

Maintaining Culture and Retaining Workers in a Hybrid Environment

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Understanding Kwik Trip’s Culture	5
Understanding Hybrid Work	6
Workers’ Preferences	6
Impacts of Hybrid Work	9
Best Practices for Maintaining Culture and Retaining Workers in a Hybrid Environment	10
Conclusion	16
Works Cited	17

List of Figures

Figure 1: Defining Work Arrangements.....	4
Figure 2: Kwik Trip Core Values.....	5
Figure 3: Sources of Workers' Preference Changes	6
Figure 4: Impacts of COVID-19 on Career Attitudes.....	7
Figure 5: Generational Characteristics in the Workplace	8
Figure 6: Negative Effects of Work from Home	9
Figure 7: Causal Categories and Corrective Strategies	10
Figure 8: Tips for Respecting Employees in Hybrid Work	11
Figure 9: Relationships at an Organizational Level	12

Executive Summary

The purpose of this research is to highlight best practices for maintaining company culture and retaining workers in a hybrid environment. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and trends in workforce attrition, employers find themselves adapting to accommodate a variety of work arrangements to remain attractive to a wide variety of employees. However, adapting to attract employees and support unique work arrangements potentially comes at the cost of company culture and the well-being of employees.

For Kwik Trip, maintaining company culture is a major priority. The Kwik Trip Support Center, located in La Crosse, Wisconsin, helps to support the rapidly growing company. The company is faced with hiring challenges because of the lack of growth in the La Crosse labor market and the stagnant size of the surrounding community. Kwik Trip must confront the challenge of how to best maintain its culture and retain coworkers in a hybrid work environment to make up for the labor-related challenges.

Analysis of research indicates the following:

- Kwik Trip has a robust culture that goes well beyond its mission statement. Through their culture, they begin to satisfy the needs of their employees.
- Employees' preferences have changed. Employees desire strong workplace culture, compensation, and growth. Generational changes indicate that Millennials and Generation Z value flexible work arrangements and innovation whereas Baby Boomers and Generation X are generally inflexible and respect authority.
- Hybrid work allows for adaptation to the changing preferences of workers. Successful flexible work practice can be leveraged through the added emphasis of Kwik Trip's core values.
 - Honesty and Integrity: Utilize the organization's code of ethics and educate employees on ethical hybrid work behavior.
 - Respect: Consideration of hybrid employee preferences, time management, and challenges to make an inclusive work experience. Schedule meetings only, when necessary, all other information should be distributed through email. Utilize time blocks and meeting breaks to ensure employee productivity and well-being.
 - Excellence: Enhancing feedback and collaboration between employees encourages improved performance for hybrid and on-site employees.
 - Humility: Acknowledgement of how employee contributions lead to organizational success. Recognition of employee performance helps encourage relationship growth within the organization.
 - Innovation: Adapting technological resources and cultural norms so they accommodate the employee and organizational preferences.
 - Work Ethic: Holding employees accountable for their performance by giving them feedback helps create a trustful and confident work atmosphere. Further developing the social capital also improves the organization's work ethic.

As a result of the research, Kwik Trip is faced with many opportunities for further developing expectations for alternative work arrangements based on the already existing framework of their culture.

Introduction

Since 1965, Kwik Trip has grown to become a staple of the Midwest. With 800 stores and 40 new stores opening each year, attracting and retaining employees who share Kwik Trip's core values is important for maintaining company culture. The Support Center located in La Crosse, Wisconsin serves as the business backbone of the company. As Kwik Trip continues to see growth, there is an increased need for hiring and retention of workers. With the La Crosse labor market failing to meet its demand, there is an increased need for flexible work opportunities to support company growth. Additionally, because of changing work-related preferences, Kwik Trip has a need for understanding how to maintain culture and retain coworkers in nontraditional work systems. The following research and analysis help to discover and evaluate best practices for maintaining culture and retaining workers in a hybrid environment. This was done by answering the following questions:

- What is Kwik Trip's culture? How does Kwik Trip leverage its culture to satisfy and retain workers?
- What are the preferences of workers? How have these preferences changed?
- What is hybrid work? How do flexible work arrangements impact employees?
- What are the best practices for maintaining culture and retaining workers in flexible work arrangements?

