A study of hybrid work environments.

The Future is Hybrid.

SHIFT COLLECTIVE
No turning back – everyone wants hybrid work

The Covid 19 crisis turned remote working into a forced experiment. Companies had to quickly and unbureaucratically create a previously non-existent and poorly developed digital infrastructure. People had to get used to screens and technical tools, and quickly develop skills and new approaches.

We’ve learned that the home office model works for teams and workspaces where we didn’t think it would. That we can hold meetings virtually as well as in person. That we can make good use of the time we have gained by reducing travel, commuting and rides in the lift.

But we’ve also learned that we need connection and the inspiring moments created by unplanned meetings at the coffee machine or in the lift. That we need a haptic place to shape culture, and create a sense of community and identification. If we now look to the post-pandemic period, all partner interviewees who participated in this study agree – full-time office culture will not return, but equally there is no desire to work in a home office full-time. In the future, hybrid work will be the norm. And it now falls to us to shape this world of hybrid working to best suit everyone.

The Shift Collective is a creation of this hybrid working world. Founded as an alliance of ten innovative German consulting companies in the thick of the Coronavirus pandemic, we see it as our mission to be an impactful partner to companies in this transformation towards a hybrid working world.

The trend is heading towards the 3+2 model

Remote work increases productivity & poses health risks

Flexiwork – the chance to combat the shortage of skilled workers

Digital Fitness – hybrid work only with excellent technology & training

New communication spaces – for participation & transparency

Leadership of hybrid teams – trust & agility more crucial than ever

Hybrid work and equality – one step forward and one step back?

Empathic & conscious communication – essential for hybrid teams

Shaping the employee experience – creative formats for digital working
We want to shed light on the future world of work with our study. To this end, we have opted for a suitably ‘hybrid’ research design with a scientific mix of methods: qualitative, quantitative and secondary.

**Quantitative survey:** We conducted a digital survey from mid-November 2020 to mid-January 2021, asking 530 employees and managers about their personal views of the current working situation and their ideal conceptions of future working environments.

**Secondary study:** In addition, we analysed the 30 top studies and research findings that developed data-based insights into the world of hybrid work in Germany and Europe during the pandemic.

**Evaluation process:** All findings were brought together through a co-creative coding and development process – they are presented in our ten theses. We have together explored these in depth through various workshops, and derived corresponding recommendations for action.

**Qualitative interviews:** We interviewed 20 top executives from large corporations, start-ups, and mid-sized companies whose roles (HR, people & culture, top-level management) see them responsible for the future world of work. In these 30-90-minute led interviews, we gained insights into how the working world is being changed by coronavirus, and into the strategies and plans of organisations in the DACH region for the post-pandemic period. We have compiled these findings, which are partly anonymised, in this study. For the sake of using everyday language, we use the terms ‘home office’ and ‘mobile office’ synonymously, even though they are different in the context of employment law.

The Shift Collective is an alliance of innovative German consultancies and agencies for a new economy. An economy that brings people, the planet and profit together harmoniously.

Together, we are an impactful partner for small and large companies on issues of innovation, transformation and leadership.

It has been clear since long before the coronavirus crisis that our conventional working patterns are not up to the complex challenges of the day. We need new answers and the willingness to make courageous decisions.

Decisions that affect companies, organisations and fundamentally the way they work together. The aim is to future-proof companies, and make them resilient and quickly and flexibly adaptable to changing framework conditions, crises and other forms of disruption.

To shape change sustainably, we bring about change on various levels. Together, as a collective of courageous, people-centred pioneers.

The trend is heading towards the 3+2 model

Thesis O1 | Work Mode

The world of work is complex, and organisations’ requirements of hybrid work are equally so. There is simply no silver bullet. Our interviews with HR decision-makers show that companies rarely opt for a standard solution for their workforce; almost all of them rely on variations or flexible models from which employees can choose. The goal here is to do justice to the diversity of work processes, team sizes and existing regulations.

It is clear employees are becoming increasingly involved in the development of future working models. There is simply not enough of individual models’ pros and cons, so employees’ needs must be the central focus.

Sandra Raßfeld from Thermondo, a digital craft company with 450 employees, reports that they set up an employee survey in the early summer of 2020. The core question: ‘How many days should you work in the office to be able to do a good job?’ The result was a value of 2.6 days. “From this we derived a 2+x rule, which means that the 150 employees at our Berlin headquarters spend two days in the office and they can work the other three wherever they want. That could be in the office, but it could also be in Mallorca.” The result was somewhat more conservative in a large media agency, according to its HR Director.

With the backdrop of a 20%-remote-work arrangement pre-pandemic, the offer is gradually increasing here as well. “The entire Board of CEOs in the agency group decided to double it. That means we’re going to 40%, which is two days a week of remote work.”

