



What Does a Hybrid Workforce Look Like for Urgent Care?

Urgent message: As COVID-19 has enabled many non-patient-facing employees to work from home, now urgent care operators must grapple with returning some of those employees to the office or otherwise managing a “hybrid” workforce.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has changed every facet of daily life. Although its impact on the world of medicine is obvious, the virus has also affected how business is conducted across every sector. That includes the administrative side of urgent care.

Companies around the world have adopted remote work policies or hybrid business models out of necessity. However, with the end of the pandemic in sight, many are wondering what comes next.

For urgent care operators, continuing with a hybrid model comes with pros and cons. While the COVID-19 pandemic may have started the work-from-home revolution, it doesn't appear to be going anywhere once the virus subsides.

Hybrid models allow employers to operate with maximum cost efficiency and provide access to a wider talent pool. On the other hand, it's more difficult to build a corporate culture and many employees struggle to develop a healthy work-life balance. In terms of health-care administration, the issue of privacy also comes into play.

So, while a hybrid model may be effective for some, urgent care owner-operators will need to carefully weigh their options when determining how to proceed.

Hybrid Work Background

Though it might seem simple to shift an in-person workforce to a remote model using all of the technology available today, doing so isn't easy. Managing remote employees is very different from doing so in-person and comes with a unique set of challenges.

Even so, it's clear that remote and hybrid workforces



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are poised to become the new “normal” as the pandemic ends. Although many companies will eagerly return to in-person operations, others have enjoyed the benefits of remote work and will want to continue functioning that way.

The same is true for employees. According to data from Gartner for HR, 64% of employees would like to continue working from home for some or all of the time once the pandemic ends.¹ Moreover, now that employees have had a taste of the remote work lifestyle, many will be hesitant to return to their in-person office job.

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Given the overwhelming demand for remote work, companies will have no choice but to adapt. A hybrid workforce model represents the best of both worlds.

It gives employees the flexibility to work when and where they want for the majority of the time. Hours spent in-person can then be focused on collaboration, team building, and productivity. This model works well for many businesses and delivers the benefits of remote work while limiting the drawbacks. However, for urgent care companies, things are a bit more complicated.

“It goes without saying that it’s impossible to shift a healthcare team entirely to remote work. Hands-on assessment and treatment is at the core of what an urgent care company does. As such, clinic-based personnel have no choice but to work on-site.”

How Do Urgent Care Companies Go Remote?

While most urgent care employees are patient-facing in a facility, urgent care businesses also rely on a team of administrative and support staff to operate successfully. While some of those individuals need to remain on-site (receptionists, managers, etc.) others can fulfill their roles at home.

Those working in areas like billing, accounting, HR, and IT do most of their work on a computer regardless of where they’re located. This means they can make the shift to remote work rather easily.

Of course, urgent care owner-operators need to take the changes associated with this shift into account. Managing a team of employees that rarely meets in-person is challenging. For instance, some employees struggle to remain productive due to the distractions that arise at home. Others have the opposite problem and find it difficult to put work away at the end of the day, leading to burnout and extreme stress.

Employers need to carefully monitor both ends of the spectrum to ensure their teams are operating efficiently and in a healthy manner. This is far easier to do when everyone is in a central location. Hybrid models are more difficult to manage because face-to-face meetings are rare and people may be working on different schedules.

Even so, adopting a hybrid model may be beneficial

for urgent care companies as the pandemic subsides. There are many advantages to consider.

Pros of Hybrid Models

Establishing a hybrid workforce has benefits for both the employer and employees. Ultimately, it helps reduce costs and improve satisfaction while giving an organization much more flexibility.

For employers, one of the biggest advantages has to do with money. When employees work remotely, office space can be reduced, printing costs plummet, and expenditures associated with brick-and-mortar locations start to disappear. Obviously, urgent care companies still need to maintain a physical presence. It’s possible, however, to decrease non-clinical office space—such as square footage in a separate building that’s leased for administrative and support staff.