Based on this research, best practices were identified to discover how to best do hybrid work to maintain culture while retaining workers.

Currently, Kwik Trip offers their employees three variations of hybrid work. A hybrid work environment is an environment in which some workers are fully in-person, some fully virtual, and some hybrid. Clarification of these environments is listed below in Figure 1.

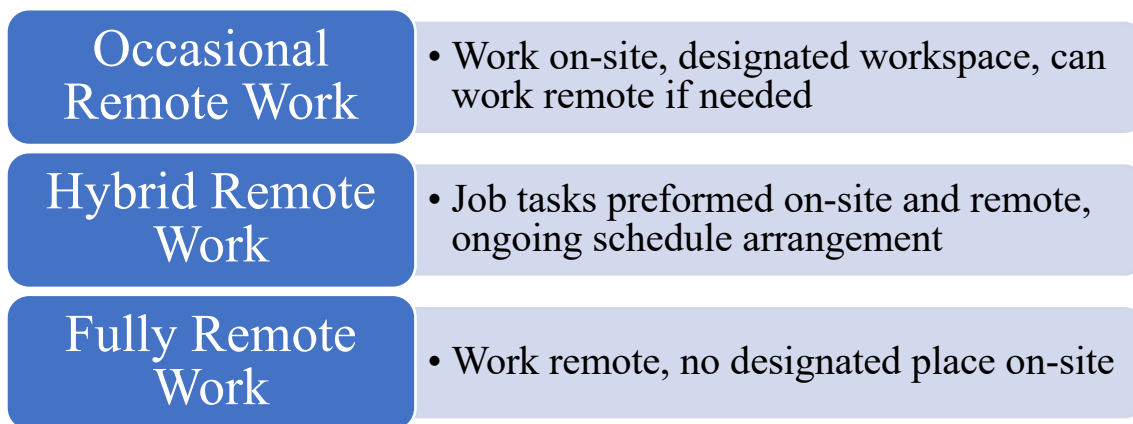


Figure 1: Defining Work Arrangements

Understanding Kwik Trip's Culture

Kwik Trip's culture is at the forefront of all its business activities. Not only is it the words on the walls, but it's a "see ya next time" and a feeling created by the individuals that embody Kwik Trip's values. Company culture drives Kwik Trip's business decisions and how they interact with their consumers and the community. Understanding the core values helps to create the basis for how hybrid work can be done without diminishing company culture.

People are Kwik Trip's priority and as a result, their company is based on treating people the way you want to be treated. They support this mission by focusing on their core values of honesty and integrity, respect, excellence, humility, innovation, and work ethic. Kwik Trip believes that by taking care of people, everyone is better. This belief is exemplified in their 40% profit sharing, Families Helping Families, and KT Wellness programs.

"To serve our guests and provide opportunities for our coworkers to grow, advance, have fun and love their jobs. With this objective in mind, our coworkers and shareowners are then able to share in the earnings of Kwik Trip. Because of this purpose, thousands of lives are made better." – Kwik Trip Mission Statement

Job satisfaction comes from the ability to provide coworkers with work-life balance, flexibility, and support, among other things. This is something that Kwik Trip values and can be observed through their culture. Work-life balance is emphasized through their core value of work ethic. That effort today will drive success in the future. The core values of excellence and innovation and Kwik Trip's purpose provide workers with the foundation of support and flexibility.



Figure 2: Kwik Trip Core Values

By providing opportunities for growth, advancement, and fun, employees are reminded of their value. Additionally, the current flexible work policy addresses the specific needs of employees.

