

Culture ***catalysts.***

How live events can help to
**accelerate corporate culture
in modern times.**

Introduction.



Corporate culture plays a critical role in the success of any business, with a traceable impact on the bottom line. Despite its universal recognition as important, it is a complex and daunting challenge that today's Chief People Officers must confront, particularly given the talent difficulties they face in these modern times.

This paper delves into the soft and "peopley" nature of culture and sheds light on how the rise of hybrid working has complicated the ability of corporations to shape it. We also examine the fierce competition for talent, with a focus on the attitudes and influence of younger generations.

Through Freeman EMEA's proprietary research with HR professionals, culture experts and live event professionals, we have identified four "**Culture Catalysts**" that can serve as a foundation for accelerating positive cultural change. These include the significant value of live events in driving corporate culture and the potential of blended, intentional, and conscious experiences to cater to the diverse needs of today's workforce. We believe that by leveraging these strategies, corporations can boost innovation, retention, and productivity, ultimately driving success in the long term.

We hope you enjoy this paper and find it both useful and interesting. We would love to continue this conversation, please get in touch.

Jason Megson.

Managing Director | **Freeman EMEA**

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The culture **problem.**

I don't expect anything in the place I work as **it only leads to disappointment.**

RESPONDENT

Freeman HR Professionals Survey 2023

Does this quote describe the kind of place you'd like to work?

Of course not. That's because most of us would recognise it as the symptom of a workplace with a culture problem.

In a recent survey of 300 HR professionals Freeman EMEA set out to explore how the post pandemic workplace and hybrid working (where employees are offered a mix of in-office and remote working) is impacting companies' ability to manage their culture.

Effective culture can account for 20-30% differential in corporate performance **when compared to "culturally unremarkable" competitors.**

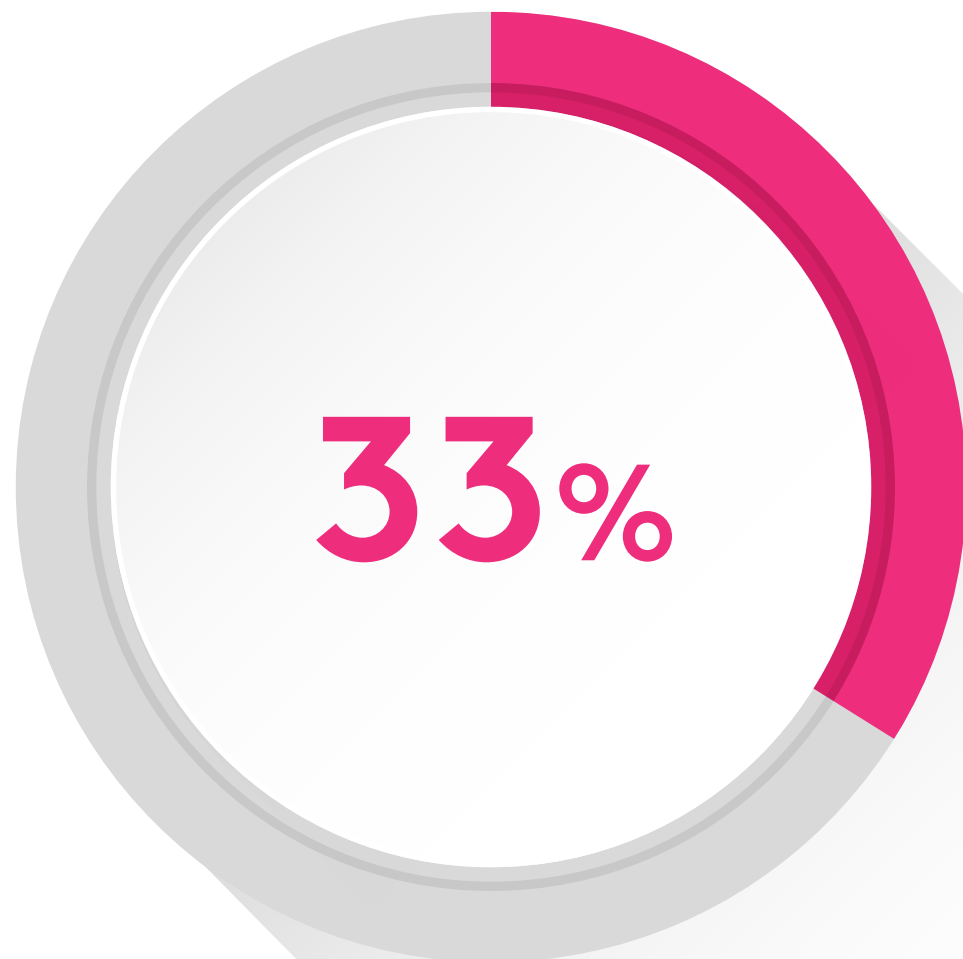
PROF JAMES L HACKETT

The Culture Cycle (2011)



