

Beyond the hype of hybrid

Insights from the ground, based
on the hybrid working practice
and plans of 14 UK companies

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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has done far more than force businesses to adapt to remote working – it has fundamentally changed the way we think about home and office. In the last few years we have seen a huge amount of speculation, commentary and research about the long-term future of work. But there has been limited scope to measure the impact of enforced home-working, or to test ‘what works best’. This is because constant fluctuations in lockdown restrictions have, until now, prevented the emergence of a settled pattern of ‘hybrid working’, as the home-office blend has come to be known. It is only now that people are starting to have a genuine choice about whether to work in the office or at home.

At Timewise we are curious about what has really changed, and how much will stick. What’s the evidence on the ground? How have different organisations approached the design of their new working patterns, and how is this translating into reality? And importantly – what’s next, now that we have the opportunity to move the conversation on and consider a long-term hybrid model and its impact.

But there are other issues. Ways of working are rooted in the organisational system and, for most businesses, remote working is only possible for a subset of their roles. The focus on home-working during the pandemic has felt detached from reality for those teams who travelled to their place of work day in day out, throughout 2020 and 2021. What impact has this had? And how are organisations managing the imbalance, as hybrid working becomes a ‘perk’ for many? At Timewise we know that in order to truly engage and support all employees, these new hybrid approaches will need to be integrated with other forms of flexible working, to ensure a degree of equity.

This research set out to explore these issues. By interviewing a range of organisations and specialists in aligned areas, we have uncovered a number of successes and challenges. We have been able to identify the three most critical priorities for businesses to focus on:

- Upskilling leaders and managers
- Enabling connection and cultural cohesion
- Ensuring fairness and inclusion

Our report provides advice from Timewise alongside the insights, to help your business make the reality of hybrid live up to the hype.

Amy Butterworth

Consulting Director, Timewise

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House of Commons	Wessex Institute
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Linklaters	

FOREWORD

Since the Industrial Revolution changed the U.K. from being a largely rural economy into a predominantly urban economy, white-collar workers have routinely commuted to an office.

Over time, the word ‘work’, became used to describe both an activity and a location. ‘Going to work’ became accepted as the norm. Alternatives to the dominance of the office became so unthinkable, that humorists created characters such as Reggie Perrin to demonstrate both the absurdity and the inevitability of the 9 to 5.

On March 23rd 2020, centuries of predictable, office working patterns came to a screeching halt. On that day, the U.K. government imposed a compulsory stay-at-home mandate for all non-essential workers. It felt like there was a crack in everything.

As office workers could not go to work in the office, they were forced to find alternatives. Managers might find employees working at home, the café, library or from their cars. Over time, many of the same people who had for years agreed to be in the office at a set time each day, started refusing to do so. They had tasted life without the cost and time invested in a commute. They had revelled in the extra moments spent with family, friends or the time afforded to be alone.

As we work through this time of flux, focusing on the productivity, well-being, and happiness of our most important asset – our employees – is key. If we would ever lose sight of that core fact, the Great Resignation movement would bring the focus right back. Our employees are in the powerful position to demand where, when and how they want to work.

Handled well, these changes in the world of work will enrich our employees, enable us to recruit and retain amazing talent, reduce facilities costs, and better align the workspace with the agile business strategies required to achieve a sustained competitive advantage.

However there is a problem. There is no road-map for hybrid working. Indeed, hybrid working may be composed of different elements for different people in different circumstances.