Kwik Trip's culture is what helps to set them apart. This is indicated in the form of multiple workplace awards that list Kwik Trip as a top workplace based on employee engagement surveys. Kwik Trip's culture plays an important role in how employees identify with the organization and ultimately, their level of organizational commitment. While culture plays a big role in retaining employees, understanding the changing preferences of workers in addition to generational changes in career attitudes is essential for attracting employees regardless of work arrangement.

Understanding Hybrid Work

Workers' Preferences

Workers' preferences are important for organizations to recognize because of their impact on attraction, retention, and workplace culture. These preferences can vary from what organizations may expect. Adapting to these preferences results in a better alignment of employee and organizational expectations, leading to person-organization fit.



Figure 3: Sources of Workers' Preference Changes

Workers' preferences are changing drastically in the modern world. Research shows that these changes stem from many different sources. New workforce entrants generally "want to feel like they're wanted and that there's a real investment in their future."¹⁰ Job aspects they prioritize are workplace culture, career-building, personal growth, recognition, and autonomy.^{3,7,10} They want to work in a healthy environment with clear feedback and strong collaboration spanning the organizational hierarchy.^{7,10}

Another source of change is personal preferences according to situational factors. Employees' abilities to operate at peak productivity and performance vary according to their

personal preferences. So, in designing hybrid work, organizations should consider the preferences of their employees and enable others to understand and accommodate those preferences.^{3,9} Certain individuals have varying preferences for flexible work due to their commute time or distance; amount and quality of office equipment available at home; level of distraction at home, such as children or roommates; and tenure, as those with lower tenure often need more time on-site for learning and development.⁶

Since these preferences vary greatly depending on the individual, optimal working conditions would presumably involve a mix of on-site, hybrid, and fully remote employees. Evidence suggests that flexible work arrangements (FWAs) complement workers' changing preferences. There is a myriad of benefits resulting from the presence of FWAs, including reduced absenteeism, stress, and burnout; increased productivity, job satisfaction, job engagement, employee retention, and employee mental health.^{7,9} Though there are great benefits from FWAs, there are drawbacks worth considering as well. FWAs are typically financed through reductions in compensation for entry-level workers. They may also result in increased work hours and therefore less leisure time.⁹

COVID-19 also influenced workers' preferences. The pandemic resulted in a significant change to how work is done. Though this change was intended to be temporary, it altered workers' career attitudes permanently. Companies are not utilizing the full benefits of hybrid work because many have the same mindset that work will return to the way it was before the pandemic.¹¹ This resulted in misaligned expectations from employers compared to their employees. Organizations stand to gain much by realigning their expectations to match those of the employees they wish to attract. If organizations offer alternative work arrangements, they will gain a stronger recruiting advantage.¹¹

