

How the Hybrid Workplace Affects Collaborative Practices

Managing by Network Program Evaluation

Briefing Document (Updated January 2024)

Introduction

In the Spring 2023, the Partnership & Community Collaboration Academy (Academy), the National Conservation Training Center, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service co-hosted an evaluation of ***“How the Hybrid Workplace Affects Collaborative Practices”*** for the Managing by Network (MbN) Program. The goal of this evaluation is to support our federal community of practice to better understand the success factors necessary to collaborate in this "new normal" hybrid workplace that combines both virtual and in-person meeting spaces and public engagement mechanisms. The data collection and analysis were supported by Victoria Henk, a Master’s in Applied Psychology student at the University of Southern California.

The purpose of this document is to brief Managing by Network interested parties and our broader federal community of practice (CoP) on the objectives, findings, and implications of this program evaluation.

FAQs

1. What is Managing by Network?

The Managing by Network course is a public/private partnership designed to support employee development and grow a thriving partnership community of practice. Managing by Network is a live, six-month, 18-webinar course held virtually every year from January to June. The course teaches 22 competencies related to partnership and community collaboration. MbN is cohosted by the Partnership and Community Collaboration Academy and its six federal agency partners – BLM, NPS, USDA FS, USFWS, DOI Office of Collaborative Action and Dispute Resolution (CADR), and USACE Collaboration and Public Participation Center of Expertise (CPCX). There are over 1,200 graduates of MbN since the course was first offered in 2008.

2. What was the focus of the MbN Program evaluation?

This evaluation collected observations made by current federal employees who are graduates of the Managing by Network Program, with a focus on **external collaboration in the hybrid workplace** with both federal and non-federal partners, including public engagement and Tribal consultation.

2. Who was invited to participate, and what was the response rate?

Survey participants were invited from among the Academy’s 2,500+ members, to represent a diversity of partner federal agencies, supervisory and leadership experience, position responsibilities, geographies, and program areas across the nation. 146 current federal employees—all alumni of MbN— were invited to voluntarily participate in the survey. The response rate was 26%. The 38 survey respondents represent the following six federal agencies:

- Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
- National Park Service (NPS)
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
- US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)



- US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (USDA FS)
- US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

3. At the time of completing the survey (March 2023), where did respondents work?

Most survey respondents were working in a hybrid workplace (both teleworking and working onsite).

- 65% of respondents were working in a hybrid workplace.
- 22% of respondents were mostly teleworking.
- 13% of respondents were working mostly onsite.

4. What were some of the key take-aways from the survey findings?

Most participants cited **generally positive impacts to collaboration** with external partners from the shift to telework and a hybrid workplace. Several respondents noted that they were already conducting business with partners primarily through electronic and phone communications with occasional in-person interactions and that the sudden shift caused by the pandemic enabled them to have **access to additional technological tools which fostered increased connectivity, inclusivity, and partner participation**.

At the same time, some respondents noted that while it was easier to engage more participants as well as more diverse participants through virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom, WebEx, and Teams, there were still some concerns of voices being left unheard. **Virtual meeting platforms were not universally preferred for all external parties in every example.** For some populations like underserved communities as well as members of Native Nations and indigenous communities, respondents noted that in-person meetings were more effective ways to engage. In addition, for making “big decisions” and having difficult conversations, several survey respondents prefer in-person meeting opportunities over virtual platforms. Outside of this evaluation, Academy staff have also heard anecdotally that virtual platforms may offer some participants a greater sense of safety for discussing highly contentious community issues.

In general, many respondents shared that the nature of the hybrid workplace afforded them increased flexibility and new tools, mechanisms, and skills to meet the diverse needs of their external partners and audiences, which **resulted in partners being better informed and more prepared to work together**.

5. What were some of the most frequently cited benefits from the shift to telework and the hybrid workplace?

Diversity, Access and Inclusion	Coordination and Connectivity	Effectiveness and Efficiency
Greater access to agency leadership and staff / increased transparency with the public	Increased ease in convening partners, especially when geographically dispersed	More effective outcomes for NEPA and planning processes
Increased participation by partners and members of the public / “more voices at the table” (e.g., NEPA planning processes, partner meetings)	Increased (and more rapid) information exchange between partners and interested parties	Increased efficiency in working with permittees and partners (e.g., meeting outcomes, permit processing, information exchange)
Supportive in advancing the federal government’s DEIA goals	Ability to overcome common barriers such of geographic limitations, travel budgets, etc.	



