Gartner®

C-Suite:

7 Myths Standing Between You and the Hybrid Future of Work

Introduction

Before the disruption of COVID-19, around 30% of the U.S. workforce was working from home at least some of the time. That number more than doubled when the pandemic hit, as enterprises overnight enabled everyone they could to work remotely. That same trend played out around the globe.

This unintended experiment in mass-scale remote work shattered one of the most durable myths about the workforce: You can't trust employees to do their jobs if you can't see them.

Now it's time for C-suite executives to reconsider this and other old ideas about what makes for a high-performing workforce — and an attractive workplace that draws the high performers you need.
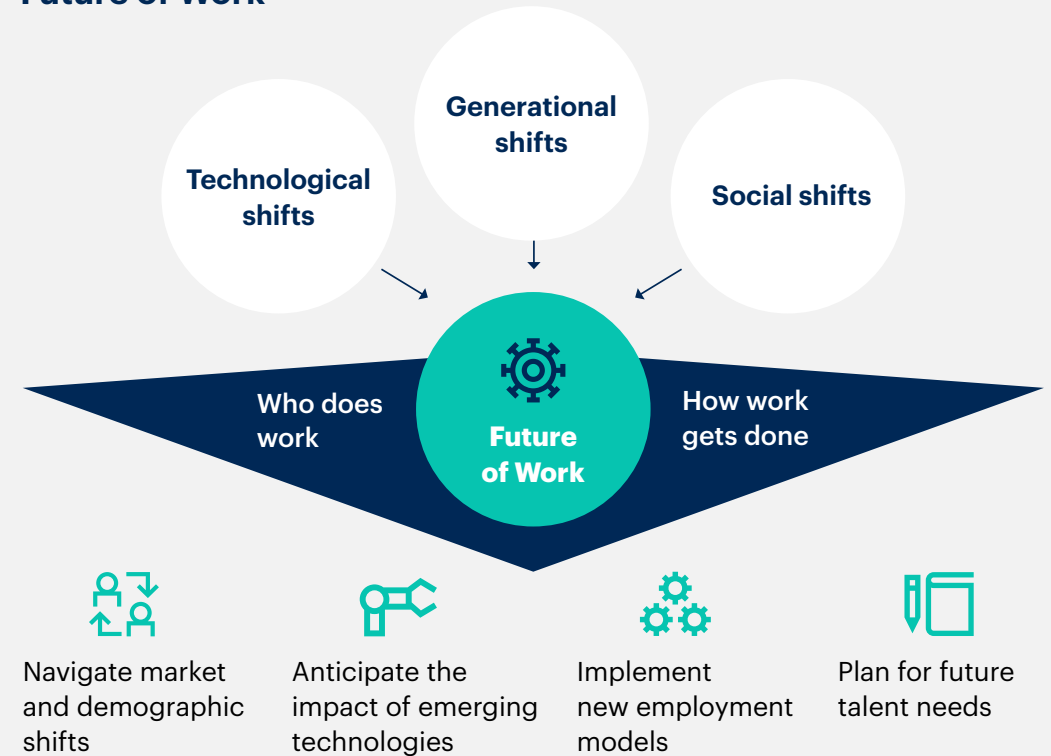
The question today goes far beyond the binary issue of whether employees are remote vs. on-site. That's a legacy mindset from the "before" times, when the drive for efficiency motivated the bulk of business decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered critical proof that efficiency often comes at the cost of flexibility. But, equally, you can't build resilience at any cost.

The smart money in today's highly disrupted environment will flow to businesses that are "composable" — made up of interchangeable building blocks that can scale up or down or swap out, according to the context.

A hybrid workforce model offers exactly that kind of radical flexibility. Capturing the opportunity takes a progressive mindset and a discrete set of steps to smooth execution.

Future of Work

Technological shifts

Generational shifts

Social shifts

Who does work

Future of Work

How work gets done

Navigate market and demographic shifts

Anticipate the impact of emerging technologies

Implement new employment models

Plan for future talent needs

Source: Gartner

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Hybrid workforce myths in the C-suite

Many business leaders have been pleasantly surprised by how successful remote work has been as an urgent response to pandemic conditions. Yet many still question the long-term value of any nontraditional workforce model, let alone a full-fledged hybrid workforce model.

Why the hesitation? Much of it stems from common myths about what a hybrid workforce model is — and old ideas about where, when and how employees perform at their best.

