



CREATIVE
CULTURE

THE FUTURE OF WORK: IS THERE A CULTURE CRISIS?

April 2021



INTRODUCTION

One year on, and many, if not most people are still dealing with the impact that COVID-19 has had on their personal and professional lives, from social distancing measures and legal restrictions limiting contact with family and friends, to working remotely, adapting to new technologies and remembering to unmute our microphones in Zoom calls.

This has meant that global companies have had to react and make swift changes in weeks if not days, which under 'normal' circumstances could have taken months, if not years. At the same time, there are concerns emerging of a dual threat caused by the new norm of working from home - corporate culture is getting diluted, and employee engagement is dwindling. Think of it in terms of expatriates, and the ties that they have with their home country. In the same way they will start to pick up new customs and be less influenced by their home culture the longer they live elsewhere, so companies have been struggling to maintain their relationship with employees the longer that they work from home.

Yet, to truly understand the wider impact of remote working on corporate culture, we must first have a better understanding of what corporate culture looks like for different companies around the globe. As we will explore, the link between national culture and a company's corporate culture is undeniable, as one directly influences the other, and this is where things can get complicated for Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) or companies looking to expand or employ globally. Despite usually having a recognised, core working culture, with internationalisation comes the need to adapt to local customs and traditions, beliefs and societal norms.

Understanding and aligning with the culture of one's workforce was an intricate matter even before the pandemic. With the move to remote working this has become even more difficult to delve into and regulate, and not everyone gets the balance right. The 'new normal' of distanced communication, the need to constantly adapt to sudden changes, the impact that remote working has had on employee engagement, and the changing relationship between employer and employee, raise concerns as to what this means for the future of not only day-to-day work, but of corporate culture on a wider scale.

Furthermore, in a world where millennials seem to value company culture above everything else, and are looking for '*invigorating and inspiring*' employers to work for, it is going to be crucial for corporate values to be deeply ingrained in order to maintain impact and influence at a distance in the months and years to come. This white paper aims to explore the relationship between national culture and corporate culture, as well as the implications of this for multinational companies, especially in the context of a post-pandemic landscape where remote working and new business models will be more prevalent than ever. How can these companies ensure their corporate culture remains relevant and engaging across cultures in order to maintain a sense of belonging for their employees?

Special thanks to Xiaoying Deng, Divya Khanna, Vijay Parthasarathy, Maria Pastorelli, Marc Wilkinson, Savanna Wilson and Jin Sun Yang for their cultural insights.

TESTIMONIAL

Anique Coffee, **Partner at WithinPeople**, supports leaders worldwide to bring brands to life through people, purpose, and product.

At Within People, we are reimagining success in 21st century organisations, illuminating the path to connected, inclusive and creative cultures. Our approach creates a new blueprint for business, where purpose-led and values-driven companies thrive through the challenges of uncertainty, and where people find meaning in work to love who they are and what they do. Our clients all over the world - from start-ups to established corporates - share one priority right now: come through today's challenges stronger than before.

One of the cultural tools being used now by our clients are their values, which are created not by looking at the different cultures of individual countries, but by aligning (and uniting) around the source of our success. Values are the common way we behave together - no matter what country you're in - that aligns us. Each person creates their own meaning and belief into the values, and when it's done right, can be used to drive growth.

In 2018, we supported our client Yoco, an African technology company, to define their cultural foundations — vision, purpose and values. Since then, Yoco tripled its customer base from when it started work on its core values in 2018 until the end of 2020, notwithstanding Covid impact. Katlego Maphai, Yoco's CEO, shared that: "Purpose allows us to move forward with strength and passion. Where every step we take links back to the fundamental of why we exist — to enable people to thrive. The Yoco core is taking us into the future. We rely on it for inspiration and the way to drive growth."



At the heart of the future of work is greater humanity. We've all experienced the ups and downs of grief and loss, and our mental health has been challenged in new ways. Leaders have been forced to lead in more human ways to support - and keep - their valuable people. 83% of executives see empathy playing a far greater role in sustaining a thriving workforce, and two in three employees would prefer to work for an organisation that shows empathy towards all its stakeholders.

