Communicating Culture in a Distributed Environment

Spring 2022

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The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the nation’s first public university, serves North Carolina, the United States, and the world through teaching, research, and public service. We embrace an unwavering commitment to excellence as one of the world’s great research universities.

Our mission is to serve as a center for research, scholarship, and creativity and to teach a diverse community of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students to become the next generation of leaders. Through the efforts of our exceptional faculty and staff, and with generous support from North Carolina’s citizens, we invest our knowledge and resources to enhance access to learning and to foster the success and prosperity of each rising generation. We also extend knowledge-based services and other resources of the University to the citizens of North Carolina and their institutions to enhance the quality of life for all people in the State

(Mission & Values, 2022).

To meet this mission of service to the state of North Carolina, the ability to recruit, retain, and support staff and faculty across our institution is imperative. The culture that defines our institution is a critical component to meet this goal. Dr. Arvind Malhotra, an H. Allen Andrew Distinguished Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill writes, “[one] of the foremost organizational challenges of the future of work is how to maintain a culture when most, if not all, the employees are virtually distributed ... Organizational identification is a key challenge in virtual work ... making it imperative to establish a virtual but perceptible culture” (2021).

The strategies of recruitment and retention, and the ways in which we can develop culture have been shifting and will continue to shift in response to a more distributive, specifically a more remote workforce and our response to this shift will determine our success. "[Only] cultures that can help organizations anticipate and adapt to environmental change will be associated with superior performance over long periods of time (Sporn, 1996).

WHY DOES CULTURE MATTER?

We are defining the university’s culture as the system of shared values, beliefs, and assumptions that help coordinate this mission (McLaughlin & James, n.d.). The UNC culture impacts every aspect of work and life at Chapel Hill. It provides informal boundaries and guidelines and our culture sets assumptions about how faculty, staff, students, and community members can expect to operate.

Distributed work for our purposes refers to a workplace structure in which one or more employees work in different physical locations. This workplace model includes remote work, but also can include the distribution of employees on the same team in different office buildings and locations across campus. In short, distributed work refers to any scenario in which team members are not co-located.
To better understand how we can communicate culture at UNC-Chapel Hill, a first point to consider is the current perception of culture from campus staff and faculty. According to results from the system-wide engagement survey conducted by ModernThink in 2018 and 2020, less than 60% of UNC faculty in 2018 agreed, or strongly agreed, that the “institution’s culture is special - something you don’t find just anywhere” (Figure 1). This number was even less for employees classified as EHRA and dropped again for SHRA employees (under 55% for both classifications).

When the same question was posed in 2020, all classifications of employees saw a drop in their agreement or strong agreement with the statement, 53% of faculty agreed or strongly agreed, 51% of SHRA classified staff, and 52% of EHRA non-faculty. (UNC System employee engagement survey: March 28 – April 11, 2022). This should be a red flag for the University and leadership should be paying strong attention as we compete for talented faculty and staff on our campus in a new global marketplace.

In addition to concerns highlighted by the shifting trend around culture at UNC-Chapel Hill there is impetus for investing in a strong culture for employee benefit as well as University benefit.

Employees who work in this type of culture report significantly higher levels of happiness. Companies with lower levels of trust in their leaders or their coworkers report much higher levels of unhappiness, even outside of work. In one study of higher education, unhappy employees were 22% more likely to believe that their leaders lacked ethical standards, 32% more likely to believe that their leaders are unaware of organizational needs, and 25% less likely to believe that their gifts and abilities were put to use in their jobs (Ficarra et al., 2020). In contrast, happiness at work has wide-ranging positive effects. Happy employees have improved physical and psychological health, greater financial success, and stronger work and non-work relationships. Investments in organizational culture thus directly benefit our employees.
Through literature reviews, campus and system level interviews, and surveys, we identified recurring challenges, opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses (Figure 2) related to culture. These discoveries have informed recommendations at the conclusion of this paper.

