

3 Implications for Employee Engagement and Equity in a Hybrid World

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Initiatives: [Employee Experience](#)

The hybrid world is innately uneven, more distributed and more dynamic. HR leaders need to evolve their understanding of engagement in a hybrid world with these characteristics in mind, focusing on equity, connectedness to work and the increased variability of the employee experience.

After 18 months of proving productivity in nontraditional environments is possible, employees throughout all industries are reevaluating what they want from their work and how their organization adds value to their lives. They also have greater expectations for flexibility and a more satisfying work environment. When these expectations are not met, engagement plummets as does inclusion, job satisfaction, psychological safety and well-being. Employee burnout and retention become serious risks. Unfortunately, while the need to monitor and measure engagement is clear, in this nontraditional, hybrid environment, it is more difficult to know what a highly engaged employee looks like.

Hybrid Environment Implications for Employee Engagement

The current hybrid environment is fundamentally different from the traditional, daily on-site environment. It is innately uneven, more distributed and dynamic. These differences have significant implications for understanding and measuring engagement.

- **Equity** – In an innately uneven environment, equity will be a key driver of engagement.
- **Connectedness to work** – In a more distributed environment, traditional indicators of engagement are no longer as visible, and measuring how connected employees are to their work will become imperative.
- **Frequent measurement** – In a more dynamic environment, employers will need to measure engagement more frequently throughout the year.

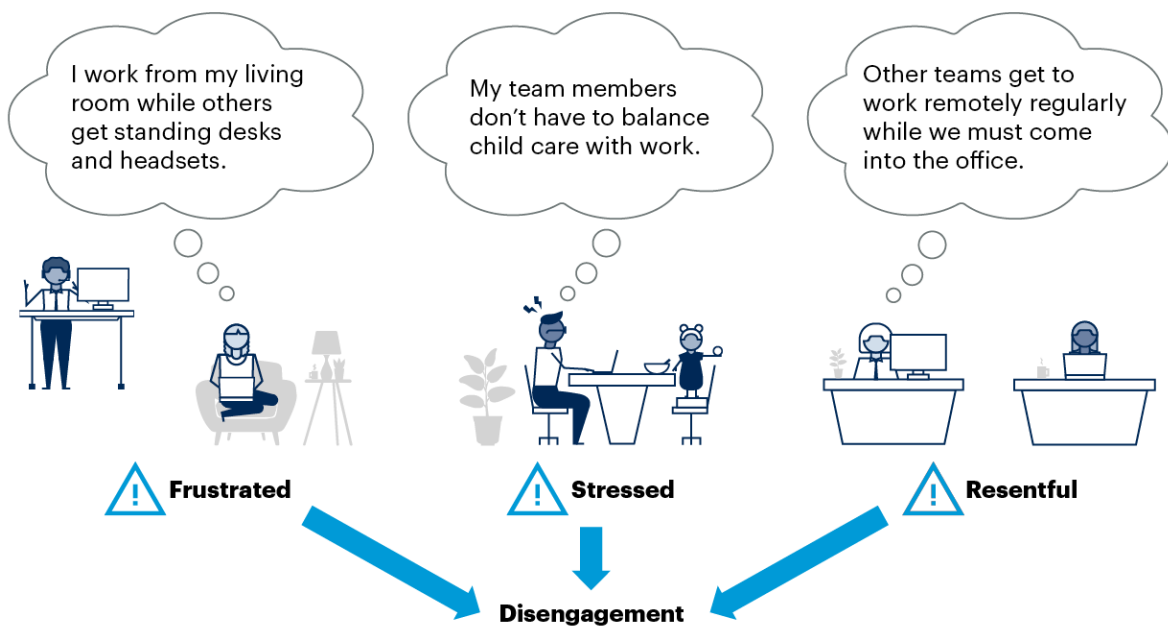
Equity Will Be a Key Driver of Employee Engagement

In the hybrid world, employees work in a variety of environments, and what they experience in these environments is also variable and uneven. The virtual interactions inherent to hybrid work also provide windows into aspects of colleagues' lives that were previously private, making employees acutely aware of these uneven experiences in ways they weren't before.

Employees easily question why some of their peers may have certain resources that they themselves do not, leading to feelings of stress, resentment and frustration. This small snapshot of unevenness can quickly escalate to a perception of inequity, which can pose a threat to engagement. HR leaders face the challenge of ensuring employees *feel* the policies of their organization are equitable.

Figure 1. Causes of Perceived Inequity

Causes of Perceived Inequity



Source: Gartner
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Gartner.

In addition to the perception of inequity, uneven experiences of the hybrid world can lead to actual inequities. Current in-office policies and norms for working still favor physical presence: 64% of executives and managers believe in-office workers are higher performers than remote workers.¹ Colleagues who commute into the office with a manager likely see their manager more often, have more access to chance encounters or last-minute meetings and can make new introductions to a wider network. These important aspects of work often factor into promotions, and 76% of executives and managers believe in-office workers are more likely to get promoted than remote workers.¹ A colleague who works from home will not have as easy access to these important aspects of work, posing a serious threat to their potential future career trajectory and to their engagement.