Now, more than ever before, humans need us to lead them in a human way, leveraging all of the qualities we already have. We're seeing Empathy, Love, and Vulnerability sitting right next to Conviction, Courage and Patience as drivers of performance. When we create systems that enable and unlock the bringing of our whole selves, we all win. It enables us to truly celebrate, experience and amplify the value in our differences; and that creates workplaces alive with possibility. When leaders show up in all their humanity, it's an open door for their people to do the same and unlock their own power. And when you unlock the power of your people, you unlock the growth of your company.

HOW NATIONAL CULTURE SHAPES CORPORATE CULTURE

How does one define the concept of culture?

Fons Trompenaars, globally renowned cross-cultural consultant and author of *Riding the Waves of Culture*, describes it as ‘*values, behaviours, and norms that you accumulate in a group in order to survive*’.

Trompenaars very clearly demonstrates how national cultures have a strong impact on corporate culture and employee understanding of their work environment, teams and management.

By extension, the values, behaviours and norms that constitute a national culture strongly influence managerial decision-making, leadership styles and human resource management practices. Therefore, ensuring that common cultural values are shared between staff members is important, in order to build interpersonal trust and teamwork within an organisation.

But how can we identify the different characteristics of each national culture? Over the past decades, Trompenaars developed his own model, the Seven Dimensions of Culture, to help managers and negotiators work more effectively with people of different nationalities. Ranging from Universalism versus Particularism to Individualism versus Communitarianism, these dimensions illustrate how culture leads to shared unspoken behaviours, mindsets and social patterns, which all vary across countries.

These dimensions apply not only to how an individual approaches their work, but to the wider corporate culture of a company. Naturally, individualistic nations breed work cultures centred around individualistic values and vice versa for those founded on communitarianism.



HOW NATIONAL CULTURE SHAPES CORPORATE CULTURE

The following examples illustrate how these global brands, despite having an international presence, have kept a strong link to their country's national culture.

L'Oréal in France is well recognised for having a corporate culture of confrontation and open disagreement, which is a key aspect of French culture, alongside being direct and honest. As one manager put it, *"At L'Oréal we believe the more we debate openly and the more strongly we disagree in meetings, the closer we get to excellence, the more we generate creativity, and the more we reduce risk."*

Another example is **Tata Consultancy Services** in India, which stands for Indian values in the way that they conduct business and look after the interests of their employees. As is common in Indian corporate culture, the company is very structured because of the cultural bias towards hierarchy in Indian society. This is not only driven by the caste system, but also by community and family structures, as well as colonial heritage. A high level of work ethic is countered by a significant workload.

Finally, **Huawei** in China illustrates the high-tech image and hard-working spirit of Chinese people well. It is known for its "wolf culture", meaning long hours, extreme loyalty, and intense internal competition to get results. It is also described as not being a global company, but a Chinese one that does business globally. Huawei relies heavily on teams of Chinese expats sent overseas, rewarding employees with good salaries and quick promotions if they achieve results that are prioritised above all else, and creating intensity that produces the high-speed, low-cost deliverables that the company is famous for.

When considering these examples through the cultural lens explained by Trompenaars, we can see in practice how the culture of a country plays into the corporate behaviour of a workplace. Whilst distance is maintained between personal and professional relationships in France, it's crucial to build a deeper trust and relationship with potential partners in India before doing business, and ventures into China need to be prepared for internal dynamics that can feel impenetrable and intense.





WHEN CORPORATE CULTURE CLASHES WITH LOCAL CULTURE

As companies internationalise and their teams are spread across wider geographical areas, it is important to consider how universal its corporate culture is and if this will translate across borders into a model that all employees will naturally align with. Even when language is not considered a barrier, miscommunication can be commonplace for companies that simply enforce their traditional way of working without considering cultural differences. This lack of shared values, understanding and behaviours makes it harder to operate across markets. In short, this is where we start to see cultural disengagement, or culture clashes.