We were curious to explore how...

the shift to hybrid working, coupled with intense competition for talent, and the needs of a younger and arguably more exacting workforce is impacting companies' ability to grow an effective culture. And most importantly, what can be done about it? And how can live events play a role?



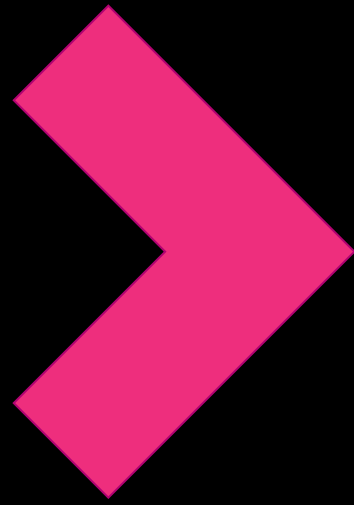
A positive corporate culture delivers 33% revenue increase¹

A positive corporate culture makes for higher engagement of employees and a 2x performance increase²



1. What The Ideal Workplace Of The Future Looks Like, According To Millennials (forbes.com)
2. <https://www.theforage.com/blog/basics/generation-z-statistics>

Culture matters.

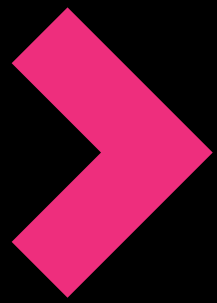


We currently see that CEOs and CPOs are facing enormous challenges - they are reengineering their business in the wake of the pandemic and the dawn of technology advances such as AI. They can't rely on the MBWA (management by walking about) tactics of yesteryear and are having to relook processes, systems, and corporate culture in order to future-proof their business.

Corporate Culture is critical to successful business, it has a traceable impact on performance all the way to the bottom line and is now a factor in M&A valuations. That is why it makes sense for employers to do everything they can to ensure they actively work to create a culture that supports and engages their staff. Since people first started to study corporate culture in the 1950's, it has been universally acknowledged as important, complex and hard to solve. With today's forces and shifts in working patterns, it is proving to be even more critical and complex.



Culture **feels.**



It's the way
the place smells.

SAM PHILLIPS

Founder and Director - RepresentNation

Before we get to solutions, we looked at what corporate culture is. We asked HR professionals and culture experts and we found general agreement: ***Culture is how a place smells and how it feels. It is an intangible emotional connection with the people you work with.*** And this is exactly what makes corporate culture such a complex management challenge. It is soft and “peopley”.

There was also agreement on what culture isn't. It is not what is written down, the guidelines and the policies. We spoke to ***Sam Phillips, a Diversity, Equality, Inclusion and Culture expert.*** She explained that a common pitfall for management teams is that they believe that culture is something enshrined by policy, as if the act of documenting corporate values is in itself enough to create a positive culture. The policy on paper isn't what makes culture change. It is the consistent and daily example that a company sets from top to bottom. Being clear about unwanted behaviours. Taking consistent action to stop them. Creating an environment where negative behaviours can safely be called out. Showing what behaviours are wanted and celebrating them.

Culture components.

So far we have learned that culture is complex, soft and not created by policy. But to understand how hybrid working might be impacting the ability of corporations to influence it, it helps to have a framework.

Researchers have identified six core components³ that are common across organisations that do culture well.

THE 6 COMPONENTS OF CULTURE

1 ▶ **Vision:**

This sets the North Star for an organisation, a clear statement about the purpose of the organisation, for example “a world without Alzheimer’s”

2 ▶ **Values:**

Guidelines on the behaviours and mindset

3 ▶ **Narrative:**

the positive and inspiring stories and rituals that make up the organisations history



4 > **Practices:**

How an organisation operates on a daily basis

5 > **People:**

You need great recruitment to identify talent that has the both right skills and will contribute to the culture you want to grow

6 > **Place:**

Place shapes culture. It impacts values and behaviours. For example, open environments engender collaboration; certain cities or locations can even foster a desired culture.