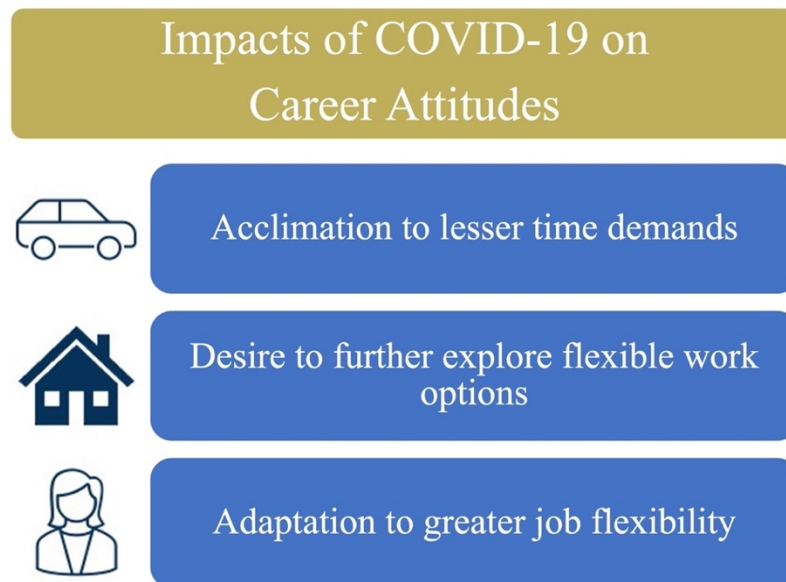


Figure 4: Impacts of COVID-19 on Career Attitudes

Workers' career attitudes were altered by the pandemic in three key ways. Workers have become accustomed to the lesser time demands of commuting while working remotely during the pandemic. Many workers may wish to continue exploring flexible work options after the pandemic. Finally, remote work has allowed some employees greater flexibility without compromising individual performance or productivity, lowering stress and improving morale.^{11,17}

The pandemic has also accelerated the already prevalent Great Resignation. Workers were quitting their jobs at an unprecedented rate before the pandemic due to unsympathetic employers, a lack of flexibility, and no opportunities for advancement.^{7,14} The pandemic only magnified this effect because it opened many opportunities employees were previously unable to capitalize on. A poll of currently employed individuals revealed the effect of the Great Resignation and the pandemic on employees, finding that more than half of workers want to leave their jobs.¹²

The final major factor influencing workers' preferences is generational differences. Different generations tend to value different things in the workplace. Baby Boomers' preferences at work evolve from their willingness to take on risky projects and proposals that align with their visions. They respect authority and hierarchy in the workplace. Generation X is mistrustful of traditional work values, full of cynicism and skepticism, and desires easily changing work environments. They are flexible, adaptable, and highly job mobile.¹⁴ Millennials value innovation and change, desire flexible work schedules, and can easily adapt to new technology. Generation Z falls into three categories: social investors, who value work-life balance; chill worker bees, who desire a comfortable workplace environment; and go-getters, who prioritize the advancement of their careers. Ultimately, this generation is drawn to companies that display high moral and ethical standards in addition to social impact.^{2,14} Generational differences are an important consideration because as time goes on, the workforce will continue to be replaced by younger generations, each with their own set of preferences in the workplace.

