U.S. Department of Energy
Environmental Management Advisory Board
Hybrid Work Environment
Subcommittee Workgroup

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The following recommendations are offered to help guide the Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management in creating effective and lasting hybrid work environments.

As background it is important to define "hybrid work," "telecommute," and "remote work." According to the Office of Personnel Management, "A hybrid workplace simply refers to a workplace that incorporates a mix of employees who are working in the office and those who are working from other locations" (OPM, 2022). Telecommuting is limited to employees and excludes self-employed workers. It focuses on replacing the employers' premises with another workplace for at least part of the work time, resulting in fewer or no trips to work (Sokolic, 2022). Remote work is a more general term and refers to any type of work done at a distance, standard and non-standard employment or contract work (Sokolic, 2022).

As context, the global COVID-19 pandemic caused workers to convert to remote based work essentially overnight. What was a growing trend in the work world became a necessity, given the health precautions instituted in the U.S. and globally. The literature reveals there are benefits and some negatives of remote based work. Some of the benefits to workers of remote work include greater control over their work which can have positive impacts on work performance, increased job satisfactions, quality and quantity of work performed, improved work-life balance, and greater flexibility and job plasticity, which improves employees' ability to manage work-life interactions (Bloom et al, 2015, Troup and Rouse, 2012). Some of the negatives with remote work can be blurred lines between work and home life which can disrupt an employee's work-life balance and lead to "zoom fatigue" (AduJarour et al., 2021). Another area of concern is data privacy and cyber security (Thompson, 2020). Working from home or remotely requires enhanced data protection by the employer and developing a mobile device management plan (O'Neill, 2022). OECD (2020) reports while employers and employees will continue to telecommute after the pandemic, few employees will work full-time remotely in the future.

Hybrid Work Subcommittee Recommendations

DOE asked the Hybrid Subcommittee to address five questions. The subcommittee added a sixth question, focusing on hybrid work and stakeholder engagement.

1. **How can EM leverage hybrid and virtual flexibilities to enhance agility and efficiency?**

- With expertise dispersed across the country, virtual tools can help to form ad hoc and formal groups that bring together needed expertise on project specific issues as well as more general policy issues

- With some stakeholders, virtual and hybrid gatherings can complement in-person meetings to maintain continuing lines of communication. For example, given the limitations of time and resources, it may only be possible to meet in person with certain communities once or twice a year. Additional, more frequent virtual meetings would help ensure a successful, continuing communication process.

- Review best practices across the DOE complex, including EM projects where agency officials engaged federal and state regulators, and contractors in virtual and hybrid meetings to ensure continuity of work and contractor performance.

- DOE must review each department and division, considering both internal and external stakeholder interaction requirements, to determine which engagements must be conducted in-person to be effective, and which can be effectively accomplished virtually, or in hybrid fashion. These detailed assessments should be conducted at the lowest responsible level within the organization.

- With respect to DOE employees, assess the impact and importance of leadership and peer level attendance in office to draw others back.

- Understand the limitations of technology and mobility of tribal stakeholders and other impacted stakeholders, and establish targeted communication venues that demonstrate the government's commitment optimizing transparency and access to key decision makers and information.

2. How can EM empower federal and contractor employees with efficient workspaces and technology that minimize hybrid workplace challenges?

- Ensure that meeting spaces are well equipped for effective hybrid communications technology – for example, multiple camera and microphone installations , large screens for projecting remote participants, etc.– and the technology to make them work well.

- Ensure that contractors are required to employ similar and compatible technology in their meeting spaces.

- EM can empower site management teams to determine what is best for the workforce given each site's unique circumstances and project schedules. Managers should have the discretion to establish schedules based on balancing in-person and hybrid work.

- Provide fully equipped workstations only to employees who commit to a preponderance of the work week in-office. Provide other incentives, such as parking, travel stipends, and awards (monetary, symbolic, etc) for in-office workers. Provide assignable hotel stations for in frequent in-office staff, available via on-line reservation process.

- Ensure adequately sized conferencing space, and resist the short term savings potential of reducing footprint beyond a level that will ultimately be inadequate to support the returning staff.

3. What are best practices to balance mission needs with a flexible hybrid workplace culture?

- Avoid a one size fits all approach.

