

The Moments That Matter for Culture in the Hybrid World

by Jordan Smith

Organizations struggle to transfer the “something special” of their culture from an in-person to a hybrid or remote environment. To fill this void, CHROs need to understand what moments in the employee experience really matter for culture connectedness, regardless of location.

Before the pandemic, leaders relied on the office to generate feelings of culture connectedness among employees. In-person interactions were frequent and unplanned, occurring in moments such as daily lunches in the breakroom, watercooler chats or catching up with a colleague at the vending machine. The frequency of these interactions changed drastically with the arrival of COVID-19 and the forced switch to remote work, and it's changing again as many organizations switch to a hybrid work model.

One might expect that as employees begin to spend more time together in the office again, connectedness will once again take care of itself. However, hybrid and remote knowledge workers currently meet with their teams in person an average of two days per week, compared to four days per week before the pandemic.¹ This amount of in-person face time may not be enough for connectedness to happen on its own.

Hybrid work is here to stay, and CHROs need to get to the root of the something special that occurred when employees were all together before the pandemic. If they don't, organizations will pay the costly price of high turnover and general employee dissatisfaction in their roles. They also need to know where to intentionally scale up efforts to make employees feel connected so they are not wasting resources on ineffective measures.

Is the Something Special of the Office Lost Forever?

The nature of that something special is no mystery: Working in a shared space creates connectedness through proximity. When used with intention, the office has the potential to bring great value by fulfilling the innate human desires to feel close to other people, experience a sense of belonging and see the impact of work that's being done. In our research on how to foster connectedness in a hybrid world, we realized not one, but two types of proximity occurred in the prepandemic environment that carry over to the hybrid world today: physical proximity and emotional proximity.

Physical vs. Emotional Proximity

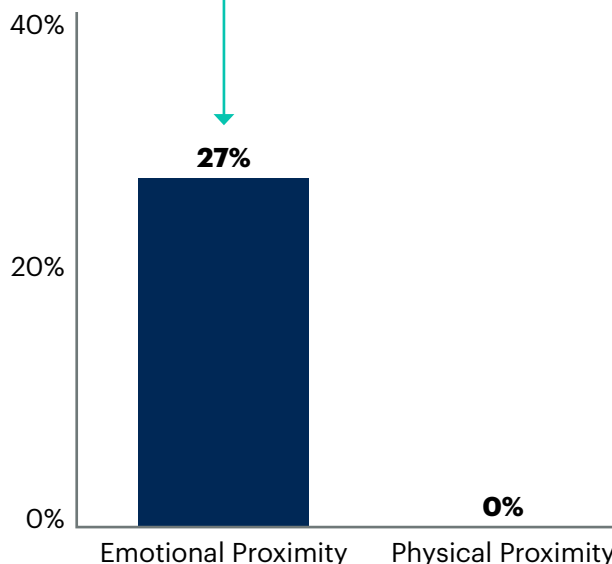
Physical proximity happens when an employee is being seen. It occurs when employees are in the same physical space at the same time (like the office). Emotional proximity is when an employee feels seen. It happens when employees feel recognized and valued. In other words, when employees feel connected to something bigger than themselves (for example, a team, a project or a purpose), they experience emotional proximity.

In a prepandemic on-site environment, physical and emotional proximity played off each other without employers having to think about it. Our data shows hybrid and remote knowledge workers are 2.8 times more likely to experience emotional proximity — feeling seen — when they are experiencing physical proximity — being seen.¹ However, when we take a closer look at the effects of each variation of proximity individually, it becomes clear that the underlying driver of connectedness is not actually the fact of being present in the same physical environment.

According to a 2022 Gartner survey, the extent to which employees are connected to culture can increase by up to 27% when employees experience emotional proximity.¹ Physical proximity alone, on the other hand, was found to have no impact on culture connectedness.¹ (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Maximum Impact of Proximities on Employee Culture Connectedness
Maximum Percentage Increase

Experiencing emotional proximity can increase an employee's culture connectedness by up to 27%.

