

Let's GLINC Differently About Hybrid Work Environments

Gerry Lewis:

Hi, everyone. You're listening to another episode of GLINC Outside the Box. I'm Gerry Lewis.

Gerry Lewis:

Higher population of vaccination rates and the reduction of active cases being reported means that more and more organizations are thinking about employees coming back to the office. But just thinking about coming back to the office or talking about it at the leadership level isn't enough.

Gerry Lewis:

Back in March 2020, when we literally overnight had to work from home, it took us weeks and even months to figure out how to make it work. And if the pandemic ended two weeks or even a month after that fateful date, as we all hoped and expected, I would agree that it would be back to the old routine in no time, but that's not the case. 16 months later, not only have we figured out how to work from home, but we essentially also figured out a lot of other things, things such as what makes us most productive, what do we enjoy about autonomy, how we have somehow found a better work-life balance by working from home and not having to travel to work, and what habits or rituals we want to keep or never lose. These past 16 months have changed the way we work more than we know.

Gerry Lewis:

All to say, the talk of returning to the office causes many organizations, including mine, some reason to pause and really think about how are we going to do this. So where do we begin? Well, there's no shortage of areas to consider, really. It ranges from safe distancing in the office, maximum capacity in the buildings, elevators, cafeterias, washrooms, meeting rooms, client meetings, business travel. I think you get the point. A lot to consider.

Gerry Lewis:

This podcast isn't about solving for or communicating guidelines for the above. I think that would take quite a few podcasts, actually. Instead, this podcast is about covering one of the most important aspects of returning to the office from the point of view of your most important asset, your team.

Gerry Lewis:

The idea of having my own team talk about how we navigate our return to the office came about in one of our virtual meetings a few weeks back. We thought it would be a good idea to use this opportunity to document our own learning, and in doing so, perhaps help others who are thinking about how they might have a similar type of conversation with their team.

Gerry Lewis:

So here it goes. We set out a series of questions, which you'll find in our show notes. My first question asked each one of my team members what they loved most over the past 16 months about working remotely. Here's what they had shared with me.

Dane:

So what I love about remote work, that it really enables me to at least conceptually balance my family, my personal care, and my work responsibilities. The other thing, and this is a really big one for me, it really enables me to be laser focused on when I'm needing to really create something.

Let's GLINC Differently About Hybrid Work Environments

Nicole:

So what I love about remote work is not having to commute three hours a day. It's the fact that I'm able to spend time with my parents during the day and see a lot more of them. They haven't lived in Canada in about a decade. And when I was in university, I only got to see them twice a year. So now that they've moved back to Canada, and I'm able to stay at home and spend some time with them, I think that it's really furthered our bond and connection as well. We've also started to use different online resources and tools to make our brainstorming sessions a lot more effective. So I think being able to adapt and leverage these new platforms is something we should definitely take into working in person again as well.

James:

What I love most about remote work is I've got a place that I've created for myself here at my home. And there's lots of sunlight, I'm surrounded by things that I've designed for my comfort. I also really love that on a global level, there's been a decrease in air pollution since the beginning of the lockdown. And even though it's just my one car, I like to think that I'm doing my small part by using less gas each and every day.

Greta:

Since I am an immigrant, and my family is six hours ahead in Italy, and when I was working at the office, I barely had the time to call them every day, especially during the work week. Instead, when I started working from home, I was able to keep up with them every day because I didn't have to commute. My self-care greatly improved during quarantine because I was able to keep up with myself. When you work alone at home, you are able to customize it however you want, and my focus on projects greatly benefited from that. And I was able to really immerse myself on certain projects. I think I really improved during the past few months.

Memo:

I'm an outdoors person, so I really enjoy being surrounded by nature. And if I can just take a quick break from work and going to the nature, or after work do some walking. So I really value the fact that I can work from different places while doing remote work.

Claire:

The work-life balance. I think it's being forced to work from home has made everyone re-examine the concept of spending 40 plus hours a week in an office and spending five hours commuting. It just feels a little dated and unnecessary now that we've been home and it's working,

Gerry Lewis:

I must admit, while some of their responses didn't surprise me, some really did. I'm glad they felt comfortable enough to share this with me. My next question builds on the first one by asking the opposite, I asked them what they didn't enjoy about remote work. And here's what they said.

