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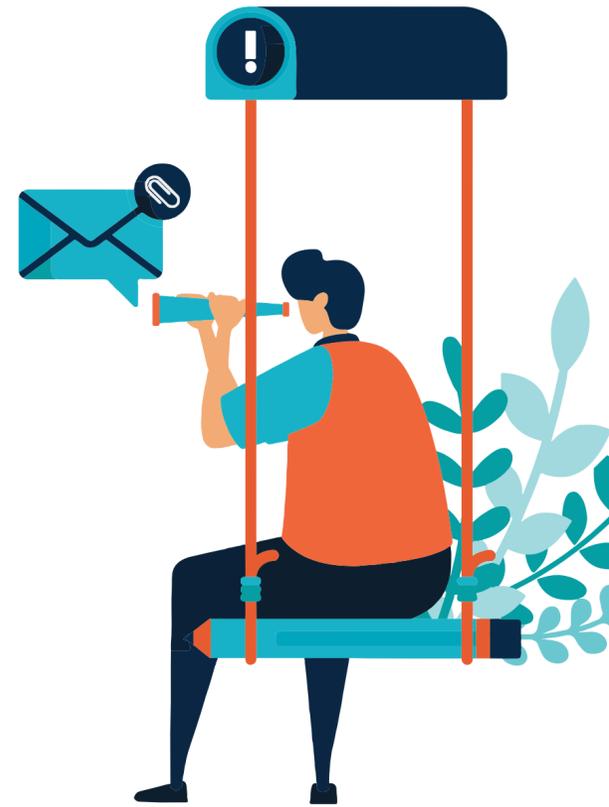
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Where is Your Office Today?

A research-led guide to effective hybrid working

Find out more about the research project, access resources and connect
with the research team at **futureworkplace.leeds.ac.uk**
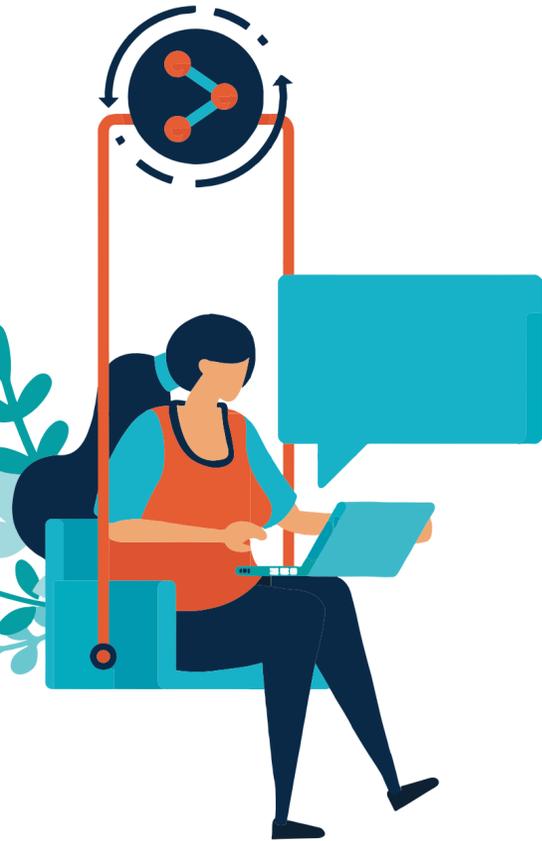
About this research

This research examines the changes to workplaces and ways of working spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. We aim to understand the implications of the changes: learn lessons, share good practice, and provide guidance for organisations adopting hybrid working or adapting offices to support their future ways of working. In this interactive report, we share insights from a range of stakeholder and employee interviews, industry workshops, cross-industry surveys of UK office workers, employee diary data and reviews of published guidance and case studies.

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Cover image Happy Vectors by Vecteezy

Research Retold

How to navigate this interactive guide?

This interactive guide has two main sections, **Context and challenges** and **Practical guidance**, each divided into subsections (eight in Context and challenges, ten in Practical guidance) and **Conclusion**.

- **Click the menu at the top of the page** to navigate to the section you want to read.

- **Within each subsection, scroll down** or use the arrows on your keyboard to read the content.

- You will be able to tell what subsection you are in because its **title will be highlighted**.

- This interactive report gives you **flexibility** to jump to the topics you are most interested in without having to read the content linearly.
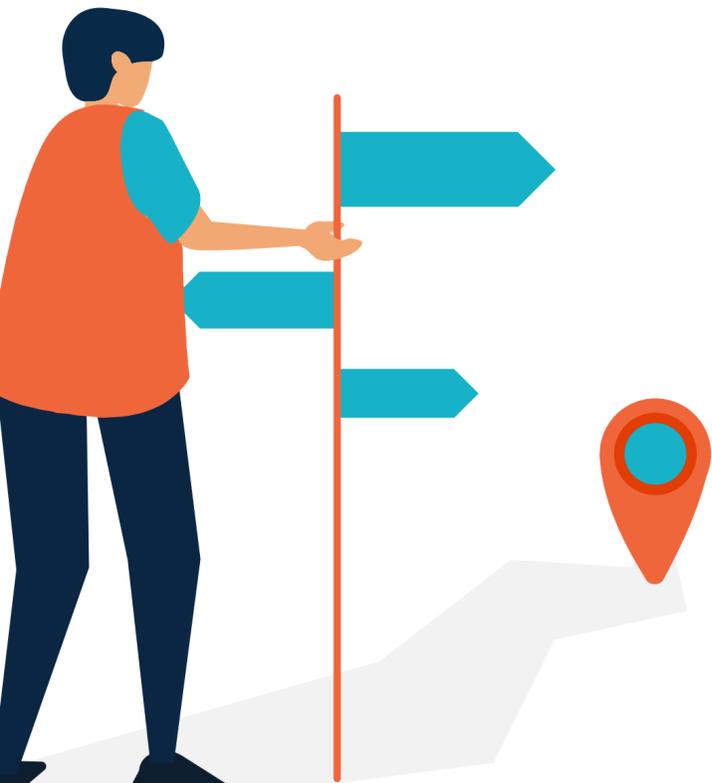
"The findings from this project are already shaping our policy making about how we design our hybrid working policies and with it our workplaces across our estate, from depots to hubs in our local centres. This vital data is also helping us assess the wider implications for the city and accelerate our recovery from the pandemic."

Tom Riordan CBE, Chief Executive of Leeds City Council

Executive summary

COVID-19, the subsequent lockdowns and enforced homeworking changed what it meant to "go to work" for many people. Most office-based staff became homeworkers overnight. For essential staff still required onsite, offices were adapted in a short space of time to incorporate social distancing, increased ventilation and other COVID-19 mitigations. This disruption has changed employees' and organisations' preconceptions over what a workplace is and has spurred a rethink of how we work in a much broader sense. This is exciting and has the potential to improve both the experience of work for employees and to drive innovation in the design of offices and ways of working.

Our research project examines the implications of these changes, provides advice for organisations looking to create hybrid workplaces and develops an evidence base for what the impact is on employee behaviour. This report provides part one of our findings, part two will be published in September 2022.

Types of hybrid working

While businesses report that hybrid working is overwhelmingly the new normal for their office workers, our research has shown that this can mean widely different things in practice. We have identified five types of hybrid working: free hybrids, timeless hybrids, nomadic hybrids, fixed hybrids and balanced hybrids. Each form of hybrid working has implications for the type and amount of office space required.

Hybrid working varies in how much control employees are given over where they work as well as when they work. We show that this is not necessarily an empowering or better arrangement for employees – an employee could be told exactly where and when they are working, expected to work in unsuitable conditions at home or have mandated working patterns that are difficult to arrange childcare around. Leaders need to be clear about what hybrid working means for their organisation, identify the level of control provided and identify where this differs across groups of workers. This is required before you can benchmark against competitors, implement a formal hybrid working policy or understand your office requirements.

Our research reveals tensions inherent in hybrid working, with the risk that employees feel there is an "us and them" – those able to work flexibly or more flexibly, and those whose roles or managers prevent this. This can be addressed through localised policies, job redesign and provision of other types of flexibility within roles. There is also a consistent tension between "me and we" when discussing hybrid working – with employees keen to retain the high levels of control and individualised ways of working gained during the pandemic, prioritising individual work-life balance or personal productivity over accepting greater co-location/office working or coordinated schedules. This requires managers to clearly articulate the purpose and benefit of office working and to press that "me does not always beat we".
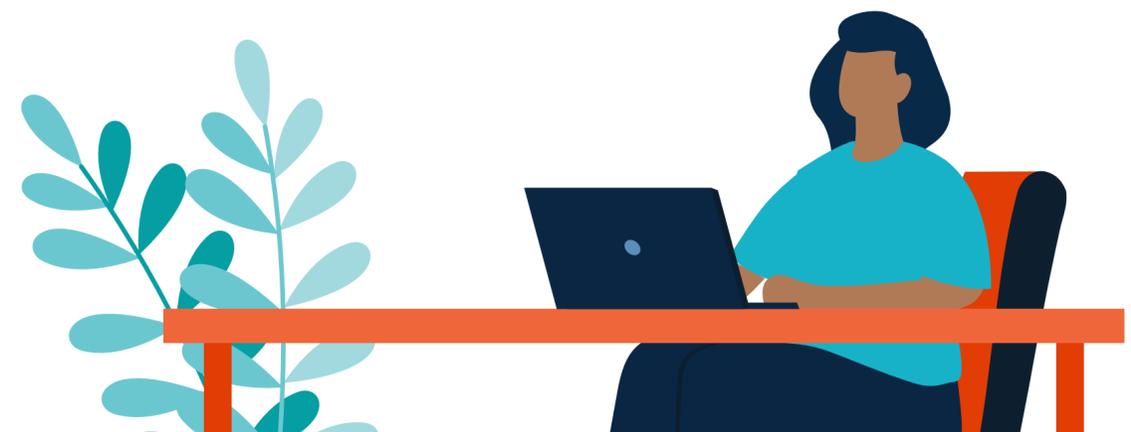
Employee perceptions of the office

Employees are not likely to be swayed to change their minds over working in the office by free yoga classes. **Our survey of 759 UK office workers** finds the most influential pull factors are task or role related (jobs needing particular equipment or feedback) and supporting colleagues (training new starters).

72% prefer to work from the office at least once a week

33% have no dedicated workspace at home

30% would like to access a "third space" such as a co-working office

41% of workers are aware of a formal hybrid working policy

18% of their offices have been adapted specifically to support hybrid working

6% of workers were trained for hybrid activities
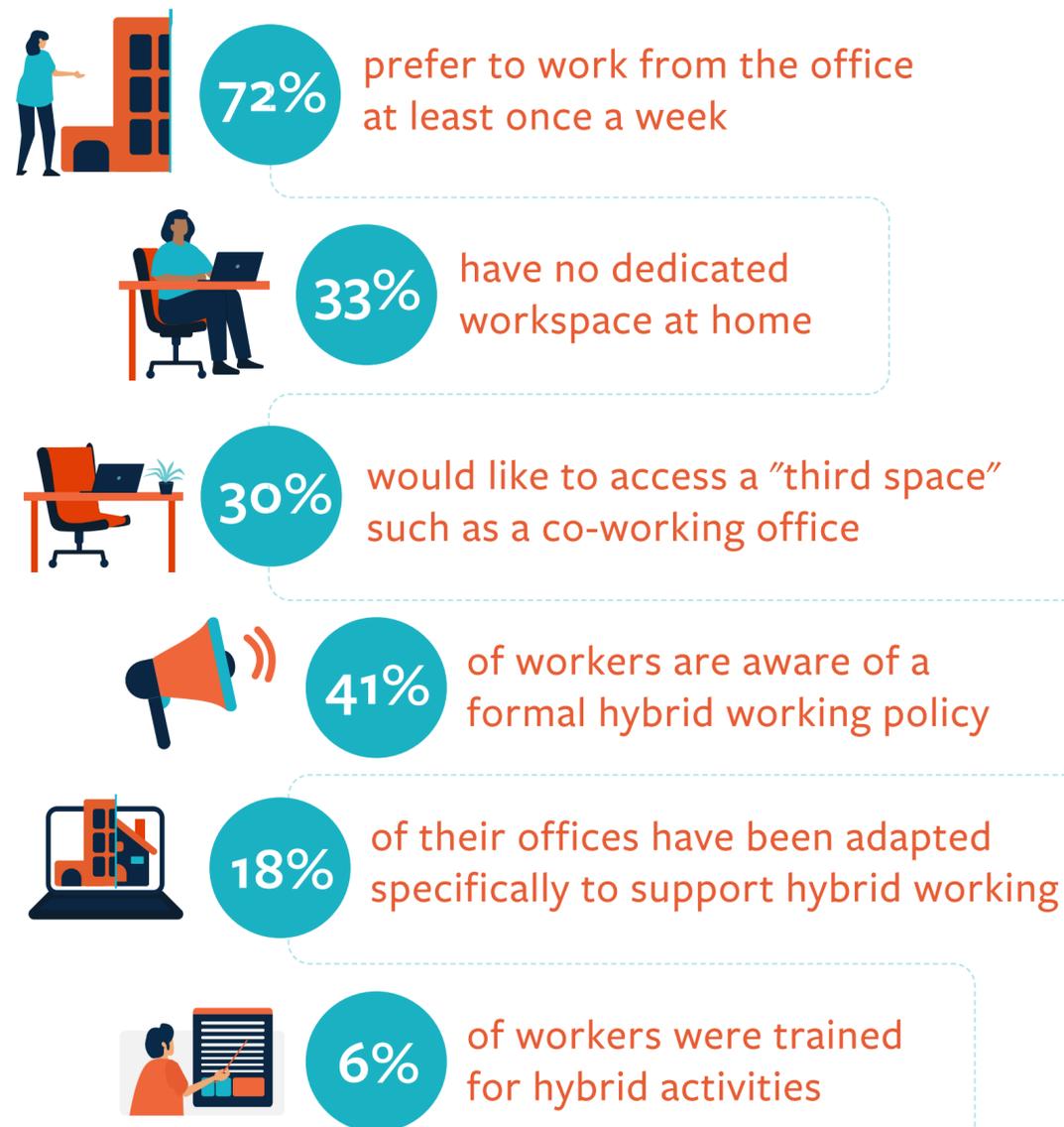
Across industry there is **a long way to go to formalise the arrangements that have grown organically during the pandemic** and to adapt the physical offices and technologies to support new ways of working.

It's a socio-technical problem

An effective hybrid workplace is **more than an HR policy or office design issue**, as our interviews and workshops with public and private sector organisations and industry experts make clear. It is a socio-technical problem, essentially affecting all aspects of "work" and requiring knock-on changes to IT, work processes, organisational goals and culture to be successful.

This raises the question of what success looks like for a hybrid workplace – there are likely to be trade-offs between objectives such as flexibility, staff retention, cost reduction, workspace efficiency, collaboration, and/or productivity. Thinking specifically about offices, different models can be pursued to support hybrid working, from leaving traditional offices unchanged, adopting agile or activity-based workplaces, through to implementing a largely virtual workplace. We provide examples to help think through the implications, drawn from our industry workshop, and suggest the systems scenarios tool as a way to work through these decisions methodically.

One-size won't fit all

There is no one-size fits all, either in terms of the hybrid policy or workplace that will suit all organisations or in terms of the individual needs of employees. Organisations will never design a perfect arrangement that suits everyone, there will be trade-offs for individuals and teams. Let's be honest, we were unable to suit everyone's individual preferences pre-pandemic, we can aim to do better with hybrid working, but there are compromises required. We need to be clear and explicit over these decisions.

The pre-pandemic trend in office design towards agile or activity-based workspaces has been turbo-charged by the pandemic. These types of offices provide a degree of flexibility and variety of workspace that is likely to provide a pragmatic solution for organisations with employees undertaking a wide range of work tasks and variable level of office occupancy. The success of such designs relies on supporting technologies and systems such as booking systems, hot-desking, etc. They raise challenges in terms of maintaining culture, balancing uncertainty and providing for different employee needs.

The office...

There are lessons about designing in infection risk mitigation measures and assuring good ventilation within both new and existing office buildings. If flexibility and resilience are objectives of our workplace strategies, then these factors need to be included.

There is still a **general need and benefit to office working**. Time working with colleagues in an office matters to participants in our cross-industry survey of office workers. This suggests there is a limit to how far we may wish to go in the split between home vs office working in hybrid workplaces.

Office working is beneficial to employees. Our cross-industry survey of office workers suggests **more days spent working from the office are correlated with higher levels of job satisfaction, work engagement and commitment to the organisation**. Our early findings from in-depth quantitative diary studies of employees also suggest a positive role for office working, with time spent in the office related to higher levels of job satisfaction, engagement and concentration.

The diary studies also show the effect of workers' perception of how much control they have to choose where to work from. For example, **when employees felt they had little control over where they worked, working in the office was associated with lower workplace satisfaction** (compared to working from home), which had a knock-on effect on performance and job satisfaction. We are following this up with further data collection and analysis, to be shared in part two of our report.

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[1]Clegg, C. W. (2000) Sociotechnical principles for system design. Applied ergonomics, 31(5), 463-477; Davis, M. C. (2019) *Socio-technical systems thinking and the design of contemporary workspace*. In: Ayoko, OB and Ashkanasy, NM, (eds.) Organizational Behaviour and the Physical Environment. Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, UK, pp. 128-146.

Challenges in managing hybrid working

Managers described several key challenges to implementing hybrid working.

1 **How to design hybrid policies**. Given the potential for hybrid working to impact HR, technology, facilities, business processes and beyond, designing a hybrid policy is complex and cannot be left to a single department to lead alone. Socio-technical principles[1] give a good guide to approaching this: engage staff, learn from their experiences, define what a good outcome looks like, map the system and identify non-negotiables, only create rules that are absolutely necessary, allow localisation where possible and be honest that we will not get everything right first time.

2 **Ergonomics of the home workspace**. Actively encouraging employees to work from home introduces new challenges for many organisations. The principles remain the same as designing safe and supportive office environments (itself complicated if workers do not have assigned workstations), requiring regular ergonomic assessments, staff consultation, building in adjustability and adaptation of working practices.

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[1] Clegg, C. W. (2000) Sociotechnical principles for system design. *Applied ergonomics*, 31(5), 463-477; Davis, M. C. (2019) Socio-technical systems thinking and the design of contemporary workspace. In: Ayoko, OB and Ashkanasy, NM, (eds.) Organizational Behaviour and the Physical Environment. Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, UK, pp. 128-146

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3   **The management of hybrid teams and how to implement a hybrid work policy.** We identified key strategies to help manage teams and individuals effectively in a hybrid workplace. These include: clear communication of the goals and rationale for hybrid working, helping employees understand how to better use hybrid work policies, and coordinating hybrid working practices across the team.

4   **The impact of hybrid working and remote working on new starters or employees early in their career.** For employees to gain an understanding of organisational culture and practices and learn vicariously from colleagues, the office plays an important role. However, learning about your job remotely has positive elements. We offer **ten top tips** to help early career workers enter a hybrid workplace.

5   **Emerging silos in organisations, with teams or groups becoming more insular during the pandemic and homeworking.** The office does facilitate different types of interaction than cannot be gained online and plays a role in supporting the development of relationships and trust.

6   **Office design.** Agile or activity-based workplaces are the fast-growing trend in office design to support hybrid working. Key factors in their success are the management of shared spaces and hot-desks and designing in the right mix of task spaces relevant to employee preferences and job roles. We provide some approaches and examples to consider when implementing activity-based working. See sections on **office building infrastructure and interior design** and on **redesigning office workspaces**.

7   **Hybrid meetings**. It is difficult to have a conversation with managers, designers or employees about hybrid working without being asked how to have an effective hybrid meeting! We provide a **set of tips to help approach hybrid meetings** successfully and manage them to deliver an inclusive experience.

The question "**Where do I work?**" is now more complicated for many organisations and employees to answer, yet it **offers a huge opportunity to improve the workplace and how organisations operate**. This challenge is fraught with trade-offs, between individuals, teams and departments, between competing goals and business objectives, with many different solutions on the table. We hope this report helps to illustrate the importance of taking a systems approach to any change, provides ideas for working through the implications of decisions and gives illustrations of the likely effects for employees.

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Context and methodology COVID-19 Milestones in England:

23rd March
Stay at home order.
26th March lockdown measures legally came into force. Work from home (WFH), furlough, only limited reasons for working in a workplace.

