

This article has been edited by the DMI Editorial Team. Edits and comments are indicated in RED below. Please DO NOT change the RED text. Add your FINAL changes or comments in BLUE below (or CAPS). Return this document to cbilson@dmf.org no later than Friday, Noon ET, June 30, 2023. No further TEXT changes will be permitted after this document is returned to DMI.

Fostering an Environment of Belongingness in the Post-pandemic Workplace

By Dr. Mersha Aftab and Hannah Pinnock

This paper investigates the key elements for fostering belongingness in hybrid and remote working contexts. Now more than ever, organizations must rediscover ways to create an environment conducive to pre-pandemic in-person interactions. Remote and hybrid working practices challenge the basic building blocks of work culture (i.e., interaction and connection among the individuals working within the teams in an organization). The paper concludes with the main principles for creating an environment of belongingness in the workplace. Contributions to this paper are taken from various individuals and organizations through interviews and co-creative workshops.

Introduction

“We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story.” --Thomas Berry¹

With the recent movement to working from home, the working environment has to be redesigned, and we must do it right. Post-pandemic work is different, and many organizations have embraced this new way of working with little time to consider the policy, strategy, or impact on people. We believe there is value in learning on the go; nevertheless, this situation presents an opportunity for us to define a mandate for the future of work. So where do we begin to *design* this new way of working?

We first deep-dived into Great Britain's largest local authority's hybrid and remote working culture to unravel how hybrid and remote work impacts performance, well-being, and belonging at Birmingham City

¹ BERRY, T. 1987. THE NEW STORY: COMMENTS ON THE ORIGIN, IDENTIFICATION AND TRANSMISSION OF VALUES. *CrossCurrents*, 37, 187-199.

Council², with 35 employees in a co-design workshop. We then sought to gain a broad understanding of experiences of belonging across industries and sectors by speaking to ten individuals from various backgrounds, disciplines, and organizations. Our conversations explored how experiences of belonging have changed as approaches to work evolved throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to some examples of good and bad practices. We used the five levers of belongingness (Stanford d.school) to frame our discussion and conclude with essential principles to create an ethos and culture of belongingness in hybrid and remote working scenarios.

Belongingness: a feeling or state of being

Let's begin with understanding what belongingness within the workplace means. The Collins Dictionary describes “belonging” as a noun and the quality or state of being an essential part of something. We explored this sense of belonging at two different levels:

1. ~~referring to do with~~ the “state of belonging,” which, according to Stanford d.school, can be categorized under the levers of belongingness: communication, rituals, role, objects, and space; and
2. ~~referring to do with~~ the “quality of the state of belonging” and how each state is being delivered in practice and strategy.

We found that for some, *the connection* is the mechanism by which an individual achieves belonging as the outcome, whereas for others, achieving belongingness is not the outcome but instead a “route to higher productivity, for greater efficiency.”³ It seems likely that an individual's seniority and role in an organization will determine which perspective they have. Furthermore, understanding what we are seeking belonging to, why we want to achieve this as individuals or as a group, and what it is that we are compromising or losing by achieving that belonging is core to understanding how we achieve it.

² Birmingham City Council, Workshop, 23.11.2022.

³ Interview no. 10, 10.5.2023.

A sense of belonging to oneself, for example, a connection with your professional and personal identity, is a good starting point, but this is not essential. We heard from one person how when working in a shop while experiencing depression, they “really began to feel a sense of belonging to a team,” and that helped them find themselves.⁴ Many people experiencing depression may also experience cognitive dissonance, which could impact a sense of belonging with oneself. Likewise, a life event such as having a baby may lead to losing a sense of self for some time. A sense of belonging to one’s professional identity is muddled when there are clearly defined roles or families of roles, such as the UK government’s Digital, Data and Technology professions. If an individual doesn’t fit into these predefined spaces, they can feel wholly isolated from the wider profession and the individual’s specific role, as well as having a compromised sense of self.

A significant theme in our discussions was the *purpose* of in-person connection. Recent UK media headlines highlight that some management teams “are struggling with an ideological belief” about where work needs to happen, which is reflected in the lack of clarity in some organizations.⁵ This lack of clarity risks breeding uncertainty and anxiety about how the nature of work and life might change should the rules be rewritten without much notice. It also leaves it to managers to decide what is right locally, resulting in inconsistency and unfairness across organizations.

Belonging doesn’t happen automatically **simply** through being in the same physical space with colleagues **several days a** week. Instead, there is a need for meaningful, purposeful connection when a team comes together and for that time to be spent doing “high-value work that is harder to do remotely.”⁶ Activity to achieve connection must be done mindfully to achieve true belonging---and can be achieved digitally and remotely.

⁴ Interview no. 10, 10.5.2023.

⁵ Interview no. 8, 10.5.2023.

⁶ Interview no. 4, 10.5.2023.

