

A Guide to Modernizing Talent Management in the Hybrid-Work Era

Now that employers and employees have experienced remote work, it's time to make “work from anywhere” work for everyone.



Executive Summary

The free trial of remote work has expired. Well over a year after the COVID-19 lockdowns spurred one of the most significant evolutions to office work since the introduction of the internet, a geographically distributed workforce is now the new normal, whether temporarily or indefinitely through hybrid-work models.

But for many who rushed to set up a home office in an over-crowded kitchen, spare closet or living room couch, there are lots of rough edges to smooth and inequities to rebalance. To date, “Remotopia” — our term for new anywhere/anytime work models — has been long on “remote” and short on “utopia.”

Ideally, Remotopia offers employees the autonomy to craft their day according to their real-time priorities and the flexibility to address varying demands as needed — experiences that are all too rare in a five-day-a-week on-premises work model. But the symptoms of outdated and ineffective talent management practices have been on full display since the beginning of the lockdown: insufficiently equipped home offices, blurred lines between home and work, and feelings of isolation and being overworked.

In a world where workers have unprecedented access to information about and alternatives to work, successful leaders will need to reimagine the basics of the working relationship to deliver on the promise of working from anywhere. Top talent, especially, will gravitate toward organizations with the widest range of work flexibility — increasingly essential in today’s highly competitive labor market.

The good news is, there's never been a better opportunity to redesign work to fit an increasingly remote workforce: Companies are more focused on being inclusive, more pressured to do more with less and more apt to use advanced technologies than ever before. Decision makers and influencers involved in designing work structures and strategies — including chief people officers, human resources professionals, organizational culture purveyors and more — have the chance now to redesign the relationship between work and location, and invest in a talent management plan that makes remote and hybrid work the centerpiece of a more inclusive, equitable, fulfilling, effective and balanced work experience, wherever employees may be.

This report covers three key aspects of an updated strategy that will attract top talent by supporting employees who — for whatever reason — wish to work outside of the traditional office setting:

- **The “how”:** **Draft the new rules of engagement.** Leaders need to work with their teams to develop and document expectations for how employees show up and complete work — from professionalism to meeting hygiene.
- **The “what”:** **Redesign work to fit Remotopia.** Using cross-hierarchy task forces, businesses should leverage a new model for understanding knowledge work activities and developing a work location strategy.
- **The “who”:** **Optimize the return on hiring.** Organizations can then use the new rules of engagement and work redesign to set up employees for success in Remotopia. This includes focusing on developing a more inclusive candidate pool using updated job descriptions and on welcoming team members to remote work with sufficient equipment and processes.

FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK, REMOTE IS THE RULE

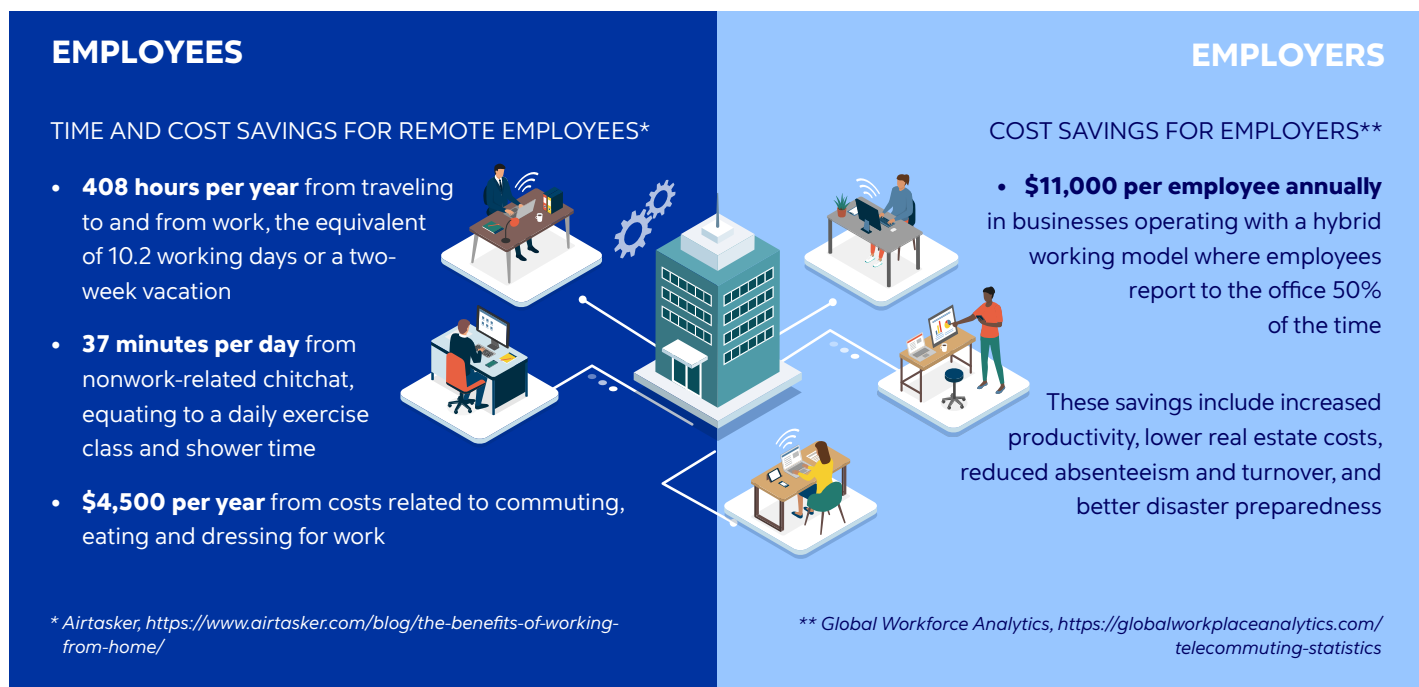
When the daily grind was put on hold last year for many office workers, it opened up the time, space and perspective to evaluate how their professional choices contributed — or not — to their own value systems. People started to view their lives as fitting around work instead of work fitting into their lives.

The result was what some have called the Great Resignation, with record-setting numbers of Americans quitting their jobs in 2021, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹ Among other concerns about their current work setup, it seems, people are less inclined to maintain an asymmetrical, burdensome and ill-fitting employee-employer relationship.

Despite all the adjustments and maneuvering required to find a groove in the rush to remote, many workers like remote work so much they want to keep it for good. In a study by Global Workplace Analytics, 82% of US employees said they want to work from home at least some of the time even after the pandemic is over.² From the signals we’re seeing, the majority of the workforce will enter into a hybrid-work model, spending some amount of time in the office and the remaining time outside of it. Some portion of the workforce will maintain fully remote status. This bell curve reinforces the importance of getting Remotopia right.

Remotopia’s redeeming value

The benefits of remote work are measurable and plentiful and pertain to both employers and employees.



Source: Cognizant Center for the Future of Work
Figure 1

While many business leaders have struggled to see remote work as a positive evolution, it's now imperative for organizations to get comfortable with a geographically distributed workforce through modern talent management constructs. As the collective workforce grows more diverse, the efforts and initiatives spearheaded by leaders must become more inclusive, more equitable, more flexible and more individualized.

Done well, remote work has the capacity to resolve many disadvantages of the traditional office environment that have gone unaddressed for decades, including:

- **Restoring accountability** throughout the hierarchy because employees are granted the space to develop their own schedules and working styles, revealing where knowledge is stored and work is actually completed.
- **Empowering team members to address non-work-related demands** and interests. This can be seen by observing how many women, who often carry much of the domestic burden, have found remote work to be a new necessity in order to stay in the workforce.³
- **Improving the experience for people of the global majority**, who report experiencing increased psychological safety while working outside of the office.⁴ A Slack survey found 97% of Black knowledge workers want the future of the office to be remote or hybrid.⁵ The traditional office environment was originally crafted for a specific type of employee, and the cultural norms emanating from that archetype can create toxic workspaces. From the pressure to conform to legacy (double) standards of professionalism to microaggressions and overt actions, the physical distance of Remotopia can help create safe spaces for employees.