June
Phased re-opening of schools, non-essential shops, relaxed restrictions and 2m rule.

August
Restrictions eased further, opening of indoor social spaces.

14th October
Three-tier system for restrictions.

2nd December
Stricter 3 tier system.

26th December
Tier four widened to other areas of England.

8th March
Schools re-opened.

12th April
Non-essential shops re-opened, no indoor mixing between different households allowed (step two).

19th July
Most legal limits on social contact removed (step four).

8th December
Move to plan B, face masks compulsory indoors, NHS COVID passes for specific settings.

2020 **2021** **2022**

July
Local lockdown comes into force in Leicester. Local authorities gain powers to enforce social distancing.

5th November
Second national lockdown lasts for four weeks.

6th January
Third national lockdown.

17th May
Rule of six indoor mixing, indoor venues re-open (step three).

1st April
Complete removal of all COVID-19 restrictions, transition to final stage of living with COVID.

10th May
Can return to work if can't WFH but avoiding public transport.

September
Return to WFH, 10pm curfew for hospitality.

19th December
Tier four introduced in London and South East.

29th March
Stay at home order ends (step one).

14th September
Winter plan, face masks encouraged.

5

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Context for COVID-19 office adaptations

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK resulted in dramatic changes to work, with a stay-at-home order implemented from March 2020. All workplaces were ordered to close unless essential, with employees required to work from home instead. This spurred one of the greatest changes to work practices ever seen. It wasn't until May 2020 that the government relaxed the restrictions to allow employees to return to offices if they were unable to work from home. Offices were only allowed to reopen during the pandemic with COVID-19 safety measures, such as enforcing social distancing, mask wearing, increased airflow and ventilation of indoor spaces and increased hygiene practices.

Over the following months, the UK experienced varying levels of freedom for working as a result of COVID-19 cases and variants emerging over time. At the same time, offices were more broadly re-designed, both for COVID-19 restrictions and to support a more flexible or hybrid approach to working. Despite these advancements the outbreak of the Omicron COVID-19 variant resulted in many offices closing once more in the autumn of 2021, with face masks re-introduced in September, regular testing encouraged, and the implementation of NHS COVID passes to access events or busy spaces. COVID-19 related restrictions were fully lifted from general workplaces in England in April 2022.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many adaptations to the physical office environment to enable office working during this time. These vary from short term COVID-19 specific adaptations to longer strategic changes such as moving offices and investment in new technologies and equipment to support more flexible or hybrid ways of working. This requires managers to clearly articulate the benefits of office working, to be honest regarding the personal costs of working together in an office and to have a compelling argument as to the collective benefits that this provides (e.g. enhancing the glue that binds people together, training and mentorship for new starters, etc).

Our research

This research project is designed to examine the changes to workplaces and ways of working spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. We aim to understand the implications of the changes: learn lessons, share good practice, and provide guidance for organisations adopting hybrid working or adapting offices to support their future ways of working.

Our project team consists of researchers from organisational psychology, information systems and engineering – we are taking a broad view of what is happening in practice to join up the dots between the management practices, employee perspectives, new technologies and workplaces being adapted.

This is the first of two reports that will share our key findings and suggestions for how to think about the challenge of adapting organisations to hybrid and more flexible ways of working. This first report explores the trade-offs involved, provides a socio-technical framework to approach change and provides data and insights into employee responses to different workplaces and ways of working. The second report, to be published in September 2022, will share more findings from our analysis of employee diaries, surveys and social network analysis from different offices.

In this report, we share insights gained from a range of stakeholder and employee interviews, industry workshops, cross-industry surveys of UK office workers, employee diary data and a review of published guidance and case studies.

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74 expert interviews

Stakeholder interviews

Interviewed experts in the design, provision and operation of offices, together with leaders and managers involved in making decisions about their offices and staff work patterns (e.g. voices from Estates, HR, IT, Health & Safety, Finance, ExCo) and subject matter specialists (e.g. inclusive design, EDI, sustainability, ergonomics)

Aug 2021 1025 workers

Dec 2021 759 workers

Snapshot surveys

We surveyed a cross-industry group of UK office workers in late August 2021 and contacted the same group again in December 2021 to understand how their experience of hybrid working had changed.

Ongoing – more results to be published in September 2022.

Industry workshops,

including socio-technical scenarios workshops with organisations to create and evaluate different models of "the future office".

4471 observations

346 employees

Employee diary study

to examine a variety of case study offices in-depth to understand how employees use, behave and feel in different types of hybrid workplaces.

Ongoing – more results to be published in September 2022.

91 employee interviews

Employee interviews

Sampling employees with different job roles, demographics, tenure, working pattern and preference to understand their office experience (during COVID-19) and to understand how they work and interact in different locations, types of spaces and hybrid arrangements.

609 employees

Social network analysis

with employees to capture social interaction patterns and to assess information flow, relationship formation and explore differences between employee groups across different office configurations, occupancies, and work arrangements.

Ongoing – results to be published in September 2022.

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Adaptations to offices and ways of working because of COVID-19 restrictions

Here are the key and most common adaptations organisations made to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection within office environments. We do not offer a judgement on the relative efficacy in reducing infection risk – data regarding how the COVID-19 virus spreads in different environments and the effectiveness of mitigations is still being published by research teams.

Limiting spaces

- Overall office capacity was generally reduced to 1/3 or below.

- Most collaborative spaces were closed. A small number of meeting rooms remained operating for critical processes.

- Remaining collaborative spaces operated with significantly limited capacity (e.g. 20%).

- Most breakout areas and communal spaces (e.g. café, kitchen) in office buildings were closed down.

- Significantly restricted use of essential shared spaces (e.g. toilets) – one person occupation at a time.

Desks and workstations

- Desks and workstations were removed or marked with signage to limit occupancy and keep social distance.

- Available workstations and seats were often provided in a zigzag fashion to keep social distance and avoid occupants facing each other directly.

- Workstations available in the office were generally provided on a shared basis (e.g. "hot-desks") with a clear desk policy. Some organisations assigned specific desks to critical roles.

- Many organisations mandated a desk booking process to limit capacity and monitor occupancy, often by using a spreadsheet rota or digital booking system.

Ventilation

- Spaces with risks of poor ventilation were identified and mitigation measures following emerging HSE and CISBE guidelines adopted.

- Operational procedures developed for offices with natural ventilation e.g. when to leave windows and doors open and when to purge the room air.

- Ventilation rates and controls evaluated in buildings with air-conditioning or mechanical ventilation and mitigation measures or corrective actions introduced.

Cleaning

- Most organisations upgraded their office cleaning regime, with increased frequency and thoroughness, as well as additional cleaning methods (e.g. disinfection).

- Office occupants were asked to develop cleaning habits themselves, such as wiping off equipment, touch points and surfaces before and after use.
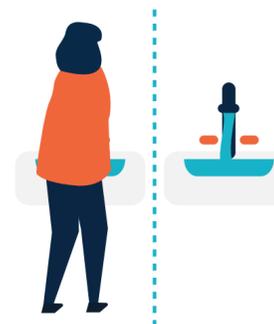
Facilities and equipment

- Shared facilities in communal areas (e.g. kitchen equipment) were removed; staff in the office were asked to bring their own tools.

- Full-height washroom and other perspex dividers were installed.

- Staff were encouraged to use electronic documents instead of paperwork where possible.

Support on commute

- Staff were asked to wear face coverings where possible in public spaces and transport.

- Some organisations provided support for employees to avoid public transport, including making parking available and accessible, as well as increasing bike storage and personal lockers.

Occupant rules

- Most organisations mandated mask wearing when moving in the office. Masks were generally not compulsory when at a desk.

- Occupants were asked to keep a minimum 2m social distance from each other at all times.

- One-way systems were introduced in common areas (e.g. corridors, staircases) with floor signage.

- Staff were encouraged to use the NHS COVID-19 tracing app – some organisations integrated it with their own booking system.

- Posters and signage were displayed to remind workers of rules and promote safety awareness (e.g. handwashing).

Sanitising and PPE

- Face masks were generally available in offices for occupants to use.

- Sanitisers provided or sanitising stations installed throughout offices, specifically at key touch points (lifts, meeting rooms, printers and kitchens).

- Disinfectant spray and wipes provided for occupants to clean surfaces and equipment before and after use.

- Some organisations provided gloves for staff to wear when handling paper documents and using shared equipment.

- Contactless washrooms adopted in new office developments.

Lessons learned from rapid redesign

Organisational stakeholders were, in general, **surprised by the success** of rapid adaptations to workplaces and ways of working.

"I was amazed actually how quickly we did adapt. We just adapted pretty much within a week... I feel really chuffed that that we were able to do that."

Organisations had been forced to rapidly redesign whole ways of working (to enable employees to work from home, almost overnight) and adapt their offices to be COVID-19 compliant for essential staff or as restrictions eased. It was striking that many reported unexpected benefits.

Many of the organisations we spoke to formed multi-disciplinary design teams or crisis teams for the first time, bringing together leaders or experts from across the business and support services. This multi-disciplinary approach provided more joined up and integrated responses – crucially, the design teams were seen as having promoted agile decision making. The decisions taken were viewed to have made organisations more resilient to future crises, by increasing their flexibility, ability to work remotely, and ways to communicate with employees.

"There are loads of positives to come out of this, which sounds insensitive. But again, I'm sure it's a well-trodden path that people say this, but the methods of working that we have learnt and having to adapt to it have definitely shown signs of doing things differently."
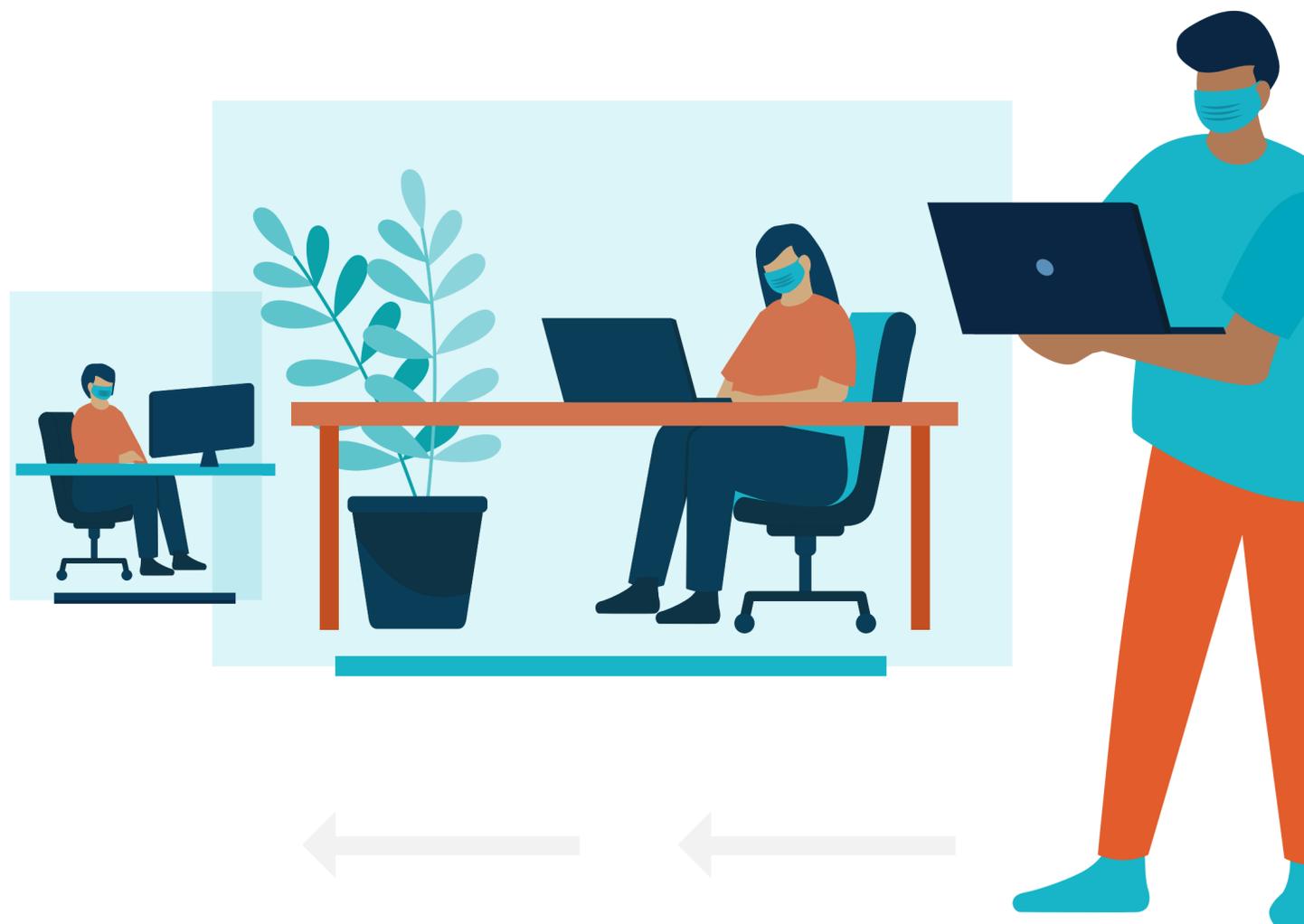
One of the most consistent challenges raised by stakeholders, other than availability of mobile technology and gaining remote access to systems and data, was planning under such uncertainty. Interviewees felt that safety measures were introduced to the offices efficiently following guidelines being issued by the government and professional bodies. However, the frequency of changes in guidance and late provision of guidance following public announcements of COVID-19 rule changes made both planning and providing effective communications to staff challenging.

Other challenges included limitations to what could be changed due to the physical design or age of office buildings. For example, for organisations based in relatively old buildings, their ventilation system may not meet recommended ventilation rates or may allow unacceptable recirculation conditions, putting occupants at risk of contaminated air flow. Many maintenance issues were also identified during the reviewing process carried out in response to COVID. This suggests a common lack of attention to the operational performance of ventilation in office buildings, which is echoed by industry experts. In office spaces relying on natural ventilation, it was challenging to maintain both fresh air flow and thermal comfort in cold conditions.

"One of our key difficulties at the moment is because we don't know what that new workplace guidance looks like from the 19th July. We'll hopefully find out next week."

While most organisational stakeholders have expressed confidence in providing their staff a COVID-secure office, they reported challenges when adapting their offices. For example, compliance towards COVID-specific office rules such as mask wearing and one-way systems weakened in some organisations later in the pandemic. This was echoed by the employee interviews where employees explained the disregard for some safety measures as being due to a lack of practicality – with some adaptations (like social distancing) being less workable as the number of employees returning to an office increased.

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What is hybrid working?

Hybrid working is commonly taken to mean "**working from a mixture of office and home**". A **2021 survey of UK employers** found more than nine out of ten businesses expect the majority of workers to undertake some form of hybrid working – suggesting hybrid working will be the norm for staff who were previously office based. Employees seem happy with this, with most reporting that they would like to spend approximately half of their time in the office, the remainder working remotely – albeit with a wide variation of preferences. This neatly fits with pre-pandemic research that suggests around 50% of the work week as a tipping point where individual benefits (e.g. job satisfaction) from homeworking may plateau.[2]

What does hybrid working really mean in practice though? What are the challenges of formalising a way of working that for many businesses arrived out of a necessity to keep operations running during an emergency, rather than by a considered decision?

Are we all talking about the same thing?

There is often an assumption that hybrid working is both flexible and empowering for workers. To what extent is this the case though? Our research suggests that there is both a huge array of working practices that may be considered as hybrid working, and that this way of working is ill-defined both within and between organisations. This hampers meaningful benchmarking and has the potential to stoke division between the haves and have nots within an organisation.

If you care about whether you have a competitive edge or worry you are behind the curve, **you need to be specific about what hybrid means for your employees and what other businesses really mean when they say they offer hybrid working**. We need to be able to classify hybrid policies in order to benchmark and compare like for like.

Defining hybrid working

Fundamentally "hybrid working" describes an arrangement whereby employees work a proportion of their time at one or more workplaces (a traditional office, client building, manufacturing facility, building site, or co-working space) with time also spent working from home (anything from a kitchen table or desk in a spare room to a separate home office building). Hybrid working has rapidly replaced previous terms such as "flexible work arrangements" or "teleworking" for describing people who spend at least some time working outside of a traditional workplace.

Different forms of hybrid work arrangements have been described in terms of the level of discretion workers have to work away from the office, as well as when they work. However, this assumes that hybrid working is necessarily an opportunity for employees to exercise control over where and when they work. Traditional ideas regarding flexible work arrangements recognise that workers may be offered flexibility over when they work (work schedules or hours) as well as where they work (with flexibility often described as the opportunity to work remotely or away from the traditional office; pre-COVID this was often a privilege extended to more senior or long-standing employees).

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[2] Charalampous, M., Grant, C. A., Tramontano, C., & Michailidis, E. (2019) **Systematically reviewing remote e-workers' well-being at work: A multidimensional approach**. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 28(1), 51-73; Allen T.D., Golden T.D., Shockley K.M. (2015) **How Effective Is Telecommuting? Assessing the Status of Our Scientific Findings**. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 16(2), pp. 40-68.

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Are you a free, nomadic, timeless, fixed or balanced hybrid worker?

Hybrid working is often talked about as enabling employees to work flexibly, retain work-life balance and to feel a greater sense of control over how they work. Our research suggests this is not necessarily the case and that the form of hybrid work arrangement that organisations adopt can yield markedly differing experiences for workers. Our interviews and industry workshops helped us to identify five distinct types of hybrid working (**see Figure 1**).
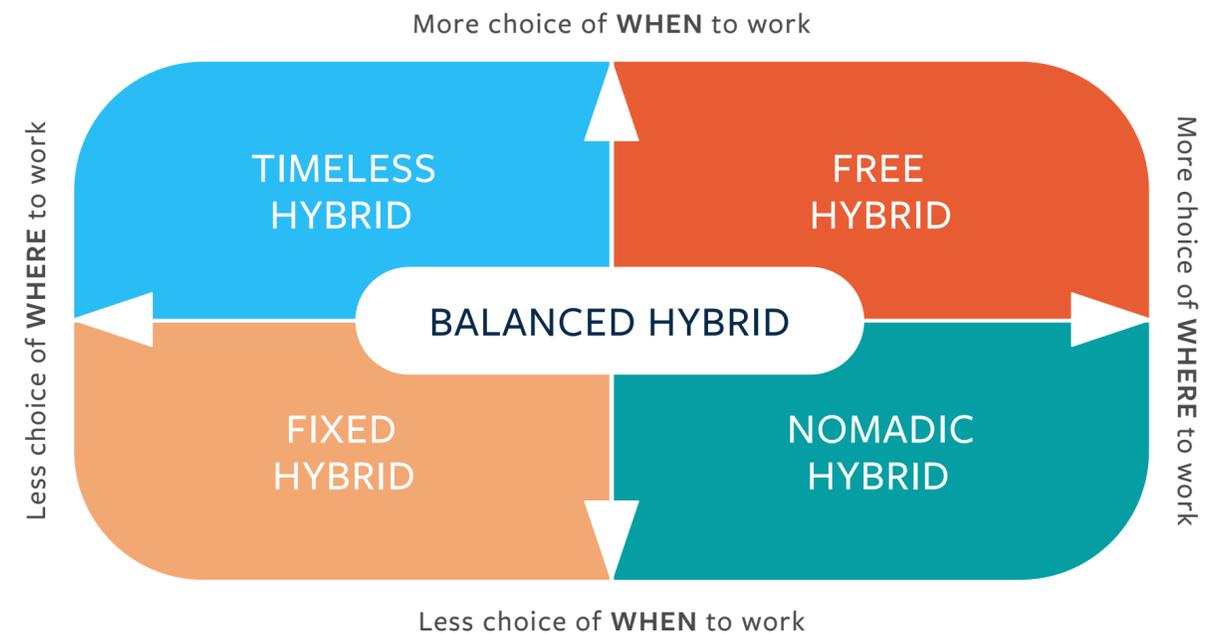
Timeless hybrids

These workers can be considered more akin to flexi-time workers pre-pandemic, with **high levels of individual control over when they work their hours**. They're likely to be highly independent workers and judged on outcomes rather than time-based performance measures. While timeless workers may be hybrid workers, in that they work from a mixture of locations, they have little control over where they work. Perhaps their access to the office is limited to fixed days or the tasks or data they work on mean their work must be undertaken in set locations even though when it is carried out is the employee's choice.

