



Making hybrid working work: Amplifying opportunity and reducing risk for businesses – People



For employees, remote or hybrid working provides reduced travel time and costs, more time for family and increased flexibility. For employers there is access to a wider talent pool, but conversely also more competition, if geography is no longer a restriction.

Employers and in particular their leaders and HR teams, have the weighty responsibility to ensure hybrid working is successful; both for employees and stakeholders. There are significant challenges such as maintaining productivity, employee wellbeing, preserving company culture, learning and development, ability to collaborate and avoiding inequalities. Now, with the government's recently announced consultation proposing changes to the way employees can request a flexible working arrangement, the pressure to make hybrid working successful, could be even greater.

If implemented, the changes are expected to encourage employers and employees to engage in more meaningful discussions around flexible working and employees would be able to request a flexible working arrangement from their first day of employment.

The wellbeing argument

Whilst working from home certainly has some challenges, the vast majority don't want to go back to working in an office full time. In Slack's latest 'Future Forum Pulse' (a global quarterly survey of workers and managers), more than 78% of respondents said they wanted more flexibility in where they work and 95% wanted flexibility in when they work.



The same report shows that employees are feeling increasingly positive about many aspects of their employment experience, from work-life balance and reduced stress and anxiety to feeling they have a sense of belonging within their organisation.

Nonetheless, empathetic employers will want to keep tabs on employee satisfaction and work-life balance. While reduced travel time may hypothetically allow for more family time and leisure activities, is this time, in practice, being spent on wellbeing, or more work? The health and wellbeing issues affecting home workers and the fact that some groups of people are impacted more severely than others, needs to be addressed.

We know that exclusive home working has had an impact on people's mental health, with many employees feeling disconnected from colleagues, isolated, or finding it harder to switch off. Yet, raising mental health concerns is something many workers shy away from. In a survey by Lime Insurance, over half of employees said they felt pressure to put on a brave face at work, despite four in 10 feeling less resilient since Covid began.

Furthermore, team meetings via Zoom and MS Teams have only emphasised the vast disparity between our working environments. Whilst senior staff may have the benefit of a private study to work from, junior staff may not have the same luxury. Where possible, managers should strive to anticipate and alleviate the stresses and strains of employees at all levels.

The mental health of staff whilst working remotely is something which must be factored into risk assessments and consultations with staff. Ensuring wellbeing check-ins between managers and staff would help reduce risks and highlight potential problems early. Encouraging team chat groups via MS Teams or WhatsApp can help include individuals and avoid feelings of isolation.

Impact on culture

Businesses need employees at all levels of the organisation to embrace and promote their values and culture. This requires frequent communication, a clear strategy and continued support and practical guidance. Employees and leaders alike are concerned about the impact of remote working on culture, with Apple CEO, Tim Cook, recently lamenting how he missed, 'the hum of activity, the energy, creativity and collaboration of our in-person meetings and the sense of community'. However, there are software tools businesses can utilise to help monitor and measure an employees' sense of wellbeing, belonging, purpose and motivation. Such insights can guide leadership and ensure company culture is not eroded.

Growth and risk to learning and development

As in other areas, COVID-19 accelerated a change in learning and development. Digital and virtual learning programs were already on the rise throughout 2019. With hybrid working environments establishing themselves, learning and development must follow suit and be delivered in a hybrid way. In a survey by communications company Poly, nearly half of UK respondents were worried that remote working could impact negatively on their development with 54% concerned they would miss out on ad hoc learning opportunities. To help mitigate this risk, businesses must adapt their training and development programmes to suit the needs and abilities of their employees. While some will embrace online learning, it will not suit all people or situations.

Management and supervision

Supervising employees remotely can be difficult. In the hybrid model, junior staff and new hires may want more face-to-face time with employees who want to be home-based. Team leaders will need to be upskilled to engage staff in blended meetings (attended in person and remotely) and manage disparate working groups.



Protocols for managers to help supervise staff should be encouraged. Schedules can be used to rotate staff members and team leaders to ensure adequate in-person time and collaboration. Individuals should be empowered to structure their week between tasks suitable for the office, such as collaboration, client engagement and stakeholder meetings, and those suitable for home, like focus time, emails, autonomous tasks and virtual learning. This will provide a balance and help improve productivity.