Dane:

I find it harder sometimes to set boundaries. The other thing is I find it incredibly challenging sometimes with the Zoom marathon of calls that we have in the run of a day. And it really just compresses the amount of time that we have left in the workday to complete any independent work. Love my kids.

Let's GLINC Differently About Hybrid Work Environments

However, it's really been a challenge the last year and a half to really have them in the same physical space.

Nicole:

I don't have easy access to my coworkers, and that often makes communicating with them a lot harder. People are starting to take advantage more and more of the fact that we can work later or the fact that we can work earlier or even on the weekends. And that can definitely lead to burnout.

James:

One challenge I do still frequently find myself with is separating my work life from my home life when both are so physically close. I end up staying at my desk longer than I probably should, and I find it really hard to end my day to reasonable time or even not sneak back into the office later that night.

Greta:

What I dislike about remote work are the feelings of isolation and alienation that builds up on the long run, especially if you live alone. And I think digital communication is very "cold" compared to the communication you have in person. And so, it makes you more detached from reality, and your mental health suffers a lot from that.

Memo:

What I dislike more about remote work is a little bit the lack of social interaction. When we are in person, it's easier just to ask someone who is next door for a file or for their opinion on something. And I think that's also a big plus from being at the office.

Claire:

When you're having a brainstorm meeting or presenting something exciting to the client, it's all just a little bit lackluster when you're doing it on Zoom.

Gerry Lewis:

I can definitely agree with everything everyone said. My personal all-time dislike is the inability to shout a random question or a thought from my office to my team. I now have to structure an email for one simple thought.

Gerry Lewis:

Leading into my next question, one of the most important aspects on employees' minds when it comes to returning to the office is their safety and wellbeing. The virus is far from gone, and living with the virus is now the norm. So I asked what are some of the safeguards or precautions that would make them feel more comfortable when returning to the office.

Dane:

Ensuring that regularized cleaning, it's not just light cleaning. So the whole sanitation part of this.

Nicole:

As someone who commutes every single day for about three hours, taking the go train and the bus, I definitely feel safer knowing that masks are mandatory. I know something we're thinking of is having

Let's GLINC Differently About Hybrid Work Environments

one person designated per office space in our office at GLINC so that it can create a bit more of a socially distanced environment. And something else that makes me feel really comfortable personally is the fact that I know we're not forced to come into the office every day and that we have the choice to work remotely.

James:

Approaching everything with a precautionary mindset is a really good idea. That means things like distanced workstations and masking indoors and enhanced cleaning protocol and stuff like that. We can start to get a gauge on what everyone is feeling comfort-wise and make further adjustments based on that.

Greta:

I think we should start to consider the commute aspect from a different perspective, because thinking about the commute really scares me. I think we should start to consider staggering starting times. For example, instead of starting at 9:00 AM, starting at 10:00 AM, 11:00 AM, or even just considering doing half days.

Memo:

When someone is not feeling well, a colleague, or just to speak up and say, "I'm not feeling well, and for the wellbeing of the rest of the team, I will work from home today." So I think that's more of an ownership thing.

Claire:

I think there needs to be space at work. Reduced capacity in an office makes a lot of sense as well. And I'd also like everyone to be vaccinated, which fortunately we're in a small office, so we know everyone's vaccination status. So that's reassuring.

Gerry Lewis:

So now that my team share with me what it takes for them to feel comfortable and safe coming into the office, the next question was key. And that's how they see themselves transitioning back to our former office environment. It was clear not everyone would just show up again. And it was also clear that whatever was decided would need a trial period and the ability to reassess if it worked as well in theory as it does in practice. I asked them specifically how they envisioned the transition to the office taking place.

