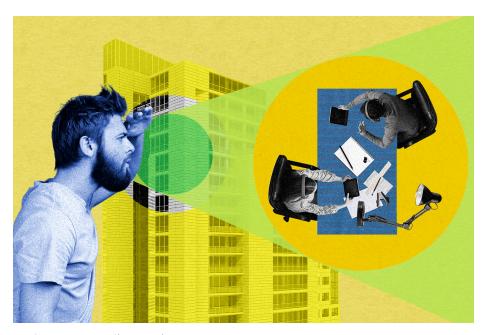COLUMN

When Hybrid Work Strategy Aggravates 20-Somethings

Younger workers want virtual *and* in-person touch points with the managers just above them. Here's how to do hybrid better — with to-office mandates.

Brian Elliott and Amanda Schneider • June 20, 2024

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Gen Z employees — workers in their early to late 20s — often get painted in anecdotes about their supposed lack of engagement in the workplace, their embrace of working from their living rooms, or their

reluctance to commute to offices and interact face to face. The reality is a lot different: Research shows that compared with employees of all other ages, 20-somethings are the *most* likely to want to come into the office two or three days a week. They're comfortable with hybrid options and working from home, but they're also hungry for in-person socialization and the kind of learning that comes from frequent interaction with experienced colleagues.

This is a challenge for companies that are still trying to work out the best types of workplaces, policies, and models for interaction to support a thriving culture — and, perhaps most importantly, serve the learning and development needs of younger generations. Getting generations aligned on how to support each other's needs and drive better organizational outcomes will take more than simple one-size-fits-all policy solutions.

Natural connection is boosted by being in the same room, but with the right technology, it can also happen online — an especially natural fit for the youngest employees. Instead of either/or, we need a both/and approach.

What this means for companies is that they need to invest across an entanglement of training and support, technology, redesigned workspaces, and two-way communication that meets workers where they are IRL (in real life). It means creating both digital and physical environments that promote connection, collaboration, and productivity. And it means that leaders need to get into those environments themselves. This is absolutely necessary to nurture the youngest cohort of workers and help build organizations that will thrive in the future.

Physical Spaces and Policies Can Better Serve All Workers

In our roles as researchers and advisers, we see many organizations where the younger workers are coming into the office, but the middle layer of leaders just above them is missing. Attendance is often driven by different life stages and caregiving demands. What workers need in terms of work-life flexibility can be different across generations.

One of us (Brian) cofounded Future Forum, a think tank launched in 2020 and backed by Slack that conducts a quarterly survey of over 10,000 desk workers globally. For years, that research has shown that the youngest cohort of workers is the least likely to want jobs that are either fully remote or fully in-office. While 78% of Gen Z employees say they can work effectively remotely, 86% also report that the primary ways they forge new professional connections involve face-to-face experiences.

Companies understand that younger workers want and need mentors, but forcing front-line and middle managers to be in offices with them three or four days a week to provide face-to-face interaction hasn't worked.

The first reason for that
is that front-line
managers are the most
burned-out employees.
They often carry both
individual workloads and the job of leading, frequently for the first time. The second reason is that teams and their managers are more distributed geographically than they used to be. At Microsoft, for instance, the percentage of teams all in the same location dropped from 61% before the COVID-19 pandemic to just 27% today. Front-line managers are leading people across different locations and time zones, not just across the floor of one building.

The risk of losing experienced leaders by imposing harsh sanctions is high. Recent research has shown that return-to-office mandates, and the lack of trust that they imply, lead to attrition in exactly the groups that everyone wants as moderators and coaches: high performers, more experienced employees, and executive leaders.

As one-size-fits-all mandates prove not to benefit companies or employees, some organizations are placing the burden on middle managers to decide what works best for their teams. But managers are being given little to no support: Seventy-five percent of companies haven't provided managers with any training on how to lead a distributed team. It's also clear from our conversations with hundreds of leaders in a variety of organizations that executives and managers can get stuck in ruts made by their own experience, believing that side-

by-side, in-person work is the only way new employees can connect and learn.

Companies Can Learn From Gen Z's Ease With Building Connections Online and IRL

To most senior leaders, culture and connections were built in the physical environment, and digital tools were all about productivity and efficiency. However, today we have two generations of digital natives with physical-digital fluidity. Culture, connections, and productivity all happen seamlessly in their "phygital" (physical + digital) worlds.

For example, Gen Z is used to a self-service approach to finding information. If they need to figure out how to create a pivot table in Excel, they don't ask a coworker; they go straight to YouTube. These insights were echoed in Amanda's work at ThinkLab, which conducted a six-month study comparing learning preferences across generations and found that Gen Z was more likely to use YouTube as a resource than any other generation. When they do want a personal consultation, Gen Z employees are not clear about the rules of engagement: They often hesitate to reach out to mentors and colleagues because they can't tell when they are available or don't want to bother them. This applies both to in-office settings *and* when working remotely and using digital tools like Slack or Teams. Members of Gen Z also don't want to look stupid and prefer to "do their homework" before seeking help.

But many companies are still firmly set in an apprentice model that favors extroverts and people who look and think like their managers, without having established appropriate ways to give employees of all ages and backgrounds deeper feedback over time. "The traditional workplace is set up to only do that mentorship and that culture-building in person," said Isabel Das, a technical designer at the architecture firm Gensler, in a recent podcast. "Until the way we work and the way we build culture in our offices can be translated to a virtual environment, there is that need and that push for younger generations to go into the office."