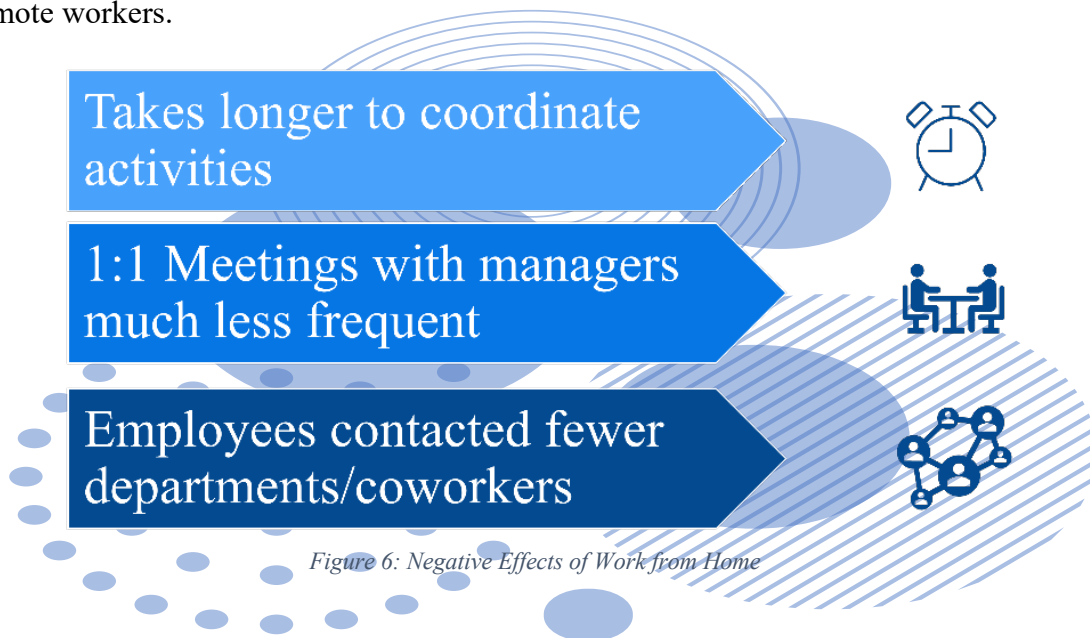


Figure 5: Generational Characteristics in the Workplace

Meeting these new employee expectations will require a shift in mindset from the organization, taking into consideration each of the various sources of change described above. Organizations may benefit significantly by creating “a culture that embraces flexibility and prioritizes employee wellbeing, understanding that this is a competitive advantage to build a thriving organization and drive long-term growth.”²

Impacts of Hybrid Work

Generational changes in worker preferences, COVID-19 related health concerns, and an increased desire for flexible work have impacted the demand for flexible work arrangements. During the pandemic, for many, remote work was a necessity. At this time, researchers tracked various data points to understand the effects of remote work on employees. This research signals factors of interest,⁴ displayed in Figure 5. Detrimental factors require adjustments to align with Kwik Trip’s culture and improve flexible work arrangements to aid in the satisfaction of hybrid and remote workers.



Most of these factors directly coincide with Kwik Trip’s previous findings with hybrid and remote work. Time efficiency decreased as distractions at home increased. This resulted from increased interruptions and increased the average length of the workday for these employees. Many of these distractions had to do with childcare,^{4,15} with which at home mothers experience the greatest level of distractions. Flexible work also became too flexible in some instances, resulting in the isolation of employees, disconnecting them from the culture of the organization. In these cases, positive effects of workplace culture were diminished, and teams and departments had less intimate working relationships.¹⁵

The negative effects as stated above, generated by alternative work arrangements, can be grouped into two causal categories: distractions and employee engagement. Strategies to limit distractions and generate camaraderie serve to directly nullify undesired effects on coworkers.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid and remote work have been driven into mainstream commerce. Growing pains of this sudden change resulted in numerous negative effects on workers away from the office. To limit negative effects, increase effectiveness, and retain workers, strategies to limit distractions and engage remote workers can be implemented.⁷

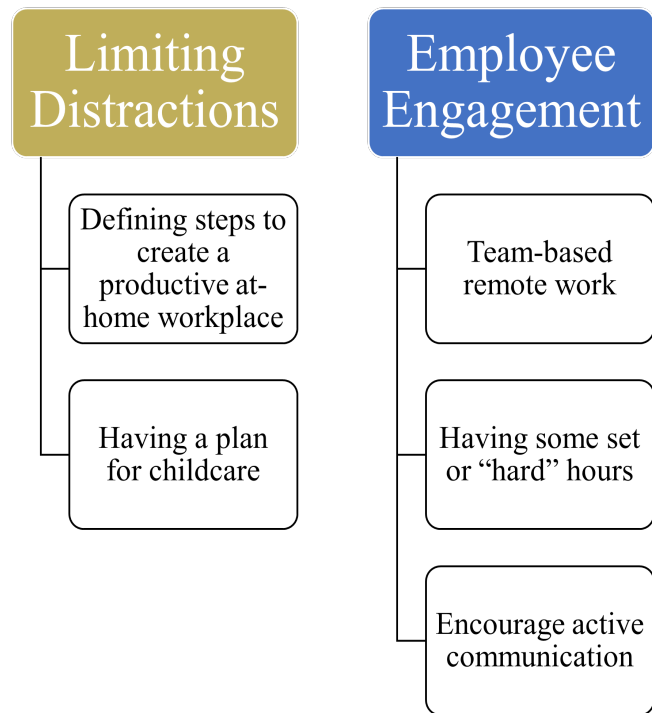


Figure 7: Causal Categories and Corrective Strategies

Best Practices for Maintaining Culture and Retaining Workers in a Hybrid Environment

Kwik Trip currently utilizes a flexible work arrangement policy that integrates its core values and attempts to establish company culture in alternative work environments. As a result of Kwik Trip’s robust culture, its core values can be adapted to maintain company culture and strengthen employee retention regardless of the work environment. Many of these best practices involve increasing active communication, scheduling more effectively, and supporting team-based collaboration which can be highlighted by an emphasis on Kwik Trip’s core values. Additionally, these core values can help guide the implementation of best practices for hybrid work, while considering the impact on organizational culture and employee retention.

