid work environments.

According to LinkedIn insights, in March 2020, only 1 in 67 paid U.S. jobs on LinkedIn offered remote work. That number exploded to nearly 1 in 6 at the end of 2021. As a result, enterprise organizations are more distributed than ever before, yet employees near a workplace are once again saying hello again to offices and face-to-face time.

So, the big question many leaders face now is
—

how can we build and maintain an employee experience in a hybrid environment?

These new needs, including establishing norms around communication, collaboration, connection, and more, go beyond your traditional HR tech stack. And while technology isn't the only solution, it will play an essential role given its innate inclusivity that doesn't rely on physical location to deliver value.

In this guide, we'll explore three critical challenges in the hybrid employee experience, help you identify how to remove these blockers before they become retention barriers, and share proven approaches to building a more agile and compelling employee experience.

1 Mitigating the "we're here, you're on Zoom" mentality

In hybrid work environments, some employees work remotely, and others work from a central location or office. The challenge? Leadership is usually part of the office group.

This "we're here, you're on Zoom" mindset creates several adverse downstream effects. One is an unintended hierarchy with co-located workers on the top and remote colleagues on the bottom – proximity bias is real.

Proximity bias is the idea that employees with close physical proximity to their team and company leaders will be perceived as better workers and ultimately find more success in the workplace than their remote counterparts. That bias often looks like on-site employees getting more time with the C-Suite and having better perks. In contrast, remote employees may get left out of meetings, inadvertently silenced on calls, and potentially overlooked for emerging leadership opportunities.

It may be challenging to understand the real needs of hybrid / remote work. Remote work arrangements might be required or preferred for remote workers close to a workplace. The proximity bias can feel even deeper for these workers when singled out for not coming into the office. Fittingly, proximity bias is now executives' number one concern concerning flexible work, according to a January 2022 Slack survey.

To interrupt proximity bias, leaders must develop, effectively communicate, and uphold expectations for coming into the office for everyone – including leadership. Consider a similar situation, unlimited PTO. If I take a day off, but my manager talks about working all weekend, I don't know what is right. Should I work on my days off? Employees follow the behaviors of their managers, which in this case, could lead to dissatisfaction, burnout, and a sense of overwhelm. Interrupting proximity bias works the same way – spell it out for employees and demonstrate it by displaying behaviors you want your organization to follow.

Five ways to prevent proximity bias and foster an inclusive hybrid workplace

Bias awareness.

Understanding you have a set of beliefs, as do others, and how these show up in the organization is critical to eliminating them from your business and creating an inclusive employee experience. Some ways you can do this are through unconscious bias training, 360 feedback systems, focusing on facts first, asking people you trust to point them out, and consistently collecting and analyzing workplace data before and when people return to the office.

Ensure all employees have an equal presence in hybrid meetings.

If there is a remote participant (even one), all participants must join the meeting virtually. Like during the pandemic, this puts everyone on an equal playing field.

Default to asynchronous communications.

Remove the fear of missing out and ensure important details aren't discussed without everyone contributing to the conversation.

Commit to using digital tools to help build social connections and community.

Co-worker relationships provide the catalyst that enables business alignment, emotional commitment, and personal accountability within a company's workforce. Trust, respect, and empathy is cultivated through connection.

Intentionally add employee experience to your HR tech stack.

Today HR tech is moving away from just being a human capital management system that controls internal processes and procedures. Many organizations are now looking for new HR tech aimed at employee experience and satisfaction. People teams recognize the need for HR applications that span the entire employee lifecycle, including onboarding and career management, to benefit utilization and mental, physical, social, and financial health. Missing one of these critical pieces means you miss the full opportunity to deliver for co-located and remote employees.

2 Remote worker isolation, overwork, and burnout

Remote work anxiety has become an unforeseen side effect of hybrid work models.

In a recent survey by Breeze, almost half of remote workers said they have been dealing with anxiety as other employees have started returning to work in person at their companies. Of those, 66 percent said remote fear or FOMO had hurt their productivity or efficiency at work, and more than half of respondents feel symptoms of depression.

Although most of us have been remote for two years, remote work in hybrid work environments for many is absent of an intentionally designed support system. The shift to transactional-only conversations, a deleted 1:1 meeting, and a lack of perceived mentorship contributes to anxiety. To bring a level of control, remote employees may feel they need to exert additional effort to be productive. Sending one last email, staying online all hours of the day and night, and not setting boundaries are common behaviors that can lead to burnout.