Figure 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Culture is local</td>
<td>● Professional isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Micro-cultures across campus</td>
<td>● Lack of “social barometer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Increased equity in the flexibility granted to mid- and lower-level employees</td>
<td>● Less face-to-face interaction to build trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Productivity overall has remained high</td>
<td>● Potential Less ownership and organizational commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Increased job satisfaction</td>
<td>● Boundary blurring; particularly for women in workforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Increased stress/fatigue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPPORTUNITIES</th>
<th>THREATS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Freedom and autonomy foster greater independence and trust</td>
<td>● Transition to more remote work has impacted staff differently than faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Flexibility</td>
<td>● Stratification of employees allows for different opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Empowerment of managers to meet business needs and team personnel needs</td>
<td>● Inequity in opportunity for on-site vs. off-site employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Employees get voice in work environment that meets their personal needs</td>
<td>● The Great Resignation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Potential for better work/life balance</td>
<td>● Remote work can create cultures in which people feel disconnected and/or can create varied cultures between onsite, hybrid and remote workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Inequity for individuals of color and those in lower positions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further exploration below provides additional context and considerations for managers and leaders in a distributive workplace model.

**Increased Autonomy.** Remaining competitive in a landscape that will undoubtedly see the infusion of more hybrid work will be top of mind for many organizations. While the impact of technology and its implications on the future of work is not a new conversation, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated the pace of change towards that once far away conceptualized future (Malhotra, 2021).

The introduction of more hybrid work models necessitates the need for greater flexibility. In a survey conducted by the Harvard Business Review, when asked, 59% of over 5,000 workers surveyed indicated that flexibility was of more importance than any other benefit or even salary (Fetter & Reisinger, 2021). More interestingly, they found that although flexibility was indeed important to employers, it was by way of their ability to exercise said flexibility in a way most conducive to their individual needs. Be it locational autonomy (the time frame in which they perform their work) or geographical autonomy
(dismantling the concept of a centralized work location), employees desire the ability to have a say in what work looks like for them. In essence, what employees desire is flexibility by way of autonomy. Research has shown that when employees are given more flexibility in their work schedules, it increases their productivity, happiness, health, while reducing stress, all of which can lower the chance of resignation (Tessema et al., 2022).

Increased autonomy, however, is not only relevant because of the degree to which employees have been able to experience it as a byproduct of the pandemic. In fact, research suggests that there might be a psychological need as well. For much of history, as it relates to the study of human motivation, the principal narrative has been that human motivation is driven by rewards (Fetter & Reisinger, 2021). That was until two psychologists postulated an alternative theory in 1985, anchored in self-determination, as the driver of intrinsic human motivation and the catalyst for human success and fulfillment (2021).

The three primary components of self-determination – autonomy, competence, and relatedness, all intrinsically motivate one to perform better and experience a greater degree of satisfaction in their work because they attribute their success to their own abilities. This is not to say that the extrinsic motivation received by way of benefits and salary is inconsequential - it does still matter. It simply does not, however, penetrate to that core psychological motivation needed to propel one to perform well (2021). Autonomy is a necessity.

**Market Risks.** The onset of the pandemic unearthed a great awakening among employees on many fronts. According to the Journal of Human Resource and Sustainability Studies, the U.S. workforce saw its largest spike ever on record in the employee resignation rate, reaching 3% per month during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2022). This occurrence of mass resignations coined “The Great Resignation”. From lockdowns to the rise of hybrid or fully remote work, employees found themselves with time to reevaluate their lives and how their careers fit within them.

Having encountered a higher degree of flexibility, much of which was compelled, emerging from the pandemic and reentering the workforce has created new expectations for what work could and should look like. Organizations hoping to bring back employees and simply insert them into the work/life and model that once was pre-pandemic should keep in mind that these circumstances have meshed to create a prominent employee-driven labor market. Employees are encountering a market rife with job opportunities with better pay, greater benefits and increased flexibility (2022). Organizations are facing more pressure on hiring and retention. Organizations that require fully in-person employment in a traditional office are having to pay a premium.

**Personal Risks.** It is undeniable that there are many advantages of virtual and distributed work, but we must acknowledge the challenges - not only for organizations, but also at a personal level for employees.