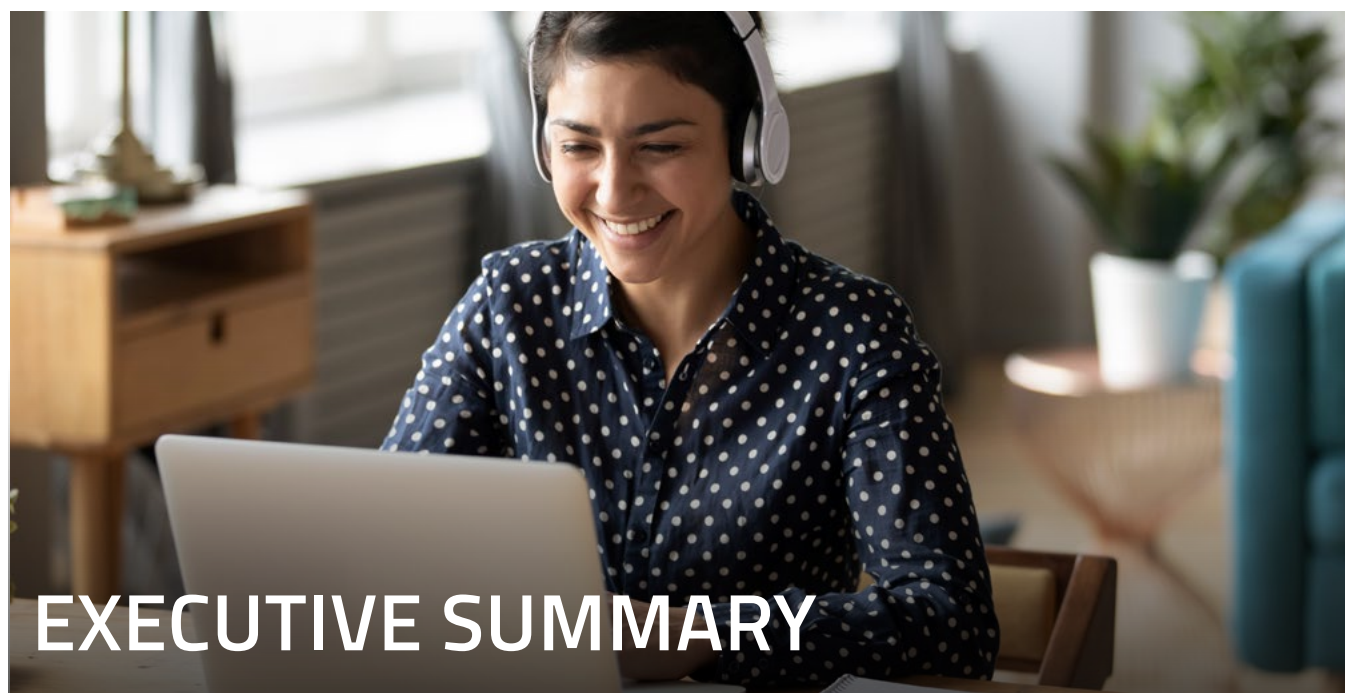
That’s why this research programme launched by Timewise is of such value to managers everywhere. It provides the reader with a patchwork of practical responses to the conundrum of how to execute hybrid working and a basis for constructing their own bespoke programme.

Steve Jude

CEO of NewFlex

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Now that the UK government has lifted all Covid related restrictions, organisations and their employees have a long-term choice to make: should they return to the office, opt for a remote working model, or navigate a permanent blend of the two, with all the complex implications that will arise?

Most organisations are opting for a blend, and have identified their frameworks for these 'hybrid arrangements'. As work begins on implementing long-term practices, this qualitative research highlights some of the different experiences and approaches. Through in-depth interviews with fourteen large companies and industry experts on three core topics, the following key themes emerged:

BENEFITS AND RISKS

Employers speak of the potential for increased productivity and reduced costs, the ability to attract more diverse sources of talent, higher employee engagement, and improved retention. But they are also anxious about the possibility of disconnection and siloed working, the emergence of new types of inequalities, and ultimately a less satisfied workforce.

ORGANISATIONAL APPROACHES TO HYBRID

All the employers we spoke to were still in the midst of agreeing their approaches to hybrid. The most commonly shared features were:

- Gauging staff preferences through extensive consultation and surveys.
- Involving the whole of the leadership team in developing the approach to hybrid working.
- Positioning hybrid as part of the wider strategy on flexible or agile working.
- Most organisations favour a principle-based approach to hybrid rather than attempting to lock in specific arrangements (although some do set out their expectations for minimum office time).
- Decisions on individual arrangements tend to be devolved to the teams.
- Some organisations are implementing 'test and learn' trial periods, in order to evaluate and adjust based on feedback and metrics.
- Work has already started on exploring the space and technology adaptations that will be needed to support permanent hybrid working.

THREE KEY CONCERNS

Our interviews identified three areas of concern that were on the radar for all the organisations, and that require particular focus to ensure the long-term success of hybrid working:

1. The need to upskill leaders and managers

It's important to recognise the additional complexity that some managers will feel hybrid brings to their role, and support them through training and tech to:

- Negotiate hybrid working arrangements that balance individual preferences with the needs of the team and wider business.
- Foster a culture of trust and accountability (a potential challenge for managers who are used to a command and control or micromanagement style).
- Avoid 'proximity bias' (where staff who are more present in the office are treated differently to those who are less visible).
- Safe-guard well-being, especially for employees who mainly work remotely.

2. Enabling connection and cultural cohesion

It's widely felt that full remote working jeopardises employees' sense of connection with each other and the business, and their ability to collaborate and innovate. However, some staff are reluctant to return to the office at all, and need to be persuaded that doing so is worthwhile. Clear guidance will be needed on why a degree of presence in the office is important to the business.

Employers may even need to improve their office offer. A number of organisations are looking at how space can be re-configured, and at social activities, in order to foster cultural cohesion and a sense of belonging.

