The hybrid workforce: the solution for the future of work?

By Sigrid Muller, Head of HR South Africa & Southern Africa at Standard Chartered

As the restrictions that were put in place to combat COVID-19 have been lifted and some companies have opened their offices, employees can expect a very different workplace to the one pre-pandemic. It is now clear that the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in new norms of working worldwide.

As organisations continue to navigate the challenges caused by the pandemic, a relatively new structure of a hybrid work model is emerging. This will allow employees to create a work-from-home schedule at their convenience while still having the option to come into the office to connect with colleagues on their teams. The hybrid work strategy can be fully supported by strategic planning and technology to keep employees connected, whether they choose to be in the office or working remotely.

To build an inclusive hybrid culture, it is critical to place the remote worker at the centre of all company activities. Companies with a strong hybrid culture will need to focus on developing a digital culture to include experiences for remote employees and allow individuals and teams to complement those with in-person events.

Organisations are adopting a flexible working model for the long term and many employees have embraced this new way of working.

The future of the workplace

The workplace will look very different in the next five years. Gone are the days of having everyone sit at a desk in a central location or office premise. Even before the pandemic, there was a shift to more flexible work patterns. However, the pandemic has significantly accelerated this change. Organisations need to adapt and create a model that addresses the needs of all its employees. There is no one size fits all approach and organisations will need to offer different options to remain competitive.

At Standard Chartered we do recognise this change and continue working on new ways of working and flexible options that will work for both the organisation and its employees. The office environment is still important and plays a key role. However, how space is designed and utilized will need to adapt to the current circumstances.

There will be a greater need for collaborative space, allowing cross-functional teams to get together for idea generation and to work on specific projects and initiatives if required. New technologies will need to be fully utilized to allow members to either be physically present or join remotely to contribute to the outcome. At the same time workspaces need to offer employees that prefer an office environment a place to work from.

Before the pandemic, one would hear often that many roles could not be done working flexibly or remotely. Employees are now working longer hours since working remotely and lines are being blurred between home and work life. Organisations need to support their employees in enabling them to build resilience, find the balance that works for them and the organisation. Employee Wellbeing is so important and there is no better time than now for organisations to focus on this. People leaders do, however, need to stay in touch with staff to assist those who have been battling to adjust to this new way of working.

Transparent, frequent interaction and communication will help employees be engaged and be part of the team. Looking at new ways of working which listens to the needs of employees will continue to maintain morale and improve it. Organisations need to embed company culture in new ways, one cannot rely on traditional methods within the office space to communicate it.

Company culture and management styles post-pandemic

Culture needs to be identified, easy to understand and integrated into all aspects of daily work. Everyone needs to embrace the culture, understand it and be able to see it in action daily. It needs to be embedded in the organisation's way of working. All employees need to embrace the new technologies out there and new ways of working, embracing a learning culture to continue to remain relevant and competitive.

In 2020, Standard Chartered launched a new online learning platform enabling all employees to drive their learning and development. This was done by identifying their areas of interest and learning at the employees' own pace in their own space while giving them relevant and up to date content to be at their fingertips.

People leaders need to adapt their management styles and they must engage with employees. There is no such thing as over-communication in this environment. Effective leaders will need to create the space to not only engage their teams on work-related matters but also engage and interact on a more social level and be more empathetic. It is also important to have team engagements just to check in with employees and how they are managing their challenges.

Equally, employees need to be present and deliver their part of the agreement.

People leaders must embrace the new way of working, provide authentic leadership to their teams and at the same time be vulnerable and accessible to their teams. This will not be an easy transition to make but a very important one to keep employees engaged and motivated. Leaders need to trust their teams and shift away from traditional work hours and traditional ways of working.

In a post-COVID-19 era, organisations must leverage this opportunity to measure their internal shortcomings and address these through the execution of a comprehensive digital workplace. At the end of the day, the true measure of a successful team is the successful delivery of key objectives.

-Ends-