Work After Lockdown: No Going Back

What we have learned working from home through the COVID-19 pandemic

The sudden and enforced mass migration of office workers to working from home during the pandemic provided a unique opportunity to follow employers and employees as they adapted to new challenges. *Work After Lockdown* is a major cross-institutional research project led by University of Southampton, funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research & Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19.

This document will be of particular use to directors of human resources, directors of strategy, agile working leads, CEOs, and policy communities. The research links to Sustainable Development Goals: (3) good health and well-being; (5) gender equality; (8) decent work and economic growth; (9) industry, innovation and infrastructure; (10) reduced inequalities; and (11) sustainable cities and communities.

Our research focused on two sectors: professional, scientific and technical (PST) and public administration and defence (PAD) that together represent 1 in 7 of all UK jobs. In addition to conducting employee well-being surveys in these sectors, the research conducted case studies in four organisations, a combination of law firms and local authorities. A combination of leaders, line managers and employees without managerial responsibility were interviewed, to get a sense of how change affects both organisations and individuals. The research traced the timeline of the pandemic from the first lockdown to the last. It walked alongside case study organisations as they navigated their new working days and, in many cases, as employees combined their professional lives with caring commitments and supporting remote learning.

Our report *Work After Lockdown: No Going Back* offers evidence and insight around organisations' learnings from working from home.

Our key finding is that there has been a permanent mindset shift about how work is organised among the UK's formerly office-based workforce. British workers don't want a daily commute to the office. Neither they nor their managers think this is an efficient way of working. While they have missed the sociability and collaboration of offices, they want to retain some of the gains of the past two years around improved trust, more humane and personalised leadership communication, and better quality meetings.

Key findings

What began as an accidental experiment around working from home is evolving into the mass hybridisation of the workforce.

There is overwhelming support (97% of our survey respondents) for hybrid working.

Flipping the default from fixed to flexible (or from fixed to hybrid) represents a step change in the future world of work. Remote and, in time hybrid, management is a complex and evolving skill that will be central to business continuity. An area of potential difficulty is where organisations stop listening to staff's different working references and needs. It is managers' responsibility to ensure that corporate strategies accommodate the hybrid and flexible working practices that suit their teams' needs.

Finding the right balance is at the heart of successful hybrid working. Employers will want to keep control of employees' output, whilst employees will want to choose when and where they work, so they are productive and achieve a healthy work-life balance.

"I think in this way we've developed our resilience or flexibility as a team."

Lessons from lockdown

We have identified six areas organisations need to work on to help achieve success:

- **Inclusion**: there must be parity of opportunity for those who are working from home and those who are in the office. Employers must make sure that their policies and processes for hybrid working are fair to all. For example, any meeting must be an inclusive hybrid meeting with quality video access and led by a chair who need not be in person, but who makes sure that everyone can contribute

- **Job Analysis**: employers should analyse and group jobs into different work styles based on their time and location needs and make this information available to new recruits and current employees. Not every job can be done off-site, and so clarity about what hybrid means for each role is crucial to build trust

- **Technology**: there should be continued investment in the right digital tools to support collaboration and communication. As a minimum, when people work in two places, they need to have easy access to IT at both locations

- **Well-being**: employee well-being should be top of the list for managers as workers prepare to work differently, and empathetic listening is a key skill that mangers need to understand the diverse needs of their staff

- **Leadership and communication**: hybrid working needs a different style of leadership, to guide through another period of change and uncertainty. Leaders were tested during the pandemic and those who had an inclusive style and listened to staff, created safety and stability, and motivated their workforce. Communication needs to be personal, nuanced and planned. Organisations should keep up the frequent check-ins with staff that happened during the pandemic period

- **Human resource management practices**: Induction and on-boarding of new starters has been a weak spot during the pandemic. More needs to be done to help new joiners feel that they fit in and know what is expected of them to do their best work.

Applying these lessons will help change the world of work to the mutual benefit of organisations and employees.

Gains and losses through time

One of the main gains from the experience has been the establishment of new working practices that have enhanced how organisations operate, accelerating transitions to paperless offices, digital learning and collaboration, and better time management.