HR leaders must strive to create equity among different working environments and include equity when analyzing and understanding employee engagement. It needs to be examined at the individual, team and manager levels to identify the extent to which inequity is present in the work environment and thus the extent to which it is having an adverse impact on engagement.

Does the individual feel they have access to the tools and technology they need to succeed? Do teams feel a high degree of accountability to be inclusive? Is the manager providing equal access to opportunity? Are there differences across employee populations, specifically those who are more remote versus those who are more in-office? Organizations should begin incorporating questions like these in engagement surveys and analyses of engagement data.

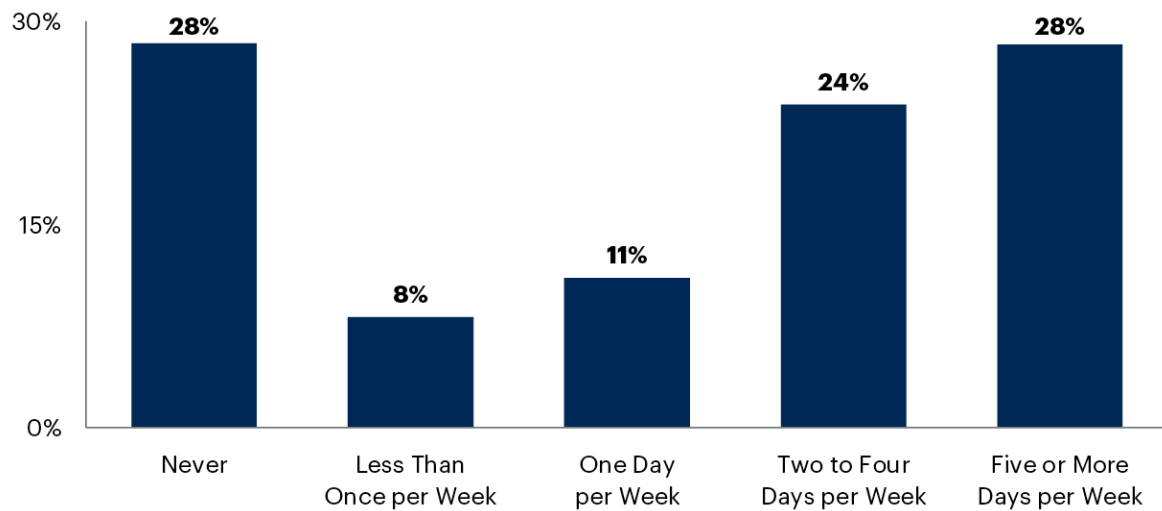
Traditional Indicators of Engagement Will No Longer Be As Visible

The hybrid environment introduces more opportunities for employees to work from separate physical locations and at different times. Employees have varying patterns of working remotely in any given week, influencing the number of times they are on-site or in the same location at the same time (see Figure 2).² A majority of meetings are now virtual: 93% of HR leaders say most employee interactions occur through virtual meetings.³ With employees working physically apart from each other more often, managers can no longer rely on in-person cues for engagement. Subtle changes in employees' mood, affect and body language are not as noticeable through a video conference call. Impromptu catch-ups, lunch breaks and observations of employee frustration in the office are less accessible.

Figure 2: Variation in Employee Work Patterns

Variation in Employee Work Patterns

Q: How Often Do You Currently Work Remotely?



n = 4,258

Source: 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work Employee Survey
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One constant remains across these inconsistent environments and infrequent in-person interactions: the actual work. Employees are consistently exposed to their work every day, whether from an office, group setting, home or third-party location. Their connection to their work is the most unchanging experience in the hybrid world and should be considered when understanding engagement (see Figure 3). Organizations should examine four key items:

- **Absorption** – To what extent does an employee feel absorbed in their work?
- **Vigor** – To what extent does an employee feel energized by their work?
- **Dedication** – To what extent does an employee feel challenged by and enthusiastic about their work?
- **Organizational purpose** – To what extent does an employee feel like their work lets them be part of something greater and worth investing in the long term?