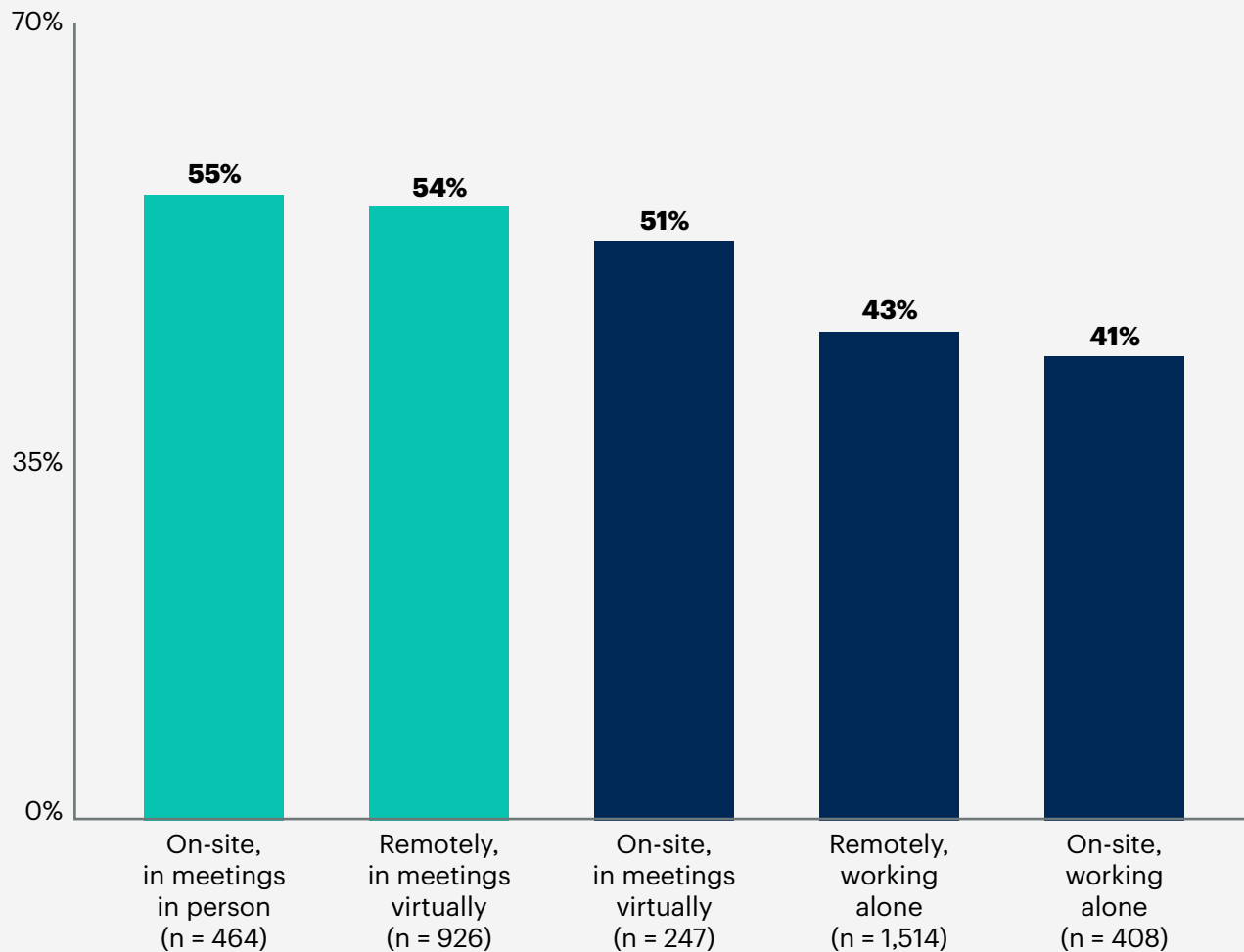


n = 3,917 hybrid/remote knowledge workers

Source: 2022 Gartner Culture in a Hybrid World Employee Survey



Figure 2. Emotional Proximity by Work Mode^a
Percentage of Employees Experiencing



n = 3,917 hybrid/remote knowledge workers

Source: 2022 Gartner Culture in a Hybrid World Employee Survey

^a Defined as the work mode in which employees spend most of their time.

Instead of requiring employees to come back to the office more often, leadership should find ways to create and nurture emotional proximity without relying on physical proximity. They need to create new strategies to help employees feel valued and part of something bigger again, regardless of location.

There are opportunities to drive emotional proximity in any work environment. Employees can feel seen in their organization while working in a variety of environments and settings. Our research shows 55% of those who spent most of their time on-site in in-person meetings said they experienced emotional proximity,

as did 54% of employees who spent most of their time remotely in virtual meetings (see Figure 2).¹

Having established that emotional proximity can be experienced from anywhere, the next question is where CHROs can cultivate it. By taking a look at the moments that matter for culture in a hybrid environment, CHROs can make informed, targeted improvements in the employee experience without spending time and resources on efforts that produce minimal return. Areas to target for improvements include leadership activities, learning and development strategies and performance management processes.