Hybrid working would appear to be little threat to **Vision**, **Values** and in the short term even the **Narrative** of a company can survive relatively unscathed. But the **People**, **Practices** and **Place** aspects of culture are more vulnerable in a world of hybrid working and at a time when workplace practices appear to be shifting rapidly.

Corporate culture **post covid.**

Read any recent article about workplaces and there's no doubt about it, they've changed. Workplace change is nothing new; over the decades we have seen shifts in demographics, employee needs, technology and skills. But the Covid years, a generational shift and intense competition for talent are all having a profound impact.

The Covid years were a catalyst, accelerating the uptake of new working formats, and allowing people to see that things can be, or even need to be, different. And though Covid didn't invent hybrid or remote working (both have been commonplace, especially in global corporations, for decades) it did send the hybrid model mainstream.

Then there's the influence of younger generations. Millennials, together with their younger cousins from Generation Z, are set to make up the lion's share of the global workforce by 2030. Estimates vary widely, but it seems realistic to say the two generations together will make up about 75%⁴ of the total. It's the attitudes and influence of these younger generations that will matter most for workplace culture in the near future.

4. What The Ideal Workplace Of The Future Looks Like, According To Millennials (forbes.com)

THREE POINTS STAND OUT:

1 ➤ **Loyalty:**

Employee loyalty is far less important to this younger cohort than it was for older workers. They've grown up in times when few "jobs for life" exist. Economic uncertainty has influenced job hopping behaviour as younger workers chase for increased salaries just to be able to survive.

2 ➤ **Values:**

They're more likely to look for roles that deliver on job satisfaction, ongoing success and are aligned with their personal values. For GenZ this behaviour is even more pronounced. They expect employers to align with their values.

3 ➤ **Location:**

There's an increased expectation that remote work will be an option. 64% of Gen Z insist on or prefer remote working⁵. It's one of the factors leading to an employment crunch.

Currently need people in the office 3 days per week to ensure company culture retained, but this has met resistance from employees.

RESPONDENT

Freeman HR Professionals Survey 2023

5. <https://www.theforage.com/blog/basics/generation-z-statistics>

Virtual training is over-subscribed though,
with embarrassingly few opting for
'in-person' options.

RESPONDENT

Freeman HR Professionals Survey 2023

There seems to be a move towards more irl
meetings although it's proving difficult to sell
the concept to staff and stakeholders,
especially amongst the younger demographic.

RESPONDENT

Freeman HR Professionals Survey 2023

The culture **war**.

The battle for talent is real. In the UK, the number of vacancies equals the number of unemployed people⁶. A recent study by Mercer⁷ reveals that:

- **99% of organisations** are facing talent challenges
- **89% of CEOs** reported that talent challenges are having a negative impact on their business
- **50% of executives** anticipating that their organisation is not set up to meet these challenges

While employers struggle to find people with the skills (and cultural fit) they need, employees have more opportunity to be choiceful in who they work for and that choice will be increasingly influenced by experiencing a positive corporate culture.

We asked our Survey respondents whether culture was important to their senior team in the recruitment and retention of talent. **59%** said “yes”.

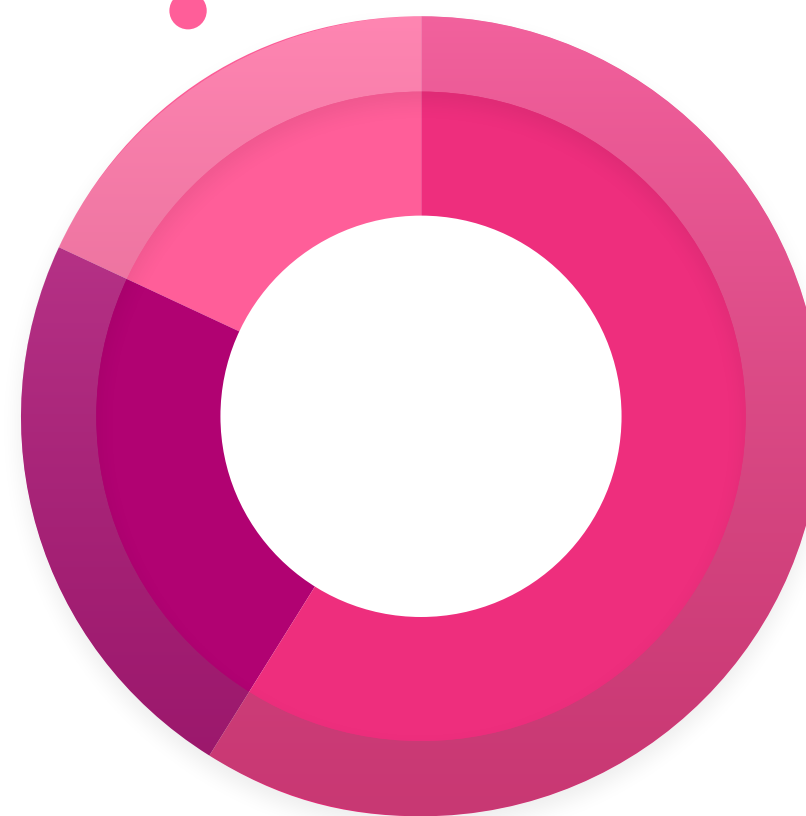
➤ **Is your company culture a central tool for recruiting and retaining employees?**