If you don't dispel those myths, you could leave untapped a key driver of organizational resilience, and handicap your attempts to attract and deploy the talent you need — especially to drive business results in an environment where you have to sense and respond to change, over and over again.

Composable thinking — architecting your business for real-time adaptability — is a key accelerator of digital transformation and part of the culture of highly resilient organizations. It will increasingly shape leadership decisions at all levels, and hybrid workforce models are consistent with that type of flexible thinking.

These seven myths are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive, but they illustrate the types of cultural and practical concerns heard in C-suites today.

Make sure to dispel these and other myths to unleash the potential of a hybrid workforce strategy.

7 myths about hybrid workforce models

01 **Our existing remote work strategy will work for a hybrid workforce**

02 **Employees are less productive outside the office**

03 **We need to monitor and measure what employees are doing**

04 **Our jobs just can't be done remotely**

05 **We need in-person contact to sustain our culture**

06 **Hybrid workforce models hurt diversity, equity and inclusion strategy (DEI) strategy**

07 **A hybrid workforce model duplicates our IT infrastructure**

01

Myth

### Our existing remote work strategy will work for a hybrid workforce

Existing workforce strategies remain grounded in the assumption that remote work will be the exception — something allowed for a minority of employees or atypical circumstances. When things go "back to normal," we'll all return to the office — but nearly half of all employees will work remotely at least some of the time post-pandemic.

Reality

Hybrid workforce strategies go far beyond remote work

In a true hybrid workforce model, employers and employees agree that business objectives — the goal of achieving the highest levels of productivity and engagement — are what determine where, when and by whom the work gets done. The choices flex with the details of the work and the context.

The hybrid model: adaptive and interchangeable

Work on-site   **Work interchangeably**   **Work remote**
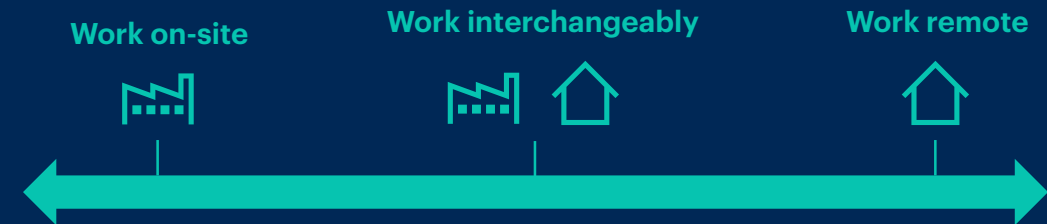
Source: Gartner

Ability to "flow through": Employees and managers have the expectation to be able to switch locations and schedules dynamically where it makes the most sense to drive both productivity and engagement.

Shared ownership: Organizations need to break down long-held beliefs and potential myths about where and how work gets done most effectively. Managers must trust employees to be effective and productive while employees need to be flexible and comfortable being mobile.

Think differently

For a full-fledged hybrid workforce strategy, you'll need to tackle three key issues:

Economics: Build the business case and strategy through tangible benefits, which include reduced operating costs, an improved employee value proposition and expanded access to lower-cost talent pools. Define workforce outcomes and degrees of flexibility for different roles.

Employee experience: Identify where and how to invest in the employee life cycle for the greatest returns on a hybrid workforce, including more employee engagement, expanded career options and improved well-being.

Organizational enablement: Ensure the workforce is fully supported in a hybrid model. Examples might include adapting facilities and workspaces, providing technology support, and redesigning workflows and processes.

