

Virtual Working Group:  
Evolving Perspectives  
on Fostering  
Connection, Community  
and Culture in the  
Remote and Hybrid  
Workplace

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November 3, 2022**

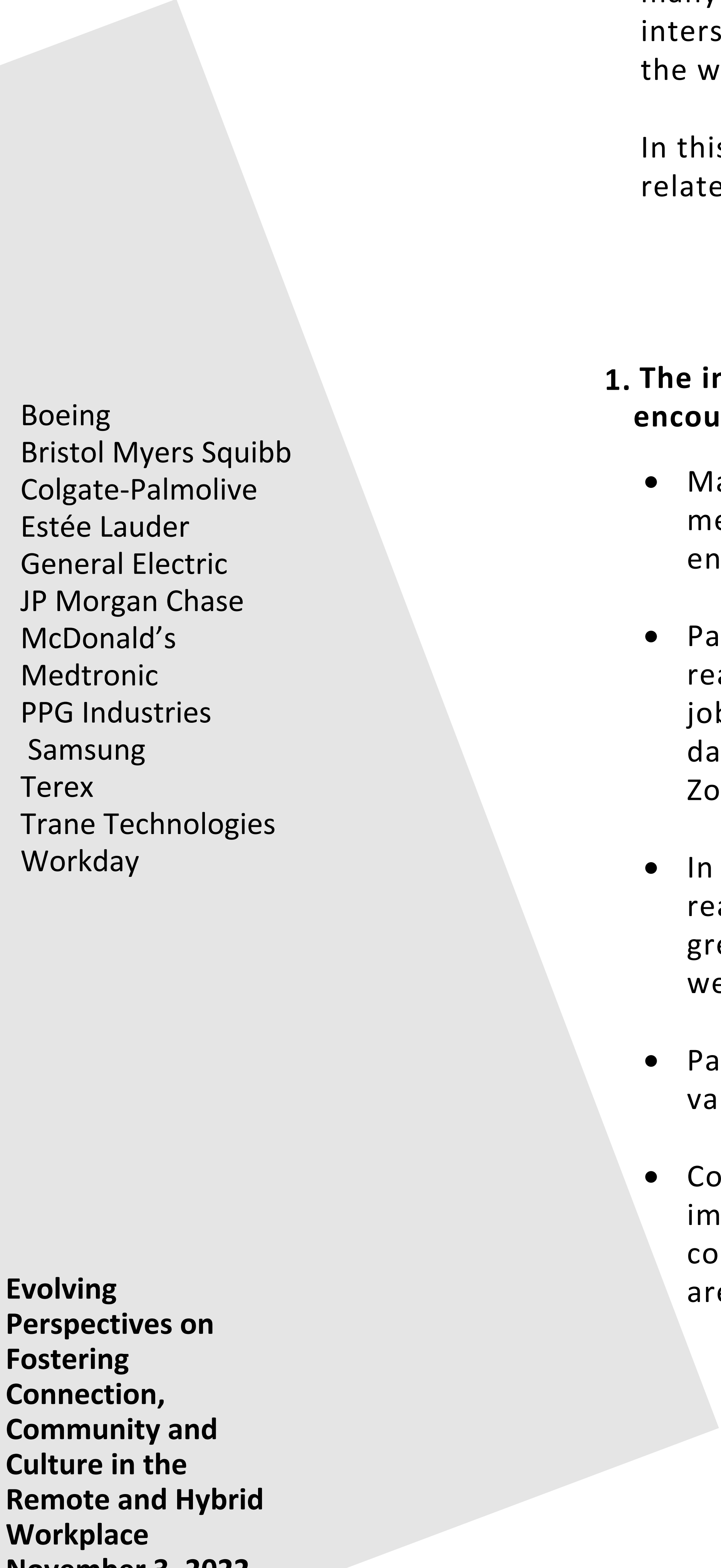
With an increased prevalence of hybrid and remote work arrangements continuing into the foreseeable future, organizational leaders are considering how to make these arrangements work more intentionally. Although a rapid shift to remote work at the onset of the pandemic forced managers to figure out how to virtually supervise, communicate with, and coordinate employees nearly overnight, leaders realize that – while initially adaptive – these emergency response strategies are not conducive to developing employee relationships, nurturing connection and community, and building and preserving organizational culture in remote and hybrid work contexts in the long term. Moreover, at this time, various factors have instigated change in the corporate cultures of many companies, inviting consideration of how such changes may intersect with new approaches for communication and coordination in the workplace.

