

# While back to office is at its peak, FOMO may haunt remote workers

People who meet face-to-face will be able to connect and work together better than people who connect through online platforms. Will this affect the overall performance and productivity of the people and the team?

Hemanshi Tewari • ETHRWorld • April 29, 2022, 14:11 IST



In a hybrid work culture, where few employees are working from home and the rest are working from the office, a sense of insecurity or FOMO among the employees who are working from home and are not able to involve themselves in a physical office environment takes birth.

Employees are FOMO-ing in the hybrid work environment as remote workers often fear missing out on one-on-one meetings, watercooler chats, tea break gossip sessions and post-work latte schedules. In layman's terms, in the hybrid work culture, where few employees are working from home and the rest are working from the office, a sense of insecurity or FOMO among the employees who are working from home and are not able to involve themselves in a physical office environment takes birth.

Last Monday, there was a discussion at the ETHRWorld newsroom regarding the raging Gen Z slang—FOMO—that has been able to successfully instil doubts amongst remote workers. There were several *What ifs*—"What if my boss offers a better appraisal to him? He meets him regularly"; "What if she gets a promotion and my efforts aren't recognised"; "What if we miss out on the new boss' gossip sessions"—that cropped up during our discussion (rather debate).

In simpler terms, first, let's see how the Hybrid model works. Rajiv Naithani, Chief People Officer, Infogain explains this better:

In a hybrid setup, some employees will work from home all the time because they don't live in the city where their payroll office is and some employees will work from home a few days a week and work from the office the rest of the time, and there will be a third group of employees who work from the office most of the time. When any organisation uses such a model, it becomes clear that this working model will cause problems for employees and teams when they try to work together and connect. People who meet face-to-face will be able to connect and work together better than people who connect through online platforms.

However, Naithani firmly believes that this would not affect the overall performance and productivity of the people and the team. It is also a fact that those who meet face-to-face have a better chance of taking advantage of collaboration and connection than those who work from home. It could mean that people who work from home might not be able to join in on the corridor and water cooler conversations, and they might lose some informal yet important information. "But that should not make individual(s) feel insecure or worried about missing out on things. Organisational culture will play a big part in bridging this gap by making it psychologically safe to work there. Managers and their teams would need to be made aware of how inclusive they are and other things that will help them work together and connect in a hybrid work environment," Naithani adds.

Where managers may give a better hike to those working from the office!

Experts say the feeling of FOMO cannot be disregarded by the managers and physical presence can't be the measure to decide on rewards and recognition. However, both working styles cannot replace each other. In order to maintain the smooth operation of the hybrid model, managers must be educated about the potential pitfalls, so that the company's culture is not jeopardised.

For instance, at Marico, the senior leadership chooses to focus on members' performance based on their outcomes rather than their physical presence in the office or the hours they log for the day.

"For us, it has always been quality over quantity," says Amit Prakash, CHRO, Marico. The company also undertook the regularly scheduled appraisals and promotion cycles in 2020 and 2021, when the employees were working remotely due to the pandemic. "All our members are equipped with robust technology and given equal opportunities. Therefore, a fair evaluation is done based on their individual performance. We believe in trusting our members to deliver the outcomes that they are responsible for and empowering them to do so," says Prakash.

To prevent the feeling of 'FOMO' or workplace disconnect, Marico actively engages with its members to listen to them and holds discussions with smaller cohorts to understand and identify opportunities for improving engagement and productivity. This helps all the employees as well as the leaders to stay more involved and thus gives them a sense of security even in a hybrid mode of work, while also offsetting any fatigue or feeling of being disconnected amongst employees.

Anoora Singh, Head - HR (Training & Admin), Organic India, agrees with this. "The visibility of the employee no doubt is better when they come to the office, this usually is not (and should not be) the only deciding factor for alignment of responsibilities. The deciding factor is essentially how soon and how effectively the tasks get done. I have also seen that most of us working from home tend to either get distracted or end up working much more – in both cases the work-life balance may become an issue," Singh highlights. However, the fact that watercooler chats are what the physical office environment is known for cannot be brushed under the carpet. The virtual office misses this part. In this regard, ETHRWorld also created videos under the theme "By the Watercooler" and this was one of the major points that were discussed in our newsroom. Those who are aware of the term may agree how even a hectic day could be toned down and increase the productivity by chatting near the office watercooler.

And now with hybrid work, this quintessential office sight is rarely seen. Hence the question - Can the fear of missing out hamper employees' productivity in the hybrid work setup?

Where employees miss watercooler chats!

Captain Geeta Jadhav, Cluster Head - HR, Tata Power Renewables, says, "Maybe we did not have watercooler chats, but we indeed had million virtual productive conversations!"

However, there were a few impediments when the company got used to the work-from-home culture. The team had to take a few steps to help the employees in their new normal journey and remote working. The company introduced cloud technology - making data storage more affordable, practical, secure and hassle-free. **Mobility at Tata** initiative was also launched where employees can work productively as per their schedule. Making the routine work of employees more engaging, the company launched **production studio technology** - this technology lets employees package and deliver their work, such as sales collateral or internal presentations, in various exciting ways, with tools like videos, podcasts, infographics, etc.

"Workplaces are changing rapidly. We are continuously exploring newer and innovative ways to engage with the employees. We started to engage more through virtual interactions like town halls, weekly meetings and celebrations with involvement of the families as well," Jadhav says.

The pandemic changed our attitudes and practices, and virtual happy hours have replaced water cooler connections. Individuals have mastered the ability to continue similar conversations. And while in-person conversations or meetings are more holistic since you can see or study the body language used during the chat, which is absent in a virtual setting, Naithani of Infogain believes such variations will not always have a detrimental effect on performance and output.

"It is critical to establish the KRAs, goals and objectives objectively so that everyone understands their position with maximum clarity. Inclusion would be critical here, as would finding ways for the employees working virtually to connect with the teams regularly," Naithani says.

So, how can managers be more considerate when it comes to hybrid work culture and look at both their workforce equally?

Experts have an answer to this!

Where managers manage efficiently!

Experts say managers must keep in mind the performance of the team member over the years and not make a decision just based on the period of work wherein the employee was working from home. And in case they see a drop in performance, Singh of Organic India suggests that they must chat to identify the challenges and help the team members overcome the same. Managers must also plan the task allocation in a much more thoughtful manner to ensure that everyone in the team feels productively occupied and challenged.

For instance, like most companies, Marico has implemented monthly virtual catch-up sessions to build relationships among members outside of the work to sustain the organisation's collaborative spirit even in the remote and hybrid working paradigm.

"We found that, during the first 18-20 months of the pandemic, work productivity and efficiency went up by almost 30-40 per cent amongst our members while they worked remotely. Further, with time, our member engagement has also been consistently between 80-84 per cent," Prakash of Marico mentions.

Considering the work style is new, experts say that managers will require additional skills to manage efficiently. Naithani suggests being sensitive to individual needs in a hybrid environment, especially moving beyond the advantages of associating with a team that works in person rather than virtually, would aid in a smooth transition. Organisational culture, systems, and governance will contribute to enabling the majority of it.