Creating a culture of collaboration

Keep your workforce connected, productive, and happy working from anywhere

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Smarter technology for all

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"Collaboration is not just technical. It's the cultural willingness to share and win as a team using the right technologies and the assumption that everyone can add value."

Wayne Kurtzman, IDC Collaboration and Social Media Research Director

Workplace collaboration's star is rising. Businesses are realizing there's more to collaboration than a means to accomplish tasks. It's also a way to strengthen coworker bonds, create synergy, break departmental and role-based silos, empower everyone to contribute their gifts, spur creativity and innovation, and improve morale.

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Defining collaboration for today's workforce

Collaboration is more than a business skill, although it is teachable and should be taught. But a collaborative approach to work can be a shared company value that permeates every day — the way work is done, decisions get made, and customer relationships are structured. It can become a culture.

Collaboration is no longer a choice or just another tactic. Working in teams is something employers now expect because they know the essential role it plays in business success. Workers who collaborate spend 64% more time on their tasks with higher engagement, lower fatigue levels, and a higher success rate than their counterparts who work alone.[1]

Collaboration has become something that attracts talent and may even land your enterprise on the best places to work list.

Communication and collaboration: What's the difference?

Communication and collaboration overlap but are not the same.

Communication is the imparting or exchanging of information, typically working toward understanding — more process-oriented.

Collaboration is the pooling of perspectives and skills, working toward producing or accomplishing something — more outcome-oriented.

You can have communication without collaboration, but you cannot successfully collaborate without communicating.

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Collaboration for generations to come

Gen Z and Millennial employees will comprise 62% of the US workforce by 2025.[2] Nearly three in four rate teamwork and collaboration as "very important."[3] Millennials are actually referred to as the "collaboration generation."

These generations have been surrounded by digital tools and steeped in social media. They grew up with a prevalence of technology at home and school that allowed them to stay connected anywhere. And much of their education was project-based learning.[4]

They've always had the power of technology in their hands, which has allowed them to communicate faster, more often, and with many friends, classmates, and now colleagues at once. Connecting with others comes naturally to them — a seamless, continuous part of everyday life.

62%

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Staying connected from anywhere

Across many industries, "work from anywhere" is a strong trend that's here to stay. Research indicates that 57% of companies have a flexible work policy.[5]

It is both harder and more important to keep a remote workforce included and engaged, and definitely more challenging to promote collaboration. One in five companies (21%) say communication and collaboration are a huge struggle for distributed teams.[6]

In the crisis of a pandemic, collaboration takes on an even more important role. No matter what the ratio of onsite workers to remote, whether across the building or across the world, your employees need each other.

For many people, separation from coworkers has brought home how connected they really want to be and how valuable it is to come together. Others are discovering a new productivity in working without distraction, yet also appreciating the balance teamwork provides. Most workers are finding it helpful to plan social time as well as project work.

Work from anywhere has been accelerated by COVID-19. But beyond this particular crisis, there will be other times of disruption when workplace flexibility is crucial to help everyone stay productive.

No matter what the future of work looks like, building and strengthening a culture of collaboration will be among the essentials.

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Want employees to thrive in your company culture? Engage them.

If your organization has poured resources into customer experience, it's time to do the same for employees.

Employee experience is a significant and growing factor in attracting and retaining talent, which is a top internal concern for CEOs.[7] Organizations that score in the top 25% on employee experience report nearly three times the return on assets and double the return on sales compared to organizations in the bottom quartile.[8]

Inside workers' hearts and minds
Today's employees are looking for a sense of purpose and satisfaction — 91% want to feel closer to colleagues and 89% want to be more connected to their company's mission and values.

Yet only 26% of knowledge workers describe their office as "connected."[9] Collaboration connects workers and makes them happy. In fact, the Happiness Index indicates that collaborative work management (CWM) software users are 85% more likely to identify as being happy.[10]

Turning to technology, workers want seamless solutions that let them communicate and collaborate from anywhere at any time on any device. Business technology must evolve to support consumer-like usage models and expectations like always-on, application-based tools that work on mobile operating systems, and modern devices from smartphones to tablets to laptops to desktops. And workers expect the kind of personalization that characterizes today's consumer marketing.

A culture of collaboration sets the stage for better communication. It validates a more level playing field where everyone can feel their unique contributions matter. This is particularly important at a time when diversity and inclusion are imperative. When employees feel valued, they not only engage more actively, but they feel freer to speak up and speak out.

