

# **A Hybrid Work Force:**

## **After the Pandemic**

**June 1, 2023**

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### **CITIZENS' ECONOMY & EFFICIENCY COMMISSION**

**LOS ANGELES COUNTY**  
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**THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY  
CITIZENS' ECONOMY AND EFFICIENCY COMMISSION**

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The mission of the Commission is to examine any function of County government at the request of the Board of Supervisors, on its own initiative, or as suggested by others, and to submit recommendations to the Board which will improve local government economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

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## **I. Introduction**

The collective experience of the past two years has fundamentally changed how the County of Los Angeles (County) defines the role of work. Even though hybrid work existed before COVID-19, the mandatory lockdown during the pandemic allowed many departments to adopt remote working models based on their respective operational needs. By 2021, hybrid work has become more common than ever, with some organizations moving permanently to hybrid models and downgrading their physical offices.

As workplaces across the County are reopening, departments are adapting their policies to allow greater flexibility. Although this shift in the workforce posed many challenges, there are transformative changes making the way the County works better. Already, hybrid work is up significantly in all departments<sup>1</sup>, and as more employees are likely to consider transitioning to hybrid soon, the challenge ahead for every organization is to meet employees' new expectations while balancing business outcomes.

## **II. Scope and Methodology**

During the past two years, in great part due to the active efforts of the Department of Human Resources with County Departments, significant improvements in systems and policies have been made and incorporated into behaviors and work practices that reflect a hybrid future. To help the County further strengthen its transformation to a flexible workforce, the Commission formed a Task Force to identify misalignments and promote ongoing efficiency to the hybrid process.

### **Scope**

The Task Force convened in January 2023 to assess the readiness of the County for a hybrid organization. To ensure this study reflects the most updated data, the Task Force reviewed the recommendations in its July 2021 report<sup>2</sup> as the starting point for this assessment. The Task Force theorized that unless there is a shared understanding and strategic alignment at

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<sup>1</sup> Across departments interviewed, employees on some form of hybrid work ranged between 30% to 100%.

<sup>2</sup> [https://assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/0234f496-d2b7-00b6-17a4-b43e949b70a2/2cf97590-2156-4e96-a1b9-95dbf51edb93/204\\_HYBRID\\_Model.pdf](https://assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/0234f496-d2b7-00b6-17a4-b43e949b70a2/2cf97590-2156-4e96-a1b9-95dbf51edb93/204_HYBRID_Model.pdf)

all levels of the organization, a gap will always exist between the current and aspired culture. To reduce this disparity, it starts with organizational alignment between senior leadership, managers, and front-line employees. The goal is to not force-fit some predefined culture onto its employees, but to use real, on the ground narratives to understand the true needs of the County's workforce.

The Task Force decided that the Grounded Theory approach<sup>3</sup>, was considered most suitable for this study because the process is best used with data coding procedures to uncover gaps or create meaning through interview surveys. The Task Force intended to provide recommendations from findings informed by knowledge gained directly from key stakeholders. Based on the choice of the Grounded Theory approach, the Task Force narrowed the objectives of the study to:

- I. Identify critical areas of concern between managers and front-line employees critical to hybrid work.
- II. Make recommendations to substantively improve the operations of Los Angeles County's hybrid workforce.

## **Methodology**

The Task Force interviewed 9 County Department telemanagers<sup>4</sup> and 50 front-line employees<sup>5,6</sup> based on a set of semi-structured interview protocol as the form of data collection. The open-ended questions allowed for follow-up questions to gain a more in-depth understanding of hybrid challenges as necessary. During the interviews, the transparency of the data collection process, the framework, and the data analysis procedures were disclosed to the participants as related to the research study. To encourage candid responses in the interview process, all interviewees were assured that

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<sup>3</sup> an inductive method used in qualitative research to generate themes leading to the emergence of conceptual theories,

<sup>4</sup> Departments selected ranged from 1,400 employees to 18,000+

<sup>5</sup> Criteria for employee selection were based on employment from the departments the task force interviewed and are on some form of hybrid schedule ranging from once a week to more than three days a week.

<sup>6</sup>Despite several attempts over a prolong period, none of the unions were available to meet with the Task Force.

their comments would not be attributed to them individually, although their remarks might be used anonymously for illustrative purposes.

After the data collection process was concluded, the field notes were systematically coded into themes representing the participants' personal account and experiences into a Microsoft Word table. Then, based on ideas and issues extracted from the coding, the codes that shared central characteristics were grouped under a specific heading reflecting each emergent pattern.

