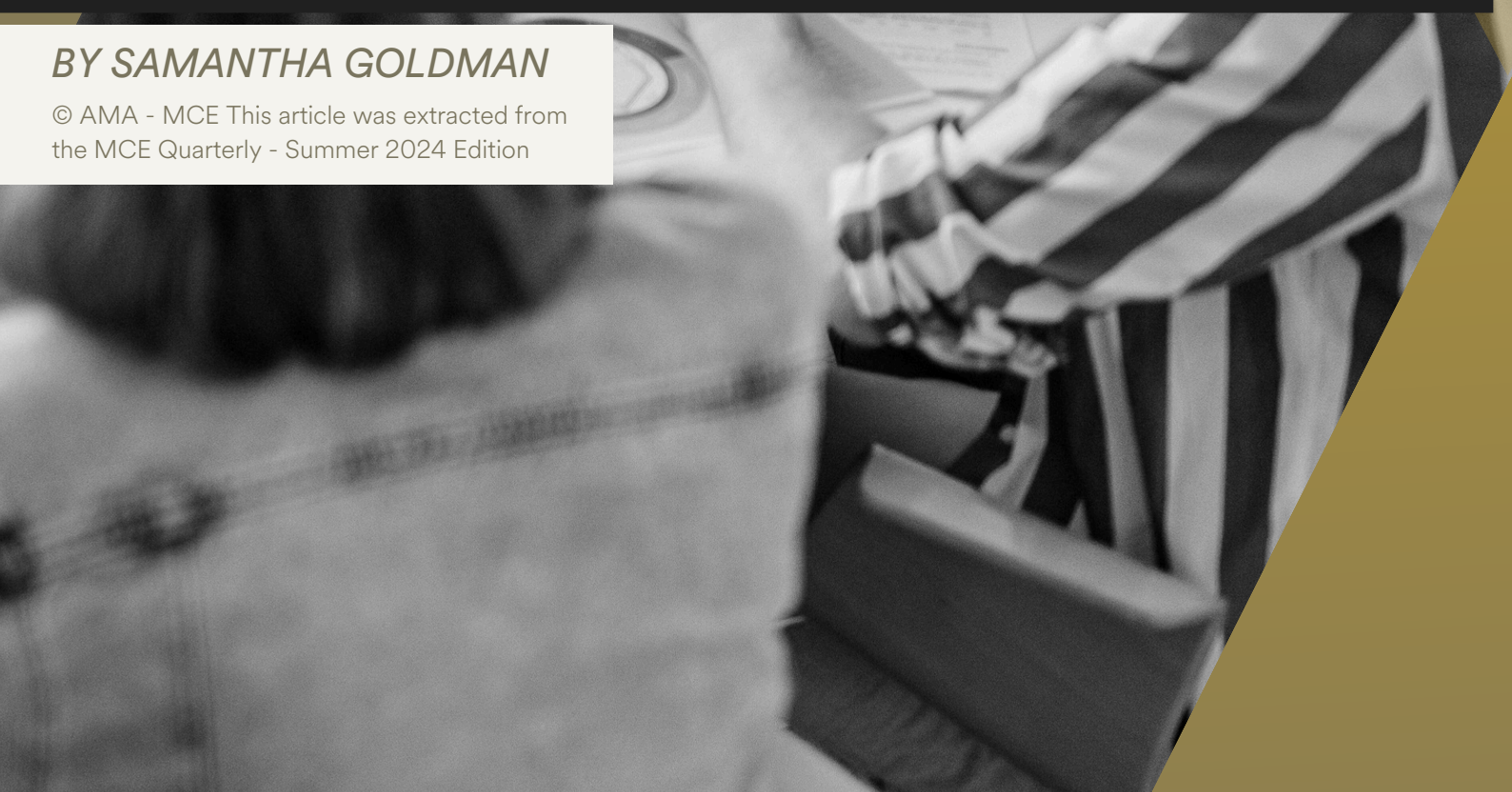




Does Hybrid Work Stifle Career Advancement— **PARTICULARLY FOR WOMEN?**

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Hybrid isn't new. That is, it's not new, but it's the new normal.