Addressing pain points

At the same time, remote workers and their supervisors encountered a number of challenges during the 2020 free trial, including sharing home workspace with other working adults, non-working adults, children and pets; blurred lines between home life and work life; and the need to retrofit home working space with inadequate office equipment, including sharing internet bandwidth for back-to-back, on-camera meetings.

Employee mental health was a pervasive threat, with many workers feeling isolated, working longer hours and ultimately experiencing burnout. A recent McKinsey & Co. study found that 49% of employees reported feeling at least somewhat burned out.⁶

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In our upcoming research on “the purpose of work” (which will be published later this year), the next generation of European employees report top drivers for employee burnout as excessive workload (45%), unrealistic expectations and bullying (44%), and a lack of acknowledgment for work contributions (30%).⁷

Many organizations have tried to address employee burnout with short-term solutions, such as instituting an annual paid “mental health day,” a one-time extra week off, a lottery to win additional time off from leave donation pools or expanded access to mental health service providers through employer-provided healthcare.⁸

While such measures have their merits, they can fall short if they are not paired with actions that address root causes of burnout, such as reducing the overall workload team members manage daily. These more far-reaching actions should be executed as corporate-wide policies that leaders, managers and employees work together on developing: minimizing time spent in meetings (frequency and duration), holding space for employees to use paid time off and sick days, increasing available time to move and refuel during the day, etc.⁹

Precautions around employee monitoring programs

A knee-jerk reaction to the distance remote work puts between employees and leadership is to implement employee monitoring. It’s important to note that employee monitoring is a data program, and data programs aren’t bandages, ice packs or crutches — data programs are rehabilitation. They require a clear target outcome, acute planning and diligent maintenance.

Organizations intent on implementing such a program should consider the following questions:

I Purpose

- > What goal are we trying to achieve with employee monitoring?
- > How can we quantify progress toward these goals?
- > Are our metrics of evaluating productivity and work outcomes adequate, informative and realistic?

I Capacity & capability

- > How much of our workforce is data literate?
- > Does our team actually have the bandwidth and the skills necessary to design, maintain and use a data program?

I Privacy & security

- > What employee information will be collected?
- > How will we protect this new personal data on our employees from security threats?

Top talent in a hybrid-work world will be best served by leaders who take the time to think through how programs and initiatives will impact team members. This includes determining whether a decision, such as implementing employee monitoring by accessing laptop cameras to surveil team members, creates an imbalance in any of the core tenets of the employee-employer relationship (see Quick Take, next page). Think about whether the recommended program cultivates trust, improves communication, demonstrates respect and acknowledges boundaries for both parties.

Guiding principles and realities of remote work

In the same way that some employees are deciding to invest more in their familial relationships and less in overly-demanding work structures, it will be vital for leaders to identify their organization's core values. When it comes to the employee-employer relationship, some basic principles might include:

- I **Place-agnostic work:** When it comes to location, look to say yes before saying no, and remove as many, if not all, impediments for employees to show up and do their best work.
- I **Empowerment:** Recognize the individuality of people — and their motivations. Some teammates need more or less support, more or less guidance, more or less time to complete a comparable task. Recognizing that a team is made up of individuals who lead independent lives is an exercise that top tier leaders will continually work through.

Organizations need to trust that if they're hiring top talent, these people are capable and competent enough to know what works best for them. This self-awareness fuels organizations to design and enact useful policies and procedures that accommodate the needs of the workforce at scale.

- I **Interconnectedness:** Acknowledge the relationships between departments, tasks and people. In our upcoming purpose of work study, 64% of respondents say mutual care, mutual support and cooperation are most important to workplace relationships.

Without the habits and traditions available from in-office work as a reference point, remote work requires more intention and an extra dose of compassion from and for employees, their circumstances and choices. Think of it this way: the mobility, agility and strength of your left big toe will impact how far, fast and accurately your right hand can throw a ball. The same interdependence exists between organizations and their remote employees.

