

MillerKnoll

ROUNDTABLE RECAP

Pilot Spaces in Hybrid Era

Fertile Testing Ground, Scalable Solutions





HYBRID WORK

Many flavors and associated challenges

Many organizations are exploring and adopting hybrid work strategies but aren't sure how to navigate the new complexities they encounter in the process. Faced with new options for where people work, planners are tasked with not only reimagining office environments for the new workplace ecosystem, but also with creating destination spaces that draw employees back, while providing an equitable experience for both remote and in-person team members.

MillerKnoll has found that small-scale pilots are a useful tool that bring clarity to the path forward. Piloting allows organizations to test new layouts, furniture, protocols and policies on a limited basis that can be measured, iterated and scaled.

Recently, we convened a peer-to-peer roundtable for workplace professionals to discuss their own pilot experiences and share best practices. Participants were all planning some variation of a hybrid workplace, typically averaging two or three days a week in the office. However, specific models, workplace strategies and protocols varied widely, as did overall goals relative to portfolio strategy and use of space.

Stages of implementation spanned a wide spectrum, as well. Some organizations were in the throes of a pilot, others had a plan in place that had not fully rolled out, and others were still considering options. Yet, despite variations in timing, strategies, and organizational priorities across multiple industries, a few general themes emerged.

Here we look through the three lenses of work: people, process and place, and summarize some common challenges, with solutions that have been explored by participants and MillerKnoll strategists.



PEOPLE

Engaging outside experts to get your people on board

After a lifetime of the traditional workday and associated commute, panelists discussed the need to rethink what the “new” workday looks like, and the challenge of getting people on board with the new approach.

While some firms trained managers to introduce employees to the new hybrid workplace, other organizations added staff or partnered with outside specialists to manage training and upskilling, as well as support change management and culture development.

One roundtable participant shared how her federal agency teamed with a learning and development firm to help them proactively address the many challenges of the new workplace on a system-wide level. So far, the partnership has garnered great enthusiasm. “I love the idea of having that learning organization support. I think that it's a critical enabler,” she said. “They have been an integral part of our work stream and workplace strategies, helping get our culture to a good place to work differently as far as hybrid work.”

Another participant, who works at a technology organization, said that they hired an individual dedicated to managing education and rollout of new processes. Internal team members shadow participants wherever they are located – onsite in a meeting room or some remote location – to “see what the experience is like for them.” Findings capture the voice of employee and are fed into a learning plan for the organization with the goal of ensuring optimal meetings.

Creating worker archetypes based on people's roles

A participant from a leading university shared how the pandemic inspired them to change plans to build a new data science building. Instead, they adapted an existing office building that was unoccupied due to most employees working from home. Not only did the university avoid constructing a new learning facility, they also enabled the future creation of a centralized student hub of services in the process.

Because the new hub building would not accommodate all the staff, it required implementing a hybrid approach with some groups working from home some or all of the time. Working in tandem with JLL, the university embarked on a future-of-work study to create guidelines for office space that make a strong distinction between student-facing and non-student facing spaces, the university's architect explained.

To help prioritize planning, planners created four worker archetypes and an increased variety of spaces. "We have four 'flavors,'" the architect explained, encompassing campus, campus-friendly, remote-friendly or remote, with accompanying additional "flavors" of space in the new guidelines.

The spectrum will span an assigned, enclosed 120-square-foot office ("campus flavor") primarily for faculty, to an unassigned shared space with a higher ratio of staff to desks ("remote flavor") with two flavors (campus-friendly and remote-friendly) in between. The large-scale pilots have yet to be implemented, but the plans put the university ahead of many of its peers in solving for hybrid workplaces.

Ensuring equity for remote and onsite workers during meetings

As a hybrid workplace becomes the norm, organizations report most employees expect that a virtual experience will remain an option. Thus, blended meetings are a reality going forward.

Yet solving for a blended audience remains one of the most difficult aspects of the hybrid work experience. Nearly every organization reported challenges in supporting meetings that combine in-person and remote attendees, which was both helped and hindered by video call technology.

Increasingly, leaders are realizing that adaptation goes beyond simply learning new technology to rethinking meetings entirely.

