

The new 9 to 5: adapting to hybrid working post-COVID



Intro

Hybrid is the word on everyone's lips right now. But beneath the excitement of a new way of working, there is a difficult road ahead. Hybrid working is full of complexities and while remote working was forced upon us, a move to a hybrid position won't happen, naturally, on its own. Formulating a hybrid working strategy is key.

The biggest difficulty for businesses will be managing expectations from employees. During the pandemic, many employees have become used to working from home. As employers begin to re-open workplaces, returning staff want to retain some of the remote working benefits. A hybrid work model is being hailed as the post-pandemic solution but is this a fairy-tale vision ignoring business needs?

For employers, in the short-term at least, it offers a comfortable route back to normality. Safety and social distancing concerns can be mitigated with fewer people in the office together. A partial return to the workplace will also put concerns about innovation and collaboration to bed.

The experiment with remote working has been largely successful. Many have been pleasantly surprised at the positive results. Now the appetite for hybrid working is stronger than ever. If there was a right time to shift from the traditional in-office 9-5 work model it is now.

This white paper takes a deep dive into the new challenges employers face and how they must adapt to ensure the new working blend is a success.



HYBRID



The hybrid work model: what is it?

There isn't an exact definition of hybrid working, (we talk about it as though it is one thing, when in fact it's many), but essentially, it means a working arrangement where an employee works some of their time at home, or at another remote location, and some of their time in the workplace or at a central hub. It's another way of describing flexible working arrangements.

There are lots of computations. The idea that workers come into the office for a few days a week and do the rest of their work at home is a hugely simplistic overview. Examples of hybrid working might include:

- Remote working with occasional on-site/client meetings
- A minimum number of days in the office and the remainder at home (this could be flexible or set days, with different parameters set for different roles)
- Mainly working in the office, with occasional remote days allowed
- Alternating set teams in the office each week
- A core team working exclusively in the office with certain people or positions working remotely (often the set-up for companies that use a lot of freelancers)

Every business is different and each must decide what level of flexibility works for them.



Why hybrid is the future of work

The primed landscape

A shift in the way we work has long been on the cards – technological advancement and the fourth industrial revolution have given businesses access to a global workforce. Video conferencing may have exploded during the pandemic, but it has been around for some time. The work landscape was already transforming to support remote and hybrid working. The pandemic accelerated this and now many of the technology barriers that had previously prevented people from working at home are gone.

The accidental experiment

The forced experiment with remote working has proved people can successfully work from home, enjoy better work-life balance, and achieve productivity gains. Many employers have also learned a valuable lesson in trust and how that impacts on the motivation of employees.

Productivity soars

The productivity benefits of remote working aren't a complete surprise. A study of 16,000 remote workers back in 2013 found the practice increased performance¹. The gain in productivity was attributed to a quieter, more convenient working environment, along with fewer breaks and sick days. Several more recent studies confirm productivity whilst working from home outshines that in an office setting.

Eyes opened

The pandemic has shifted how employers view remote work and many are more open to it now than they were before. A recent State of Remote Work survey by Hubstaff found 84.5% of companies intend to continue offering some remote work options after the pandemic². Studies repeatedly prove that remote employees get more done. They perform better, get work done faster, and take less sick time. The results achieved by remote workers during the pandemic has won over sceptics. The appetite for hybrid is there. Hubstaff's research found just 15.5% of employers intend to get staff back to working in the office full-time.

Innovation must be restored

You may be wondering, if remote work is getting such a good write up, why bother going back to the office at all?

Research by Nicholas Bloom, a senior fellow at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR), has shown that face-to-face meetings are essential for developing new ideas and keeping staff motivated and focused³. He fears the collapse in office face-to-face time will result in an innovation slump.

Although the pre-conceived notions that people can't be as productive working from home have been shattered, the ability to foster innovation electronically remains a challenge. A survey commissioned by Microsoft of thousands of workers and leaders across Europe revealed that innovation has been hampered by a strain on team culture during the pandemic⁴.



A hybrid work model addresses the innovation issue, even more so when it comes to retaining and hiring top talent. Remote and hybrid working means that people can access a wider talent pool than before.

Time to switch off

Another reason the fully remote position must change revolves around wellbeing and the always-switched-on culture that has crept into the lives of many. Working from home has had its benefits but isolation, burnout and poor mental health are problems that have increasingly come to the fore.