Is productivity really the holy grail?
The quest for higher productivity has always driven business and will likely remain among the top enterprise success factors. Studies have shown a strong correlation between collaboration and productivity. McKinsey reports online collaboration tools and digital workplaces have the potential to increase productivity by 20% to 30%.[11]

And collaborative work is five times more likely to result in higher performance.[12]

As work from anywhere becomes more common, we are learning more about remote productivity. In one study, telecommuters worked 1.4 more days per month, or 16.8 more days per year, than people who worked in an office.[13] In another report, 77% of telecommuters said they were attaining higher levels of productivity.[14]
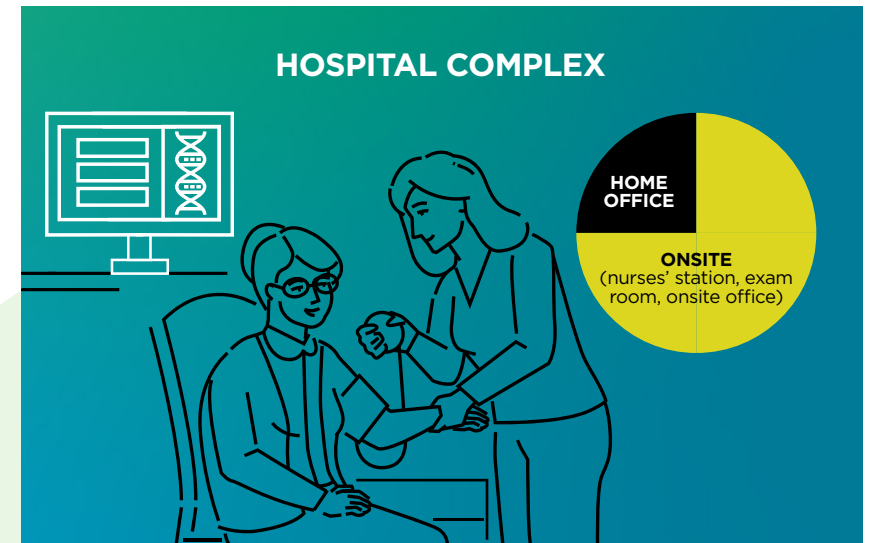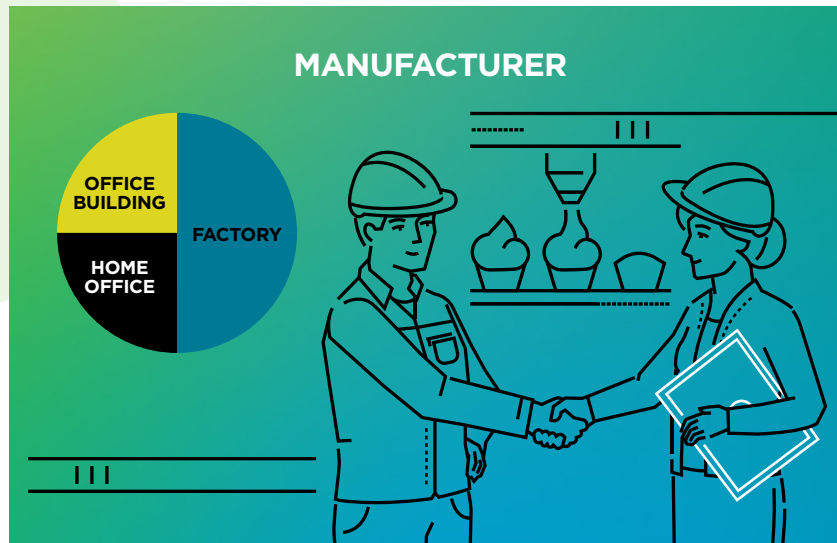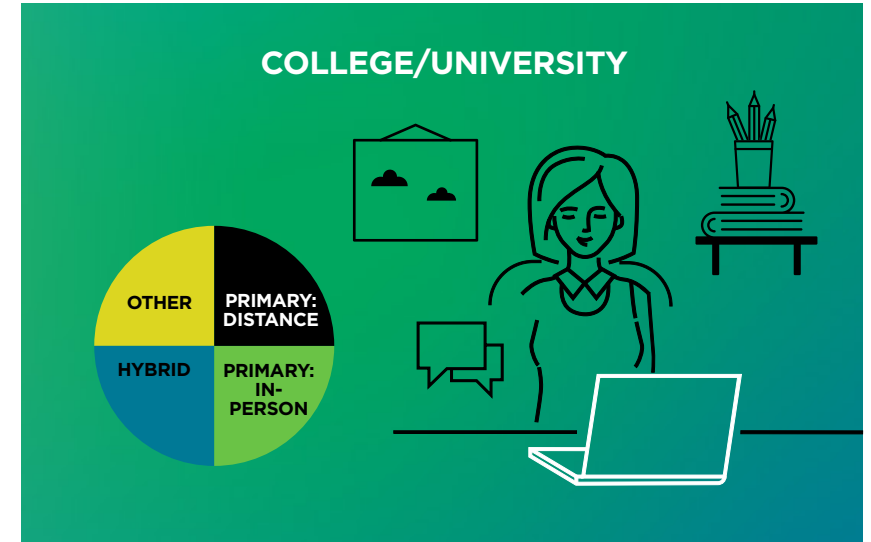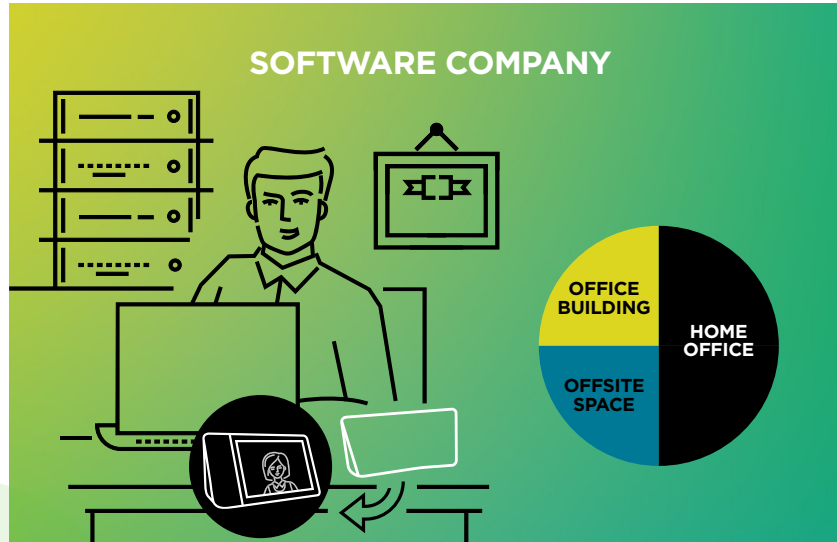
In a culture of collaboration, productivity is just one of several success metrics. The process is valued along with the outcome.