While pre-COVID-19 hybrid meetings might have found a large onsite team gathered around a Polycom speaker phone, and a lone caller out of sight, struggling to hear cross-conversation, today's video technology creates a different scenario. In many cases, the bulk of meeting participants are calling in from an individual laptop, and the onsite participants may be in the minority, often struggling to find an appropriate quiet and well-equipped venue to take video calls and meetings.

Additionally, the level playing field experienced when all meeting participants are on a laptop camera changes when some employees join in person. Relationships shift further when meetings take on activities that risk excluding some employees.

"As some people are coming in to do visioning sessions, and so on, that center of gravity now shifts to people in the room. But we still have team members who are unable to come in for whatever reason," a participant related.

"How do we level the playing field as a seamless experience between those that are online and those that are in person?"

Adjustments in audio, video and etiquette were some best practices participants were exploring to improve equity among all participants.

One solution shared was to use both a room camera and encourage in-person attendees to use their laptop. For the in-person portion of a blended meetings, faces may show up on one screen with content presented on a second monitor.

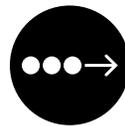
“As technology improves, you can read facial reactions better onscreen than in a full-room experience. So, we do both,” described Kimberly Bombery Smith, senior director workplace strategy for MillerKnoll. Such an arrangement means that the whiteboard experience must adapt to virtual as well.

“I encourage the in-person employees to bring their laptops so that they have a visual of everyone’s face as well as having the full-room camera so they can see the whiteboard exercise that we’re doing.”

Several participants echoed that they had a similar policy. If one person is attending virtually, everyone connects via laptop so faces appear right-sized on the screen rather than a tiny image around a table. Others were testing cameras within large rooms that rotate to focus on the speaker. Monitor size, placement and practices should also consider the individuals who may be uncomfortable speaking up on a screen, knowing that their face might appear enlarged to fit a wall-size monitor.

MillerKnoll shared that they had been workshopping some blended meeting scenarios and room settings, piloting spaces that are more effective as well as more inclusive and equitable. Options centered around varying table shapes, room layouts, furniture configurations and acoustics, including exploring centralized or distributed audio strategies.

“We must continue to think about the overall level of sound and explore it as an actual design element. We must bring it down as we are in a more amplified experience,” explained Tracy Wymer, MillerKnoll vice president of workplace strategy, reminding participants that the pre-pandemic office was often a loud, distracting place. “When you use distributed audio, you can keep the overall volume down. People don’t feel they have to shout at a centralized speaker or mic.”



PROCESS

Simplifying and standardizing technology to create more seamless experiences

While levels of tech agility varied at the beginning of the pandemic, COVID forced organizations to quickly become adept with different technology and connectivity, rapidly transitioning from occasional conference calls to daily video meetings with both onsite and remote participants.

At least two organizations committed to Microsoft Teams, finding a single tool would accommodate their room booking needs as well as connectivity. Based on positive piloting, one firm fit out every meeting room in North America with Teams technology.

Other organizations found creating simplified, universal technology standards was key to supporting varied teams. One ultimately settled on providing just a Wi-Fi source and power as they found, “The more different groups that are in a space, the harder that standardization becomes.”

Another streamlined hardware. “Everyone that you’d like in your spaces has to be using the same tech, the same docking stations, so that they’re untethered, and they’re free to connect anywhere,” he said. “If you can’t make that investment, you won’t have success.”

One organization tried and quickly dropped virtual whiteboards, despite some employees leaning into the novelty of it. An executive admitted it was harder than initially expected, and many people were not willing to put in the time required for successful technical upskilling. Moreover, most leaders assumed the technology would rapidly change, anyway.



PLACE

Creating flexible floorplans to support hybrid teams

Leadership at a technology firm formerly subscribed to a traditional 1:1 desk-to-employee ratio and expected that employees be in the office daily – despite batch reports and other data that showed low levels of utilization.

The remote work experience during the pandemic changed their minds. They saw engineers were even more productive working from home, an option the teams had long requested in place of being onsite in the open office model they worked in.

Going forward, their hybrid model will be working in the office two or three days a week, with specific days determined by individual teams.

The organization is piloting a flexible neighborhood approach where teams are assigned a particular area of the floor and desks can be reserved via booking app by the day (currently) or two-hour increments (future). Additionally, they are piloting hybrid meeting spaces outfitted with new technology and furniture settings to support the people coming in a few times a week to collaborate with the large, distributed teams.