Take advantage of a wider talent pool

Flexing where people work will open new talent pools, as more employees crave a new way of life post-pandemic. A recent survey by insurance company Aviva revealed that 65% of workers plan to make changes to their careers in the next year – whether that's looking for a new role that allows home working or following a different career path entirely.

Parents of under-18s are particularly likely to hop jobs, with well over a third of parents planning to look for a new role this year, according to Bright Horizons' 'Modern Families Index 2022'. Creating a working model which allows employees more personal or family time is essential across all generations.

Guard against potential inequality and discrimination

Increasing one to ones, team meetings and opportunities for collaboration across teams is key, as is ensuring those less visible are not disadvantaged in promotions and rewards. Many workers fear 'proximity bias' – a belief that co-located workers will progress more quickly. Recent research by LinkedIn found that 44% of staff believe that in-office workers are more likely to be favoured by bosses over those working remotely. It is important to instil in managers an attitude whereby employees are recognised and measured based on outcomes and not how much time they spend in the office, or the exact hours they work.

There is potential for greater equality and diversity, but this shouldn't be taken for granted. Martyn Sakol, Business Psychologist from Organisation Effectiveness Cambridge, suggests hybrid working could lead to inequality in the workplace. "Companies might be sleepwalking into discrimination by adopting a hybrid approach which appears to be more inclusive". He expands that "Employees spending more time in the office are unfairly advantaged to connect, evolve, and adapt with each other, because they have access to the boss, are better networked, have more interesting work to do, and could potentially receive better promotion prospects.

Support employees' physical health

Employers are responsible for the health and safety of their staff, this includes when working remotely. Wherever your people work, you need to ensure their safety and assess the risks. Minimise risk by providing appropriate home office equipment where necessary and make sure staff have access to clear guidance on practical health and safety measures they can adopt.

Guidance on exercise and nutrition should be included as part of a health and wellbeing programme. Businesses could provide employees with online workouts and should certainly encourage their staff to take adequate breaks throughout the day. Blocking time in the calendar for lunch or creating a no meeting policy during the lunch period are simple measures to adopt.

Pay differentials and reducing pay

Organisations are considering their pay scales as employees are no longer paying high travel costs to commute to work. This needs to be weighed against the risks of demotivation, departures and unfairly treating those

working at home, so take advice before implementing any pay cuts.

Working abroad

Some employees see remote working as an opportunity to work from abroad. This can give rise to additional costs for you. Employees may need to be registered and insurances obtained. Tax and social security costs may also be higher and you will need to check legal and tax implications of employing a person in a different country. Lastly, you don't want to inadvertently create a business establishment in another country which would create a liability to business taxes.

Recommendations

The learnings from lockdown are that employees can be trusted and are as productive, if not more so, even when out of sight. Hybrid working promises continued benefits for organisations whilst offering the flexibility that employees want – a “win, win”. As working models evolve, organisations need to retain the right to pivot their model if the business or customer needs are not met. We recommend that businesses adopt changes conditionally and temporarily, so they can course correct if remote or hybrid working is not delivering for them.

Our top tips for getting the most from your hybrid workforce:

- **Create and communicate a clear hybrid or flexible working guide** that the company and employees can embrace.
- **Provide regular, honest and transparent communication from leadership** and management.
- **Adopt a health and wellbeing programme to provide training and support with mental health, resilience and wellbeing.** Consider funding an Employee Assistance Programme or training people to be Mental Health First Aiders.
- **Upskill managers.** Provide training to upskill and train team leaders to engage staff in a hybrid working model. For example, increase one to ones, team meetings and opportunities for collaboration across teams to ensure those less visible are not disadvantaged in promotions and rewards
- **Take advantage of a wider talent pool.** Consider candidates from further afield who may be more willing to travel further two to three times a week to their place of work. Be careful when it comes to employees working aboard as there will be legal and tax implications to consider.
- **Provide appropriate home office equipment to reduce risk to employees' physical health.** Carry out regular risk assessments and consultations with staff and encourage managers to be vigilant to spot signs of poor health.
- **If considering pay-cuts, seek legal advice before doing so.**



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