Figure 3. Connectedness to Work Model

Connectedness to Work Model



Source: Gartner
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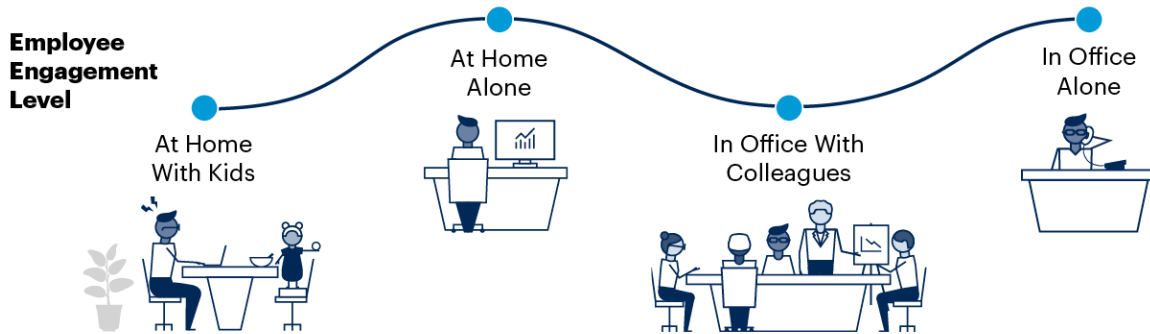
Expanding engagement to include an employee’s connection to their work can provide HR leaders with a more holistic view of how engaged an employee is in their job. By looking at absorption, vigor, dedication and organizational purpose, HR leaders will be able to see much more clearly in the hybrid environment whether an employee is truly satisfied in their job. If their employees are looking forward to their work or feeling like their work is connected to a greater purpose, these are good indicators they find their job enjoyable and meaningful, even if they are experiencing stress in other aspects of their lives.

Variability Will Be a Key Characteristic of Engagement

As employees work frequently from different locations, their day-to-day environment is more dynamic (see Figure 4). They no longer have the predictability and consistency of the daily morning commute, eight- or nine-hour work day on-site and evening commute. In the hybrid world, employees may experience a multitude of environments within just one week. All of these options in the hybrid environment for where, when and with whom you work creates a more fluid environment, and employee engagement levels are likely to fluctuate.

Figure 4. Engagement in a Dynamic Environment

Engagement in a Dynamic Environment



Source: Gartner
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Gartner

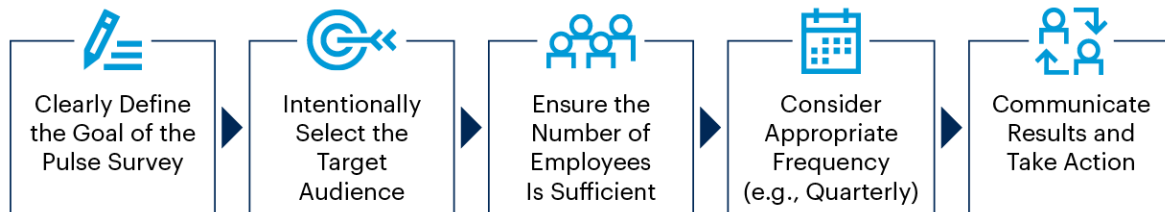
Measuring engagement in a static way through an annual survey no longer makes sense. Organizations should adopt a measurement approach that is more frequent throughout the year, such as pulse surveys, to get a better handle on the patterns of fluctuating employee engagement. Just one point in time will not pinpoint potential aspects of the hybrid work environment affecting engagement. Without multiple points in time, organizations may miss signs that their employees are regularly disengaged by policies the organization can change.

Pulse surveys or continuous listening allow organizations to keep up with the ever-changing work environment and its influence on their employees. Organizations should follow five steps to optimize their use of pulse surveys (see Figure 5):

1. Clearly define the goal of the pulse survey to guide the question selection or creation process.
2. Intentionally select the target audience to guarantee the right voices are included.
3. Ensure the number of employees is sufficient to support any action or conclusions from this survey.
4. Consider the appropriate frequency based on the fluctuations of the topic or survey focus.
5. Communicate results and take action to demonstrate to employees that their voices are valued.

Figure 5. Five Steps to Support a Frequent Pulse Check Strategy

Five Steps to Support a Frequent Pulse Check Strategy



Source: Gartner
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Gartner

Conclusion

HR leaders must evolve their understanding of engagement as the working environment evolves, and the fundamental differences of the hybrid environment must be considered. Equity must be taken into account as a key driver of engagement. The connection to work must be considered as an indicator of engagement. Measurement must be more frequent, through pulse surveys or continuous listening, to pick up on the more varied, fluctuating levels of employee engagement.

By evolving the understanding of and approach to measuring employee engagement, HR leaders can improve their identification of employees at risk of disengaging and ultimately leaving and pinpoint practices driving engagement to scale across the organization.

by Annika Jessen

This article is one of several articles appearing in [HR Leaders Monthly: December 2021/January 2022](#).

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[3 Innovations to Improve Measuring the Employee Experience](#)

[Pulse Surveys: Why, How and When to Use Them](#)

[Use Stay Conversations to Improve Engagement and Retention](#)

Endnotes

¹ 2020 Gartner Improving Employee Engagement Survey. This survey polled 5,000 employees globally from November to December 2020.

² 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work Employee Survey. This survey polled 4,264 employees globally to determine how work design changed in a hybrid work environment and test hypotheses for how leading organizations adapted.

³ 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work HR Leader Survey. This survey polled 75 HR leaders globally in February 2021 to determine how work design changed in a hybrid work environment and test hypotheses for how leading organizations adapted.

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