Additionally, there are three realities of remote work that leaders need to accept in the hybrid-work era. While they may, at first, sound like value-based assumptions, all are, in fact, supported by data:

- **Flexible work structures are preferred.** A Robert Half study of Canadian employees found that 81% said they prefer a hybrid or fully-remote work arrangement.¹⁰ This isn't a threat, it's a promise: this same survey found that one in three professionals who currently work remotely due to the pandemic would look for a new job if required to return to the office full-time. Once remote work becomes the norm, the next talent battleground will be how effectively it's supported.
- **Happy employees improve your bottom line.** Thriving employees make for a thriving business. Studies have shown a positive relationship between employee satisfaction and higher stock market returns.¹¹ Each decision we make in our day to day lives aligns with our core value system or it doesn't. When these choices continually oppose our values, that's where change lives.
- **Healthy employees are good for business.** Investing in employee wellness delivers significant returns. In one study, the more that employers invested in well-being best practices, the lower their average employee turnover rate went, to the tune of an 11-point spread between employers following the least and the most well-being best practices.¹²

Consider that attrition costs are equal to the combined annual salaries of all employees who have exited the company¹³ multiplied by the attrition rate. So if the total of those combined annual salaries is \$15 million and the attrition rate is 11% due to a lack of employee well-being, then the value of employee well-being to the company is approximately \$1.65 million (11% x \$15 million = \$1.65 million). That is how much the company would save by allowing team members the autonomy to determine how to organize their tasks, time and interactions.

WRITE THE NEW RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

There is an unprecedented opportunity — and need — to take a deliberate approach to setting up employees for long-term, continued success from outside of the traditional office. To make remote work fit for purpose, leaders need to rethink the sometimes subtle, unstated and often ambiguous expectations of employee behaviors and expressly communicate those expectations. That is, what do acceptable and not acceptable behaviors look like, and how is that information conveyed to new team members?

What made the average pre-pandemic office workplace “tick” — how team members showed up to work, interacted with one another and grew the organization — was rarely explicitly articulated. Often, these critical details are embedded in the office culture, and employees are left to figure out a standard operating procedure through networking and costly trial and error.

The lack of stated guidelines about how, when and what to expect at work can contribute to a diminished sense of psychological safety, which workforce experts often correlate with employee attrition.¹⁴

When Google conducted an internal study to uncover what makes teams most effective, for example, it revealed that how team members interact, structure their work and view their contributions was far more important than the specific individuals on the team.¹⁵ This aligns with other research that shows employees who reported higher levels of psychological safety are less likely to jump ship, and more likely to embrace diverse ideas and generate more revenue.

Because subtle cues are much harder to read from a geographically removed perspective, there’s an ever greater need to articulate expectations of the workforce to remote workers. Right now, leaders — alongside top talent — have an opportunity to build an inclusive work environment with appropriate guardrails from the ground up. Leadership and the workforce need to work together to craft their organization’s new rules of work with remote at center stage instead of as an understudy.

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Set the baseline

Setting these guardrails begins with defining what professionalism looks like, sounds like and means to the organization, as well as addressing presenteeism and other biases head-on. Top talent doesn't always talk the loudest or the most. Instead, top talent gets things done — whether that's by connecting the right people, having a thoughtful conversation, coaching, mentoring and upskilling team members, developing a new process or setting healthy boundaries.

Outcomes and progress mean more than how busy employees appear to be. Businesses need to identify the activities and habits that make the organization successful and then zero in on how to promote these in the natural work process for team members.

In hybrid and remote work environments, businesses also need to be more intentional as to how and when they bring together team members in-person. In [our “21 Jobs” report](#), we've forecast the need for work-from-home (WFH) facilitators to oversee the integration and engagement of the remote workforce and ensure the right technologies, talent management processes and culture are in place to make Remotopia a reality. One idea is to host comprehensive on-site “flash” weeks, where team members gather in-person to meet and greet, connect and collaborate.

Australian graphic design platform Canva reimagined its global approach to team building and collaboration by reducing mandatory physical office appearances to just eight times per year. As the company recently stated, the pandemic has “disproved the notion of collaboration being best in one way or in one place.”¹⁸ The intent behind this planned schedule of on-site activity is to enhance belonging and rapport among team members, as well as reduce the cost and confusion related to sporadic or disorganized trips into the office.