Dane:

I need to pace myself. We really just need to feel that it's okay to speak up and to share a concern. And I think there's a responsibility that leaders have within the organizations, but it doesn't just rest with leaders. It rests with peers as well, to be able to set the tone and to set the norms, create those new norms in terms of the level of communication and how real people can honestly communicate what is on their minds and how they're feeling. But sometimes, just being able to feel heard, it's an important piece for us as individuals. And I think organizations need to pay more attention to the human aspect of change.

Dane:

Let's GLINC Differently About Hybrid Work Environments

The reintegration plan in general also needs to allow hybrid or even 100% remote work arrangements. I think companies need to see this as an opportunity to reimagine how they create value.

Nicole:

I'm definitely excited for this new normal. Part of me is a little bit nervous to get back into the public transit system and commute every day to work. But knowing that I'm going to be able to see my coworkers a lot more regularly, I'm definitely excited about.

Nicole:

Another thing that's going through my mind during this transition period is the uncertainty about how a rotational schedule will work out, and especially the fear of missing out on information, if you're the one that's not going in person. I might be missing out on social experiences that my coworkers are bonding over or key pieces of information that maybe somebody thought they had communicated to everyone, when in reality they hadn't, it was just to the people in the office that day.

James:

There's all sorts of things. I'm really excited for some of the things I've missed. This could be maybe a nice business dinner, or even a funny story that you hear from a coworker over lunch. But I'm also balancing that against some of the concerns around a possible fourth wave and new virus variants and all of the scary things that you hear about in the news.

Greta:

COVID-19 will stay with us and will keep on evolving. We are not able to eradicate yet. So there will be new variants that come up, and so new safety measures may pop up anytime. I see this transition time as a time of experimentation, where we try to experiment with new way of working. For example, what really needs to be done in person, why we really need to meet up.

Greta:

I'm a graphic designer, and I do think that in-person learning sometimes is way better than watching a tutorial online or a workshop online. I learn a lot from meeting other creatives and see them working in-person instead of see their work screen.

Memo:

I've been working from Mexico for the last year and a half, and I'm really excited to meet the team in person again. I'm also hoping that we will value more the fact that the gather again, to become a more effective team. The fact that we are gathering, that time should be really used to be efficient and effective at work because we can also do things remotely.

Claire:

For me personally, there's a lot of logistical things I have to think about. So my daughter's in daycare, and they have reduced daycare hours to allow for cleaning because of COVID. So adding the drive to get her to daycare, plus the 30 plus minutes I spend commuting to the office, there are just a lot of moving pieces, and I don't really know how it's going to work.

Gerry Lewis:

Let's GLINC Differently About Hybrid Work Environments

I know my team well and appreciate how each of them have a different view on what it would take for them to feel comfortable about the transition to the office. Something James said about missing out on a funny story shared by coworkers at the office, it reminded me that I don't think I've laughed with my team in over 16 months. A really good laugh. And I miss that.

Gerry Lewis:

I also really like what Greta shared about that even in transition, it's a time of experimentation. Now that I've a better understanding of what it would take to create a safe environment and how they envision the transition to feel when they come back, I then asked them to describe to me from their perspective what their perfect hybrid work environment might look like.

Dane:

For me, the perfect work environment would accommodate 100% to remote working arrangements during particular periods of time, while still providing me with the opportunity, if I need to meet with my fellow teammates in a shared space. I have two school-aged boys, and it's important that we as parents pay extra attention, more so than we normally would, I think, to ensure that they're also thriving in this type of environment, and as they are returning to their face-to-face interactions as well in a gradual way. Those commitments may not be hard and fast commitments that we can then create in a new reality. And I think we need to be okay with that, without sacrificing the commitment to the clients or the quality of the work that we're doing. We shouldn't see these things in oppositional ways.

Nicole:

For my personal preference, I would probably want to work maybe 50% at home and 50% in the office. The fact that I live with my parents makes me very cautious of myself being put in situations where I could potentially get COVID.

Nicole:

I think as well, in terms of creating that hybrid work environment, prioritizing the days where I need to be in the office if we have a client meeting, but also knowing when we can take client meetings remotely.

James:

I have built a really amazing space here in my home for myself. And I feel like I'm doing some of my best work now from home because of all of the things that I've built to make it a productive space for me.

