

Get ready for the next era of work



We are emerging from the largest remote working experiment of our time. So how should bosses prepare for a new normal that's still far from clear? And what are the opportunities for re-thinking the next era of work to create a better future?

 **Capita**

If there's one thing most of us have learned over the past 12 months, it's how we feel about working from home.

Thanks to several months of enforced remote working, we have become much more educated around how to structure our days, what we do well at home and what's best done in the office. Many of us have found a new balance and are enjoying using our time differently.

Chantal Free, executive officer, people solutions at Capita states that, "there's a growing question in employees' minds around how they want to spend their time going forward. They will want some changes, triggered by the pandemic, to be permanent." But while most of us have a reasonably clear view on what we want next, we are not all looking for the same thing. And this presents the world's employers with a sizeable challenge. Now that lockdown is lifting, bosses are left balancing corporate needs around culture building and collaboration with the individual needs of the employee: namely the flexibility and work-life balance they've enjoyed while working remotely.

Kelly Singleton, HR director for global tech, Barclays, believes the discussion here is no longer if the future

of work will be hybrid, but how hybrid should be done. It would seem that the workforce agrees – Envoy's "Return to the Workplace" report showed that more than 40 per cent of workers would take a lower-paid job if they were guaranteed a hybrid working model. Clearly this hybrid future is something that employers will have to factor into their planning. And many are already responding to the shifting needs of their workforce. A recent survey from Capita found that over 40 per cent of senior decision makers are now planning on shifting to a hybrid set-up in 2021, with a quarter offering a permanent work-from-home solution.

The implications of this are vast. This is not just about where we work. Employers need to be re-thinking benefits, support systems, how they manage performance and progression, how their leaders engage with the workforce, and even the very role of the workplace itself.

In partnership with Capita, WIRED brought together business leaders and leading academics to explore the opportunities for evolving and improving the next era of work.





Deciding on your approach to flexible working

The office-versus-remote work debate can split teams, says Natasha Bernal, WIRED's business editor. "If you've just started a new job or are at the early stages of your career, you probably want to be in the office to learn from others. Those who have been in the workforce for longer, and typically already have a network of contacts, are perfectly prepared to work independently." This scenario could see the office being filled with junior members of staff with few senior people to guide them, pass on knowledge or share skills.

But what people really want is likely determined by a range of factors such as life-stage, living circumstances, commuting distance and career status – it's largely down to individual needs and personal preferences. "Some of us can't wait to feed off that office energy," says Stefan Bachmann, director of talent acquisition at Cisco. "Others just can't see themselves going onto a congested Tube, eating at their desk while socially distanced, perhaps not knowing if the person next to them has been vaccinated." That's why Cisco Webex is anchoring around employee preference - allowing employees to leverage collaboration tools that empower them to work remotely when they choose to.

Singleton agrees that ultimately, it comes down to individual cases. "It is important to work with colleagues to find out what they want, and then marry this up with the needs of the business," she says. Singleton also flags a very real problem that many businesses are now grappling with: "hybrid working needs to work for both the business and for colleagues – but it's much easier said than done."

When deciding on the right approach to take, employers should not only consider the top-down and bottom-up approach, but should also look at this through the lens of the team – a viewpoint shared by Eva Ducruezet, chief people officer at GoCardless. "We're going for a model that's left up to the team, as that's the unit that will make us successful. These teams don't always map to reporting lines – this is more related to what projects people work on together." Ducruezet adds that this approach will enable solutions that offer individual flexibility as far as possible, while ensuring alignment from teams that regularly work together.

Whatever approach is adopted, most employees just want to know the plan so that they can plan their days and lives. "What we're hearing from our staff is the need for clarity," explains Catalina Schveninger, chief people officer at FutureLearn. "Will I be at a disadvantage if I move away and am not able to show up in the office every week?' There is an increased expectation around the openness and transparency of the ground rules."

