March 2022

Heroes of hybrid

How tech-forward executives remove friction and bolster human connection in the future of work

webex
by CISCO

Contents

webex by cisco

Work:

where
we've
been

where
we are

where
we're
going

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed the way we work. While some found working from home a welcome respite, others realized just how much they enjoyed in-person collaboration.

How are executives handling these two different approaches? While many companies are swinging to one extreme or the other, tech-forward industry leaders believe the future of work is hybrid: a blend of both in-person and remote work.

But defining what the future of hybrid work entails depends on whom you speak to. We interviewed leaders in HR, Real Estate, and Information to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities hybrid work brings, as well as the friction points between departments. Read on to discover their philosophies on the future of work through the lenses of empathy, equity, and security.

webex by cisco

HR's perspective on hybrid

Keeping work balanced

From the perspective of the HR executive we interviewed, hybrid work means creating a new work environment that's flexible to people's needs. ❀

webex by cisco

"

We've actually lived through a really practical experiment. Most of us couldn't do anything but work remotely, and I think the art form is now: How do you bring those [learnings] to what we knew to be normal before? So, it's not a return … but it's taking the best of both worlds."

Fortune 500 Director of Talent Acquisition

webex by cisco

Empathy: Human connection is lacking among hybrid work. Many people are more overscheduled than ever before. Virtual conferencing has paved the way for back-to-back meetings, without so much as a five- or 10-minute break between them. With the pandemic marching on and people resigning from their jobs en masse across industries, is this pace really sustainable? Finding moments of connection is critical for collaboration but also for employees to be able to sustain their workflow. How can you lead an effective team if they're feeling burnt out and disengaged from one another?

"We need to get better at empowering people to switch off and not be online all the time. How do you turn off? How do you find balance, because we don't have these transition periods anymore–where we are driving to the office or walking from one meeting room to the other. We are going from a meeting–usually running a minute late to the next one–and you hit the button, and you are immediately dialed in. So we don't have these breaks anymore. How do you create these little moments in between work that feel more natural? How do we make that pace more sustainable?"

One way to feel more connected to your team is through a weekly check-in via your team chat. These small moments–paired with virtual happy hours, book clubs, trivia games, and informal meetings–build relationships. Going out of your way to build moments of connection with your team is critical to making empathy the focus of your leadership.

Boundary setting is something this HR executive admits we haven't quite cracked yet, but it starts from the top. If leaders don't show their team empathy, employees can leave to find a place that does. If leaders set this example and encourage their team to prioritize their life outside of work, the team will be more empathetic, and leaders can retain their talent.

Equity: Hybrid work is one of the most equitable labor developments we've had in our lifetimes. First, proximity bias is removed. Employers are no longer biased to seek out candidates who live close to a corporate office. Instead, they can find the best talent, no matter where it lives. This gives more opportunities to those in small, rural communities because they can

work for large corporations without commuting great distances, saving both time and money.

However, there are challenges to equity that hybrid work highlights. Not everyone's home is set up to be as comfortable as a corporate office. Some employees may not have the square footage for a dedicated workspace, they may have small children to care for, or other life circumstances that can make working from their homes difficult. Leaders need to heighten their senses to that. They may not be able to provide an office space to every employee that needs one, but perhaps they can send them noise-cancelling headphones to increase focus. Improving equity begins by leading with empathy.

Security: As far as security is concerned, this executive admits, "I just want security to work!" Security is not the focus of an HR leader, but that doesn't mean it doesn't play a role. Hybrid work can only function with technology that's robust enough to trust but not so complicated that it interrupts work-flow. That's how we get security that is both empathetic and equitable.