Not sure

18%

No

23%



Yes

59%

6. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/jobsandvacanciesintheuk/january2023>

7. 2023 Global Talent Trends Study | Mercer

Other surveys with senior management put the importance higher. Mercer Consulting have been working on this challenge, and through a survey of nearly 11,000 Executives, HR Leaders and Employees they have identified five action areas for winning in the talent market. Their winning tactics are tightly aligned to the People and Place elements that support a vibrant corporate culture.

CULTURAL SHIFTS THAT WIN TALENT

Create a relatable environment

- listen and adapt to your employees' needs; build culture and practices that are values-driven and adaptive by design

Work in partnership with your employees

- build business resilience through ensuring equity and inclusion are embedded in your talent models

Support employee well-being

- encourage healthy, rewarding, and sustainable work behaviours

Build for skill improvement

- continue to invest in building the workforce of the future through training and a mindset of lifelong learning

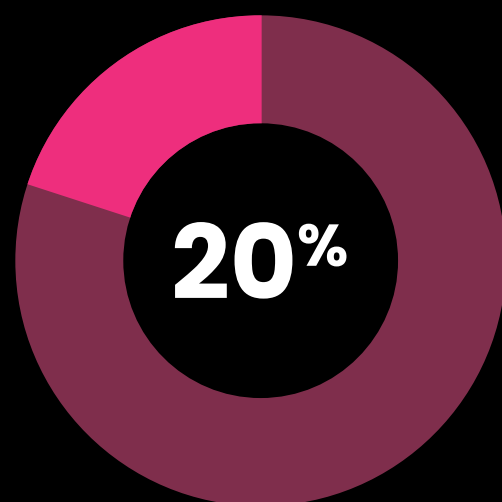
Unlock employee energy

- redesign work, working and the workplace to meet talent challenges

Virtual culture.

There are notable upsides to remote working: a perceived increase in democratisation and reduction in hierarchies, a greater sense of wellbeing and safety, increased productivity and beneficial new ways of working. However, the newness of the model means that business are left struggling with the downsides, and in particular those that important to corporate culture;

- **Reduction in social bonds** – it's harder to build up social networks when remote interactions tend to be task based, rather casual in an office
- **Virtual Fatigue** – with task based virtual connections, there's not enough ways to understand corporate goals, or get the training and skills needed
- **Virtual ineffectiveness** – virtual replacements for causal connections are not generally effective. They work for some teams and industries, but for many, they are not a replacement
- **Innovation Impact** – although settling down for the day-to-day running of the business, virtual is not optimal for innovation and growth



In our survey, **20% of people reported that they were using virtual meetings** as a way to maintain their culture, and worryingly, 2/3rds of them said it was the only tool they were using.

