



Hybrid working



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Introduction

WM People held a virtual roundtable on 24th May 2022 to bring together employers and experts to discuss latest developments and some of the challenges involved in hybrid working.

The roundtable was hosted by Gillian Nissim, founder of WM People, who spoke of how hybrid working had existed before Covid, but had ramped up since, with studies repeatedly showing high demand for it. She cited the latest Office for National Statistics figures which reveal that 84% of people who had been working remotely during the pandemic want to work remotely or in a hybrid way as restrictions are lifted.

She said the aim of the roundtable was to highlight and share evolving practice with regard to hybrid working as well as to talk through some of the challenges.

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Flexibility for all

Nissim introduced the event's sponsor, Roche, who outlined the evolution of their award-winning How we roll programme. Roche doesn't have any laboratories in the UK and the work it does is mainly office-focused. Before Covid, the company was very flexible, but there was a sense that access to flexible working was dependent

on individual managers and not consistent throughout the company. So Roche set up a cross-functional team, led by the people function, to look at how to improve on the flexibility it was offering to make it more equitable. The review it carried out was broader than flexible working, embracing diversity and inclusion, work life balance and belonging. The idea was to empower employees to pick when, where and how they worked best. There were three key guardrails - transparency, communications and effective delivery.

Roche tested its programme out on a small group of 55 people, increased this to 110 people after a month and then rolled it out to the whole organisation just before the first Covid lockdown. They backed this up with lots of case studies showing the wide range of people who benefit from flexible working as well as education on the business case. They found that the policy increased their engagement scores across different sectors of the business as well as scores related to work life balance and employees feeling Roche was invested in wellbeing. This was all happening while there was a big transformation process taking place in one part of the business where there was a risk of redundancy for some people and people who had been working in the field were being transferred to head office.

In order to enhance the How we roll programme, Roche also introduced a location agnostic policy to enable people to work from anywhere in the UK with any travel to head office being paid for. Everyone was paid a full salary.

Wellbeing and culture

Nissim then introduced two expert speakers. Jane Sparrow, founder of Culture Builders, has been working in the area of flexible work culture for many years. She said she was seeing a big divide between employers who were going remote first as a result of Covid and those who were demanding that people come back to the office. She thinks this will settle down in time, but for now different organisations and different teams are tackling the Covid challenges in very different ways. Some are worried about the isolation, loneliness and exhaustion that some remote workers feel. Others are facing challenges as their customers and clients are starting to work differently after Covid and want different things.



Many employers are dealing with this by looking at flexible working policies and stipulating, for instance, how many days a hybrid worker should be in the office, but policy on its own is not enough because it is about culture, said Sparrow. She says

culture is based on what we believe as an organisation, for instance, the common understanding about flexible working, how people behave in the organisation and how those beliefs and behaviours align with the organisation's policies. She said issues of behaviour and belief are often missing in organisations' approach to flexible working. Teams need to understand how they will work in a flexible way. They can do this by testing and learning and having pause points where people can check if something works and can prepare for any changes that may have practical implications, for instance, with regard to childcare. She added that this approach can help managers who are often not equipped to have hard conversations about performance issues around flexible working.

The Culture Builders has just launched a new app which focuses on wellbeing issues related to hybrid working. The aim is to get teams to own how they work on their wellbeing. The app is based on research showing the return on investment if organisations get wellbeing right when it comes to remote and hybrid workers. It measures how teams are doing across six areas of wellbeing: physical, emotional, focus, motivation, personal growth and inclusion. It involves a weekly or biweekly set of nine playful questions about wellbeing. Based on the answers the app tells them if the team is up or down in any of the six areas and suggests several actions they can take. The team members then discuss these and vote on them before the actions are shared out among the team. The actions are designed to create new wellbeing habits.

Focusing on virtual benefits

Andy Lake, editor of Flexibility.co.uk, said he is also seeing a huge variety of practice and puzzlement around hybrid and remote working. A lot of people don't know what to do, he said. Their approach to hybrid working is broadly split between two tendencies: controlled hybrid working based on set policies and mandated days in the office and flexible hybrid working based on looser frameworks that give workers greater autonomy and choice. He is also seeing more remote first organisations who break down the binary between home and office working as they are about people working effectively wherever they work.

There is a lot of technical innovation going on, for instance, around acoustics for those recording in-person meetings for remote workers, so that everyone gets an equivalent experience of an event. There has been a lot of innovation around developing adaptable and reconfigurable office spaces, although this can be difficult when it comes to leasing arrangements. Many employers already have multiple spaces with different layouts for different tasks.

Lake said hybrid working is not new, but he has seen some organisations that have been doing it for a while slipping back of late, with the transformative element of it often forgotten. Many of the questions about hybrid working link to technology, culture and other issues and there is a lot still to be done to ensure people get all the benefits they can out of a more virtual workplace environment.

One size doesn't fit all

Employers agreed that every organisation and team had different challenges and benefits when it comes to hybrid and remote working and that there is a huge diversity in how it is being implemented. Andy Lake said different organisations have different starting points. What matters is having an integrated programme of change - backed by the right levels of budget - where people can see some of the benefits of change, for instance, more remote and hybrid working can cut travel and enable recruitment of a wider talent pool. Employers who get it right can also become employers of choice.