3. Ensuring fairness and inclusion

While hybrid working can improve inclusion for several groups of people who struggle with a 9-5 office routine (parents, older workers and those with health conditions), it gives rise to other forms of potential unfairness:

- Do those who are less present in the office risk being marginalised and having fewer opportunities than colleagues who are more visible?
- If decisions on individual arrangements are devolved to teams, might different hybrid working patterns emerge for similar roles across a business?
- And what about employees in roles where it's not possible to work from home at all? To ensure equity, some organisations are considering other flexible arrangements for people who can't benefit from hybrid.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR EMBEDDING HYBRID?

The hybrid journey will be an iterative process, with much experimentation to find the right balance between meeting individual and business needs. Employers are still learning; solutions to challenges are still being sought, and unforeseen implications are still being uncovered. It will take several years for most organisations to work out the optimum approach, and to resolve the office conundrum. Even then, the approach to flexible working will keep on evolving.

One thing's for sure: there is no longer a status quo, and there may never be one again. But that's a good thing because, when done well, flexibility has the potential to enrich our working experience, bring healthier balance to our lives, and support inclusivity for groups which struggle with travelling to an office for 5 full days a week.

CONTEXT AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

What the literature told us

Much has already been written about the future of work post-pandemic, and nothing more so than the expected large-scale shift to hybrid models which combine office based and remote working. For example, in a survey conducted by ACAS¹ more than half (55%) of employers said they expected an increase in the proportion of staff working remotely or at home for part of the week. The demand from employees appears to be even stronger, with another survey by the CMI² finding that almost nine in ten (88%) are looking for some form of hybrid working arrangement moving forward.

However, the literature also indicates that the transition to hybrid working isn't straightforward, and there are many considerations to effectively manage the shift. For example, the ICAEW³ suggests that attention needs to be paid to ensuring that those working more remotely have a similar experience to their more office-based colleagues. The CIPD⁴ advises the need to plan for and respond to a range of wider organisational implications, involving technology, facilities, employee well-being and inclusion. And Capgemini⁵ believes that organisations should rethink all elements of the employee lifecycle including onboarding, learning and development, compensation and benefits, and performance management. A report from the University of Birmingham Business School⁶ additionally makes a case for considering legal issues such as risk assessments, health and safety, data protection and employment contracts.

So the switch to hybrid has many far-reaching implications that employers are only just beginning to consider.

What we wanted to elucidate for employers

The overall aim of our research was to explore the reality of hybrid working on the ground, now that many organisations have committed to long-term change and identified their frameworks, and are beginning to put new practices in place.

In particular we wanted to understand:

- How different organisations have gone about designing their approach to hybrid working
- What their experience has been so far, when implementing their chosen approach
- How they plan to embed this new way of working and ensure its long-term sustainability.

What we did

We conducted a rapid review of the published literature on hybrid working, followed by 14 exploratory interviews with organisations that have considered or decided to adopt hybrid approaches. The organisations that took part are diverse, representing a range of sectors and business sizes. In addition, we conducted interviews with selected experts in the aligned areas of office space, technology and employment law.

1. <https://www.acas.org.uk/new-study-reveals-half-of-employers-expect-more-flexible-working-after-pandemic>

2. <https://www.managers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/wf-cmi-making-hybrid-inclusive-policy-brief.pdf>

3. <https://www.icaew.com/insights/insights-specials/hybrid-working-and-the-future-of-work>

4. <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/flexible-working/planning-hybrid-working#gref%20>

5. <https://www.capgemini.com/gb-en/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/12/Report-The-Future-of-Work.pdf>

6. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/business/research/wirc/hybrid-working-beyond-covid19.pdf>

WHY ARE EMPLOYERS STICKING WITH HYBRID?

The organisations we spoke to for this research came from different starting points, with some describing an office-centric culture while others were working in a hybrid way even before the pandemic, often alongside offering other forms of flexibility. However, across the board, the pandemic showed that it is possible to operate in a different way – and to do so successfully.

Employers have been keen to learn from this experience rather than reverting to pre-pandemic work patterns. For almost all those we interviewed, hybrid working is perceived to combine the best of remote and office-based working and to be an important part of being a modern, flexible employer.

As such, in most cases, hybrid working is not viewed as a temporary measure – there is a commitment to a permanent change.

“We’ve had two years of largely remote working and minimum time in the office and it’s hard to say that it’s not been successful for the business.”

“We suddenly found that we were able to operate in a way that we would never have deemed possible. Our people have adapted very well and it didn’t take us any time - we pretty much flicked the switch (from office to home) and kept running.”

“We wanted to make the most of what the pandemic taught us but not lose the team work and creative juices that you get in an office environment.”

“I think the vision would be that we would want people to work effectively and efficiently to deliver the client service but in a way that also marries to what they would like for their life.”

“It’s not just a phase, it’s a conscious culture shift.”

“It’s 100% the type of organisation we want to be; we want a reputation for being modern and flexible.”