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Quick Take

Objects on screen may be closer than they appear

While the formal dress codes of yesterday are being challenged in every way, from leggings to beards to braids, employees are under excessive scrutiny as they open their homes and third workspaces to their coworkers via videoconference calls.

And despite the hope that Remotopia would help eliminate bias at work, the opposite is often true, as recency, proximity and similarity biases can be easily spotted in remote work.¹⁶ These can show up in various ways: performance evaluations in which a manager relies too heavily on the most recent work an employee has completed rather than the person's full body of work; a leader who values team members who are physically closest to them (read: in the office); or a supervisor who favors team members whose remote work habits resemble their own.

To counter harmful biases, businesses need to redefine the organization's approach to "appropriate" dress and background settings by breaking out of traditional boxes. Managers should focus on listening to the style and merit of the individual's ideas rather than their self-expression through dress, hair and surroundings, and become more self-aware about how they judge people¹⁷ so they can better acknowledge the humanity, dignity and individuality of others.

By doing so, managers can cultivate an inclusive environment where unconventional team members feel welcome and included. This will extend a sense of belonging to each team member, not just those who fit an archetype that leadership is accustomed to. As we've seen in our research on belonging, a greater sense of belonging leads directly to employee happiness and health and must be present in remote work. (For more on this topic, see our report "[What It Means to Belong at Work.](#)")

REDESIGN WORK FOR REMOTOPIA

In the rush to remote work, many organizations fell victim to the inertia of tradition and missed the opportunity to design work to fit specific needs of the business and remote employees themselves. Now, as hybrid-work models are emerging, leadership and team members need to partner in designing how work is defined, evaluated and compensated, starting with remote work.

This starts with mapping the outcomes needed to support business operations and how that work contributes value to the organization. This exercise can bring some stability and logic to compensation models in a remote environment. Rather than basing compensation on location, organizations need to devise structures that reward team members on their impact to the business. While this can be a difficult and even tedious exercise, employees would benefit greatly from not only knowing how their work generates revenue, serves customers or cuts costs but also how much they're valued because of that work.

Another aspect of redesigning work is to rethink what purpose “the office” serves in the world of hybrid work. Traditionally, offices have operated as the place for executing all the types of work needed in many job roles. This includes everything from “heads-down” work (e.g., research, analysis, customer support, coding, documentation, training and development), to “heads-up” work (e.g., ideation, knowledge sharing, networking, strategic planning), to capability demonstrations and research and development. In actuality, though, heads-down work can be performed anywhere, while heads-up work has been facilitated best in the physical presence of other people.

Devising a role-specific location rating

With hybrid workplaces, it will be important to redefine what types of work and work-related events are best done where. To do this, businesses should first identify the core activities that each individual role in the organization is responsible for completing. From there, cross-hierarchy task forces can be created to evaluate the remote fitness of each of these activities by taking a look at how effectively specific job activities — not tasks — can be completed outside or inside the traditional office setting. This exercise must be completed using direct input from individual employees and their managers.

To complete this exercise, the following numerical values should be defined for each job activity:

- **Time spent:** The estimated share of time that should be dedicated to each activity
- **In-office and remote ratings:** Based on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing the function is best completed effectively in-office and 5 representing the function is well-facilitated remotely

Organizations can then combine these values to create a location rating (Time Spent X Rating / 5) that can be used to develop a location strategy for each role. By mapping these results, organizations can start to paint a clear picture of where roles can be located based on the work they do.

By incorporating these details into job descriptions, businesses can also help potential job candidates clearly understand what will be asked of them, what resources will be available to them, with whom they will work closely, etc. (in addition to the available compensation range). Within any job description, estimates should be included as to how much of the role can be performed successfully outside of the traditional office setting.

An interesting outcome of the heads-down/heads-up model is that senior leaders — many of whom have struggled to communicate the purpose, value, urgency and details of a return to the office order¹⁹ — are the very people whose jobs are most focused on the collaborative, heads-up work best supported by an in-office presence. It may be that senior leaders will be most apt to be found in the office vs. the majority of other workers who will find a balance between remote work and an in-office presence.