With increased distribution and decreased face-to-face interactions, it is not surprising that some employees may feel “out of the loop”. When looking at the effect of professional isolation on teleworker job performance and turnover intentions, it was found that while teleworking may afford employees the opportunity to be more productive, that benefit may not manifest in those employees who feel professionally isolated (Golden et al., 2008). This trickles down to the confidence an employee brings to work and the inherent belief in their ability to perform their duties well. Thus, job performance ultimately suffers.
Increased autonomy poses the risk of becoming a double-edged sword. Traditional work in a centralized, brick and mortar location has the effect of creating distinct boundaries between one’s work life and home life, but what happens when your home becomes your office? Workers, with a distinct, increased frequency among women more than men, are subject to the concept of “boundary blurring” (Kim et al., 2020). From parenting to household chores, errands, and workplace demands, delineating what should be done and when becomes more challenging when those lives are not separated by distance. While job satisfaction may improve with increased autonomy, it can also create higher levels of daily fatigue and heightened work-to-family conflicts.

Impact to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts. Diverse and inclusive teams are resilient. They create more unique ideas, are better at making decisions, and diverse teams are better at making innovative ideas happen than homogenous ones. Organizations that seek and value diverse viewpoints also experience higher rates of innovation. Research by Great Place to Work has shown that “organizations that actively engage remote employees or employees with longer tenures (who are sometimes left out of “cutting edge” initiatives) tend to be much more innovative.” Proven DEI strategies help prevent siloed structures and promote productivity, collaboration, and stronger communication across teams within an organization. As Gary Garrison, et al, wrote: “Vying to remain competitive, organizations are infusing globally dispersed talent into teams with the understanding that diversity may enhance creativity and team performance. In fact, it is suggested that maximizing knowledge creation in ... organizations may depend on increasing the diversity of team members” (2010). Considering this understanding of the importance of diverse and inclusive teams, we must consider the impact of distributed workplaces on all employees.

The personal, professional, and university risks identified have a disproportionate impact on parents, women, and people of color. There was a considerable impact on women as the workplace transitioned away from traditional structure. While the workplace shifted, simultaneously childcare options became limited during the pandemic. Due to both, women were more likely to experience boundary blurring, an inability to continue working while also acting as primary caregivers. This collapse of the home-office divide, and increased remote work negatively impacted [women’s] ability to participate in the workforce. More than 2.3 million women have left positions since February 2020 because of a lack of childcare or other support structures during the pandemic (Connley, 2021).

With respect to individuals of color, according to Dr. Ella F. Washington, the “privilege of working from home is afforded to less than 1 in 5 Black Americans.” Dr. Washington notes, “[you’re] already starting from a deficit in terms of trying to build equity when talking about the Black population working remotely” (Leisyte, 2021). In addition, nationally - people of color and lower wage earners are less likely to be granted flexibility, including work from home (Gould & Shierholz, 2020). UNC should explore this trend to determine the race and gender impact on employment flexibility decisions. To be a leader in the 21st Century, and reflect our commitment to DEI, UNC must constantly seek to improve and strengthen DEI policies to ensure a level playing field for all levels of the university including students, faculty, and staff.

“At Carolina, diversity and inclusion are about building understanding across differences, creating conditions to ensure the equitable educational and social benefits of diversity and cultivating an inclusive and supportive environment for undergraduate, graduate and professional students, faculty and staff – where every person feels valued and has an opportunity to add value” (Diversity and inclusion, 2022).
“Our work suggests that culture can, in fact, be managed.”

The means by which culture may be managed, according to Dr. Freeman A. Hrabowski III and his co-authors, is through collaboration on the creation and implementation of a shared vision across all levels of institutional hierarchy (2019). The Future of Work is an excellent example of UNC’s administration putting forward a vision for the future of work at Carolina after empowering departments to experiment. Department were able to make determinations according to their own specific culture, while also ensuring they were meeting business needs. Then drawing on those experiences from campus departments in collaboration with the Remote Work Pilot Survey, were able to ultimately enshrine flexible work with the rollout of the Flexible Work Options Playbook. This Playbook provides a framework, or overarching culture, authorized by university leadership but allows space for each department, or micro-culture, to be empowered to operate to best meet their needs.

