



# BACK TO THE OFFICE, OR FORWARD TO SOMETHING NEW?

Right-Sizing Workplace  
Transitions After Covid



**By recognizing that individuals and organizations have parallel needs, companies can implement measured and balanced post-pandemic transitions that benefit all stakeholders.**

As we progress deeper into 2022, many companies find themselves at an important crossroads. If, as we all hope, the pandemic continues to subside, employers will have to choose their next move. They can return to pre-Covid norms and bring employees back to the office full time. Or they can opt for a new operating model. For many companies, this means broad adoption of remote work or establishing a hybrid office/remote setup.

Which path organizations choose will depend on many factors. The overall challenge lies in meeting the needs of employees without abandoning the needs of the business. Ideally, these are two concepts that will align as closely as possible.

Achieving balance is the ultimate goal in the process of transitioning to a post-pandemic normal. Overcorrecting in either direction can deprive one set of needs over the other. The onset of the pandemic forced businesses to quickly comply with public health mandates, and it was a baptism by fire for many. The luxury of this current juncture is the ability to assess lessons learned since 2020 and make informed choices about next steps.

Employers who embark on next steps with a “right-sizing” mindset that equally considers employee and organizational needs will set up their business for long-term success.



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## Organizations and Individuals have a Hierarchy of Needs

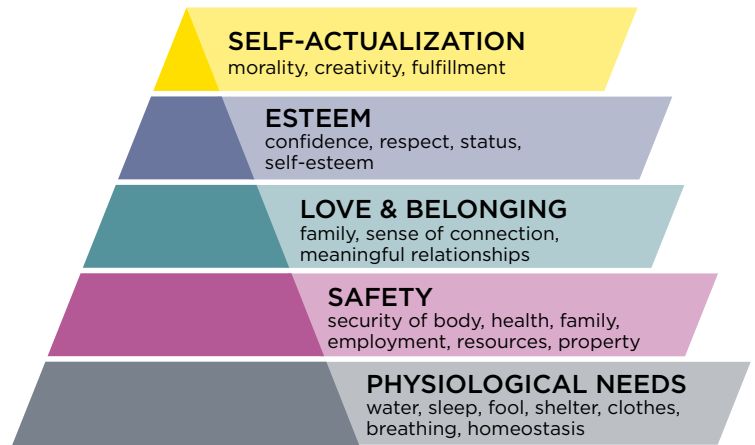
From a change management perspective, one way to approach a transition – whether fully back to the office or to a permanent hybrid/remote model – is to first understand that organizations, just like people, have a hierarchy of needs. The parallel nature of these needs can serve as a useful guidepost in ensuring that changes serve both employees and the company at large.

Just like individuals, the organizational hierarchy of needs starts with a foundation of basic survival. For companies, it's the ability to generate revenue and pay employees, while for individuals, it's covering the basic needs of food, shelter, clothes, etc.

The pandemic's onset forced both individuals and businesses to reckon with their most basic needs. On the individual side, tens of millions fell back on savings or unemployment claims, worried about health and safety, and/or scrambled to cover childcare. For businesses, sudden loss of revenue forced millions to tap into cash reserves, impacting compensation and employment security, and many pivoted to create new interim sources of revenue.

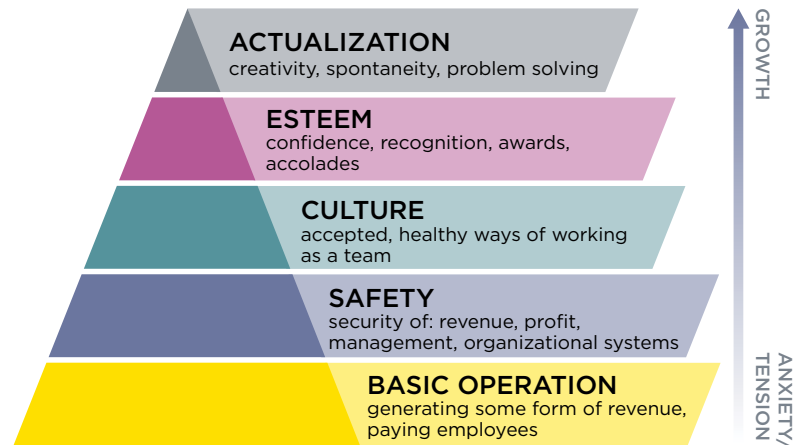
*Organizations, like people, have a hierarchy of needs.*

### MASLOW'S



HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

### ORGANIZATIONAL



HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

The pandemic's onset forced both individuals and businesses to reckon with their most basic needs, illustrated by the two lower levels of each pyramid.



With unemployment down and the corporate world adjusted to new ways of working, the situation, and the lower tiers of the pyramid, have stabilized. But current evidence shows we are moving back up the pyramid in two important ways:



**The Great Resignation:** Attrition rates in the corporate world continue to balloon at record rates<sup>1</sup>. While research identifies a variety of reasons for this, many employee concerns – such as a sense of belonging at work or feeling respected by one’s boss<sup>2</sup> – are clearly higher-level needs in the upper three tiers of the pyramid. From a time of survival mode, many are now making employment choices based on esteem, sense of connection, status, and feelings of fulfilment.