In the example of Mergers & Acquisitions, pressures for global integration and local responsiveness can lead to varying degrees of integration between a parent company and its subsidiaries. It takes time to integrate firms, and adapting company culture to a new environment can result in trade-offs and losses, leading to employees feeling disenfranchised by the whole process and misunderstood in the culture with regards to their customs, expectations and ideas.

This culture clash can work both ways, as was apparent with **Tesco PLC** exiting Poland. Amongst the reasons for their withdrawal from the Polish market, it was rumoured that the corporate culture was too soft and resulted in cultural disengagement amongst employees in a country where the culture is much more direct.

Walmart serves as another example of this, as it failed to truly understand German culture, and ended up leaving the country in 2006. Training its German employees according to the same *'have a nice day!'* culture and verbal engagement with customers as with its employees in the US singularly backfired, as it was a foreign concept to German customers who found it strange, if not fake.

People react, communicate, and make decisions in different ways across borders, so even well-established corporate cultures that have been built up over decades can be broken down over a surprisingly short period of time when there is a lack of cross-cultural inclusion. As corporate culture wanes, miscommunication increases and trust erodes, which can have a detrimental effect not only on levels of productivity and compliance, but also financially.

So, while we can safely say that the culture of a company is often a key driver for its success, issues with cross-cultural management can cause major problems both when operating in a new country and within the same territory where there is some level of cultural diversity. It is proven that diversity can increase team efficiency. However, businesses that do not acknowledge or understand the different cultures, and cultural nuances, that exist amongst their employees, generally struggle to create a positive or conducive work environment, and this can have a financial impact. This is true at an international level with globalisation, but increasingly at a domestic level too as our nations become more culturally diverse.



HOW COVID-19 HAS BROKEN DOWN CORPORATE CULTURE

A year after the onset of COVID-19, our lives, and the workplace specifically, have changed drastically. So how has this impacted corporate culture?

We know that the 'new normal' post-COVID-19 has had a dramatic effect on the communication and relationship between employers and employees across countries. Home working has accelerated employee disengagement which was already a cause for concern, and since the assets of a business are not just tangible (cash, goods, property), but intangible too (corporate culture, employer brand), due care and attention must be paid to this worrying trend.

The separation between home and work life has been quite clearly broken on a global scale, which has proved to be a real hurdle in countries like the Netherlands or Switzerland, where people prefer to keep their personal and professional lives separate. Working from home can also be a struggle in countries like India or China, which typically invest a lot of time into building solid relationships, including spending time outside working hours with colleagues and clients, as it is seen as vital to meet business objectives. Interacting solely via online platforms, and therefore not being able to have face-to-face communication, makes opportunities for ad-hoc conversations (or 'watercooler chat') with colleagues few and far between.

Interact Software has identified the main challenges of this new model of working to be: the impact on corporate culture and wellbeing, accountability, security (both digital and physical), boundaries between work and home life, time zones and communication. Whatever the main challenge for each company or individual, it is clear that the physical distance from the office, and by extension from that space of shared values, motivations, behaviours and expectations leads to a weakening of the corporate culture.

