

# Where Companies Want Employees to Work — and Where People Actually Want to Work

Nine employee archetypes can inform organizations' in-office, remote, and hybrid strategies. **by Radostina Purvanova and Alanah Mitchell**

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Illustration by Klawe Rzeczy

**Contemporary narratives depict the workplace as an arena** where managers keen on reinstating office routines clash with employees who cherish their work-from-home arrangements. That's catchy but inaccurate. Rather, the modern workplace is a testbed where organizations are presently experimenting with different approaches

to a “new normal.” Some are indeed throwing down the gauntlet via an office-forward strategy to preserve company culture. But others are embracing reinvention via a remote-first strategy to provide maximal employee flexibility. Still others are threading the needle via a hybrid strategy to synergize culture and flexibility.

To learn more about the effectiveness of these strategies, we conducted interviews (72 team members and 17 company executives) and ethnographic research in three national organizations. Each company featured a distinct strategy: office-forward, remote-first, and hybrid. We quickly realized that while companies were busy crafting their strategy, employees were settling into their own work location preference: the home, the office, or a mix of both.

But here is the catch. Company workplace strategies and employee work location preferences do not just exist in isolation. Rather, each specific point of alignment (or misalignment) between company strategy and employee preference gives rise to a unique employee persona. Meet the nine personas shown in the figure below.

## A New Approach to Employee Workplace Preferences

The intersection of company workplace strategies (i.e., their leniency around how much time employees are required to spend in co-located offices) and employee workplace preferences (i.e., how much time workers want to spend in the office) gives rise to distinct employee personas. Successful back-to-office policies require identifying alignment or misalignment between employee and employer preferences.

		Company strategy		
		REMOTE-FIRST	HYBRID	OFFICE-FORWARD
Employee preference	HOME	<b>Avatar</b> Work-from-home is the most rewarding and energizing	<b>Rebel</b> Work is a means to live; family is life	<b>Producer</b> Work is about productivity, not social life
	HYBRID	<b>Centrist</b> Going too far down the remote-work path is dangerous	<b>Integrator</b> Office-plus-home is the best of both worlds	<b>Progressive</b> The benefits of remote work must not be lost
	OFFICE	<b>Community-seeker</b> Work life is not the same without office comradery	<b>Traditionalist</b> Office work facilitates work-life separation	<b>Officer</b> Work-from-office is the most rewarding and energizing

Source: Radostina Purvanova and Alanah Mitchell



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### Employee Personas

Let's start with home-preferring employees. When these employees work for a remote-first company — a point of perfect alignment between company strategy and personal preference — the Avatar persona is born. Avatars are experienced employees who “grew up in the corporate office,” but they came to love virtual interactions. Strong advocates

for their company's remote-first strategy, Avatars are intensely loyal for the freedom they have been granted. They recognize the "golden handcuffs" of remote work may be stalling their career...but they don't wish to be uncuffed.

What happens to home-preferring employees when their company champions an office-forward strategy? This point of perfect misalignment creates the Producer persona. Producers actively avoid the pleasantries of office life. "I guess I do maybe miss my coworkers a little bit" is polite code for, I don't care about the social stuff. But the real reason Producers want to work from home is they just don't see how the office advances productivity. "For a lot of the things we do in the office, I'm just sitting there, thinking: We could be doing this at home."

And home-leaners in companies trying out a hybrid strategy? This point of half-alignment between company strategy and personal preference produces the Rebel persona. Rebels yearn to be released from the chains of office life permanently, not just some of the time.

To Rebels, work is now a means to live; family, friends, health, and personal growth are life. What caused Rebels to flip the script and endorse life-over-work? The answer we heard: "It's not like they are giving us amazing raises every year. It's silly to be so dedicated anymore."

