

Hybrid work - how to include your remote colleagues

Workers in South Africa are at a crossroads as some people return to the office and while others choose to stay home making for a complex new working model that can be difficult to get right.



Source: Rebrand Cities from [Pexels](#)

Linda Trim, director at Giant Leap, one of South Africa's largest workplace design consultancies, said: "The new hybrid workplace creates a host of challenges - one of the biggest is that people working in offices will have a much richer exposure to people's behaviours and knowledge at work than the remote people. They will have a shared experience that simply isn't available to people outside the office."

Trim noted that at the start of the pandemic, many office workers were all in a similar position. "But now as hybrid work becomes the norm, there is a growing communications divide between the in-office and remote people. During meetings for example, we've noticed a tendency for office people to direct their comments to each other instead of to their screens. They would tell inside jokes and forget to call on the remote people."

What are the top 5 solutions to these challenges?

1. Fewer screens

During remote meetings it is difficult to assess eye contact and to follow the usual back and forth between people as they communicate, often using non-verbal cues. It is very difficult to gauge one-to-one communication between people during remote meetings.

Said Trim: "Our temptation when holding hybrid meetings is to have the in-person people get together in a room and each open their laptops. Instead, try to set up one camera that captures everyone in the room — their faces and bodies. This way, everyone gets access to the same non-verbal exchanges between the people in the room."

2. Create turn-taking rules

When people first try hybrid meetings, the people present got into a quick flow of bouncing ideas off each other and drifted towards ignoring the remote participants. “People felt left out and unheard,” Trim noted.

Formal rules about turn-taking and calling on people are often now needed until everyone has had a chance to share. “Remote people are already at a disadvantage, so small behaviours that give them a voice are critical,” Trim advised.

3. Kill the chat box

The chat box on collaboration tools like Teams has the potential to create more than one narrative, as in-person and remote workers start to have separate sidebar conversations during meetings.

“When people have different understandings of who contributed and how others responded, you have fertile ground for conflict,” Trim warned.

For hybrid meetings, consider disabling the chat box. Encourage people to say what they think and ensure remote and in-person people follows the same guidelines for speaking up.

4. Prioritise in-person time for newcomers and independent workers

The two groups who may see the least value in coming to the office—newcomers without work friends and people who work independently—are ironically the most at risk for losing out by staying home. “Not only are these employees not as naturally integrated in social networks, but they also have fewer opportunities to showcase their ‘unseen’ work.”

Encourage newcomers and independent workers to spend time at the office. And when they get there, don’t have them sit alone in a cubicle working.

5. When people come to work, give priority to social networking over just business

When bringing everyone together, the temptation is to do the work that feels a bit more difficult to handle remotely. Focusing purely on work, though, does little to close the communications and knowledge gap between remote and in-office people.

“If you want to get the most bang for your buck, have people spend that precious in-person time networking. Have one day a month where everyone comes to the office for an informal ‘happy hour’ get-together. The goal is for the most isolated people to make small connections across their networks. Over time, they will build their network and learn how to better navigate the office,” Trim concluded.

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