

How to navigate career advancement in the new world of hybrid work

Experts share advice on how to stay visible amid a massive shift in the workplace model

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As Canada's COVID-19 vaccination rate climbs and provinces reopen further, companies are looking for staff to return to the office. But with a growing preference for hybrid working, many employees are wondering how to navigate career advancement in a new work environment.

According to a survey released in May by KPMG, 63 per cent of Canadians want their physical workplace back. But this does not necessarily mean a full return to in-person working. Instead, 77 per cent of Canadians embrace the flexibility of hybrid work – working partly from home and partly in the office – and most of them want this model to be the new standard.

Stephanie Bai, a digital intern at Toronto-based *Broadview Magazine*, is one of them.

While Ms. Bai personally wants to return to the office full-time because she misses the connections that can be more easily formed in person, she says she would prefer a hybrid model for work in general. She points to its benefits for different workers, such as those who have to manage child care or have a long commute.

But this widespread interest also prompts concerns among workers about how their employers would handle a transition to hybrid work. In particular, the KPMG survey says 49 per cent of Canadians worry that their desire to work remotely would put their career at a disadvantage.

"It's equally clear that Canadians have a lot of concerns about how that will work," said Doron Melnick, partner and national leader of KPMG's People and Change practice, in a statement.

"For many organizations, it's uncharted territory."

Leadership experts and career strategists say they have also heard these concerns. In turn, they offer strategies to stay visible, as well as manage negotiations and promotions, amid remote and hybrid working.

Among their most common advice is to overcommunicate, whether it be through e-mail or internal communications plat-



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forms such as Slack.

Even in settings that often guarantee face-to-face interactions such as meetings, experts say it's still important to announce your presence during them. Ms. Bai says she has been following this rule since starting her virtual internship in May, in which she would challenge herself to speak up at least two or three times during meetings.

"The first thing to acknowledge is that out of sight, out of mind is very much a real thing," says Chanèle McFarlane, a Toronto-based career strategist. "It's important to ensure that you are not having any long periods of time going by where you're not talking to anybody."

Ms. McFarlane adds that following this advice could also mean having virtual coffee chats or reaching out to colleagues outside your immediate team – practices that not only make you more visible, but also build new relationships.

Similarly, Vancouver-based workplace and leadership expert Michelle Ray suggests playing host to co-working meetings with colleagues, which she says will lessen feelings of isolation and allow you to "take the lead in a visible way."

"Self-leadership is all about

your character," Ms. Ray says.

"So, when you demonstrate that you are taking the lead, not only are you increasing your visibility, but you are also increasing your credibility ... and your promotability."

Experts also stress that workers, especially those who are women or racialized, need to document and share their accomplishments.

"I know we sometimes suffer from imposter syndrome and feel a little icky around putting ourselves out there, but now is not really the time to keep that hidden," Ms. McFarlane says.

For workers who are looking to increase their visibility, Helen Ofosu, an Ottawa-based career psychologist and human resources consultant, says they shouldn't be shy about sharing their achievements or perspectives outside of their workplace.

"This is a time when it's probably easier to maintain one's visibility, especially outside of the office because now we have LinkedIn," Dr. Ofosu says.

"Having some external visibility – whether it's through volunteer boards, through LinkedIn, through guest blogging, through podcasting, through writing [opinion pieces] – also creates better odds that you can find bet-

ter opportunities elsewhere."

At the same time, the conversation around remote and hybrid working is not just about workers wanting more flexibility.

Ms. McFarlane and Dr. Ofosu point out that Black, Indigenous and other workers of colour were often hypervisible in the traditional workplace. But over the past year, the move to remote work has allowed some to shed that mental burden. Now, many are worried about having to return to an environment that doesn't work for them, while fearing that resisting a return to the office will be a barrier to their career development.

"In the workplace, racialized folks are reminded that they are the only or one of very few," Ms. McFarlane says. "They are no longer hypervisible when they are at home."

"They don't have to face microaggressions as much, they don't have to code-switch, they can actually show up more effectively." (Code-switching means changing your normal speech pattern and behaviour to conform to an environment's dominant culture.)

For those who want to talk to their employer about sticking with remote or hybrid work instead of returning to the office

full-time, Ms. Ray suggests crafting the request as a win-win solution.

"Keep in mind what is important to your employer while putting forth your own agenda," she says, "so you're demonstrating that you really understand what's important to them."

But the experts also acknowledge the need for employers to address their own biases and ensure an equitable workplace for everyone, regardless of their work arrangement.

To start, this could be as simple as ensuring that meetings are set up with technology to include both those who are working in-person and remotely.

In general, experts say a great employee and employer often share a similar trait: excellent communication.

"Very transparent communication is super key," says Ms. Bai, who also has management experience as the managing online editor of *The Varsity*, a student newspaper at the University of Toronto.

"Including everybody in the conversation and being really clear about communication and keeping people updated, that feels super important to me."

