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Enhancing Collaboration in Hybrid Advertising Agencies

Written by

HAILEY COLLOM

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Table of Contents

- 01** Abstract
- 02** When Hybrid Hurts Teamwork
- 03** Agencies Pivot to Hybrid Work
- 05** Guiding Principle #1: Choose the Right Hybrid Policy
- 06** Hybrid Policies in Action
- 08** Guiding Principle #2: Build in-Person Connections
- 08** Reviving in-Person Connections
- 10** Guiding Principle #3: Optimize Hybrid Meetings for Inclusivity and Productivity
- 11** From Boardrooms to Remote Calls
- 12** The Future of Hybrid Collaboration

Abstract

Collaboration in a hybrid advertising agency is challenging. With employees managing tight deadlines across different locations and schedules, teamwork can easily break down. Without strategies to strengthen collaboration, teams risk miscommunication, disconnection, and decreased productivity. But, if employers take time to review their hybrid policies and implement best practices for hybrid work, they can mitigate these issues and create a collaborative hybrid workplace.

This white paper pairs three case studies on Winnipeg advertising agencies – UpHouse, 6P Marketing, and Brandish – with three guiding principles about choosing the right work policies, building in-person connections, and optimizing meetings to show how employers can refine hybrid policies to enhance collaboration. This paper gives employers practical ideas to increase collaboration and ensure their hybrid agency supports meaningful employee connections.

When Hybrid Hurts Teamwork

Collaboration is the backbone of advertising agencies. Creative teams, strategists, account managers, and clients must work together to deliver powerful campaigns, but the collaborative nature of agency work can become particularly challenging. Especially for tasks like brainstorming sessions and pitch development – ones which teams have traditionally done with everyone in one room. Barriers to collaboration, such as ill-considered hybrid policies,¹ meeting participation difficulties,² and isolation³ can disrupt the flow that agencies rely on to meet tight deadlines and demanding client expectations.

Barriers to Collaboration

Collaboration is difficult in hybrid workplaces. One issue is how people participate in hybrid meetings, which are prone to poor camera setups, bad audio quality, and proximity bias (People in the room engage more with each other than with those who join remotely).⁴

Employees also struggle to connect to their company's culture⁵ and their fellow employees⁶ when they aren't in the office consistently. Employees who are in the office less may feel isolated and communicate less with their coworkers,⁷ leading to a more fragmented office culture.

It's also harder to build in-person connections between employees when people may not be in the office at the same time. Without a sense of unity, employees can become less engaged and company values can weaken.¹⁰ This all means employees are less likely to feel motivated to collaborate.

64%

of employees working hybrid or remote jobs said, "poor collaboration is costing them at least three hours per week in productivity."⁸

78%

of employees say leadership could be doing more to promote collaboration within their organization.⁹

Agencies Pivot to Hybrid Work

Hybrid work – which is any type of work where employees split their time between working physically in-office and remotely – takes many forms. The amount of time employees spend in the office varies depending on the policies of an organization.

As an employer, there are many benefits to having a hybrid workforce. On the financial side of things, employers can save costs by renting smaller office spaces, as there is less of a need for all employees to be in the office at the same time.¹¹ Many employees want to work remotely some or all the time, so hybrid workplaces can also retain current employees and recruit new employees better than fully in-office workplaces.¹²

“Being at a hybrid workplace is a career game-changer (and a gift). UpHouse gives us the autonomy to work in the way that’s best for us, which for me, is sometimes working from home. I love having the flexibility to get my focus time in and also make room for ‘life admin’ tasks like appointments. Hybrid work makes it all possible.”

- Sydney Small, UpHouse Copy & Creative Manager

Why Are Advertising Agencies Often Hybrid?

In 2023, 59 per cent of advertising agency employees across the world worked in a hybrid work model, a 19 per cent increase from 2022.¹³ This shift was largely driven by the rise of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic and employers' efforts to bring employees back to the office. To encourage this transition, many agencies implemented hybrid policies without thorough planning. Now, many employees and employers believe a hybrid model continues to benefit the agencies they are a part of.

Why Do Advertising Employees Like Hybrid Work?