In this working group, 13 CAHRS companies discussed several issues related to hybrid/remote work arrangements and return-to-work policies.

**DISCUSSION  
TAKEAWAYS**

**1. The importance of intentionality, purpose, and motivation in encouraging employees to return to the office**

- Many companies are struggling with conveying a clear, compelling message about intended work arrangements – particularly in encouraging employees back to the office for all or part of the time.
- Participants cited the importance of giving employees a convincing reason to return both in a general sense (e.g., Will it help me do my job better? Will it make me better off personally?) and on a day-to-day basis (i.e., wanting to avoid commuting to the office only to sit on Zoom meetings all day).
- In many companies, there is a perception among employees that the reason to come back is because the executive team thinks that a greater in-person presence will increase output, which has not been well received.
- Participants reported mixed successes with “fun” as a return-to-office value proposition (e.g., free lunches, snacks, potlucks).
- Companies have made some progress but there is still opportunity to improve in intentionally planning meetings, opportunities for collaboration, and one-on-one meetings based on when employees are in the office.



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## 2. The role of HR and people managers in managing changing work arrangements

- Companies have struggled with leaders responding differently to planned return-to-office initiatives, with some people managers struggling with tough conversations and wanting to avoid conflict in mandating a return.
- Participants recognized that there is not a one-size-fits-all answer for every leader or team, but noted that a continuing challenge for HR is negotiating how to provide and encourage the needed flexibility while offering the prescriptive guidance around return-to-office that many people managers are seeking.
- Participants highlighted the question of how to lead a hybrid workforce as a prevalent question among managers in this time.
- There is a clear need to help people leaders better understand how they can have the greatest impact in helping their employees and teams navigate what can seem like ambiguous company expectations, particularly given a number of “false starts” that have occurred when companies have asked employees to return, only to send them home again when COVID spikes occurred.

## 3. Lessons learned in the transition from remote to hybrid/in-person arrangements

- Participants noted that one way to help leaders manage the ambiguity around flexible return-to-office policies is offering a bit of structure (e.g., encouraging two days a week in person as an anchor).
- Participants noted a potential need for companies to adapt office spaces and/or upgrade work areas to align with the post-pandemic normal.
- Universally participants highlighted the importance of making it clear that enforcement and/or implementation of return-to-office and hybrid work arrangements needs to be owned by people managers rather than by HR, noting that people managers need to figure out how to translate the company’s policy into what works at the local level. Some people managers have resisted taking ownership of this implementation.
- Participants suggested that the role of HR in companies’ return-to-office planning should be clarifying policies, offering guidance, and supporting and facilitating focus groups (though some noted that even in these roles their teams had been over-burdened in the last several months).

## 4. Addressing challenges of hybrid/remote work arrangements for the employment relationship

- Inclusion has been a major challenge in the hybrid work context, which has been exacerbated by remote employees not turning their cameras on and in-person leaders tending to disproportionately direct their speaking toward people in the room.

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- Participants emphasized the importance of tactics to create psychological safety and invite participation, with one suggestion involving reaching out to individuals in advance of a meeting to prepare them for the discussion and ask them to share their perspective with the group.
- Participants noted effectiveness of leaders making efforts to determine how they can best connect with particular employees, whether one-on-one or in a group setting.

#### 5. Charting a new path forward

- For companies going through strategic or cultural change, participants emphasized the importance of providing clarity and consistency in messaging around the company's employee value proposition and what comes next, with sensitivity to change fatigue in light of the turmoil of the last few years.
- Participants shared the positive impact of ensuring transparency and open dialogue with employees around where the company is going and what this means for them.
- Even within companies not undergoing significant change, participants noted challenges in socializing new employees and highlighted the importance of intentionality in messaging, with an eye toward new employees' lack of familiarity with the company, people, processes, etc.

This Summary Report was prepared by David Chung and Rebecca Kehoe for participants of the "Evolving Perspectives on Fostering Connection, Community and Culture in the Remote and Hybrid Workplace" Virtual Working Group.

**The Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) is an international center serving corporate human resources leaders and their companies by providing critical tools for building and leading high performing HR organizations**

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