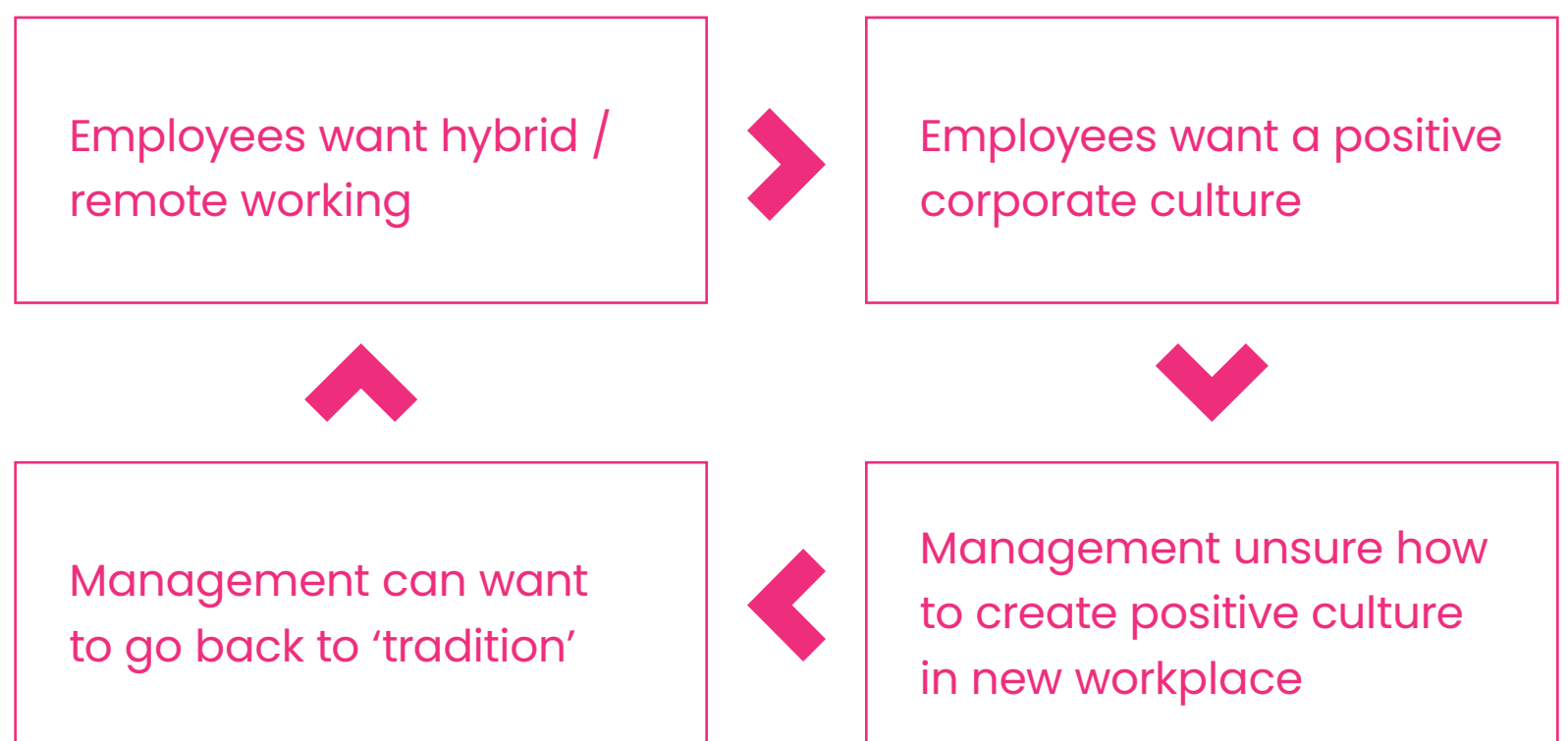
The culture paradox.

We have established that creating & maintaining a positive corporate culture, a “healthy” organisation that people enjoy working for and which encourages the best work possible, should be a priority for any business. This is the key to talent attraction, retention and productivity. We’ve also seen the importance of paying close attention to the People and Practice elements of the McKinsey model to adapt to the changing workplace.

But what about Place? With hybrid working and the ‘nowhere office⁸’ being the norm, how do we ensure we don’t lose the value of getting people together in the same physical space? There are some tricky tensions to manage.

- **Younger generations in the workforce have a preference for hybrid working** – but equally important to them is their ability to connect with others and to grow their skills.
- **Managers feel that remote working makes it harder to maintain a positive corporate culture** – but few have the skills to work through the challenges and so resort back to what they know: trying to get people back to the office.

So, we end up with the culture paradox, a set of contradictory circumstances, where the desire for flexible working can work against the need for a positive culture. Which in turn does not help retain people who don’t want to be there.



HAVING IN-PERSON MEETINGS AND EXPERIENCES IMPROVES EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT BY 2.5x, INCREASES RETENTION 2x AND IMPROVES EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE OF WORKING FOR THE COMPANY 2x⁹

Leadership want 'in person' but nobody else does.