Fixed hybrids

These workers have the least freedom. They have **little if any control over where or when they work, with both work locations and work hours fixed**. This may mean they have prescribed days when they must work from the office and set days they must be home-based, with shift patterns or inflexible work hours. This is a form of hybrid working – employees work from multiple locations, but do not have control over work arrangements. These hybrid workers are often overlooked in discussions of the "new normal" and talk of benefits of hybrid working. This is the new work reality for many employees within roles and industries traditionally considered "highly controlled work environments" such as call centre workers. This arrangement may reduce employee control and increase work-life stressors, e.g. having to arrange childcare around commute patterns they have no control over, or work from home on days that may be unsuitable.

Figure 1: Hybrid working classification

More choice of **WHEN** to work

Less choice of **WHERE** to work — More choice of **WHERE** to work

TIMELESS HYBRID · FREE HYBRID · BALANCED HYBRID · FIXED HYBRID · NOMADIC HYBRID

Less choice of **WHEN** to work

University of Leeds Hybrid Classification

Free hybrids

At its most liberating, hybrid working can reflect high levels of autonomy over both where and when an employee works ("free hybrids"), with employees able to decide not only when they work, but also the locations they wish to work from (e.g. café in the morning, office in the afternoon, join a late Zoom call from home in the evening). Crucially, free hybrids have **control over when they access different workspaces, as well as when they choose to work**.

Nomadic hybrids

The workers have the choice of where they wish to work from, essentially free to choose any location they wish (e.g. employer's office, co-working space, home, café or beachside) as long as they are able to undertake their work. Nomadic hybrid working involves working from multiple locations but is not exclusively homeworking (this would make you a homeworker, not a hybrid worker). Nomadic hybrids enjoy **control over where but not when they work, with working hours specified**, e.g. in shift patterns, traditional work hours, or times most likely to cover business operations or enable synchronous team working.
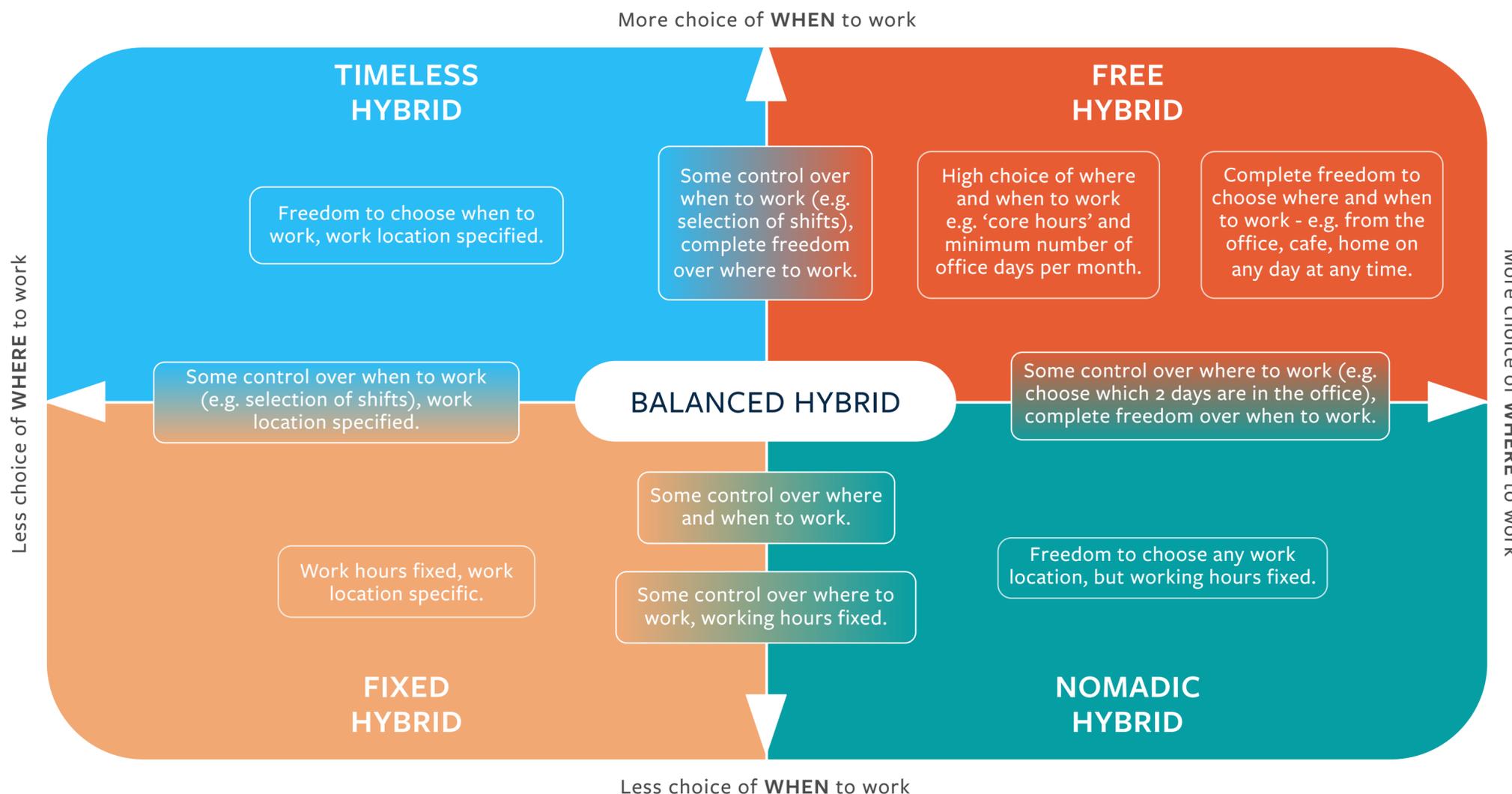
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Balanced hybrid

Hybrid work arrangements are likely to fall somewhere within this spectrum, with the mid-point described as balanced where **employees have some control over both where and when they work, but within specific boundaries**. For example, they may be office workers with core hours and a minimum number of days that they must work from the office per month. Beyond this, the employee may be able to design their work schedule to suit themselves over the course of the month. We can think of this as having guiding principles or policy rather than a rigid hybrid work routine or laissez-fair approach that anything goes.

All these work arrangements can be considered hybrid working and are being seen implemented in practice. The types of workspace, management practices and technologies to support these arrangements, and employees' experiences, may vary considerably. Choosing any version of hybrid working has implications for the wider organisation, such as the area and type of office space required, supporting technologies, management practices, etc (**see Figure 2**). We discuss factors and trade-offs involved in making decisions over what form of hybrid working to adopt in the next sections.

Figure 2: Description of hybrid work arrangements

More choice of **WHEN** to work

TIMELESS HYBRID

Freedom to choose when to work, work location specified.

Some control over when to work (e.g. selection of shifts), complete freedom over where to work.

FREE HYBRID

High choice of where and when to work e.g. 'core hours' and minimum number of office days per month.

Complete freedom to choose where and when to work - e.g. from the office, cafe, home on any day at any time.

Less choice of **WHERE** to work

Some control over when to work (e.g. selection of shifts), work location specified.

BALANCED HYBRID

Some control over where to work (e.g. choose which 2 days are in the office), complete freedom over when to work.

More choice of **WHERE** to work

FIXED HYBRID

Work hours fixed, work location specific.

Some control over where and when to work.

Some control over where to work, working hours fixed.

Freedom to choose any work location, but working hours fixed.

NOMADIC HYBRID

Less choice of **WHEN** to work

University of Leeds Hybrid Classification

Tensions when implementing hybrid working policies

Us vs them

Employees we speak with consistently want to feel they are being treated fairly when it comes to hybrid working. This was also a finding of prior research into flexible work arrangements.

Staff may be told they all have the opportunity to work in a hybrid way, but their experiences within an organisation may be wildly different depending on their team, role or manager. This can lead to perceptions of "us" and "them", between those with the opportunity to work in a hybrid way and those without, or those working in a fixed vs timeless hybrid arrangement. We have seen this first-hand during the pandemic between those workers required on-site to deliver key services and their colleagues whose roles were more easily transferred to homeworking. There is a real danger that this sense of "us" and "them" will grow as we move beyond emergency restrictions and temporary ways of working to a "new normal" (or just normal).

Take action:

1 Be precise when talking about hybrid working. Specify what this means for individuals and groups, highlighting where this experience may differ.

2 Be clear on the purpose, value and reasons for office working.

3 Link decisions over hybrid working policies to clear business outcomes, work design and operational constraints. This will reduce the opportunity for decisions to be viewed as personality driven or favouritism.

Principles win over rules

In setting out a hybrid policy there can be a temptation to over-specify and reduce opportunity for variation and inconsistency. While this may provide a more consistent experience across an organisation, it can also lead towards a fixed-hybrid model and reduce employee flexibility, undermining the key benefit many employees say they value from hybrid working.

In our research we have seen both global companies and SMEs struggle with rigid rules such as two days per week or 60% minimum time in the office. Often, such rules don't survive first contact with reality and the differing ways of working across teams and business areas (what is reasonable for an HR department may be completely unworkable for a sales or events team whose schedule is highly variable). Rather than being overly reliant on rigid policy or top-down commands, we need underlying principles to serve as the basis for localisation.

If an organisation localises hybrid working arrangements the likely end point is that they adopt a varied set of work arrangements across their business (e.g. balanced in the product development team, fixed in the call centre, solely office-based for the office support team). To counter potential disparities between groups, we need to be clear on what the approach will be for roles that cannot be performed in a hybrid manner (these could be fully remote/homeworking or fully site-based). This is the other flashpoint for feelings of inequity – e.g. where someone feels that they are being denied the opportunity to have flexibility over where and when they work just by nature of their specific job role when they see colleagues enjoying a different arrangement. Again, this is not isolated to hybrid working, it is a risk present in any organisation where work arrangements vary. Clear principles and business reasons will help to justify different arrangements, but we may also be creative in how we narrow any potential gaps in employee experience.

Redesign jobs to make them hybrid ready

Some organisations we have studied are using tried and tested principles of job redesign and employee engagement to overcome feelings of "us" and "them". For example, in a financial services firm, the management proactively redesigned support roles so staff in branch offices (whose work was previously in-person customer facing) are now allocated a proportion of the head office telephone or web based customer service activity, so they can spend at least one day per week working remotely.

There is an opportunity to look at the organisation of work, allocation of tasks and activities at a system level, to design in opportunities for remote working across employee roles that may not traditionally have been able to work in this way. This could be tackled gradually as roles become vacant or as a larger redesign activity.

Offer other types of flexibility or control

In the construction industry and manufacturing (traditionally seen as highly site-based), we have seen organisations try to reduce staff concerns and improve retention by introducing other forms of flexibility (e.g. changing working practices so there is greater flexibility over individual start times, quality assurance work undertaken from home, condensed working time to shorten the working week, etc).

Hybrid working centres around choice over how and where work is done. Where the role precludes hybrid working we can engineer in other opportunities for employee choice to offset this. Such approaches will be important to counter the so-called "great resignation" and many leaders' fear of losing key staff to competitors offering greater flexibility.

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Me vs we

We have observed a friction between "me" and "we". This quickly becomes apparent in discussions with staff (across seniority levels) where individuals often express the desire to retain control over their own schedules, how and where they work, while simultaneously wanting to have more certainty over how others work, expressing frustration over the difficulties they experience coordinating with colleagues, agreeing on in-person activities, delivering services, etc. There is a contradiction in the desire to retain individual control and simultaneously to expect colleagues to work in more predictable or scheduled ways.

This disconnect between "me" and "we" is clear when discussing productivity and the value of working in the office or being co-located. Individuals often discuss the benefits that homeworking or choosing when they work from the office has for their personal productivity – for example, by reducing time lost to commuting, taking part in office rituals (e.g. shared coffee breaks or after work drinks) or the interruptions from co-workers through the day. Employees question why they should give up their time and sacrifice individual performance just to come into the office. Cost can also be influential, with employees now used to lower commute and work-related outgoings (e.g. one interviewee shared how she saved over £1000 per year no longer buying "commute coffees"). This reflects a general lack of clarity over the value or purpose of co-locating or working from the office. Why would you be happy giving up your time if you couldn't see the benefit?

Most reasons managers give about the importance of bringing staff together in-person concern building or maintaining the "we" – the social fabric of the organisation. Time spent working together in an office may be an investment in developing or nurturing culture, sharing knowledge, supporting colleagues, fostering innovation, accessing training, supporting staff wellbeing. The benefits of these collective activities may be more difficult to quantify, but they feed into the shared perceptions of "what it's like to work here".

Take action:

1 Be clear about the value of collaboration and co-location – of how this time spent together contributes to wider outcomes.

2 Be explicit that we can't just prioritise individual performance – "me" doesn't always beat "we".

3 Be honest that time spent physically working together may come at a personal cost.

4 Ensure that rewards and recognition reflect the shared or in-person activities that you want to promote.

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Monitoring vs trusting

Supervision is commonly believed to be more efficient in the office – it's one of the key reasons offices developed originally and has helped **drive the growth of open plan working**. In our interviews, managers and organisational stakeholders frequently report that monitoring performance is a big challenge when staff work from home. Managers often find themselves not knowing whether employees are actually delivering what is expected – is a lack of interaction a sign of industriousness and focused working or of an employee being on a box-set binge? The lack of visibility can raise uncertainty, sow the seed of mistrust and strain team relationships (team members resent colleagues who they feel aren't pulling their weight), captured well by a team leader from a national research institution:

> *"I could see within their diary that they were available, and therefore I suggested that if we could have a quick five-minute catch up. However, then it took them over an hour and a half to respond to me to say 'oh yes, I'm available now'. But I don't know what they were doing in the time."*

Approaches to monitoring

One solution is to rely on in-person monitoring, i.e. more time spent in the office. This could be taking away the option of homeworking and returning to full-time office-based working, or towards a fixed hybrid model whereby supervisors or managers are able to specify a much greater proportion of time working physically alongside their reportees. However, counting hours at a desk and presenteeism does not necessarily equate to work being done or quality of performance. It also reduces the flexibility and control that employees prize under hybrid working.

> *"I don't monitor them really closely. They've all worked in the business a long time. They know what they're doing. I know if the work's been done because I review that work, but I don't, you know, I don't check up on them to see if they're working every half an hour or anything."*

An alternative approach is to capitalise on analytics and virtual monitoring to ensure that staff are working remotely. Activity analytics on digital platforms (e.g. Microsoft Teams) can be used to track workers' presence – for example time spent logged into the platform, interactions with others, volume of messages sent or other bespoke measurements from any in-house systems in use. In industries working with confidential or classified data, there may be requirements for staff to have webcams switched on while accessing key systems. While such techniques can provide much needed assurance and compliance controls, a common concern from interviewees was the over-use of these tools sends a signal that staff aren't to be trusted. In our interviews with staff, a number of employees expressly reported that their work from home exhaustion comes from a feeling of being constantly monitored. This is a real risk that needs to be weighed against what may seem easy or low-level digital monitoring.

Trust and clarity

Working from home required managers to put trust in their team members. This sense of being trusted is frequently praised by employees we spoke to – they felt they were able to work flexibly around their individual circumstances without being constantly monitored, and this helped them maintain their individual performance. Managers highlighted the risks of individual staff taking advantage of remote working:

> *"The vast majority of colleagues have really paid us back for that kind of faith and trust that we put in them. But there was always a small number who chose to, you know, take advantage of the situation." "[…] sometimes you do get people who… maybe don't tell the truth, you know, so you end up with somebody self-isolating every other week and that becomes a problem."*

It is naïve to assume that the answer to a small number of staff abusing remote working is to either return to full office working or leap to intrusive monitoring. Staff who are present in the office may not be productive and employees can learn to game monitoring systems. The key to both is good management – clear and demonstrable objectives and outputs, active communication and feedback whether remote or in-person working. **Read our section on managing**.

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What does hybrid working mean for employees?

Hybrid working can take many forms, but what do we know about how employees are responding to changes implemented since the COVID-19 pandemic? Some key findings from our cross-sector surveys of UK office workers and diary surveys from within organisations adapting their workplaces to hybrid working.

Where do people want to work?

Unfortunately there is no clear answer to this question. Employees' perceptions of what they want varies depending on when they are asked, as Dr Matthew Davis and Hannah Collis have explained in a **podcast**. Our experience evolves and is influenced by the behaviours of others we work with. Our December 2021 survey of UK office workers found hybrid working is becoming increasingly popular across sectors.

49% of employees want it to be their permanent work arrangement

28% want to work from home full time

23% want to return to the office full time

We are repeating this snapshot survey in late spring 2022 and will provide further updates in the next report.

> *"So, you've got almost polar extremes of people that there's inevitably people who cannot wait to get back. You know, they really have missed their colleagues. [...] At the flip side, there are some colleagues who probably have decided that they would prefer never to come back into the office and feel they can work very comfortably and effectively, always through Teams and from home."*

There is much talk of employees wanting their offices to become social hubs or places to simply interact with colleagues, with solo activities taking place at home. Our snapshot suggests this is overly simplistic, with a wide range of individual preferences for what tasks to work on where. Collaboration does seem to be the key activity to bring people together:

TASK	WORKERS WHO PREFER TO UNDERTAKE THIS TASK IN OFFICE
FACE TO FACE MEETINGS	86%
TEAM COLLABORATION TASKS	84%
SOLO, HIGH CONCENTRATION TASKS	35%
CREATIVE TASKS	29%
SOLO, LOW CONCENTRATION TASKS	28%
HYBRID MEETINGS	27%
VIRTUAL MEETINGS	7%

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Our findings challenge some assumptions around the space and equipment required in the office for hybrid meetings if people were given the choice of where to join from, and illustrate different work preferences.

Office workers seem to be consistent in preferring an assigned desk – i.e. their own (80% August 2021, 84.5% December 2021) rather than a hot-desk/shared desk. 30% of office workers wanted access to a third workspace (e.g. a co-working space), suggesting that employees may be wanting a change to their home workspace or office – a promising statistic for co-working spaces which have developed across UK cities.

How have offices and work changed?

It's understandable to think, based on media excitement, that every office has been re-fitted and hybrid working policies are common. But this is not what we found within our snapshot surveys:

OFFICE WORKERS' EXPERIENCE	PERCENTAGE
OFFICE ALREADY HAS TASK-SPECIFIC SPACES	58%
UNASSIGNED DESKS (HOT-DESKING)	43%
AWARE OF A FORMAL HYBRID WORKING POLICY (DECEMBER 2021)	34%
USING A DESK-BOOKING SYSTEM	21%
AWARE OF A FORMAL HYBRID WORKING POLICY (AUGUST 2021)	21%
WORK IN AN ACTIVITY-BASED OFFICE	17%

Despite the low adaptation of offices to hybrid working, many employees may already be in offices that can flex to support different ways of working. But workers' experiences suggest many organisations are still far from formalising future ways of working.

What might bring people back to the office?

The top factors uncovered in our survey for wanting or needing to return to the office were:

FACTOR	PERCENTAGE
JOB REQUIREMENTS	77.6%
TO HAVE MORE FLEXIBILITY	74.5%
THE COMMUTE (VIEWED POSITIVELY)	72%
TO MEET NEW COLLEAGUES	64.5%
FOR TRAINING REQUIREMENTS	63.8%

These were mostly consistent across employees, with only a slight gender difference identified – women were more likely to want to work from the office if they were meeting new starters or if their colleagues were in the office, compared to men. Overall, men wished to work a greater proportion of their time in the office in the long-term than women did.

There were also some differences between those working in public and private sector organisations. Public sector employees rated factors such as social interactions, having available workspaces and free parking as higher "pulls" to work in the office compared to private sector employees, who instead favoured subsidised public transport. As noted elsewhere, these findings highlight the key role that the commute plays in employees' decision making about their workplace. Public sector workers also wished to work a greater proportion of their time in the office in the long-term – several hours more each week – than those in the private sector.

Interestingly, the lower ranked factors in determining returning to the office within our snapshot survey were found to be having a gym or health membership, the office aesthetic environment, availability of personal storage in the office and being visible to other colleagues and managers. These findings were echoed within our employee interviews since these factors, along with further incentives such as free food, were rarely mentioned

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What is the impact of hybrid working on office workers?