For those who need or prefer to work remotely, maybe because they are neurodivergent, disabled, or have caring responsibilities, Covid-19 created many more opportunities in the workplace and, therefore, greater belongingness. As a result, we have learned that remote work makes work more accessible and manageable. Lots of noise and sensory stimulation can be overwhelming for some who are neurodivergent, “I didn’t realize how much energy being in the office took out of me and how much stress it put on me.”⁷ When there is no daily harmony with your environment, there’s unlikely to be a strong sense of belonging to an organization, compromising the connection we discussed **previously** ~~at the start~~. For those with physical disabilities, a remote working environment is inherently more inclusive. It ensures everyone is in the same “space,” instilling a sense of equity and, when done well, establishing a shared connection.

Levers and Principles of Belonging in Hybrid and remote work environments

The levers of belongingness provide a good framework. Below we have summarized our findings and aligned them to the five actions: inviting, welcoming, knowing and accepting, participating and contributing, and growing.

1. Inviting

For hybrid or remote working, inviting means the intentionality of including participants within a team or an organization. This stage starts before a person joins the company and shows itself in job advertisements, communications with the recruiting manager, and online systems.

On the recruitment front, we heard from Sarah Carter, a recruitment specialist for digital delivery roles, who has sought to foster a sense of belonging through inclusive recruitment processes to widen the accessibility of roles and opportunities and bring joy by creating the best conditions for interview success, taking the pressure to perform off and putting candidates at ease.

⁷ [Interview no. 2, 10.5.2023.](#)

At Birmingham City Council, one of the recommendations from the co-design workshop was to be mindful of the accessibility of an invitation. Whether the invitation is sent via email, handwritten note, or verbally, focusing on how the message will be perceived and also how the message is delivered is critical. Using a mixed media approach with a personalized message on the invitation is an excellent way to connect with individuals and make them feel valued. For example, a video message with subtitles attached to an email addressed directly to the person, text reminders of an upcoming recruitment or networking event, and adding why their presence is valued are ways of taking a more personalized and accessible approach to invitations.

Birmingham City Council's Digital and Technology Services team has considerably changed their approach to the recruitment process. Recently they met with the talent pool virtually to take any questions from applicants before they were selected for interviews. This ensured that the applicants connected with the team before the interviews, which is the first step toward belongingness.

2. Welcoming

In virtual or remote working, welcoming is demonstrated through active hospitality during virtual interactions to enable participants to bring their whole selves to the team or the organization. Individuals get a sense of the authentic culture of the organization from the platforms and opportunities it provides for sharing knowledge and experiences. Based on the Birmingham City Council project data, the term “feeling safe” seemed a common requirement when teams met. As a public sector organization, it has a culture of virtual and face-to-face standups, reviews, and feedback, which help to share knowledge and keep track of projects. Team members reported having both the opportunity and a sense of safety to express their thoughts openly during virtual meetings, which adds to the sense of belonging for the team.

3. Knowing and accepting

Embracing participants for who they are and what they contribute to the team, organization, and culture is essential for belongingness. Lisa Riemers, an independent communications consultant, told us that she worked with one organization that had invested time to build a connected community in the office which reaped dividends during the pandemic when they were able to switch to hybrid sessions. Weekly lightning sessions continued to run, which featured three segments consisting of a five-minute talk and a five-minute discussion. They were typically project related, but there was always one session that was a personal topic. It was an informal way of increasing the visibility of the work across teams and connecting with colleagues as people by hearing about their humanity. “If you made the time to step back from your desk, whether virtual or not, it was really powerful.”⁸ This impact was felt acutely after George Floyd was murdered in May 2020 and the Black Lives Matter movement gained traction. Internally, the organization was able to create a safe space for people to share their own experiences of racism and for others to learn from their colleagues with diverse experiences.

In organizations where individuals are supported to bring their passions to their day job (for example, being skilled in illustration while working in a central function at a branding agency), we can expect to see a much stronger sense of belonging. "If people have space for their passions---they can connect to what moves people, and better understand them---there's a stronger sense of belonging if people can feel seen and there is space to deploy those interests and skills as part of their jobs."⁹

4. Participating and contributing

Meaningful connection through feedback and difficult conversations that aim to achieve authenticity in engagement helps to ensure individuals know their contribution matters. Many organizations routinely make time and space at the start of meetings to purposefully connect before starting the core agenda. This creates psychological safety and, when routinely modelled by senior leaders, enables colleagues to get

⁸ Interview no. 3, 5.5.2023

⁹ Interview no. 8, 8.5.2023

additional support that might be needed. This is particularly important when colleagues are not face-to-face, and it's more difficult to read body language or when cameras are off entirely. At the Centre for Digital Public Services in Wales, some teams use Geekbot to conduct a daily, digital check in---a [stand-up](#) of sorts for colleagues to respond to individually, with the results shared on a Slack channel. This helps to give a view [of](#) how each colleague is feeling that day and their priorities. “It helps you focus on your work and keep you on track. It also helps to flag where there are [workload issues](#).”¹⁰ For some types of work, there is enormous value in being face-to-face. One participant who routinely works from home spoke of a rare opportunity to work in person with colleagues based in another city “It made me feel like I belonged to something tangible, not just talking to a computer all day.”¹¹

At a strategic level, organizations with compelling [missions](#) and values communicated at all levels that act according to these are well placed to provide colleagues with a collective sense of belonging to the broader organization. Organizations that don't act authentically isolate colleagues and create a sense of disconnection. Indeed, if a colleague is misaligned with the organization's vision, values, and culture, this will have a similar impact. To combat this and design a post-pandemic workplace that facilitates belonging, organizations need a mission that serves as a common goal, clear two-way communication and ~~acts authentically~~ and consistently actions.