Final thoughts: The future of hybrid work removes gaps in equity, and paves the way for a flexible workforce that allows people in different life stages from all over the world to come together and work as a team. But there is still room for improvement. Leaders need to focus on creating intentional moments of connection among their team, and encourage proper boundary setting, so all employees can enjoy the right work-life balance.
These focuses will keep work sustainable to help prevent burnout, increase empathy, and retain talent.

webex by cisco

Workplace experience's
perspective on hybrid

Making connection intentional

If the future of work is
not entirely in our
homes, and not entirely
in the office, where is it?

webex by cisco
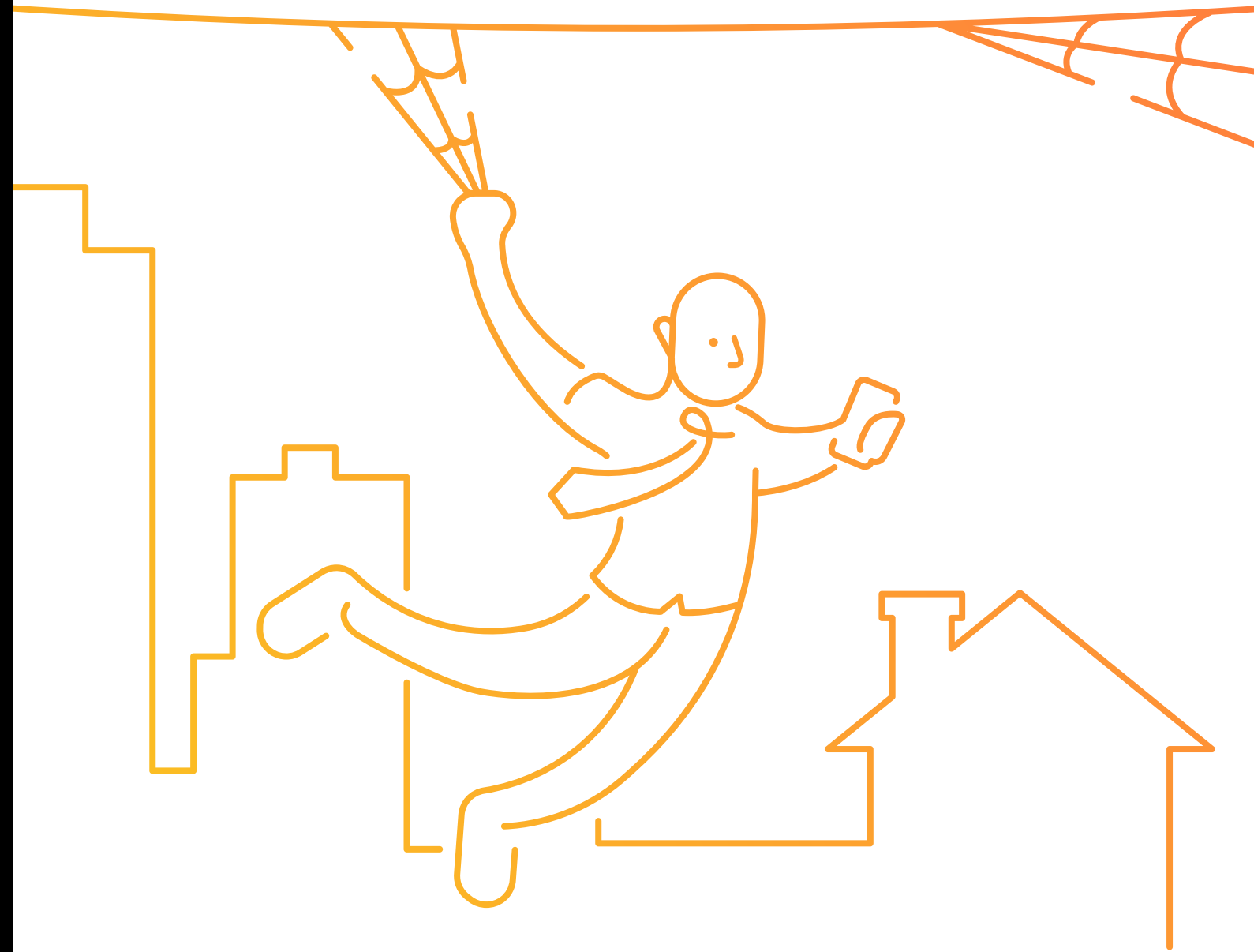
That's a question that one Workplace Design and Experience executive is working towards answering. At the beginning of the pandemic, many companies were eager to figure out what to do with their empty office spaces. Some rushed to sell their real estate, while others stood firm in their belief that teams would be returning to the office full-time no matter what. But that's not the perspective of this Real Estate executive.