Looking at the data from our snapshot survey in December 2021, when we took account of being able to control where you were working from (as not everyone had a free choice due to COVID restrictions or workplace policies), we found that **spending more days in the office was related to higher levels of job satisfaction, engagement and commitment to the organisation**. We are exploring this in more detail over time within our diary studies (full results to be published in September 2022). Early data from over 4000 diary entries shows working in the office is associated with higher levels of employee job satisfaction, engagement and concentration, and that employees working in the office undertake additional tasks more than when they work remotely.

Our snapshot data suggests that **working in the office may not be universally positive for employees**. It shows a link between more days spent working in the office and lower levels of work-life balance (how well employees feel able to balance work and home pressures). The positives of office working (job satisfaction, engagement and commitment) may be at the expense of greater conflict between work and home life.
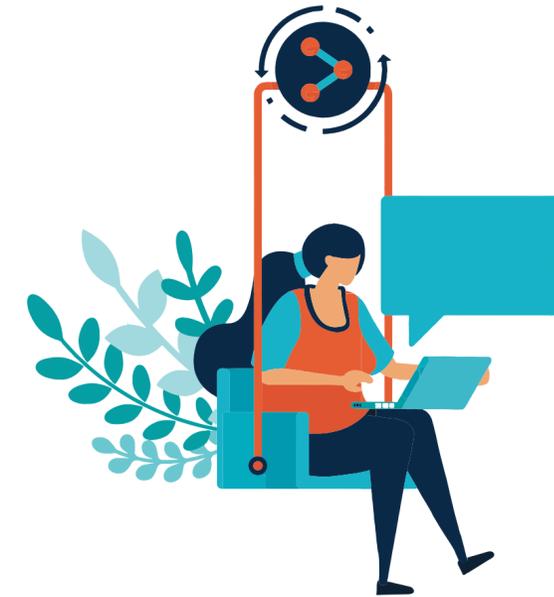
What is the impact of hybrid working on home workers?

Many assume that working from home is most beneficial for maintaining a work-life balance, with our interviews indeed highlighting that it gives employees flexibility to work around home tasks. There are still differences in individual experiences and preferences though. Some employees we interviewed say the lack of separation between home and work lives impacts their ability to remain focused on their work tasks. This separation is likely to be weakened with a lack of dedicated workspaces within the home, such as a home office or clear desk set up. Our snapshot data revealed that 35% of respondents in December 2021 still did not have a dedicated home workspace, whether that is a separate office at home, or a dedicated workspace set-up, only down by 1% from our August 2021 snapshot. **The availability of suitable workspace means that employees may have starkly different experiences working from home**.

We followed up on this within our diary project, finding that having a dedicated workspace was related to higher self-rated performance, job satisfaction, work-related motivation and engagement. In contrast, working from an adapted home workspace, such as from a dining table, was associated with a range of negative outcomes, such as noticing more distractions, experiencing greater interruptions to work, engaging in counter-productive work behaviours (e.g. checking social media) and higher levels of exhaustion. Therefore, the available home workspace plays a central role in the experience of working from home, determining whether it is a positive or detrimental factor to both performance and work-life balance.

Are people prepared for hybrid working?

Effective hybrid meetings which some employees join from the office and others online are a significant element of successful hybrid working. Somewhat shockingly, **only 6% of respondents to our snapshot survey in December 2021 had received any hybrid meeting training**. If hybrid working is to succeed, we encourage employers to invest in and facilitate hybrid working and meeting training.

The ability to work effectively from both office and home requires suitable home workspaces. In our December data, we found that **35.6% of the sample had changed their home workspace throughout the pandemic**, including making dramatic household changes such as the renovation of spare bedrooms, building offices in the garden and even moving house, to smaller adjustments, most often the introduction of a proper desk/chair. While all adjustments may improve the experience of home working, **large changes are likely to be an option only to those who own their properties and have the financial capital to move house**: likely older workers. It may be that younger and less affluent workers are less able to work routinely from home and should be considered when developing hybrid working policies. They may require more access to an office or third spaces.

We found people are thinking about costs and work commutes in different ways now, having worked from home for the majority of the last two years, compared to before the pandemic. For example, **while a 1.5hr commute was acceptable before, this is no longer being tolerated especially by those who have demonstrated the ability to work from home effectively and efficiently**.

In our snapshot survey we asked about general **household bills and outgoings**, comparing current bills (December 2021) to those before the pandemic. Workers reported their outgoings to be largely the same overall. However, this was a result of increased spending on energy and internet bills but a significant decrease in travel-related spending. This balance may change given the rapidly increasing cost of energy to heat or power homes.
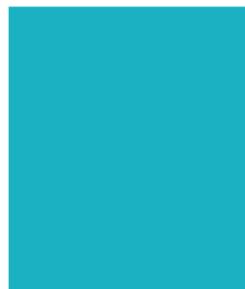
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What does this mean for hybrid working?

There is not and will never be a one size fits all answer to what work pattern or arrangement suits all workers. There is a wide range of individual differences between employees, both in terms of work preferences (e.g. where they feel most comfortable or productive) and different home and family arrangements which impact on what is possible or desirable. Organisations should recognise this. Providing employees with a sense of control over deciding where they work seems beneficial. However, there is a fine line to balance between having control over work and having too much control. The employee interviews identified too much control over where and when to work can be an additional stressor for some employees, particularly those new to the organisation or work, and workers who are used to traditional working patterns.

Suggestions for successful hybrid working:

Regularly seek feedback from employees to understand what they want. This can be either through surveys or town hall meetings, but it is important to demonstrate that their voices are heard, and their feedback leads to meaningful changes.

If you haven't made any changes to the office or work policies yet, you're not behind the curve! However, we recommend planning these changes soon, based on research and evidence from your own organisations.

You need to provide a reason for employees to be in the office, such as tasks which cannot be done from home. Gimmicks are not likely to entice employees to work from the office.

Everyone has a unique working experience, with the home environment having a big impact. This may be the biggest factor in determining how much employees wish to work from the office.

If commuting is preventing employees from working in the office, how can you help? Providing parking, shuttle buses and public transport contributions will aid in removing this barrier.

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A whole system approach to designing hybrid workplaces

Adapting a workplace to be hybrid ready is more than a policy change

Adapting workplaces and work practices to hybrid working is not simply an HR issue or an isolated change to work design. As our interviews demonstrate, it's a broad organisational design activity and can affect all aspects of a business and how work is done. Decisions over where and when employees are allowed or empowered to work should not be tackled in isolation since the wider system will influence, support or undermine whatever hybrid policy is in place.

Employees or managers do not act within a vacuum. Their choices are shaped by the decisions, actions, needs and routines of those around them, together with the technologies and spaces available to them. Our research highlighted the value of having representatives from different disciplines/business areas involved in the adaptation of offices to COVID-19 restrictions. This enabled problems to be spotted early and for opportunities to join up the thinking during these changes. The same approach applies to longer-term workplace planning.

Socio-technical systems thinking

This is a socio-technical problem: we can't disentangle hybrid policy, individual choices, the role of technology, availability and types of workspace, culture and ways of working from one another. The social factors (e.g. policies, individual preferences) are influenced by and may affect the technical factors (e.g. the physical workspace, the collaborative software). Any attempt to introduce or formalise hybrid working needs to consider both intended and unintended consequences of all the different factors.

This way of looking at business problems is built on decades of socio-technical systems research. We can use this mind-set to view any organisation as a complex system made up of many interdependent parts, e.g. people, culture, goals, processes, technology and infrastructure, with a change in any one aspect of the system causing change or requiring adaptation elsewhere. Our hexagon model illustrates **how these different factors may link together** (**see Figure 3**).

Socio-technical research shows that systems work at their best **when both the social and technical aspects are jointly optimised**, i.e. we think about the knock-on effects of change before we implement it and we look beyond our immediate interests (e.g. HR, IT or estates).

Figure 3: A whole system with interdependent parts
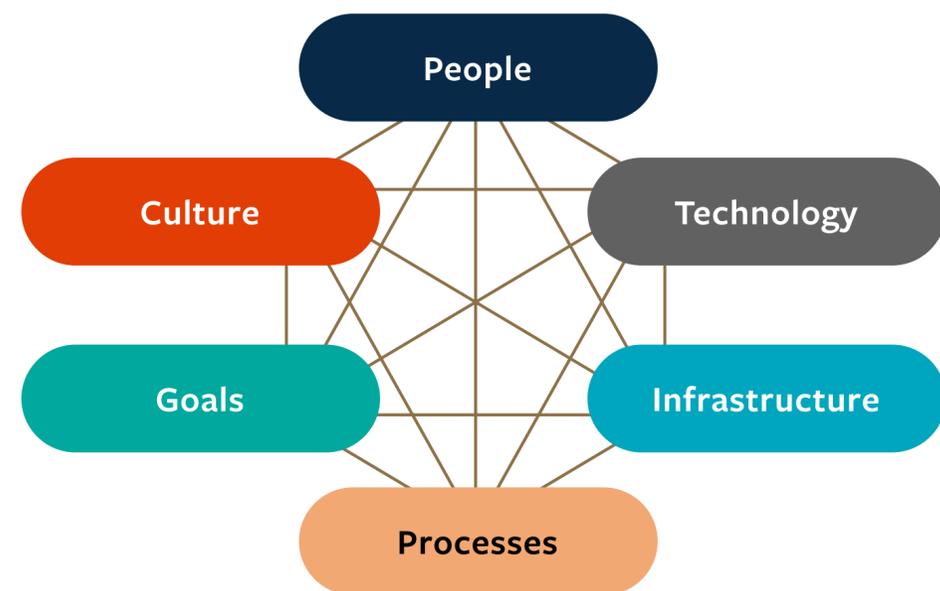
Interviews with industry stakeholders including workspace providers, designers and consultants and business representatives reinforced how hard it is to talk about the post-pandemic office, hybrid working or even just "the future" without jumping from topic to topic. For example, a discussion could move from mobile connectivity and the need for video conferencing equipment, to the variety of job roles and needs that need to be catered for, to people's different home situations, the need to create places that inspire people, and the challenges of retaining staff. There is no escaping the connectedness of this issue.

What is success?

What would a "good" socio-technical system look like? The answer is presumably different for each organisation. **Success requires organisations to contemplate their ultimate goals**. Goals may evolve in a hybrid workplace. When we redesign the system to changing circumstances, it might be helpful to consider what fundamentals should remain and what to amend or abandon. It is also important to recognise that different stakeholders will have different needs and goals for hybrid working. For example, while those paying for offices and space need to ensure that space is well occupied and used, those working on the ground are likely to have different priorities. **"Success" will look different to different people, and it is useful to recognise this**.

Productivity and performance

Networking and connectedness

Organisational culture

Flexibility and agility

Equality, diversity and inclusion

Client or customer satisfaction
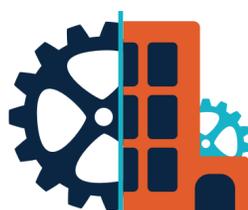
Creativity and innovation

Staff wellbeing

Sustainability, environmental and social responsibility

Talent attraction and retention

Efficient use of office or buildings

Learning and development

Junior members and new starters are given a hand when they look for information and support and have opportunities to develop themselves effectively

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What does a hybrid workplace look like?

There is no one-size fits all

Hybrid working provides organisations with a wide range of choices for the future, each of which have consequences for other parts of the system. Some of these choices will be intentional and triggered by the design, but others will be unintended and unforeseen. A decision about the core hours that people are to work, for instance, might unintentionally have a negative impact on presenteeism (being present for the sake of it). A decision to require anchor days for teams to be in the office might unintentionally create cliques in the workplace, or improve within-team communication practices but stilt communication *across* teams in the wider business.

Similarly, a hybrid working scenario that seems successful from the perspective of one stakeholder group might negatively impact another. For a facilities manager whose goal is to increase use of an office, a policy mandating three days in the office might achieve "success". For a worker concerned with productivity this mandate might have a very different impact on speed or volume of work, and might negatively impact turnover intentions (intention to quit). Nevertheless, being in the office might improve collegiality and team communication. This is because there are multiple indicators of success, and design choices can influence these differently.

It is therefore important that organisations have opportunities to think through, define and agree the different aspects of success together. With clear and agreed metrics that reflect individuals' and organisational needs, it can be easier to think through alternative scenarios, and their implications for the wider organisation systems, including any trade-offs that might need to be considered, and contingencies to mitigate these. A crucial note on future workplace design is that there is no one-size-fits-all. Different scenarios will have pros and cons. Organisations need to consider each of the socio-technical aspects in relation to the objectives they are trying to achieve, together with the specific circumstances and constraints under which they adopt the new scenario.

In our project, we use a **"System Scenarios Tool" (SST) methodology** and hold multi-stakeholder workshops to help partner organisations think through the redesign of their work system to accommodate hybrid working. Workshop attendees are encouraged to develop alternative scenarios for hybrid working and the supporting workspace design and evaluate them against organisational circumstances and contingencies. These discussions consider strengths, concerns, problems and new ideas, helping organisations better understand key trade-offs and potential compromises that may be required.

Next, we summarise **three scenarios** for future ways of working, based on our research. These illustrate some of the systemic challenges faced by organisations looking to implement hybrid working practices:

1. Traditional office
2. The agile workplace (activity-based office + home working)
3. The virtual workplace (no offices, remote workers)

| CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES | PRACTICAL GUIDANCE | CONCLUSION |

| Executive summary | Context and methodology | What is hybrid working? | Tensions when implementing hybrid working policies | What does hybrid working mean for employees? | A whole system approach to designing hybrid workplaces | What does a hybrid workplace look like? | Case study: Walker Morris |

Scenario one:
Traditional workplace

The organisation decides to adopt a "return to normal" strategy, with an aim to bring employees back to work as they did before the pandemic. They encourage staff to work in the office as much as possible, with three to four days a week mandated attendance (fixed hybrid). The organisation has a traditional open plan office, with most desks allocated to individuals and teams, some meeting rooms and a small amount of social space which remains unchanged. The basic office technologies remain the same, other than some upgrades to facilitate increased demands for video conferencing (e.g. teleconferencing equipment in meeting rooms, noise-cancelling headsets for employees to use at individual desks).

Figure 4: Traditional workplace with a plan to "return to normal" using a fixed hybrid model

● People

- Equality in experience, with no "us and them"
- Limited individual flexibility and autonomy
- No training required
- Certainty over work schedule
- Time and money lost due to commute
- Impromptu interactions and easy to connect with colleagues
- Helping others and interruptions take time from individual tasks
- Clear work-life boundary – little opportunity to blur work and home life
- Cannot work according to task or individual preferences
- Critical mass of colleagues and buzz in the office

● Culture

- Lack of trust
- Traditional workplace culture, inflexibile
- Consistent culture across organisation
- Presenteeism – expectation to be in the office regardless of whether employees feel productive
- Strong organisational identity and image

● Goals

- Encourage collaboration by being physically co-located with colleagues
- Facilitate in-person learning and supporting new/junior employees
- Minimal adaptation and disruption
- Return to "normal"
- Minimal financial investment
- Frequent office working

● Technology

- Video conferencing and hybrid meetings conducted in the office are not effective, offering a poor experience
- At-desk video calls distract those seated around
- Digital tools are not utilised as much as they could be
- Controlled environment for access to confidential data
- Easy to deliver IT support – standardised kit onsite
- Basic technology in place to facilitate remote working if needed

● Infrastructure

- Low proportion of collaborative or meeting space
- Traditional look and feel
- Individual ownership of space – personalisation, storage, ergonomic adjustments
- High levels of background/ office noise
- Few physical changes to the office required
- Assigned desks means no booking system, a desk is always available

● Processes

- Mandated office attendance for fixed number of days in a week
- Traditional team management and coordination – based around in-person activities.
- Focus on quick in-person interactions over hybrid or formal meetings
- No formal remote working contract
- In-person learning and development activities

Key trade-offs

Minimises upfront cost and disruption with higher on-going office overheads over the long-term (amount of office space retained).

Provides employees with certainty over where they work from, ensuring all employees have a suitable workstation, but at the expense of individual flexibility and work-life balance (e.g. being able to work around childcare or home commitments).

Minimal coordination cost/effort, easy team working and knowledge sharing, but difficult to hold virtual meetings with clients or colleagues, limited collaboration space.

Office provides individual configuration and ownership of workstation, layout means it is noisy and distracting for independent job tasks.

Consistently high number of employees in the office means it is used efficiently and there are a critical mass of people in each day to provide a "buzz" and social experience. However, limited availability of task spaces or social areas can be a consequence.

Level of control over work pattern (towards the fixed hybrid model) reinforces traditional image, makes recruitment and retention more challenging and limits opportunity to attract talent from beyond the local area.

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CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES	PRACTICAL GUIDANCE	CONCLUSION

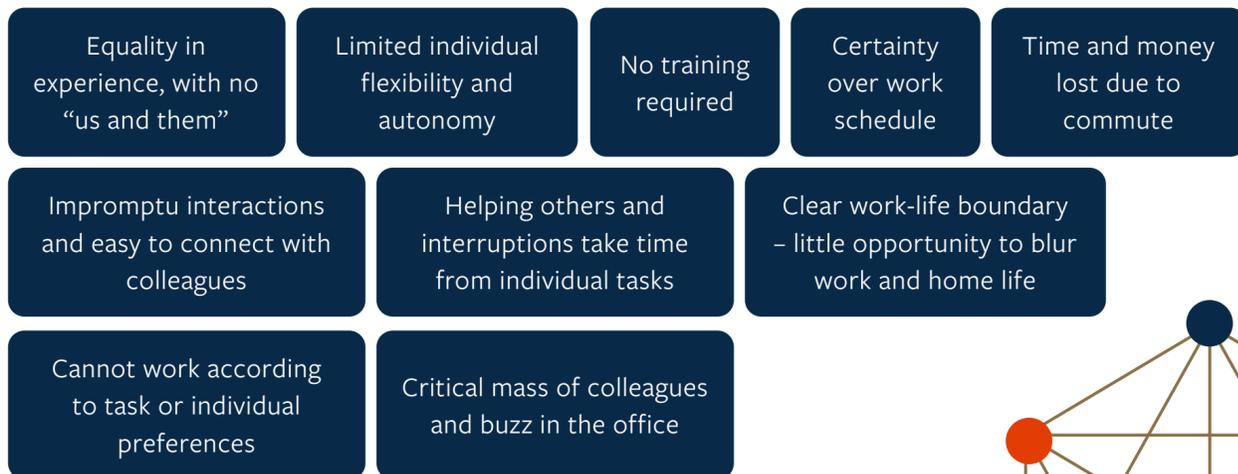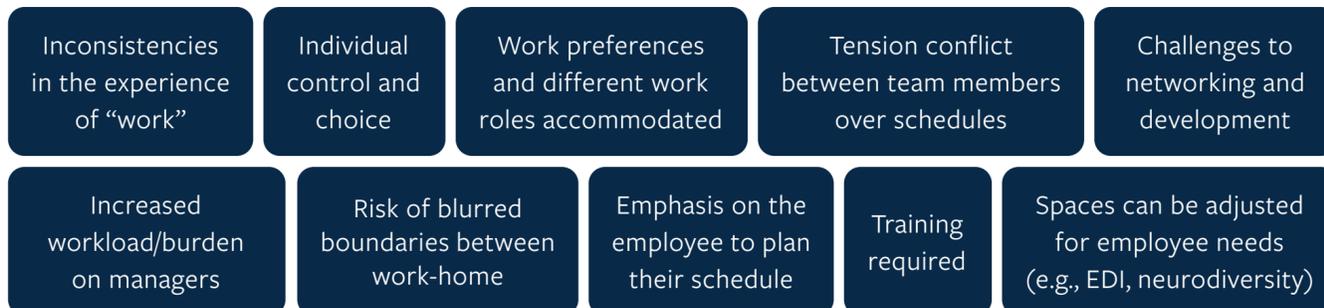| Executive summary | Context and methodology | What is hybrid working? | Tensions when implementing hybrid working policies | What does hybrid working mean for employees? | A whole system approach to designing hybrid workplaces | What does a hybrid workplace look like? | Case study: Walker Morris |

Scenario two: The agile workplace (activity-based office + home working)

The organisation sees benefits from remote working, as demonstrated during the pandemic, and seizes the opportunity to adapt their workplace to reflect more time spent working at home in the future. They incorporate a balanced hybrid model of working, which leads to lower occupancy in their office. To make the space more conducive to new ways of working, the organisation redesigns their office spaces based on the principles of an agile workplace and activity-based working. The proportion of space given over to individual desks is reduced, as only a few employees have requested to be in the office every day.