The work of mangers saw substantial change, as the importance of connecting with and supporting workforces became key to maintaining productivity during the lockdowns. Managers of remote teams refined a skillset that involved supporting workforce well-being, managing virtual connections, initiating complex conservations about future working patterns, and ensuring effective induction and on-the-job training for new starters.

Where staff felt supported by their managers and mangers appreciated the efforts their staff made in rising to an extreme set of challenges, a new climate of workforce trust evolved, which can be a huge asset going forward into hybrid working. It will be vital to factor recognition and reward of these new managerial skills into recruitment and promotion processes.

As working from home became more established during the 18 months of the research, a number of longer term benefits and challenges emerged:

Gains

Improved productivity	**Better quality meetings**	**Going paperless**
Increased managerial trust of remote working	**Improved access to employment**	**Business model innovation**
New management skills around remote working	**Estates efficiencies and office design**	**Improved team relationships**
New digital skills	**Reduced commuting and travel costs**	

Losses

Social deficit	**Work intensification**	**Labour market exit**
More complicated communications within teams	**Lost opportunities for on-the-job learning**	**Employee fatigue and well-being concerns**

Implications for human resource management

The transformation and learning that occurred during the pandemic raises specific and nuanced issues for people management and the expertise needed to support and maximise productivity of a spatially-dispersed workforce. There are four inter-related aspects that need to be addressed:

○ **Recruitment**: As online interviewing has offered benefits around time management and participation, it could be further enhanced through: the inclusion of competency-based interview questions around remote working skills; developing robust offers on candidates' hybrid working questions; and supporting managers to negotiate suitable hybrid working arrangements.

○ **Induction and on-boarding**: The research identified weaknesses in new recruits being able to make meaningful connections, develop organisational knowledge, and build professional skills. Responses to this can include: developing robust and flexible induction programmes, at the same time as prioritising team induction; assigning mentors to new recruits to help navigate organisational norms and work practices; and training line managers on induction and allocating workload time for this important task.

○ **Development and training**: On-the-job training has been challenging to implement during lockdown, with some young people anxious that they were not amassing professional knowledge and skills as rapidly as they would have done in person. Some actions that can be taken around this include: providing clear training and guidance for line managers around transmitting everyday learning; including the new skills demanded by hybrid working and management into organisations' training programmes; being creative around online training and experimenting with multiple formats to retain attention and enthusiasm for learning; and ensuring that training resources are accessible.

○ **Diversity management**: Mangers' knowledge of their staff's circumstances grew exponentially during the pandemic, and was necessary to support their well-being and to maintain productivity. Further support can be provided around: managers' workload in appreciation of the time necessary to communicate well with distributed and diverse teams; ongoing training around job design, managing flexible working arrangements, and hybrid management; and building diversity management into organisational strategy as a key component of business continuity.

Conclusion

A leader commented, *"hybrid doesn't work by accident, it only works if it's planned and structured"*.

If organisations fail to adapt to their workforce's new expectations around work they run the risk of losing their staff. Attracting new staff would increase recruitment and training costs. Ultimately, workforce churn and difficulties in securing new talent would impact on productivity and impinge on their reputation in the marketplace as a good employer.

However, the *Work After Lockdown* research shows that employers can avoid this risk and sustain workforce goodwill if they seize the opportunity to engage in new hybrid working practices that offer mutual benefits.

Work After Lockdown: No going back has wide application to organisations in this next phase of change and economic recovery after the pandemic, which will be a time of habit-breaking practices when clear organisational messaging will be vital to success in retaining and motivating staff. If organisations grasp the opportunities to refine the practices that have developed over the period, and if leaders can tap into the workforce goodwill and agility seen over the last two years, then decent work can be created that preserves gains around autonomy, flexibility and work-life balance, while enhancing those around workforce collaboration.

For more information about the research, please contact Jane Parry, *Work After Lockdown* Principal Investigator: *j.parry@soton.ac.uk* *www.workafterlockdown.uk*

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