The hybrid work movement accelerated during the pandemic, but in many organizations, we've been doing it all along. This is especially true at enterprise companies, where you may have had team members in different locations, sometimes in different areas across the world, going back well before 2020.

The real adjustment was having to be fully remote while working from home. We were all shook up initially and then realized that hey, we can make this work. The lesson is that it's not really where you work, but in fact how you work—the methods and practices that you put into place—that makes all the difference.

An important insight we've gained is that for women, being in a more flexible work environment has given them the ability to take on roles that they may not have before. And they want to take on even more. In fact, McKinsey & Company's "Women in the Workplace 2023" study found that after the pandemic, roughly 80% of women expressed a desire to be promoted to the next level, compared with 70% before the pandemic.

This is even more true for women of color—88% expressed ambition for promotion, showing that the pandemic (and increased flexibility) didn't dampen women's career aspirations.

That's something that has proven true for me, but it has also meant that I've needed to adjust the way I engage with and lead my teams.

SOLVING FOR GROWTH AND CONNECTION

Distributed work isn't all upside, however. Something that I think really affects everyone, from a community perspective, is the disappearance of the "coffee chat" or water-cooler-style conversations that help form relationships, especially early in your career.

I've seen younger people, who are still trying to figure out their networks, mostly impacted by this. And I think it's on companies and the organizations within those companies to help identify other ways that we can create those moments for people. (Think: getting team members who live in the same area together on a regular basis, forming interest-based groups or channels, and even holding team or company offsite get-togethers.)

But it's not only companies' responsibility to help foster this kind of connection. This new environment has also forced women to create more networking opportunities for themselves within their company. What's important to note here is that it's not just about clocking in, clocking out, and how many days you're in the office. Rather, are the people that you need or want to connect with going to be in the office that day?

I tell women this: You need to take the initiative on that. You need to find those people. You need to reach out to them. You need to make the time because you're not just going to walk by them in the hallway and be able to have that quick conversation.

As an example, we're a fully remote company at Mural, but there's been an employee-driven initiative to open up two small offices—one in San Francisco and one in New York City—where we're giving people the option to go in so that they can connect with their colleagues. It's something that leadership is proud to support and get involved in, because we see how our employees are taking that initiative and wanting to build connections with their colleagues and also across departments.

Rather than a rewind to the "old ways," the way we're approaching this is as an opportunity for growth by trusting our employees to know how best to manage their time—and what time is best spent together versus working remotely.

DISTRIBUTED WORK IS THE FUTURE: WOMEN CAN LEAD THE WAY

As more women take on leadership roles, hybrid and distributed work enables us to lean in to our strengths, build new skills, and grow—while taking advantage of greater flexibility.

Flexibility. When it comes to flexibility, basically everyone agrees it's important, regardless of gender. I know a lot of women who have children and need to get home right after work. The same McKinsey study I referred to earlier found that “flexibility is especially valuable, with 38% of mothers with young children stating that without workplace flexibility, they would have had to leave their company or reduce their work hours.”

In the “before times,” when you had to be in the office every day, commute to work, clock in and clock out regardless of the shape of your work, all of this dampened women's ambition and put unnecessary restrictions on the way we work together. Now, I'm able to create a much better work-life balance—and it's more about creating the schedule that works for me.

And I'll go one step further: On a personal note, I'm pregnant! In our distributed work setup, I'm in control and able to decide when and how I tell people my news (welcome to my circle of trust). A friend and CEO told me that she went through the majority of her pregnancy without most people at her company knowing that she was pregnant. About a month before she went on leave, she informed the full company and made sure everyone understood the plan for while she was on leave. This ensured that no one treated her differently because she was pregnant.