In the digitally influenced IBM Group, the Head of HR, Norbert Janzen, assumes that 50%-60% of working time will be spent in the home office. Only spending two to three days on site in the office is a likely scenario. The Shift survey confirms that 65% of participants across all industries would like to work remotely two to three days a week in the future.

Our findings are consistent with the assessment in the report ‘Workplace Ecosystems of the Future’ by Cushman & Wakefield (2020): “It is reasonable to expect reaching an equilibrium where the average employee works remotely approximately two days a week.”

Hybrid work is the order of the day. While the model remains flexible, the trend is clear: three office days and two remote workdays – or vice versa. We call it the ‘3+2 model’. The parameters for weighting and freedom of choice must be defined contextually according to company, area, team setup or personal preferences.

What hybrid work model would you personally like to see in the future?

1 day per week remote
- 0% until 29 years
- 9% 30-39 years old
- 11% 40-49 years old
- 24% 50 years old +

2 days per week remote
- 0% until 29 years
- 9% 30-39 years old
- 11% 40-49 years old
- 24% 50 years old +

3 days per week remote
- 0% until 29 years
- 9% 30-39 years old
- 11% 40-49 years old
- 24% 50 years old +

4 days per week remote
- 0% until 29 years
- 9% 30-39 years old
- 11% 40-49 years old
- 24% 50 years old +

1 week remote & 1 week in the office
- 0% until 29 years
- 9% 30-39 years old
- 11% 40-49 years old
- 24% 50 years old +

Alternative model
- 0% until 29 years
- 9% 30-39 years old
- 11% 40-49 years old
- 24% 50 years old +

A practical case study

“There will be three main models employees can choose from in consultation with their manager. With this, we give teams a lot of freedom to decide what makes the most sense for them.”

Britta Schindler, Head of People & Change at the telecommunications company A1

1. Office-based: 4 days in the office and 1 day flexible/remote.
2. Mobile-based: Exactly the opposite, 4 days remote, 1 day in the office.
3. Best mix according to individual preference: 2-3 days in the office, 2-3 remote.

Our recommendation

1. Define a company-wide hybrid work strategy. A conscious approach creates clarity in flexibility.

2. Actively involve your employees. This way you can develop demand-oriented and accepted approaches.

3. Inform yourself about liabilities under labour law. Even specific wordings mean different legal obligations for employers.
The office as an essential space – for creativity, connection & identification

One of the most hotly debated questions around hybrid work is what role the office will play in the future. Whereas it was the working world’s indispensable foundation until recently, evidenced by investment in large campus projects or real estate close to the city, many experts have begun preparing an obituary for the office of late.

Our analysis showed the office will continue to play an important but radically changed role in the world of work. While 63% of those we surveyed agree that operational work can easily be done from home, 76% want a place for teamwork and informal exchange: the office as a team & creative space.

To achieve this, new, individual office concepts must be created: fewer workstations and personal offices, more meeting areas and creative spaces.

None of the companies we surveyed wants to do away with the office altogether. The impact of the office as an identity-forming and culture-shaping tool is too high. The personnel manager of a medium-sized trading company commented: "We notice that employees are no longer as closely connected to our company as they used to be."

The HR Manager of an IT group also confirmed this challenge: "Culture is shaped by people and by people working together. Values are communicated particularly well on site. If the employees lose their closeness to this culture, you become more interchangeable as an employer. They could theoretically do the same job at another company. It’s a challenge to solidify culture in hybrid working."

Hybrid work does not mean farewell to the office, but instead heralds a new evolutionary stage for it. Companies are facing the challenge of cultivating culture, identity and employee loyalty in a digital space and realigning the office to the needs of hybrid work. Encounters, exchange and creativity will be among the most important design principles.

Our recommendation

1. Use periods of low office utilization to make small budget adjustments to your office to create quick wins for better meetings and workshops.

2. Develop scenarios for future office concepts based on real workforce needs.

3. Define measures to make the identity, culture and values of your organisation tangible in the digital space.
Remote work increases productivity & poses health risks

Hand on heart. Before the pandemic, most of us would have expected productivity would decrease significantly by working full-time at home. Laundry, paperwork, YouTube videos... Many managers we interviewed were surprised remote work was equally as, or more, productive: meetings are more structured, communication focuses on the essentials, less time is lost waiting or driving in. Miriam Schilling, HR manager at outdoor sports supplier Vaude, marked “that employees work better, are more focused and, in some cases, more efficient”. The Vice President HR Development of an automotive group summed it up: “If I look at my immediate team, our challenge is to achieve more than we did last year, and we succeeded in doing so despite working remotely.” On average, respondents in our study say they tend to be more productive remotely than in the office.