BENEFITS AND RISKS

Employers anticipate a number of compelling benefits of hybrid working, if they can get it right. These include the potential for increased productivity and reduced costs, the ability to attract more diverse sources of talent, higher employee engagement, and better retention.

However, a range of risks are also foreseen, such as potential disconnection and siloed working, new types of inequalities and ultimately a less satisfied workforce.

It is therefore regarded as critical to carefully plan the design and implementation of hybrid working, in order to maximise the benefits and mitigate the risks.

“I’d want it to lead to a more engaged workforce, which enjoys the autonomous way we’re enabling them to work and has improved work/life balance and well-being.”

“It will be another string to our bow in recruitment and it will help us be seen as a forward thinking and trusting organisation.”

“For every positive there’s a risk of a negative.”

“We probably have it in us for this to work and work well, but if it doesn’t work the potential negatives are as big as the potential wins.”

APPROACHES TO THE DESIGN OF HYBRID

Employers reported different approaches to determining their particular version of hybrid working, but there were also some common features. In most cases there was extensive consultation with staff as a first step, in order to understand their preferences. The whole of the leadership team typically had some involvement in developing the approach to hybrid working, which was often seen as part of the wider strategy on flexible or agile working.

At this stage, the majority of organisations seem to be opting for a principle-based approach to hybrid rather than attempting to lock in specific arrangements. However, in doing so, some set out their expectations for minimum office time, while others have chosen not to be prescriptive about this. The decisions on the precise detail of individual arrangements, or even suitable patterns for different types of roles, tend to be devolved to the teams.

“There is not a fixed mandate, it's about what's right for clients, what's right for colleagues, what's right for you.

“We're 60/40, so 60% in the office and 40% working remotely, but however that shapes your week or month is up to you.



CASE STUDY 1

Moving from a traditional 'bums on seats' mindset

This company previously had a strong and traditional workplace culture, but leadership attitudes have changed after seeing what has been possible during the pandemic.

Hybrid working now comes under their agile working policy (informal adjustments to working patterns), so changes can be made at any time and central approval is not required. Employees only need to formally apply for flexible working if it will be a permanent arrangement that affects the number of their contractual working hours.

The leadership team has provided guidance recommending two to three days per week in the office, to retain the collaborative culture. But they also acknowledge that some business units may differ from this. There has been extensive communication with staff about the new approach and they have received positive feedback.

However, only 40% of this company is office-based, so the new guidance on hybrid working does not touch the majority of employees. In order to ensure equity, they are looking at how they can enable other forms of flexible and agile working for those who have site-based roles.

CASE STUDY 2**A free and open approach, based on trust and accountability**

Even before the pandemic, this large company had some flexible arrangements in place, including a nine-day fortnight and ad hoc remote working for those whose jobs allowed this. They moved to fully remote working for this group during the pandemic, and staff feedback was that they wanted to retain some of the additional flexibility they gained during this time.

The leadership team determined that hybrid working is the best way forward for their organisation, and they spent a lot of time considering what type of hybrid model they wanted. They ultimately decided on an approach based on accountability and trust that people will do the right thing, rather than mandating how hybrid should be carried out.

They have chosen not to stipulate a minimum number of days or specific days of the week that people need to come in. The only expectations set out centrally are for Monday-Friday working (as their partners and stakeholders work this way) and for some face-to-face presence each week at one of their sites. Beyond this they have asked line managers to agree with their teams what suits them and their stakeholders best, which could change week to week or month to month.

**CASE STUDY 3****Paring back office time, based on employee consultation**

This organisation set up a programme to consider the future of work holistically, with 'where people work' as one strand of this.

The starting point for their hybrid working design is an expectation that everyone will have reason to come into the office sometimes, even if this is simply a need to get to know the team socially. Beyond this, the leadership team decided not to have a blanket approach to hybrid, but to consider it in terms of different job roles and activities.

They developed a series of different work style typologies and hypothesised different degrees of office time for each of these. They then polled all colleagues on their preferences for office versus remote time and also asked teams to have structured conversations about arrangements that could meet the needs of the business, team and individuals.

The whole company survey initially found an average preference for three days in the office, but once the team-based conversations were conducted, the ratio flipped. They are now working towards less than 40% of colleagues' time being in the office on average. One of the reasons for this has been data showing productivity improvements related to more remote working, due to fewer absences and less downtime.



LEARNINGS FROM EARLY IMPLEMENTATION: THREE KEY CONCERNS

Thus far, the organisations we interviewed have primarily focused on communicating their intention, and developing guidance and training on how to manage hybrid working. In some cases, new hybrid arrangements are being implemented as pilots or 'test and learn' trial periods, in order to evaluate and adjust based on feedback and metrics. Work has also started on exploring the space and technology adaptations that will be needed to support permanent hybrid working.

