

Hybrid Work – Pendulum Swing or Paradigm Shift?

Gerry Lewis:

Hi and welcome to another episode of GLINC Outside the Box. I'm Gerry Lewis.

Gerry Lewis:

It finally feels like the worst of the pandemic is behind us and people are beginning to rediscover the simple joys of normalcy, going out to concerts, planning for travel, taking real vacations, and even setting wedding dates. Imagine that. These are things we'll never take for granted, I hope. Yet one area of life that seems to have changed forever is the way we work, specifically how and where we work.

Gerry Lewis:

Hybrid work is where many, if not most organizations, are today. Now, hybrid is defined as a flexible work model that supports a blend of in-office, remote, and on the go workers. In fact, I once heard it described as an ecosystem where employees can migrate between various locations depending on the work and where they feel the most productive. I really like that. An ecosystem versus a specific location. Our topic today is hybrid work, pendulum or paradigm shift. Is it here to stay or will the pendulum swing back to how we work in pre COVID times.

Gerry Lewis:

Here to discuss this with me today as Carrie Blair, President of Tayside Group, a boutique consulting firm whose purpose is to help companies and people thrive at work. Carrie's experience and roles include Executive Vice President, Chief Human Resources Officer at Allstate Insurance Company, Global Executive Vice President, Chief Human Resources and Communications Officer for Sun Life Financial, following 20 years at TD where she's held progressively senior leadership positions in human resources in Canada and in the US. Her proven track record as a leader who understands the critical role HR plays, particularly in times of transformation and change makes her the perfect guest to join me today to chat about this highly debated topic on everyone's mind. I've known and worked with Carrie since her days at TD and I was thrilled when she agreed to speak with me today. Welcome, Carrie. It's great to see you.

Carrie Blair:

Gerry, always great to see you. It's such a pleasure to be here. I'm really excited to talk about this topic, which not only means a lot to me, but spending time with you also means a lot to me.

Gerry Lewis:

Thank you. Thank you. TD seems like several lifetimes ago, doesn't it?

Carrie Blair:

It does, but it was fantastic.

Gerry Lewis:

It was. I'm really excited too, not only to get to chat with you, but to see sort of where we end up on this pendulum paradigm shift debate. We'll see how the conversation goes, but let's start with the whole concept of hybrid work in organizations. Now, while it seems this way of working as a result of COVID, we've heard a lot of this term since COVID, it's actually not something new, is it? For international organizations in your case, for Allstate, Sin Life Financial, TD Bank, this was how they worked well before the pandemic. I'm just curious what are your thoughts about that?

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Carrie Blair:

Gerry, I agree, first of all. The concept of hybrid is not new and it did exist pre COVID. I think the key though is the motivations have changed. And so, if I think back over time, we called it something else. We had work from home policies. We had flexible work arrangements and those were typically geared at providing flexibility for certain people or certain roles. They were geared at managing physical real estate costs. People wanted to get their real estate costs down. They were to create some spaces for people to innovate, collaborate, and come together, and they were also arose early on because it helped us compete against startups and tech savvy companies who were competing for talent, but I would say we used to view hybrid work or remote work as a perk, and today, it's become an expectation.

Gerry Lewis:

I love what you said about the motivation has changed. Went from specific reasons, real estate, collaboration, competition to really now, it is the way we work. If that's the case, what would you say has changed since COVID as a result of hybrid and specifically I'm talking about how teens connect, how individuals are coached, do you see that has changed pre COVID to now? Tell me about that.

Carrie Blair:

Gerry, I think there's a lot of things that have changed or been amplified since COVID. The first thing I would start with though is the increasing importance of having a common purpose. We're seeing more and more organizations creating a common purpose, using it both internally and externally to attract talent, to attract customers, and to make a statement for what they truly believe in. This common purpose is becoming a tie that binds. It's getting embedded into the organization. In a way, it's creating a sense of empowerment and accountability that used to be fostered by face to face connectivity.

Carrie Blair:

The other way I think it's changed is this whole rise of employee choice. And so, we used to think that organizations had the power tilted in their favor. They made the rules, they set the parameters, the guidelines of how people would work. Now, I think that's changed, and people and employees in particular are expecting more balance in how, when, and where they work for their employers. Because we had such large numbers of people who worked remotely through COVID, the number of workplaces now offering greater flexibility, hybrid and remote work, has actually become the main attractor and I would go so far to say as the new signing bonus for people.

