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Face time vs. flexibility

■ When Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer called employees back to the office, she set off a firestorm over remote workers. All agree, though, that collaboration is key.

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GOODMAN



MAYER

Years ago, on the legal beat at The Miami Herald, I often collaborated with other reporters and editors in the newsroom who weighed in on my story ideas and worked side by side to move a project in a bigger, better direction. Now that I work at home, I miss the back-and-forth banter that can lead to ramped up creativity. And I can understand why companies are taking strong measures to step up collaboration.

Today, the buzz word in business is collaboration, the 21st century driver of innovation and the inspiration behind corporate decision making. The focus on collaboration has led Burger King to take down the walls between its cubicles. It triggered Yahoo's announcement last week to bring remote workers back to the office. And in October, Apple even attributed executive management changes to a need to encourage more collaboration between the company's hardware, software and services teams.

This intensified push for face-

to-face interaction and information sharing comes at a time when workers are pushing for flexibility, begging the question: Can a collaborative culture be created without impeding work/life balance?

In a bold move last week, Yahoo's CEO Marissa Mayer argued in a memo banning remote working that collaboration happens when people are working side-by-side. "Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people and impromptu team meetings. Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home. We need to be one Yahoo! and that starts with physically being together."

The backlash against Mayer's banning of telecommuting work was swift and angry. Telecommuting and work/life advocates worried aloud that Mayer was attempting to reverse flexible workplace advances. Outspoken

● TURN TO FLEXIBILITY, 6B

The debate over remote workers intensifies

• FLEXIBILITY, FROM 8B

CEO Richard Branson called her decision “a backwards step in an age when remote working is easier and more effective than ever.”

But can anyone really argue that Mayer is wrong to feel that there is value in the conversations that arise when people are physically together in a room? There’s a reason that Google has configured its offices with a lunch room extraordinaire. It’s to keep people on campus and working together.

Most workplace experts believe the best practices in collaboration strike a happy medium — allowing workers to come to the office some of the time but also manage their own schedules.

Perna Gupta, chief product officer at Smule, a music app developer, has come up with her ideal solution, which she recently explained in the *New York Times*. She believes employees should have the flexibility and proper tools to work when and where they want but that the office should remain a gathering place to communicate ideas. After Smule bought her company, Khush, she pushed for the same schedule she had previously instituted; employees come to the office three days a week for five hours, starting at noon, allowing for collaboration. Otherwise, they work from wherever they want.

Attorney Ronald Kam-

mer, who manages the Miami office of law firm Hinshaw & Culbertson, says employers have no choice but to find middle ground if they want to keep top talent. “Banning flexibility could lead to losing brain power.”

In law, Kammer has found firms have to be nimble to keep their talented attorneys and most allow myriad flexible arrangements — including working on occasion from vacation homes. Firms also must adopt the right technology to work with legal teams spread across the country. “Clients want the best legal minds working together,” he says. “They don’t care if they’re doing that from the same office or remotely.”

Most companies, though, are struggling to find a structure that satisfies the needs of employers and employees. Corporate futurist Christian Crews, principal of AndSpace Consulting in Fairfield, Ct., says companies with the greatest competitive advantage are “managing the tension between getting engagement from employees who can make their own hours with the tension of getting critical mass in a building to create innovative new approaches to business.”

Crews says requiring employees to work from the office isn’t enough; Collaboration takes management that is forward-thinking and open to embracing technology that facilities brainstorming,

along with an office configuration that encourages serendipitous run ins. “It’s about taking it beyond Post-it notes on a wall or huddling around a white board.” Futurists studying how to encourage and improve face-to-face collaboration are looking at new tools for running meetings, he says.

At the same time, experts are studying how to get more from virtual collaboration. Citrix, headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, has developed technologies that allow workers to hold virtual meetings, share documents and join together in online work rooms. Now, the company is creating platforms to enter virtual conference rooms where you can actually see who is in them before deciding to enter.

Brett Caine, senior vice president and general manager of the Online Services Division of Citrix, says he sees the benefit of face-to-face meetings, but the advanced technology to allow online collaboration has made the experience richer. “With HD video, it’s as if you are sitting around a conference table sharing content and looking at the emotional reactions.” However, he says, “you have to want to cooperate this way.”

At Citrix, 86 percent of employees work remotely at least some of the time during the week. Teams are spread across the globe and have webcams on their computers. It is an expectation that a colleagues are

working from somewhere other than the office. And, it’s a model that works, which is why Citrix is continually improving technology around online collaboration, Caine says. “We believe that notion that being in office is rule right now, but increasingly in the future it will be the exception.”

For now, at least, group meetings are sometimes irreplaceable. A few weeks ago, Miami PR firm owner Tadd Schwartz called his staff together for an impromptu brainstorming session. About a dozen account executives sat in a circle on the floor and couch tossing out ideas for how to tie Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign into more business for its grocery chain client. One suggestion met with giggles, but within seconds a colleague came up with an alternative. “That back-and-forth banter, that’s where collaboration comes into play,” Schwartz says.

Finding the right balance is one of his biggest challenges, Schwartz says. “Offering employees the option to work from home from time-to-time is something we do, but I know for a fact we work better and are more creative as a unit in the office where we are interacting.”

Workplace columnist *Cindy Krischer Goodman* is CEO of *BalanceGal*, a provider of news and advice on how to balance work and life. Connect with her at balancegal@gmail.com or worklifebalancingact.com.