Kwik Trip’s core values of honesty and integrity showcase how they approach business interactions honestly and ethically. These values provide Kwik Trip with a culture that is desirable among coworkers, customers, and business partners. Organizations that are committed to ethical behavior attract talented employees, improve their public reputation, and create trust among employees, customers, and business partners, which translates to better company performance.¹⁸ Employers can ensure ethical behavior by frequently educating and engaging employees on the organization's code of ethics as well as their policies and procedures regardless of work arrangement. Communication is essential to maintain honesty and integrity in a hybrid

work model. Employees should be encouraged to actively communicate and doing so will ensure ethical behavior is being maintained.¹⁸ Employers are responsible for providing employees with ethical guidelines to ensure the employees retain the company's ethical standards.

Ultimately, hybrid work is a privilege and employees must be held to a high standard of honest and ethical behavior. Workplace culture suffers when hybrid work is used to avoid certain aspects of a job role such as conflict or counterproductive behavior. Ethical behavior is an important dimension of Kwik Trip's culture. By demonstrating these behaviors, regardless of work arrangement, both consumers and prospective employees will be attracted to Kwik Trip. Integrity must be at the forefront of all actions and conversations to ensure that employees are acting ethically on behalf of Kwik Trip.

Respect involves the degree of thoughtfulness and courtesy demonstrated through employee interaction. The hybrid work model requires respect between employees to make work in different locations inclusive and enjoyable. Employers need to respect the time, preferences, and challenges that employees have while also maintaining productivity.² Emphasis should be placed on creating a more inclusive environment between hybrid and on-site employees. Management needs to respect that there are differences between virtual and on-site work models and attempt to minimize the perception of these differences. Additional channels of communication such as emails, chat functions, and phone calls between workers ensure that everyone receives the same information and feedback to effectively do their jobs.

For a flexible work model, increasing employee interaction is best achieved through virtual meetings. Productive meetings with only the necessary members are essential for ensuring time isn't wasted and that meeting members feel like their time is valued and respected. Employee productivity can be improved by emphasizing respect for employees' time and implementing the following practices. These practices include only scheduling necessary meetings, considering opportunities for replacing meetings with emails, creating time blocks where no meetings are allowed, including breaks during long or consecutive meetings, and setting expectations for response times on emails.^{2,13}

Organizations that value respectful behavior emphasize the importance of thoughtful consideration towards other employees and their well-being. Treating employees respectfully creates a welcoming atmosphere that employees are glad to be a part of and encourages workers to make meaningful contributions that support the organization and its values.

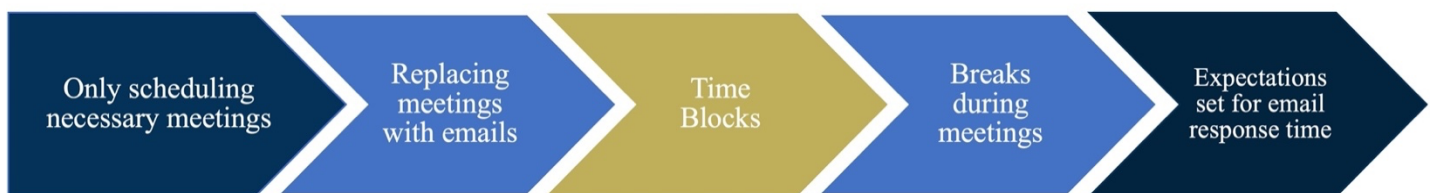


Figure 8: Tips for Respecting Employees in the Hybrid Environment

Excellence refers to high levels of productivity and performance at work. Hybrid work excellence is achieved when employees experience equitable access to all resources they would receive on-site. Hybrid employees must receive the same support from supervisors as on-site employees to be effective at their jobs. Supervisors must increase their levels of communication with remote workers by utilizing check-in points to gauge progress, challenges, or concerns employees have regarding their work.² Virtual meetings allow for increased collaboration on a variety of tasks. Meetings and teamwork should be interactive and engaging to ensure that each employee can collaborate effectively. Virtual meetings should follow the same format as traditional on-site meetings.¹⁹