However, our interviews identified three areas of concern that were on the radar for all the organisations planning to adopt hybrid. Particular focus on these fronts will be needed to ensure long-term success.

1. THE NEED TO UPSKILL LEADERS AND MANAGERS

Those we interviewed believe that leaders and managers require additional skill development in a number of areas, as they have never led through a situation like this before. The key areas are:

- The knowledge and ability to negotiate fit-for-purpose hybrid working arrangements, that balance individual preferences with the needs of the team and wider business.
- The need to adapt their approach to people management, making a more conscious effort to foster a culture of trust and accountability. This will be especially true in organisations where there has historically been a command and control or micromanagement style.
- A number of participants mentioned the importance of avoiding 'proximity bias', where staff who are present in the office may be more likely to be allocated important projects, or be considered for promotion. To mitigate any unconscious bias, organisations recognise they need to design a more outputs based approach to their performance management, and upskill managers to implement this.
- Finally, it was felt that managers in a hybrid world may need to carve out more time to proactively check in with employees, to monitor their well-being.

“We’re taking a collaborative approach with employees where we are flexible to their needs and they’re flexible to ours.”

“It requires mature, and sometimes difficult, conversations to reconcile individual and business needs. These conversations need to be ongoing as arrangements develop and mature.”

“This puts the onus on empowering staff to take accountability for delivery and to work as teams; and for managers to trust them to do it.”

“We fundamentally changed how we work because of the pandemic. Now we need to capture the benefits and ensure people’s well-being. This means tackling bad practices like long working hours in front of screens.”

TIPS FROM TIMEWISE

- Review your current management development offer. Is it fit for purpose or does it need updating to account for the impact of hybrid working arrangements? Recognise the additional complexity that some managers will feel hybrid brings to their roles.
- Make sure the benefits of your hybrid approach are visible to managers. Build examples into leadership communications and conversations with teams.
- Incorporate ways of working as a standard part of existing manager-employee interactions – at 1-1s, development conversations or well-being check ins. This will help managers to keep discussions focused on the value and impact of different ways of working – for the individual, the team and the organisation.
- When reviewing the uptake and success of your hybrid approach, analyse manager feedback separately to observe any differences from their team members. Make sure you ask managers about the impact on their own role and productivity, not just their team’s. Some of our clients have found that, unchecked, there can be a propensity for managers to come into the office more than they intended, in order to overlap with team members’ different working patterns. Your hybrid approach needs to work for managers as well as for their team members.

2. ENABLING CONNECTION AND CULTURAL COHESION

A widely-held view during the pandemic was that full remote working jeopardises employees' sense of connection with each other and the business, and their ability to collaborate and innovate. A hybrid working approach provides an opportunity to redress some of this, whilst balancing it with the benefits to employees of continued home-working.

However, some staff will need to be persuaded that coming back to the office is worthwhile. Employers will need to articulate clear and compelling reasons why this benefits the team as a whole, and ultimately the business. Some organisations have already provided their employees with support to plan for effective use of co-located office-time, for activities that are best done as a team rather than individually.

Employers may even need to improve their office offer. Most research participants were considering what they could do to engender cultural cohesion and a sense of belonging in a hybrid environment. They spoke about reconfiguring offices to provide 'we space' rather than 'me space', and several had already started to cut back on desks in order to create increased space for meetings and collaboration. They had also begun to improve technology to ensure people have a seamless experience between the office and remote working, and are trained to use digital collaboration tools.

“ We need to change how the office is - it's now too big and people feel that they're rattling around. We need to grapple with how to make the organisational space more appealing and do something creative.”

“ We were losing the social glue that comes with mixing in a vibrant office environment. We've lost a bit of fairy dust so how do we recreate the cultural stuff when working in a very different way?”

TIPS FROM TIMEWISE

- Changing ways of working can force some uncomfortable questions about organisational identity and culture. Encourage open conversations to find out what people most value about working for your business, and then consider how you can magnify those through your ways of working.
- Support managers to discuss the value of office time with their teams. What activities are best done in the office? Teams can then identify the priorities for their office time and make it a valuable part of their working week.
- Set aside time for employees to connect, in both structured and less structured ways, and invest in making sure your office has the right spaces for people to do this.
- Encourage virtual collaboration too – team connections aren't just an office matter. Develop processes to help team members share work and ideas during times when they're not together – this could be rethinking how you run team stand ups and check-ins, or using tools like virtual whiteboards and wikis.
- Make it easy! Lots of our clients are upgrading their desk booking systems and video conferencing technology. Others are thinking about how employees transport and store equipment when working across more than one location. Sorting out the basics will remove frustration and make hybrid working more enjoyable and effective.



