SOLVING THE LAST PIECE OF THE VIRTUAL WORKING PUZZLE

A few months ago, we decided to do something different. Our job at YSC is delving into the hearts and minds of others, and creating the conditions for change in individuals and organisations. We flipped this on its head and turned the lens on ourselves. This was not without risk: any reporter will tell you the golden rule is to avoid becoming the story. Yet we did it to get under the skin of the single most persistent challenge posed by virtual working, and because, as luck would have it, we realised we had the perfect sample.

DILUTION OR DYNAMISM?

Most challenges posed by the explosion of virtual working – once overwhelming – have been overcome. Once bewildered pioneers now feel proud of having steered the course to a new way of doing business. After all, the start of the pandemic was a long time ago.

Yet whilst the operational gremlins have largely been ironed out, the cultural and relational repercussions continue. And as both cause and consequence of culture, employee onboarding has become 'the single factor most negatively impacted by virtual work', according to post-pandemic research[1].

Onboarding sounds simple. It's about settling in new joiners, helping them feel ready to contribute, and doing everything possible so they can thrive – except it's so much more than that. It is arguably the key mechanism through which your culture evolves. And it's the piece of the digital puzzle that many organizations still haven't cracked.

Virtual working models, even when 95% figured out, still struggle to replicate the power of the flesh-and-blood office. Old-timers already ensconced in a network are less affected (though not without risky patterns to watch out for, see network drift), but new joiners can struggle to feel connected and like they 'get' the culture. Gone are coffee-breaks, kind offers of help, and overhearing how David from finance fell foul of some unwritten rule.

By contrast, the increasingly popular hybrid working path raises issues of fairness and consistency. Some new joiners will be able to enjoy the full in-person experience, maybe even going for a drink or two, whereas others may be grumbling about a diluted experience from another region, country, or even continent.

The risk in both models is that new virtual joiners are only exposed to a fraction of the cultural norms they used to experience. In the long term, something gets lost. Unattended, organizational culture can erode over time, tending towards the average.

The research shows that having a run-of the-mill culture is not a good thing at all from a financial perspective. Distinctiveness attracts and retains talent, and unique behavioral norms enable people to go above and beyond. In fact, the most distinctive, different, vibrant cultures outperform the most ordinary by around 20 to 30%. Your cultural atmosphere flows into brand perceptions, employee value proposition, retention, and, via all these processes and more, onto the bottom line.

We are left with one simple question: how can onboarding work better for organizations that have chosen to embrace virtual working, fully or partially, and who want their culture to be an engine of value?

Like many organizations we were fully remote during the height of the pandemic and have since moved to a hybrid approach. We have also been growing as a company. Our own people were the perfect case study – our post-pandemic new joiners.

We asked them to share their anonymous experiences and insights, and analysed the results. Here is what we learned.

1 'INTENTIONAL INTERACTION' IS WHAT COUNTS IN SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL ONBOARDING

Of our respondents, over 80% cited the importance of 1:1 meetings in making them not only feel comfortable, but like they 'got it'. A theme came through again and again that culture depends on the quality of working relationships. Most reported a feeling of having to be more deliberate in building these relationships as someone joining a new organisation virtually.

> **The main adaptations I made were intentionally reaching out to people to casually check in, keeping my video on as much as possible, and making time to check in personally at the beginning of meetings.**

> **The richest source [of cultural awareness] was through the 1:1 introduction meetings where people were very helpful and open in sharing about themselves, their local market, and our culture.**

Leadership tip: It might sound like a paradox, but plan for spontaneity. Brief, informal 1:1 calls with new joiners are a productive use of time, even if there isn't a critical item on the agenda. As a reference point, think about the amount of time that was spent over the course of a normal week on office conversations, and try to schedule in even a fraction of that time.

2 GETTING A PICTURE OF THE CULTURE IS ONE THING – FEELING CONFIDENT IN THAT PICTURE IS ANOTHER

The respondents were united in feeling like they were able to get a sense of the culture, but they were less certain about whether they were actually right. People will always create an image based on the data available – what matters is that they are supported to create the right one.

> **It is difficult to determine whether your observations and assumptions are correct when you are solely engaging virtually in finite and generally short periods of time.**

> **I may think I understand the culture, but it's hard to know if my read of the culture is accurate.**

[1]https://www.forbes.com/sites/adigaskell/2021/09/28/how-to-form-bonds-in-a-virtual-workplace/?sh=741b54b76c2e

3 ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITIES SUCH AS INITIATIVES, TOWN HALLS, AND EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS, ARE NOW EVEN MORE IMPORTANT SIGNALS OF YOUR CULTURE

Formal organizational activities have always helped to sustain a culture – and their symbolic power is only increased in the absence of an office. New joiners pay particular attention to what is and what is not focused on, who gets to speak, and how those speaking want to come across.

> **I was fortunate enough to start on a day with an all-hands event which, for me, has been one of the best ways to get to know the culture each month. The small things – like the fact that there is a handover between each region, the back-and-forth in the chat box, the transparency around our financials – were all indicators of the type of culture I had joined.**

> **All-hands events – what is shared and given attention, how people interact with one another on the calls, who is on the calls, how comms are managed between different geographies, acceptability of presence of children and pets on calls!**

4 MEETINGS SHOULD BALANCE OPERATING TIME WITH RELATING TIME – AND NOT OVER-INDEX ON EITHER

When considering what worked for them as new joiners, many emphasised the importance of using even quite task-focused calls to quickly build rapport.

> **I generally try to start any interaction with a little time for personal connection or reflection. This became even more important to build relationship and maintain a human touch.**

> **It is important that people try to open their cameras and share personal stuff without derailing the purpose of a session. You get to know other´s realities and get close to them.**

5 ONBOARDING VIRTUALLY CAN ACTUALLY BOOST INCLUSION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Not all voices focused on the challenges. In fact, many reported a perhaps unexpected benefit of feeling more included than they might have done for having joined remotely. They emphasized the advantages of building global connections, as well as feeling free from social comparison.

> **I often wonder if I would have such a close relationship with my co-workers from other regions if we were not fully virtual.**

> **Having more of my colleagues work from home as well levelled the playing field for me – we were finally all in a little box!**

IN A NUTSHELL

Onboarding new leaders and employees remains the single most persistent challenge posed by virtual and hybrid working models. This matters for new joiners, and it matters because successful onboarding is essential to sustaining a vibrant, value-adding organizational culture. Our own new joiners were a perfect sample for delving into what makes virtual onboarding work. They focused on being intentional about all that used to be automatic – connection, culture, even spontaneity – and the potential positives in terms of inclusion.

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