Additionally, team agreements can help to ensure teams are equipped with the necessary understanding of group guidelines and policies.¹³ Managers should also determine how their leadership skills can adapt to better manage hybrid workers. Success in this environment requires a growth mindset. By implementing one-on-one meetings, managers and employees can better understand the best approach to ensure worker preferences and performance are considered. Teams need to develop a shared understanding of the team’s priorities to develop team principles and guidelines. Teams should utilize frequent follow-up and reflection to ensure that the principles and guidelines for hybrid work continue to align with employee priorities^{2,13}. Hybrid work requires a mindset of all employees to contribute high levels of support and effort in all aspects of their job performance. Enhancing feedback and collaboration is essential for maintaining excellence within the organization.

Maintaining excellence within hybrid work allows for a foundation of healthy relationships between employers and employees. These relationships increase employee retention, satisfaction, and well-being. Figure 7 shows the difference between struggling and thriving relationships at an organizational level.



Figure 9: Relationships at an Organizational Level

Humility refers to the modest appreciation for coworkers and company success that Kwik Trip demonstrates publicly and privately. Kwik Trip is known for not actively seeking public recognition, however, internal recognition can be incorporated into the workplace culture to encourage successful workers. Hybrid workers require a deliberate display of this modest appreciation from coworkers and supervisors because office interactions and feedback are nontraditional.¹⁹

Acknowledging positive performance is important because it empowers employees and can lead to further growth and relationship development which benefits organizational culture and employee retention.¹⁹ Ignoring conflict and poor performance from hybrid workers degrades the overall output and culture of the team and addressing this poor behavior is essential for maintaining a healthy work culture.¹⁹ Relationship-building takes more time and emphasis in the hybrid environment, but it is necessary for maintaining culture. Employees who have thriving relationships with immediate team members report better well-being, and higher productivity, and are less susceptible to turnover than those with poor relationships.² Employees with thriving relationships beyond their immediate team are more satisfied with their employer, more fulfilled by their work, and have a more positive outlook on workplace stress than those with poor relationships.² Humility in a hybrid work model allows an organization to foster positive workplace relationships between employees because it encourages the acknowledgment of workers' contributions to an organization's success.

Innovation encourages creative thinking and supports the implementation of unique solutions to overcome internal and external challenges. Maintaining business as usual prevents organizations from recognizing and responding to the changing preferences of the workforce. Research suggests that workers have shifted workplace values and now prefer flexibility in the workplace.²

Organizations benefit from encouraging new norms regarding flexible work and adopting hybrid or remote work opportunities to satisfy worker preferences which may lead to increased employee engagement and retention.⁸ Investing in new technologies and resources provides employees with the ability to operate and communicate more efficiently which is necessary for achieving a successful and functional hybrid work model.⁸ Adapting toward innovative ideas and techniques allows organizations to capitalize on change within the industry. The change in employee preferences is one area where innovation can lead to sustaining organizational culture and employee retention.