The Cappgemini study also describes this gap between short-term performance gains and long-term effects: “But while nearly 70% of organisations expect these benefits to outlast the pandemic, (...) employees are feeling apprehensive about the long-term consequences as burnout starts to take its toll.” (Cappgemini, 2020)

Employees appear particularly committed and are constantly available, but according to the interpretation of those we interviewed, mainly in order not to be thought of as lazy, out of a sense of loyalty or because they do not want to jeopardise their new, highly valued autonomy.

Even though the perception of stress varies greatly depending on life circumstance, role and context, our survey points to a low level increase in stress levels (by 0.73 points on a scale of -5 to +5). At the same time, serious fatigue towards digital work – video call to video call, and lack of live interaction – can be observed, which translates into an increased need for mental health initiatives.

Even if the Covid-19 pandemic demanded a particularly radical form of home working, this extreme experience confirms: 100% remote work is not a sustainable solution. In the medium and long term, hybrid work is more detrimental to both the workforce and the company’s success.

Julia Reuter, Director of Strategy, Human Resources and Culture at the Media Group RTL Germany, sees a need for action: “We have offered intensive training for our managers to point out the risks, especially from an HR perspective. You can see that our employees are getting ill more at the moment. That’s why we’re offering more webinars on topics like addiction or depression now, which are well-received.”

Don’t be blinded by good numbers. In the medium term, you will benefit from effectively designing a balanced, hybrid working model.

As a manager, promote targeted exchange within the team. Transparency about expectations and rules takes the pressure out of everyday life.

Provide mental health interventions. Professionally moderated space for reflection, resilience training and one-to-one coaching are of particular help.

Our recommendation

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Flexiwork – the chance to combat the shortage of skilled workers

Though hybrid work brings new challenges, companies are presented with the opportunity to better attract and retain talent in flexible working environments.

Companies at a location disadvantage or where access to skilled workers is competitive benefit from this in particular. The HR Manager of an IT group details: “We can now make better offers that are attractive to top talents too – and where moving to the country isn’t always necessary either. On the other hand, we can better integrate colleagues from rural or international locations.”

The more flexible use of part-time workers by means of selective, hourly working or shift work with breaks of several hours and no commute is also attractive for companies and employees alike.

Both parties benefit from this flexibility; companies only pay for what they need. And employees can better combine their work with other things, like their hobbies or family time.

Sandra Raßfeld, Chief Customer Officer (CCO) at Thermondo, uses the example: “The employees in customer service take on more flexible shifts, e.g. in the mornings and evenings, and take longer breaks at lunchtime because they’re not needed. That’s great, and they wouldn’t do that if they were in the office, because those four hours off at lunchtime wouldn’t be any good for them.”

Hybrid work is becoming an economic stimulus package for job matching, flexibilisation and internationalisation – and can thus become a game changer, especially for ‘hidden champions’ in rural areas. “Eliminating spatial distance as a limiting factor (could) improve the matching of job seekers and employers (...). Ultimately, this could boost overall economic productivity,” three authors from the ifo Institute wrote in the FAZ.

What are the biggest advantages of remote work for you?

Question from the survey conducted, the 3 most frequently cited responses

- Doing away with the commute: 74%
- Time flexibility: 69%
- Location flexibility: 48%

A practical case study

“The realisation that many activities in our company can be carried out completely remotely, even better than in the office, has led to a rethink in our sourcing and recruiting process. In the past, we had advertised jobs throughout Germany, but always for the Berlin location. In the summer of 2020, we advertised a new customer advisor position as a 100% home office position for the first time and filled it after only a short time with a candidate from Baden-Württemberg. Compared to previous advertisements for precisely this position, we not only received many times as many applications: Above all, we had significantly better qualified candidates. The possibility to work for Afilio flexibly from home, even from other parts of Germany, expands the field of really good applicants for us enormously.

In the meantime, we have additional team members, also in other fields of work, working from Brandenburg, Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate. In the near future, we estimate that we will advertise half of our positions for home office work across Germany in order to access a broader pool of talent. If wage bureaucracy doesn’t complicate the process too much, we may well advertise home office positions outside Germany in the future.”

Philip Harms, founder and managing partner of the start-up Afilio

Our recommendation

1. Revise your company brand and communicate hybrid work opportunities clearly to attract the right people.

2. Extend your search for employees by finding new ways beyond time and country borders.

3. Discuss new, innovative collaboration models, such as the development of a fluid pool of employees.

The HR Manager of an IT group details: “We can now make better offers that are attractive to top talents too – and where moving to the country isn’t always necessary either. On the other hand, we can better integrate colleagues from rural or international locations.”
Coronavirus has brought a significant upswing in digital transformation to Germany: new tools have been developed, introduced or integrated into existing environments – a real triumph for many IT departments. According to the ‘Flexible Working 2020’ study by Deloitte, 84% of those surveyed now use significantly more digital communication channels. And 79% of those we surveyed say that infrastructure and technology are currently no longer a challenge for hybrid work.