He says, anybody swinging to one extreme or the other "means they have zero idea what to do. It's a classic punt. They're just picking which side to punt to. Everybody else is going to land somewhere in the middle [with hybrid work], and it's going to depend on who they are, their culture, what their role is."

webex by cisco

Empathy: One of the biggest findings from the pandemic, according to this executive, is that singular work can be done from anywhere. While this breakthrough has granted people much more flexibility, it has also illuminated just how important human connection is to the work we do every day. How can an executive in real estate bridge that gap? By reimagining where we connect, how we connect, and why we connect with our team members.

Where: Instead of traditional office spaces, corporate collaboration centers allow for flexibility in the types of meetings team members have, from informal chats over a cup of coffee, to connecting over an impactful training, to brainstorming in a room with white boards. Workspaces filled with cubicles and walled-off conference rooms are likely not the answer in the future of hybrid work.

Why: Whether it's in-person or virtual, many of us suffer from meeting fatigue. When trying to build connection in your team, ask yourself why you're meeting. This executive explains it best:

"If I walk in a workspace and I flip up my laptop and start projecting an Excel sheet on the wall, that's a total fail. Why did [the team] all just drive into an office to stare at an Excel sheet on the wall? The reason we go to that space is so we can have a connection, and that could just be a cup of coffee, sitting around asking, 'Hey, how's it going,' you know? Having and building where that sort of social capital can be built is key."

How: Does it benefit the team to meet at one of these collaboration centers twice a year? Once a month? Would your team benefit from an informal get-together at a bar or restaurant, or do you need dedicated time to work on projects together? Leaders must be proactive in asking these questions to know how often in-person connection is necessary to build relationships.

Equity: Since hybrid work rarely requires employees to commute regularly, they can add more flexibility into their workday. Those who need to work in short spurts with small breaks in between have the freedom to do that. Those who are early

risers or night owls can adjust their work schedule to meet their natural pace. Abandoning rigid daily commutes and 9-5 office hours is more equitable to many different types of people and lifestyles. Furthermore, building collaboration centers in major cities creates a central point that your team can commute to at the same time. No one will be at a disadvantage due to where they live.

Security: The most secure way to have a meeting is in person. While technology can be incredibly secure, nothing beats a face-to-face conversation. Collaboration centers provide a secure space on company property that supports this type of connection. When employees want to meet, they don't need to go to a coffee shop off campus and worry about confidential information being heard by passersby. Employees can have work conversations in a secure, casual setting in these nontraditional workspaces.

Final thoughts: Being intentional with where, why, and how we connect with one another is critical to building an effective hybrid workforce. "Are we going to be perfect about it? Absolutely not. But we're going to try. At least we're going to move forward, make a mistake, and course-correct."

webex by **cisco**

Engineering and Security's perspective on hybrid

Better tech makes hybrid work.