1. Improved work-life balance

Hybrid work enhances work-life balance by giving employees more control over their schedules. This increase in autonomy can decrease stress, leading to lower chances of burnout.¹⁴

2. Reduced commuting time

Eliminating commute time can save employees hours of their time each week. Shorter commute times reduce stress and increase job satisfaction.¹⁵

3. Flexibility to meet their personal and family needs

Hybrid work allows employees to have more flexibility regarding when and where they work. This enables employees to manage personal responsibilities – doctors' appointments, childcare, and home maintenance – more easily.¹⁶

The Role Employers Play in Building a Collaborative Hybrid Workplace

Employees look to their employers to shape hybrid policies that align with their company culture, team dynamics, and personal needs. Successful hybrid workplaces require employers to make a deliberate effort to enhance in-person connection, provide the right tools and support, and continually adapt to ensure both productivity and engagement thrive, all while keeping employees satisfied with the workplace.

Through my research, including interviews with three Winnipeg advertising agencies – UpHouse, 6P Marketing, and Brandish – I identified three guiding principles that improve collaboration in hybrid advertising agencies:

1. Choose the Right Hybrid Policy
2. Build in-Person Connections
3. Optimize Hybrid Meetings for Inclusivity and Productivity

While each agency takes a different approach to hybrid work, they all prioritize collaboration among their employees and have experience making a hybrid model effective for their organizational objectives, clients, and employees.

Guiding Principle #1: Choose the Right Hybrid Policy

When choosing what type of hybrid policy to implement, an employer must consider an agency's leadership style, team size, and core values. To ensure employees can collaborate in a hybrid workplace, employers must balance the needs of their employees and their company.

When creating a hybrid policy, it's best to start by understanding the difference between scheduled and self-directed policies, and set-time and adjustable-time policies.

Scheduled Versus Self-Directed Policies

Scheduled policies set specific days employees must be in the office. An example of an agency that practices this is Honest Agency, which requires employees to be in-office Tuesday to Thursday, with the option to work at home on Mondays and Fridays.

Self-directed policies let employees choose what days they would like to come into the office. An agency that practices this is UpHouse, which gives employees the option to choose when they would like to come into the office. Depending on an employee's role, they may spend more time in the office or remotely. For UpHouse Administrative Specialist Paula Giraldo, this means she is often in-office to handle her office administrative duties.

Set Time Versus Adjustable Time Policies

Set-time policies require employees to work at certain times, like 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.. For an agency like 6P Marketing that has a set-time policy, this ensures everyone is available during the same time, whether they are working in-office or remotely.

Adjustable time policies give employees more choice about when they work. Agencies like Brandish implement these policies so employees can work at times that are convenient for them, such as later in the day or earlier in the morning.

Hybrid Policies in Action

UpHouse: *Self-Directed, Set-Time*

UpHouse, a team of over 40 people, transitioned to a hybrid work model in May 2021 after the COVID-19 lockdown. At the time, UpHouse's team was much smaller, with just under 10 employees. When deciding what policy to go with, co-owners Kiirsten May and Alex Varricchio had to consider the needs of both their small team of Winnipeg employees and their remote employees from Vancouver and Calgary. They eventually landed on a self-directed, set-time policy because it allows employees to choose if/when they come into the office while ensuring employees are available roughly from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m..

Cassidy Price, Brand & Partnerships Manager, said UpHouse's slogan for hybrid work and collaboration is "With Autonomy Comes Responsibility." This means UpHouse gives employees the freedom to work from where they like and that "nobody is going to be watching over your shoulder as long as stuff is being completed."

6P Marketing: *Scheduled Set-Time*

6P Marketing adapted its hybrid model shortly after going almost fully remote during the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown. Paul Provost, President of 6P Marketing, said he prioritized "maintaining performance and predictability" when creating the hybrid policy. His team ran a series of surveys with the agency's approximately 40 employees to figure out their preferences for hybrid work. 6P Marketing ultimately landed on a version of a scheduled set-time policy. Employees work with their managers to select the number of days they want to be in the office and what days of the week they come in. This information is then put on a company calendar, so every employee knows who's in the office on what day.

Paul said figuring out how to go hybrid was challenging at times. As employees returned to the office, Paul found some struggled to readjust to the office environment. Conversations, phone calls, and general distractions became more noticeable and harder to ignore.

"The remote work program and our existing flexible work hours configuration allow me to incorporate household obligations and personal appointments."