5. Growing

Organizations can enable personal and professional growth regardless of the working environment. In any organization, there will be a spectrum of needs and preferences. It's key to acknowledge that one size does not fit all, and for some, remote working is akin to “playing The Sims half the time” but getting paid at the end of the month.¹² For others, remote working is the only feasible way to engage with their

¹⁰ [Interview no. 7, 2.5.2023.](#)

¹¹ [Interview no. 4, 10.5.2023.](#)

¹² [Interview no. 4, 10.5.2023.](#)

organization and fulfill their role. Hybrid working has meant that “having a screen in front of them and being persistently available... is a physical barrier, a distraction” for colleagues.¹³

Face-to-face and hybrid working also facilitates “the theatre of power,” giving more power to those who are privileged through their financial situation, their lack of caring responsibilities, disability, and/or health complications. Leaders, in particular, typically benefit from this privilege, with the organizational working scenario ensuring the power dynamic sits in the hands of leaders, providing a sense of visibility and control. In a hybrid setup, visibility bias becomes apparent, mainly when senior leaders are regularly present in the office. Suppose a colleague does not engage in the onsite working environment. In that case, there is a risk [that](#) they are disadvantaged because they aren’t seen and don’t have the opportunities for “water cooler” conversations. Conversely, colleagues may approach these rules more flexibly in organizations that have a mandate but where there is no senior leadership presence in regional offices.

Conclusion

So, how does an organization create a sense of belonging that ensures colleagues feel connected to their team, their role, and the organization's mission? In the post-pandemic world of work, this isn’t easy and requires a thoughtful, concerted, and consistent approach. Each organization's approach and degree of success will differ, but we have proposed five guiding principles to support this effort:

Principles for creating belonging:

1. **Trust** that people understand their needs and how they work best: Organizations should look to enable colleagues to choose where the work happens wherever possible because one size does not fit all, and enabling choice is the most inclusive approach.

¹³ [Interview no. 6, 3.5.2023.](#)

2. Remember that people seek to **belong to something**, not everything: We need a strong sense of belonging to something in our sphere, but this doesn't have to be felt at all levels, across all groups and spaces. It can come from shared experience, a common purpose, or a unifying vision.
3. Aim for **quality in-person connection** over the number of days in the workplace: We don't need to be in the same physical space every week or month. A quarterly or biannual team meetup that is curated and considered will nurture belonging that is sustained until the next meetup.
4. A **purposeful approach** will help get remote working right: It must value the different ways of working, aiming to level the shared experience without replicating the in-person environment.
5. Commit to investing time in regular, meaningful **well-being check-ins** with colleagues: Measure how someone is doing daily and how they might need additional support because people are not just their jobs

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank our valued contributors [from](#) the Birmingham City Council, Birmingham City University, and all the participants who gave their time to be interviewed.

- ~~James Gregory, Head of Delivery at Birmingham City Council~~
- ~~Digital and Technology Services at Birmingham City Council~~
- ~~The 2021 January and 2022 September cohorts of Design Management Masters at Birmingham City University~~
- ~~All the participants who gave their time to be interviewed for this paper, including but not limited to:~~
 - ~~Lisa Riemers, Independent Communications Consultant~~
 - ~~Josh, Content Designer for a charity~~
 - ~~Martin Price, Service Design Manager, BT Group~~
 - ~~Sarah Carter~~
 - ~~Natasha Curran, Medical Director, Health Innovation Network~~

- ~~Tassos Stevens, Director & Maker, Coney~~
- ~~Gemma Murphy, Centre for Digital Public Services~~
- ~~Nour Sidawi, UK Civil Service~~
- ~~David~~

Author bios:

Dr. Mersha Aftab is Course Director for MA Design Management Course and a senior lecturer in Design Management at Birmingham City University. Her research interest is putting design as a strategic lead and proposing human-centered innovation. As the lead for a design-led transformation group, Mersha uses empathy to connect and integrate disciplines to create a valuable contribution to transformations.

Hannah Pinnock is a design thinker working at the intersection of organizational culture, design, and digital. She helps public sector organizations progress on their digital transformation journey, facilitating the adoption of human-centered design approaches and agile working methods. Hannah is the Strategic Design Lead at Methods, an ALTEN Company, and over the last two years, has been working with Birmingham City Council on delivering its new digital strategy and customer program.