Mapping out a healthy work day

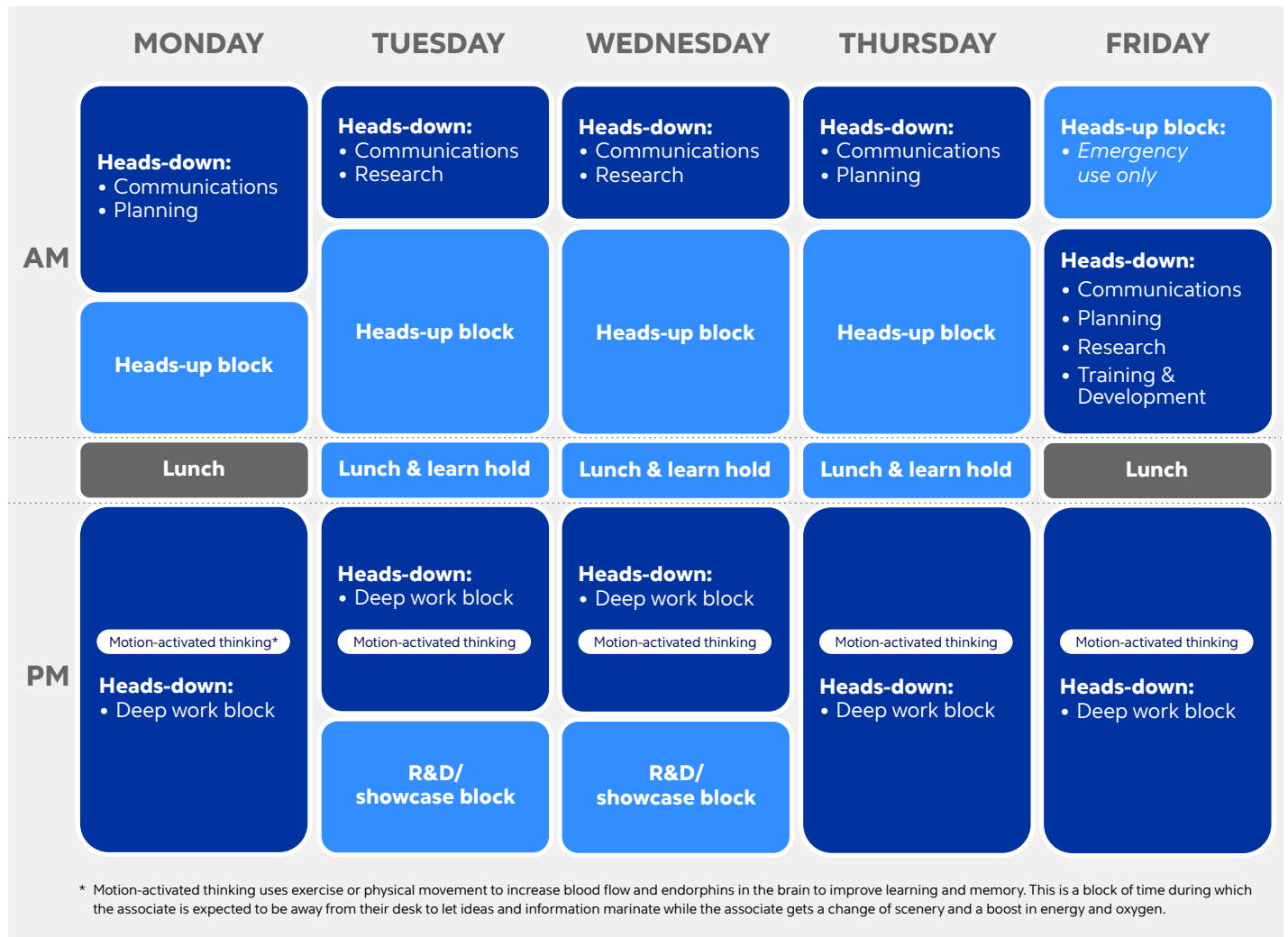
In addition to categorizing and evaluating the activities and outcomes for each role, businesses need to assess and map how team members should work together. This assessment should include specifics on meetings: their purpose, how they can be conducted effectively, how participants can contribute productively, and when they should be scheduled. Meeting hygiene should also be detailed, including calendar blocks to protect team members from rampant over-booking.²⁰