02

Myth

Employees are less productive outside the office

Pre-COVID-19, remote work was often limited. The micromanagement style of many organizations dictated that employees be in the same location to enable direct oversight. Some remain skeptical — but there is no evidence that remote employees aren't delivering against business outcomes.
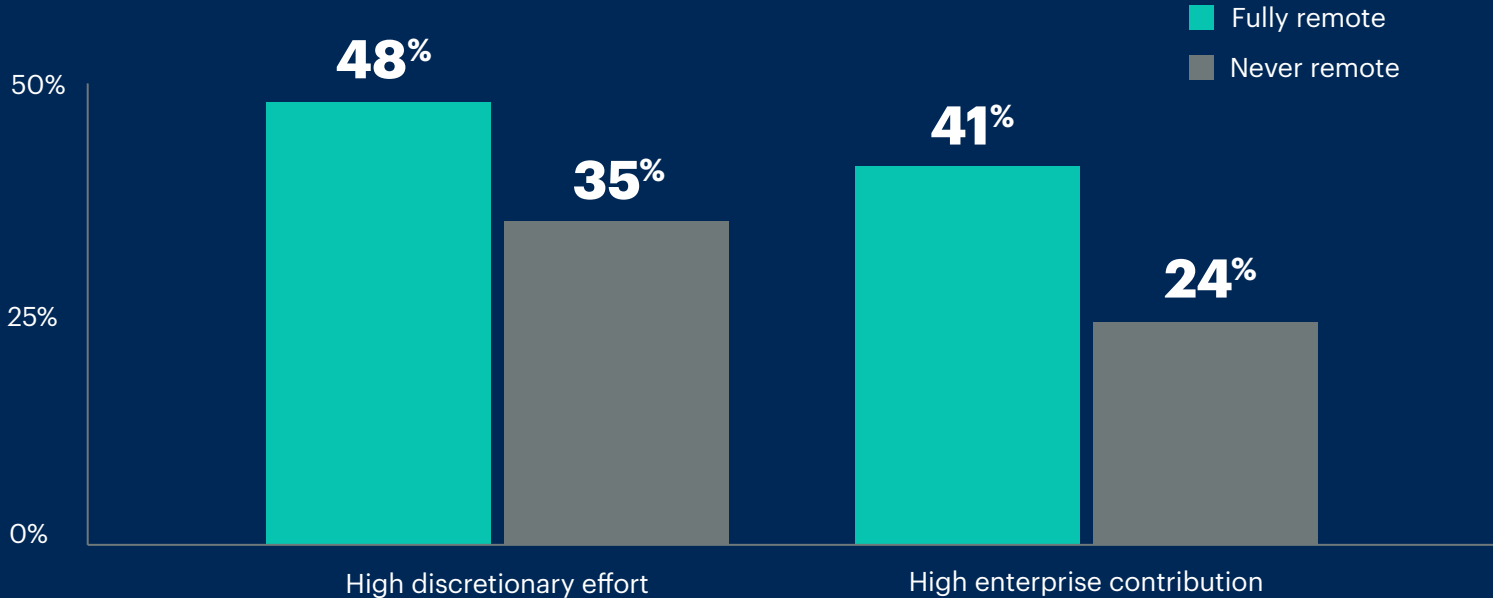
Reality

Remote workers more often go above and beyond and report higher performance

The question is no longer whether employees can be productive when working remotely. The question is what you need to provide to employees for them to be productive.

Higher performance of fully remote employees

Percentage of employees reporting high scores

Legend:
- Fully remote
- Never remote

	High discretionary effort	High enterprise contribution
Fully remote	48%	41%
Never remote	35%	24%

n = 5,002
Source: 2020 Gartner Workforce Responsiveness Survey
Note: Values represent the percentages of employees who scored greater than 78.6 on indexes ranging from 0 to 100.

Think differently

To help remote employees to succeed, you'll need to commit:

Resources: 70% of businesses are allowing employees to bring home work equipment, and 58% have supplied new hardware.

Managerial support: The role of hybrid-workforce managers isn't to micromanage productivity; it's to remove barriers and enable outcomes. Weekly one-on-one meetings with direct reports are a good way for managers to communicate expectations and provide direction and feedback. Employees can use these catch-ups to provide updates on their assignments, ask advice and communicate challenges that could undermine their effectiveness.

Skills support: Soft skills such as adaptability, self-motivation and remote collaboration all help remote employees to be more effective. HR and business leaders can together develop programs to hone these skills. Innovation sprints, for example, are a good way to hone adaptability, as they force employees to produce a defined output within a limited time.