RESPONDENT

Freeman HR Professionals Survey 2023

[We're] Forcing personnel into the office.

RESPONDENT

Freeman HR Professionals Survey 2023

Culture **catalysts.**

Through our research, we have identified four Culture Catalysts: when balanced, these principles support positive culture in the new workplace:

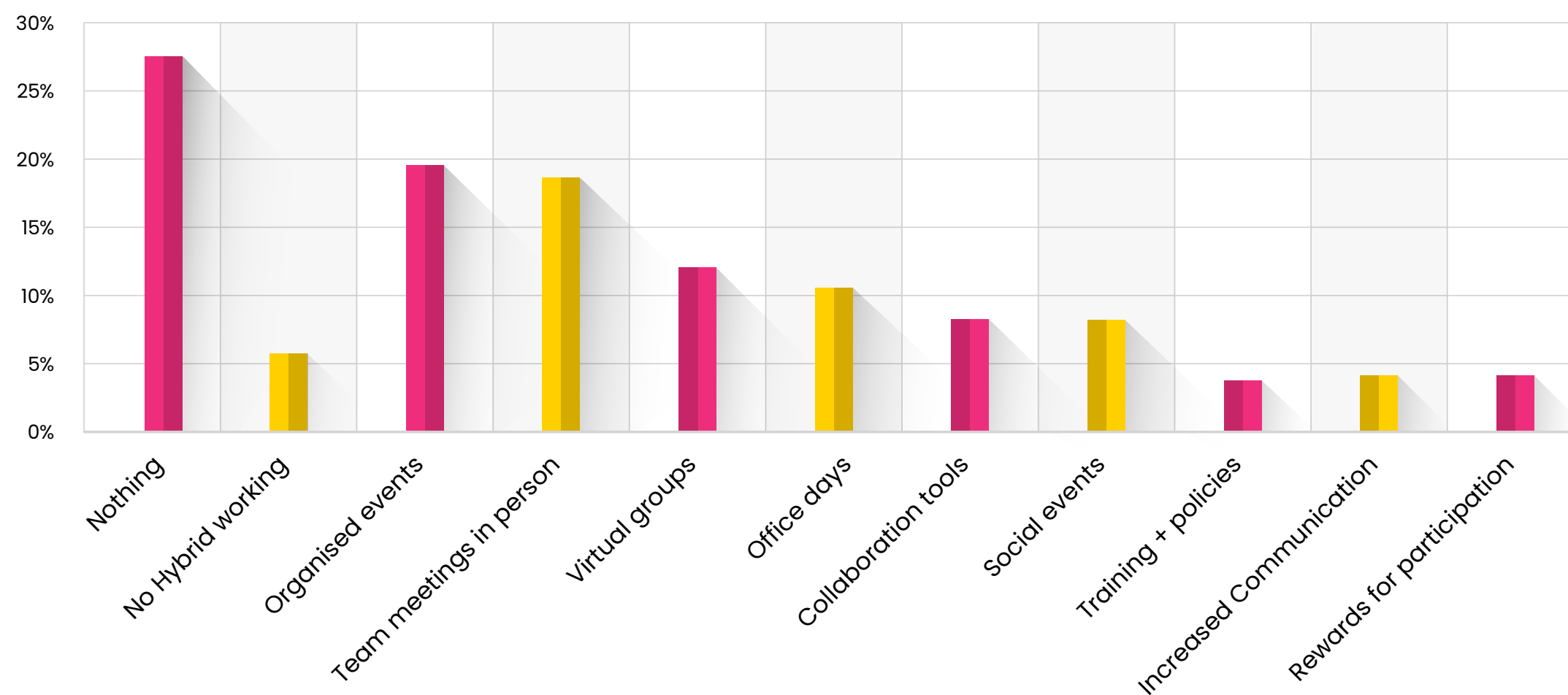
- 1 ➤ **Embrace hybrid working** – it's here, it is not going away. Empower your teams and treat it as a positive way of working rather than something to be endured.
- 2 ➤ **Improve virtual working skills** – Upskill of management and teams. Make sure they have the tools and skills to effectively work virtually and give management (especially middle management) the skills to support this.
- 3 ➤ **Change the role of the office** – make it a space for collaboration and connection, and information sharing, not just a bank of desks – embrace the 'great renovation.'
- 4 ➤ **Create in person moments that matter** – by making live company events work harder and smarter for you and your teams.