Dr. Barbara Sporn writes that a perfect culture informs who we are, to whom we talk, why we do the work, with whom we work, and our perspectives, and that an organization whose culture provides these things “can better adapt to environmental changes and realize innovations” (1996). Certainly, the pandemic presented an environmental change to which UNC needed to innovate to survive and thrive. However, it must be noted that a distributed workforce is not a new phenomenon at UNC. Not even counting the autonomy with which professors operate, or the divergence in business needs and areas of responsibility of various teams within a department and departments within a division, staff in all areas of campus work life have worked, at least occasionally, in a physically distributed environment. The pandemic merely expanded, magnified, and codified this phenomenon.

We must continue to explore how our culture adapts, responds, and evolves in the context of a new landscape. Returning to Hrabowski III et al.: The culture of an institution is evident in our values, traditions, tacit rules and permissions, and accepted approaches. It is evident in our daily activities and our habits of mind. It is evident in the questions we ask and those we choose to ignore, in the achievements we record and celebrate and those that go unnoticed, and in the initiatives, we choose to support and those we choose not to support (2019).

UNC has adjusted rules and permissions, and accepted approaches while seeking to preserve its values. Now it is down to other institutional leaders, i.e., managers, to engage in the right activities and habits of mind, ask the right questions, and support the right initiatives in order that their culture remain healthy and vibrant, while remaining in accord with the University’s culture. Dr. Malhotra provides some guidance on the right values and initiatives, that they make our work both mindful and meaningfully socially impactful, all while granting us autonomy (2021).
How Do We Get There?

Strategies to Develop Culture in a Distributed Environment

Improve and Optimize Communication. In this section, the emphasis is literally on communicating in “Communicating Culture in a Distributed Environment.” Underpinning every facet of cultural transmission is intentional and effective communication. This is especially true in a distributed environment. “In virtual teams, trust is often based on actions, rather than goodwill ... Because goodwill is hard to observe virtually, expectations about actions and the actions themselves need to be made as explicit as possible for all others to see” (Malhotra et al., 2007). Simply, in the relative absence of richer interpersonal relationships fostered by co-location, actions speak louder than words, but moreover, words are actions unto themselves.

The literature is unanimous in its ground rules for communicating in a distributed environment: maintain frequent, transparent, dialogic, navigable, and consistent communication (Sull et al., 2020). The need to communicate more frequently, remotely, cannot be overemphasized. “The communication process is a crucial part of the success of any virtual team ... frequent communication enhances shared team identity and therefore moderates the effect of distribution on interpersonal conflict ... [and research] ... revealed that frequent communication increases the trust in the teams” (Weimann et al., 2010). In the absence of casual encounters in the halls or breakroom, or office drop-ins, deliberate communication is required to maintain team unity.

Another way to put this is that, finding ways to support staff causes them to feel more a part of the organization (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). There are innumerable ways in which professional and social support for employees may be communicated, thus communicating the importance of the mission, the value of the team, and the value of the individual. Coronavirus + Business says the “easiest way to establish some basic social interaction is to leave some time at the beginning of team calls just for non-work items” (2020); Malhotra et al., describe “virtual-get-togethers” (2007), as did some of our interviewees; and, Garrison et al., tout “cultural awareness training” (2010) as some of the ways in which managers may reinforce team commitment and support for the individual.

Macro examples of the University communicating culture include the Future of Work, but also others embodying the three pillars of the University - research, teaching, and public service - such as public scholarship made more accessible to staff by the pandemic-driven expansion of the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), e.g., Zoom. Consider the more readily available UNC Program for Public Discourse; Wilson Library Research Forum; UdocuCarolina events; or the University Libraries Off the Shelf author series. The Reckoning Initiative at the University Libraries is an excellent example of a cultural guidepost that provides everyone in the Libraries with a framework in which to share their varied experiences and to provide a common thread to bind their varied workflows.

Teams that attend to their communication methods will also realize benefits. In the absence of co-located face-to-face interactions with all the myriad benefits associated with that ancient method of team building, a distributed workforce can still get information circulated as or more quickly, collaborate with all the powers of technology supporting their efforts, and in so doing more readily cast aside some of the negative drawbacks of hierarchical team dynamics. (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2014). Research also
indicates that as teams become more efficacious with the communication technologies, higher levels of trust tend to develop among members ... While there may be fewer social cues per message in computer mediated exchanges, in time, distributed team members tend to communicate as effectively as [face-to-face] members ...” (Garrison et al., 2010). With this observation we have come nearly full circle: communicate often, communicate clearly, communicate about every aspect of work-life balance, and communicate using the correct media for that which you are communicating.