- Build on the specific needs and requirements of each position and assignment.

- Rethink how work is being done and what activities require or benefit significantly from in person interaction.

- EM mission needs should dictate whether an employee is able to work in a hybrid environment, and may change regularly. Employees working in hybrid and in-office environments should be subject to the same performance standards and "clock-in, clock out" procedures based on clearly-defined procedures and expectations."

- Differentiate leadership, directors, managers, etc., from the front line workforce, placing greater expectations on the former, and allowing greater flexibility for remote work for the latter, to the extent that remote work can be effectively performed without significant negative impacts. Leaders must set the example, and ensure their departments have a functioning model that supports onboarding, training & mentoring, effective team interaction, administrative support, etc. Some of these functions can be shared amongst the leadership group to provide a level of hybrid flexibility for the management team.

- Focused attention should be paid to the onboarding model of new internal staff personnel in the hybrid work environment, providing a personal touch.

- Develop a mobile device management plan. Mobile devices may include cell phones and laptop commuters.

4. How can EM foster a diverse, equitable and inclusive hybrid environment?

- Unexpectedness and urgency of COVID impacts caused many telework programs and agreements to be hastily developed and employed.
    - Positions may be poorly suited for hybrid work
    - Systems may not be effective in supporting hybrid situations
    - Training may be lacking for both workers and managers
- Comprehensive planning and deliberate implementation is key for an <u>effective</u> hybrid environment.
    - Planning and analysis should cover the total workforce.
        - Supports coordinated implementation
        - Provides equity and fairness by comprehensive consideration of all positions
    - Worker engagement in planning/analysis process enhances performance evaluation process and management engagement with staff
- Planning requires as the initial step an objective analysis of the positions focused on the primary characteristics of the work.
    - Some positions are better suited to telework/remote work
    - Some positions require greater administrative and logistical support to succeed in a hybrid work environment
    - The annual performance evaluation cycle can be utilized with a slight expansion to define the terms and characteristics of the hybrid work envisioned for the employee. Many organizations had already included casual work variation adjustments in the evaluation process, making it relatively simple to use this existing tool to agree on hybrid work.
- The matrix in Figure 1 provides a quick and easy first step to organize positions in a hybrid environment into four fundamental types of work as shown in the diagram below. The matrix differentiates the work by degree of complexity and amount of required interaction with other workers.

- Understand and fully account for the limitations and personal needs of staff in establishing policy and making decisions that meet the requirements for the workforce.

- Centrally engage HR and Diversity & Inclusion Officer in policy-setting related to hybrid work strategy.

