

# Is Your Return-To-Office Policy Flexible Enough? It's Not Just About Location

Human Resources Today | Jen Colletta | April 3, 2023

Three years into the pandemic, the concept of workplace flexibility is nothing new for HR. After all, the number of hybrid jobs available in North America increased 350% between 2020-22.

But as companies move to formalize their long-term hybrid policies—and some increase the number of in-office days—HR needs to expand how it thinks about flexibility: Location is just one piece of the puzzle, according to Christina Janzer, senior vice president of research at Slack.

At Wednesday's Wharton People Analytics Conference in Philadelphia, Janzer urged attendees to take a broader view of flexibility—and reap the rewards when it comes to productivity, inclusion and building cultures centered on connection.

## Why flexibility works

In outlining the tech company's approach to flexibility, Janzer pointed to Slack's global quarterly survey of more than 10,000 desk workers that it has conducted for more than two years. That data demonstrates realities HR leaders are familiar with in a post-pandemic world: Eighty-one percent of respondents want flexibility in where they work. And those that have it are 8% more productive than workers required to be in an office full-time.

But even more than where they work, employees desire choice in when they work: Ninety-three percent of those surveyed by Slack are looking for flexibility in their schedule. Those with full schedule flexibility report 40% more productivity than in-person employees, along with a 53% greater ability to focus.

"Flexibility means breaking away from the rigid, 9-5, meetings-packed schedule," Janzer said. "It means more autonomy for people to work when it's best for them, giving them time to do that amazing, deep-focused work. And it also means giving them the ability to go to a doctor's appointment or take their kids to school."

Janzer used herself as an example: Prior to the pandemic, she usually started her commute before her three kids were awake for the day and returned home just a few minutes before they went to bed.

"That was my normal. Except it wasn't normal, and I didn't realize that until I was able to experience a different way of working," Janzer said. By having flexibility in both when and from where she works, Janzer estimated she gained 15 hours a week with her kids, which she called "life-changing."

That shift can make the difference for working parents, particularly women, who have left the workforce in droves in the last three years.

“Staying in the workforce no longer feels like an impossible feat,” she said, noting that Slack’s quarterly data has consistently highlighted higher belonging scores among employees of color, women and working moms who have choice in how they work. “Flexibility is not the cure for all workplace discrimination—but it helps improve inclusion.”

Along those lines, flexible hybrid arrangements, Slack found, also bolster employee connection: Remote and hybrid workers were 15% more likely than in-office workers to say they feel very connected with their direct manager, executive leadership and the values of the organization. And this population is nearly 60% more likely than their in-office counterparts to say company culture has improved in the last few years—ranking flexibility as the top contributor to that improvement.

“It’s not about after-work drinks, it’s not about free food—flexible work policies improve company culture,” Janzer said.

### **Doing hybrid ‘better’**

Capturing these benefits in a post-pandemic world, Janzer said, involves a mindset shift in how business leaders consider the relationship between humans and digital tools. Pre-COVID, the physical office setting was the center of the workplace and digital tools were considered secondary; now, digital tools are the primary driver of work, supported by the effective use of in-person work.

“The pandemic gave us the opportunity to do hybrid better,” Janzer said.

Slack is approaching that opportunity, she said, by reconsidering the human-digital relationship with a focus on the three Rs: reviving what it loved about its pre-pandemic culture, and rethinking and redesigning what could be done better.

That has involved the rollout of two initiatives to promote more “focus time”: Weekly Focus Fridays, where no internal meetings are held, and Maker Weeks—held twice a quarter—that cancel all recurring meetings for the entire week and encourage asynchronous collaboration through Slack.

While those strategies have been well-received, Janzer said, HR found that employees still were dissatisfied with day-to-day meetings in general: Surveys found that both managers and employees thought half of all meetings could be canceled with no real impact.

So, the organization rolled out a “4D Model” for live meetings: They should be used only to discuss, debate, decide or develop people; meeting organizers are encouraged to consider asynchronous communication for other purposes. At Slack, for instance, some teams rely on recorded video clips that employees can watch when convenient for them, or the Huddles audio option to resolve specific issues.

Optimizing flexible work also needs to involve redesigning teamwork, Janzer said. That may mean formalizing some “rules of the road” for teamwork, such as when employees are expected to be online and collaborating and how hybrid meetings should be run.

Any redesign, Janzer cautioned, needs to include a willingness to experiment—with leaders encouraging and acting on employee feedback and continuously iterating. For instance, the first

trial of Maker Week within the engineering sector yielded near-universal approval, but when it rolled out to sales, only 42% of those employees found it effective. After continuous improvements to the model, that number jumped to 77%.

“You’re not going to get it right the first time,” she said, but it’s vital that HR embrace this “big leadership opportunity” to re-envision what hybrid, flexible work will look like in the long-term. “There’s no going back to normal—especially when that ‘normal’ was not particularly inclusive, and not the path forward.”