Since one objective of this study is to find alignment or misalignment between managers and front-line employees, this grounded theory coding approach was conducted for both groups of participants. The resulting themes generated from both primary groups were necessary since an organization's culture is significantly linked to leadership practices and what employees actually experience.

Finally, the Task Force evaluated, analyzed, and debated the data from the interview responses, and where clarifications were needed, the Task Force went back to the interviewees for further exploration. This process of data analysis<sup>7</sup> eventually led to the final step of developing recommendations from the findings.

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<sup>7</sup>The Task Force recognized the potential of human bias in performing this type of study and encouraged the unabashed scrutiny of non-substantive evidence and opinions.

### III. Key Findings and Recommendations

The findings of this study were gathered utilizing a grounded theory design based on qualitative coding procedures and thematic analysis. To balance the perspectives of the study from a management viewpoint and line employee perspectives, many hours were spent gathering responses from close to 60 interviewees.

The qualitative interview process produced three key findings (see *Figure 1* below) in the study. Since the interview questions and methods were open-ended, some of the key findings may have received one or more recommendations depending on the respondents' knowledge in a particular subject matter. For example, when a respondent provided several answers, the data analysis used in open coding captured the multiple responses for each question and then coded them appropriately. Not all the ideas are mutually exclusive and therefore, the decision was made to group subthemes including ideas worth exploring further under the same categorical finding.