One way for managers to ensure strong communication across virtual teams is understanding and acknowledgment of which ICT works best for content delivery. Figure 3 describes the strengths and weaknesses of various media according to “Media Richness Theory” (Weimann et al., 2010). Figure 4 offers “Task-media advice rules” (Weimann et al., 2010). What both figures hope to offer is guidance on how best to maximize available tools. “Team members often complain about a misuse of the different tools, limited or complete lack of communication rules for the different tools as well as in the face-to-face meetings” (2010), but there is opportunity to ameliorate those frustrations.

**Figure 3 - Media Richness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Timely feedback</th>
<th>Body language</th>
<th>Facial expression</th>
<th>Tone of voice</th>
<th>Convey emotion</th>
<th>Convey message</th>
<th>Equivocality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Equivocal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video conferencing</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Equivocal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Equivocal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Equivocal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Unequivocal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text messaging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Unequivocal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written documents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Unequivocal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4 - Optimize Communication (via adherence to “Task-media advice rules”)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Tasks</th>
<th>Recommended Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distribute pure information</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain Decisions</td>
<td>Depending on complexity: email, phone, videoconferencing, face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share Documents</td>
<td>Email; Shared Drives (Teams/OneDrive/Sharepoint)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solve Conflicts (Depending on Gravity)</td>
<td>Phone, Videoconferencing, face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergencies</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange of views (depending on the complexity of the problem)</td>
<td>Email, phone video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage Relationships</td>
<td>Email, phone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Identify how DEI lens is being applied at all levels for success.** The *UNC Libraries Reckoning Initiative* is one of several DEI initiatives UNC uses to advance racial equity, inclusion, and antiracism across the University.

In an article posted on the University Library website in March 2021, Monica Figueroa, Interim Librarian for Inclusive Excellence for University Libraries talked about launching the Library’s “Reckoning Initiative” and how it will provide her organization with the DEI lens needed for thinking in new ways about all the work that they do. “How can we be a more just and more inclusive organization across the board?” She says that the Reckoning Initiative is “the common thread that unites projects such as reconsidering the language we use to describe library materials or identifying and removing the barriers that have discouraged BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and People of Color] individuals from pursuing or remaining in the library profession.”

“It would be easy just to issue a statement or point to our values” at challenging times, said Figueroa. “But to put real action and leadership commitment behind our words and values, as the Reckoning Initiative does, is something that I think sets us apart. It gives us so much to look forward to.”

The five broad areas that make up the Reckoning Initiative Framework include

1. Education and training opportunities for Library staff
2. Programmatic work
3. System analysis and change
4. Integration of inclusion and antiracism into Library work and
5. Tracking and assessment

A special website was developed to help highlight all of the DEI work underway across the Library organization which could serve as a learning opportunity for other departments and groups across campus.

**Prioritize Autonomy.** As mentioned earlier, employees in this post-pandemic workforce are seeking flexibility by way of autonomy - and are willing to leave their current organization to find it. Given this reality, autonomy can no longer be looked at through the lens of “benefit” but rather “necessity” (Fetter & Reisinger, 2021). The university and its’ departments can enable autonomy in hybrid work by:

6. **Shift from policies to principles** - While work guidelines are needed to ensure equity in hybrid environments, instead of adopting policy mandates that spell out the when and where of hybrid work (inherently restrictive to autonomy), focus on principles and best practices to create a common understanding while still creating space for employees to seek out new ways of working to achieve balance in their lives.
7. **Invest in competence and relatedness** - Mastery of skills and a sense of belonging are equally important to the intrinsically human motivated need for self-determination. By investing in an employee skill development and easing the fear of suffering professionally due to social isolation, organizational investment here, by design, *empowers* autonomy.
8. **Support employees with the proper tools to facilitate increased autonomy** - With physical workspaces now being viewed as more of a “nice to have” social hub rather than a necessary mechanism to accomplish work, university leaders can ensure that their employees and
empowered with the appropriate tools and technology that facilitate their ability to exercise their autonomy and be effective from anywhere.