Work ethic illustrates the commitment and effort employees demonstrate to meet expectations and succeed. For hybrid work, this is important because employees might not always feel like contributions are recognized. By holding employees' accountable managers indicate to employees that their contributions matter and ensure that the standards of the company are met by each employee. Accountability ties together both excellence and respect values because managers need to remain empathetic to the individual challenges employees encounter without sacrificing the productivity of the company. Employees must also respect the needs of their organization so that they perform to the company's standards. Managers who enforce accountability provide workers with sufficient feedback on their results as well as connect with coworkers to ensure that the flow of information remains consistent.¹⁹

Managers who adjust to the hybrid work process, support employees, and encourage the development of social capital to improve relationships and ideas formed between coworkers. Management must display a great deal of effort to facilitate these and manifest these employee connections, but the extra effort pays off significantly in the form of enhanced workplace culture and reduced employee turnover. Incorporating an interactive atmosphere reinforces the development of social capital which emphasizes the idea of work ethic.¹⁹ Managers can connect employees across departments, offer cross-functional learning opportunities or schedule virtual coffee meetings.⁸ Providing employees with cross-functional learning opportunities allows workers to develop skills that are not commonly performed in their job role. Virtual coffee meetings allow for a casual meet-up between supervisors and employees so they can build relationships.

Further development of employee relationships can be empowered by acknowledging individual contributions to the team. Articulating an interdependent framework based on each member's work ethic connects the team with a common goal so teams can reach their desired outcome. An organization that values a strong work ethic holds its employees accountable for their performance by providing feedback to ensure the organization's desired results are achieved.¹⁹ Hybrid work operates more efficiently when employees are committed to developing relationships, improving trust, and group work ethic which benefits the organization's culture and employee retention.



Hybrid work presents various obstacles to the function of an organization. Overcoming these obstacles gives an organization a competitive advantage within the industry. Kwik Trip has developed core values that establish priorities and define their work culture while on-site. Hybrid work requires additional attention to accommodate organizational and employee needs. Within the core values of honesty and integrity emphasis can be placed on the importance of the code of ethics and related policies to ensure employees behave ethically. To emphasize respect, the well-being of employees who participate in hybrid work should be monitored. Ensuring that the time and contribution of these employees are recognized. Excellence is displayed in the hybrid work

environment by dedicating support to hybrid teams, increasing levels of collaboration, and clearly defining team goals and guidelines to boost overall performance. Humility reflects how organizations should acknowledge and recognize success, instead of sharing how well the company is doing with the public organizations should use their social capital networks to share with employees how their contributions have created this success. The acknowledgment of employee contribution is important in the hybrid work environment because employees who are working virtual receive less recognition compared to other coworkers. Innovation is necessary for organizations to incorporate to adapt to the changing preferences in the workforce. The hybrid work model requires the support of innovative technologies and ideas and adapting the organization's software and hardware gives workers the resources and tools they need to collaborate effectively. The cultural norms of the organization also need to be addressed and adapted so they can accommodate the needs of virtual and on-site employees to create a more inclusive atmosphere for everyone. Finally, the work ethic of a company must be prepared to adjust to the demands of hybrid work. Holding employees accountable for their contributions to the organization by developing social capital network builds a sense of trust and leads employees to be motivated to meet the expectations of their coworkers and supervisors. The hybrid work model demonstrates many characteristics that create employee disconnect and impact the culture of the organization but through hard work and commitment organizations can capitalize on the benefits of a strong and engaging culture that satisfy the preferences of the workforce.

Conclusion

Kwik Trip has an all-encompassing culture that prioritizes people and that through the golden rule and caring for others the greatest amount of good can be done. As our world continues to change the preferences of workers will also adapt. Worker's desire personal growth, autonomy, clear feedback, strong communication, work-life balance, and flexible work arrangements. Hybrid work is here to stay but it doesn't come without decreased productivity, increased isolation, and fewer opportunities for interaction. Using Kwik Trips' core values, adjustments can be made to adapt to changing preferences of the workforce. Many of these adjustments include increasing collaboration between virtual and on-site workers, active communication, and effective utilization of scheduling techniques. Relationships developed through these practices help to increase organizational commitment and develop culture.

After analysis of Kwik Trip and their current hybrid work policy, there are many opportunities for further developing the expectations for alternative work arrangements based on the already existing framework of their culture.

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