Carrie Blair:

The other thing that's changed is the role of the office. And so, again, if we really think traditionally the role of the office was the place you went in and you did your work and you met with your colleagues and you went home, and we used to think of this in discreet ways. We used to say, "Well, we have a talent strategy. We have a real estate strategy and we have a technology strategy," but I don't think those things can be managed independently any longer. They need to be thought of and you used this word earlier, as an ecosystem. How do we bring solutions together for companies and for employees so that they can really can thrive at work?

Carrie Blair:

When you bring people together now, it needs to be more intentional. You need to be really clear about what are you coming into the office for. Are you coming to work on strategy and innovate and

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collaborate? Are you coming in to meet with clients and partners and build your networks and those relationships that you've been longing for and missing? I've often been hearing stories still of people saying, "I went into the office this week on the Tuesday, because that's the day we were supposed to be in. I went into the meeting room and I was the only person there. Everybody else joined by Zoom," or the opposite of that is, "Everybody came into the meeting last Tuesday and it was amazing, but everybody went to their desks or their offices and put their heads down and did heads-down work."

Carrie Blair:

And so, I think what really has changed now is we have to rethink when we bring people together would be really intentional about what it's for and it should be to engage with people, to reinforce our culture, to provide accessibility to colleagues and leaders, and really get creative and innovative.

Carrie Blair:

The last thing I think I would say on this is the role of the leader is changing. No longer can people manage by FaceTime, no longer can they manage tasks and activities. We now have to manage to productivity, to outcomes, and to engagement. And so, engaging requires having real conversations with people, knowing who they are, knowing what matters to them, and also leaders have to share that back about themselves. There's a real level of authenticity, accessibility and empathy that existed in varying degrees before. When you saw it before in a leader, you knew what it could look like because it was rare. Now, it is going to become the norm and the expectation for people.

Carrie Blair:

And so, being really intentional again about setting up meetings, connecting with people, changing the way you lead, changing your routines, and I think the trick in all of this is we can't just expect a leader to change overnight. Our role as leaders in organizations ourselves is we're going to have to help leaders change how they do these things.

Gerry Lewis:

So many... I'm writing down as fast as I can, Carrie, all the incredible things you're talking about. First of all, let me just jump onto from an employee perspective, the whole concept of hybrid work being the new signing bonus I think is bang on because I think that's exactly what we are hearing and you're hearing a lot about the great resignation and even people who, the statistics that show that employees who said, "If you force me back to work full time, I will leave this job." That is really coming out loud and clear.

Gerry Lewis:

I love that whole concept of the new signing bonus. I also love the fact that really it's about becoming more intentional of why we bring people to the office. We'll talk a bit more about that, because I'm going to go into some of the different type of models a little bit later and we can talk about how do we create that intentionality.

Gerry Lewis:

I love also the final part you said about the leader, because I think that is where the biggest challenge are for leaders. It's not that they don't want to manage this face to face time, to manage the outcomes, to manage their activities, to manage to engagement, and to create the norm, it's the suddenness of it. It's almost like, well right away, you need to start doing this right away and that makes it really difficult. As a leader, it's not so much not knowing what we need to get done, it's this pace in which this change is

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happening to us as well. What would you say, where do I begin? I know where I need to go, but how do I actually get started? What are your thoughts on that?

Carrie Blair:

I think there's no easy way, but I start with, what are my routines now? I would start with talking with my team. What's going well? What's working for them about how we already operate? Because you don't need to change everything. Then, what's not working for them and why and figuring out are there adjustments that can be made either at the team level or the individual level.

Carrie Blair:

Then, I think it really is setting a new set of expectations, setting a new kind of code for the team about how we're going to work together once we come through that. Saying, "Okay, here's what's working. We're going to continue to do that. Here's what's not working and we're going to go experiment and we're going to go test and learn on a few different things." Whether that's using different collaboration tools like Slack, like MURAL, like other things to record our meetings together, whether it's like we create some social time in our one-on-one meeting, so 45 minutes of that meeting is spent on working through the business issues, but the other 15 is how are things going? What do you need support on? Where can I be helpful to you?

