

Crafting a Sense of Belonging for Hybrid Workforce



A profound need for a sense of belonging exists in both personal and professional spheres. Connecting with individuals who share common values and interests provides a sense of being part of a larger collective.

The dynamics of this sense of belonging have traditionally relied on physical interactions, complemented by digital connections in recent decades. However, the established norms were challenged by unprecedented global events leading to a shutdown.

In the exploration of the future of work and discussions regarding the impact of flexible/hybrid working on the concept of belonging, engagement has taken place with clients and communication professionals associated with All Things IC.

To further explore the significance of belonging and its implications for internal communication, an invitation was extended to Helen Deverell to contribute to the All Things IC blog. Gratitude is expressed to all those who responded to her call for insights.

Helen Deverell, an internal communication consultant specializing in audits, strategy development, workshops, change program support, and project delivery, has shared her expertise on the matter. With a background encompassing in-house roles and experiences at various agencies, Helen is also recognized as a Fellow of the IoIC and actively contributes to her blog discussing internal communication topics.

Crucial for Business: The Significance of Belonging

In the past year, our interpersonal connections have been confined to screens, and the concept of belonging has gained newfound significance. As Isabel Collins, a Belonging and Culture Consultant, aptly puts it, "Our sense of belonging was taken for granted until it was taken away."

The shift towards a hybrid working model, combining remote and office work, is likely irreversible. In this evolving landscape, maintaining a sense of belonging poses a challenge, and internal communication plays a crucial role in addressing it.

According to Isabel Collins, recognizing belonging as a business-critical issue is the initial step. In the aftermath of the initial lockdown focus on productivity, organizations now understand that the core concern is fostering a sense of belonging. Isabel emphasizes three key elements in creating belonging within the evolving hybrid work environment: Connection, Compassion, and Confidence.

1. **Connection:** Understanding how to integrate individuals into the organizational fabric when physical workspaces are no longer a constant.
2. **Compassion:** Acknowledging the diverse experiences during the pandemic and promoting a sense of belonging by respecting and accommodating these differences.
3. **Confidence:** Signifying both having trustworthy confidants for mutual support and faith in the organization and its leadership.

Internal Communication's Function and Impact

While the responsibility for fostering a sense of belonging extends beyond internal communication, we play a crucial role. This involves considering effective channels for meaningful connection, actively listening to employees, relaying their perspectives to leadership, and crafting clear and transparent communications.

Clarity becomes particularly vital in the context of hybrid working. To address related queries, attentive listening is essential. David Norton from CommsQuest Consulting highlights their approach:

"We conduct listening exercises to encourage employees to express their thoughts openly. While we often inquire about their understanding of the business vision, we sometimes overlook asking, 'how are you?' When individuals feel acknowledged, they perceive value and, ultimately, a sense of belonging.

"After these listening sessions, we collaborate with leadership to construct a narrative reflecting the gathered insights. This narrative not only encapsulates what we've heard but also presents a vision for the future—a collective journey for employees with a glimpse of the destination's atmosphere."

Fostering Inclusion and Diversity: A Crucial Responsibility

For numerous individuals within our organizations, the fracture of their sense of belonging predates the pandemic and the advent of hybrid working—it often never existed in the first place.

Annique Simpson, Change Comms Business Partner at A2 Dominion, defines belonging as the psychological safety within a team—an ability to express one's whole self at work—and the presence of individuals in the organization with whom she identifies.

"Belonging, for me, extends beyond whether or not I see my colleagues face-to-face. I aspire to work for organizations that are deliberate and authentic in their pursuit of inclusion and diversity, taking a public stand on issues I care deeply about, such as anti-Black racism.

"I also believe we must be cautious not to overly engineer belonging. It's a profoundly human experience that needs to unfold organically. While we can foster an environment that encourages belonging, we must avoid turning it into a perfunctory checkbox exercise devoid of meaning."

Annique also emphasizes the crucial role of internal communication in supporting an inclusive organization that, in turn, nurtures a sense of belonging.

"We need to listen to a diverse range of employees, considering their perspectives on the topics we communicate, incorporating and amplifying different voices, and challenging ourselves regarding the individuals featured in our communications—do we consistently showcase the same faces?

"We must also acknowledge that inclusion holds different meanings for different people, and not everyone desires involvement. As long as the door remains open for them to participate when they choose, it's essential to respect those boundaries."

Clearly, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to belonging, especially in the midst of fundamental changes in the way we work. Instead, our focus should be on listening to and understanding all our employees, providing clarity on the meanings of both belonging and hybrid working, and communicating with empathy and compassion.

Rather than viewing this transition as a challenge, Isabel suggests reframing our perspective:

"Ultimately, the pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to reaffirm what we belong to, why it matters, and how it makes a difference."