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Debunking the lazy leader's argument against remote work

Leaders can mitigate the disadvantages of people working offsite while leveraging the advantages to the benefit of more people and resources across the company.

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BY NABIL BUKHARI

To be hybrid or not to be hybrid? While this may seem to be the only question in discussions around returning to the office (RTO), such an oversimplification ignores a more important question: How can leaders adapt to changing work dynamics to benefit their companies and workforce?

If remote work options are the way of the future, leaders should evaluate how to best harness the upsides—like a better work-life balance for happier employees and the advantages of global talent forming cognitively and geographically diverse teams—while mitigating new challenges in team building and relationship development. From where I sit as a CTO, ordering people back to the office without properly weighing the pros and cons of remote work is just lazy leadership.

Through a critical enterprise-wide analysis, leaders can mitigate the disadvantages of people working offsite while leveraging the advantages to the benefit of more people and resources across the company.

WALKING THROUGH THE RISK MITIGATION PROCESS

The Industrial Revolution transformed the labor ecosystem, and over the next 250 years, it evolved, undergoing massive changes and improvements along the way. The work ecosystem is again transforming as remote and hybrid

options become part of the mainstream workplace. At times, so much newness and complexity will feel chaotic, and leaders can hardly expect to solve every issue overnight. You can, however, guide its development.

To start, pull the conversation down to a practical level and explore the benefits of hybrid solutions. Take an inventory of what works well and the potential challenges of remote work across the company. Then, rank those pros and cons in terms of importance and go down that list, determining which of the three main means of mitigation would best address it:

- Update processes, from onboarding to optimizing team performance;
- Retrain leaders, especially front-end managers, on how to deal with remote teams; and/or,
- Leverage AI to make people more productive.

Invite collaboration from multiple levels of leadership, including the C-suite and frontline managers. This can help establish a more inclusive and diverse understanding of challenges and potential solutions, while also fostering a sense of ownership and accountability throughout the organization. For it to really work, however, leaders need to get comfortable with chaos.

GUIDED CHAOS LEADERSHIP THEORY

My theory of management is guided chaos—one person can neither dictate from the top nor allow the grassroots to execute in isolation. Leaders bring everyone together to generate many ideas and then guide those ideas to execution. When blending top-down and bottom-up feedback, expect chaos. If I had 500 teams and each one came up with five ideas, we would have 2,500 ideas. The key is how we *guide* the chaos.

When we ran an enterprise-level analysis on remote work optimization at our company, we found massive overlaps in some issues, and a few that came out of left field. Effectively mitigating these inefficiencies was more than a simple matter of choosing between remote or not—it required a multifaceted and dynamic approach that carefully considered the complexities and challenges involved at all levels. Coordinating the job was chaotic. We could have buckled under so much feedback and reflexively issued a back-to-the-office mandate, not allowing that chaotic part to happen. But this would have been a mistake.

To balk at this scale of data as an excuse to order people back to the office is another example of lazy leadership—a failure to look for patterns and identify priority items that would reap the most benefits in favor of an easy answer.

Just ask workers at Amazon, Apple, and Gap what happens when leaders issue RTO mandates without considering the people most impacted by their decisions—those people start walking out. By guiding the chaos rather than restricting it, leaders can end up with more inclusive solutions and happier teams.

SMALL RISK, BIG COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Instead of pushing RTO mandates when uncertainty grows chaotic, some leaders are finding ways to let their remote staff stay remote, and they are reaping the benefits.

Before the pandemic, only 20% of Allstate employees worked remotely. By May 2023, 75% worked from home and 24% were hybrid. When 95% of their employees requested a

flexible work environment in the summer of 2020, the company listened. Allstate has since seen a 30% increase in candidate diversity, and internal applicants for leadership roles have increased 456%. Similarly, since Autodesk rolled out its hybrid-first work culture, the company has received a 58% increase in job applications and more diverse job seekers.

At our company, the hybrid model we implemented called "flex work" focuses on skill up-leveling and feedback for continuous iteration and improvement. This model has allowed us to increase the value and size of our company.

Instead of issuing RTO mandates, leaders should recognize how remote options offer a competitive advantage—access to larger talent markets and different economies, and global teams potentially providing a buffer against geopolitical instability affecting an organization's operations and market entry. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, a well-executed hybrid work model can contribute to a company's success.

THE WAY OF THE FUTURE

Mitigating the disadvantages of remote work will be a difficult process that takes time and requires science, some art, and a lot of focus on the human condition—but the shift has begun, and it is unstoppable. Leaders should be intentional in guiding its evolution to ensure they get the hybrid model right according to the unique needs of their company. They should assess function by function, team by team, whether or not they really need to have fully in-office teams, and remember it is not an either/or debate.

Establish a comprehensive understanding of the situation and its potential impact, and evaluate the overall desired

outcome rather than simply taking the path of least resistance. This will result in more informed decision-making as the remote ecosystem continues to shape our future.

Nabil Bukhari, CTO at Extreme Networks, *fosters tech democratization and positive social impact through visionary leadership.*

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