Special to The Globe and Mail

When the office water cooler goes virtual

TANYA HAYLES

Before the pandemic, companies hosted potlucks, after-hours meetups and seasonal activities designed to keep employees engaged and happy. But office closings because of COVID-19 put an end to these in-person interactions.

"The impact of employee engagement (or disengagement) is a bottom-line issue," according to the Canada Human Resource Centre. "Statistics show that unhappy workers cost the North American business economy well over \$350-billion annually in lost productivity."

It pays to make the workplace more than just a place of business. So, how do companies create meaningful connections when the only way to see your colleagues is virtually?

Sarah Mawji, a PR executive with Harbourfront Wealth Management (HWM), says it's been particularly challenging for larger, international organizations. The company has 22 offices in Canada, operations in the United States, and nearly 200 staff. Prior to the office's closing, the best way to connect with different regions was at the company's annual conference, which offered trips for award winners and other bonus prizes.

At the beginning of COVID-19, HWM did what most companies did: held online happy hours and virtual bonding activities, and virtual games. But as the pandemic wore on, energy waned.

The company saw its biggest morale boosts by weaving team-building activities into the workday itself. The first 15 minutes of a meeting could be anything from "show and tell," to bring your pet



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to "work," to a quick dance party.

"We see a sense of joy in people because we are going back to very rudimentary elementary-school vibes, if you will, but it's really made a big impact because it's touching on that personal level and closing the gap," Ms. Mawji says.

Office closings have been similarly difficult for CivicAction, a non-profit organization in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton region that prides itself on connecting people as part of its mandate for civic leadership and engagement.

When the world was open, Jodie Rawn, vice-president of activation, says her teams always took the time to connect in both big and small ways. From lunches in the boardroom to yoga to casual after-work beverages, the play was just as important as the work at CivicAction.

Many assumed the pandemic would be resolved after a few months. A year and a half later, CivicAction had to get more creative with the virtual fatigue setting in. One of the tech tools the

organization uses is Slack, a mobile and desktop app that allows a company to create different communication channels.

"It is without a doubt one of the best things I've been exposed to during the pandemic," Ms. Rawn says. "We have work channels, we have news channels, we have fun channels, we have random channels – even a recipe channel." This allows employees to opt into getting the type of content they want without their e-mail inboxes being inundated with messages they don't want.

Meghan Callaghan, vice-president and public sector national practice leader at BFL Canada Risk and Insurance Services Inc., acknowledges the malaise that has set in with both work and play being online only.

"We've been employing a variety of strategies to keep people socially engaged but not overwhelmed as Zoom and work fatigue is real," she says. "We want to create enduring relationships with our employees but not overload them."

In response to the pandemic,

BFL conducted a national survey to determine how employees wanted to connect with their colleagues.

"The result was the BFL Synergy Project, which included virtual yoga classes, cocktail parties, mental-health talks, book clubs, national competitions with offices challenging other offices in various outdoor activities. All of these activities were voluntary, with employees able to participate in the activities that were of interest to them," she adds.

One of the creative virtual undertakings by the CivicAction staff has been "The Great Pandemic Novel." Ms. Rawn posts a couple of sentences and then tags someone to add the next two lines. "People are really, really invested in this story," Ms. Rawn says.

What about employees who started jobs during the pandemic? It's one thing to connect when you know your colleague isn't a morning person or that there's a group who discusses *Game of Thrones* at lunch every Monday. Being included in team dynamics got harder for those that didn't have the same opportunities to get to know people on a human level. However, simple things such as ensuring employees are onboarded with the proper tools and equipment can go a long way toward setting the process off on the right foot, Ms. Rawn explains.

Ms. Mawji started her role at Harbourfront in the throes of the pandemic. She recalls the little actions that made her feel part of the team, from a personalized welcome package from her boss, to being able to meet with a colleague at the office with proper health protocols in place, as ways she was brought into the fold. Her employers made sure to include

her in team activities right away and actively worked to ensure new staff wasn't excluded.

To help welcome newcomers, CivicAction assigned new staff an onboarding buddy. That person was not only a guide, but also a friend to help get them through the first-day-at-a-new-job jitters. "It's a really nice way to just immediately have a friend, which everyone could use when they're starting off in a new role," Ms. Rawn says.

Within the first three days of a new person joining the team, there would be an online water-cooler discussion time so the team could talk about themselves as people first versus their roles and responsibilities, Ms. Rawn says. This humanizes everyone to the new employee who only gets to meet them virtually, and further builds on team dynamics.

It's clear that while there may be some perks to remote work, most are missing human connections.

"Going into an office is something that we can easily complain about when we have it, but we complain about it when we don't have it," Ms. Mawji adds.

With vaccination rates on the rise, more employers are making plans to reopen their offices. However, the shift won't be a simple one. Ms. Callaghan remarks: "Reopening offices, implementing hybrid work models, and engaging employees in meaningful ways in the 'new normal' is going to have hiccups. We have an incredible opportunity to create company cultures that put our employees front and centre regardless of whether they are in a physical or virtual office space."

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