It poses the question, where do the productivity gains in remote teams come from?

Of course, employees working from home can get more done without any distractions. But chats by the water cooler and distractions in the office are important aspects of working life. It is becoming clearer that people working at home are pushing themselves harder than they should. The question now is, how long will it be before they crash and burn?

Hybrid gets a green light

We don't yet know if the hybrid model will keep productivity high, reinstate creativity and innovation, address issues of burnout and isolation, and meet business needs. On paper at least, the hybrid model looks like a workable solution with potential to offer the best of both worlds.

A significant number of businesses are preparing for a hybrid work set-up. A recent study found that nine out of ten organisations are likely to combine remote and on-site working post pandemic⁵.

And there is strong evidence that employees want it too.

67% of employees who worked remotely during the pandemic believe a hybrid model of work is ideal for them⁶.

It would appear an irreversible path has been set in motion. If it plays out positively, hybrid working will become a powerful lever for attracting talent and retaining staff in the future.



Hybrid won't happen on its own: the challenges

Businesses and individuals can certainly make hybrid working successful, but it won't just happen on its own. The challenge for companies, HR leaders and managers will be to ensure the right infrastructure and strategies are in place.

The challenges include:

Managing split teams

It's complacent to think employees can thrive in both environments with a single management style. Managers will need to upskill to effectively manage split teams.

Collaboration

A big challenge will be how to make sure employees who are working remotely still feel part of the in-office team. Video calls should be encouraged, and remote workers must be invited to collaborate with those working on site. The onus will be on managers to ensure an even playing field.

Spontaneity

One of the biggest difficulties with remote working is spontaneous interaction. Communication tools, such as Slack, for

example, can help to a certain degree. As businesses move to a hybrid work model, managers will need to continue to explore communication solutions that keep everyone connected across the team.

A seamless culture

Employees will require encouragement, support and the right tools to feel like they are part of a team and connected to the business vision. Managers will be responsible for ensuring this runs seamlessly from the office to working at home.

The office space

Workplace set-ups will also need to change. The experience in the office needs to be more than it was before. Workplaces need to be inviting and offer something more to employees than

working from home. Otherwise, why even bother coming in? Workspaces must be designed to encourage creativity and foster collaboration, with more breakout areas than before.

Employee experience

Redefining the employee experience will be central to the success of hybrid working. Managers will need to ensure the right balance between culture and self-management via digital tools. Levels of stress, anxiety and depression have increased during the pandemic. Monitoring and supporting employee wellbeing will be more important than ever as people adjust yet again to working in a different way.

Managers and HR professionals will need to be aware that while some people are excited about the lifting of social restrictions, others aren't ready to embrace meeting in larger groups face-

to-face. A hybrid approach to wellbeing will also be required with an offering that can be accessed by all – including initiatives online.

Reward and recognition

Re-establishing company culture will be one of the biggest challenges for businesses as the working dynamic shifts once again. Recognising and rewarding individual and team achievements is an important way to show gratitude and has a critical role to play. This will need to be handled delicately if people are returning from furlough to ensure any feelings of exclusion aren't accentuated.

Technical parity

Technical parity for employees working in the office or working from home will need to be addressed. Flexible cloud-based connectivity is essential. Data and security protocols should be updated and regularly checked.

Learning from mistakes

Employers and employees alike will be experimenting with flexible working, and not all trials will work out. Continual communication and feedback will make navigating bumps in the road much easier. Open conversations with teams could also uncover solutions that leaders, HR and managers hadn't thought of. There's an opportunity here to work more closely with

employees. This will help with buy-in when certain plans don't work out and have to be shelved.

Offering choice

There's a big assumption that everyone wants to continue working from home. But let's not forget that remote working was forced upon us and not everyone has enjoyed the experience. In fact, many have struggled with space, parenting and caring roles, isolation, work-life balance and more. Employers will need to decide, if feasible, how to offer choice to employees about where they want to work. There will be limitations on what employers can offer. How that is managed with employees will be a challenge.



Hybrid model roll out: the practical responsibilities of CEOs and HR professionals

As employers roll out hybrid working models, they will be keeping a keen eye on how the new practices impact productivity and performance. What is not so easy to measure is how employees cope with the new ways of working. It will be up to leaders, HR professionals and managers to create a culture where employees feel safe to reach out. It starts with getting the practical responsibilities right.