6. What were some of the most frequently cited collaboration challenges from the shift to telework and the hybrid workplace?

The most frequently cited **challenges** to collaboration cited by survey respondents were:

- Difficulties utilizing and optimizing new technology tools
- Ensuring all voices are being heard during virtual meetings
- Informal, organic relationship building needed more intention
- Meeting fatigue
- Internet access/bandwidth challenges/poor webcam quality

7. Are there other important observations from the evaluation findings?

The sudden shift that many federal employees experienced during the pandemic from working onsite to telework forced federal agencies to quickly embrace information technology tools developed and offered by the private tech sector. Federal agencies have benefitted from modernizing their IT infrastructure. The day-to-day work of partnership practitioners especially has been impacted by this systems change. **Without the rapid adoption of the tech sector's products and services, agency partnerships and public planning processes would have been stymied.**

In addition, video conferencing meetings have replaced audio-only conference calls as the **new standard** for non-in-person discussion and engagement with external partners and members of the public. This new practice to share and see information simultaneously in real-time as well as see faces and body language (and sometimes pets 😊)—instead of hearing voices only—has generally **benefitted communication, camaraderie and relationship building, transparency and trust amongst external parties.**

8. What is important for MbN cohorts¹ to consider in its training programming moving forward?

There are several considerations for the MbN cohorts.

- a. This evaluation reinforced that **the 22 core competencies being taught during the MbN course are still relevant** and needed by partnership practitioners collaborating in the hybrid workplace.
- b. Not surprisingly, **meeting facilitation skills** was one of the most cited essential competencies as the demand for virtual and hybrid meetings quickly rose.² While participation in virtual meetings increased, some survey respondents felt ill prepared to effectively facilitate meetings with partners in the virtual and/or hybrid space.
- c. **Additional competencies** were identified by survey respondents as being essential to effective collaboration in the hybrid work environment. These identified competencies pertained to the following areas: **communication skills, technology proficiency, and flexibility.**
- d. **Collaborative file sharing³ and cross-organizational scientific data management⁴ continue to be an area of challenge for partnership practitioners.** These federal employees in particular need a higher degree of technology management proficiency relative to their agency peers who are not consistently working with external partners. Federal partnership practitioners, along with all

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² Note that the MbN Program started incorporating virtual meeting facilitation skills into the 2019 course curriculum and has been actively developing and modeling these skills throughout the delivery of the MbN flagship course.

³ Also identified in MbN Training Needs Assessments consistently since 2021.

⁴ Goldberg, L. (2018) *Capacity Building for Collaboration: A Case Study on Building and Sustaining Landscape-Scale Stewardship Networks in the 21st Century.*



members of the federal workforce, have raced up a learning curve pertaining to IT proficiency and agility, but the process is far from over. MbN cohosts might consider what employee training opportunities and IT/organizational practices can best address the collaborative technology gaps identified above.

- e. Future training needs assessments might incorporate questions related to **how supported practitioners feel in facilitating virtual and hybrid meetings as well as maintaining and sustaining a well-connected partner network in a hybrid work environment** that utilizes onsite and online communication practices and mechanisms. There can be a tendency to conflate running a virtual or hybrid meeting with running a partnership. Facilitating effective meetings is a component of facilitating a partner network towards achieving shared goals, but they are distinct competencies. Questions on training needs assessments should support respondents in differentiating between these competencies to ensure the usefulness of training needs assessment results.

9. What are key questions for federal agency leadership and decision makers to consider?

1. How is my agency preparing its partnership practitioners to be successful in the hybrid collaboration space? What opportunities might exist to better coordinate with sister agencies pertaining to this question?
2. How can my agency ensure that partnership practitioners are maximizing their use of the “new tools in their toolbox?” What are ongoing needs and persistent challenges? What changes should be considered?
3. How is my agency monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of partnership and community engagement meetings being held in person, virtually and in hybrid spaces? What are our indicators of success, and are these indicators shared by our federal partners?
4. Who at my agency can benefit from learning about these findings?