03

Myth

We need to monitor and measure what employees are doing

By June 2020, most organizations were tracking the productivity of employees working remotely. Only 29% were not, down from 51% in April — even though "productivity" is highly context-specific and so is extremely difficult to quantify.
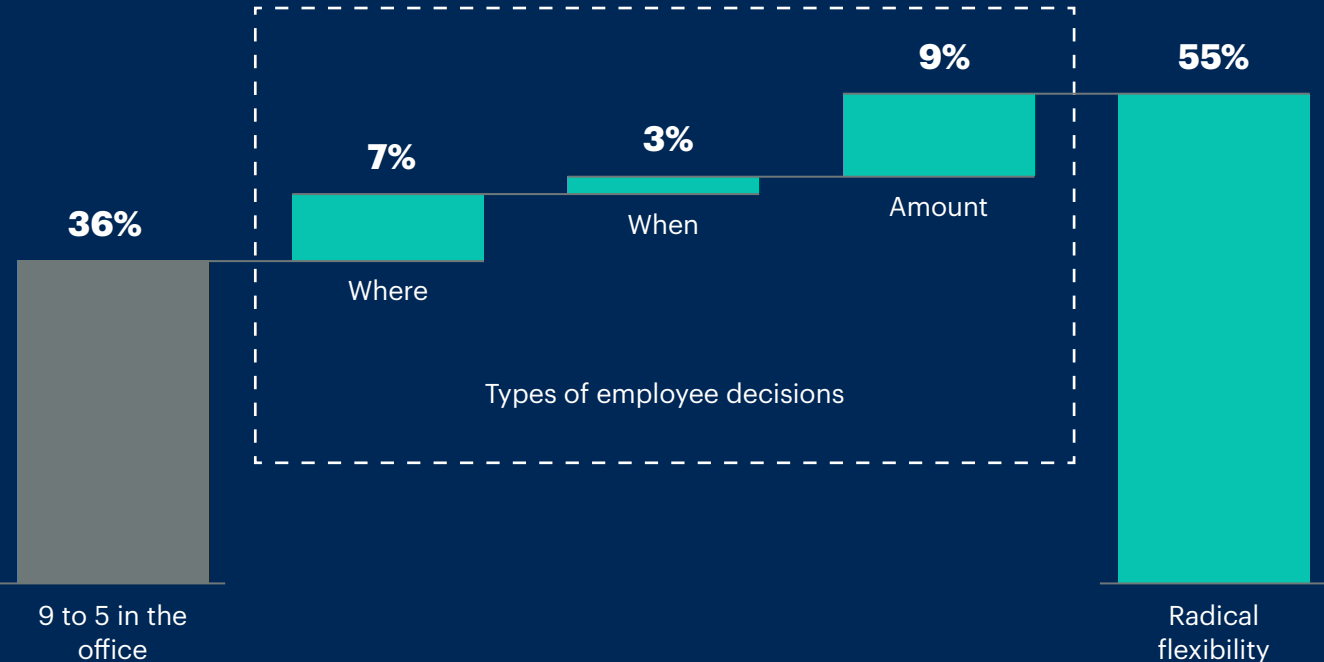
Reality

Employees thrive when given radical flexibility

More employees go above and beyond at work when organizations give them a choice over where, when and how much they work.

Flexibility fuels employee performance

Percentage of high performers

36%

7%
Where

3%
When

9%
Amount

Types of employee decisions

55%

9 to 5 in the office

Radical flexibility

n = 5,000
Source: 2020 Gartner ReimagineHR Employee Survey

8

03

Think differently

Focus less on how much people get done (their productivity) and more on how consistently they produce desired outcomes.

HR and business leaders can together define what the success of a hybrid workforce model looks like for the organization and identify measures that capture those success factors. Track these measures to understand whether the hybrid workforce model is working and where to improve.

Consider success measures in two broad categories:

Workforce outcomes: Track employee performance in relation to business objectives, effective collaboration across teams, behaviors that demonstrate a culture of trust and accountability, a seamless and consistent employee experience, and prioritized mental and physical well-being of all employees.

Business outcomes: A cost-optimized workforce footprint, a strengthened employer brand and strong contributions to revenue from innovation exemplify measures of success. Track improvements such as reduced costs, increased revenue, greater process efficiency, more business opportunities from cross-site partnerships and the ability to attract diverse, high-quality candidates.

04

Myth

Our jobs just can't be done remotely

Many executives overestimate the number and type of jobs that really cannot be remote, because they look only at jobs as a whole, not the composite tasks.

Reality

Hybrid workforce models look beyond roles

Most jobs fall somewhere on a spectrum between fully portable and fully nonportable. Assembly-line work, for example, includes almost all nonportable tasks. Surgeons, in contrast, perform a mix of nonportable tasks (e.g., the surgery itself) and highly portable tasks (e.g., notes and paperwork).

Hybrid workforce model decision matrix

	Low feasibility	High feasibility
High portability	**Continue working on-site. Improve feasibility.** Example: Planning work (such as project scheduling)	**Offer complete work location and schedule flexibility.** Example: Reactionary work (such as replying to emails or text messages)
Low portability	**Continue working on-site.** Example: Physical work (such as installation, transportation).	**Continue working on-site. Improve portability.** Example: Procedural work (such as logging client interactions in CMS, setting up planners for client meetings)

Source: Gartner

04

Think differently

For a hybrid workforce model, you'll need to evaluate the portability of tasks.