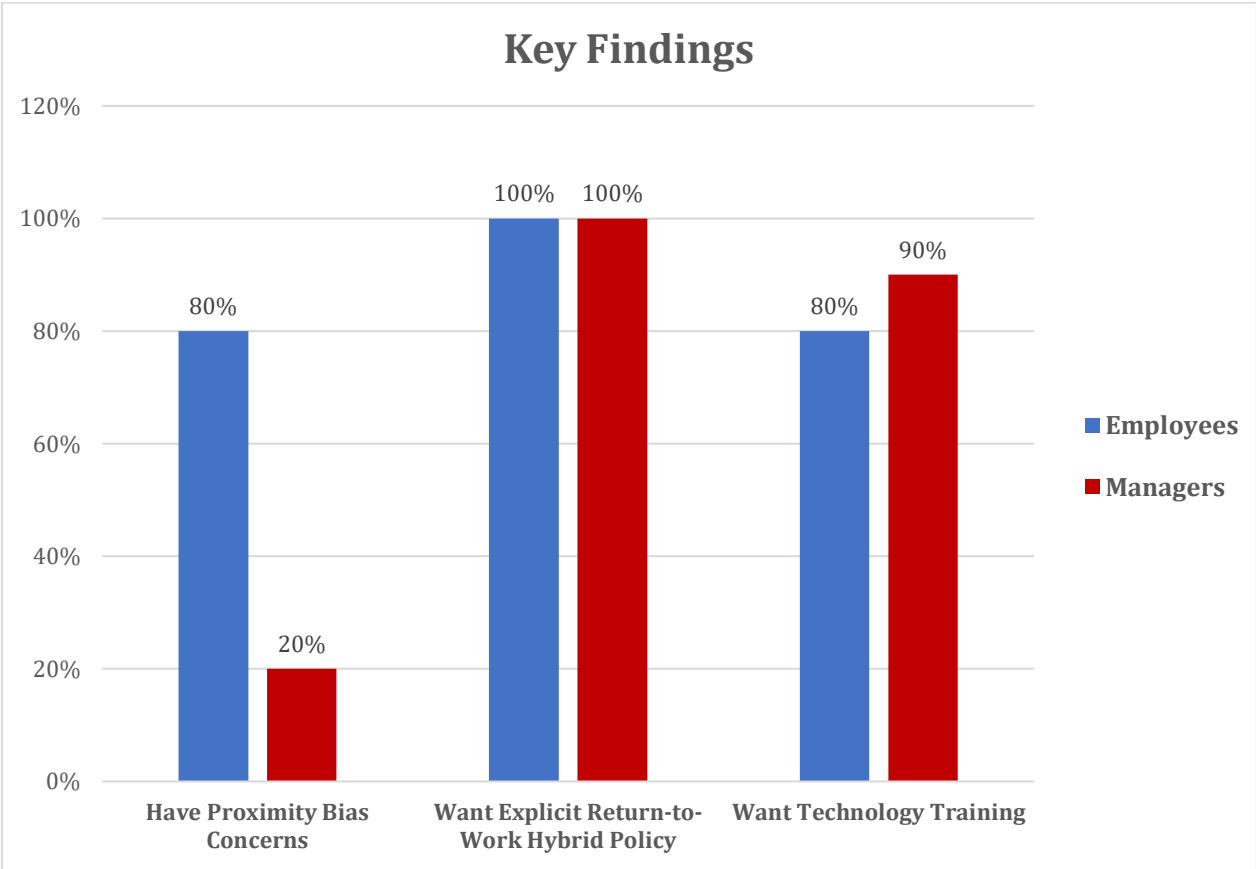


Figure 1. Responses of employees to managers comparison on the three key findings.



To help the reader follow along, these two objectives were used to guide the Task Force toward fulfilling the study's purpose:

- I. Identify critical areas of concern between managers and front-line employees critical to hybrid work.
- II. Make recommendations to substantively improve the operations of Los Angeles County's hybrid workforce.

**Finding #1: While the hybrid work model has its benefits, 80% of hybrid employees are concerned about the potential inequity in promotions that favored in-person workforces. When telemanagers were asked about how hybrid employees are being evaluated, 80% interviewed expressed that they valued results over time in the office and being a hybrid worker is not a barrier to entry for advancement.**

Promotional equity is a concern. When employees are not in the office, they feel that their chances of promotion are lower than those who are at the office. Employees worry about feeling invisible to their managers after transitioning to remote work. They felt that, however productive, they suffered from a lack of facetime with colleagues and managers, which negatively affects promotions, and ultimately may stall careers.

Employees need to feel as though they are connected to colleagues and the workplace itself, and this unfulfilled psychological need remained a concern for employees in a virtual workforce. Even with sophisticated videoconferencing technology that allows for reading body language and facial expressions, the concern is that virtual colleagues are more likely to feel isolated socially and professionally because their face-to-face interactions are less frequent. To address the psychological need for meaningful social inclusion and interaction, the majority of managers are experimenting with weekly themed events such as employee birthdays, snack days, or just informal check-ins to better understand the challenges employees face.

Additionally, 80% of managers surveyed affirmatively asserted that hybrid workers should see themselves as contenders for promotional opportunities and that their career advancements will be based on performance and not location-based or predicated on time spent in the office.

The other 20% of managers admitted that the perception of visibility plays a role sometimes, especially those in the front-line. They acknowledged that traditionally, being seen by others while at work resulted in positive outcomes for employees because it is a reality that people not in the office, do not develop relationships and managerial skills as readily, or didn't have the opportunity to show those skills. That tendency to forget about someone is a sort of unconscious bias.

**Recommendation #1: That the Board of Supervisors considers directing the Department of Human Resources to develop a Proximity Bias Training Course to help managers be aware of the unconscious tendency to value employees in the office more than remote workers in a hybrid work environment, and in addition, track data to analyze if hybrid employees received as many promotions compared to in-office peers.**

It is in the long-term interest of organizations to find a way through this issue. Since remote work is expected to remain the post-pandemic normal, there's growing concern that promotional bias towards in-office workers could become an equity issue. However, these influences may reduce organically as hybrid becomes more entrenched. As older managers retire, they will get replaced by newer administrators who increasingly grew up in hybrid work environments, and these new managers may be less likely to have ingrained beliefs that workers must be physically present to be trusted and, ultimately, promoted.

Meanwhile, managers need to be aware of the difficulties that time and distance create and take ongoing, proactive steps to mitigate that impact. Given how quickly the workforce has changed, hybrid workers need to have some patience with employers and be aware of the need to self-advocate. The Task Force agreed that today's evolving work arrangements will

have to come with new methods of how employees are evaluated. Research suggests that one of the ways<sup>8</sup> to combat proximity bias is not to ignore the problem or bring everyone back to the office, but to strengthen inclusion programs and adopt operating models that address this challenge in a systemic way.

**Finding #2: There is growing resentment toward employees who are allowed to work in a hybrid schedule from those mandated to work in the office or the field.**

As pandemic restrictions end, more companies are calling employees back to the office – yet the rules are not universal for all workers. 100% of the employees surveyed did not expect work arrangements to go back to a pre-pandemic normal. But they felt that their managers could have accommodated them with a more desirable hybrid schedule.