James:

Now that said, there's also obvious benefits to in-person meetings, both for developing concepts and brainstorming, and as well for collaborating to execute a project with one another. The people I tend to work with, because of my role as the director of operations, tend to be remote. I've operated like that in my career and in the various operational roles that I've had for a long time, and so it's second nature to me.

James:

I think a lot of what I do, because it's based in systems that are online that we can all share, that helps to anchor us and relieve some of the pressure that builds up. And I think that's one of the great things

Let's GLINC Differently About Hybrid Work Environments

about this podcast that we're doing, is we're going to all find out what the ideal situation would be for one another and ultimately come to an agreement on what works best for the company.

Greta:

I think I would schedule the workweek in a way that I have three to four workdays where I'm at my computer at home, working by myself because I really like to be able to immerse myself in projects. Since I would like to have this one or two days where I can meet in person with my team or [inaudible 00:18:08] with clients.

Memo:

In my view, based on the type of project that we need to develop or build, we should come up with a plan, what will be more efficient or effective to do in person, and what can get done remotely. If you give your employees freedom, I think that they will do great work, especially if they're employees who value that sense of flexibility and freedom.

Claire:

I really have to think about what it is I do on a daily basis because a big chunk of my job is planning and organizing and writing and editing, which are all very solo tasks. That being said, there's also a part of my job involves collaborating and brainstorming and meeting with clients. I'd like to go into the office when it makes sense for the work, as opposed to set days.

Gerry Lewis:

After hearing my team's responses and reflecting on what they said, I had one final meeting with them to discuss how do we make this work as a team and for our clients. This final question departed from an internal about us perspective and took a larger view of the best output for us and for our clients.

Gerry Lewis:

During this meeting, we collectively arrived at the following five conclusions, which I call team realities, that help bring context to what would be our next steps in returning to the office.

Gerry Lewis:

Reality number one, 100% of what we create as a team and for our clients can be done remotely. Reality number two, despite everyone already being double vaccinated, there is still a mix of uncertainty and concern around the commute to and from work. Reality number three, our physical space at the office will not be able to accommodate all the members of my team while adhering to the two meters social distance rule. Reality number four, our creative team of designers and animators set up a customized workspace at home over the last 16 months with specialized software and equipment, which would be difficult to bring back and forth to the office. And reality number five, there are members of the team who really do want to start coming back to the office because there's a real sense of isolation and Groundhog Day syndrome working from their bedrooms and living rooms.

Gerry Lewis:

So here's what we decided as a team. Phase one of the return we'll ease over the summer months, starting in August. And in keeping with the necessary protocols for social distancing, we have designated specific workspaces in our office for a maximum of four people in the office at one time. Using a

Let's GLINC Differently About Hybrid Work Environments

calendar booking system, those who wish to work from the office will simply schedule themselves accordingly, using this booking system. The fact is, no one is expected or required to come in. We're calling this first phase at your own pace. This works really well for those who wish to try this out, but no pressure whatsoever to show up at the office.

Gerry Lewis:

We also decided that phase one will have a review period, likely late September, early October. It's likely by then, we'll have more information about what works and what needs adjustment. We'd also have the benefit of seeing what happens locally in our community as well. Everyone on the team was really pleased with this. And even though remote work has proven to be highly productive, we agreed that there are still some communication issues we should work on as a team to further adapt.

Gerry Lewis:

The only thing that is certain about the return to the office environment is that there isn't one best way that will work for everyone. We've been away from the office too long to just return to the way it was. And that's a good thing. We've learned more about how we work as a team, what drives our productivity, and how to adapt and manage stress like never before. If we just return to the way it was before COVID and pretended like these past 16 months didn't really impact us or our clients, then we would have truly missed some very important lessons here. The success of finding an optimal hybrid work environment begins with engaging your most valuable asset, your team. And yes, these conversations will require a little bit more preparation than normal, but the investment will be worth it because you and your team will be more clear, more confident, and more comfortable when the time comes to go back to the office. Thanks for listening to another episode of GLINC Outside the Box. I'm Gerry Lewis.