**Empower Managers.** The decentralized nature of the university means that a decentralized approach to culture is the most likely to succeed. By empowering managers, the university can empower those with the most influence over their own “micro-culture” with the necessary resources to succeed. The UNC System Office has embraced this norm in its’ strategy and has focused on giving departments significant autonomy to determine how to navigate the world of remote work. Each department is encouraged to create the work environment that best fits their team.

However, there is a risk with relying too heavily on individual managers without considering the overall impact to the institution. When employees see their peers treated differently, it creates a perception of unfairness. While we fully support the university relying heavily on managers to craft culture, we also encourage the university to develop tools to track the impact of these decisions on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and to act quickly to create the right nudges toward fairness.

**Intentional Onboarding Processes to Connect and Develop Connection Early.** Effective onboarding is essential in the era of the Great Resignation when the University faces an increased need for viable candidates coupled with increased competition for viable candidates. Onboarding is, of course, an area in which every aspect of communicating culture in a distributed environment comes into play. In the scenario of onboarding a new employee, the danger of a distributed environment is that the new employee never feels connected to the team and therefore never develops the trust in the team to share their fresh ideas, nor earns the trust of the team to have their ideas considered. However, if a team is set up correctly to communicate their culture, the benefits of a new employee may be fully realized.

The North Carolina State University Libraries published a *Better Practices for Remote & Hybrid Working Environment* document that offers several excellent recommendations for onboarding. “Departments may wish to create a “newbie questions document.” A newbie document enables folks (new or not) to ask questions about process, approach, or perspective for work without having to ask the question in front of everyone” (2022). With this type of document, the new employee is informed by the work of existing staff who also benefit from thinking about, and recording, their workflows.

Another recommendation in keeping with intentional communication is to define levels of requested response time at the departmental or even institutional level and to provide guidelines on the use of communication channels. “Additionally, staff may benefit from the centralized development of a general communications guideline document detailing information such as when to use a particular communication channel over another, or who to contact for general help with a communication channel” (2022). Documentation is central to the process: “A fully onsite employee will gain a lot of information just by being in the space and near other colleagues. For remote or hybrid employees, who won’t gain as much information through day-to-day proximity, documentation is even more important” (2022).

Finally, attend to the human element: “Many organizations implement a buddy system, in which a new hire is paired with someone else in the organization who can act as a resource for learning about
culture, processes, policies, and what it is like to work there” (2022). The need for mentors was echoed in our interviews with campus human resources representatives as a key to retention. A well-chosen mentor can fulfill within themselves every facet of effective culture communication by being present professionally and socially, answering questions about process and interpersonal relationships, and highlighting team strengths (and weaknesses) in service to the university mission.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. **Find ways to grant flexibility and autonomy.** There is recognition that to meet business needs, not every position can function in the same way, and some positions may require fully in-person work structure. This does not mean there is not opportunity to grant employees flexibility and autonomy in other ways and allow employees voice in considering flexible arrangements. One example is rethinking the workday model and considering options such as a four-day, ten-hour, work schedule. As the focus shifts to goal oriented from process oriented, managers and employees can consider how to meet goals and business needs not restricted to the traditional five-day, eight-hour workweek.

2. **Communicate intentionally.** Communication in a distributed environment should be frequent, transparent, part of a two-way dialogue, easy to navigate, and consistent. In the absence of face-to-face interactions replete with their myriad social cues, communication using media must be highly intentional. Attention paid to this seemingly simple directive will pay dividends in maintaining and building culture.

   ➢ **Meet intentionally.** Provide meeting agendas and make full use of technology to create iterative agendas that continue conversations after the audio/video call has ended. Assume virtual meetings are the norm. Encourage video but accept audio (lead by example). Spare time at the outset to check-in on how staff are doing.

   ➢ **Document intentionally.** Document all workflows. Document your team areas of expertise and where your work intersects with other teams. Document manifestations of workplace culture in the form of communication norms, and preferred media and their uses. Use media to let documents or list-making applications speak for you asynchronously by charting your progress.

   ➢ **Attend to the human in human resources.** The absence of or infrequent face-to-face interaction need not and must not spell the end of team camaraderie. Build check-ins regarding work and life into your communication schedule. Seek virtual professional development opportunities for your staff. Learn about one another, the campus, and the world through DEI training.