Productivity gains positively impact a company's bottom line, and of course, that's a good thing. But a culture of collaboration is about more than driving profits. It creates a richer, more satisfying environment — especially attractive for a new generation of workers, 86% of whom care more about values than a bigger paycheck.[15]

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What does your organization's future look like?

Where will your employees be and how will they be collaborating?

No matter what your industry, there will likely be a mix of onsite and offsite workers in a variety of locations.

SOFTWARE COMPANY

OFFICE BUILDING
HOME OFFICE
OFFSITE SPACE

COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY

OTHER
PRIMARY: DISTANCE
HYBRID
PRIMARY: IN-PERSON

MANUFACTURER

OFFICE BUILDING
FACTORY
HOME OFFICE

HOSPITAL COMPLEX

HOME OFFICE
ONSITE (nurses' station, exam room, onsite office)

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Your mission should you choose to accept it: the IT team's role

IT's role is expanding — and fast. Even before COVID pushed more workers out of the office, the proliferation of mobile devices was nonstop and the trend of flexible work was gaining steam.

IT teams are now responsible for deploying, managing, securing, and supporting what can be an unwieldy mass of devices. Add to that leading the implementation of a new generation of collaboration tools — evaluating, sourcing, deploying, and providing training — and there's all the more reason to have a carefully laid plan.

Underlying all this is a heightened awareness of employee experience and the mandate to enhance it, which brings us full circle back to employees' desire for collaboration. To thrive in our changed landscape, people need collaborative solutions. And these solutions are some of the most important building blocks for a culture of collaboration.

Collaborative leadership
Ideally, any collaboration technology initiatives will be developed and delivered with the buy-in and partnership of the CEO, CIO, and HR. At a time when technology is woven into just about every employee experience, HR and IT are strongly linked. In fact, Gartner predicts 20% of organizations will include employee engagement improvement as a shared performance objective for HR and IT groups.[17]

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- **83% OF WORKERS DEPEND ON TECHNOLOGY TO COLLABORATE.**[16]

- **BUT 59% FACE CHALLENGES WITH THEIR ORGANIZATION'S TOOLS.**

- **SO 16% USE PUBLIC SHARING TOOLS WITHOUT APPROVAL FROM THEIR EMPLOYER.**

Head this scenario off at the pass.