Being able to work from home while pregnant has been amazing. Something as simple as scheduling doctor's appointments and not having to worry makes such a difference, not only for my career but also for my personal life. Knowing that I can adjust my schedule as I need to makes me feel incredibly fortunate. On the flip side, as I think about returning to the

office after maternity leave, I'm actually excited to have an office to go to. There are also benefits to compartmentalizing my workday and family time—the key factor is that I'm entrusted with making those judgment calls myself.

That's what employees want—and we're proving that it works better every day.



Intentionality. As a leader, it's more work to be intentional, but the best leaders are intentional ones. They're constantly thinking about how to improve things for their team and exploring different practices and structures that help work make sense for everyone.

So as a leader in a hybrid setting, you can't just do what you've always done. You need to change the way you work. If we're coming into the office, then—why is that? What, specifically, do we do on those days? With your weekly team meetings, how do you zero in and make sure that your other leaders or your direct reports know what to expect? Recently, I was at a dinner with several other

chief marketing officers. One particular connection of mine was talking about how she and her team are coming back into the office—they go to the office two or three days a week now—and how they have very programmed days together.

They've adjusted their calendar and their ways of working so that their time together is purposeful and focused. It can be as simple as saying something like, "OK, Wednesday is going to be an in-office day. What do we all do every Wednesday together to make sure that it makes sense for us to be in the office, versus just changing the location of where someone's desk is?"

But being intentional about your time together doesn't mean that 100% of your time is "productive," in the sense that it's directly related to business outcomes. You need to bring the same level of intentionality to how you build relationships and create an environment where people are comfortable being themselves.

For example, I take 30 minutes a week now to do "Coffee Chat Fridays" with the team—and this is something that I love and make space for because we're a remote team. It's my opportunity to have conversations with the team that are intentional, yes, but aren't formal.

And, if you do it right, you'll find that it actually does help the bottom line as well.

Structure. There's a simple Mural template that I like to use every week for my meetings with our VPs and direct reports.

This quick meeting template helps me prioritize and gives us a shared frame of reference for the rest of our week. It's also really important that I understand what is happening in a person's life outside of work—the type of things I might have caught up on when grabbing coffee on Monday morning. Lately, our favorite weekly icebreaker has been "What's high priority for you this week: at work and at home?"





Using this kind of format is especially important in a distributed context, because your team also knows what to expect and there is transparency and alignment across all the strategies and tactics that go into any successful campaign or product.

Those aren't things that I purposely did before. The same goes for team check-ins. In the past, I didn't say to myself, "It's Monday—I need to meet with all of my direct reports and check in with them on anything they want to share about their personal lives." Now, it's a natural aspect of most of our meetings.

By creating structure, you're able to become a better leader. Instead of worrying that people won't speak up because they're uncomfortable in the environment or there isn't a natural-feeling way to do it, it's about building systems that create those opportunities. I didn't use this much structure before coming to Mural, but now I can't imagine a meeting without it.

Templates and shared visual workspaces also help decision making in a distributed work environment because it's critical to get the blend of synchronous and asynchronous right. With structure, everyone can stay on the same page, regardless of what time zone they're in. We can still build that shared understanding and alignment, and move forward faster on projects because structure facilitates better teamwork.

Without it, we know teamwork isn't working. That's something that adversely affects women more than men as well—our own Teamwork Research Report found that 56% of women experience burnout due to poor teamwork, versus 49% of men. And this is true regardless of where they work.

As women are taking on more leadership roles in an evolving, but still flexible, environment, we need to make sure that we're intentional about what we're doing, and that we're changing the way we lead to best fit where work is going.

What that means is, we need to start putting these practices into place so that we can be amazing leaders for today—versus reverting to old habits or feeling bound by tradition rather than what we know works now. We're just scratching the surface of what's possible. It's not time to turn back. Distributed work is the future, and women are well positioned to be the next generation of business leaders. So let's give them the training and tools they need to make teamwork work, for everyone. AQ

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