Can we build technology that meets our need for human connection? 🔒

webex by cisco
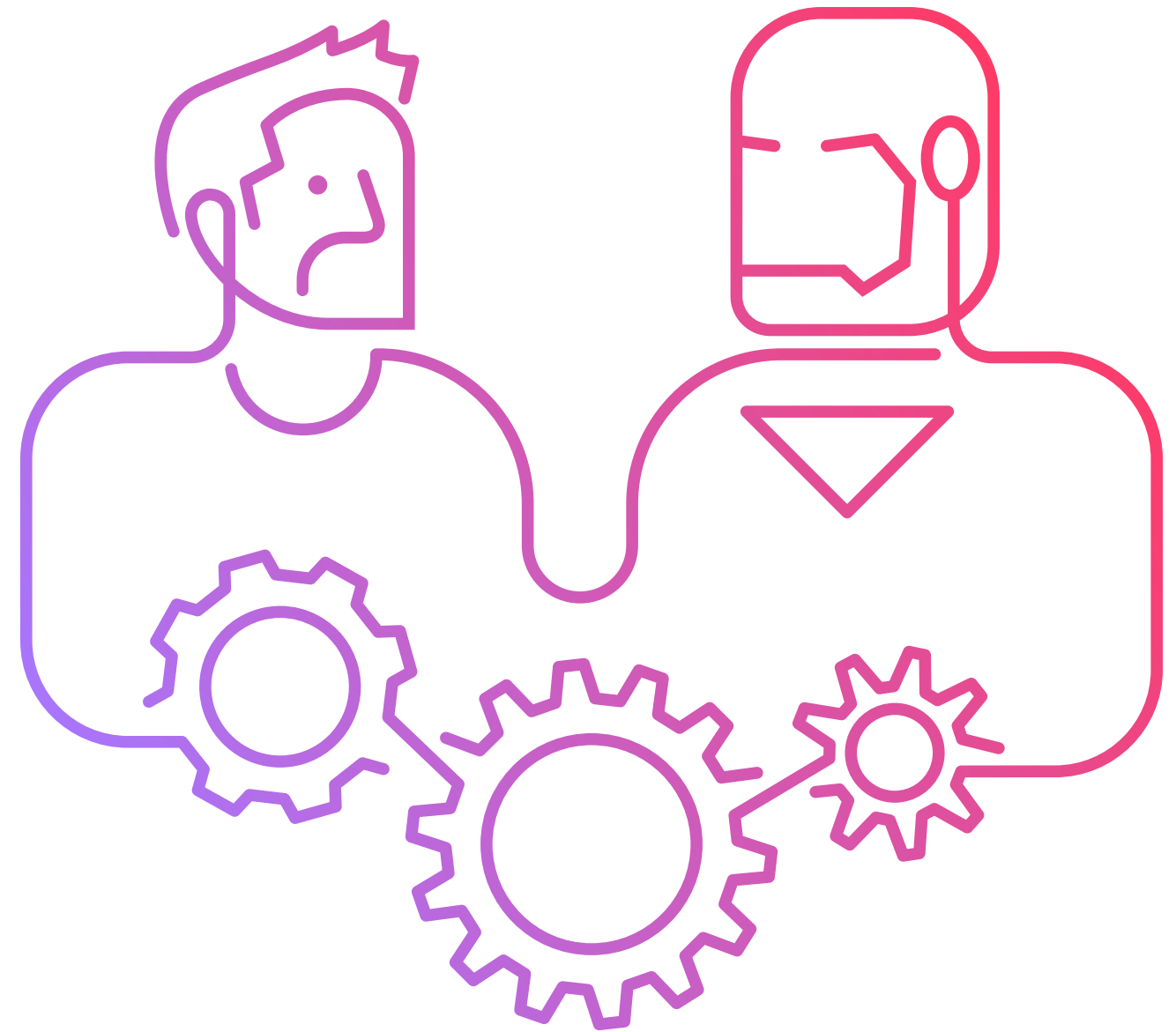
While some businesses are touting software that seems empathetic, one Engineering and Security executive is doing the work to build technology that is responding to a real human need for connection. From their perspective, the future of hybrid relies on the marriage of effective technology and widespread adoption of that technology.

"

The pace of technology is quite rapid. But when you look at how quickly the technology can evolve, it's not the technology that's going to be the bottleneck [in hybrid work]. It's going to be how humans interact with the technology that's going to be the bottleneck ... I think we're making these grandiose assumptions of, we're just going to move right into hybrid work and it's going to be easy. And it's not. We're going to encounter a lot of friction there, and most of it will not be technology limitations."

Startup Founder, Director of Engineering Innovation
for world-renowned tech conglomerate

webex by cisco

Empathy: We can't have lazy tech that's built in response to buzzwords. We need to ask what an empathetic workforce looks like. Though current video software has brought us to where we are today, it isn't providing the depth of connection that people crave. Speaking to each other in a 2D grid, even with cameras on, doesn't come close to talking to someone in person. Humans have a need to connect with each other in 3D. This Information expert hopes Webex Hologram can fill this gap in human connection to create a more empathetic hybrid workforce.

