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Are hybrid workers more productive? One company did the math.

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The debate between remote, in-person and hybrid work continues to rage — with even best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell recently weighing in on the future of the office.

Spoiler alert, the author of "The Tipping Point" and "Blink" is a fan of the office — at least for certain kinds of work.

More than two years since the start of the pandemic, many companies are still tweaking and refining their work strategies to find the option that provides the ideal mix of culture, employee satisfaction, productivity and morale.



BETHANY BICKLEY / ACBJ; GETTY IMAGES

A global travel company ran a hybrid trial with hundreds of workers to gauge if they were more productive than onsite employees.

But some businesses are also taking the opportunity to experiment, including global travel company Trip.com. The Shanghai-based company has 35,000 employees and decided to attempt its own randomized trial.

It took 1,612 engineers, marketing and finance employees and gave half the option to work from home, and the other half had to come into the office.

“Their motivation was to improve employee job satisfaction to reduce attrition and ease hiring,” according to a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper published recently. “The obstacle to implementing hybrid (work from home) was managers’ concerns that employees would underperform on their days at home.”

With that in mind, the company decided to formally evaluate a hybrid system over six months before making a decision over a full firm roll-out.

What happened? Attrition rates among those with a hybrid schedule plummeted 35% compared to those who did not, while employee satisfaction scores improved. While employees who worked from home worked about 80 minutes less during the work week, the amount of work increased by about 30 minutes over the weekend.

And those with a hybrid schedule increased the number of group calls and individual messages, even when they were in the office. Employees had become accustomed to a more synchronous style of communication.

Overall, the researchers, which included Nicholas Bloom, the William Eberle Professor in the Department of Economics at Stanford University, Ruobing Han, of Stanford University and James Liang, from Trip.com and Peking University, found no difference in overall performance or promotions between groups.

Lines of code written by engineers working from home increased about 8% compared to those who were in the office full time.

“Taken together, this suggests perhaps a small, potentially positive impact of hybrid-WFH on productivity. This is important, as the

main criticism of hybrid-WFH has been its negative impact on productivity, which executives like Elon Musk at Tesla, Jamie Dimon at JP Morgan, and David Solomon at Goldman Sachs have noted when pushing for a full return to the office,” the researchers wrote.

The company, which hasn't responded to requests for comment about the change, eventually announced plans to roll out its hybrid policy to the entire company following the trial.

The Trip.com trial wasn't the only example of an organization finding success with a hybrid or remote model.

A survey by Eagle Hill Consulting found 46% government employees who teleworked part time or all the time said their team's performance has improved.

Just 35% of those who worked in person in the office said their team's performance has improved. Younger workers were more likely to report working fully remotely while older workers are far more likely to be in person.

“The pandemic was transformational for the government workforce, accelerating what employees have long desired: more flexibility,” said Melissa Jezior, president and CEO of Eagle Hill Consulting. “Our research is a clear signal that flexible work environments – both fully remote and hybrid approaches – can deliver performance results.”

Jezior said a public entity's willingness to offer remote flexibility could be important at a time when public employers are struggling to compete with the private sector.

The latest data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that while overall job openings fell to about 10.7 million, companies have largely not increased their layoffs of employees, despite big headlines from tech companies and signs that the heavily venture-driven industry is softening.

Economists say workforce dynamics — including continued broad-based hiring activity across a range of sectors — suggest employees will continue to hold leverage in the job market for months to come, even amid a recession.

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