   ➢ **Onboard to retain.** See above. See below. Institute a mentoring program, complete with any available training. See your workplace culture clearly through the lens of someone outside being brought inside.

   ➢ **Foster communities of practice.** Find commonality in work-life experiences in the workplace through participation in communities of practice. Leverage the group to discover solutions to similar problems and/or through fostering new relationships. Engender trust in the institution through removal of silos, taking full advantage of the flattening qualities of information and communication technologies.

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2. **Employ strategies that Support Diversity Equity and Inclusion on your Team**
Co-create workplace guidelines. Be transparent about expectations and policies; create workplace guidelines that work for everyone; demonstrate how employee feedback will shape policies that affect everyone.

Improve transparency. Transparency during decision-making reinforces culture and builds trust; break down silos and increase information sharing between leadership and employees; clearly document roles and responsibilities to reduce confusion and clarify path to career development

Create opportunities for purposeful interactions. Intentionally create opportunities for interaction that supports networking, innovation, and career advancement; create ways to foster moments of connection amongst staff especially

Democratize your workflows. Avoid designing meetings, roles and promotional opportunities around in-person or face to face experiences; ensure all employees have equal access to career advancement; pay attention to meeting dynamics; ask for feedback from those who are typically quiet; find ways to engage and encourage everyone

Track meaningful data and focus on outcomes. Seek out meaningful, outcome driven ways to stay on track; use metrics that measure employee sentiment, productivity, motivation, connection, and belonging

See Appendix B: Strategies for Cultivating Culture that supports Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

4. Focus on outcomes, not processes. As identified in consideration of flexibility and autonomy, the new workplace model is shifting. Organizations and managers will need to reposition the focus of traditional processes which has been process-oriented, to a new mindset focused on outcomes. Shifting to outcomes focus as opposed to process, employees, managers, and organizations can find better opportunity for flexible work arrangements. The structure of all individuals in the same space and the same time is not the future, and responsiveness to culture shift will help managers keep teams moving forward. Managers should recognize the benefit of allowing employees to meet goals in ways that best meet their needs while still meeting organizational goals and objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SENIOR LEADERSHIP

1. Create a culture that supports in-person, hybrid, and remote work in your division. The future of work at UNC is inevitably a distributed one, with in-person, hybrid, and remote teams. While some divisions may have business needs that have an in-person or remote focus, finding ways to ensure that all types of work are given sufficient priority is essential.

2. Review department practices to ensure that they match your policies with special attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The university’s strategic goals and policies place a clear priority on diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, the increased distribution of work over the past two years has made it more difficult to ensure that the university is moving toward these goals. Senior leaders should ensure that their divisional practices continue to be aligned with the university’s policies and goals as employees shift into a remote environment.

3. Create means of communication that fit your division’s work needs and support both in-person and remote work. Employees should have intentional opportunities to work together in a variety of formats. In-person time should be prioritized as a key opportunity for collaboration. Meetings that focus on
strategy or long-term priorities should frequently take place in-person. For virtual environments, this can include video conferencing, synchronous or asynchronous chat, or telephone calls. Email alone is not a sufficient means of fostering the communication necessary for collaboration.

4. Consider whether your senior team should be hybrid (rather than fully in-person or remote). If your divisional goals include maximizing productivity and collaboration both in-person and remotely, then it is vitally important that managers and senior leaders demonstrate these goals through their own work. Senior leaders that use the same tools, modes of communication, and work styles as their division are the most likely to foster productivity and collaboration on their team.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNC CHAPEL HILL AND UNC HR

1. Create tools to empower managers. The university is already well on its way on this recommendation. The Future of Work Project and the Flexible Work Options Playbook are designed specifically to provide guidance and support to managers. These tools should continue to be developed and distributed to managers as the nature of work at UNC continues to evolve. Recent research indicates that only a small number of organizations have created specialized training programs to prepare virtual team leaders and virtual team members. Among those organizations that have training programs in place, an even smaller number rate them as effective. And some organizations report that while virtual team training is available, it is often ignored (Malhotra et al., 2007). It is recommended that UNC consider developing manager training tools and ongoing training opportunities to support virtual management skill development.

