Content Summary

This document provides advice and key considerations on how organisations can begin to prepare for a return to the workplace and longer term move to hybrid working.

A wide range of research, including a YouGov survey and CIPD research, indicate that after the pandemic the majority of workers want to continue to work from home at least some of the time, presenting new opportunities for organisations to establish new ways of working.

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Planning for Hybrid Working

A wide range of research, including a YouGov survey and CIPD research, indicate that after the pandemic the majority of workers want to continue to work from home at least some of the time, presenting new opportunities for organisations to establish new ways of working.

While some employees want to work from home all the time after the pandemic, most would prefer a balance where they are in the office for some of the week and at home for the remainder. This has led to the use of a relatively new term: hybrid working. Many organisations are now considering what 'hybrid' means for them, how they might meet this new employee demand, and what will need to be in place in order for these new ways of working to be effective.

For most organisations, the introduction of hybrid working will require a significant culture shift and establishing new ways of working and associated policies and practices. We can learn some lessons from working from home during pandemic, however, in some ways hybrid will make greater demands of managers and organisations than the urgent shift to total remote working. With the vaccine roll out offering a potential return to the workplace for current homeworkers later in 2021, how, why and what should organisations think about implementing a hybrid approach?

Benefits of hybrid

Despite the many complexities and challenges of living and working through the global pandemic, employees have still identified many benefits from working from home;

• Better work–life balance
• Greater ability to focus with less distractions
• More time for family and friends
• Saved commuting time and costs
• IT upskilling and higher levels of motivation

Other benefits of flexible working include:

▪ Savings on office space
▪ Higher levels of employee satisfaction
▪ Reduced absence rates

The full benefits of hybrid working as a specific form of flexible working are yet to be fully researched but we can expect that it will, when properly implemented and supported, lead to similar benefits for both employees and organisations alike.

Short-term planning for return to work

Depending on the prevalence of the virus at that time, organisations will need to make their own decisions about when and how employees may return safely to their offices. Organisations may wish therefore to plan for interim hybrid working in the short term whilst also considering longer term strategic decisions on more flexible forms of working.

Any plan for return to the workplace needs to include communication and reassurance about COVID-19 safe measures. It will also require ongoing wellbeing support, especially in relation to employees who may be anxious about returning to the workplace or using public transport to commute. In relation specifically to interim hybrid working, people professionals should:

• Determine if any roles should be prioritised for return to the workplace.
• Identify any employees who need to continue to work from home in the short term, for example, because they remain vulnerable, have ongoing health conditions or are undertaking caring responsibilities.
• Calculate safe office occupancy levels in order to maintain social distancing.
• Establish a plan for when employees will work from the office and when they will work from home. This should include reference to caring responsibilities, wellbeing issues and any relevant personal circumstances and preferences.
• Where possible, try to ensure that all employees spend some time in the office and some working remotely, possibly on a rota basis.
• Consult with employees on plans for returning to the workplace and encourage them to raise questions or concerns.

Long-term planning for hybrid working

Roles which previously may have been considered as unsuitable for flexible or homeworking have been successfully undertaken from home for a sustained period. Although hybrid working is different from remote working, we can draw on some of the lessons and experiences from pandemic related working from home period.

There is no single way to implement hybrid working, and its exact form is likely to vary from organisation to organisation. Key steps towards introducing hybrid working should include:

• Agreeing an overall strategic position on hybrid working for the organisation and development of a policy and supporting guidance reflecting the strategy.
• Defining hybrid working to the specific organisational context. This might include different forms of hybrid working even within one organisation.
• Engaging people managers throughout the organisation, providing an opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns, as well as the provision of training and development to support successful hybrid working.
• Development of a communication plan to share plans for future hybrid working with all employees, including information on how to request hybrid working.
• Planning for organisational implications of hybrid working on matters such as technology, employee wellbeing, inclusion and facilities.

Policy and procedure

Hybrid working is a form of flexible working. Therefore, employers may consider either adapting or updating an existing flexible working policy to include hybrid working as a specific category or introducing a specific hybrid working policy. What is appropriate for each business will depend on their specific context. Whichever decision is made, as hybrid working is a relatively new concept, any new or adapted policy should be issued with supporting guidance and information to enable effective implementation.

When developing policies and procedures organisations should consider the following:

▪ Clarifying roles and responsibilities for hybrid workers and people managers.
▪ How hybrid working intersects with other forms of flexible working.
▪ Reviewing other related policies including, for example, expenses, IT usage, homeworking and data protection.

This is also opportunity to review wider flexible working policies and procedures to determine if they are fit for purpose. Ideally, organisations will offer a range of flexible working options in addition to hybrid working, promoting the different forms of flexibility and how to access them.

Legal implications of hybrid working

Organisations will need to give consideration to the contractual implications of hybrid working. Where employees make a formal request for hybrid working through a flexible working policy (and the request is accepted) this will amount to a formal change to terms and conditions of employment. Hybrid working (and indeed other forms of flexible working) can also be undertaken on an informal basis without a contractual change. You should make sure that employees and managers understand the differences and implications of both.