Remaining workstations become hot-desks available for all staff to use as and when they come to the office. Collaborative spaces, social areas and breakout spaces are introduced to facilitate in-person teamwork and social connections. New technologies are also adopted in the refurbished office, such as hybrid collaboration tools in meeting rooms to facilitate hybrid meetings and teamwork. The organisation aims to position their office as a central collaborative hub where colleagues come to meet and work together, while independent work can be done at home.

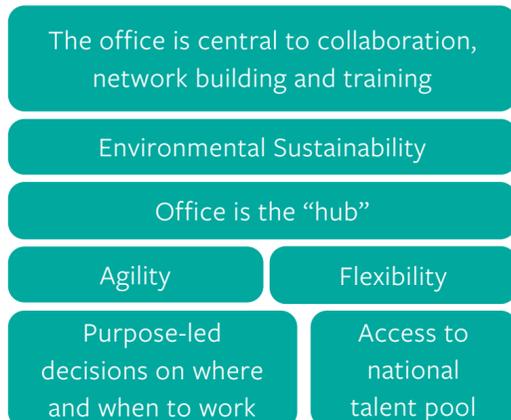**Figure 5: The Agile Workplace - activity based office with balanced hybrid working**
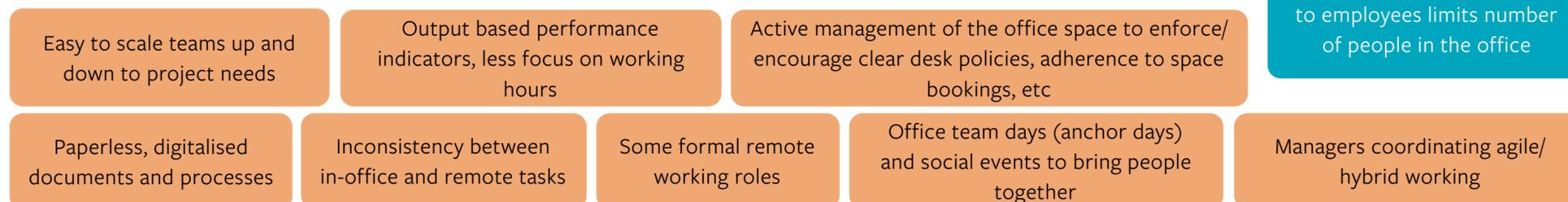

● People

Inconsistencies in the experience of "work"	Individual control and choice	Work preferences and different work roles accommodated	Tension conflict between team members over schedules	Challenges to networking and development
Increased workload/burden on managers	Risk of blurred boundaries between work-home	Emphasis on the employee to plan their schedule	Training required	Spaces can be adjusted for employee needs (e.g., EDI, neurodiversity)

● Culture

Inclusive – adaptable to different individual cirumstances	Flexibility and agility in working and decision making	Cliques and silos
		Trust

● Goals

- The office is central to collaboration, network building and training
- Environmental Sustainability
- Office is the "hub"
- Agility / Flexibility
- Purpose-led decisions on where and when to work / Access to national talent pool

● Technology

Variable experience for hybrid meeting attendees	Duplicate equipment provision for both office and home working	Uniform technology provided at hot-desks (e.g. uniform monitors, docking stations, peripherals)
Digital booking system for hot-desks and task spaces	Security measures and mitigations required for offsite confidential work	Video conferencing and hybrid meetings technology in meeting rooms and meeting "pods"

● Infrastructure

	Requirement for workstations at home		
Flexible spaces	Purpose-led spaces, conducive to different tasks and activities	Space is used efficiently	Contemporary workspace
Redesign cost and disruption	Lack of "own" space, limited personalisation or traditional personal storage	Space reallocated from desks to quiet, collaboration, social and meeting space	
		Ratio of individual hot-desks to employees limits number of people in the office	

● Processes

Easy to scale teams up and down to project needs	Output based performance indicators, less focus on working hours	Active management of the office space to enforce/ encourage clear desk policies, adherence to space bookings, etc
Paperless, digitalised documents and processes	Inconsistency between in-office and remote tasks / Some formal remote working roles	Office team days (anchor days) and social events to bring people together / Managers coordinating agile/ hybrid working

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Key trade-offs

High degree of personal control over where and when to work can support wellbeing, work-life balance and individual preferences, but is balanced against the increased efforts and stress in managing hybrid working (e.g. uncertainty over work scheduling, coordination with others).

Individual work patterns (e.g. when to come to the office) for employees and teams suit specific needs, but may promote or reinforce cliques and silos.

Freedom to move between task or activity spaces comes with a loss of own spaces in the office.

Established workers gain more benefit to their networks from these flexible arrangements, but new starters' opportunities are limited, as network development is facilitated by co-location.
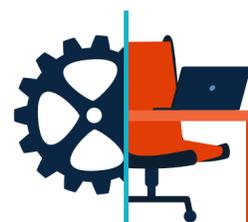
Activity-based workspace allows for the workplace to be tailored to job tasks, increasing a sense of fit between task and space. However, it requires greater active management and a change in working style/behaviour by employees.

High agility or a smaller number of desks relative to occupants enables the repurposing of office space for other activities (e.g. collaboration, social or hybrid meeting spaces) or a reduction in the overall amount of office space required. However, this constrains the opportunity of employees to access the office, and may require rotas, booking systems or other protocols to limit and smooth occupancy. This will constrain hybrid workers' autonomy and force trade-offs in which groups or individuals are prioritised to be in the office. For example, managers could prioritise team days where their team members work in the office together, limit this to encourage cross-team mixing or prioritise younger workers or those with less suitable home workspace – each reduces the opportunities for others to access the limited office space.

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Scenario three: The virtual workplace (no offices, remote workers)

A more radical scenario in which the business moves entirely to a virtual workplace. Having adopted agile working for many years, the organisation has already accumulated some maturity in accommodating remote and mobile working. It re-examined the need for a physical office based on its full-remote working experience during the pandemic and decided it is no longer necessary.
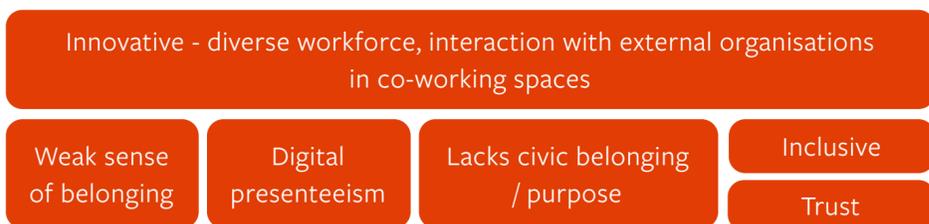
The organisation releases most of its office estate except for an office for public events, key client meetings and to maintain a corporate base. The company also partners with flexible co-working space providers to allow employees to work in a conveniently located shared office. Staff are provided with equipment and a budget to work anywhere, including a workstation setup at home and mobile devices. The organisation encourages employees to make use of other public spaces to work and meet informally. Full freedom is given to staff to choose where and when to work (free hybrids).

Figure 6: The Virtual Workplace – homeworking, access to third workspaces, with a corporate base office for free hybrids
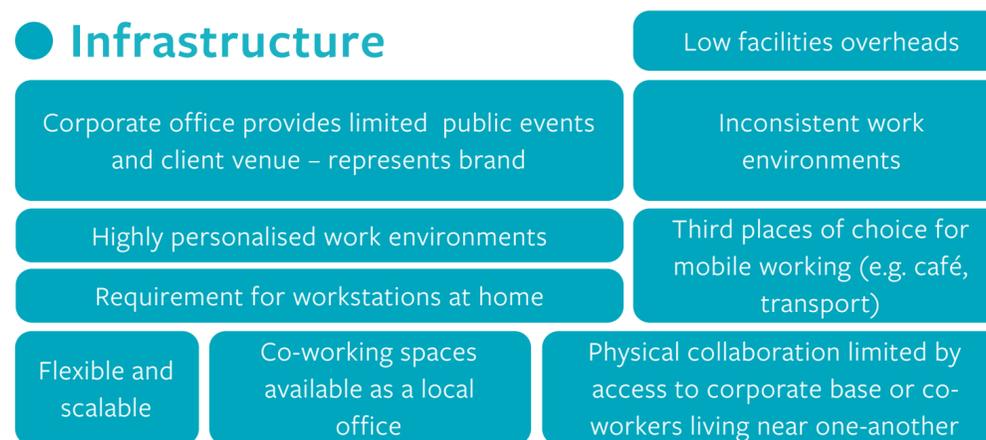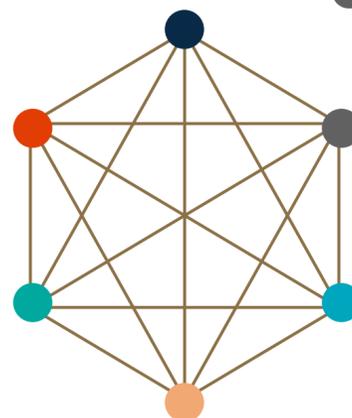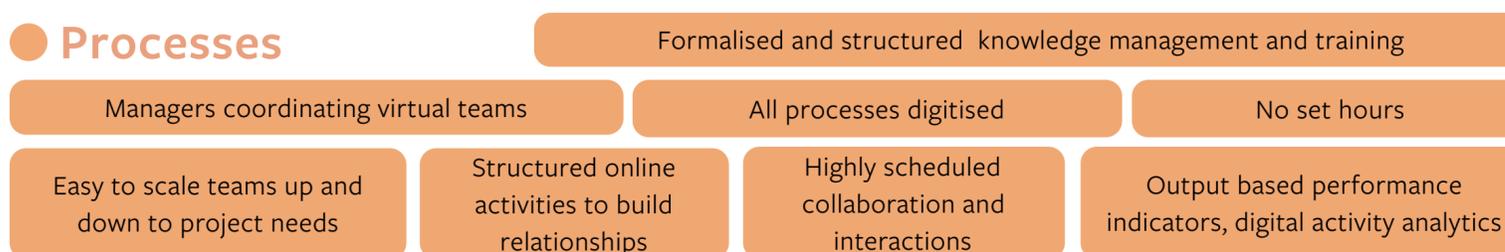

People
- Risk of blurred boundaries between work-home
- Work preferences accommodated – choose own workplace and schedule
- Flexible around home responsibilities, commitments or social life
- Increased workload/burden on managers
- Challenges to networking and development
- Risk of isolation and lack of social interaction
- Lowers barriers to individuals joining the workforce
- No commute costs
- Risk of digital fatigue
- Individual control and choice
- Requires independence
- Training required

Culture
- Innovative - diverse workforce, interaction with external organisations in co-working spaces
- Weak sense of belonging
- Digital presenteeism
- Lacks civic belonging / purpose
- Inclusive
- Trust

Goals
- Minimal fixed estate overheads
- Environmental sustainability
- Access to global talent pool
- Full digitalisation
- Maximum flexibility
- Online first

Technology
- Dependent on online systems
- Variety of tools for virtual collaboration and community building
- Virtual first – consistent online meeting experience
- Working fully on digital platforms, cloud-based services
- Stable high speed internet connection is a minimum requirement for staff
- Range of security measures and mitigations required for working with confidential data
- Laptops and mobile devices for all

Infrastructure
- Low facilities overheads
- Corporate office provides limited public events and client venue – represents brand
- Inconsistent work environments
- Highly personalised work environments
- Third places of choice for mobile working (e.g. café, transport)
- Requirement for workstations at home
- Flexible and scalable
- Co-working spaces available as a local office
- Physical collaboration limited by access to corporate base or co-workers living near one-another

Processes
- Formalised and structured knowledge management and training
- Managers coordinating virtual teams
- All processes digitised
- No set hours
- Easy to scale teams up and down to project needs
- Structured online activities to build relationships
- Highly scheduled collaboration and interactions
- Output based performance indicators, digital activity analytics

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Key trade-offs

Releasing offices reduces facilities overheads, reduces the organisation's direct environmental impact and allows employees to save money and time on their commute and work wherever suits their needs. However, access to the work environment can be inconsistent among different members of staff because of home working conditions and local access to third-place offices.

The remote working model opens access to a global and more diverse talent pool (e.g. it reduces barriers for individuals with caring responsibilities or who face challenges to working in a traditional office). The primarily remote working arrangement risks alienating some staff who prefer in-person interaction or a more formal office option, risking turnover of existing staff.

Technology and networking tools can support collaboration, but different management techniques and training are required to manage virtual teams and to build team relationships. There are risks of isolation from colleagues of silo-working.

Fully remote working allows consistent IT solutions across the organisation, which can be beneficial in digitalisation (e.g. less need to suit hybrid working, standardised digital tool use). But these solutions can be restrictive to employees, which encourages workarounds and shadow IT use (e.g. using personal devices or private messaging).

Employees here will have ultimate control over when and how they work, which will only be suitable for certain types of individuals who are highly organised and can effectively self-manage. It is a very different way of working, and so new starters and less conscientious employees may need additional training and managerial support to work effectively.

Working virtually can be beneficial for certain types of tasks and roles. But it can be much less effective for other type of activities (e.g. creative collaboration, social interactions).

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| CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES | PRACTICAL GUIDANCE | CONCLUSION |

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Case Study: Walker Morris

Overview

Walker Morris is a commercial law firm, providing legal services for multinational companies in a broad range of sectors including manufacturing, retail, corporate and finance, healthcare, private equity, technology and media, energy and renewables, public sector and infrastructure and real estate. The organisation has around 450 employees, including partners, professional and non-client-facing staff. Most are based within its Leeds city centre office.

Before the pandemic, staff predominantly worked from the office full time. There were flexible and agile working policies in place: the former allowing employees to work non-traditional hours but within a permanent contract, while the latter allowed professional staff members to work from anywhere within their normal working hours, typically amounting to two to three days in the office. These policies were not widely used.

Walker Morris moved to a newly renovated office on Wellington Street in Leeds in August 2019. This has a completely open plan structure with no individual offices in contrast to the firm's previous offices. The aim of this new office layout was to encourage communication and collaboration across departments within the organisation, allowing it to offer a multi-disciplinary approach to its client base. To facilitate this, there are no assigned desks or seating arrangement, however teams have "neighbourhoods" with a set number of desks allocated, so teams can be co-located. Each individual desk houses a desktop and suitable peripherals, and additional hot-desks are provided to offer short-term, collaborative working. These are groups of tables with no dividers or equipment to seat up to eight individuals working from laptops or papers, positioned at points within the wider open space of the office. Other office facilities include various sized meeting rooms, pods for individual calls, and informal seating within the entrance to the office. Since the COVID-19 outbreak employees are required to book desks or workspaces, adhere to a clear desk policy and store any belongings in lockers if needed.

As a law firm Walker Morris conducted many processes in-person and on paper before the office move, although there were some specific technology systems in place to support flexible work, such as MiCollab (to divert office calls) and Loop-Up (for conference calls). During the physical relocation it introduced NetDocs, an online document management system.

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Initial response to the pandemic

Six weeks before the first lockdown order, a Business Continuity Group, consisting of Heads of Departments and the Managing Partner, had started planning given trends emerging from China and elsewhere. This included contacting each team to ask what equipment or provisions they needed in order to work from home, with efforts mainly focused on teams which had never worked from home to support the transition when the lockdown order was made.

In line with Government advice, all employees were asked to work from home unless their role necessitated being in the office, with some furloughed initially. A small group of employees continued to work in the office to complete core roles and administration tasks, such as post, printing and copying. As the pandemic went on, Walker Morris relaxed some of these restrictions, allowing individuals to work from the office if they were struggling with the home work environment or for mental health reasons. These changes were planned and managed by the Business Continuity Group.

During the first lockdown a COVID-19 Workplace Policy was implemented which was essentially a risk assessment of individuals' actions (e.g. social distancing, hand hygiene) and regulations to follow (e.g. no in-person meetings, work from home). This risk assessment led to the Office Occupancy Plan, which included physical office adaptations such as reduced occupancy levels, social distancing, removal of such things as crockery/cutlery and a one-way system around the building.

While Walker Morris had already transitioned to NetDocs which enabled the majority of the workforce to work remotely from the outbreak of the pandemic, the biggest development during the pandemic was the implementation of Microsoft Teams and virtual workflows. Introduced in the summer of 2020, this replaced the conference calling software and is now in widespread use across the business and its client network.

The firm introduced software such as DocuSign to digitise systems which had previously been paper-based, as well as a remote printing service: individuals can send items from their home to be printed and posted to clients from the office. It extended its meeting room booking system (Condeco) to cover desk bookings. Most employees already had laptops but it provided them to all other staff members to facilitate working from home.
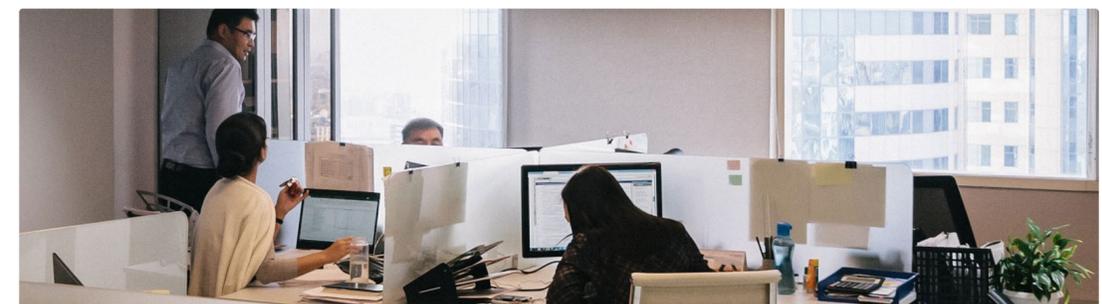
Changes and implementations to support future ways of working

It is expected that employees will not return to the office full time, five times a week, unless they want to. Walker Morris asks employees to be in the office to support client services, training, collaborate and to complete work that cannot be performed elsewhere, with work patterns decided between employees and line managers. From September 2021 it asked all employees to work from the office for two days per week, or part time equivalent. In considering the return, Walker Morris sought to ensure its plans work for employees and clients, and allow employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance. No changes were made to its existing agile and flexible working policies, but they are constantly under review and may develop as work patterns stabilise. The COVID-19 Workplace Policy has been removed but good hygiene and cleaning practices remain in place.

Walker Morris' current office was designed to provide flexible, task-based spaces and to support hybrid and agile working. Its design facilitates communication, cohesion and collaboration across the business, taking into account the variety of roles across the firm.

Despite the office having been designed to support hybrid working, uptake of homeworking had previously been low. To support the now higher proportion of hybrid working in the post-COVID era, and a greater ratio of staff to desks, the desk booking system will remain in place to support office usage, replacing the paper-based system introduced prior to the pandemic.

The firm reports that if Teams had not been successfully implemented and useful, employees would be keener to return to the office to fulfill their job roles in more traditional ways. Those who are returning to the office have tended to revert to ways of working prior to the pandemic, whereas those who have maintained hybrid working are using Teams and other technologies and software more effectively.

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Challenges

The main challenge for Walker Morris related to their new starters, specifically junior members of staff. Typically, these new employees shadow and closely observe more senior members of staff, learning through "osmosis" and other informal methods alongside their formal training. There were previously more opportunities for junior solicitors and lawyers to form close-knit networks amongst themselves and network more broadly across the organisation to learn from other areas of the business and facilitate a cohesive organisation. As with many organisations, for those staff who joined during the pandemic, these opportunities were not available to them as freely, with networks more formalised through organisational structure or specific introductions. The firm is looking at how to adapt learning methods to prevent a lack of development opportunities. It has also been suggested that the lack of interaction and engagement with a physical workplace may impact the knowledge of an organisation's culture, which relates to a sense of belonging and engagement.

A concern is that individuals who have only, or will predominantly, work from home or client sites may become very insular and have higher levels of turnover intentions.

Walker Morris' shift to home working throughout the pandemic led to better work-life ratios for some employees, enabling them to complete their job tasks at times best suited for them. Many managers also found Teams useful to supervise and feedback on work tasks, since it allows them to share their screen with many more junior staff members at the same time, rather than previously just asking them to crowd around the computer screen.

So the challenge, not only for Walker Morris but for many other firms, is how to manage the training and exposure of new starters to the business culture and practices, while maintaining the benefits of working from home.