Hybrid-leaning employees are also not a monolith. When they work for a hybrid company — a point of perfect alignment — the Integrator persona emerges. Integrators enjoy virtual collaboration, but they don't lose sight of the importance of office presence for teamwork...and a healthy dose of impression management. Integrators are happy — a likely outlier in Gallup's ever-dropping [job satisfaction reports](#). How have Integrators cracked the code of work-life happiness? They've

replaced the unrealistic idea of work-life balance with that of work-life flow. “I don’t believe in checking all the boxes at the same time. I check them as I can.”

Other hybrid-leaning employees find themselves at half-alignment with their company’s policy. In office-forward companies, hybrid-leaners develop a Progressive persona. Progressives fail to see why their company’s strategy has to be so “old-fashioned, toxic, and non-inclusive.” They worry that newly acquired remote-work skills are going to be lost; that home-preferring peers are going to be pushed out. In remote-first companies, hybrid-leaners develop a Centrist persona. Centrists feel alarmed their company’s heading too far down the remote-only path. They worry about irreparable damage to relationships, mentoring, and teamwork. Catch a pattern? Half-alignment causes both personas here consternation.

And finally, the office-leaners. When office-preferring employees work for an office-forward company — a point of perfect alignment — the Officer persona emerges. Officers see the office as a home-away-from-home. They are intensely loyal to the company for the community they are granted. Though they do like being social, they’re mainly concerned that remote work removes the human element from the work experience. “I think we’re as productive at home and all of that. But just...people are missing out on the human part of work.” To re-humanize work, Officers relentlessly role model officing, in full alliance with their company’s office-forward strategy.

How do office-leaners fare in remote-first companies? This point of perfect misalignment produces the Community-seeker persona. Community-seekers are “in actual hell.” One described feeling like a voiceless hermit; another — like a soulless husk piloted by Teams. Community-seekers have taken community building into their own

hands. They rally teammates to go to the office...which often fails. They work from a Starbucks or a coworking space. They hope for at least one required anchor day. And, they are weighing options.

Office-leaners in hybrid companies — a point of half-alignment — develop a Traditionalist persona. Traditionalists care about work-life separation. They don't go to the office just to find work-life balance. They go to the office to be productive, and they think you should too.

### **Aligning Workplace Strategies and Employee Preferences**

It's time to recognize that work modality strategies push employees into different personas. The good news? Your strategy will always produce supporters. These in-alignment personas — your Avatars, Integrators, and Officers — will be your best cheerleaders. Use them! But, ensure these supporters understand other personas exist. In our research, we were struck by the fracturing among employees we saw. In the office-forward company, Officers and Progressives were at odds, and Producers had retreated to the corner. In the remote-first company, Avatars were barreling through Centrists, and Community-seekers were feeling forgotten. In the hybrid company, Integrators seemed to live on a happy planet, but Rebels and Traditionalists were in a tug-of-war, pulling the company in opposite directions. What should business leaders do?

Start by educating yourself and your people on the persona diversity within your own workforce.

Next, understand your dissenters. Surprisingly, your dissenters are the half-aligned personas — the Rebels, Progressives, Centrists, and Traditionalists. How can you support them? For one, communicate your workplace strategy clearly. This is especially important for the hybrid strategy. What does “hybrid” mean? Failure to clarify leaves too

much open to interpretation. Also, include dissenters in your decisions. Hearing their concerns will help you craft a better strategy. That's how you actually meet in the middle.

Then, take time to make tough but strategic decisions about the misaligned personas. Could you place Producers in individual contributor roles and accommodate their desire to work from home? Could you create mini-office hubs where Community-seekers can feel socially immersed? Or, is your best bet helping misaligned personas find a better fit?

Finally, shine the light on yourself. Ask yourself: Am I aligned with my company's strategy? Do I like the persona this has made me adopt? In today's testbed of a workplace, finding alignment is how you thrive.

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**Radostina Purvanova** is a professor of leadership and management at Drake University's Zimpleman College of Business.



**Alanah Mitchell** is the associate dean of academic affairs and Aliber Distinguished Professor of Information Systems in the Zimpleman College of Business at Drake University.

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