Employment contracts should also state a contractual location. This does not necessarily change as a result of hybrid working, but employees who work permanently from home normally have their home address as their workplace. Employees should be advised to discuss any implications of homeworking with their landlord or mortgage provider and house insurer. There may also be tax implications if an employee wishes to work some of their remote time outside of the UK. Organisations should take legal advice where appropriate on their implications of hybrid working.

Communication

Exactly how a hybrid team needs to communicate will vary depending on its size, the nature of the roles in the team and the specific type of hybrid working being undertaken. Consider some of the following recommendations for effective hybrid team communication: Meetings should be held online by default. This will help to ensure that each attendee has a consistent experience of the meeting. When co-located employees have a face to face meeting but colleagues attend remotely this can lead to 'presence disparity', where people experience the meeting differently and communication can be disrupted.

During the pandemic many employees have reported feeling fatigued by long online meetings. When teams are working in a hybrid way, communication can be enhanced by asynchronous tools such as Slack or chat functions in platforms such as Microsoft Teams. This allows people to have more schedule flexibility, as well as location flexibility, and reduces online meeting time. Building in regular social and human connection opportunities to support employee engagement and team building.

Manager training and development

Hybrid working will make new demands of people managers. Although managers may have developed new skills in terms of managing a remote workforce, hybrid working brings unique challenges that are different from both predominantly remote and predominantly office-based working. Organisations will need to put learning and development in place to ensure effective people management. This should include three separate but related elements:

- Developing the skills to ensure effective communication, performance management, team and relationship building and collaboration in hybrid teams.
- Managers will also need information and guidance on ensuring diversity and inclusion, effective induction and employee engagement with a distributed team.
- Technology skills may also need further development – see the next section for more information.

Technology and equipment

Technology plays a critical role in hybrid working. Employees need to be able to work seamlessly between workplace and home, and there needs to be ease of connectivity between people in the office and those working remotely. As a result of the pandemic many employees have had to get up to speed with new technologies such as online meetings and asynchronous communication tools. Although many organisations had to build employee digital capabilities to support working from home rapidly, not everyone is fully competent with all of the technologies that will enable hybrid working and further training may be necessary.

Organisations may wish to consider the following:

- Supporting employees in fully using available technology, as well as using them in a way that supports health and wellbeing.
- Reviewing systems and equipment available in offices and provided by individuals in order to assess whether it will appropriately support hybrid forms of working.
- Providing a mix of recommended tools (with implementation support) to enable hybrid meetings and collaboration.
- Putting in place appropriate security measures to ensure system and data integrity.
- In addition to technology, considering what other equipment will support effective and healthy remote working, including the provision of office furniture or mobile devices.

Wellbeing

The employee wellbeing implications of COVID-19 will require focus for some time. This may include supporting employees experiencing poor mental health, addressing specific concerns and anxieties about the return to the workplace and the impact of Long COVID. In the longer term, hybrid working may support improved wellbeing through reducing commuting time, providing employees with more autonomy around their schedules and extra time for health and wellbeing activities. Hybrid working may however bring with it specific challenges around work-life balance and managing the boundaries between work and home.

Consider the following:

• Providing training and support to employees on managing work-life balance whilst working in a hybrid way / working from home.
• Offering training on digital wellbeing and having healthy habits in relation to technology use, including helping employees to mindfully disconnect.
• Helping managers to understand the potential wellbeing implications of hybrid working and equipping them to have appropriate wellbeing conversations.
• Ongoing mental health support and information for all employees.
• Ensuring managers are aware of potential signs and symptoms of poor wellbeing or mental health, as these may be weaker whilst employees are working remotely.

Performance management

When employees are working remotely or more flexibly, their performance may be harder to observe. In the short term, whilst the pandemic and its immediate implications are ongoing, employees may not be able to be as productive as normal, and managers may need to adjust their expectations (and formal objectives) accordingly.

Longer term, instead of assessing employees via time in the office (or in virtual meetings), managers will need to adjust to assessing performance through outcomes, contribution and value. Managers will not be able to monitor every aspect of an employee's work when they are working remotely, nor should this normally be necessary.

Consider some of the following:

• How equipped are people managers to manage performance based upon outcomes, objectives and results?
• Are current performance management systems and processes fit for purpose in a remote environment?
• Does current organisational culture reward or encourage presenteeism, and if so, how can this be addressed?
• Ensuring managers have 121 time with team members on a regular basis to discuss performance and update objectives.
• Having mechanisms to identify and reward great performance, as well as address poor performance with hybrid workers. These systems are likely to already been in place but may need to be adapted for a changing context or reminders about good practice issued.

Employee lifecycle

Increased flexible working, and hybrid working in particular, affects all aspects of the employee lifecycle. People professionals should review each stage of the employee lifecycle within their organisations in order to identify where amendments need to be made in order to enable effective hybrid working.

Key Considerations Consider:

- Including the availability of hybrid working in recruitment activities to support talent acquisition.
- Induction processes for hybrid workers, including assimilating company culture and values and building a relationship with other hybrid team members.
- Provision of learning and development activities in hybrid workplaces and supporting long term career development.
- Amendments to performance management systems or processes.
- Reward and recognition strategies, with reference to ensuring that reward and recognition is fair and not biased towards those spending more time in the office.
- The inclusion and diversity aspects of hybrid working and in particular considering how hybrid working might both support inclusion initiatives but also the risks that some may be excluded through remote working.

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