10% of employees were frustrated because they could apply for exemptions but when they did, their requests were rejected with no explanation. 30% of the employees lamented while they were praised for their productivity and had never missed a deadline during the pandemic, some of their colleagues with the same classification titles may work from home up to three days a week while others have to return to the office 4 days a week. The disparity between who gets to work from home and who has to return to the office has created friction, and tensions are bubbling to the surface, affecting workplace morale. Some employees believed their bosses don't have a clear, flexible-working policy, and that they made it up as they went along.

This perception is not without merit. As departments scramble to develop return-to-work hybrid policies, a lack of plausible explanation from managers can exacerbate rising tensions. 100% of the managers surveyed stated that who gets to remote work and when are strictly based on their departments' operational needs. They emphasized that it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. All the managers interviewed affirmed they are operating without

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<sup>8</sup> Sustaining and strengthening inclusion in our new remote environment  
<https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/sustaining-and-strengthening-inclusion-in-our-new-remote-environment>

a return-to-work hybrid policy or are in the process of developing one. A lack of company cohesion linked to aggrieved employees can lead to a raft of negative consequences that might affect workforce dynamics. For some, such displeasure might not create resentment towards colleagues – but towards the department instead and may lead some employees to challenge such decision making at a higher level.

All the managers surveyed for this study underscored the need for a County-wide return-to-work hybrid policy to provide clear guidelines, ensure fair and consistent practices, and achieve legal compliance. Even though hybrid work models offer many benefits, departments face challenges in optimizing resources that ensure a healthy and productive workforce, despite location.

**Recommendation #2: That the Board of Supervisors considers directing the Department of Human Resources to develop a Countywide return-to-work hybrid policy and assist County departments in creating business objectives for a hybrid work environment.**

The pandemic opened up a rare opportunity to do things differently. Before the pandemic, some departments had never contemplated a remote work model and now must adjust. Rather than returning to the old ways, departments should take advantage of this otherwise catastrophic event to rethink how work is done. For DHR, that means moving from a compliance mindset to embracing strategic flexibility. DHR professionals have a huge opportunity to create new guidance and work practices.

The Task Force also learned that DHR has already begun working with County departments to develop County policies and meaningful business metrics for their hybrid workforce.

**Finding #3: 80% of employees surveyed revealed that they want a more seamless experience whether they are working from home or in the office. Similarly, 90% of managers expressed facing challenges on using technology to better manage their employees, with large departments faring much better than small departments.**

Technology is foundational in a hybrid workplace. While 100% of all the employees surveyed stated that a hybrid workplace has made them more satisfied with their jobs around flexibility and work/life balance, 80% expressed the need for better peripheral devices and accessories that promote wellbeing such as headsets with noise cancelling features, standing desks for ergonomic support, and computers that feature eye care modes.

90% of managers<sup>9</sup> interviewed indicated that while they want to continue to enhance the remote work experience so it can continue to deliver a seamless and stressless working environment, there are currently very strict County rules for providing peripheral devices for employees working from home.

50% of managers surveyed indicated that they have found a lapse in customer services at least once when employees must transfer or escalate an issue to a supervisor or another department but then the calls get dropped during the transfer or the intended person is not available.

**Recommendation #3a: That the Board of Supervisors considers directing the Director of the Department of Human Resources and the CIO to develop and formally publicize County policies that address the purchase and use of non-County issued work equipment while working from home.**

Building a work culture that thrives in the post-pandemic era requires refocusing on policies and strategies that drive both employee performance and company success.

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<sup>9</sup> In general, larger departments fared much better than smaller departments when it comes to IT support and services

Therefore, organizations must make sure their workforce have the proper equipment they need to run the technology they use, both at the office and away from it. Establishing these ground rules from the get-go can help secure the work environment despite where and when your employees are working. Aside from the most obvious communication technology, there is a huge amount of technology needed to let workers operate remotely without compromising productivity and security.

**Recommendation #3b: That the Board of Supervisors considers directing the Chief Executive Officer to evaluate County risks associated with remote work and develop strategies and management practices to mitigate unexpected exposures to the County.**

During the pandemic, state and county regulations directed much of the workforce to work from home, and employers and employees did what they needed to do to remain safe and functional. But now that the mandates that structured our personal and professional lives during the pandemic have been rescinded, many County employees have continued to work under a hybrid or flexible schedule. While the County can better ensure the health, safety, and well-being of their employees while on company premises, it might not be realistic to expect the same level of safety at remote workspaces. If not dealt with, this can put employees and the organization at risk. In consideration of these new work approaches, managers must know the existing state and federal laws that govern the workplace including the remote and hybrid work environment. One area of concern implicated by a few managers was the potential for workers' compensation exposure in a flexible workplace.