Identify the tasks that can be done remotely, and then work with employees to understand their preferences about where they work.

For those who want to work remotely some or all of the time, provide the resources they need to do it. Set expectations around what they can do anywhere, what they must come to the office to do and how often they're expected to be there.

As organizations get more sophisticated, they may also redesign work to allocate nonportable tasks to team members who need to be in the office anyway. This lets employees work remotely full time if they choose to do so.

05

Myth

We need in-person contact to sustain our culture

Many C-suite leaders fear that the lack of in-person contact in a hybrid workforce model will dilute corporate culture. Yet culture itself isn't constant; it adapts to dynamics in the organization.

Reality

Cultural values are changing; orchestrate that change with an open hybrid workforce mindset

Collaboration, agility and trust are increasingly important cultural values in resilient organizations and don't relate to physical location.

Closed
Hybrid is a risk

Open
Hybrid is an opportunity

	Dominant mindset	
Temporary	Expect hybrid to be	Permanent
Fostered through presence and oversight	Perceive productivity as	Fostered through role and goal clarity
As HR's responsibility	View enhancing employee experience	As a shared responsibility
As static and owned by others	View cultures	As dynamic and co-owned by leaders
Only when required and proven	Use new ideas, processes and technology	When an option and promising

Source: Gartner

Think differently

Think first about the cultural norms and values you want to promote and the behaviors that reinforce them.

Then work on how to promote those behaviors in a hybrid model to create a shared purpose and deeper connections with and among full-time employees.

Many leaders fear, for example, that innovation can only thrive in a physical workplace where ad hoc and in-person brainstorming takes place or when employee teams collaborate with nontraditional (e.g., gig) workers.

Ensure that innovation thrives by orchestrating it:

Create intentional collision opportunities. Foster virtual gatherings that pull in employees from diverse business units or from outside the organization. Intentional matchmaking connects people who realistically would never interact in the real world.

Teach employees to use formal and informal networks. The existence of groups within or across business units isn't always obvious. Teach employees about the networks that exist and how to access them.

This same type of intentionality should apply to all aspects of the desired behaviors and culture.

06

Myth

Hybrid workforce models hurt DEI strategy

Concerns that employees feel disconnected from their colleagues in remote work environments can feed fears that a hybrid model, in which colleagues are physically separated by design, will undermine diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

Reality

Hybrid workforce models can make it easier to tap a diverse talent pool; inclusion and equity need discrete intentional effort.

Whether the workforce model is hybrid or not, the imperative is to remove unconscious bias in talent recruitment and development and performance management processes, and demonstrate inclusion and equity. This type of sustainable DEI approach will make you an employer of choice for diverse candidates — whether you deploy a hybrid workforce strategy or not.

Change in inclusion due to sustainable DEI initiatives

This 20% increase corresponds to a:

- 6.2% increase in on-the-job effort
- 5.0% increase in intent to stay
- 2.8% increase in performance

▲ = 20%

Organizations without sustainable DEI initiatives

Organizations **with** sustainable DEI initiatives
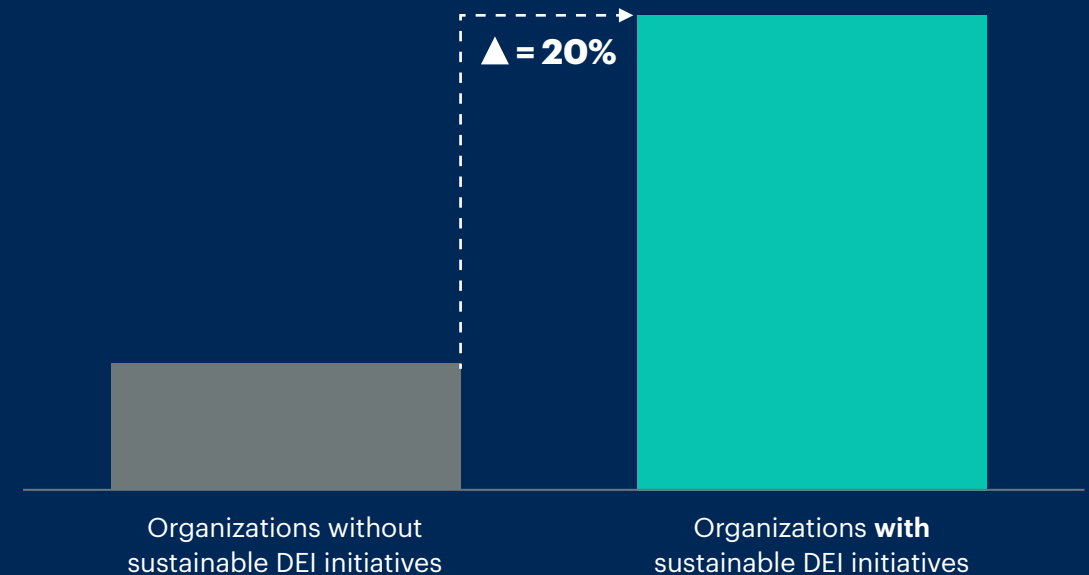
n = 9,689 employees
Source: 2019 Gartner Diversity and Inclusion Employee Survey