Many organisations are going to fail at the first step – actively embracing hybrid working as a positive change in corporate behaviour. Not every job and role can do that, but when it is possible, they'll likely find the desire for it will never go away now and this is going to be crucial in attracting new talent to companies.

Creating in person moments that matter

In our survey we asked Human Resources professionals what they have been doing to build and maintain a positive culture. Over a quarter of respondents feel that their organisation is taking no action on corporate culture – most of them seeing no action or it not being seen as important; others because budgets are not in place.

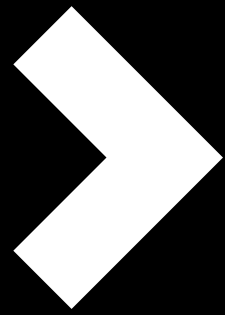
Culture catalysts in the workplace



Of those actively working on culture, the main activity identified was getting people together. They cited a range of tactics including organised events (e.g. conferences and training), regular in person team meetings or mandated office days. It's clear that virtual and hybrid events will remain with us, but their growth may not be as large as predicted at the height of the pandemic, 97% of event professionals expected to see hybrid events prevail¹⁰. However in-person is back with force.

Our research is backed up by evidence from the corporate travel sector, where live event attendance is cited as one of the drivers for increases in corporate travel in 2023.

10. <https://welcome.bizzabo.com/reports/evolution-of-events-report>.



75% – OF RESPONDENTS BELIEVE
IN-PERSON EVENTS FACILITATE MORE
SOCIAL INTERACTION, **THE ABILITY TO
BOND WITH CO-WORKERS/CLIENTS.**¹¹

In-person meetings and events have proven to be the most effective way to drive employee wellness and retention, instil company culture and corporate values, improve team bonding, and increase professional development.

AMEX GLOBAL MEETINGS AND EVENTS¹²

11. <https://www.ahla.com/news/survey-77-business-travelers-64-workers-say-return-business-travel-more-important-ever>

12. <https://www.amexglobalbusinesstravel.com/content/uploads/2022/10/2023-Global-Meetings-and-Events-Forecast-opt.pdf>

Events

build culture.

Across our research, the conclusions on the value of in person events and activities are unanimous.

They're an effective way to:

- instil company culture and corporate values
- drive employee wellness
- Increase retention
- improve team bonding
- increase professional development
- Improve innovation for business and ops strategies

There are clear benefits to ensuring there are organised events as part of ongoing working practices to build and maintain culture.

For all organisations, even those that are fully remote, getting people physically together is an essential tactic for creating a successful corporate culture.

Automattic, the company behind Wordpress, have famously always been remote, with people working from where they choose across 97 countries¹³. Automattic designed for a distributed company from the start, with effective tools to support social connections across teams, yet they still get together for a week every year as a whole company and set aside another two to three weeks a year for team get togethers. For Automattic, this is about having shared goals and directions, created, and communicated directly.

13. Automattic working approach: <https://automattic.com/how-we-work/>

The types of events reported in our survey ranged in scale from all-company down to the smaller teams, which could be functional with all levels or management groups. There is an appetite to do more in the space.

55% of our survey said they are planning in-person company events, (against 19% that are using them already) which indicates that companies are slowly incorporating them back into their working approach.

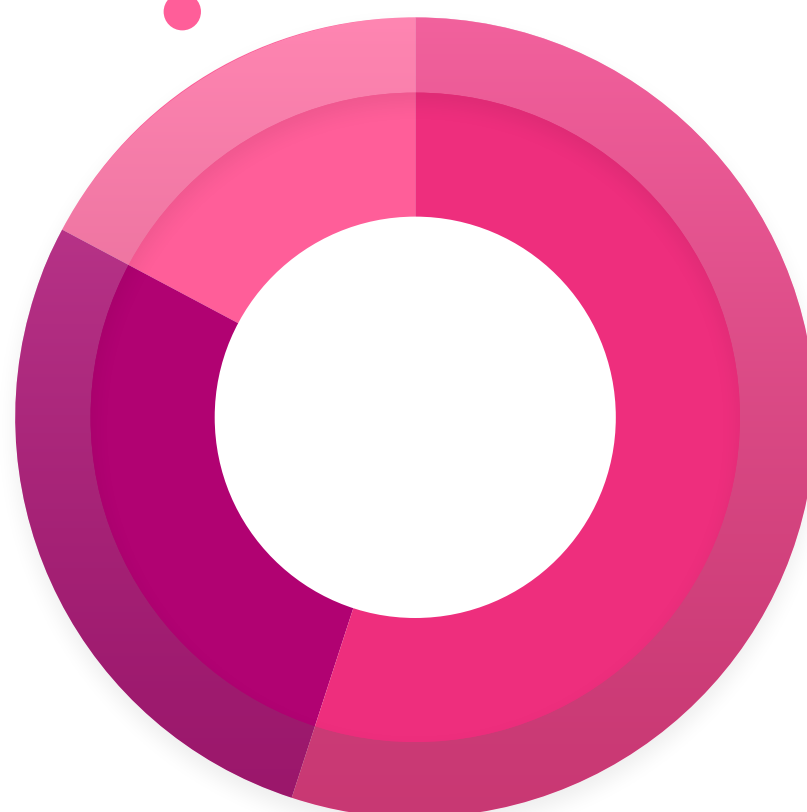
➤ Are you planning in-person company events?