CASE SUMMARY	PRE-PANDEMIC	PANDEMIC	FUTURE WAYS OF WORKING
Ways of working	Predominantly in the office, partners/senior employees travel to different sites.	Work from home, office open for skeleton administrative team and those who need it for job and/or mental health reasons.	More freedom over work location, advised to work where job tasks and service to client can be most effective. Will not return to everyone 100% in the office.
Work policies	Flexible and agile work policies to allow different work hours and workplaces. Only used by lawyers, uptake was low.	COVID-19 Workplace Policy – restricting office use, occupancy and ways of working.	Removed COVID-19 Workplace Policy.
Office provisions	Unassigned seating, team neighbourhoods, pods, meeting rooms and hot-desks. Fewer desks than employees.	Occupancy restrictions, social distancing and one-way system implemented.	Re-opened existing office provisions, slightly reduced occupancy.
Technology provisions	Conference call system, call re-direct system, NetDocs.	Microsoft Teams Condeco adapted for desk booking. DocuSign and other digitalisation of paper-based processes.	Continued use of technology introduced during the pandemic.

| CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES | PRACTICAL GUIDANCE | CONCLUSION |

| Designing a hybrid policy | Office building infrastructure and interior design | Redesigning office workspaces | Ventilation | Designing offices to be infection resilient | The ergonomics of hybrid working | Managing in a hybrid world | Supporting early career or new starters | Hybrid working and workplace networks | Hybrid meetings |

Designing a hybrid policy

The approach to designing hybrid working matters

We must recognise that designing and introducing a hybrid working policy, or formalising ad hoc arrangements developed over the course of the pandemic will bring change for many staff. In many cases we will be reducing staff discretion and control compared to the high levels of individual flexibility many workers experienced during the pandemic. How much choice are we giving individuals over where and when they work (i.e. are we aiming for free hybrid or fixed hybrid)? What are the boundaries and expectations? Is there scope to interpret policy locally?

How should we approach this design challenge and change process? **We outline the key steps and questions, based on our observations of organisations tackling the same challenge and drawing on tried and tested socio-technical design principles:**

● Be clear on the purpose, value and reasons for office working

Without a clear statement and rationale, it will be challenging to engage the majority of staff who want to work either partly or exclusively from home. Start with an answer to the employee who wants to know why they should pay to commute to an office, miss time with their children at the end of the day or work from an environment that isn't designed exclusively around their own individual taste and preferences. The benchmark for a workplace is no longer just your competitors, it is also the home workplace many employees have crafted.

● Define what a good outcome would be

Be clear about what success will look like. No office or hybrid work arrangement will be perfect by every measure. What is most important to your business? Cost reduction, innovation, efficiency of space, staff wellbeing, choice, collaboration? Where are you prepared to trade-off (this may be contentious) and what do you put in place to compensate for perceived losses?

● Map the system

What needs to change to support your vision of hybrid working? What are the likely socio-technical barriers to change? Is the office fit for purpose or will a fear of not being able to find a desk, poor meeting room equipment or a culture of presenteeism undermine the policy? Do reward or performance management systems need to be revised to give managers confidence that staff are performing when they are at home?

● Articulate the constraints and non-negotiables

Be clear about minimum expectations – for example, hybrid does not mean only home working. Do you allow exclusively homeworking? This may need to be formalised in employment contracts, with legal and HR implications. Be clear about minimum expectations and ground rules, such as which tasks cannot be performed remotely, minimum service levels, data security, etc.

● Don't rush to create rules

Beyond the minimum expectations try not to over specify, allow localisation and consider other ways of achieving desired outcomes. For example, rather than rotas or set days for home/office working, would a smaller number of anchor days (when teams come together on-site) or a minimum number of office days per month achieve a similar result while providing more individual discretion? Alternatively, can tasks or personal development events be used to draw team or project members together on the same days, while not locking a routine in or making this feel overly prescribed? Question the purpose of any rule, for example if its aim is to balance office capacity, would booking systems achieve the same purpose?

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CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES	PRACTICAL GUIDANCE	CONCLUSION

| Designing a hybrid policy | Office building infrastructure and interior design | Redesigning office workspaces | Ventilation | Designing offices to be infection resilient | The ergonomics of hybrid working | Managing in a hybrid world | Supporting early career or new starters | Hybrid working and workplace networks | Hybrid meetings |

● Staff involvement and engagement is key

We know that pull typically beats push when it comes to change – people who feel they have ownership over the change tend to help pull it through to success. Front-line staff also tend to be able to spot problems in design or practical issues that may make policy difficult to implement (they see bits of the system that leaders cannot). Our interviews and workshops highlighted the tensions and difficulty of implementing hybrid policies in a blanket top-down manner – policies need to be adapted to reflect the requirements of different roles, cultures and norms. This process can be empowering for staff involved, whose frontline knowledge and buy-in give credibility to new rules. For example, it can give certainty over what tasks or activities are non-negotiable for in-person, online or hybrid working, and clarify where there is discretion over how people carry these out. Engagement helps resolve the question of when "we" is more important than "me" though understanding everyone can't work exactly as they wish all of the time.

● Be prepared to lose people

How employees work, their personal situations and expectations are all likely to have changed significantly since the start of the pandemic. A formally hybrid workplace with its knock-on implications for ways of working will not suit everyone. Employees' jobs may feel very different to the jobs they crafted while they had more control over how they worked during the pandemic or their jobs before it.

● Experiences matter

Whether the office has a buzz, provides a positive experience, or feels like it adds value can all contribute to virtuous or negative spirals. Is there a critical mass or mix of people you need in order to create a positive experience? If so, consider how you encourage this – our research shows that task, personal development and mentoring related activities are strong pull-factors for employees deciding when they will work from the office – far more so than free food or the like.

● We need to train people!

Hybrid working is different to fully remote or in-person working. Different management styles, team working practices and communication tools are needed for success in purely virtual environments. Hybrid working brings its own challenges and we need to prepare people, which doesn't appear to be happening yet – in our cross-industry survey of UK office workers only 6% had received any training in holding or attending hybrid meetings.

● Act with honesty and be prepared to fail

Designing hybrid work practices involves trade-offs for individuals and groups within any organisation. We need to be honest about these and that formalising hybrid work arrangements may reduce the discretion staff have become used to. Most firms are testing and refining their approach to hybrid working, experimenting with different types of workspace, technologies and management tools – this is exciting, but creates risk. We should acknowledge that not all changes may be successful, and how we work may evolve as behaviours settle into routines and pandemic effects lessen. This requires flexibility in any design and formal review points to learn lessons, adapt and improve.

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Office building infrastructure and interior design

Office design adaptations in response to hybrid working needs

Beyond adapting physical office environments in response to short-term viral transmission guidance, organisations participating in our research are at different stages of introducing design changes to facilitate agile working practices. In some cases, organisations had adopted agile working policies and invested in designs (in new or refurbished spaces) prior to the lockdown. Others were part-way through this process, and some have recently started to move from open-plan designs with assigned desks to designs **adapted for agile working**.

Our interviews highlighted that the pandemic and shift to hybrid or greater home working has turbo charged the "agile" and "activity-based working" design trends that existed pre-pandemic. Many features found in offices designed for agile working before the pandemic can be found in office designs adapted to future working patterns and technologies post-COVID. Such features include personal workstations designed for hot-desking, touch-down spaces for occasional informal meetings and short-term working, meeting rooms, collaboration spaces and personal spaces (pods) for short periods of focused work. Where hot-desking spaces may have included desktop computers, these have generally been displaced by docking-station arrangements for use of laptops (a limited number of specialist desktop machines being retained for dedicated functions in some organisations).

The appropriate mix of task-based workspaces and the overall level of office space are highly dependent on the organisation's hybrid working strategy and the nature of the employee roles to be accommodated. Strategies that allow

maximum flexibility may require more space for base workstations and more office space overall, for example. Some organisations have also relied on the flexibility of hybrid working and the preference of some new employees for home working in order to expand rapidly (i.e. without having to find new office space) in some areas of activity.

Some features of recent office designs have emerged in response to both changes in working preferences and transitions in office/business technologies. Changes in practice that impact the design and use of physical space include:

- Frequent on-line meetings and switching between on-line and in-person meetings

- Use of online communications rather than telephones

- Almost paperless operations

- Predominant use of laptop computers rather than personal computers

- Less provision of cellular offices for senior staff

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As organisational focus has recently been on return-to-work, the need for meeting in hybrid mode has grown. The optimal combinations of technology, behaviour and physical meeting space for hybrid meetings are still emerging. The general trend is to use meeting rooms equipped with innovated online meeting equipment and there is a need for a higher proportion of meeting rooms being fully equipped.

The sound of conventional telephones in office environments may be uncommon in future but offices' acoustic environments will change because of occupants' greater participation in on-line meetings and events. Design responses to meet these changes include introduction of small seating spaces with some acoustically absorbent surfaces that are alternatives to a base workstation and intended for on-line meeting tasks. Fully enclosed spaces (kiosks with doors) for online meeting activities are also being used to provide some acoustic isolation – for the benefit of the participant but also other users of open workspaces.

Online meetings scattered through work diaries are expected to cause more switching of location during the day in offices where alternative spaces like these are available. Needs vary depending on whether someone is speaking occasionally in a meeting, listening passively or whether they are presenting. Whether or not spaces intended for such activities are used in practice is probably dependent on behavioural factors and operational/social norms in particular offices. The transitional nature of the current return to work period suggests that such norms (e.g. whether someone moves to participate in an online meeting or not) are yet to be established. For example, it may be that most occupants prefer to stay at their base workstation while they participate in online calls/meetings.

Individual acoustic needs may be very different than pre-pandemic in that occupants may spend a good deal of time using headphones. This may provide some isolation from background sounds, but some users may be distracted by others when they are not using headphones and doing more focused work. In anticipation of these challenges some office designs include nominated silent areas with alternative workstations (limited in size compared to a base workstation) for occupants needing quieter environments for focused work. Again, whether offices have the appropriate balance of workstation and specialised workspaces is not yet clear.

Technical issues arising from the increasing adoption of hybrid working practices that are relevant to the design of infrastructure include:

> **Less need for hard-wired network infrastructure – more network traffic over Wi-Fi**

> **Lower power and cooling demands from lower use of desktop computers**

> **More variability in occupancy, both spatially and temporally, which may be reflected in peak demands for air-conditioning. Overall energy consumption calculations may need to be based on revised design norms.**

> **A need for further innovation in acoustic treatment of office spaces**

These potential changes may need to be addressed alongside any emerging changes in **ventilation standards**.

Many organisations' acceleration of paperless operation has office design consequences. Dedicated space for printing facilities may no longer be needed or can be reduced; and (perhaps after a transitional period) less or little space will be required for physical file storage. Floor space could be freed up for additional task-based facilities.

Additional recruitment and retention challenges are consequences of mass movement of office working towards WFH and hybrid working. In some sectors the provision of attractive office environments (in addition to flexible work arrangements) are now factors in both recruitment and retention. This is reflected in investments in higher standards of room finishes (e.g. foyers and washrooms), facilities, on-site support as well as more attractive on-site catering and amenities. While there are recruitment and retention concerns amongst most stakeholders, investment in office refurbishment or relocation has been dependent on budgetary constraints and pre-pandemic investment in office design changes.

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Redesigning office workspaces

Many organisations are developing spaces in their offices to facilitate new ways of working. Spaces with particular relevance to hybrid ways of working include video conferencing enabled meeting rooms, collaborative spaces, informal "touchdown"/breakout areas, quiet areas and acoustic pods. The general rationale behind these additions to the workplace is to provide spaces complementary to home working and suited to the specific needs of different tasks employees undertake. It marks a move away from the individual's desk being the default base for most tasks, in order to facilitate hybrid and in-person collaboration, social interaction, private conversations and concentrated individual work.

Space switching

Flexible offices commonly adopt an activity-based design where occupants are given the options of different spaces to choose from, depending on their tasks. However, while some workers adopt a working style with space switching as a habit (e.g. using a sofa for light work, pods for concentrated work and breakout areas for social interactions), more people tend to use a fixed space for working during the day. "Office nomads" tend to enjoy office designs with various spaces while the people who work mostly at their desks see less benefits from an activity-based office design. When space switching becomes a necessity (e.g. a private call requires acoustic isolation), some may see the need to move a burden or hassle, despite the dedicated space being more conducive to the task.

Operating desk areas

Many organisations have introduced hot-desking or desk sharing in their offices. Reasons behind this decision can differ: e.g. for COVID-safety (socially distanced seating), for higher space efficiency in low occupancy office (reducing individual desks), or for a more flexible use of the office spaces (activity-based design).

It is important to understand employees' experience with different types of desk operating models. A general theme emerges that people who feel comfortable with hot-desking are more willing to work in the office. Some employees find hot-desking unfavourable in comparison with using an assigned desk, for several reasons. These are contributory factors to a preference for workers to work at home. Whether or not a desk is allocated to specific individuals or teams, a sense of territoriality can develop once employees get into the habit of using one particular desk. Team members who sit in the same area of hot-desks can become protective over the space even though they do not have exclusive ownership. This can undermine the idea of "hot" desking and risk the principles of agile offices.

Configuration of workspace
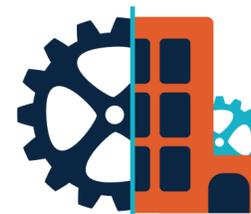
Many employees highly value the ability to configure the workstation setup and equipment. Desk operation and desktop equipment supply both play their roles. For example, height-adjustable desks and additional monitors could facilitate customisation, and clear desk policy could make configuration difficult as some find it fiddly to readjust their workspace every time.

Personalisation of workspace

Employees describe personalising their desk and the surrounding area by adding ornaments, plants, family photos and trophies. It can make switching workplace harder if the employee is used to working in a personalised environment.

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Different unassigned desk policies

Unassigned desk policies vary between organisations. Nuances in how these operate can result in difference in space use with specific advantages and disadvantages.

Each approach to managing unassigned desks presents trade-offs and the most appropriate solution will vary depending on the goals of the organisation (e.g. to promote interaction across teams, to maximise space efficiency).

"Free-for-all" hot-desks (non-reserved)

Employees need to find a desk to sit ad hoc when they come to work in the office. While this provides flexibility in choosing workspaces, it is often reported that employees are unable to find a space they want or all spaces are occupied when the office is busy. In addition, teams sometimes find it difficult to get together in a free-for-all office as group of desks are less available.

"Any-desk" hoteling (reservation-based)

Access to a desk is reserved via a tool or reception to guarantee a workspace in the office. Workers can still choose where they want to work. This allows flexible workspace use while mitigating the concern of not able to find a desk in a busy office. It controls the number of employees in the office and ensures that enough desks are available on a given day.

"Booked-desk" hoteling (desks booked via tool/ system)

Employees book a specific desk before coming into the office. This can allow employees to book into a favourite area of the office or to know who they will be sitting next to (if the booking tool supports this). Booking in advance requires greater planning and management on the part of the employee.
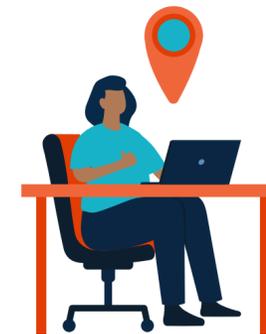
Team-zoned hot-desking (desk-sharing)

Desks are zoned and assigned to each team or department, normally with a desk ratio less than one (less than one desk per employee assigned to the office). This allows team members to easily find their teammates, sit and collaborate with them with no concern of others outside of their team taking the space. However, this limits employees to sitting with their immediate team. Interviewees reported team hot-desking was a less efficient use of desks compared to a free-for-all hot-desk policy.

SME focus:

Throughout our interactions with partners across our project, we found that SMEs were just as much, if not more likely to have redesigned their offices during the pandemic, engaging in activities such as office re-branding, introduction of new furniture or spaces, or complete office moves. With a smaller workforce having assigned desks may make sense, if you are all positioned within a larger space with easy access to colleagues. But this does depend on the 'goal' for the office: why are your workforce coming in? Perhaps having multi-functional spaces might be more suitable if you want to facilitate collaboration and communication. Moreover, introducing a booking system for certain spaces may seem unnecessary for a smaller office, but it can reduce conflicts in the office if some spaces become more used than others.

More information

Podcast: **How is office design changing to accommodate hybrid and new ways of working?**

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Ventilation

In 2021, research findings confirming COVID-19 should be regarded as an air-born infection resulted in increased emphasis on the **risks of poor ventilation** in UK guidelines. This was reflected in new guidance from HSE and professional engineering organisations such as CIBSE. Stakeholders responded by assessing the risks of poor ventilation in their building stock. This resulted in the introduction of guidance for staff regarding window operation where appropriate and in some air-conditioned buildings, professional assessment of ventilation performance (e.g. measurement of system flow rates and internal air distribution patterns). In some cases, this has resulted in additional refurbishment costs.

Buildings with natural ventilation

Guidance on risk management in naturally ventilated office spaces (e.g. from the HSE) acknowledges the complexity of assessing actual ventilation performance and that there is a link between thermal comfort and ventilation in such spaces. Operation of windows is also influenced by the social norms of occupant behaviour and whether occupants have both physical and social opportunity to influence window opening. Survey results show the opportunities occupants have to control window opening are very variable.

Other measures taken in response to UK guidance on ventilation related risks include improving air flow in circulation areas. Stakeholders have not reported problems making physical adaptations to spaces with natural ventilation. Their concerns mostly relate to complaints about cold temperatures and draft in periods of cooler weather. The timeline of lockdown conditions – and hence varying levels of office occupancy – meant occupancy levels have been low during winter conditions, so data about managing natural ventilation in offices is limited. Hybrid working under lockdown conditions has been self-limiting on office occupation, potentially mitigating ventilation related risks. We have not found stakeholders taking up air quality (CO2) monitoring in naturally ventilated offices, in contrast to its introduction in schools. Rather, there has been reliance on occupants following guidance provided by management.

A further risk mitigation measure to deal with poor ventilation is to use room air cleaning devices (typically combining high efficiency filters and UV disinfection technology). The study does not show this being taken up in stakeholder office spaces.

Survey results suggest some dissatisfaction with ventilation and sensations of unacceptable draft as well as office temperatures. Although responses do not represent a high proportion of occupants being dissatisfied, these levels are higher than typical design intentions. Similar levels of dissatisfaction with environmental conditions are found in naturally ventilated offices and those with air-conditioning.

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Buildings with air-conditioning

Stakeholders with purpose-designed air-conditioning systems (as opposed to small, retrofitted systems) have drawn on professional advice from landlords and external consultants. Our examination of the engineering details of stakeholders' buildings has revealed three broad scenarios regarding ventilation performance (flow rates), with associated impacts:

PRE-PANDEMIC	PANDEMIC
Relatively modern large office buildings have designs that implement flow rates to recent standards and have not required any intervention.	Organisations have had freedom to change room layouts without restrictions imposed by the ventilation system. Although organisations consulted Facilities Manager (FM) professionals regarding changing occupancy densities in certain areas (new quiet seating areas or meeting rooms), they have not reported design restrictions due to ventilation concerns.
Older large buildings whose air-conditioning systems are approaching end of life (e.g first installed in the 1980s or 1990s) may not experience intended ventilation rates (due to deterioration or maintenance issues) so can require larger interventions to restore intended levels of performance or meet modern standards.	Dealing with renovations to air-conditioning infrastructure has brought challenges in terms of split responsibilities for infrastructure (landlord/tenant) and management of knowledge of the systems e.g. loss of design or commissioning information. These are not new problems for FM staff but can introduce delays if further measurements of system performance need to be made and analysed.
Adjusting system controls to ensure maximum fresh air flow rates can limit systems' ability to control temperatures.	Anticipated in guidance and a pragmatic response to ensuring avoidance of recirculation. In one case study building, room temperatures vary with outdoor conditions to a noticeable extent. This may require longer term intervention in air-conditioning infrastructure (on the part of landlords) to correct.

Changes in occupancy and use of office equipment and increases in ventilation rates have implications for the balance of heating and cooling in buildings as well as overall energy demands and carbon emission rates. In particular, achieving higher ventilation rates (whether by mechanical or natural means) has implications for energy use, increasing heating demands and emissions in the winter season in particular. Therefore, there is potential tension between the goals of providing infection resilience and emissions reduction (approaching net-zero operation). It is yet to become clear whether increased heating related emissions are offset by lower power demands or reduced heating during total lockdown periods. For some buildings, balancing health and wellbeing goals with emission reduction goals will be more complex and may suffer a temporary setback.