Leaders need to understand how remote workers perceive their actions and behaviors. For example, there is a fine line between thanking someone publicly for going above and beyond to help in a situation and making it feel like the only way to be rewarded at work is to prioritize business over life.

4 Tips for Making Remote Onboarding More Inclusive

Get your copy

Four ways to support remote workers in an inclusive hybrid workplace

1. Prioritize where to focus energy.

There are many ways to reduce isolation, workload, and stress, but start small. Use employee surveys to help you determine a path forward and launch. Getting focused efforts launched will help show your commitment and move from words to action. It could be as simple as normalizing a virtual morning standup with remote and on-site employees. During these standups, peers can celebrate efforts, make work visible, ask questions, and leaders can quickly remove barriers and re-prioritize efforts to align to an average amount of work hours.

2. Rest ethic is as important as your work ethic.

At Virgin Pulse, we have unlimited PTO. Leaders commit to taking one week off a quarter, demonstrating the importance of unplugging. They support this commitment by engaging employees in dialogue before leaving and sharing how they completely removed laptop and work projects during this time. Similarly, walking meetings (remote and on-site) are encouraged to step away from screens and eliminate the need to share something for more organic conversations.

3. Positive affirmations.

Gallup's study on companies with the highest engagement levels found that employees who receive praise regularly increase their productivity, receive higher loyalty and satisfaction scores from customers, and are more likely to stay with their organization. A little thanks goes a long way!

4. Give everyone tools to integrate work and life.

Think of your wellbeing program as part of your HR tech stack. You wouldn't operate your business without payroll or time & attendance, so why not wellbeing? Give your entire workforce the tools to empower employees to prioritize themselves, create social connections, and celebrate wins within and outside the workplace. As part of your overall People and HR strategy, wellbeing platforms can also help you build your culture, bring all your benefits into one place for maximum utilization, and help support your growth with new perks or partners without adding the stress of procurement or vendor management.

3

Owning organizational change before it owns you

If you are not re-evaluating and restructuring for organizational success in the new hybrid work environment, you are swimming against the current.

Change is rarely easy. The more extensive and complex a business is, the more challenging it is to implement change effectively. When the need for change becomes apparent, many enterprise People teams turn to the guidance of the Prosci ADKAR Model, McKinsey 7-S model, and Lewin's change management model, to name a few. These systems provide

methodologies that emphasize the importance of centering your employees on how you plan and implement a change through clear, effective communication and empathy.

Right now, this might feel like a good step forward; it might also feel highly overwhelming. We understand. We encourage organizations to think about change as healing vs. hard. By reframing the story, People teams can make intentional choices to help transition people, processes, and resources to thrive.

It's time to activate change.