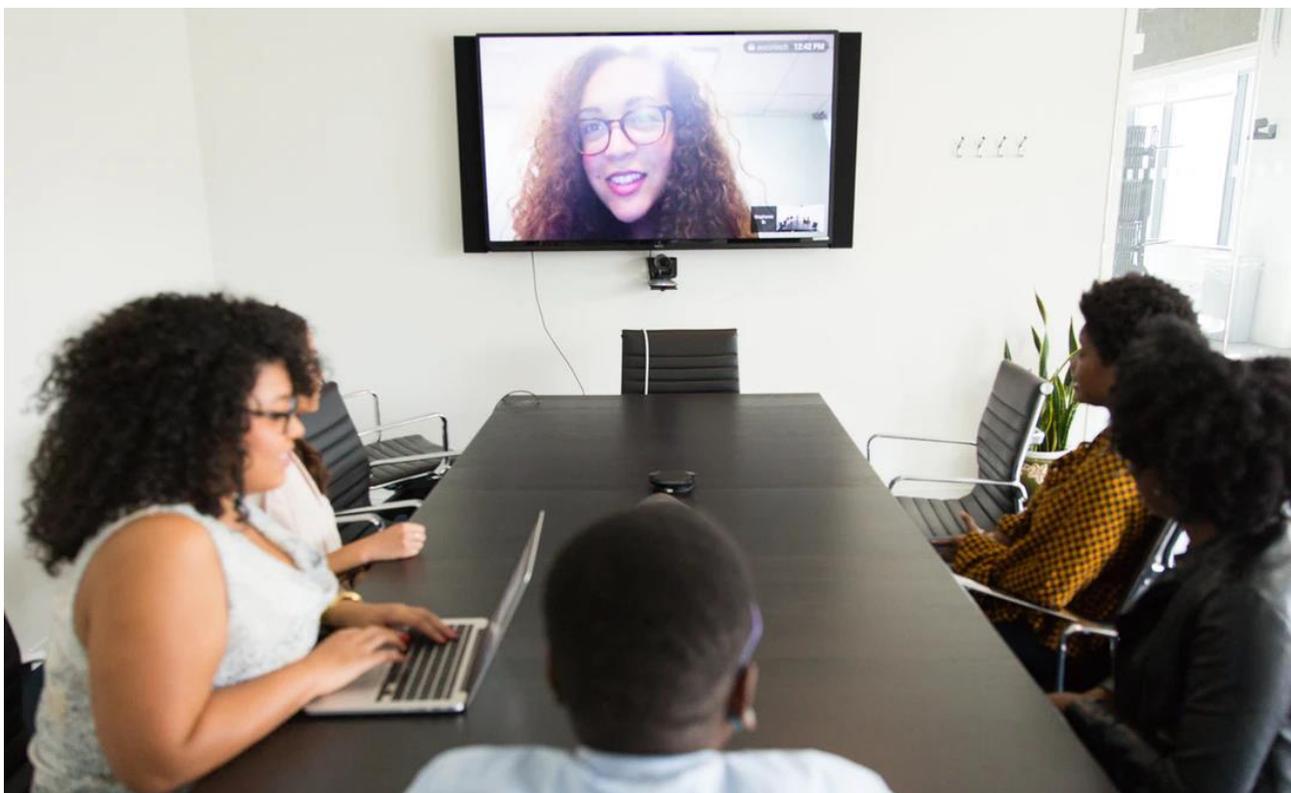
If we return to the words of Trompenaars, we are reminded that culture is formed from the '*values, behaviours, and norms that you accumulate in a group in order to survive*'. Therefore, when members of this group - employees and colleagues - are dispersed into separate environments, usually their homes where priorities, behaviours and attitudes are all different to those we see in the workplace, any corporate culture, no matter how strongly ingrained, is likely to start breaking down.

What is more is that this has deeper effects on employee wellbeing. Where colleagues have been used to sharing the same environment to work collaboratively, helping to motivate, praise and advise one another as well as simply having that morale boost from interacting with people who share common problems, interests and objectives, employees are now having to navigate this conflict of cultures since their home and work lives have collided. This added pressure of having to balance the roles of both colleague or employee and parent/partner/housemate, along with a lack of human interaction has had a significant impact on both levels of productivity and employee wellbeing.

HOW COVID-19 HAS BROKEN DOWN CORPORATE CULTURE

In response to this breakdown in common corporate culture, and therefore employee disengagement, Interact Software suggests solutions ranging from managers clearly defining expectations or deliverables and using digital solutions to check-in on and unify global employees to using social tools or company intranet to provide cultural insights for inclusion purposes or even something as simple as cutting down on email in favour of other forms of communication. The aim of these solutions is to help businesses to counteract disconnection from corporate culture, ensure a better sense of inclusion and connection amongst different global teams, and take care of the mental health and wellbeing of their employees.