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Rethinking the workplace

The pandemic didn't just send the workforce home – it redefined the very idea of the workplace. Whatever the next era of work brings, most agree that a central workplace itself still has a role to play in helping employees to develop networks and build their “social currency” at work. This is something that new recruits, regardless of seniority, have found particularly difficult in a fully remote environment. Ranjit de Sousa, president of Lee Hecht Harrison, asserts that the office still has a very important function: “It plays the role of ensuring that you create culture, collaboration and community. These are things which definitely cannot be replicated in a remote working environment.”

Ducruezet suggests that, “When people think about going back into the office, their reference point is how the office used to be.” But, in her view, the pandemic has given employers an opportunity to disrupt old ways of thinking and approach the workplace from a new angle, viewing it as a product

that is strategically designed, managed and evolved. “I don't think we'll ever say, ‘this is how the office works’ ever again,” she adds. “I think it will be a constantly evolving concept.” For Ducruezet, the workplace is wherever people are doing work in a way that's going to enable the success of the company and its ability to deliver its long-term strategy. And that could be anywhere, be it the employees' home, the office or a coffee shop. “It's about designing a workplace that will facilitate that,” she says.

As workplace redesign ramps up, technology has a key role to play. For those employers promoting a return to the office, technology can help to mitigate employee anxiety, as well as provide a reason why they might want to return. Singleton says Barclays is redesigning its campuses so if staff do come in, it's a valuable experience. “It's giving colleagues this curated experience when they're on site – not just so it's better for when they're here, but in order to turn the workplace into a more collaborative place.”





Measure outcomes, not actions

How management leads and supports their people has never been more important. “The silver bullet to the success of hybrid work is quality of leadership,” states Schveninger. After all, “high quality leaders really are the architects of the future of work.”

In this new era of work, established practices – from communication channels to performance management and promotion processes, to onboarding of new talent, will need a re-think.

Performance management, in particular, poses several potential challenges. As Carl Benedikt Frey, director of Future of Work at Oxford Martin School points out, “Being at work is really important in building up management capital – and that’s quite important when it comes to promotion”. Employers need to be aware of the often unconscious proximity bias towards staff who are in the office – something that has the potential to cause long-term issues. “We have seen that women who are carers or who have young children are less likely to go into the office than single men, for example,” says Frey. “That can translate into different promotion rights, and then you’ll have a real diversity problem.”

“We are building bias by design because performance management is about the ‘what’ and the ‘how’, says Schveninger. “How people get tasks done is observable behaviour – something that’s hard to measure for remote employees.” It seems that the time has come to redesign the system, identify the points of bias and take an output-driven focus that measures success according to what is actually being delivered, rather than one defined by proximity. As Bachman says, the goal now is to ensure that “progression becomes a level playing field, an equalizing opportunity.”

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The opportunities ahead

The disruption that's arisen from the pandemic could be the trigger for unprecedented positive change that paves the way for a new era of work – one that is more flexible, more fair and more likely to set a distributed workforce up for greater success. As organisations reconsider the future of the workplace, now is the time to capitalise on this. “There is this huge opportunity where we can really slingshot ourselves into the future,” says de Sousa. “We can make progress happen in just a few months instead of years.”

There will be challenges ahead in balancing individuals' needs and preferences with that of their organisation and their immediate teams. But, we will undoubtedly continue to see meaningful progress around flexible working – with a far greater proportion of organisations finally looking to offer longer-term solutions that work for both the business and the individuals that it employs.

For employers, a more decentralised workforce will mean access to new and more diverse pools of talent, as many employers are no longer limited to geographical distance. In addition, according to Free, we will see an ongoing shift in organisations from needing to acquire talent to preferring to access skills as and when they need them – something that can promote agility and forward thinking in the long-term.

For employees, there is the prospect of a much sought-after work-life balance, workplaces that better meet their needs, and the ability to make career choices uninhibited by the necessity to be near to the office.

For our planet, the next era of work may deliver a more positive impact, too. As Frey points out: “I think it's such a simple thing as cutting commutes, which is good for people's wellbeing and it's good for the climate, too. I think we shouldn't forget that.”