3. ENSURING FAIRNESS AND INCLUSION

A hybrid working environment has the potential to improve inclusion amongst office workers. It supports the needs of several groups of people who struggle with a 9-5 office routine (parents, older workers and those with health conditions). And it can support inclusion at recruitment, by giving employers access to a more diverse and less geographically restricted workforce. Some organisations we interviewed have begun to advertise roles as being primarily home based.

But what about potential bias between those who attend the office more regularly, and those who work more from home? Do those who are less present in the office risk being marginalised and having fewer opportunities than colleagues who are more visible? What can employers do to ensure fairness?

Another risk envisaged by one research participant is that very different hybrid working patterns could emerge for similar roles across a business. This is a concern when decisions about acceptable hybrid patterns are devolved to team level. It was felt that harmonisation may be needed in the future, to avoid the development of microcultures and to mitigate any employee concerns about fairness. This may prove to be a challenging area for organisations where managers and teams have a good degree of autonomy.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what about the needs of employees in roles where it's not possible to work from home at all? To ensure equity, some organisations are considering other flexible measures that they can make available for people who can't benefit from hybrid arrangements.

“We want fairness for everyone, regardless of where they work.”

“We want to ensure that there are no second-class citizens.”

TIPS FROM TIMEWISE

- Take the time to understand what working arrangements will help all of your people to do their best work.
- Make sure your managers think about characteristics such as gender, age, caring responsibilities, physical and mental health and disability, to ensure equality.
- Gather data about the impact of hybrid working on your employees. Many organisations have used back-to-office surveys to develop their hybrid approach, and then gone on to conduct evaluation questionnaires to gauge employee satisfaction with working arrangements. As well as considering employee opinions, look at other information such as employee relations data, performance and promotion figures, attraction and retention rates. Is hybrid working having an impact on these?
- Update your training and guidance on equality, diversity & inclusion, to reflect the biases that may arise in relation to hybrid work. Ensure that managers understand these and know how to address them. Put processes in place to mitigate against potential bias in decision making, work allocation and performance evaluation.
- When considering whether hybrid will remain informal, or whether it will need to be embedded in staff contracts or Terms & Conditions, ensure that your approach supports equality of access for all those who are able to, and wish to, have a hybrid arrangement.
- Offer other forms of flexibility alongside hybrid. Giving options for flexible times and hours of work will further support inclusion and fairness.
- Think about teams and roles where working at home isn't possible. Innovative approaches to scheduling can have a dramatic impact on the experience of people in frontline roles, who may feel excluded by the focus on hybrid work. Making some form of flexibility possible in all roles, and promoting this, will help tackle any sense of unfairness.

POINT OF VIEW - TECH EXPERT

Andrew Davis, Head of Future Workplace Strategy and Growth at Fujitsu

“When the pandemic first hit, most companies were set up for only 10-20% of their people to work remotely, and it was a case of scaling the tech platforms they had, quickly. Many were surprised by how well they were able to do this, delivering the remote working experience that was needed, at least for the initial phase. And of course, a lot has been done to roll out video conferencing solutions; we’ve seen huge increases in the adoption of Zoom and MS Teams, which have got us through the period of enforced remote work.

Now that we’ve moved into the next phase, people are rethinking their workforce strategy and their security approaches. Many organisations are wanting to accelerate their use of cloud technology to manage the range of working locations. And organisations are really thinking about how to get the most from their technology, to support changes to the way people work.

Technologies in the office need to change as the purpose of the office shifts; organisations will have to upgrade their conference equipment, enhance voice quality and invest in more cameras, to improve the experience of hybrid meetings. Integration is becoming key – the digital whiteboards you use in office meeting rooms need to be seamlessly integrated with the ones you use at home.

Technologies that enable people to collaborate and ideate are what companies most need to be thinking about – hybrid requires more than just video conferencing and sharing a word document. There are lots of exciting applications to help companies work out collaboration, especially asynchronous collaboration – online planning and task tools, wikis, virtual whiteboards with static content, and even virtual office set ups.

Just as hybrid gives people more choice about where they work, they are also demanding more choice about the tech they need to do their work well. Some forward thinking organisations are offering more power to their employees – giving allowances for them to buy software that will help them work at their best, or to buy their own devices for work.

And when it comes to recruitment, candidates are increasingly expecting employers to demonstrate not just that they allow their people to work flexibly, but that they have a supportive tech strategy in place. Offering up to date and choice-driven IT services can help attract candidates – technology and work are so intertwined now.”

TOP FIVE TECH CONSIDERATIONS FOR HYBRID SUCCESS:

1. Ensure that working from home is an equal tech experience to the office, particularly for hybrid meetings and interactions
2. Adopt and integrate immersive collaboration experiences like virtual whiteboards
3. Enable teams to share information and ideas asynchronously – encouraging them to share their work openly using online tools
4. Use system-generated data through productivity applications like virtual assistants and user analytics, to understand how teams work and improve well-being, long hours, attention and distraction
5. Explore how other AI innovations could work within your work environment – automating processes and helping to make people more productive.