The fact remains that whilst the experience of COVID-19 around the globe has led to a significant adoption, by necessity, of remote working, what is not clear is how this will play out as the pandemic recedes and societies return to a sort of 'normal'. Undoubtedly, working habits for millions around the world have changed for good, but the office will remain important for specific sectors and for employee engagement and communication. This will also be affected by attitudes and infrastructure in individual cultures, globally. However, what is true across the board, is that companies who want to successfully maintain a strong sense of employee engagement will need to tweak their corporate culture to the new realities and challenges of working, as well as the expectations and personal needs of its employees.





HOW COVID-19 HAS ACCELERATED CULTURAL DISENGAGEMENT

Whilst the virus sees no borders and has affected us all indiscriminately, what does change from country to country is the response to the pandemic. We have seen different restrictions, attitudes and behaviours forming in line with each nation's best interests and the effects of this new model of working has played out very differently across the globe.

Looking first from the perspective of national culture, we know that the pandemic has revealed counter-cultural behaviours in some cases. Countries like the US or Switzerland have struggled to comply with government regulations, even though they are typically universalistic and place a high importance on institutions of laws, rules and regulations. This is in great contrast with traditionally particularistic cultures, such as South East Asian countries, usually prone to making their own decisions based on the situation. Throughout the pandemic, they have actually shown much more respect towards the rules implemented to fight the crisis, rather than following their own instinct.

That being said, the pandemic has also emphasised pre-existing cultural differences and disparities between some countries. Some of the most striking examples relate to the concept of trust between employers and employees. In the context of remote working, this has not been an issue in a country like the Netherlands, as employees feel accountable and autonomous enough to be productive from home. However, in France, company culture revolves a lot around employers monitoring the working hours of their employees and ensuring that they stay long enough in the office, which has been a lot more difficult to check up on for obvious reasons.

Beyond cultural responses to working from home, COVID-19 has also seemingly highlighted material inequalities between advanced and emerging economies. In their *review 'What's next for remote working'*, McKinsey compares and contrasts different activities and their potential for remote working across 9 countries. The report reveals that while hybrid models of remote work are likely to persist post COVID-19, they will tend to benefit well-paid and highly educated employees in advanced economies, and therefore increase global inequality. Remote work potential is concentrated in a few sectors, such as finance and insurance and information technology, and it is generally industries where remote working is difficult to implement, like agriculture and manufacturing, that tend to prevail in emerging economies. India highlights this perfectly, since *'although the country is known globally for its high-tech and financial services industries, the vast majority of its workforce of 464 million is employed in occupations like retail services and agriculture that cannot be done remotely'*.

We also saw the effects of this inequality gap when Telstra, an Australian telecoms company, had to close call-centre offices in India and the Philippines. Staff in these locations didn't have the laptops, internet access or security clearance to work from home and so Telstra decided to hire 2,500 temporary roles in Australia, and have since announced that these employees will become permanent.

HOW COVID-19 HAS ACCELERATED CULTURAL DISENGAGEMENT

The pandemic, and more specifically the shift to remote working, have also led to a new worry among employees: if there is no need for them to be present in their country of work, are they at risk of being undercut by someone working from home in a country where the standard of living, and therefore their salary expectation, is lower? Whilst many companies don't currently have the infrastructure to do this type of 'offshoring', they can access platforms such as Upwork and Fiverr which connect freelancers and employers for a fee, and these platforms reported significant growth in the mid to latter part of 2020. Yet this increasing disparity amongst employees is not only a country-to-country matter, it also exacerbates inequalities that are already present amongst workers of one nation, given the likelihood that workers in higher income brackets have a greater level of flexibility and resources to move to hybrid working patterns.

Finally, the pandemic might also have a wider impact on inclusivity efforts. In November 2020, the BBC warned that widespread working from home could risk increasing racism and prejudice - but why? We have just seen that online platforms have taken advantage of the move to remote working, and made it a viable option for freelancers and employees. While this could be considered a positive step, allowing for a greater level of flexibility, in actual fact there are implications for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) that enhance disconnection.

The England and Wales study for the Woolf Institute indicates that face-to-face interactions in the workplace promote relationship-building, mutual understanding and acceptance, and enhance cultural integration.