An ideal schedule would incorporate the following key tenets:

- **Mental health protections:** Taking breaks for water, nourishment, exercise/stretching and mind clearing; schedule blocks for deep work (up to four hours per day²¹), motion-activated thinking and logging off for the day after a reasonable contribution to the business.
- **Intentionality:** When bringing team members together for meetings, be clear about the purpose, the objective and any necessary pre-work. Implement a multitasking-free zone to make space for undivided attention and engagement. No more meetings about meetings. Identify specific reasons to use video calls — not every call requires people to be on-camera.
- **Flexibility:** Asynchronous work is a given with distributed teams. Identify and flag activities that require simultaneous effort to make sure team members are properly supported to complete tasks and activities according to plan. Schedule appropriate heads-up working sessions to complete synchronous work. Grant team members the autonomy to schedule all other work as they see fit.

Figure 2 depicts what a team member's work week could look like after completing a job activity analysis and implementing focus protections.

An intentional approach to hybrid work



Source: Cognizant Center for the Future of Work
Figure 2

OPTIMIZE THE RETURN ON HIRING

The third step in modernizing talent management for the hybrid-work era is to upgrade recruiting and onboarding efforts. The goals here are threefold:

- I **Widen the aperture** on what constitutes a qualified candidate in a world where people can work remotely
- I **Develop recruiting activities to ensure a best-fit model** for the changing workforce
- I **Equip employees from day one** to more effectively support remote success

As competition for top talent increases, leaders can use the work redesign insights from the previous step to pursue unconventional candidates as a way to bolster the organization's available skills and expertise while delivering on its commitment to workforce diversity, equity and inclusion. This starts with reevaluating the artificial restraints many organizations have placed on the candidate pool in an effort to maximize ease and convenience in recruiting and onboarding team members for physical offices.

An important way to do this is to remove four-year degree requirements from jobs that ultimately don't require them, especially in light of the fact that four in five adult Americans do not have a bachelor's degree.²² For many job roles, a four-year college degree does not guarantee job readiness. In 2020, for example, IBM launched an initiative to address the "skills gap." The company created 1,000 jobs and replaced degree requirements with verifiable skillsets mapped to specific role competencies. This program reinforces IBM's commitment to skills meaning more than degrees.²³

Another crucial change is to curate recruiting channels to ensure a broad mix of qualified candidates enters the pipeline. This may include reconsidering longstanding recruiting relationships, such as certain "target" schools or referrals from leadership and middle management. It could also entail producing and conducting virtual informational sessions, job fairs or meet-and-greets on LinkedIn or other platforms to connect with unconventional and interested talent. This shift will require talent acquisition teams to work much more closely with HR and hiring managers to align on target skills and capabilities.

The overall goal is to create a candidate experience standard that showcases the organization's commitment to Remotopia. This standard should detail the talent acquisition touchpoints, the number and types of interviews required to make a decision, and the expected timeline to complete the process. This information should be communicated to the candidates, and material should be provided to help them prepare for the process.

At Google, candidates are connected directly to a single point of contact from the "People Operations" team and are given a link to a suite of up-to-date interview preparation materials, a streamlined interview timeline and checkpoints to assess the experience. Hiring managers return go or no-go verdicts to candidates as soon as they are available. Most importantly, Google surveys candidates who complete the interview process for feedback on their experience.²⁴

Upgrade onboarding efforts

By improving how team members are welcomed into the organization, leaders can reduce costs related to attrition while strengthening the employee-employer relationship from the start.

Imagine a home office in a box arriving at your door on your first day with the high-quality equipment needed for a successful remote office.

Your box includes a laptop, a second monitor, wireless mouse, keyboard, quality headset with microphone, cellphone, WiFi hotspot, lighting and neutral backdrop. You also get the standard branded notebook, a nice pen, a water bottle and a small plant for ambiance.