POINT OF VIEW - EMPLOYMENT LAW EXPERT

James Froud, Partner & Head of Employment Practice at McCarthy Denning

“Clearly, hybrid working is not a new phenomenon. What is ‘new’ is the fact that just about every organisation in every industry has been forced, by circumstances beyond their control, to adapt and to adopt different ways of working. This has broadened and accelerated the conversation around the introduction of more permanent agile / hybrid working practices. In my view, we are too early in the ‘post-restriction’ world to identify the emergence of legal trends associated with a pandemic-enlightened workforce. However, there certainly are a number of risks associated with home-working that have potential legal implications:

Health & safety risks

Are people’s workstations compliant with safety regulations? With remote working being the exception, rather than the rule, organisations have typically adopted a light touch and relied on their employees to flag any problems. There could be issues arising from this in the future.

Well-being/mental health risks

This is almost certainly a ticking time bomb, with some employees feeling isolated from being forced to work remotely, or under pressure from being ‘always on’ because there is no differentiation between home and the workplace. The isolation risk with hybrid working will of course be logically reduced in a post-restriction environment, but it will still exist where an element of remote working becomes the default position and/or is enforced. On the other side of the same coin are the workers who have realised they can work effectively from remote locations and do not need or wish to commute regularly (or at all) to a central workplace. Employer insistence that these individuals ‘return to normal’ on a permanent or

regular basis is bound to create tension and lead to well-being issues.

It is of course more challenging for managers to spot issues if people are working remotely, and they should ensure they carve out time to focus on employee well-being, for example through regular catch-ups. They will also need to maintain audit trails of this.

Equity considerations and discrimination risks

It’s inevitable that some people will have to work a hybrid pattern when they don’t want to, and that others who want hybrid will not be permitted to work in this way. It will be important for organisations to develop a fair, transparent process, to avoid discrimination claims. This issue also spans performance management, as additional complexity is introduced with the ‘invisibility’ of remote workers. Objective, output-based assessment will be needed – which may be a challenging transition for businesses that do not already work in this way.

Confidential information risks

Remote working massively increases the risk of confidential information being leaked. Businesses are going to need to get a better grip on this and ensure their policies and contracts are robust enough. Technological solutions will almost certainly be needed.

Other issues that will need to be addressed include the need for decisions on the extent to which hybrid and other ‘flex for all’ arrangements need to be baked into contracts. It’s important to bear in mind that even if it isn’t specified in a written contract, practices and expectations can create their own rights. A prudent employer will be very clear on what they are accommodating and what they are not, including specifying trial periods to check whether provisions work, and having the right to amend arrangements.”

TOP FOUR LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR HYBRID SUCCESS:

1. Ensure that contracts/policies are fit for purpose. If any form of home-working is involved, there should be a home-working policy that covers off H&S, confidentiality, and right of access to the individual's home where reasonably required (eg to check the working environment, or security of the tech set up).
2. Contracts also need to clarify whether remote working arrangements are a contractual right, or at the discretion of the employer so can be withdrawn at any time. Make sure you cover whether employees are able to base themselves from a different geographic location, including abroad (where different legal frameworks will apply).
3. Put extra focus on employee well-being, as hybrid or remote working won't be good for everyone. For example, the junior professional who lives in a shared flat and needs training and supervision is very different to the senior executive with a dedicated home office and space to walk the dog. Stress claims were on the rise before the pandemic, and while changes to working arrangements may alleviate some issues they will add to others.
4. Make sure that confidential information is sufficiently protected from accidental and deliberate leakage.



POINT OF VIEW – SPACE EXPERT

Steve Jude, CEO of Newflex

The business world was already moving towards greater flexible working, and the emergence of hybrid patterns had begun long before the pandemic. It's just that lockdowns forced a niche idea onto centre stage, and people felt they needed to give it a name.

Home-working has been forced on most of us, and it has turned out to be not as bad as many people thought it might be. It saves money and enables employees to be more productive, while giving them a better work-life balance. Financial directors are now asking why they should pay for office space if it isn't being used to full capacity. The uncertainty about future needs means they are reluctant to commit to long-term leases which could become unfit for purpose. And for some companies, remote working has proved to be so successful that they are grappling with whether they need an office at all. Such a question was unthinkable only a short time ago.

We are still at the stage of working out 'what does all this mean?' Business decision-makers must go back to the basics of why they need an office in the first place. It's a modern take on the old saying, "I don't need a hammer I need a hole in the wall": I don't necessarily need an office, I need a thriving, wealth-creating enterprise.