- Steven Bamburak, 6P Marketing COO

Brandish: *Self-Directed, Adjustable-Time*

Unlike 6P Marketing and UpHouse, Brandish adopted a more flexible policy in 2017. Alexandra Martin, Partner and Director of Strategy at Brandish, said Brandish prioritizes treating their employees with a high level of trust and giving them autonomy over their schedules. Before COVID-19, employees were in the office more often, but unless they had meetings, they had the option to work from home or work during the weekend. After COVID-19 restrictions, the team at Brandish didn't feel like they were impacted by efficiency or communication issues, and they shifted to a self-directed, adjustable-time policy. At the same time, Brandish also implemented a four-day workweek that lets employees work the same hours but have Fridays off.

At Brandish, there aren't certain hours employees have to be online, but Alexandra said meetings, collaboration sessions, and project deadlines often dictate employees' schedules. "Everyone is accountable to their work and will do what they need to get the work done," she said.

Key Takeaways

The success of a hybrid workplace begins with employers ensuring their policy is right for their workplace. As an employer, it is important to take time to survey and talk with employees to understand what they need from a hybrid policy. Consider whether more structure or more flexibility might strengthen your team's collaboration, and what barriers your team could face depending on the policy you choose.

Guiding Principle #2 – Build In-Person Connections

Why Are In-Person Connections Important?

While virtual meetings and communication tools are indispensable for collaboration in hybrid workplaces, in-person gatherings are still extremely valuable. According to a 2023 study in the *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, casual conversations in the workplace improve employee performance by 43.6 per cent.¹² These casual conversations are harder to come by in hybrid workplaces, where employees have less chances to socialize.

How Can Employers Build In-Person Connections?

Employers can build in-person connections through a variety of activities. These range from more unstructured activities like casual celebrations for events like birthdays and wellness activities (like mindfulness sessions or therapy dogs), to more structured activities like office lunches, “lunch and learns,” creative brainstorming sessions, team-building events, and retreats.

Another major factor in building in-person connections is having good onboarding protocols for new employees and student interns. Agencies like 6P Marketing and UpHouse often encourage new employees or student interns to be in the office as much as possible, allowing them to better understand the culture and build relationships with their colleagues before attempting hybrid work.

Reviving In-Person Connections

UpHouse

To ensure employees can build connections in person, UpHouse uses a mix of both formal and informal activities. Cassidy said UpHouse often hosts lunchtime activities for employees like lunch and learns, where an employee or industry professional holds a discussion about a specific topic like leadership or time management. UpHouse also hosts open-invite brainstorming sessions for all employees, no matter their position or department. In fact, the very set-up of the office is a collaborative environment, with couches and boardrooms for lunches and meetings. Any employee can book a desk if they want to come into the office to work.

UpHouse also brings their entire team together in person twice a year to celebrate Pride and winter holidays. Paula said during these biannual gatherings, the team attends local events, team-building events, and staff parties.

6P Marketing

Paul said that having space for employees to be together in-person is foundational to their company culture. Paul explained that early in the COVID-19 lockdown, 6P Marketing tried to host a virtual teambuilding event, but said it was “weird” and not something they tried to attempt again. At 6P Marketing, there’s a variety of different in-person team-building events and general employee get-togethers, such as weekly staff lunches, Halloween costume parties, birthday celebrations, and award celebrations.

6P Marketing also has a policy that new employees and students must be in the office full-time for at least three months. This allows new employees to meet the people they will be working with and get to know the company’s mission, vision, and general culture.

Brandish

Like UpHouse, Brandish brings its entire team together twice a year for team-building activities and retreats. This has included flying everyone to their Winnipeg office and flying their Winnipeg team to Toronto. Employees also travel with one another to attend advertising events like awards, showcases, and panels.

“In the past, we’ve had different virtual meetups, but after 2022, those lost their steam,” said Alexandra. Now there are more informal get-togethers in the office and after work between employees.

Brandish also hosts networking and headshot events to encourage staff and the local community to get together, meet each other, and spend time talking about the industry.

Key Takeaways

Employers can help prevent isolation and boost employee performance by scheduling regular in-person get-togethers. Employers can ask employees what kind of in-person event they prefer and cater get-togethers to what they like best. Also, employers can verify that employee onboarding processes are building the necessary connections by gathering direct feedback through surveys and informal check-ins.