The Top 5 Moments That Matter for Culture Connectedness

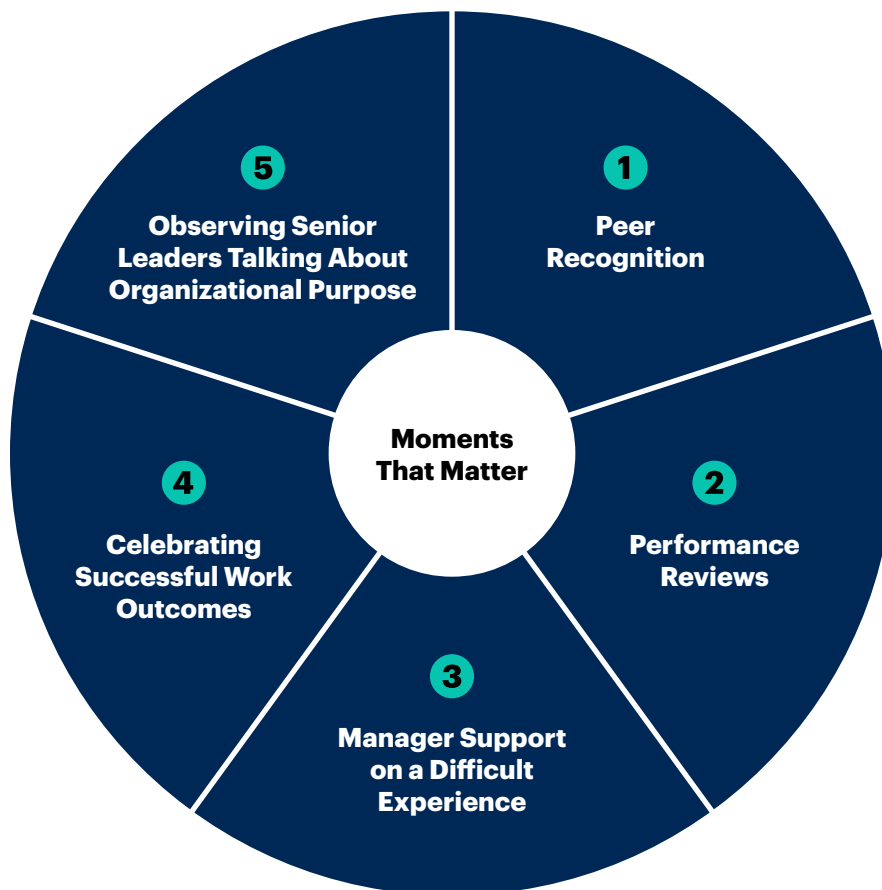
We surveyed nearly 4,000 hybrid and remote knowledge workers from a variety of organizations and identified the ones that felt culturally connected to their organizations. To be considered culturally connected, employees had to report feeling like they identify with, care about and belong within the organization. We then investigated the moments in the hybrid and remote workplace when these employees felt the strongest cultural connection (see Figure 3).

1 Peer Recognition

About 3 in 5 culturally connected employees say moments of peer recognition created a strong sense of culture. These were the top-ranked moments where culturally connected employees felt culture strongly.¹ CHROs can promote peer recognition in a hybrid and remote setting by:

- Making time for moments of gratitude in team meetings
- Encouraging employees to write notes of appreciation
- Making more personal moments feel important, such as through a virtual birthday celebration or e-gift contribution to an employee's wedding registry

Figure 3. Top Five Moments When Culturally Connected Employees Experienced Culture Strongly



n = 949 hybrid/remote culturally connected knowledge workers

Source: 2022 Gartner Culture in a Hybrid World Employee Survey



By creating an intentional space for peer community-building and acknowledgment, employees feel significance as individuals and team members, and know they are valued contributors within the group.

2 Performance Review Feedback

Performance reviews were the second-ranked moment where culturally connected employees (58%) felt a strong sense of culture.¹ Leaders should take the time to recognize and acknowledge individual employee contributions to the team's success. When improvement is necessary, managers should be supportive and offer solutions to help employees reach their goals while also taking into account their personal life circumstances and well-being. Accounting for the impact of personal factors in performance feedback is a powerful signal that organizations care about their employees as people, not just workers, and prioritize the wellness of the employee over work outcomes.

3 Manager Support During Difficult Experiences

In a hybrid and remote environment, employees endure a wide range of experiences and are sometimes unable to escape personal distractions when working from home. Fifty-five percent of culturally connected employees experienced a strong sense of culture when managers supported them through difficult moments.¹ Managers should prepare for personal disruptions in employees' lives to have a more pronounced impact in a hybrid workplace and devise an empathetic strategy for handling disruptions in project workflows. While this support might not come naturally at first, managers can develop empathy like

any other skill — with training and practice. Some methods for fostering empathy include vulnerable conversation practice, creating a network of support or reprioritizing workstreams.

4 Celebration of Successful Work Outcomes

Fifty-four percent of culturally connected employees said celebrating successful work outcomes was a moment when they felt a strong connection to culture.¹ In a hybrid environment, projects and workflows can feel like they all run together, and something else is always on the to-do list. When employees are partially working from home, after a project is finished, they can often feel like there is no conclusion or closure to working with a team. Leaders should take advantage of the virtual environment and create time to recognize and admire a job well done. By acknowledging and rewarding success, team members feel appreciated and acknowledged, even in the absence of physical proximity.

5 Leaders Talking About Organizational Purpose

The fifth most common moment when culturally connected employees felt a strong sense of culture was when they heard leaders speaking about organizational purpose (53%).¹ Leadership should frequently highlight the purpose of individual employee roles, teams and the company as a whole. Doing so helps employees see that, even from their homes, they are contributing to something bigger than themselves in their community and, depending on the organization, a global scale as well. When employees feel they're part of something bigger than themselves, they feel connected to culture regardless of their location.

Conclusion

As employees continue to navigate new and increasingly varied hybrid work arrangements, CHROs must work harder than ever to keep employees emotionally invested in the organization. In a hybrid world, leadership must be intentional about where it directs resources to make employees feel connected to the organization's culture. With a culture strategy focused on emotional proximity, that culture can flourish regardless of employees' location.

¹2022 Gartner Culture in a Hybrid World Employee Survey.

