

Building a blueprint for the hybrid workplace

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The [hybrid workplace](#) is on its way. That seems to be the general consensus. Unless you work for Goldman Sachs where flexible working is an [‘aberration’](#) and [having lunch is apparently frowned upon](#).

Some organisations are sticking with the fully flexible or [work from anywhere](#) (WEA) model. While establishment figures like the [Governor of the Bank of England](#) are already saying that the future will be hybrid.

There are a few things to observe about this debate.

Firstly, hybrid working is not a choice open for all workers. ONS data from earlier this month tells us that only 36% of UK workers have the option of working from home.

The next point is that for all of these proclamations about the hybrid workplace being the future – we simply don’t know that to be the case. We are replacing one mass workplace experiment (remote working) with another (hybrid working).

As with all experiments we don’t yet know what the results will be.

Stuck in lockdown for more than 12 months, it is certainly possible that workers will flood back to the office when restrictions ease. And, once we’ve got used to commuting again will we simply fall back into the old routine?

There’s no getting away from the fact that a hybrid workplace promises to be more complex than the pre-pandemic model, or indeed the fully remote workplace.

It is going to present a significant management challenge, ranging from mundane logistical issues around booking desk and meeting room space, to issues around fairness and how flexible policies are applied across the organisation.

The burden will fall on local line-managers to introduce and maintain new ways of working with their teams - building connections, enabling collaboration, and inspiring innovation.



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And yet the evidence suggests that there has been little investment in preparing, coaching, and supporting managers in dealing with the coming complexity (for example, through online training around managing a dispersed workforce).

Instead, many organisations have focussed on setting top-down mandates (e.g. 3 days per week in the office for all staff) as well as the (understandable) emphasis on workplace safety (i.e. social distancing measures, PPE, etc.).

Rather than organisations setting inflexible policies from the top, the emphasis should be on helping managers exercise their judgement based on what is right for the organisation, the individual and, crucially, the team. Only managers will be close enough to balance the competing factors in this equation.

Managers will be looking for guidance and so clear, practical, and workable policies will be essential. But being over-reliant on top-down policies risks being too inflexible and prescriptive. Instead, organisations should encourage a values-led approach, trusting managers to do their jobs well while also equipping them with the necessary skills and tools. Values that encourage flexibility, empathy, and trust will underpin successful hybrid working and will provide the space needed for the learning and adaptability that will be required.

In Montfort's view the preparations around hybrid working should focus on creating a blueprint for the longer term.

Our approach for developing this blueprint is based on 3 stages:

1. Gathering employee insight – listening to the preferences and requirements of employees to help shape the organisation's response.
2. Taking an integrated approach – gather subject matter expertise from across the organisation (and externally where appropriate) to ensure that the approach to hybrid working is fully integrated and thought through (this could be a workshop-based process).
3. Developing a blueprint for hybrid working – based on the insights of employees and experts, develop a blueprint (i.e. a set of principles and an activation plan) for hybrid working that can be applied consistently across the organisation. The blueprint should not only cover the physical and technology agenda, but commercial and cultural issues as well.

Of course, hybrid working remains an experiment. So, having a flexible mindset will be critical. The blueprint will need to be revised and adapted based on what works, and what does not. Keeping continuous feedback loops in place with managers and employees will therefore be crucial.

It will be fascinating whether that feedback tells us hybrid working is here to stay, or whether there is a return to pre-pandemic levels of office presenteeism. Either way organisations need to be prepared.

If you would like to know more about Montfort's 'Future of Work Blueprint', or talk about any issues relating to the hybrid workplace, please email Scott McKenzie at mckenzie@montfort.london.