Carrie Blair:

Then I think it's also tying it back to the purpose of the organization and why the organization exists, so this whole concept of purpose. We used to say to people is if you can live into our purpose every day, the rest of the things don't matter, because if you come in every day focused on that, you will make the right decisions. You'll interact with the right people. You'll behave in the right way and our customers will win and our shareholders will win. I think there's something around really just having an honest dialogue and setting up a set of new norms and be willing to be vulnerable and be willing to make mistakes and to test and learn.

Carrie Blair:

I also think that training departments and L&D folks in other parts of the company can help bring best practices together and share those best practices across groups, whether that's a group of leaders at the top of the house or otherwise, but I think there's a real, real opportunity. We talk about this often, but it's how do you get the managers in the middle? A friend of mine calls it the magic middle, because those are the people who manage the hundreds of people who talk to your thousands of millions of customers every single day. I think what we need to do is we need to further embed training, new routines, opportunities, best practices into that group. If we can get them on the flywheel and we get the leaders at the top engaging in a different way, I think the whole paradigm starts to move into a much more productive and healthy work environment for everyone.

Gerry Lewis:

That's amazing. I've always, I've never heard of it referred to as the magic middle, but in working through a lot of organizations and in change management, in fact, that is that middle group that often creates either success or the failure. It is that middle group. I'm so glad you... Now I have a new term, many new terms from speaking with you today. I also like the fact that you talked about the vulnerability, or even just a honest exchange of speaking with the employees about what are some things we should try. Team norms is really resurfacing in that regard. A lot of companies are now

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resetting what are the team norms that will work for us that, will not work for us any longer, and I think that's very powerful as well.

Gerry Lewis:

I'm going to move to my next part, which is the different models, but just before I do, Carrie, I cannot help, it is more of... maybe it's a personal question, but I hope I am the voice of many managers that you're talking about in leaders. You talked earlier about our need to manage outputs versus inputs and activity level. I get that and I think that's important because I cannot see what everyone's doing any longer, but that's a very tough ask because there are inevitable days where I kind of go, "What are they doing? Where are they? Are they working on this? I hope they're working on this. They should be working on this." How do I, other than stopping myself from having these thoughts, what are some things I should start thinking about to kind of really move towards managed outputs?

Carrie Blair:

I think there's a few things. I think one is pick the top two or three that are the most important, be really clear about what your expectation of that output is, when it's required, and when you're going to check in, because I think sometimes what happens now is we get to the end, something gets produced and if we'd been in the office, we would've seen that, "Oh, that's maybe not going the right direction." And so, we have to figure out what's the check-in point along the way so somebody doesn't get too far down the road thinking everything's going great and then it shows up for you. I think that's really important.

Carrie Blair:

Then I think it's, what's the measure of success, what does success look like and being, again, really clear about that. What I used to say to people is, "Look, let's agree on the top three things you're going to do, when they're required, what success looks like. By the way, don't come if it's due November the 30th, don't come to me November 29th and tell me it's going to be late. Tell me October 30th or October 1st, it's going to be late and let's then see if we can renegotiate that time, get you other help or support, lean in in a different way." But I think it's clarity, being clear on your expectations and the outputs required and what success looks like.

Carrie Blair:

I think, also, managers actually have to be broader than ever before, because they're now managing so many things in a disparate way and they're remote, so you actually have to tilt to being a bit of a generalist to make sure you've got your hands on everything and you know what's going on.

Gerry Lewis:

Thank you very much for that. I will definitely focus more I think on, as you say, what are the top three, and really, I love the check-in points. I think that's very valid because sometimes we just assume we expect something on a certain date, but there's no check-in, but it's those check-ins that are going to be critical.

Carrie Blair:

One of the ways we used to think about it too was what's the top three and what's the next three. If the top three things get done earlier, better, quicker, faster, somebody's not then sitting idle to say, "Well, where do I go now?" It's kind of an above the line, below the line kind of scenario, but here's the top three things that matter this quarter, this month, this week, this year, and here are the next three

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things. That also gives you a chance to constantly reiterate and say, "Okay, those were the next three, but these things have happened in the environment around us now, so we got to reshuffle." I think that's also an important point is being able to reshuffle things as new information becomes available, as the context around us changes.