Meanwhile, employers benefit from having a larger talent pool to recruit from. It’s just as easy to hire a remote medical billing expert that lives halfway across the country as one that lives in town. This helps keep companies competitive, with the best talent available. Moreover, allowing employees to work remotely if they choose to is a great way to boost retention.

For employees, there are also financial incentives. Working from home means less money is spent on commuting, lunch, and other day-to-day activities. The more important factor, though, is that employees gain flexibility and autonomy. Working from home isn’t for everyone. However, those who excel at it are able to be more productive by working in a comfortable environment and on their own terms. This allows employees to create a more desirable work-life balance.

In summary, the benefits of a hybrid model include:

- Decreased costs for both employees and employers
- Access to a wider talent pool
- Improved retention of current employees
- More flexibility and autonomy
- A better work-life balance and more comfortable work environment

Cons of Hybrid Models

While the benefits of a hybrid model are numerous, there are also serious drawbacks to consider. These issues are compounded by the unique nature of staff working for a company that deals with protected health information (PHI).

On a basic level, one of the biggest disadvantages of remote work is decreased collaboration. It’s easy for a workforce to become disjointed and stale when face-to-

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face meetings and interactions aren’t happening. Many employees feel disconnected from their peers and the company’s culture while working from home. This is especially true when some individuals are working remotely while others are on-site.

The biggest issue related to hybrid models for urgent care companies is privacy. Employees need to have a suitable workspace at home where they can safely and securely handle patient information. This is far easier to manage in-person and can be a challenge for companies using a remote model. Before implementing a hybrid policy, urgent care owners need to ensure that their remote employees have a dedicated home workspace and all the tools necessary to maintain patient data privacy.

While hybrid work can be a great tool for retention and recruiting, it can also be a drawback. Some people simply prefer working in-person and may not want to work from home on a long-term basis. Likewise, it’s difficult to develop and maintain an engaged, “sticky” culture when employees aren’t interacting regularly.

In summary, the disadvantages of a hybrid model include:

- Decreased collaboration and innovation
- Challenges related to patient data privacy
- Difficulty building and maintaining company culture
- Employees may feel disconnected and unhappy
- Retaining individuals who don’t like working remotely

In Conclusion

After the COVID-19 pandemic ends, the workplace will never look the same. The days of entire teams working in-person at a company office are likely gone forever. As more companies take advantage of remote and hybrid models, urgent care owner-operators should be aware of the pros and cons.

Making It Official: Creating a Work-from-Home Policy

To safeguard protected health information, a work-from-home policy should include the following elements:

- Employees should not allow any friends, family, etc. to use devices that contain PHI.
- Have each employee sign a confidentiality agreement to assure the utmost privacy when handling PHI.
- Provide encrypted, security-enabled technology or develop a bring-your-own-device policy with clear usage rules.
- Employees who store hard-copy (paper) PHI in their home office need a lockable file cabinet or safe to store the information.
- Employees need a shredder at their location for the destruction of paper PHI once it is no longer needed. The company needs to specify when it is ok to dispose of any paper records.
- Employees must follow the organization’s media sanitization policy for disposal of all PHI or devices storing PHI.
- Make sure employees disconnect from the company network when they are done working. Usually, IT configuring timeouts take care of this.
- Employees cannot copy any PHI to external media not approved by the company. This includes flash drives and hard drives. You may require all PHI to stay on the company network.
- Keep logs of remote access activity, and review them periodically. IT should disable any accounts as soon as access is no longer required.
- Mandate that any employees in violation of these procedures will be subject to the company’s sanction policy and/or civil and criminal penalties.

Adapted from: Meeting HIPAA Requirements. TotalHIPAA. Available at: <https://www.totalhipaa.com/hipaa-compliance-working-remotely>. Accessed May 7, 2021.

With proper management, a hybrid team of administrative and support staff members can be a win-win situation for urgent care companies. Adapting to a hybrid model that balances productivity, culture, and the needs of employees will be key to success in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as the world attempts to establish a new normal. ■

References

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