Not sure

17%

No

28%



Yes

55%

Whilst it is clear that events are increasing and seen as a valuable tool for growing culture, it's also clear that they'll need to evolve; they'll have to work harder and smarter. This often one of the few times staff meet each other in person and is therefore an opportunity that companies should ensure that they are maximising.

Company too large for these but **having six monthly larger team meetings.**

RESPONDENT

Freeman HR Professionals Survey 2023

I expect monthly in-person team meetings that will also involve 'bonding' sessions.

RESPONDENT

Freeman HR Professionals Survey 2023

Horizontal **culture.**

For in person events to play a larger role in growing an organisation's corporate culture, you need to ensure that all employees see them as valuable.

We spoke to Phil Burgess (*former Chief People Office at CSpace, now co-Founder of Within - building connections in the workspace*). He wisely advises caution about trying to solve everything with just one big event. Burgess says that the key is to be intentional in their design to ensure what the event offers is truly great, rather than trying to do everything, and doing everything badly.

Burgess also recommends putting in place support for smaller networks, communities of interest or peer-to-peer connections. Without in-office activity, junior staff can often lose the opportunity to build their networks. If they are at an event with multiple management levels it may be hard for them to build those vital horizontal connections. So, it is important to design opportunities to connect horizontally across levels, not just vertically.

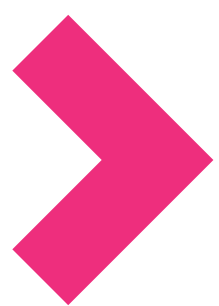
Events as a **culture catalyst.**

Corporate events can no longer be mere lip service to engagement and growth. Employee expectations have changed, especially within the younger generations and corporate events now need to demonstrate clear personal value and provide opportunities for professional growth.

To connect with today's workforce, events must be authentic, personalised, and aligned with employees' career aspirations and desired culture¹⁴. This requires a deep understanding of the blended space between formal, informal, and social experiences, as well as the ability to design in-person events without limits. Companies that embrace this generational shift will see increased talent attraction, retention, and productivity.

Companies must also consciously create inclusive programs and experiences that reflect the needs and values of their workforce. By being intentional, they can accelerate corporate culture and community, fostering innovation and driving employee wellness.

In the moments where people are brought together, corporate culture and community are accelerated. As the war for talent intensifies in a time of hybrid working and virtual boardrooms, events are one of the catalysts that plays a huge role in accelerating positive corporate culture, driving employee wellness and fostering innovation. Companies that recognise this and invest in meaningful events will reap the rewards of a happier, more engaged, and more productive workforce.



LIVE EVENTS HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE
VALUABLE TO BUSINESS THAN THEY
ARE TODAY.



In the moments where
people are brought
together, **corporate
culture and community
are accelerated.**

Freeman EMEA



HOW WE CRAFTED '**CULTURE CATALYSTS**'.

This white paper was developed by **Freeman EMEA** in collaboration with Strat House, a strategy practice designed for brands in the 21st Century.

We analysed global trends relating to corporate culture in the modern hybrid world of working and conducted a survey with 300 UK based HR professionals currently working in large businesses to assess the current challenges and actions they are taking in building corporate culture. We also conducted interviews with experts across human resources, corporate culture, DE&I and live events to discuss the themes in this paper and potential solutions.

Thanks to everyone who contributed to this conversation.