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Practical points to consider:

● Buildings with natural ventilation can maintain fresh air easily by keeping windows open, however **there are additional steps which can be taken to manage risks**, such as introducing CO2 monitors and room air cleaning devices.

● **Air-conditioned buildings which may not be up to current industry standards need to be assessed urgently**. Other attempts to avoid air re-circulation, such as opening windows, results in dramatic changes in temperatures across the office, impacting employee comfort and productivity.
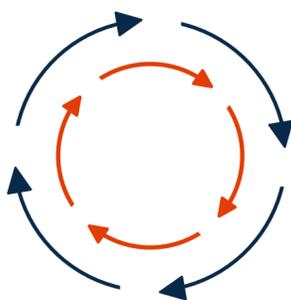
● There is a **tension between increasing fresh air and circulation while managing costs and energy efficiency**. From a health and hygiene perspective, mitigating poor ventilation should be the focus which unfortunately may set back net-zero goals.

SME focus:

Often occupying smaller spaces within a larger office building, SMEs have faced more problems than larger firms relating to the landlord/tenant responsibility split, and may rely on others to manage ventilation standards within buildings. For those in non-managed offices, natural ventilation has been favoured but as mentioned above, is often accompanied by complaints over comfort and warmth. On the whole, we are finding that SMEs do not necessarily have the funds to invest in ventilation updates or re-design, instead making do with what is already in place. SMEs are highly adaptable, and can involve staff in changes (e.g. window use policies) and make them quickly and efficiently.

More information

Infographic:
The importance of good ventilation
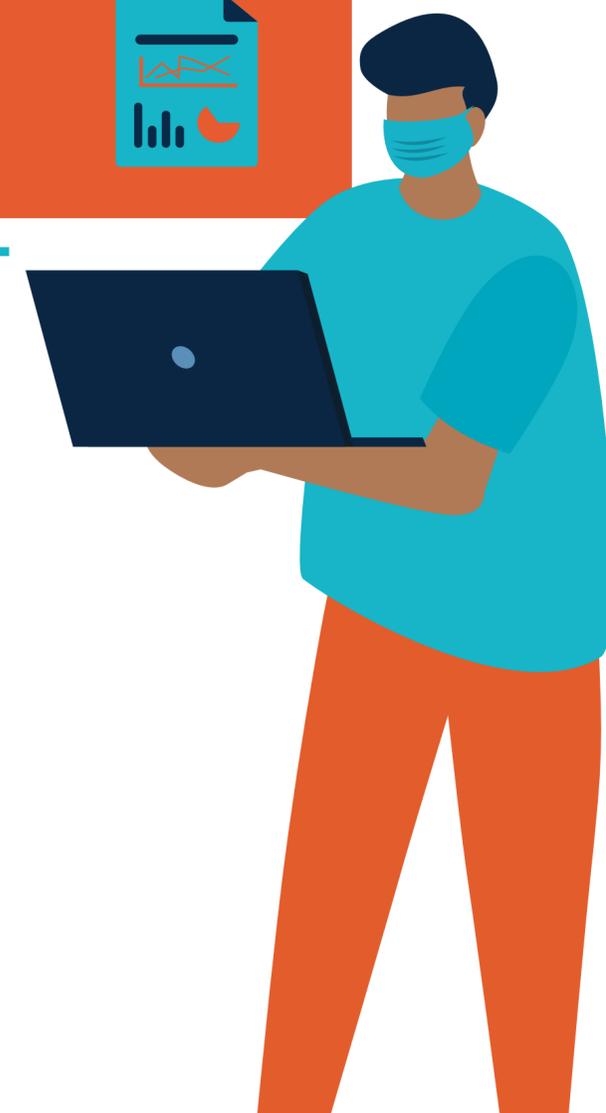
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Designing offices to be infection resilient

As national guidance on viral transmission mitigation measures have been relaxed, organisations and office design professionals have proceeded with new and refurbished office projects with a view to future agile working. Intentions regarding designing for infection reliance are not clear and guidance is not currently well defined.

Some of the health-related measures implemented in office environments during the pandemic are worthwhile in future design and operation because of their co-benefits. These include ventilation and hygiene measures. The role of social distancing by design is less clear.

Improved ventilation by way of upgrading air-conditioning systems, along with elimination of localised poor ventilation, should lead to improved fresh air flow rates and effective delivery of fresh air to occupants and so be beneficial post-pandemic. Improving ventilation is a mitigating measure against COVID-19 infection but should also lead to reduction of room carbon dioxide levels. High room carbon dioxide levels are known to lead to poor levels of alertness and reduced cognitive performance. Consequently, there can be a productivity benefit from improved ventilation in air-conditioned buildings – possibly helping to justify investment in office infrastructure. The benefits of improved ventilation in naturally ventilated offices are clear during warmer weather but are prone to being frustrated in cold weather due to the preference of occupants for thermal comfort over air quality.

In naturally ventilated buildings it is hard to achieve improvements to ventilation that are also optimal from a thermal comfort and energy perspective. One approach that has now been trialled more widely is to use carbon dioxide sensors and alarms in offices. Sensors can give information to occupants and be used to automatically open adapted, motorized windows. Monitoring room carbon dioxide levels, data logging and analysis could become a regular task for FM professionals. However, this approach has not emerged among office stakeholders in the study.

Improved hygiene measures were a familiar feature of office buildings during the pandemic. Such measures have been concerned with higher levels of surface cleaning and hand washing using more effective cleaning fluids. Further uptake of agile workspaces and paperless operations mean surfaces tend to be clear at the end of all working periods so consistent cleaning of workspaces is more achievable. At the same time, movement from desktop PCs to laptop technology means the risk of viral transmission via shared keyboards and mice can be minimised.

In addition to providing mitigation of COVID-19 infection risks, improved ventilation and hygiene can mitigate health risks from other viral transmissions that are common causes of sickness absences e.g. colds and influenza. Consequently, although improvements in ventilation and hygiene may have come about by virtue of government guidance during the pandemic, there are both personal and organisational benefits from maintaining these higher standards.

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The need for social distancing (2m in most countries) during the pandemic meant normal seating arrangements would not comply as most desks are in the range 1.4-1.8m wide. As social distancing is no longer mandated, there is currently no limitation on office designs in this regard. Evidence from the study is that furniture layouts have not explicitly considered social distancing regarding spacing of seating positions. Use of partitions between opposing workspaces has been retained in some cases – perhaps also for acoustic reasons. In some working areas such as "quiet spaces" occupants are more closely spaced than base workstations. Collaboration spaces facilitate closer interaction and sharing of work surfaces, but this means people are relatively closely spaced and facing others. Scientific evidence supports there being higher risk where voice levels are higher and persistent – this suggests spaces like call centre workstations be considered higher risk environments. Whether these factors should be considered in office designs, or related risks mitigated by other measures is not yet clear.

Several research projects running in parallel with this have been examining risks of viral infection in offices relating to ventilation and future approaches to providing infection resilience. The **Infection Resilient Environments project** funded by the Royal Academy of Engineering will publish recommendations in May 2022 regarding combinations of physical measures and management policies that can contribute to resilience. A further example is the **AIRBODS project** – outputs to be published in October 2022 will include a model of infection rates relating to different office ventilation scenarios. Whether these outputs will recommend revision in ventilation standards or health and safety guidance is currently uncertain.

Most organisations in the study are currently ramping-up levels of office occupancy and using booking software to manage and monitor this. Hence the resilience of office spaces and working practices to further risk of infections have not yet been fully tested. Some office design practice questions according remain open.

Practical points to consider:

● Even with the decrease in COVID-19 restrictions, **keep good ventilation a priority** – this is beneficial for ventilation, hygiene and employees' cognitive performance.

● Consider investing in **room carbon dioxide (air quality) monitors** in spaces with opening windows.

● Ensure ongoing **monitoring and reporting of air quality in air-conditioned environments** and assign related responsibilities.

● Guidance on **office infection resilience** will be updated continually as we learn from research.

● Have an individual dedicated to keeping themselves up to date with the **latest regulations** to ensure you're following best practice.

SME focus:
Ensuring offices are infection resilient doesn't need to be an expensive endeavour and should be considered not only to prevent the spread of COVID but other, future infections:

● Maintain **hygiene measures** which were brought in during the pandemic, encouraging employees to regularly wipe down desks and shared spaces before/after use. This can be as simple as providing wipes in key areas.
● If desks cannot easily be moved to allow for distancing, look into the introduction of **small barriers** to break up desks. These can be functional too, acting as notice boards and soundproofing to minimise noise from online calls. Other furniture such as lockers and plants can also act as barriers or space fillers.
● Keep up **occupancy tracking** – understanding how many are regularly coming in can help inform any future reductions in occupancy if needed, while still ensuring productivity.

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The ergonomics of hybrid working

The ergonomic considerations for office-based working are well known, given the legal requirement to offer display screen equipment and broader ergonomic assessments for staff members who experience physical discomfort when working in the office. **Here's a toolkit of resources**. However, given the move towards agile and hybrid office environments, several key issues must be considered.

With the increase of informal working spaces, such as breakout zones, comfier meeting points and touchdown workstations, employers need to consider the ergonomic impact on staff health and wellbeing. Specifically, while these spaces are great for collaboration and creativity, they can often encourage poor posture, especially if working from laptops positioned on lower tables for long periods of time, resulting in back and neck problems.

These agile working environments are also related to the increase in hot-desk work models. Here, it is worthwhile to consider the standardisation of workplace equipment, to ensure workspaces and desks are equal, and all have the equipment required for anyone to touch down and work effectively. These desks and equipment should be adjustable to allow individuals to tailor each desk, screen and chair height easily to their physical needs. Being able to make these small adjustments quickly daily will prevent musculoskeletal problems arising.

Adjustability also feeds into equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), making the workspace accessible for all. When designing new activity-based workspaces, it is important to ensure they are actually open to everyone, not just the majority of the workforce. Availability of assistive technologies is an issue we observed. While employers have provided additional software and technology to those who need it, often on a laptop or a single computer in the office, this limits where they can actually work from. We encourage employers to roll out any software across all office computers and screens, consulting with those individuals to facilitate their full engagement with the office environment.
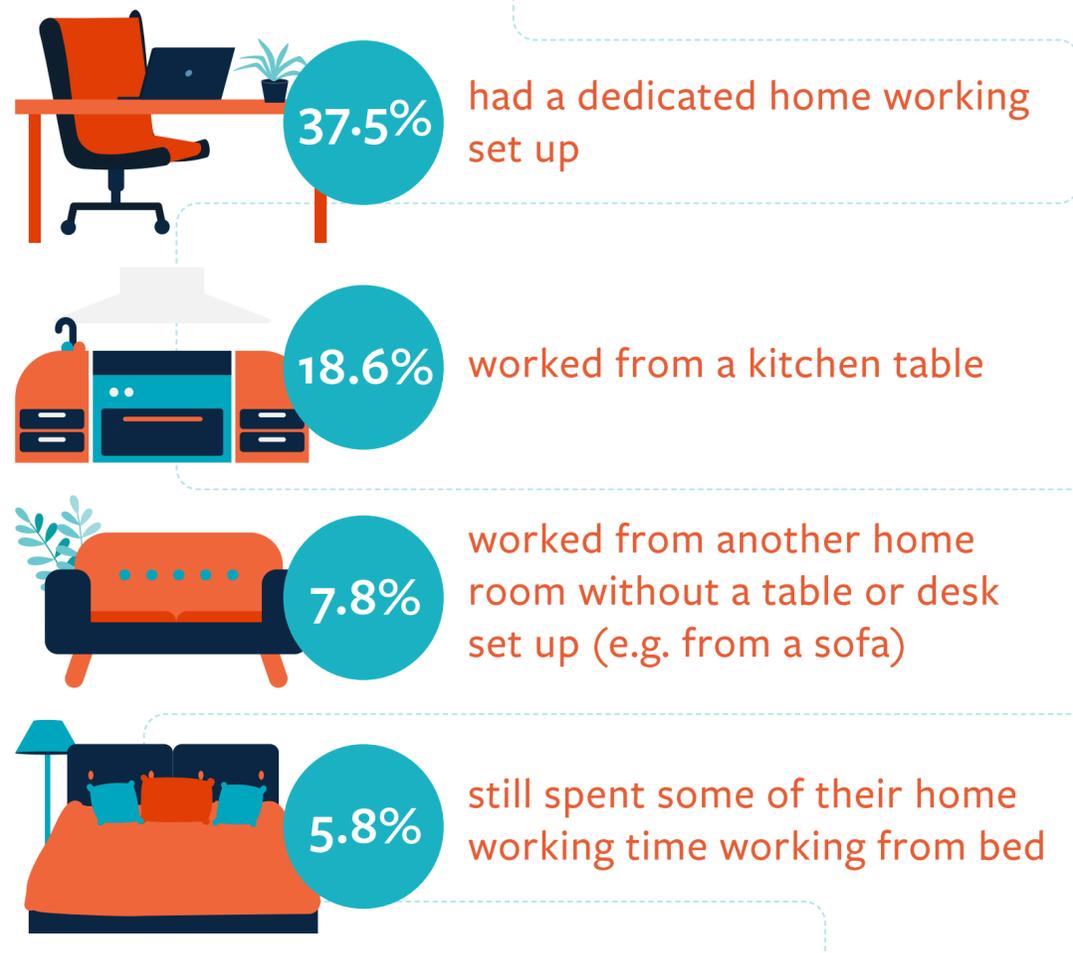

Similarly, it is important to account for all neuro-diverse workers who may work better in different office environments. In our research and workshops with employee groups we found many neuro-diverse employees are more productive at home as they have been able to tailor their environment to their specific needs, more so than neuro-typical employees. To encourage these groups back into the workplace and facilitate their performance, additional spaces may be required in the office, such as sound dampening pods or darker rooms to limit stimulation.

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Home working

Like many organisations our partners are heading towards a hybrid working pattern, with a view that a proportion of the working week will be dedicated to home working, whether this is employee choice or a result of reduced office space. It is important to remain aware of problems home workers can face. Despite the time employees have already been required to work from home, our December 2021 survey found:

37.5% had a dedicated home working set up

18.6% worked from a kitchen table

7.8% worked from another home room without a table or desk set up (e.g. from a sofa)

5.8% still spent some of their home working time working from bed

It is always encouraged to have a supportive chair and desk set up at home to reduce the development of back and neck pain. Ergonomics offers further **guidance** about how to work from different spaces and maintain a healthy posture. It may be desirable to try to welcome those employees without home workstations back to the office, but we urge caution here due to likely EDI implications, as those without the structured set up were less likely to be a manager and were generally younger in age than those with a dedicated office room.

General tips

Across all workspaces, it is important to consider the role of breaks. Breaks from working, especially from looking at a screen, have been widely demonstrated to have positive influences on health and wellbeing as well as performance and engagement outcomes. Within a snapshot study of work behaviours that we conducted in winter 2021, we found that employees switched their workspaces more in the office than when working from home.

While switching spaces does not fully align with taking breaks, it does indicate a very static workforce and may predict future musculoskeletal issues. In the office, breaks can be encouraged by facilitating activity-based working, with employees moving around the office based on their job demands. Indeed, when asked how many times employees switched spaces for acoustic reasons, such as moving to take a call or to move away from a louder workspace, the frequency increased. While this is not a drastic improvement, it hints that encouraging employees to move spaces depending on their work tasks may facilitate a healthier approach to working.

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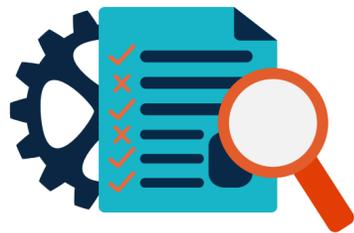| Designing a hybrid policy | Office building infrastructure and interior design | Redesigning office workspaces | Ventilation | Designing offices to be infection resilient | The ergonomics of hybrid working | Managing in a hybrid world | Supporting early career or new starters | Hybrid working and workplace networks | Hybrid meetings |

Practical points to consider:

Conduct regular ergonomic risk assessments
The **Health and Safety Executive website** includes self-assessment checklists which can guide early discussions with employees about their physical experiences with their workplace.

Include employees in the design and consultation of new office developments
Involving employees with different backgrounds, tenures and individual characteristics when developing offices or working policies can highlight gaps and needs which hadn't been considered. This can also help support employees when rolling out organisational changes.
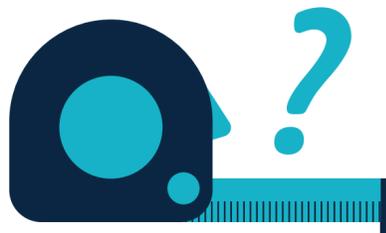
Can everything be adjusted?
If you are moving to an unassigned desk approach, ensure all equipment and technology is adjustable to meet different employee requirements.

Manager-led healthy working
Employees often feel unable to take short breaks for fear of reprimands, however this is important for healthy, sustained performance. As a leader, show your employees how they should be working.

Remove barriers
Make it easier and more streamlined for employees to request help or additional equipment if needed.

SME focus:

Many of the practical points can be easily applied to both SMEs and larger organisations, with some factors, such as engaging staff in design and removing reporting barriers, being much easier to facilitate in smaller businesses with flatter structures. Yet, within smaller and micro-organisations, adjustability at each workspace may not be required if everyone is already working within a shared, open space with enough desks. The key message here is to facilitate and maintain an open communication channel with your employees to understand what is needed for both productivity and health.

More information

Podcast:
Creating an ergonomic workspace for those returning to the office

Infographic:
Home workspace guidance

Additional resources:

- **General home working guidance**
- **Occupational health at work toolkits**
- **Tips for teleworkers [employees]**
- **Tips for teleworking [employers]**

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Managing in a hybrid world

Hybrid working challenges managers. First, the understanding of hybrid working can vary across workers as we explored here. Second, some hybrid working models means workers can decide where to work, which can also affect what, when, how they do their work. Not all workers appreciate this responsibility and may not know how to exercise hybrid working effectively. Third, hybrid working creates a significant amount of work for managers in coordinating requests from different workers. Such a challenge is even more prominent when the impact of hybrid working on teamwork, such as teamwork operation or cross-team work, is considered. To manage these challenges, managers should consider the following practices:

1 Communicate with workers about the ideas and goals of adopting hybrid working

Different organisations have different policies and designs of hybrid working. As hybrid working is likely to be adopted widely in society, workers can easily tell how their hybrid working arrangement is different from workers in other organisations and develop a (mis)interpretation of their hybrid working arrangement. As such, managers should ensure workers are well informed about why specific hybrid working policies and rules are adopted, and the expected benefits of using them. Communication helps workers understand the rationale, accept and follow the policies and rules.

2 Help workers to use hybrid working policies better

Hybrid working can contribute to workers' well-being (for example, being able to achieve a better work-life balance), but also gives them the responsibility to manage their own workload, from daily activities to long-term career development. To some workers, choices and autonomy can cause a sense of uncertainty. Newcomers also need to know the norm in their work context before knowing how to arrange their work activities. Managers should guide workers to find their best way to exercise their hybrid working arrangement and actively craft their jobs regarding what to do, where and when to work, how to perform their tasks, and with whom they work together or remotely to complete specific tasks. Managers will need to understand each worker's needs and coach them to exercise a hybrid working arrangement to fit individual needs. In other words, managers will need to weigh up their mentoring role to help workers adjust to hybrid working.

3 Design hybrid working policies in a team or cross-team context using the knowledge of social network

Coordinating hybrid working arrangements for a team or across teams can introduce totally different factors to consider, such as the flow of information, the frequency of interactions, and the pattern of interactions across partners (e.g. one-to-one, one-to-multiple, or fluid). Managers should not simply rely on an organisational chart to develop hybrid working policies or designs for teams. Instead, understanding the interaction needs and patterns within and across teams can be vital to developing and operating hybrid working arrangements.

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SME focus:
Set up open communication channels, both to gain feedback from your employees and to share regular updates about changes – being smaller means this could be conducted at a business-wide level, giving all employees a voice.

More information

Blog posts:
- **Returning to the office: How to craft our work for a successful transition**

- **Challenges of flexible working for workers, managers, and organisations**

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Supporting early career or new starters

Imagine that working from home was your first and only experience of the workplace. Not only were you learning a new job, and navigating the organisation's politics, culture and norms, you also had little to no prior work experience to benchmark experiences against. While much has been written about the challenges of hybrid working, little research has focused on the distinct challenges faced by early-career, new employees such as recent graduates, school leavers, and interns.