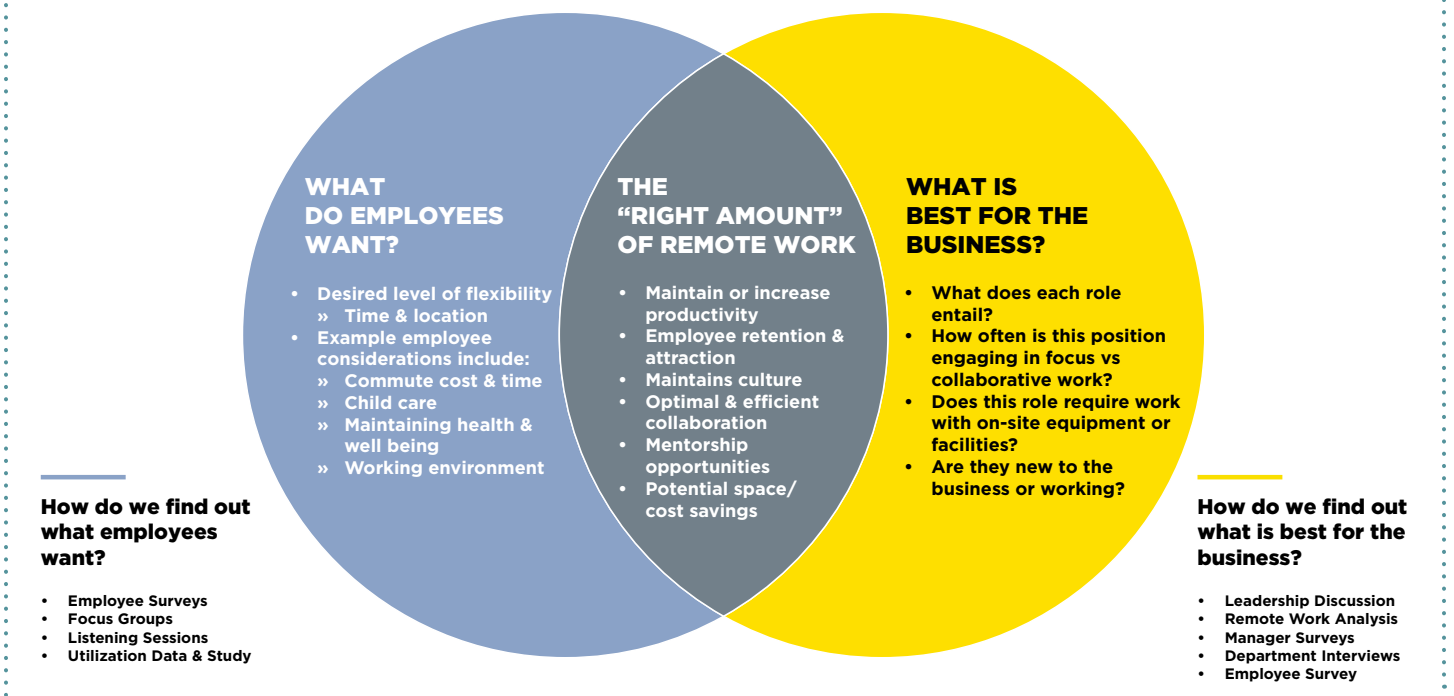


**The Great Pivot:** Companies across the world are announcing they will make permanent changes in their operating model or are considering it<sup>3,4</sup>. Microsoft, for example, is making adjustments to its hybrid model<sup>5</sup> to meet employee expectations around work-life balance. LinkedIn now lists job ads, and invites people to state their preference, for in-office, remote, or hybrid setups. Similarly, building landlords are beginning to introduce more amenities<sup>6</sup> in a bid to lure tenants back to the office with the promise of greater employee comfort. This again shows organizations contending with higher-level needs – implementing changes that greatly impact employees and by extension, culture, engagement, teamwork, and motivation.

Understanding that both individuals and organizations are striving to address parallel needs, we can start to ask the right questions to determine the appropriate level of transition post-pandemic – one that balances what both employees and employers want.

*Approach*

**DETERMINING THE “RIGHT AMOUNT” OF REMOTE WORK**



Using a variety of data gathering methods, companies can document both organizational and employee needs to begin the process of “right-sizing” solutions for a transition.

## Ask Key Questions

The following is just a sampling of key questions company leadership should ask when planning return-to-office transitions. We illustrate these with common scenarios we have come across in working with organizations, followed by an assessment of individual vs. organization needs, and a potential solution that provides a balanced response to both.

### WHAT OLD WAYS WILL STILL WORK, AND WHAT WON'T?

**Scenario:** An organization, pre-pandemic, had a strong culture of social interaction and mentorship, which suffered with employees going fully remote, but employees have expressed a strong desire to maintain some level of home working moving forward.



#### INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Visibility at work, advancement, recognition, mentorship, and social time with colleagues



#### ORGANIZATION NEEDS

Spontaneous interactions and ideation, creativity, and collegiality to maintain a productive culture

**Potential solution:** Implement a regular “all hands” day or half day, weekly or monthly. This will give employees scheduled in-person facetime. Likewise – when public health mandates allow – keep organized in-person social opportunities for employees on the calendar. Either of these can complement a hybrid home/office working schedule.

### WHAT LEVEL OF FLEXIBILITY IS THE RIGHT FIT?

**Scenario:** An organization has a strong need for in-person collaboration or team use of technical tools (for example, an architecture firm) or a culture of in-person meetings with clients (such as a law firm), but employees have expressed a preference for more flexibility in their working arrangements.



#### INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Flexibility to seamlessly collaborate with teams or meet with client in person to do jobs effectively



#### ORGANIZATION NEEDS

Maintain productivity, creativity, and attention to clients for optimal business results

**Potential solution:** Increase amount and availability of client-facing facilities and work areas for teams. Invest in effective and seamless booking system technologies. When employees have choices in work setting that complement their home environments, it extends options for productivity and lets organizations rest easy knowing employees have the resources they need.



## HOW WILL THE COMPANY COMMUNICATE TO AND RECEIVE FEEDBACK FROM EMPLOYEES?

**Scenario:** An organization has decided to permanently adopt a hybrid model, but is struggling with ways to establish open, two-way lines of communication with employees.

 <p><b>INDIVIDUAL NEEDS</b> Feeling heard, integrated within the workplace and not distant</p>	 <p><b>ORGANIZATION NEEDS</b> Maintain open lines with employees for effective management, healthy teams, and timely feedback</p>
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**Potential solution:** Establish protocols for managers at all levels to check in with their teams consistently - whether by phone, video call, or in person. That means not just an employee’s immediate supervisor, but perhaps also a departmental or regional manager. This ensures checks and balances in chains of communication. Introduce two-way reviews, giving staff a chance to be heard and to provide feedback on their supervisors instead of only the other way around. Finally, engage with HR to make employee surveys a regular practice, soliciting feedback throughout the duration of a transition as well as after.

## WHAT POLICY CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO REINFORCE FLEXIBILITY?

**Scenario:** Employees at a company express a strong preference for flexibility to work from home, citing the advantage of saving on commute time and cost, but express concerns about ability to “unplug,” and working odd hours. The company needs a solution that ensures flexibility but that does not lead to burn-out and resulting attrition or low productivity.

 <p><b>INDIVIDUAL NEEDS</b> Saving costs on commute and better ability to juggle personal obligations with work, wellness and well-being</p>	 <p><b>ORGANIZATION NEEDS</b> Greater savings on real estate costs, maintain employee productivity and engagement, avoiding attrition</p>
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**Potential solution:** This is a situation that could call for an examination of sick and vacation time allowances. The flexibility that working from home affords employees can be negated if they feel the need to be “switched on” around the clock. To ensure that both employees and employers truly benefit from a hybrid or remote setup, companies should review their paid time off policies. Extra vacation time, floating holidays, or defined sick time will give employees greater room to unplug when they need to - and companies will experience better retention<sup>7</sup>.

## IMPLEMENTING CHANGE THAT WORKS FOR EVERYONE

2021 has been a year of crucial feedback from employees. In addition to the record number of voluntary resignations, labor across many industries is asserting its voice at levels not seen in decades<sup>8</sup>. We can assume that this surge of expression from workers is necessary and overdue. But responding to employee concerns need not be a one-sided exercise. As corporations ponder their next moves to adjust to a more flexible world of work, aligning the needs of the individual and the organization can produce right-sized solutions for each company’s unique culture and long-term goals.





**SOURCES:**

- <sup>1</sup> Maurer, R. "Will Workers Continue to Leave their Jobs in Record Numbers?" SHRM, December 7, 2021. [\[View Source\]](#)
- <sup>2</sup> De Smet, A., Dowling, B., Mugayar-Baldocchi, M. and Schaninger, B. "Great Attrition or 'Great Attraction'? The choice is yours." McKinsey Quarterly, September 2021. [\[View Source\]](#)
- <sup>3</sup> Build Remote. "Every Company Going Remote Permanently: Nov. 30, 2021 Update," [\[View Source\]](#)
- <sup>4</sup> Build Remote. "Every Company Announcing A Hybrid Work Model: Nov 15, 2021 Update," [\[View Source\]](#)
- <sup>5</sup> Klinghoffer, D. "Hybrid Tanked Work-Life Balance. Here's How Microsoft is Trying to Fix it," Harvard Business Review, December 8, 2021. [\[View Source\]](#)
- <sup>6</sup> Grant, P. "Will Outdoor Terraces and Chefs Lure You Back to the Office? These Buildings Hope So," Wall Street Journal, December 10, 2021. [\[View Source\]](#)
- <sup>7</sup> Sage HR. "The Simple Solution to Employee Retention: More Paid Time Off," July 18, 2016. [\[View Source\]](#)
- <sup>8</sup> Greenhouse, S. "'Striketober' is showing workers' rising power - but will it lead to lasting change?" The Guardian, October 23, 2021. [\[View Source\]](#)



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