Health and safety obligations

Employers have a duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees. This includes mental health and wellbeing. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has produced a comprehensive health and safety fact sheet which outlines an employer's responsibilities⁷.

The CIPD factsheet is based on requirements set out in the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, when few would have considered the prospect of remote working. The 1970s were more about Hi-Fi than Wi-Fi! But the same principles and requirements are relevant today regardless of employee location.

As we navigate the unknown, HR professionals may need the support of occupational health specialists. Employers should consider this a wise investment, using external help as required. The last thing you need on your plate is an employee tribunal.

Returning to the workplace

There's a lot to communicate to employees as they return to the workplace. Key points include:

- Opening hours/shifts/rotas
- Directional flows
- Hot desking protocol
- Desk layout, lockers, desk drawers and safety
- Keyboard and telephony cleaning protocol
- Stationery protocols (own pens, paper etc.)
- Reception cover and visitor protocol
- Meetings (minimal, social distancing etc.)
- Cleaning regimes, when cleaners will be in
- Protocol for using breakout spaces
- Hygiene and handwashing requirements
- Social distancing
- Temporary kitchen protocol (use of crockery, cutlery etc.)
- Use of sanitary facilities
- Health – COVID symptoms and what employees must do
- Mental wellbeing – reinforce availability of managers, leadership and HR for help

A seamless duty of care

The dilemma for HR leaders and managers is how to maintain the same duty of care when people are splitting their days between the office and home.

There are many practical challenges, as well as wellbeing/mental health considerations. We've been warned of a ticking time bomb around mental health as employee wellbeing suddenly became invisible. Employers need to be aware of what could be coming down the line. Employee Assistance programmes and mental health first aiders are more vital than ever.

Preventative measures are also key to your duty of care. Understanding where employees' wellbeing vulnerabilities lie allows employers to identify and support their workforce before problems grow and require mental health first aid or long-term sick leave.

We already know that visibility of wellbeing in remote workers is much harder to track than in office-based teams. Hybrid models where employees can do whatever hours they want will need careful management. It may seem like the perfect gig for employees, but there's way too much danger of burnout where structure and boundaries are nowhere to be seen.

A focus on communication

As we navigate a new path in the world of work, effective and transparent communication is essential. Employers should begin with a consultation process with employees before implementing back-to-work policies. If there have been redundancies, employees will need to understand why. How the communication of these difficult business decisions is handled will have an impact further down the line.

It's not just what is being communicated, but when. If remote workers find out important information second-hand or as an afterthought, it could demoralise and make them feel unimportant. All employees should receive information at the same time, regardless of their location.

One-to-one meetings are also critical. With such huge uncertainty ahead, just giving information over Zoom in a team meeting won't cut it. Employees need a space to voice concerns and not everyone feels comfortable doing this in front of colleagues. If a business doesn't have enough managers or HR people to do this, delegating or setting up a buddy system will help. Employee surveys also provide a means for employees to express their concerns.

Although we have become accustomed to Zoom or Meets calls, a video conference call takes on new dimensions when some are present in the room and others are remote. It can be harder to be heard when you are the only remote attendee. It is crucial to equally involve all participants.

Team bonding and checking in

Perhaps the trickiest dilemma is ensuring remote workers don't feel isolated compared to their in-office colleagues. When we were all at home, we were all in the same boat. Now socialising with colleagues in the office could happen more for some than others. It's those impromptu conversations (the "water cooler moments") that help bond a team. Managers should do their utmost to involve remote workers in the social aspect of office life and try to pair people on certain projects.

The other risk if some people are working many hours remotely is the lack of opportunity to check in with them. When people are away from the office, it is harder to spot the signs of stress or issues with mental health.



Make hybrid a success with WeThrive

As we move into the brave new world of hybrid, cultivating an environment of engagement will define success. Businesses will need a radical rethink of culture to get hybrid right. There are challenges ahead, but, as management consultants McKinsey argue, this is an exciting and rare opportunity to reshape culture⁸. Meaningful values, knowledge sharing, role clarity and performance transparency will matter more in hybrid work cultures.

As businesses shift from fully remote to the hybrid model, maintaining a culture of trust, recognition and inclusion across the workforce, wherever people are working from, is vital. WeThrive's employee experience platform supports these aims by optimising communication, connection, learning and insights through Manager- and Employee-specific Bubbles.