Figure 1.
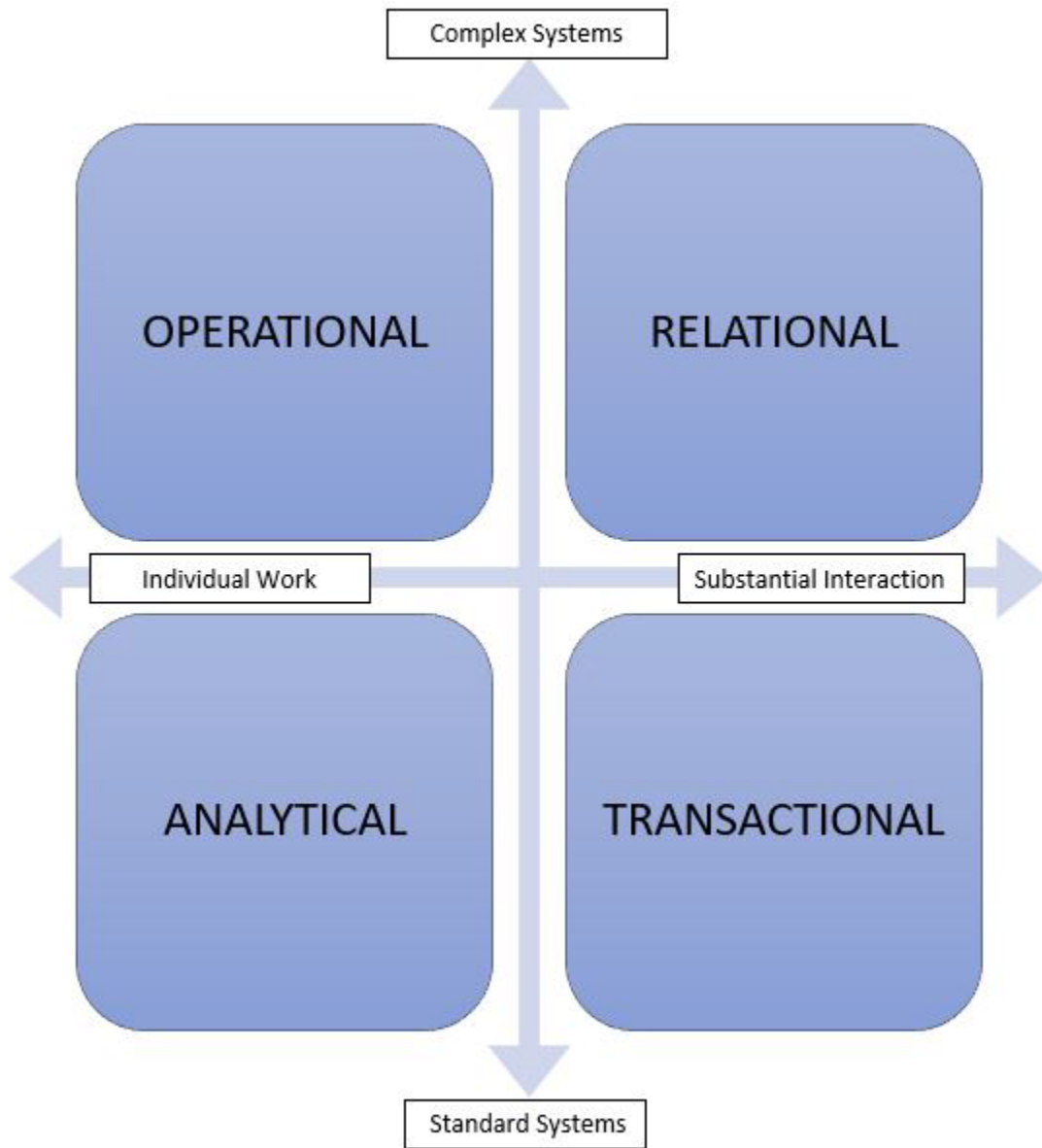
- Analytical - primarily work conducted by an individual or small teams that requires substantial concentration for extended periods of time. Required interaction with other workers is minimal. (Accountants, safety analysts, etc.) Most appropriate for a hybrid environment and easiest to administer.
- Operational - primarily work conducted to implement processes or operate equipment, often in a field or non-office environment. Required interaction with other workers is usually high, but also well-defined and consistent, and rarely can tasks be completed from an alternate location. (Equipment operators, environmental sampling, field technicians, safety officers, etc.) This is least appropriate for a hybrid environment and most difficult to administer.
- Transactional - primarily work that implements processes through completion of process steps and transfer to others for further process implementation. Required interaction with other workers varies widely depending on the nature of the process and point within the process. (Procurement, records management, quality assurance, etc.) Can be appropriate for hybrid environments depending on the interface with other parties and administration typically depends on coordination with the other transactional parties.
- Relational - primarily work that involves people interfaces. Required interaction with others is the focus of the position. (Managers, supervisors, stakeholder affairs, etc.) Usually less appropriate for hybrid environments and administration requires formal and reliable systems to ensure the relational interactions.
- After completing analysis of the workforce positions, training is critical to ensure successful implementation by managers and workers.
  - Training should be formal and documented as part of the hybrid environment development process
  - Training for managers/supervisors should precede training for workers
  - Training may be broadly considered to include a familiarization period onsite for workers that are planned for extensive telework or remote work

5. What are best practices for office hoteling?

Numerous guides are available on-line that cover the basics for effective office hoteling. Among the essentials: (1) have good reservation software or staff available with clear instructions on how to reserve space; (2) have an easy to read floor plan so that users can readily find the assigned work space; (3) make sure the space is cleaned regularly and welcoming to users; (4) have IT equipment and other hardware set up with secure log-on information and tech assistance readily available; and (5) seek feedback from users on how to improve the workspace and experience.