To build a diverse and inclusive workplace, companies need to develop fair, equitable processes and realize women leaders' contributions each day. More significant investment in DEI data collection, formal mentorship, employee recognition, mental and emotional health, and clarity on advancement processes will better equip companies to achieve the change they say they're seeking.
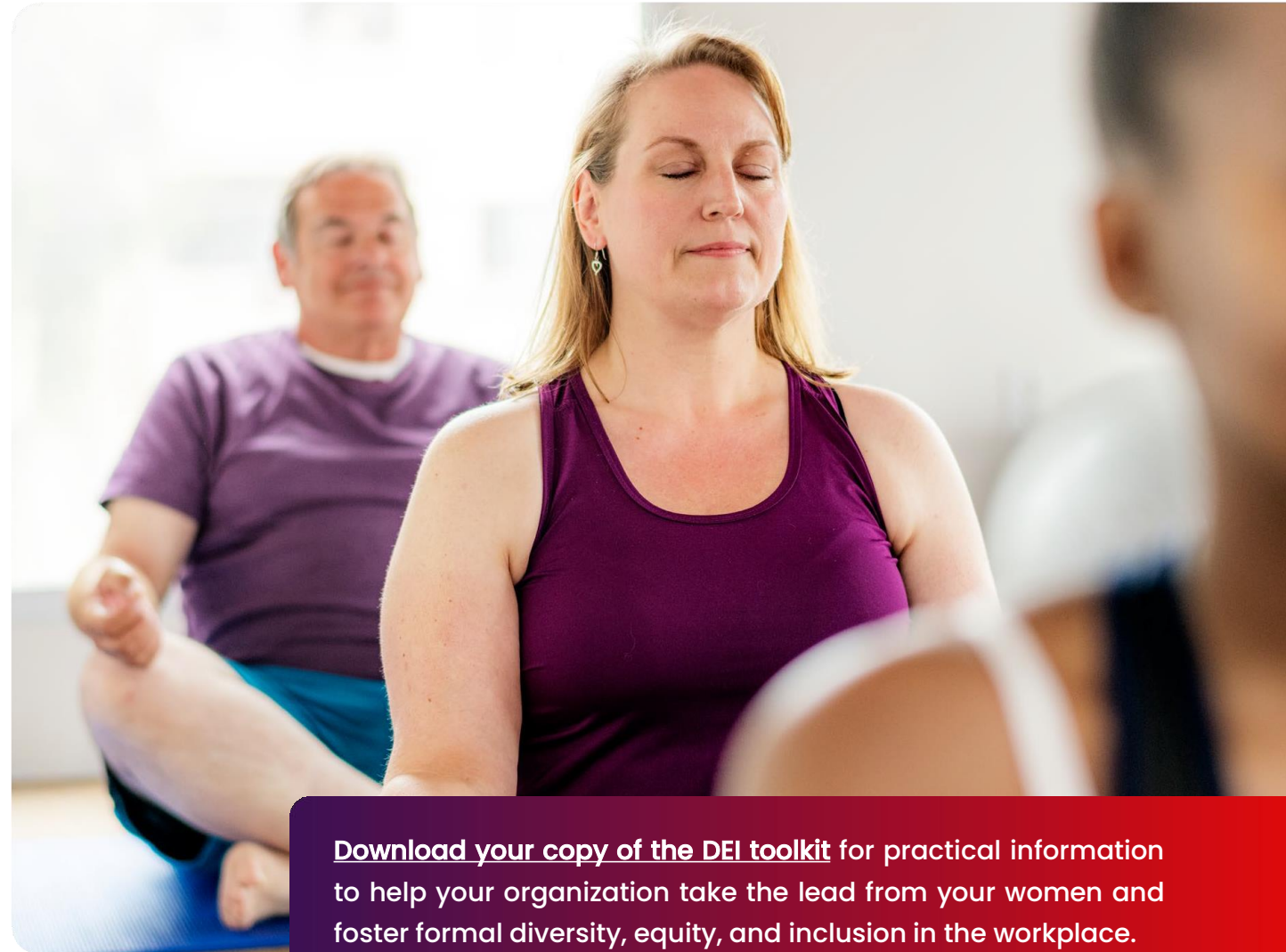
Download your copy of the DEI toolkit for practical information to help your organization take the lead from your women and foster formal diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace.

Three ways to own change and foster an inclusive hybrid workplace

1

Get buy-in from senior leadership by connecting employee experience to business objectives

Thinking about organizational change through the lens of your employee experience may feel new to senior leaders. A simple way to secure leadership buy-in is to identify problems in the business and explain how your employee experience will address them. For example, perhaps your company is experiencing high turnover. Engaging employees for feedback on critical milestones in their employee journey can help you overcome areas of impact you can see in your HR analytics but don't know why.

Additional ways to integrate change and experience may include ensuring all new hires within the quarter are included in a social healthy habit challenge to build relationships or have a different member of leadership send a personal message each month. Small changes in your employee experience that connect to business problems to solve can help you get senior leadership buy-in.

2

Power of transparency

Reflect on your transparency and communication practices from early in the pandemic. What was successful? What could have been better? Use this as a basis for organizational communications in the future.

One crucial lesson learned during the pandemic was that leaders don't need all the answers, but employees want to know that leadership is aware and working on it. Employees expect to be included in decisions that impact them and given the ability to provide feedback. When things are opaque, it feeds rumors, assumptions are made, and trust is impacted. The power of transparency helps to create clear direction forward for your organization.

3

Use employee wellbeing as your organizational superpower

The wellbeing of your employees isn't a checklist, nor is change management. Both are business strategies to increase productivity, engagement, and overall health.

When it comes to enacting change in a hybrid work environment, a full-stack health and wellbeing platform can help you emphasize the employees, not just the work environment. Your employees are your most valuable asset – build your thriving community. Choose a wellbeing program that treats employees as individual human beings, helping them to navigate all the different pieces and parts of their work-life integration, supporting them at a personal level.