2. Ensure that units are creating hybrid, not in-person or virtual only work environments. Departments should have clear policies and practices in place to support multiple modes of work if they fit their business needs. In-person employees should be set up to work remotely if appropriate. Virtual employees should be granted opportunities for in-person interaction on a regular basis. Crossover points should be intentionally created in physical and virtual spaces to foster collaboration and prevent silos.

3. Identify ways to track the impact of hybrid, remote, and in-person work on the university’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion goals. The university needs to embark on a coordinated effort to understand the impact of these changes on the university’s diversity in a variety of ways. We need to develop the capability to understand the indirect impacts of remote, hybrid, and in-person work decisions on the university’s diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. The 2022 Employee Engagement survey includes questions on the impact of remote work, but the university will need more data to ensure that we stay on track. We recommend that the university find ways to collect data on hiring, promotion, and turnover through the lens hybrid work, including each of the following:

- **Promotion decisions based on remote, hybrid, and in-person work** (including both the employee’s position prior to the promotion and the proposed changes to the employee’s work plan based on the promotion).
- **Remote, Hybrid, and In-person work data based on employee salary and employee level** (employee, manager, and senior leader)
- **Turnover data based on positional flexibility**, including looking at whether concerns with positional flexibility is linked with race, gender, or family obligations.
SOURCES


North Carolina State University Libraries. (2022, March). *Better practices for remote & hybrid working environment: Final reports.* Retrieved May 25, 2022, from https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GN1Zxls49UOCgrqVqb4AkRQKjYvx14POoru_gB_mBw4/edit


APPENDIX A

Key Resources at UNC

- **UNC Teleworking Guidance** - https://fo.unc.edu/sce/hr/teleworking-guidance/
- **The Reckoning Initiative** - https://library.unc.edu/reckoning/
APPENDIX B

Strategies for Cultivating Culture that supports Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Co-create workplace guidelines

- Be transparent about expectations and policies.
- Foster engagement by co-creating workplace guidelines that work for everyone.
- Demonstrate how employee feedback will shape policies that affect everyone.

Improve transparency

- Transparency around decision making reinforces culture and builds trust.
- Make the results of polls, informal interviews, or employee sentiment scores public to demonstrate your ongoing commitment to tracking and documenting an equitable work culture in real time.
- Increasing information-sharing between leadership and employees or across departments breaks down silos.
- Clearly documenting roles and responsibilities reduces confusion, creates smoother workflows, and clarifies pathways to career advancement.

Create opportunities for purposeful interactions

- If a shared workspace does not exist, then create an intentional plan for interaction that supports networking, innovation, and career advancement.
- Find ways to make space in a busy workday to foster moments of connection, including demoing projects and creating space for non-work topics.
- Employees who feel more connected to the purpose of your organization and its values will not only be more motivated, but also more satisfied at work.

Democratize your workflows

- Avoid designing meetings, job roles, and promotion opportunities around face-to-face experiences.
- Ensure that team members have equal access to career advancing projects.
- Paying special attention to meeting dynamics, and ask for feedback from team members who've been quiet. Avoid prioritizing the loudest voices, and ensure that you are engaging your entire team.

Track meaningful data, and focus on outcomes

- A distributed environment makes it harder to easily gauge how your department is doing, so find meaningful, outcome driven ways to stay on track.
- Useful metrics include employee sentiment scores, productivity, motivation, connection and belonging, and demographics.
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEWS

As part of our research, we interviewed human resource leaders and practitioners throughout the university. Their insights into culture, remote work, and the applications at UNC have been invaluable to our analysis. We thank them for their contributions to this report.

- Danielle Bass, Assistant Director, Human Resources, Kenan-Flagler Business School, Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise
- Matthew Brody, Senior Vice President for Human Resources, UNC System
- Linc Butler, Associate Vice Chancellor for Human Resources, UNC
- Monica Figueroa, Interim Director, Library Human Resources, Librarian for Inclusive Excellence
- Tanvi Goel, Human Resources Consultant, UNC School of Medicine
- Becci Menghini, Vice Chancellor for Human Resources, UNC
- Anne Schwarz, Director of Human Resources, PBS NC