Additional question:

6. How best to function with stakeholders in a hybrid environment?

Many agencies and governing bodies at the federal, state, and local government levels are holding hybrid public meetings, which were a necessity during the pandemic, and now have become more routine. Such meetings can have many benefits, particularly the inclusion of under-represented stakeholders that otherwise would not be able to travel to an in-person meeting.
However, hybrid meetings can also be viewed by some stakeholders as less than ideal due to a reduction in interaction that can only be achieved by in-person communication.

The matrix presented above for employee work positions can also be used with slight change in perspective to similarly make an initial differentiation in stakeholder discussions. Like employee work efforts, stakeholder interaction in a hybrid environment will vary widely in effectiveness depending on the complexity of the issues being discussed and the number of participants or amount of dialogue. Understanding the basic differences in the particular stakeholder interaction can support selection of the best hybrid or other communication tools, and thus increase the success of the interaction.

Recognize that in dealing with stakeholders the timeframes for actions and decisions may be substantially different than working with government employees, and can be magnified in a hybrid stakeholder communication environment. DOE-EM and most city, county, and state government entities are strongly influenced by a two-year or four-year election cycle. In a hybrid environment this may cause DOE-EM and some stakeholders to seek the maximum progress during limited in-person meetings. However, many tribal organizations view issues through a much longer time perspective, often decades or longer. So they may perceive the hybrid communication environment to be pushing them to decisions faster than they are comfortable. This

effect can be further exacerbated if trust is a key element of the communication or decision.

EM must also consider how its hybrid workplace culture will interface with stakeholder needs for interaction and effective communication.

- As with internal operations, COVID forced both government and private sector institutions to modify how they interfaced with their customers and broader stakeholder communities. In order to function, organizations had to replace or modify activities that had previously involved in-person interactions, with virtual engagement mechanisms. While initial efforts were imperfect, with time organizations and their stakeholders developed effective tools and found ways in which the tools used to facilitate interaction could enhance stakeholder communication. For example, virtual meetings made it possible for a more diverse range of stakeholders to participate in meetings, freed from travel challenges.

  At the same time those communities without the necessary internet infrastructure, such as small rural communities and tribes, may have been put at a disadvantage in their ability to communicate effectively.

- In addition, certain cultures place a high value on in person interactions to build trust and may find even high-quality virtual interaction to be inadequate.

- In going forward, EM will need to examine how to provide hybrid experiences that will work for its stakeholders and balance the advantages of virtual and in-person engagement.

Points to consider:
  (1) Public notice of meetings should be communicated in a variety of media, including newspapers, flyers, electronic newsletters, and websites.
  (2) Some stakeholders may not have access to broadband and internet, so a public venue such as a community center or public library should be made available for users to access technology.
  (3) Hard copies of documents, presentations, and other materials should be provided at public venues, as venue owners do not have the resources to print such material, particularly long, complex documents that contain color maps and tables, etc.

(4) Hybrid communication methods that put one participant group at a relative disadvantage should be used with caution and every effort made to mitigate the disadvantage.

(5) Sometimes using a hybrid meeting when in-person is preferred can be seen as better than no communication. However, for stakeholder groups that are disadvantaged by the hybrid meeting even this "better than nothing" mindset can erode trust if used too often.

(6) Hybrid meetings that involve decisions at a local site level should always be held at the site to allow stakeholders to attend in-person, if desired.

Summary

The recommendations provided in this document focus on the following six questions:

1) How can EM leverage hybrid and virtual flexibilities to enhance agility and efficiency?

2) How can EM empower federal and contractor employees with efficient workspaces and technology that minimize hybrid workplace challenges?

3) What are best practices to balance mission needs with a flexible hybrid workplace culture?

4) How can EM foster a diverse, equitable and inclusive hybrid environment?

5) What are best practices for office hoteling?

6) How best to function with stakeholders in a hybrid work environment?

Each of these questions has been addressed with guidelines to help inform the decision makers at EM. As EM moves forward, it is important to note that there is not a one size fits all approach to creating a productive and effective hybrid work environment. Some of the decisions are best made at the individual unit level to create the optimal outcome for all employees. One of they key themes within these recommendations is the need to balance a flexible work environment while maintaining productivity and effectiveness. Seeking input from directly from employees is important while working to address organizational needs. Maintaining open communication within units will help foster on healthy and productive work environment.

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