Leaning in on this superpower can help you continue to support all aspects of change while providing all the pieces and parts employees need to build resilience, understanding and social connections during times of uncertainty.
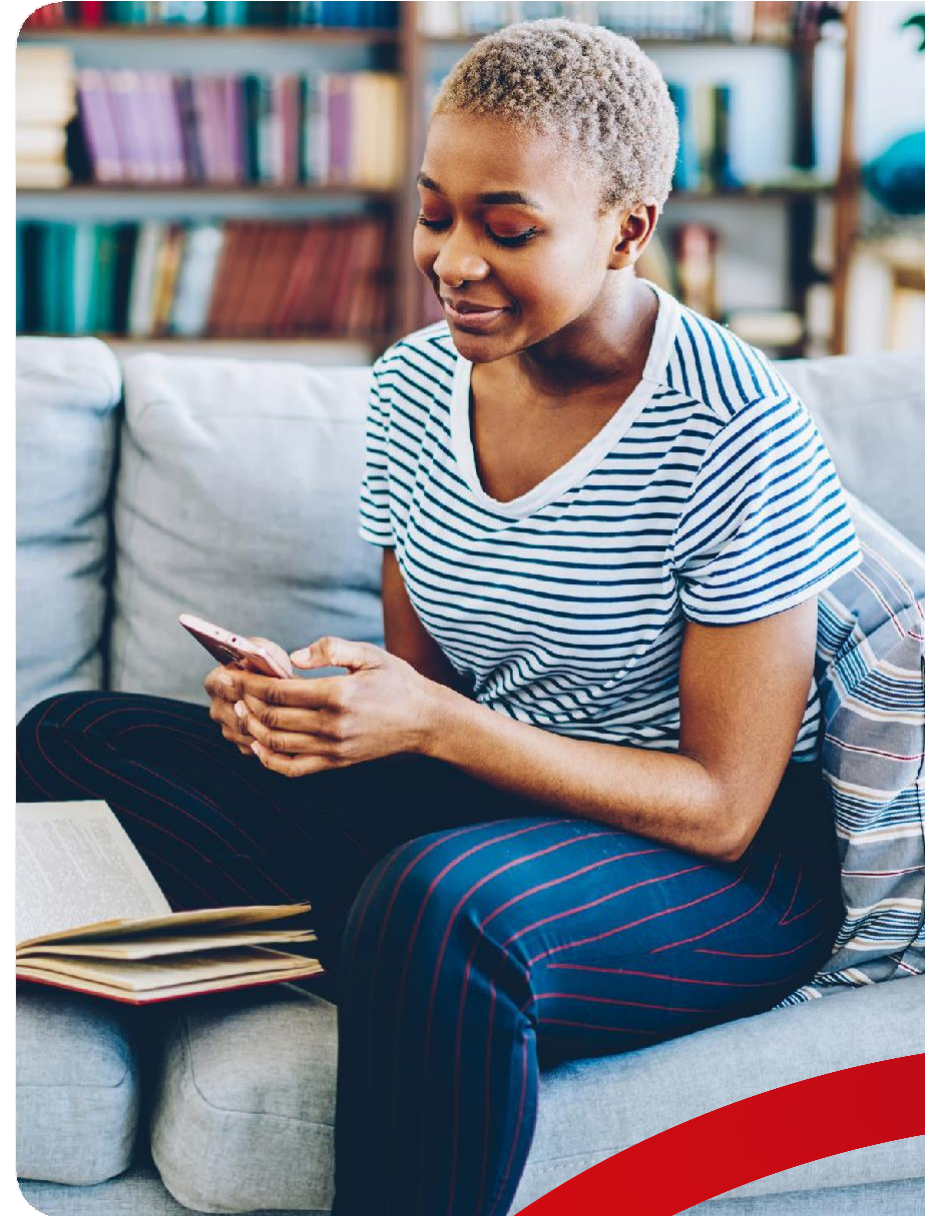
About Virgin Pulse

Virgin Pulse is the leading digital-first health and wellbeing company that empowers organizations across the globe to activate populations, improve health outcomes, and reduce spend in an era of accelerating cost and complexity. Virgin Pulse's Homebase for Health® connects data, people and technology to deliver high-tech, human-touch experiences that engage and reward individual journeys. Virgin Pulse impacts over 100 million people across 190 countries by helping Fortune 500, national health plans and many other organizations change lives – and businesses – for good. For more tips and insights, connect with us on **Twitter** or **LinkedIn**.

Trusted by people-first organizations that use Virgin Pulse to help power their employee experience and company culture.

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