Workers' compensation is important for the same reasons pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic-to help the County avoid hefty out-of-pocket costs if an employee is injured. Because most departments surveyed did not compare workers' compensation cases in the three phases, there is not a clear and consistent trend to establish any correlation between working in the office and hybrid work.

However, of the 33% of departments that provided workers' compensation claim comparisons during and post-pandemic, the number cases declined between 30% to 50%. Although this revelation may not be surprising since the COVID-19 pandemic affected all businesses in California, some implications may help both the county and employees better handle policy enforcement as hybrid work is becoming the new standard of conducting business. For example, do departments with higher hybrid work potential have lower loss costs? Proactive management practices, including remote and hybrid employment policies, is recommended for departments with operations that allow for such flexibility.

**Recommendation #3c: That the Board of Supervisors considers directing the CIO to work with departmental IT units to take inventory of all departmental learning needs and choose the best tools that meet both employee and managers without sacrificing security, compliance, and privacy concerns.**

Managers and employees are both hungry for better digital tools. While 90% of managers believed pursuing digital transformation is more important now than ever before, only 20% said they are among the decision makers in those efforts. The same group of respondents also observed that their teams would benefit most from solutions that help them automate tasks, thus freeing up time to focus on work that matters. They bemoaned that, however, organizational policies—including different departments using different software, limit their ability to proactively explore or start digital solutions on their own. These shortcomings point to a gap between what leadership and technology departments consider to be a priority in meeting the needs of a workforce often dispersed across locations.

The result is a disconnect, whatever investments in digital solutions the organization is making, many individuals have little say in the matter. The surveys offer a window into how technology is helping—and hindering—people today, along with fresh insights into the tools and processes leaders should adopt to help people be more empowered and productive.

**Recommendation #3d: That the Board of Supervisors considers directing the CIO to work with departmental IT units to create a comprehensive Microsoft Teams training program that will equip employees and managers with skills and proficiencies required for excellent service delivery.**

The most problematic feedback from managers is learning about calls in Teams. While Calls are a quick way to connect in Teams. They did not know that an individual can have one-on-one calls or calls with several people. They also did not know that Teams allows anyone to set up calls ahead of time like a meeting or start them on the fly while in a chat.

90% of employees agreed that end-users across all departments need to be involved—not just IT or senior leadership. Typically, front-line employees are on the receiving end of digital transformation. Some employees working in Teams don't feel empowered by the tools they have because they feel like they don't understand the full capability of this platform.

For both managers and employees, it's crucial to make sure hybrid employees can continue to improve and develop their skills and knowledge in the same way that this would happen with in-person training. A good training program includes asking for feedback to ensure that remote employees are never left behind or excluded from continuous learning and development.

## **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

Hybrid work has the potential to offer a higher level of flexibility, a better work-life balance, and a more tailored employee experience. However, this newfound flexible work approach also has the potential to create an unequal playing field and to amplify in-group versus out-group dynamics, which can flip those advantages to the liabilities side of the ledger.



In this study, the Task Force shared research that illuminates the dynamics that underlie efforts to build inclusion in a diverse, hybrid workforce and shined a spotlight on the need to learn new leadership competencies. The pandemic has taught us that culture will stand or fall with managers. These same leaders have spent the past two years under crushing pressure, shepherding their people and organizations through uncertainty amid unprecedented economic challenges.

But as the world shifts more fully into hybrid work, County leaders have a new and urgent challenge: setting the standard for flexible work in a way that balances business outcomes with employee expectations. Leading remote staff requires strong management skills and even new skills that may not have been required when working in person. The biggest opportunity for leaders is to reimagine the role of the office and create clarity around why, when, and how often teams should gather in person. Making the office work for all employees will take radical intentionality. There's no one-size-fits-all approach. The key is for managers to clearly guide employees as they experiment and learn what works for the team. Technology plays a key role, but this moment calls for a new mindset.

The best leaders will create a culture that embraces flexibility, focused on employee wellbeing, rethink the role of the office, rebuild social capital for a digital-first workforce, and create new practices for sustainable flexible work. Managers must understand the differences in how employees react to working virtually as opposed to on site and help team members respond to those differences and operate in ways tailored to their environment.