Working from home might limit these opportunities, and ultimately could reinforce the negative impact of unconscious bias. On top of this, working from home makes it much more challenging for employees to connect with one another, especially those from different backgrounds, and this is a detrimental factor in the drive for inclusivity.

The common theme throughout all of these consequences is the fact that the physical distance is only exacerbating cultural differences and leading to greater cultural disengagement as a result. Bearing in mind that this physical distance is making it harder for any company to engage its employees in a sense of shared corporate culture, the fact that cultural differences have been magnified between nations makes the job of establishing shared values, behaviours and norms much harder for MNEs looking to implement a strong corporate culture across borders.



SUCCESSFUL CORPORATE CULTURES IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL REMOTE WORKING

The challenges brought about by the pandemic and this new way of working mean it is more important than ever to consider both cultural differences and ways to support employee engagement in the workplace. Here we take a look at examples of companies that have successfully managed to adapt their corporate culture globally, whether as a response to internationalisation or the new working landscape. There are many factors for these successes: from staying local and creating a family atmosphere for staff as well as customers, to the 4 day week, global transcreation of terminology, and hybrid working.

The American fast food corporation, **Yum! Brands**, has become the largest restaurant company in mainland China. In 2011, it was reported to be opening one new KFC store every day. This is not the KFC that consumers in western cultures would recognise though, as fried chicken is made there using dark rather than white meat to reflect local tastes and preferences. Quite simply, '*...to do China, you have to do China*'. Staying local was at the heart of its success, in sourcing local food suppliers, having close ties to the Chinese government (an essential prerequisite), hiring local management who had an understanding of western business too, and adapting the menu to local tastes, all of which combined to place it at the heart of the community. The relationship between employer and employee has more of a family feel, and great care is taken to recruit, train, and keep, key staff. Lastly, the China division chairman and CEO of KFC China, Sam Su, took the decision to move away from the conventional path of taking on larger geographical areas to focus solely on China, so he could better manage it and develop a 'national footprint'.

Nando's was founded in South Africa in 1987, entered the UK market in 1992, and now operates over 1,000 outlets across 35 countries. Nando's emphasised the importance of a family feel for both customers and employees, and having teen appeal for the under-21 market who are encouraged to stay by free refills. You know what to expect when you go to Nando's as a customer, aside from chicken, chicken, and more chicken. Fast, friendly service, big tables, (specially commissioned) South African artwork on the walls, lively music, and a little bit of work on your part by going to the counter to order, and collecting your cutlery, preferred drinks and sauces. Even the architectural features are personalised and adapted, giving it a non-standardised feel.





SUCCESSFUL CORPORATE CULTURES IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL REMOTE WORKING

There are companies too that have been versatile enough to adapt their corporate cultures to the unexpected and unpredictable conditions caused by COVID-19.

Unilever New Zealand moved beyond the working from home debate to other alternative flexible working options such as the 4 day week, spurred on by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who wanted to give a boost to tourism and help employees with work/life balance. Wellbeing is at the core of Unilever's activities, which carries out workshops globally around a four part framework (purposeful, physical, mental and emotional). Unilever even goes so far as to adapt terminology around the world to make it more locally relevant.