Think differently

Devote discrete attention to diversity, equity and inclusion.

With a hybrid workforce, organizations certainly need to be committed and intentional about DEI initiatives — but so will they in more traditional workforce models.

The good news is that employees provided with flexible work options say they are more likely to bring their authentic selves to the organization, which improves their engagement and performance.

Commit to ensuring that inclusion strategies large and small work to remove any barriers to equitable advancement. For example:

Develop good everyday work habits, e.g., ensure everyone is heard in a virtual meeting.

Review how work is assigned, e.g., don't preserve certain clients only for in-person sales calls.

Listen to employees. Pulse employee groups about their work experience, and ask what they need from the organization to feel connected and heard. Leverage employee resource groups (ERGs) to ensure everyone has a voice, and identify new practices, from flexible work schedules to additional hardware or software for differing needs.

07

Myth

A hybrid workforce model duplicates our IT infrastructure

Nearly 70% of infrastructure and operations (I&O) employees view the enterprise's priorities of speed and agility as being at odds with infrastructure's mandates for reliability and efficiency. But this reflects a legacy mindset that will significantly constrain infrastructure speed and agility.

Reality

Resilient organizations continuously reengineer their IT strategies and infrastructures anyway

Resilient, future-fit organizations need "Everywhere Enterprise" strategies — which go beyond enabling a workforce with mobile devices and remote access alone.

Everywhere Enterprises use technology, team structures, processes, skills and tools to empower dispersed workforces, harness distributed infrastructures and serve ubiquitous customer bases.

Requirements gathering by IT

Who are the users and what is their job function?	• Executives or mission-critical employees • Users with intense data analysis needs • Users with "normal" requirements
What kind of device is being used and who owns it?	• PC vs. mobile devices • Organization vs. user-owned • Phone/tablet • PC-class
What kind of applications and data do users need to access to and are they located on-premises or in the cloud?	• Browser-based on-premises • Windows-based on-premises • Browser-based cloud • Windows-based cloud
Where in the world is a user located?	• Verify user's policy complies with all local labor and privacy laws

Source: Gartner

Think differently

Embrace best practices for serving "everywhere" needs.

To serve the "everywhere" needs of a hybrid workforce, you'll need to deliver consistent and secure network access for all employees (traditional and nontraditional), regardless of where they work. CIOs will need to work with other business leaders to help define the requirements.

Best practices for designing and deploying the right systems include:

Define requirements. Establish the specifics of who needs what, including minimum download and upload speeds, and negotiate coverage to include as many employees as possible.

Optimize performance. Deploy solutions that distribute traffic across the network and prevent backlogs that come from routing everything through the on-site data center. Enhance network uptime for employees whose local broadband provider doesn't provide enough coverage.

Invest in cloud-based services. Cloud providers deliver reliable service regardless of worker location, while allowing enterprises to quickly shift capacity in response to disruption.

Conclusion

The current world context is pushing organizations to make better-informed, faster decisions to survive in a rapidly changing environment. Hybrid workforce models reflect the kind of intelligent composable business response needed for individual functions and whole organizations to digitalize activities, at scale and at speed.

But hybrid models do challenge long-held beliefs about when and how employees perform well. It will take deliberate strategic planning to scale such hybrid models in a way that drives business objectives and cost savings. Senior leaders will also need to invest in enabling technology and lead cultural change to tap into innovative employment models.

A candid C-suite conversation about hybrid workforce models needs to take place — and soon. The pandemic environment may seem like an employer's market, but that's an illusion, especially when it comes to talent in high demand.

There is no going back to the work model that prevailed before the pandemic. And your organization can't be resilient without composable thinking that embraces the possibility of nontraditional strategies like hybrid workforces.

Start by dispelling the myths that stand between you and your ability to capture this competitive opportunity.

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