



Hybrid Working Beyond COVID-19

Research findings and recommendations for implementing hybrid working

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In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted national governments to actively encourage working from home (WFH). According to the ONS, around 47% of UK employees did some WFH at the height of the pandemic¹. Therefore, working practices changed for millions, and a global experiment in WFH began. As we contemplate a post-COVID society, organisations are faced with difficult decisions around future working practices as employees desire more flexibility. This briefing paper contemplates the future of work and offers recommendations for employers based on current research.

Changing Attitudes and Intentions

Pre-pandemic, suspicion surrounded WFH, despite its benefits, with a culture of presenteeism dominating most organisations. The COVID-19 crisis has since forced the issue of WFH, compelling even reluctant employers to reflect on their assumptions and consider the benefits of WFH. Consequently, attitudes are changing. Research by the **Universities of Birmingham and Kent** in 2020 and 2021 has revealed that since COVID-19²:

- Flexible working has become less stigmatised
- Managers have been generally supportive of homeworking
- Fewer managers now believe that presenteeism and long working hours are prerequisites for career progression,
- Most managers believe that WFH increases productivity and improves concentration,
- Trust between managers and employees has increased,
- Managers are more aware of work-life balance issues



Overall, managers believe WFH will become more commonplace now that Senior Managers and Board Members have seen it working. A 2021 CIPD survey mirrors these findings, reporting that 40% of companies expect over half their workforce working regularly from home in future³. Therefore, many organisations across all industries are contemplating these changes for at least part of their workforce.

Post-pandemic Working

Some organisations will resume pre-COVID-19 working norms; others may move entirely to remote working, but evidence suggests that many traditionally office-based companies will operate some form of **hybrid model**. CBI data from autumn 2020 showed 47% of employers surveyed favoured employees dividing their time evenly between an office/ other workplace and home; in 2019, only 8% supported this⁴. McKinsey suggest that around a quarter of employees in advanced economies are likely to WFH three or more days a week post-pandemic⁵. A **hybrid model** could allow employers to attract more geographically dispersed talent, potentially boost productivity and reduce facilities' costs without creating new ongoing issues around culture, training and wellbeing, if managed carefully. Importantly, employers need to manage the transition carefully to realise maximum benefit and avoid

creating a two-tier workforce. Communication will be key as uncertainty over the future of work is the biggest cause of anxiety for employees⁵.

Equality is a concern, graduates/higher paid staff were more likely to WFH during the pandemic and they are the most likely to request continuing with this arrangement. There are also potential concerns that women will be more likely to WFH to balance caring responsibilities and more men will go into offices where the visibility might bring more opportunities for career enhancement. The following section makes some key recommendations about a move to hybrid working.

Recommendations

1. **Start a dialogue between managers and employees** who have worked flexibly during COVID-19 to identify how to build on mutually beneficial outcomes, including working methods and work location. Consider surveying employees, if not already done and/or having preference conversations where you discuss employee experiences, preferred working methods and the organisation's approach. Check the [Equal Parenting Project website](#) for more information.

2. Think about the business benefits.

Organisations can benefit from reconfigured offices which could become more flexible for teams to meet for collaboration and creativity. Working remotely over long periods of time, though, can be isolating or impractical for some, so ensure that those who want to work onsite still can. Organisations can also promote flexibility as a recruitment and retention tool, targeting talent from further afield and making the organisation more inclusive.

3. Review and revise flexible working and family friendly policies across your organisation to reflect the lessons learnt during the pandemic and any changes to culture or practice that have materialised.

4. Consider the potential impact of hybrid working on inclusivity across your organisation.

Avoid benefitting some groups and disadvantaging others with a two-tier system. Consider, for example, are women WFH and men in the office or are lower paid workers coming in because they do not have adequate facilities at home? In relation to equality and inclusion, undertake a survey to identify areas for improvement. Lower income earners can receive support to WFH through the existing **HMRC scheme** to cover overheads for homeworkers. The TUC suggest that parity of investment would ensure that investments in remote working are matched by a proportionate investment in those who cannot WFH⁶.

5. Consider manager wellbeing and provide training on managing remote teams.

Distinct differences between long-term WFH and office working mean different management techniques and processes are required, for example, for feedback and communication. Some managers and staff will feel uncomfortable with new ways of working so this must be recognised. Managers may need extra support as they must handle new processes and potentially provide more pastoral care.

6. Review and, if necessary, revise performance measurement.

Evidence suggests that moving from focusing on presenteeism to trust and flexibility can improve results, employee wellbeing and loyalty. It may therefore be more appropriate to measure by results. Virtual presenteeism also exists, those WFH shouldn't feel the need to be permanently on call to prove themselves. Also, be vigilant for signs of work intensification, burnout and isolation that are associated with homeworking.

7. Train all staff in data security

to ensure that it is not simply viewed as the I.T. department's responsibility. As more activity and confidential meetings move online, employees must know what is appropriate and how they can help enhance cyber-security.

8. Promote gender equality

by encouraging and supporting more men to work flexibly. Flexible working can be normalised and the stigma removed to break down gendered caring norms, which have negatively impacted the career progression of women for decades.

9. Pay Attention to the work environment and infrastructure

for home-based work as you would for the office. This support is essential to encourage inclusivity. The TUC recommend an evaluation of where a lack of investment is preventing some (typically lower paid) employees from WFH. Digital poverty also needs to be addressed.

10. Review communication processes

to ensure that quality information and support are provided for both office and remote staff. This promotes collaboration and mitigates against the possible isolation that can result from remote working. Avoid 'Zoom fatigue' by eliminating unnecessary formal meetings and encourage more informal/social communications. Managers should 'check in' with employees rather than 'check-up', ie, provide information,



guidance and support rather than contacting staff to ensure they are working⁷.

11. Consider the legal issues

around, for example, risk assessments, health and safety, data protection, equality and contractual matters such as who provides and pays for equipment. A useful CIPD document is [here](#).

12. Re-set the culture.

Many organisations may need to proactively develop a culture of results rather than presenteeism.

Finally, this is an opportunity to take stock, build something positive out of COVID-19 working experiences and really consider the culture and working practices you want for your organisation's future. As you work through these, think, are the planned changes inclusive, realistic and inspiring for your organisation and are they really built upon what we learnt through COVID-19? Do they reflect the needs and desires of our employees and customers? Are we creating a better organisation?

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