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employees are worried about returning to the office — in whatever form it takes. This is where leadership matters. Go to your team with a clear plan and a positive ...

Paul McDonald • Jul. 01, 2021



What will offices look like after the pandemic? It's a good question that raises an even better one: After a year when teams have worked remotely, how much of post-pandemic life will take place in an office at all.

Few accounting practices will abandon the office altogether. Offices facilitate close collaboration and coherent organizational culture. However, finance managers will

also want to safeguard any efficiencies that rose from the pandemic, such as reduced

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improved their work-life balance. Others worry about isolation and wish to rejoin their teams in person as soon as possible.

The most striking statistic is that only 25% of employees want a total return to the office. Furthermore, 1 in 3 professionals said they would quit if they couldn't work remotely at least part of the time. For most practice managers, this means a return to business as usual isn't in the cards.

On the other hand, only 26% of workers want to work from home full-time. Though drawbacks to not being in the office cited in the survey include weaker relationships with coworkers and stunted career growth.

Nearly half of respondents (49%) favor a hybrid schedule, with a mix of in-office and remote working days. This approach would help people maintain their work-life balance while also allowing for essential face-to-face interactions.

How to build a hybrid team

A hybrid work schedule presents managers with a new set of challenges. Communication breakdowns pose a risk, and you won't be able to please everyone all of the time. However, you can minimize disruption by following a few basic steps:

1. Define your expectations for remote workers

Remote employees have a great deal of flexibility. For example, they can adopt a [windowed working pattern](#), doing, for instance, a few hours in the morning and the rest of their shift in the evening.

It's crucial to agree to these patterns in advance. Be clear about availability requirements, daily targets and the way employees report back to you. Once you've

set expectations, people should be free to arrange their schedules however they like

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It's a good idea to map out these requirements before you negotiate schedules with individual employees. Decide how many people you need in the office each day, and make a note of any professionals who are required on-site at specific times.

3. Plan team meetings

Whether it's a five-minute daily standup or a quarterly strategy review, team meetings are vital forums for sharing best practices, analyzing problems and brainstorming ideas.

Ideally, you'll have an agreed time where everyone is on-site, and this will be your window for team huddles. Failing that, you'll need to decide between holding hybrid meetings, with [remote workers calling in to the conference room](#), or continuing with all-virtual get-togethers. The latter is worth considering if you're worried about remote team members feeling disconnected from their office-based peers.

4. Keep reviewing the schedule

Hybrid working will be a new and potentially jarring experience for many. Check in with everyone regularly, and ask questions like:

- Do you feel empowered to complete your duties when working remotely?
- Do you feel included in all relevant team conversations?
- Does technology help or hinder you, and are there any tools that would enable you to communicate and collaborate more effectively?

5. Work with a talent solutions firm

Maintaining a hybrid team is as challenging as building one. Sooner or later, you'll need to hire new staff — a time-consuming process that will impact the balance of your team.

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- **Engaging** — Talk to the employee about their concerns. Are they worried about the risks of being among people? Or is it a work-life balance issue?
- **Supporting** — Sometimes the employee might just need extra information, such as your approach to vaccinations or worker safety measures. Be patient, show empathy and don't discount someone else's fears just because you don't share them.
- **Accommodating** — If you can adjust your schedule to support an employee's needs without inconveniencing their colleagues, do it. It's a small price to pay for keeping a valued professional on board.

The last year-plus has been tough on everyone, so don't be surprised if your employees are worried about returning to the office — in whatever form it takes. This is where leadership matters. Go to your team with a clear plan and a positive mindset, and there's every chance you'll inspire them to carry their pandemic-era adaptability and resilience into the new normal.

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Paul McDonald is senior executive director at talent solutions and recruiting firm [Robert Half](#). He writes and speaks frequently on hiring, workplace, leadership and career-management topics. Over the course of more than 35 years in the staffing industry, McDonald has advised thousands of company leaders and job seekers on how to hire and get hired.

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