Having an overall framework at an early stage and communicating clearly the possible benefits and rationale is important for creating a mindset for innovation, he said. People can see how things can be done better and look at each task to see where, when and how it can be improved and be consulted along the way as the changes are brought in.

There was a discussion about the challenges of keeping in place flexible policies that have served businesses well over the pandemic, with pressure from some leadership teams to revert back to the old normal. One employer talked about whether economic uncertainty might be fuelling moves back to the office in part, particularly if managers are in favour of less remote working. While the labour market is currently tilted towards workers who can demand more flexible working, this could change quickly, he said. Government attitudes are important in that regard as is the response of the larger employers.

Technology and visibility

Two big challenges are dealing with potential conflicts between those who work remotely and those who can't or don't want to and ensuring visibility for remote workers. Technology is helping to bridge some of the gaps between those who are in the office and those who aren't, with virtual collaborative tools, for instance, streamlining collaborative processes and asynchronous tools meaning people don't have to be available at the same time. Roche has taken a hands-off approach to check-in meetings allowing teams to self manage. This has come at a time when Roche has been seeking to remove some of the management hierarchies. This has meant senior managers often have responsibility for larger teams so cannot micromanage their teams.

Managers are getting better at rethinking what visibility means - with a focus on availability rather than physical presence. Some are continuing with regular check-ins which provide an opportunity for people to talk. Many employers use platforms like Teams or Outlook.

When it comes to the pressure to be 'always on', employers took a range of approaches. One spoke of scheduling in breaks to avoid people feeling they had to be on their laptops at all times. Some spoke of the blurring of work/life lines for remote workers and the lack of a clean break at the end of a working day, but Andy Lake said he was wary about some reports about the mental health pressures

of working remotely. He said people may be working longer hours, but at a more comfortable pace which is better for their mental health.

One employer spoke of the need to be careful that people are not facing too much work as they return to full capacity. Managers can find it challenging to keep tabs on this, said one employer. That is why working out within a team what is possible is important.



Lake also spoke of the need not to confuse Covid working when everyone was disconnected from the outside world and normal remote working and commented that having work life conversations encouraged people to think about their lives outside of work. He mentioned that loneliness in work is a growing work trend and doesn't only relate to remote working. He feels that a more rounded approach to life is needed generally.



What is the office for?

Employers emphasised the importance of using the office for things that are done better in person rather than sitting on a zoom call.

One employer spoke about the role of digital transformation in all areas of work. While their work is divided into consultancy-focused and sales type roles, they have been reviewing job roles and looking at which activities might be best suited to office work. They also have designated remote roles. Some of those who have moved to remote roles face challenges, but they are dealing with these as they come up. They also make the point to those most resistant to hybrid working that some traditional jobs that might be viewed as office-based, such as estate agent work, are mainly done outside the office.

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Employers agreed that there is a need for more focus on pastoral support and in-the-moment coaching for remote workers and support for managers having to intervene if performance is affected. The overall aim should be to empower individuals to make better decisions on how and where they work best.

Back to the office

On returning to the office, one employer spoke of the importance of having core days when people can come in for team meetings and have that social contact. This is a way around the issue of people not coming into the office because no-one else is going to be there. One employer said being in the office enables people to interact with larger networks whereas remotely they might only meet in their own teams. However, others said there could be a negative impact on engagement if people felt forced back to the office. Employers said that if core days or hours in the office are mandated the rationale should be communicated honestly.



Another employer spoke of how anxiety and other issues linked to adapting to life back in the office for some of the week can be addressed with mentoring and coaching programmes. Others spoke of the potential disconnect between employers and clients. But others mentioned that other aspects of working such as training have now moved online, meaning hybrid/remote workers and office-based workers are on the same level.

There was a discussion about younger workers. One employer said some groups benefit from more contact, such as apprentices. They said they were seeing that apprentices who had started off working from home and had missed out on important opportunities to learn about their role and the industry. However, Andy Lake said he knew of a smart working pilot which involved reverse mentoring for apprentices which had been very successful. He warned against making assumptions about specific groups of people. Some employees see mental health benefits from being at home more while others see mental health issues. It all depends on the individual and the context they are working in as well as the support available, he said.

Key takeaways:

The discussion focused more on the challenges and experiences of employers rather than best practice as everyone recognised that employers are still experimenting and feeling their way towards new ways of working. Context is important. What was recognised broadly was:

- The importance of teams taking ownership of wellbeing issues and how they work best
- Engaging with employees before creating new flexible ways of working and communicating the whole way through the process so everyone feels included
- Making the most of and experimenting with new technology coming online that aims to improve the virtual experience
- Focusing on outputs and availability rather than visibility
- Understanding both the positives and negatives of different types of working and addressing the underlying issues, such as loneliness
- Having open conversations about work life issues so people can rethink what it means for them
- Laying down looser frameworks and guidelines for greater flexibility rather than rigid policies
- Scheduling in breaks so people don't feel they have to be always on
- Empowering people to make their own decisions about what works best for them and their teams.