Managers had a steep learning curve in March 2020, switching to managing remote teams. Now they will need upskilling again so they can support employees seamlessly as they switch between locations.

Safeguarding wellbeing will become even more important as businesses learn to live alongside a potentially life-threatening disease. The forthcoming changes may be unsettling and stressful for employees too. Managers will need to identify those who are anxious and offer reassurance. WeThrive's tools offer a safety net and help managers, to not only spot those who are struggling, but to access resources on how to

support them as well.

More than ever, employers will need to understand the causes of stress and anxiety and connect with employees individually to help each person thrive. WeThrive's Manager Bubbles offer targeted learning content for managers and daily insights into their team. Information sharing and self-serve learning will become increasingly important now employees are rarely in the office altogether.

WeThrive's employee experience platform provides a 360o view of your people by monitoring health, engagement and motivation and transforming feedback into instant actions for employees and managers.

Developed by our founder, a behavioural psychologist, our software ensures employers and managers get to the root of conscious and subconscious factors impacting employee engagement, productivity, happiness and motivation. The tools enable instant surveys, offer insightful feedback, provide a rich library of resources and access to a digital coach to help managers and individuals thrive.

One of the common problems we've identified is how time is so squeezed for managers and HR professionals – there just isn't the time to do the detective work necessary to pick up all problems employees are experiencing. WeThrive's platform enables employees to survey themselves. Employees receive instant

recommendations for improvements they can begin to make themselves, followed by curated learning content. However, pain-points are also picked up on a manager's dashboard, so they can cut straight to focusing on important conversations. We effectively triage and shine the spotlight on the areas managers need to focus on.

The unique personalised WeThrive bubbles give employees complete autonomy to self-analyse and resolve personal goals. Employees can take a quick self-survey at any time and gain instant feedback from our digital coach.



How often do you feel you have all the necessary support and resources to do your work?



A new experiment is about to begin



How much of the time are you able to interact positively with others at work?



#1 Connection Recommendation

Low scores in this area suggest you don't feel part of a team and don't get a buzz from being part of something bigger than working on your own. Make a positive effort to communicate with your team, contribute more regularly in meetings and ask for feedback

Recommended Reading

The power of appreciation



There's an important distinction between recognition and appreciation. Leaders who understand this can have a more meaningful impact on the people around them.

Business leaders who think hybrid working is a phase and believe things will eventually go back to how they were, are in danger of a talent drain. The hybrid model is here to stay and will soon become a key perk. Businesses that resolve hybrid nuances now will be stepping ahead of the crowd. Companies that offer an inclusive and open culture and take their employees on that journey with them will fare best.

That's where WeThrive is confident it can help. Success will come more easily to those who are proactive in identifying challenges and offering solutions. Our workplace psychology model wraps core ideas from motivational theory into a practical tool for managers and employees.

Our platform is for organisations who want to improve productivity, safeguard wellbeing and retain staff – no matter where their people are. Most important of all is transparency. There are so many uncertainties ahead. Keeping everyone briefed and included in conversations will mean leaders, managers and workforces can navigate future hurdles together. It requires structure and this is where the right employee engagement tool comes into its own.

Understanding and empowering your people will be pivotal to making a success of hybrid, the new 9 to 5. Employee engagement software is no longer a soft option, it is critical and essential.

The next experiment with work is about to begin. Is your business hybrid ready?

[Why not try WeThrive's free survey yourself to see how intuitive it is? If you like it you can also get your first 10 Bubbles free!](#)

Get 10 users free

Endnotes

- 1 Stanford University School of Business, Working paper, March 2013, [Does working from home work](#)
- 2 Hubstaff blog, 31st Aug 2020, [Are remote workers more productive?](#)
- 3 Stanford News, Article, 30th March 2020, [The productivity pitfalls of working from home in the age of Covid-19](#)
- 4 Microsoft Reporter, 15th October 2020, [Flexible ways of working are here to stay](#)
- 5 McKinsey and Company, Article, 17th May 2021, [What executives are saying about the future of work](#)
- 6 BCG, Article/Research, 26th October 2020, [What's next for how we work in the UK?](#)
- 7 CIPD, 4th June 2020, [Health and safety at work fact sheet](#)
- 8 Podcast, 11th June 2021, [Culture in the hybrid workplace](#)



hello@wethrive.net wethrive.net +44(0)1273 921788