When this executive's colleague first tried out Webex Hologram, they felt the experience was so realistic they started tidying up their home. "Even though your brain knows that's not [necessary], that feeling of presence is there. It's very different, and I think we have not even scratched the surface of how we as people will respond to those types of immersive and hybrid scenarios. We don't know what we don't know yet, and I think we're making these grandiose assumptions of, we're just going to move right into hybrid work and it's going to be easy. And it's not. We're going to encounter a lot of friction there, and most of it will not be technology limitations."

Equity: To make hybrid work equitably, we can't assume all of our old work habits will fit effortlessly into a hybrid future. Take a company-wide mandatory PTO policy as an example. Maybe people enjoyed having certain mandatory days off in the past. Now that work is becoming more flexible, will employees still want this rigidity in their PTO policy? Companies and team leads need to ask: How do you empower your employees to make their own decisions within guardrails? By reimagining old policies to allow for more flexibility, you can create a more equitable work environment that suits people from all walks of life.

Security: As hybrid work progresses, it's important for teams to take a more active role in understanding what level of security is truly necessary for their work. Many businesses are eager to adopt "end-to-end encryption," but this executive sees this as another buzzword. Most people believe they need the most secure solution out there, but if that interrupts your workflow, is that heightened security effective? In hybrid work, teams need to find the balance between having a protective solution and a usable solution. This will instill trust in the team while still allowing them to do hybrid work with ease.

Final thoughts: Hybrid work is the future, but the friction between the pace of new technology and the pace people are willing to adopt that technology will be a challenge. However, by building tech that fills the gaps we're experiencing in human connection, this executive hopes to create a more empathetic and equitable workforce.

webex by cisco

Friction in the future of hybrid

Though each executive has a different perspective on the future of work, there were two common areas of friction identified.

The balance between intentional and casual connection

People, regardless of their role, need some aspect of human connection in the workplace, and virtual connection as it stands now is not enough. Solving for this gap in human connection will not be simple. All three executives agreed there needs to be elements of both intentional and spontaneous connections, and these goals can seem contradictory.

Intentional connection refers to a connection that has a purpose; it isn't simply a casual meeting without an agenda or having a meeting when an email could be just as effective. Because people are already overscheduled, adding an unstructured chat to someone's calendar can feel like a waste of time and cuts into important working hours. Intentional connection refers to meeting with another person with a specific purpose in mind, like getting coffee together to discuss progress on a new project.

On the other hand, when doing hybrid work, one of the main types of connection we miss out on are casual "water cooler" conversations. Some of the most memorable conversations happen simply from being in close proximity to one another. This type of connection cannot be planned or forced; they happen almost serendipitously.

So how can leaders find ways to intentionally connect yet allow for "water cooler" chats? One executive brought up the idea of an "unconference."

"I've gone to so many conferences where I never once listened to a talk. You go to the conference because you're not sure who you're going to run into. I can listen to talks virtually. I don't have to do it in person live. It's the spontaneous conversations ... there's always good that comes out of that."

Perhaps leaders could learn from this by planning one or two "unconferences" per year. This is an intentional way to get your team together, but it allows for the flexibility of casual conversation.

The pace of adopting new technology

The gap between technology's capabilities and what people are comfortable with is going to be a greater divide than we may think. Technology develops at a much faster pace than people are willing to adopt. Take video conferencing as an example. The technology has existed for a long time, yet people were resistant to turning their cameras on until technology like virtual backgrounds and noise reduction made "cameras-on" meetings more comfortable.

Regardless of whether the advancement discussed was a new collaborative workspace or a 3D meeting with Webex Hologram, each executive agreed that adoption of these advancements will be the biggest hurdle. Yet, with innovative leadership and a workforce that's eager for the future of work, they're hopeful that this new technology will reimagine hybrid work for the better.

webex by cisco

While there's no single, unified perspective on the values, tools, and methodologies needed for the future of work, each executive made it clear that keeping people as the focus is essential. Work must be adapted for human needs and behaviors, not the other way around. Human connection is the core of what will make hybrid effective, yet creating enough person-to-person interaction is also a challenge in a hybrid environment. Through their alignments and shared challenges, the philosophies of these three executives provide an interesting window into what the future of work may hold.

webex by **cisco**