We perhaps think of today's early career workers – "digital natives" – as the generation best placed to embark on a remote or hybrid career, because they have grown up in such a tech-enabled world. Certainly, our research shows that new graduates are well adept to utilise technology and can use this to quickly learn and master their core job tasks during periods of remote working. However, our research also reveals a more nuanced picture of their remote working competencies and specific challenges they report when entering the hybrid workplace for the first time.

In particular, our research suggests we should not assume that all early career or new starters feel they are disadvantaged by remote working. New starters reported lots of the same advantages as other workers (e.g. work-life balance, enjoying no commute), when working completely remotely some of the time. They also reported some specific advantages that they felt had arisen purely due to the opportunity to work remotely, such as learning job tasks through replaying recordings of meetings, hiding notes on video-calls and so appearing better prepared than they felt inside (!), and being able to attend meetings that would previously have been restricted due to room capacity constraints.

"I'm slightly concerned for the generation that's younger... Maybe your generation, where if you're new into the workplace now, maybe this is all you've ever known. And I think it doesn't bring out the best in people. So, I'm concerned that we need to bring people back together, not as much as we used to, but you know, that human contact is a basic need."

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Ten top tips to help early career workers entering the hybrid workforce

1 **Think about how your new starters will learn how their job role fits within the wider business**. Those we spoke to felt they learned core tasks quickly, but often without really understanding how their work (and that of their immediate team) contributed to the work of the wider organisation.

2 **Build ways to help new starters meet other people**. Early career new starters reported finding it easier to meet people their age and grade, but felt less at ease with more senior or older colleagues, and found structured opportunities helpful. Consider "anchor days", hybrid work patterns, and using the physical space to encourage early career colleagues to meet and learn from a variety of people.

3 **Consider providing early career employees with a more experienced "buddy" to help them navigate the culture and norms of the organisation**. Where such schemes exist, new starters found it useful to have someone to ask "silly" questions of. Do not assume all new starters have the same needs and challenges. For instance, we found that those living at home with parents or siblings working in professional environments reported learning workplace norms by mirroring their relatives' behaviours. Those without such role models relied much more on their workplace colleagues for these signals.

4 **Help them develop strategies and techniques to improve their workplace visibility**, without encouraging them to be intrusive or overly demanding. Early career employees can find it difficult to know how to strike this balance when they are not around colleagues and can worry about their colleagues' perceptions of them. Give guidance around what you expect from them.

5 **Help new starters develop the confidence to ask the right questions (and for help), at the right time, and of the right people when working remotely**. In the office they would typically draw cues from the way others behave, but might not have easy access to such cues at home, or in a hybrid work environment.

6 **Help new starters develop techniques for approaching uncomfortable topics with colleagues**. This can be difficult for early career employees even in an office environment, but those working at home told us how they would find it quite easy to avoid such situations, and where conflict did arise this was often invisible to others, so they found it difficult to learn how to resolve it.

7 **Show new colleagues how and when different types of remote working platforms are being used in your organisation**, and what the etiquette is. While they are likely to be comfortable using the technology itself, they may need some support with developing norms and conventions for use.

8 **Encourage new colleagues to see the value in informal, social interaction with colleagues**, as well as purposeful communication about work projects. New starters told us that they worried general conversation would be viewed as timewasting in the remote workplace, even though when they did experience serendipitous conversations these often led to learning, improved productivity and morale, lower intentions to leave, and process innovation.

9 **Prepare new starters for peaks and troughs in their workload by normalising this**, and helping them to develop strategies for seeking support when needed. It can be hard to benchmark your workload against that of colleagues when working remotely.

10 **Do not assume that new starters need to be in the office all the time to be able to develop**. Being in the office can help them learn from others, but is less useful if they are in the office and their team-mates are working a different hybrid pattern.

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"Yesterday there was nobody else apart from one person [I know from my team], and I don't know anybody else. So, there was a lot of people, but I don't even say hello to them because it's just... there's just too many people. So yeah... I can't say there's more interaction in the office because I don't always feel like that."

SME focus:
While it might be easier to integrate new starters within an SME environment, as there are fewer people they might need to connect with, you still need to facilitate networking opportunities for them. If they are required to be in the office, ensure other colleagues are too, at least for the first few weeks, so they aren't the only one in!

More information

Podcasts:
- **Starting your career during the pandemic**

- **Trends in employment practices for student hires during the pandemic**

Blog posts:
- **How remote working can affect workplace learning**

- **Why the built work environment is so valuable to those just beginning their careers**

- **The challenges of remote communication for new workers**

- **The importance of being proactive at the start of your career when remote working**

Report:
Starting your career during a pandemic

Infographic:
Starting your career during the pandemic: How organisations, universities and interns can help

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Hybrid working and workplace networks

Social networks and why we should care about them

Social interactions are at the heart of the workplace for many people. Workplace friendships help to cultivate a sense of belonging and commitment that can help reduce turnover, while strong advice networks can help organisations solve problems more quickly, improve innovation, and capture and manage knowledge more effectively. In other words, workplace networks are vital to an organisation's performance.

Networks and workspace

Traditionally our workplace played an important role in helping to build and maintain networks. We speak to people in corridors and staff rooms, in the kitchen as we make our lunch, or in the queue of the work canteen. Sometimes those conversations are just small talk –

"How was your weekend?"

"Did you watch the tennis yesterday?"

– but they matter. They help us find people who share our interests and those whose company just helps make work that bit more enjoyable.

Sometimes they lead to deeper conversations about projects we are working on, and can lead to us to think about the same thing in a different way, or to new opportunities and connections –

"I must put you in touch with…"

Not only do workplaces provide environments that facilitate unscheduled and incidental conversations, they are also rich with cues about how to communicate and build these networks. Workspaces provide clues to the hierarchy, whether through the fact that some people's offices are hidden away or access is restricted through gatekeepers, or because the spaces reserved for some people are bigger or grander than others. We also get cues about who and how we should approach people – we see the people who always seem rushed, or who others seem nervous around, as well as those who seem welcoming and approachable.

The online workplace is not like this though, and employees reported missing these unscheduled conversations in the Covid era. One participant told us:

"Almost every conversation I have now is planned. I'm coming to this conversation with something to inform you, or I need something. Whereas, I see you at the coffee machine, I don't have an agenda… and we can talk freely. That's not really happening [in 2021] because you join an online meeting and I need to communicate X, Y, and Z in half an hour."

Of course, employers have noticed this! In conversations and LinkedIn threads people share concerns that employees feel isolated, feel they can't reach out for a quick call unless they know someone well enough, or find break out rooms too prescribed. We know through our research that employers are working hard to find new ways to promote unexpected conversations, through initiatives like:

"Coffee Roulette" where you agree to call an employee at random with no agenda once a week.

Online team socials and quizzes using break out rooms and games.

Encouraging employees to use the phone to make an impromptu call, rather than organise a scheduled meeting.

Is everyone feeling the same?

There is clearly not a single solution to this problem. Plenty of organisations feel their teams are doing well at supporting each other, keeping in touch, and promoting within-team networks. There are certainly benefits, with some employees reporting that they have been able to attend international meetings they may not have had access to before, or can sit in on a video call in a way that would have been previously impossible due to the room size available on site. This is great for network building and managing knowledge. However, in a purely remote world of work, truly serendipitous conversations can be harder to find, and this is one of the key aspects that several organisations are hoping to improve on as they move to hybrid working, through a combination of remote and workplace-based work.

What do organisations need to think about to help networks work for them?

Organisational maps and charts are useful. They show who to speak with about what and clarify responsibilities. But these formal networks are just one part of the communication puzzle. While it is unrealistic to expect organisations to ever be able to manage their employees' networks (and nor should we encourage this!) there are things employers can think through to harness the benefits of social networks within their workforce:

● **Understand the different needs of your workforce**
What kinds of network are valuable to your employees – friendship? Information sharing? Advice seeking? Different jobs might need networks for different reasons. For instance, an analyst in a very technical role might not need to collaborate as regularly to get their work done, but might find their network crucial for social support or feeling part of the organisation (important if you want to nurture employee retention!) For a worker whose role is to bring in new customers or build business collaborations, access to the right people at the right time is crucial. Each type of network is important but might operate differently.

● **What is the purpose of the space and how will it support your networks?**
If workspace is at a premium and rotas are going to be essential, then employers need to think about who is coming in and when. Are you encouraging communications that would have happened online anyway, because people know each other well enough to make a phone call, or should the workspace be used to encourage people to meet who would not have otherwise?

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● **How can you bring your "out groups" in?**

As well as the people we gravitate to, there are also people who we feel make our work that bit harder, who we have less in common with, and who we only go to when we really have to! Often that means we get closer to those in our "in group" and spend less time with our "out group". But this can be problematic, and can encourage cliques and create echo chambers which are damaging to innovation and performance. Online working can make out groups less visible and cliques more prevalent, so employers should think about how to use the workspace to maximise the potential of the whole business.

● **Creating inclusive workplaces**

If some types of worker, such as those with caring responsibilities, would prefer to work from home more often, how can technology be enhanced to provide them with the same opportunities for ad hoc conversations? Care needs to be taken so the benefits of office presence do not perpetuate disadvantage by reinforcing office factions.

The people in your personal network are important and affect your experience of work – whether you feel supported, stressed, or encouraged. Who you know, who those people know, and who you have access to will also affect who you go to when you need advice or support. We tend to go back to "good" sources – people we trust, believe are competent or have good integrity – and avoid others. So the quality of our informal networks really does matter for innovation, performance, knowledge management, and worker satisfaction, and as organisations move towards new models of hybrid working, it should be top of the agenda for discussion.

SME focus: The reduction of casual conversation and emphasis of 'purposeful' networking is not unique to larger organisations: we found many examples of this within smaller organisations and teams. A key issue was typically relating to the formation and maintenance of an 'in-group' of colleagues who collaborate and communicate more closely than others. Interestingly this is often grouped around those who seem 'similar' to others, such as younger or older colleagues, those with caring responsibilities, etc.

Solutions to this problem, however, are potentially easier to implement in SMEs. One such approach could be encouraging whole office or team lunches, after work drinks or even away days to foster closer networks across these groups. Many networks are also shaped by a few key, important individuals – utilising these people to reach out to others, move around the office more openly and engage with communication across teams can normalise these behaviours, encouraging team members to act in similar ways.

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Hybrid meetings

What are hybrid meetings?

A hybrid meeting involves a mix of attendees joining in-person, typically in a dedicated meeting space, and other attendees joining remotely either from home or elsewhere. The meeting is enabled using audio and video conferencing technology such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams or other digital tools. As organisations begin to move into increased hybrid ways of working, hybrid meetings can be a way to manage room capacity and maintain social distancing by limiting the number of attendees physically meeting. They can also help ensure everyone required can attend regardless of where they work. Below we outline some of the ways hybrid meetings can be conducted and how to create a positive hybrid meeting experience.

Supporting technologies for hybrid meetings

Technology and network connections are essential to the smooth running of a hybrid meeting. There are several ways to conduct a hybrid meeting depending on the room design and the technology available.

Individual devices

All attendees connect to their own device individually, making use of their own microphone and cameras (but attendees in the same room may use one central speaker or one attendee's device to minimise sound feedback).

In this set up, all attendees can see individuals on camera regardless of where they are located in the room or elsewhere. If all attendees have a suitable device, this usually does not require a significant redesign of meeting room space, although a stable connection would be essential for all attendees to share the same experience.

Central meeting room technology

Attendees in the meeting room share a screen, microphone(s), speakers, and camera. The central camera captures attendees in the room and the screen shows attendees who are joining remotely. The camera may be fixed in one place or rotate to the person speaking.

In this case, sound quality is essential to ensure anyone speaking can be heard and to avoid attendees talking over one another. Our snapshot survey found overtalking contributes to a negative hybrid meeting experience; making it difficult to hear what is said which can lead to important information being missed.

"People would talk over each other as you cannot see in person when someone is going to speak."

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Enhanced hybrid meeting technologies

In some instances, artificial intelligence (AI) can be integrated into central meeting room technology to **enhance the experience**. This usually requires a moveable camera and microphone, and AI that can detect who is speaking and rotate the camera accordingly. AI technology can also offer a hands-free experience by using voice activation control to join and manage meetings. Providers such as Logitech Room Solutions integrate with Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet.

For many organisations this type of AI-assisted technology would require a significant upgrade and investment in equipment and potentially room design, so the most can be made of the technology. It may be more suitable to larger organisations where hybrid meetings were the norm pre-pandemic and will remain essential going forward.

Network and connectivity infrastructure

Network infrastructure is essential to ensure a **positive hybrid meeting experience**, the snapshot survey and interview data suggests. Poor connectivity was one of the largest factors influencing a negative hybrid meeting experience. Connectivity issues often led to delays and meant meetings lasted longer than they should. Issues also created poor sound and image quality and sometimes meant attendees couldn't join or had to leave meetings. This was reported by attendees physically in meeting rooms and those joining remotely. Organisations should ensure their network infrastructure is up to date and fit for purpose. It may be harder to control attendees' connectivity when not in the building.

Collaborative technologies

Technologies are also needed to share documents, ideas, and work collaboratively. They provide virtual spaces and repositories where documents can be shared before meetings (e.g. SharePoint and One Drive), and tools for collaboration such as Miro and the virtual whiteboard feature in Microsoft Teams. Our survey data suggests that the use of collaborative technologies can **help hybrid meetings run more smoothly**, as all attendees have access to the same documents.

Virtual whiteboards can also aid discussion if sound quality is hindered or when attendees feel unable to contribute verbally.

"Productivity tools such as online whiteboards also work well for communication of ideas during hybrid meetings."

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How to create a positive hybrid meeting experience

As hybrid meetings are likely to be here to stay, it is important to create a positive meeting experience as close to, if not better, than a traditional in person or fully remote meeting. We suggest the following guidelines based on our research of participants' experiences of hybrid meetings:

● **Provide a meeting Chair or coordinator**

Interview and survey participants reported that hybrid meetings with many attendees often led to a more negative meeting experience. This was due to the difficulty in managing large numbers of people connecting to the meeting, contributing to discussions and overtalking. Hosting a hybrid meeting requires a different skill set to a fully online or fully in-person meeting. For example, there is a need to manage verbal contributions and ensure a balance between virtual and in-person contributions, so some attendees are not excluded from the conversation. Similarly, it is important to ensure informal exchanges and social cues can be seen by all.

Action!

Provide a meeting Chair to help facilitate conversations to minimise the potential for overtalking.

● **Meeting etiquette and expectations**

Some participants felt that when joining meetings remotely there was a tendency to feel less engaged and get easily distracted as there often wasn't a requirement to have cameras and microphones on.

"It's also possible for the people online to disengage (turn camera off and work on email, for example), to the irritation of those physically present."

This might be because online meetings were often described as feeling less formal than in-person meetings. Therefore, managing a hybrid meeting may require some guidance.

Action!

Provide guidance on what is expected from attendees to help develop hybrid meeting etiquette. For example, speaking at a suitable volume, ensuring those joining remotely have cameras turned on, and muting when others are speaking to reduce background noise.

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Be inclusive

Participants also reported the risk of creating an "us and them" divide between those attending in-person and those attending remotely.

"Virtual participants are second-class citizens to the meeting, occasionally forgotten and not able to get the attention of the chair or other participants like those present in the room."

This led to some participants feeling isolated, less able to contribute and that those in person had more power in decision making, particularly if the manager was in the physical meeting room.

Action!
Remind attendees that all contributions are valid, and everyone can participate in meetings. Ensuring in-room attendees are not having their own conversations in the background may help, as well as reacting to non-verbal cues and the hands-up function in larger meetings so everyone gets a turn to speak.

Training

For many participants, their organisation provided very little or no training on how to host a hybrid meeting or use the technology (in-room and remotely).

"Training and development needed for chairs and participants if hybrid meetings are to be the norm."

Those participants who had experience with hybrid meetings pre-pandemic reported more positive hybrid meeting experiences. This is likely due to them being better able to manage the situation and the technology.

"We have always had meetings like this really. We have secure meetings using special IT, whereby multiple locations (maybe only two, but some up to 30+) dial into a meeting. Each screen (i.e. physical location) will have multiple people in the room. So this has really been natural and normal for us for many years."

It was also found that a lack of IT support before and during meetings meant that attendees often had to troubleshoot on the spot which took up valuable meeting time.

Action!
Provide training to all staff to help ensure staff know how to use the hybrid meeting facilities, how to troubleshoot for technical issues and who to go to for support if needed.

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Upgrade technology and infrastructure

As mentioned above, the success of a hybrid meeting is reliant on the technology and network connection.

"The hybrid meeting experience has been problematic with ineffective technical infrastructure in some of our meeting rooms – this has led to some quite difficult-to-follow meetings."

While it might not be essential for all organisations to have the most advanced technology available, all organisations that intend to continue with hybrid meetings should have up to date technology to enable a smooth meeting experience.
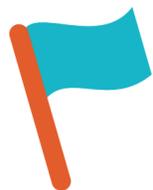
Action!

Ensure technology and facilities are up to date, make use of collaborative tools and invest in upgrades where necessary. This may also mean redesigning the physical meeting space (e.g. moving tables and chairs; relocating screens, cameras, microphones etc) to allow equipment to be installed and all attendees to participate. It is important for those in the room to be able to see and hear one another, just as it is for those remotely.

SME focus:

Many of these actions are applicable to both SMEs and larger corporations and shouldn't be skipped over even if there are fewer attendees. Investing in expensive tools and technology isn't always the answer, especially for SMEs without the budget. The most important factor to invest in for hybrid meetings is network infrastructure and a stable internet connection. Following this, managing behavioural problems can be just as effective for a successful hybrid meeting even if the meeting software doesn't have full capabilities. For example, having a Chair is important even within a smaller meeting to provide clarity and a single voice to lead if technological problems arise. It may be easier to roll out new equipment within an SME, but the focus should remain on training, ensuring every employee completes the courses to be able to use the tools to their potential.

Conclusion

- **Most organisations have yet to formalise their hybrid working policy** or adapt their offices to new ways of working – this is work in progress!

- **Be clear and precise over what a good outcome will look like** and what you mean by hybrid working in your organisation.

- **This is not any one function or individual's problem to solve** – socio-technical and joined-up thinking is needed. Adapting to the changes to work that COVID-19 has spurred requires input, advice and change across the organisation.

- **Involve your staff in the conversations**, be open and honest that we are all learning and that your approach may need to change over time.

- **This is an opportunity to improve** both how we work and employees' experience – however, we will never be able to satisfy everyone, we need to balance me vs we and there will be many trade-offs.

- **Part two of this research will be published in September 2022** with more data about the impact of different hybrid working arrangements and workplaces on how employees think, feel and perform.

"Working with Leeds University Business School has enabled us to make well informed decisions on the right solutions for our Society. The expertise of the team has supported us to collect and validate invaluable data internally, whilst also providing access to the bigger picture in the external marketplace. This has allowed us to introduce a more flexible, hybrid approach to work for our colleagues, has informed plans to make changes to our workplaces, to introduce new enabling technology, and be confident in our approach to meet the needs of our colleagues whilst balancing them with delivering for our members and customers. We will continue to work with the team at Leeds University Business School to review progress and adapt where necessary to what remains an evolving challenge in the post pandemic environment."

David Robinson – Product Owner, Workforce of the Future Programme, Skipton Building Society
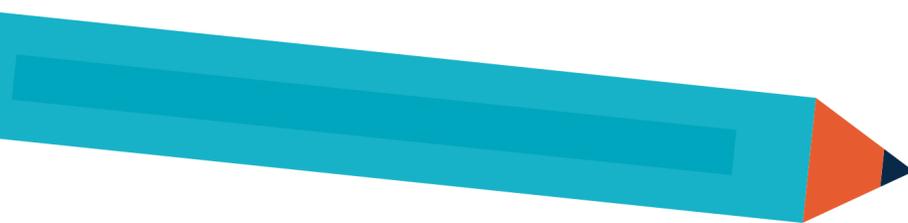
Get in touch with Dr Matthew Davis m.davis@leeds.ac.uk to:

- Talk about ways that we could work with your business
- Learn more about our existing and upcoming research
- Get involved with our work
- Attend an event

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