Gerry Lewis:

What I really like about that, the next three concepts, Carrie, is that we're also helping employees have a longer view on projects as well. Yes, I might have my top three and my next three, but the more we discuss the next three with them, they'll start thinking about what their following three is. I think that's a really important part of empowering employees, creating that sort of strategic view for them, not turning them into order takers of to-do lists and they can really start. I really love that. Thank you very much for that.

Gerry Lewis:

Let's build on those insights and let's talk a little bit about transitioning back to the office. Just this weekend actually, I was reading an article and what was interesting, it's amazing what new terminology comes out of hybrid work. Everyone has a new terminology. Apparently, I was just hearing things like people were giving employees a choice between three days in, two days remote, that type of thing, but there's actual terms for it.

Gerry Lewis:

I just want to share it with you. We don't need to go into it, but I just thought it was really cool. Flexible hybrid work mode means that they can choose whatever they want, number of days. Fixed hybrid work mode means Monday, Wednesday, Friday, you come in Tuesday, Thursday, you work from home. Office first hybrid work model, remote first hybrid work model. I just thought it was really cool that all of a sudden, there are these actual models that exist rather than just calling it transitioning back to work. From your perspective and you working with many clients as well, what approach do you think is predominant, working well, working best?

Carrie Blair:

I think that's a tough one to answer, Gerry, at this stage of where we're at. I kind of start with no one size fits all. I think the answer is it depends, the classic it depends. I've seen some organizations taking, I would say, a very rigorous and almost scientific view to how they're doing this. They're examining all the jobs in their organizations and then they're scoring those jobs, can they be remote? Can they be hybrid? Do they have to be office jobs? Then they're saying, they're lining up the people, but then what they're doing is saying, "Well, that's how the job works, but how does the job on its own... But how does that job interact with a team? What's important about who that job needs to work with to be successful?"

Carrie Blair:

They're taking that output from that analysis and they're meeting with leaders and they're saying to those leaders, this is what we think the jobs are just based on the job spec or the job profile. How does that job really show up and operate in your organization? Then, once they do that, they're then designating to people what their roles are, so very specifically, you're an office worker, you're a remote worker, you're a hybrid worker. When they found that jobs could be done in more than one way, then they gave employees choices. What do you prefer? Your job could be remote or could be hybrid. How would you like to work? And so, I think some organizations have been very scientific about that.

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Carrie Blair:

I think others are honestly just doing what we talked about before is test and learn and experimentation. I've seen a number of things happening in companies, which I think are really cool. We're starting to see this emergence of the four-day work week in North America, which has been predominant in other cultures, but not here. You were talking about what you've been reading lately. I was reading last week at Davos. Even Davos, the attendees at Davos are starting to talk about could four-day work weeks really work?

Carrie Blair:

I've seen organizations doing summer hours, every Friday off or half day Fridays. Recently, I don't know if you saw this, Gerry, but KPMG came out with a concept called Roam, which I really love, which is two months of the year, you can work remotely outside of our offices and you pick what those months are in conjunction with your workload and your manager. I thought Roam was a really interesting and new concept.

Carrie Blair:

Some organizations I see mandating out of the office days. And so, companies in the US here, like OneAmerica are saying in the month of July, we don't want people to come into the office. We still want you to work, but again, kind of this Roam concept. Work where you need to be. Don't be in the office. There's no expectation. We're not going to manage big meetings around that, big interactions, those types of things. We're going to plan those outside of that month so you can work on Roam.

Carrie Blair:

My former company, Sun Life Canada, we had a work from anywhere policy. You could work in any of the Sun Life Canada offices, where you needed to work for your day, or you could work from home. Again, we had flexibility where people could sign up for desks and come in where they needed to be. Then other organizations that I think have been at this for a long time, like Deloitte, who 10 years ago had the foresight to build this just incredible Deloitte University facility in Dallas. What they do is they bring people together and senior people expect to go to DU at least once a year. Part of that's about reinforcing the culture of DU and giving people an experiential dip into what it's like to work there, to network, immersion rooms, state of the art equipment, big push on wellness has come through. That might be a new tie that binds if organizations maybe don't want all the real estate they used to have. Maybe they transitioned to a university concept that's really modeled after what the folks at Deloitte have done.