Guiding Principle #3 - Optimize Hybrid Meetings for Inclusivity and Productivity

According to a study done by Leesman, about 40 per cent of employees find it difficult to participate with others in hybrid meetings.¹⁸ This is because employees are hesitant to interrupt someone who's speaking, or they're frustrated with technology difficulties like lag. In hybrid meetings, it's more difficult to read people's body language.¹⁹ If some people have their cameras off, employees can miss visual cues or may not recognize who's speaking during a meeting.²⁰

To address these challenges, agencies should implement the following best practices for hybrid meetings:

1. Establish Hybrid Meeting Etiquette

Just like in-person meetings, hybrid meetings have their own set of rules that employers must define for employees. Ensure your team is aware of these rules, such as raising a hand before speaking and giving remote employees the chance to speak first so they're not lost in conversation.

2. Prioritize Inclusion

Ensure all employees, whether remote or in-office, have access to the same tools and resources, like high-quality cameras and good microphones.

3. Invest in Quality Technology

Employers should consider investing in meeting technology, like 360-degree cameras and conference speakers so everyone can see and hear whoever is speaking.

4. Encourage Engagement

Hybrid meetings require intentional engagement. Facilitators should set expectations for participation and contribution to allow space for casual conversations that hybrid employees may otherwise miss out on.

From Boardrooms to Remote Calls

UpHouse

For UpHouse, every meeting scheduled in employees' online calendars has a Microsoft Teams link for remote employees. In the beginning, Cassidy said hybrid meetings were sometimes difficult. "The audio, when you have multiple people in the room, could get very frustrating." UpHouse invested in the Meeting Owl 3, a 360-degree conference camera, microphone, and speaker that cuts out background noise and makes it easier to see who is talking when there are multiple employees in a room. This made establishing their meeting etiquette and getting remote employees involved and engaged easier for everyone.

After meetings are over, UpHouse uses Microsoft Teams AI to automatically send a meeting summary, so everyone is aligned on what they discussed and what the next steps are.

6P Marketing

At 6P Marketing, the team attaches a Zoom meeting link to every calendar scheduled meeting to ensure remote employees can participate. Paul said most of 6P Marketing's meetings are hybrid and held in their conference rooms, but there is a general rule that client presentations should be in person. Paul also said client feedback and clients' reactions to their work are at the heart of what 6P Marketing does, so being able to see their reactions in person is something the team values.

6P Marketing hosts hybrid Monday huddles with the entire team, where employees can share their good news. This prompts remote and in-person participants to get involved. Making casual conversation about what's going on for them helps everyone feel like part of the team.

Brandish

At Brandish, their team primarily uses Google Meet for meetings. As a "remote first" agency, most meetings are held completely remotely. The only meetings held in person are usually small meetings between employees who primarily work in the office. Like 6P Marketing, important client meetings are often held in Brandish's Winnipeg office. Brandish flies out key remote employees from different provinces as needed to ensure they can attend.

Brandish's Winnipeg office is fully set up with high-quality cameras and microphones so employees can participate in meetings without worrying about possible tech issues.

"I also love that I can head into the office when I want to see clients or coworkers face-to-face—it's great for certain meetings or just a change of scenery. But being able to stay home is just as awesome, especially if it's more convenient on a given day."

**- Victoria Stephens, Brandish
Project Manager**

Key Takeaways

Employers should talk to employees and listen to their opinions on how meetings are run. Employers can survey employees on what they enjoy about hybrid meetings and what they think could be done better. Another way employers can ensure hybrid meetings are strong is by auditing the current meeting technology they use and looking for gaps that may be causing collaboration to be sidelined.

The Future of Hybrid Collaboration

Hybrid work is the future – and current reality – for many organizations. Ensuring collaboration stays strong must remain a priority for employers no matter where employees are working from.

Advertising agency employers should stay informed about emerging trends in collaboration and continually invest in new tools, technologies, and policies that enhance teamwork. Employers should regularly assess the effectiveness of their current hybrid strategies by gathering feedback directly from employees. By conducting surveys and holding open discussions with employees, employers can make informed adjustments to better support their teams, both in the office and at home.

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