While we've had hundreds of years to develop generally accepted social norms in the physical world, we're still learning how to adapt those

practices to a hybrid world. Asynchronous ways of working and virtual tools can still feel clumsy. But building relationships online and making the most of asynchronous interactions is what Gen Z does so very well and so very naturally. And therein lies a clue to helping hybrid teams develop modern ways to connect today.

Tackling the Hybrid Work Challenge: Five Actionable Ideas

How do we handle these challenges, especially given that the majority of teams in many companies are now distributed across multiple cities and time zones? Leaders will need to invest in digital tools and physical environments that help promote connection, collaboration, and productivity. They will also need to look to their youngest workers to model how to use these options. Just as a fish doesn't know it's in water — it's just swimming — our youngest workers can provide a case study on how to reframe "the way it's always been done" for a new era. Here are five of the best ideas we've seen.

1. Build connections, culture, and mentorship opportunities digitally, not just physically. Connection today is multimodal. Leaders need to see culture-building as something that happens both in real time in person and in a digital environment. One way to help executives understand this is to compare it to trade shows: After you meet someone in person, the deeper relationship often builds in the virtual follow-up. In the same way, Gen Z is more likely not only to connect in the office but also to leverage digital tools (email, Slack/Teams, and text) to deepen connections and prompt new ones.

Having clear norms like digital office hours for managers (for example, 10 a.m.-11 a.m. Monday through Wednesday) helps younger teammates know when it's OK to knock on virtual doors for advice.

Leaders should empower Gen Z employees to create content and forums to "reverse-mentor" older colleagues, whether it's a lunch-and-learn program or demonstrating asynchronous video sharing. They can also encourage the use of communication platforms for culture-building: At one consulting firm, an employee's "sneakerheads" channel evolved from a small space for a few friends who collected the latest Nikes to a channel with thousands of employees from departments

around the globe. This new form of connection offers a means of building weak ties.

2. Invest in redesigning workplaces as hubs for connection. Open-office floor plans dedicated only to heads-down work don't fit the needs of most teams today. Spaces can be repurposed to support more collaborative, creative, and flexible work. Instead of simply shrinking floor plans to save on costs, engage teams to get their input on their design. Get multiple perspectives and test layouts before investing in large-scale changes.

This is where establishing a "shadow board" of Gen Z workers might have immediate benefit. When Gucci's sales were declining, it created a group of nonexecutive younger employees for leaders to consult with on strategic initiatives. Their input helped the company reframe its products and branding to connect with a younger demographic, and sales grew 136% in four years. Similarly, an internal group of younger employee advisers can share their own ideas about office design.

3. Encourage team-level norms. Norms, or team agreements, are guidelines for how a team should work together. Norms typically include an articulation of response-time expectations, the communication tools team members should use, why teams meet, and how often — such as monthly planning sessions for an engineering team or Tuesdays for pipeline review in a regional sales team. At a large financial services company that Brian supported, one element in all team norms was for managers to pick a standard "mentorship day" activity.

Norms are especially important to new employees, but there are huge benefits to involving everyone in creating them. Team members who regularly review their working norms are almost two-and-a-half times

less likely to leave their companies compared with other employees. Teams that set their work policies together have also been found to be more effective and happier at work.

4. Focus on measuring success based on outcomes, not activity or inputs. Management by walking around doesn't work when teams are distributed. Monitoring hours or keystrokes makes it worse: Employees spend their time gaming the system through coffee badging and using mouse jigglers.

To close the gap, focus on outcomes. Employees are most productive and engaged when they're given the flexibility and trust to manage their schedules and are judged based on the outcomes they've committed to. Companies can also leverage the entrepreneurial spirit and youthful energy of Gen Z by reframing goals for the company as challenges that they can help solve. Clarify the end goal, but leave gray space in how goals will be achieved. Then publicly and authentically reward progress toward those goals.

5. Train mid-level managers to communicate goals and expectations clearly. Front-line leaders who are at higher risk for burnout need tactical advice, training, and tools. The onus for making the workplace work better can't fall on managers alone.
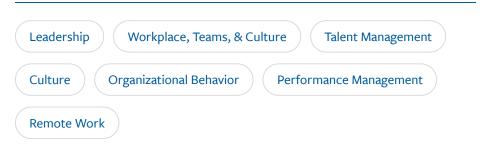
Especially in the hybrid era, managers should be coached in how to run a good one-on-one meeting. A weekly 30-minute session should, at its base, discuss what progress was made against goals the previous week, the current week's priorities, and the roadblocks the employee is experiencing. Regular meetups improve performance and provide room for dialogue about what's working and what's not.

Tools like personal user manuals can also bridge gaps in understanding between teammates. Knowing who's a morning person versus a night owl, or who likes to jump right into a brainstorming conversation versus having time to digest an idea, can help managers build more effective intergenerational teams.

If the thought of implementing all of our recommendations is overwhelming, leaders can start by talking with their own employees

and finding out which of them matter most. Having a dedicated group of people across human resources, IT, and communications who are focused on building more effective flexible work practices can go a long way toward applying these ideas and making organizations more effective.

Here's the bottom line: There has never been a more important moment to not just worry about the learning and development of Gen Z workers but to learn from them as well. This cohort is projected to account for about 27% of the workforce by 2025. Companies would do well to pull younger employees directly into the conversation and deeply engage them in figuring out the both/and of investing in in-person and digital collaboration and connection. While many organizations are still grappling with redefining the next normal in this hybrid world, the future is already unfolding at the companies where the next generations of leaders are already engaged.

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