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The nuts and bolts of collaboration technology

Enter: A new world of team collaboration technologies.
Beware: Over-choice.

There are thousands of cloud-based collaboration tools available today. Far and away the most popular are those that enable the kinds of social tools employees are probably already using — chat/messaging, posting, liking, tagging, following. These are familiar interactions for employees, making adoption easier. And they provide a means to communicate quickly and often throughout the day.

A WORD ABOUT FRICTION: AVOID

Many organizations struggle with a diverse range of devices and applications that may not be interoperable. Layering on single-point collaboration solutions could create more problems than are solved.

The benefits of any solution you deploy will not outweigh the additional barriers to adoption caused by the friction of multiple systems. If possible, pursue unified communications from the outset, so collaboration tools are consistent and integrated across the enterprise.

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The big 3

Most enterprises will need three types of collaboration tools: project management, messaging/chat, and videoconferencing. The best platforms combine two or more of these. Microsoft Teams, for example, focuses on videoconferencing with full chat capability and several powerful features to promote collaboration. You'll want to match your platform's capabilities to the level of sophistication and kinds of processes your enterprise needs.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Task and workflow management applications are centralized, cloud-based project management systems for assigning and tracking tasks. They provide real-time access to your organization's workflow, allowing users to view, set, follow up on, and complete projects and tasks from any online device. This kind of broad project visibility is essential for collaboration. Digital organization makes it easy to see the overview and details, by day or over time.

INSTANT MESSAGING AND CHAT

For many people, messaging applications have become part of daily life and an integral part of business communication. Instant messaging and chat applications are valuable as an alternative to the slower pace of email or a way to have a quick conversation in real time with one or more colleagues or clients. It's important to establish a company platform for chat/messaging so data and privacy are protected, rather than leaving employees to revert to familiar consumer platforms.

VIDEOCONFERENCING

While social tools are great for quick interactions throughout the day, video meetings are the clear choice for more in-depth communication and deeper collaboration. More than three-quarters of employees surveyed, including distributed workforces, think videoconferencing is the best team communication tool for creative and collaborative tasks. Video meetings deliver many of the benefits of face-to-face interaction.[18] Employees say it strengthens internal collaboration as well as relationships with customers, suppliers, and partners.

Like many other enterprise functions, videoconferencing platforms have a way of proliferating, leaving a confusing assortment of licenses and procedures that are frustrating for both IT teams and users. In fact, 61% of executives report that their companies are operating three or more video communications platforms.[19] Consolidation makes things much simpler. In addition to improving adoption, 74% of executives believe consolidation leads to significant cost savings.[20]

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Top 10 things to look for[21]

Here are some popular capabilities to consider as you evaluate project management, messaging/chat, and videoconferencing platforms.

1. Workflow automation
Eliminates bottlenecks and gets the right information to the right people at the right time.

2. Real-time file sharing
Enables team members to share, access, edit, and retrieve files and avoid delays, errors, and version control issues.

3. Mobile-friendly interface
Enables users to access the platform from anywhere using a smartphone or tablet.

4. Real-time analytics
Collates and analyzes data from across the organization and delivers actionable insights using technologies like machine learning and predictive analytics.

5. Search
Allows users to use keywords, tags, and search filters to quickly locate content, files, and previous conversations.

6. Personal and group calendar
Uses shared calendars to coordinate team meetings and activities.

7. Integration
Syncs up with your current systems to ensure seamless information exchange and minimize manual data transfer.

8. Security
Safeguards sensitive data by enforcing the latest cybersecurity protocols, compliant with industry regulations.

9. Uptime and backup
Features built-in redundancy and a comprehensive backup and recovery plan to minimize downtime.

10. Access control
Allows only the right people to view, edit, or share specific files or data.

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What does workplace collaboration of tomorrow look like?

The future of collaboration is unfolding. By necessity, we are already seeing a decrease in in-person/in-office meetings and a sharp rise in videoconferences. But phone calls and emails are also being replaced with increased time on collaboration platforms and greater adoption of instant messaging and chat. Social media-like tools are in the workplace to stay.

Emerging technologies include virtual and augmented reality solutions that promise deeper engagement and greater productivity, and data collaboration solutions that help organizations blend multiple data sources — creating a richer experience and helping teams reach meaningful conclusions. And not so far in the future as you may think, we could see both coworker and customer collaboration with AI-driven bots.

There's an abundance of evidence that building a culture of collaboration adds quantitative and qualitative, tangible and intangible value to enterprises and employees. Building this culture takes planning, diligence, patience, and technology. But once established, a culture of collaboration returns corporate and people benefits for the long term.

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