One size will not fit all, and businesses will need to find bespoke solutions, but the likelihood is that there will always be a role for the office for collaborative tasks. New styles of offices have developed, specifically designed to engender connectivity and creativity, and provide spaces for idea generation. NewFlex have partnered with Axa at 22 Bishopsgate to develop such a space.

And in all businesses, there will be people who feel the need to get out of the house; but that doesn't necessarily mean they want to commute into the city every day. So hub and spoke models (a large central office, with smaller work stations in local areas) may be a good solution for some organisations. Our 'out of town' business centres, with parking, have experienced a much higher growth than usual during the pandemic, as people chose to work near home and take the car rather than public transport.

Leaders need to move quickly on redefining how they use their offices, and how they are configured to suit, otherwise they risk losing people to organisations that do it better.

TOP THREE SPACE CONSIDERATIONS FOR HYBRID SUCCESS:

1. Look at your company real estate portfolio not just for cost savings but for how much better it can be.
2. Consider how best to use space to foster creativity – for many people, execution work can be done at home. People want to use the office to innovate, meet with others, share ideas, and so office space needs to be reconfigured to enable this.
3. Innovative use of space can nourish the physical and mental health and well-being of employees. The hub and spoke model recognises that people don't want to be in a home environment all of the time, nor do they always want to commute to their central office. Consider giving your team access to memberships of local spaces to meet this need – where they can work but also use a climbing wall or visit a restaurant.

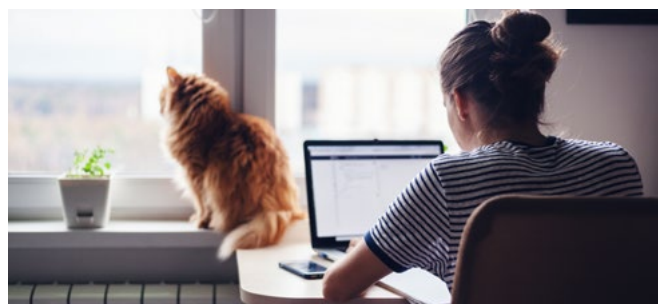
WHAT'S NEXT FOR EMBEDDING HYBRID?

There was general recognition amongst the employees we interviewed that the hybrid journey needs to be an iterative process, with scope for experimentation in order to find the right balance between meeting individual and business needs. Most felt they were still very much at the start of this journey, having been largely reactive to the pandemic so far.

For example, some were still in the process of determining what their approach would be, and how they would monitor progress and evaluate success. A few were beginning to consider the wider implications of hybrid working on employment contracts, the way remuneration and benefits are structured, or their future real estate portfolio. But others had not yet got this far.

Several employers were wary of focusing so narrowly on work location that they might miss the opportunity of widening their lens post-pandemic, to consider other ways of becoming a more flexible and attractive employer. A few were already beginning to look at this.

Only one organisation involved in this research has chosen not to adopt hybrid working, due to the make-up of their workforce – they have so many frontline roles that they felt it wasn't fair to have some people being able to work from home. The business is, however, looking at what other types of flexibility they can offer their people, to ensure they have a competitive employee offer.



“We’re mere infants and probably not even crawling let alone taking our first steps. When you think of all those decades of 9-5 Monday to Friday, always in the office. It’s a massive change, a massive impact on the world of work, probably forever.”

“We’ve started doing it because we’ve been forced to. No one’s doing whole systems thinking about it, we’re allowing it to evolve. It’s not planned, so we don’t see the wider reach and we may miss opportunities.”

“It would be dangerous if we all patted ourselves on the back and said we’ve delivered flexibility because we’ve adopted hybrid.”

“We need to generate a different approach to what being flexible means. I think we perhaps haven’t explored that as much as we could, because we’ve been pulled back to this Covid-led binary debate about in the office vs. out of the office.”





FINAL THOUGHTS FROM TIMEWISE

It's clear that for all the hype about hybrid, organisations still have some way to travel. Employers are still learning; solutions to challenges are still being sought, and unforeseen implications are still being uncovered. The views of individual employees are still settling too, and are likely to change with their circumstances and life stages.

We anticipate that 2022 and 2023 will be about embedding arrangements and making policy adjustments, as organisations really get the hang of hybrid and resolve the office space conundrum. And even then, the very nature of flexible working means that the approach will constantly evolve.

One thing's for sure: the pandemic has decisively put an end to the traditional approach to working patterns. And that's a good thing, because flexibility has the potential to enrich our working experience, bring healthier balance to our lives, and support inclusivity for groups which have always struggled to fit the 9-5 regime.





Timewise is a multi-award winning social business and leading change agent in the flexible working sphere. We conduct research, share market insights and deliver consultancy services to help employers attract and develop the best talent. We also run Timewise Jobs, a jobs board for roles that are part-time or open to flexibility.

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