As you go through orientation, you find out your employer offers a stipend to outfit your new home office with a desk, chair, desk lamp, printer with ink and paper, whiteboard and markers, and a surge protector. You're also given a reloadable debit card preloaded with \$300 that can be spent on anything from subscription food services, to groceries for your first few weeks of settling in. Funds can be added to this card to cover the expense of additional bonding events, including free-lunch Fridays, catered lunch-and-learns or happy hours for remote team members.

You hear from your assigned talent partner about the company's onboarding activities designed to foster belonging and community among remote, hybrid and on-site employees, starting with an apprenticeship program taking place during your first month. You are paired with a veteran employee in a similar capacity to your new role who will help familiarize you with the processes, procedures, norms and inner-workings of the team and organization at large.

Your new virtual guide walks you through examples of best-in-class work products. As an apprentice, you shadow your guide on calls and working sessions to learn what professionalism looks like in this context. Also, you complete a level-specific boot camp directed by team leads to ensure the working standard designed for the new normal is well understood and can be met by all new team members.

As you check your calendar, you notice there are six new-hire coffee chats already scheduled for you. You notice an email with a list of team members with whom you are encouraged to connect and why you should set up those additional meetings. You find two recurring meetings on your calendar, as well. These regular, informal check-ins will be used by the talent team to verify that you have what you need to succeed, you feel as though you are a part of the team, and you are clear on the expectations for you as an individual.

Such an experience is not unprecedented. US-based innovation consultancy, Fahrenheit 212, uses its “High Dive” program to connect and galvanize new hires. In this program, new hires across levels work together to learn about the company’s innovation process and use those skills to develop a mock deliverable based on a real, recent client prompt. This enables team members to learn what “good” looks like, what kind of work the team does, and what the expectations are for each individual’s level.²⁵

By instituting some or all of these experiences, businesses can give new hires the confidence of knowing what’s coming next, where they’re supposed to be, and what the expectations of them are. Think about how invested employees would begin to feel in the success of this program and their team, as well as how much stronger their relationship with the talent team will be because of a smooth two-way communication flow.



PREPARE YOUR PROCESSES, PEOPLE AND CULTURE FOR SUSTAINED SUCCESS IN REMOTOPIA

The main reason remote work has proved so challenging is its success depends on the strength of the employee-employer relationship. It has never been easier or more important to acknowledge the humanity of other people. Compassion for that humanity will fuel long-term success because, ultimately, all organizations are simply group projects — a collection of people working together toward a goal.

Organizations that embrace this opportunity to redesign how they attract, engage and support their employees will accomplish the hard work needed to thrive in the future of work. There's no one-size-fits-all outcome; organizations with the best remote-work talent management strategies will be those that resist the urge to lift and shift someone else's hybrid-work model onto their own set of circumstances. This will mean:

- **Understanding how your workforce feels about remote work** and what they need to be successful
- **Building a custom approach for remote work** that fits your unique tapestry
- **Getting comfortable** with a test-and-learn approach

The most extraordinary aspect of Remotopia is the opportunity to start completely fresh. Savvy leaders will leave obsolete metrics, cumbersome processes and toxic management habits in the pre-pandemic past to set a clear vision of what work is, how it is evaluated, how people are brought together to achieve the organization's goals, who is included on the team, and how those team members are empowered to achieve. Working together, organizations can restore the employee-employer relationship for a fruitful path forward.





Endnotes

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Keahn Gary is a Senior Manager with Cognizant's Center for the Future of Work. Her research with the CFoW focuses on modernizing value systems and optimizing evaluation methodology to create dynamic and inclusive work environments.

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About the Center for the Future of Work

Cognizant's Center for the Future of Work™ is chartered to examine how work is changing, and will change, in response to the emergence of new technologies, new business practices and new workers. The Center provides original research and analysis of work trends and dynamics, and collaborates with a wide range of business, technology and academic thinkers about what the future of work will look like as technology changes so many aspects of our working lives. For more information, visit cognizant.com/futureofwork.

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