In the process, the tech firm quickly realized that comfortably seating in-person attendees and accommodating new meeting technology, including a large, centralized panoramic camera with multiple screens, required their largest meeting rooms, which will inform future planning.

Making the office a destination to draw employees back

Pre-pandemic office utilization rates were less than ideal. Participants reported that they hovered at around 40 to 50% in their own offices, measured with tools ranging from booking apps to badge data to observation “with an old-school clipboard.”

Herman Miller’s space utilization trend data shows that, during the five busiest hours each day, workstations were only used, on average, 35% of the time.

A fundamental driver shaped nearly all the participants’ thinking: the reimagined office must be a destination that draws people out of their home workspaces. Such was the strategy an energy firm used as they leaned in to an onsite-heavy model, and away from its former agile strategy. Leadership sought to move back to a 1:1 desk ratio and a fixed hybrid model in which all employees are expected in the office Monday, Tuesday and Thursday with the goal of building teamwork and collaboration.

Additional flexibility may come later as utilization metrics continue to inform planning. But one thing was certain. “This really cements that we’re not shrinking our footprint,” the firm’s real estate leader said, though he expects it to ebb and flow with the size of the workforce.

In the meantime, the energy organization is investing in offices to create a high quality, inclusive environment that will entice employees back.

“We do believe in the theory of destination environment. So, we'd like our employees to be proud of their spaces. They have to be cool. They have to be a draw. Because you don't have to be there.”

Whether the energy firm is an outlier or not, their path is clear. “We’re doubling down and everybody’s going to have a place to sit in an office. Whether they use it or not, we’ll see,” the energy organization’s real estate leader added.

Leveraging coworking to reduce real estate footprint

Pre-pandemic, a government agency had standardized on activity-based working that allowed employees to transition easily post-pandemic. Despite utilization ranging from 40 to 60%, leadership ascribed to a 1:1 desk to employee ratio.

The agency had data from HR worker agreements that showed less than 10% of employees wanted to come back more than once a week. In response, the agency is testing an ecosystem of options available to all but some operational workers. The plan calls for bringing people back gradually to a modernized workplace ecosystem, comprised of 100% unassigned seating in different locations within the city, including some newly opened coworking spaces.

Realizing that one size did not fit all, they now provide latitude by department, allowing for choice within general standards set by corporate. Additionally, a team was identified for a pilot to determine whether the agency's footprint could be reduced by 50% to 60%.

The concept allows employees to “pick your place based on what's most convenient in terms of facilities for your teams. They can choose what's closer to where you live, or maybe has free parking,” providing an alternative to commuting to city centers, the agency's director explained.

“Our idea is that by growing the network in the areas where demand is highest, we provide the maximum amount of flexibility,” she added.

A reservation system allows employees to select from seven available locations, so demand informs leadership of the number of employees returning and the locations they are selecting. Utilization metrics are applied to both desks and meeting rooms.

As the pilot runs, the agency is measuring actuals and planning for a more gradual return when local restrictions are lifted, and demand will likely be greater. Any possible peaks in demand will be managed by space reservation, and only be comprised of select locations that will be modernized over time, since the agency plans to divest many of the older spaces. Once updated, locations will be added online to form part of the network, which will be right-sized at a later point, likely a three-to-five-year plan that will ultimately total a 40 to 70% reduction of current spaces.

The strategy will allow the agency to exit leases (which comprise about 50% of its portfolio) that don't meet their criteria for being green, accessible, or well-located.



NEXT STEPS

Participants agreed that solving for the hybrid workplace was definitely a work in progress, and piloting was a valuable tool to test the waters. Other important elements in the process that the leaders identified were well-planned change management strategies, updated and clearly communicated etiquette policies, and using space and visual cues to drive behavior and support culture. For example, one participant was implementing wayfinding color schemes that evoke intended behaviors to signal planned use of select zones in her pilot. A bold palette identifies collaborative zones and softer schemes are used in library areas, each standardized across the country and work typology.

Most participants were planning to monitor progress following implementation, and evaluate levels of success, with future iterations likely.

To guide planners in the piloting process, MillerKnoll produced a Guide to Launching Successful Pilots, detailing four key steps in the journey to pilot spaces.