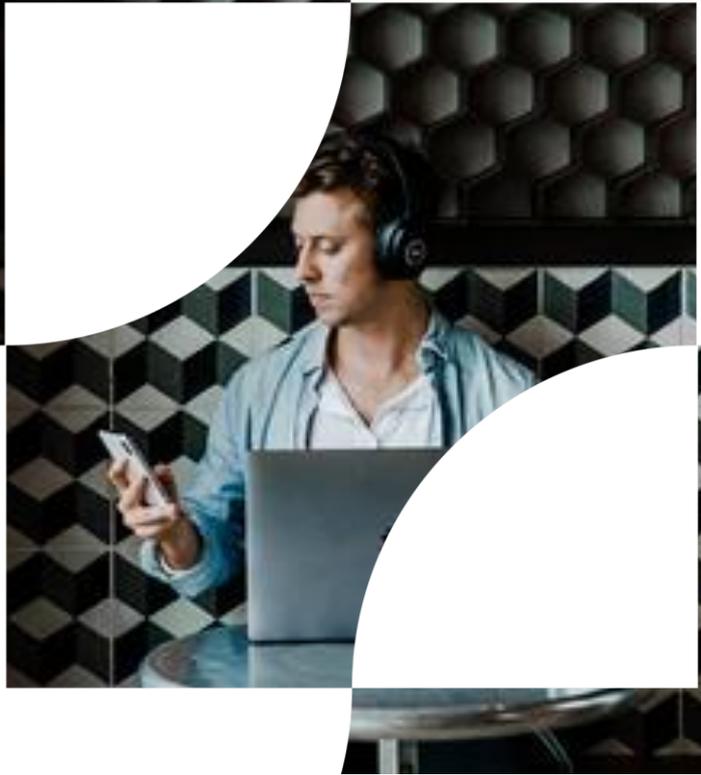
Previous trials of the 4 day week had already happened elsewhere in New Zealand, with Andrew Barnes pioneering and testing the model with the company he founded, **Perpetual Guardian**. His findings from an 8 week trial period with 250 employees, were that engagement increased, stress levels dropped, workload was actually easier to manage, and team dynamics and wellbeing were improved too. **Microsoft** has seen similar results and reported productivity gains of 40% from a trial of the 4 day week in Japan.

Finally, **Salesforce** is implementing a new working policy for its 54,000 global employees with most employees to work remotely (at least on a part-time basis) after COVID-19. There will be three options available - flex, fully remote, and office-based. Flexible working will apply to most, with some essential business (such as meetings) to be conducted in the office and remote working to apply the rest of the time.

In this way, employees can balance their personal and professional lives in an 'ever-connected world'. Salesforce is not alone in embracing remote working, with other tech companies such as Twitter, Pinterest, Dropbox and Yelp making a similar commitment.

Critically, when paired with additional flexible working policies, new models like this might also benefit gender equality in the workplace. According to Women in Advertising and Communications (WACL) and the #FlexibleFirst campaign, *'Flexible working is a primary influencing factor in closing the gender pay gap, ultimately delivering gender equality in our industry and beyond'*. The past year has shown that a range of employees can benefit from remote working, whereas prior to COVID-19 there was an assumption that it solely benefited working mothers.

There is no denying that, despite being something forced upon MNEs, the global move towards remote working has forced us all to rethink our working structures for the better. New models like hybrid or flexible working, as opposed to working on a fully remote basis or in the office 5 days a week, are here to stay. Yet, they could even offer multinational companies a more inclusive solution that caters for improved wellbeing, a better work/life balance, greater consideration for different cultural routines and flexibility for those who cannot work from home due to limited or no access to the internet, and for those who can only work from home certain days a week.



CONCLUSION

Whilst the question of corporate culture has always been a challenge for international companies, COVID-19 has presented new hurdles that have impacted employee engagement. With the rise of remote working, cultural and linguistic barriers are no longer the only obstacles to implementing a strong sense of corporate culture and we are seeing companies around the globe offering different solutions to counter this increase in disengagement, with flexible and hybrid working proving to be a successful and inclusive model for many.

Yet, in a climate where cultural differences are more pronounced than ever, ensuring that teams are knowledgeable and respectful of other cultures (whether nationally or internationally) has never been so important. As we have seen in this whitepaper, every market, region and community is driven by different sets of values and rules (both informal and formal) and these are all penetrating further into the working world as we rely less and less on physical workplaces.

Offering cross-cultural management training opportunities to employees is central to supporting a more informed management style, facilitating improved productivity and performance, and successfully establishing corporate culture away from home territories and even within domestic business relationships at a time when diversity and inclusion are rightly on the agenda of most global company board meetings. Find out [more](#) about how you can enhance cultural sensitivity amongst your teams.



CREATIVE CULTURE

195–197 Victoria Street

London SW1E 5NE, UK

E info@creativecultureint.com

W creativecultureint.com

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