



Roundtable Member, **Nick Rutherford, Director, Facilities at Wildbrain,** shares strategies for building connections in a hybrid workplace.

Mentoring **MATTERS**



Our team is a hybrid team, with some employees in the office and others working remotely. We've recently seen a few people leave and hired new employees as well. I'm worried about maintaining a sense of company culture in this hybrid model, and how to build connection among our team members.

Nick's Point of View

The challenge presented is going to become increasingly more prevalent as more and more companies turn towards a hybrid model as society moves out of covid-19 pandemic. Turnover is natural process in the employment cycle within companies and solutions to maintaining company culture amid employee turnover may be more obvious in a traditional work environment where everyone attends the same location on a daily-basis and exposure to colleagues happens inherently. The importance of maintaining strong culture can't be overstated for the benefits it provides for employee satisfaction and the general health and wellbeing of a team.

Employees working together in an office are situated in an environment where spontaneous interactions occur and bonds are built around commonalities, whereas remote workers aren't necessarily connected to those same experiences. Especially with new employees who don't have pre-established bonds working alongside colleagues in-person, slipping into a pattern of transactional behaviour is all too easy when workdays are filled with scheduled meetings, emails, and updates. These routines leave little room for genuine human interaction when colleagues aren't near to provide a sense of community in between.

Hybridization

Hybridization, in essence, is the combination of different elements so with that definition in mind, most companies are, in some form or another, already a hybrid workplace whether they be composed of diverse teams, departments and business units or revenue streams, individual personalities and backgrounds, or any other disparate elements that make up the company. Remote work is an element increasingly being added to the workplace but can be integrated to the whole much like any other new element by applying the same values that your organization has relied on for success in the past.

Creating Community

To ensure a sense of community is maintained and connections are being built with new team members, any opportunity for social engagement, whether it be work related or casual, offers the most benefit when accessible and inclusive to all team members. Each space and moment utilized by your team, whether it be a meeting room, a learning opportunity, or a social gathering should be designed with your hybrid model as the foundation rather than an afterthought. Are meeting rooms accommodating for virtual attendees as well as physical attendees and are the values and experiences that have made your team tick in the past being conveyed in both environments? It's certainly a proposition that requires creative solutions.

Virtual & In-Person Gatherings

Every hybrid model will function differently and present unique obstacles. Is geo-location a factor in your hybrid model? If so, does it make a social outing unfeasible for certain individuals who don't live within reasonable commuting distance to a central location? In that case, have you considered hosting team building activities that don't require physical attendance? For example: hosting an in-person lunch and learn with a virtual component and using a food delivery service to make sure those calling in virtually can participate in the lunch part as well and not feel excluded.

This certainly doesn't mean don't go out for dinner after work with colleagues who may be on premises risking making others feel excluded. It just means that when options are available to include everyone, those are probably to best choices to make for the team.

The Final Word

Respect is another important factor in making people feel comfortable right now. Some remote workers have made a choice because of their comfort level congregating. Everyone's threshold is different, and choices made, for varying reasons, shouldn't be penalized, but rather supported as part of the team chemistry. A productive member of the team is a productive member of the team, and should be valued as such, regardless of whether they want to or are able to go out and have a drink after work or not. The key here is that each person feels included as well as motivated and inspired by their teammates to achieve company goals together.

From my perspective, one of the most important considerations for a successful hybrid model is the word "and." Rather than approaching decisions as "X or Y", try "X and Y." Rather than hosting the meeting virtually or locally, host it virtually and locally. Instead of ordering the pizza on Wednesday so only those in office on Wednesday can participate - order it for Wednesday and Thursday to include more of the team. The best part about facing this challenge right now is that so many other companies and teams are working on solutions to the same problems. You aren't alone!



Nick Rutherford has been working at **WildBrain** for six years and has over 10 years of facilities experience in the media/entertainment industry. Nick holds a BFA from OCADU and multiple certifications from George Brown College. He is equally passionate about creative pursuits and building amazing spaces for creativity, productivity, and communities to flourish.



Glain Roberts-McCabe is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.