Carrie Blair:

Then, of course, you're seeing other things, which I think are more policy changes like unlimited vacation and things like that coming up through the organizations like Goldman Sachs. I think all of these things can work in various ways and not necessarily even mutually exclusive, but I think it comes back to, it depends on your organization and your culture and how it all works together and you still have to measure productivity, outcomes, and engagement.

Gerry Lewis:

Carrie, one of the wonderful things about doing these podcasts, it's really... Well, that's why we call it GLINC Outside the Box, because that's exactly what we're doing. The downside to doing these podcasts, I'll be honest with you, is I almost don't want any of my team members to listen to this podcast because

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all of a sudden, you just created all these incredible ideas and they're going to come back to me and say, "Hey, Carrie said four-day work week. Hey, Carrie said Roam, two months of the year." But joking aside, I do love those ideas and we chatted about this before. It's certainly what we are hearing of these very innovative things that people are doing. It's tougher on the small business because when you have a small business of 5 or 7 or 10 or even 15 employees, that becomes more difficult, but it doesn't mean it's not doable. I just think that the flexibility is a powerful, like you said, it's a new signing bonus. It becomes very powerful. I like that. Don't worry, Carrie, my team will be listening to this podcast].

Carrie Blair:

At least somebody will hear.

Gerry Lewis:

Somebody will. One of them will. We've been talking about hybrid work in organizations, not really net new, but certainly new focuses, new motivations. We talked about the different types of hybrid work models and I totally agree with you, I think we're still in a very experimental stage right now, but to leave ourselves open to have even more flexible thinking in terms of how it works.

Gerry Lewis:

This brings me to the original question and title of this podcast really is so, what do you think? Is everything we're discussing today wonderfully interesting, but Gerry, everything's going to probably swing back to 2019, everyone's going to come back to the office, everyone's going to be jammed into subways and street cars and buses, or has this been a paradigm shift and we've changed forever?

Carrie Blair:

Gerry, if you had asked me this question the start of the pandemic in the first few months, my answer was this is a paradigm shift. Companies quickly transitioned to work from home. Schools went online. The daily grind of commuting came to a halt, but as time progressed and other challenges started to emerge, social isolation, children missing their friends and their childhood development, people living where they work and vice versa and not having parameters, becoming full-time caregivers to relatives. I thought, okay, this is going to be a pendulum shift.

Carrie Blair:

But if I had to make a prediction today based on what I'm seeing right now, I would say it's a pendulum shift with a twist. That means, I think there's so many positive things that have come out through this dark, dark time of the pandemic that both employees and employers are going to want to incorporate those into a new way of working, but I don't think we're going to see it go all the way to a paradigm shift. I think some elements are going to come back and we're going to see new things get incorporated to make the workplace just even better for people and for employers to grow and thrive.

Gerry Lewis:

It won't be, as you say, the whole new world completely, it will be a shift back, but maybe some augmentations here and there that will stick?

Carrie Blair:

Yeah. I think it's a pendulum swing with a twist.

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Gerry Lewis:

Sounds like a great name for a cocktail, Carrie. Fantastic. Thank you very much for that. One of the things, hybrid work as we discussed today is really redefining what it means to work and collaborate in more distributed, yet more connected world. That's a fact, and organizations that mandates when employees come into the office or not, whether teams can select their number of days or not, both the how and the where of work has changed forever. That is the one constant we know.

Gerry Lewis:

What I've learned from you and in speaking with you today, it's really, regardless of whether it's a paradigm shift or a pendulum with a slight shift for organizations, all leaders are going to be challenged to rethink the experience employees need to remain productive, engaged, and how best to collaborate from wherever they are. That to me is also the constant, that as a leader, we need to think about productivity, engagement, collaboration in this sort of new hybrid world.

Gerry Lewis:

Carrie, we talked a lot of different things today. Is there anything we did not touch upon today that you want to share with us or is there anything you want to reinforce to our listeners as something to kind of walk away with that's an important thought?

Carrie Blair:

I think there's two things, Gerry. I think the first thing which I said earlier on is which once was viewed as a perk is now an expectation, and two, flexibility is the new signing bonus.

Gerry Lewis:

Carrie, always great to chat with you. I always learn something every time I talk to you. Thank you very much for being on our show today.

Carrie Blair:

Thank you, Gerry.

Gerry Lewis:

Thank you, our listeners, for joining in for another episode of GLINC Outside the Box. I'm Gerry Lewis.