But while the integration of technology has been successful across the board, tech literacy seems to be lagging far behind: “Executives in particular find it difficult to use digital tools and the resulting changes in communication,” explains the personnel manager of a family-owned company. Tools are continuously developing: Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet now have numerous functions. The new tools are rich in functions for creative workshops, efficient surveys and effective training and discussions. New tools such as Wonder, Meet Butter or mmhmm enable completely new, innovative virtual meetings.

“We see a high training deficit in the use of digital tools. Mostly, only the basic functions are used and further possibilities for brainstorming, exchange formats or the like are left out due to a lack of self-confidence,” adds the HR representative of an insurance company.

While the technical basis for hybrid collaboration has been created, there is still a strong need for training in the competent use of the tools to be able to leverage the full potential of hybrid work: “However, using virtual meetings correctly and designing them effectively and efficiently needs to be learned – there is often still a need for support here.” (Deloitte, 2020).

**Our Top 5 Tooling Toolbox**

**Miro.com & Mural.co**

Virtual whiteboard tools, Miro and Mural, enable comprehensive, digital collaboration in real time. A wide range of formats can be implemented, from simple brainstorming sessions to complex processes. Boards can be expanded as required, individually designed, and also offer numerous features for the digital implementation of meetings and workshops. Thanks to their constant adaptability and being up-to-date, the tools also offer enormous potential for long-term projects in terms of their agile understanding of work.

**MeetButter.io**

MeetButter is an all-in-one platform and an absolute hit for digital workshops. With its simple and intuitive interface, the tool leaves hardly anything to be desired and convinces with extremely well-thought-out functions. In addition to a visible agenda, breakouts, voting, polls, the integration of Miro, YouTube and the Google Suite, the tool from Copenhagen offers a great deal more for facilitating smooth virtual workshops.

**Wonder.me**

Wonder breaks with the rigid structures of classic web conferencing tools and brings the virtual space to life, through which users can move with an avatar. When two or more people move towards each other, a video call automatically opens between them. The tool is ideally suited for digital events or workshops, where people can switch between different conversation formats without having to make an appointment or change channels.

**Gather.town**

Gather combines a charming 8-bit look with high-performance technology to enable the creation of virtual and user-defined spaces. Users can continuously explore the 3D worlds as avatars and make video calls with other people based on proximity to each other. With the ability to customize and incorporate interactive and fun features, Gather can be used to create unique formats from casual meetings to large conferences.

**Our recommendation**

1. Design a clear tool landscape that enables testing of new features and offerings.

2. Create test rooms for virtual meeting formats in which managers and employees can experience and test a new form of collaboration and new tools.

3. Develop training and coaching initiatives for digital fitness to manage the hybrid workday effectively and efficiently.
New communication spaces – for participation & transparency

Physical space quickly reaches its limits. Online meetings and live streams, on the other hand, offer a whole new range of possibilities. What was previously discussed in a closed meeting room now takes place on the World Wide Web. More cost-effective and time-saving, cross-location and interactive. With a company-wide digitalisation and corresponding user competence in the staff, there is the chance to integrate all employees of a company, to create transparency and to live real participation with the possibilities of digital interaction.

“We expanded our dialogue format with the Management Board from 2,000 to 3,000 people to 8,000, and it worked better than we ever expected. The response has been enormously positive: people who previously only knew the Board of Management from the press or such are suddenly experiencing it directly,” reports the Vice President HR Development from the automotive industry. Julia Reuter, Head of HR Strategy at the media group RTL, had a similar experience: “We communicated a great deal and were very transparent in contrast to the past. As a result, we have ensured more openness overall and have already transferred more responsibility.” Because the immediacy of the remote world has advantages, adds Julia Reuter: „As it’s much quicker to set up an online meeting than to clear out all the conference rooms and make the seating.

Hybrid work setups enable new, innovative forms of communication and participation as an exchange across hierarchical levels. The prerequisite for this is a change in thinking on the part of top management: because transparency makes people vulnerable - and can cause insecurity. Managers are thus given a new task, become content creators for the entire company and are in constant exchange. “And live. Everyone hears everything, everyone sees everything. So, the issue of transparency has increased massively compared to before, in terms of personal exchange, no matter at what level,” confirms the HR director of an agency.

One example: “Our CEO communicates with the entire A1 team at least twice a month in the Workplace Live Update. He gives a short update on the company and answers the employees’ questions in a live chat - questions that the team is currently concerned about. He has established a valuable exchange format here for himself and also for the team.” Says Britta Schindler, Head of People & Change at the telecommunications company A1.

Create transparency about company developments. You will be rewarded with growing trust and commitment.

Develop innovative ways of communicating internally. Opportunity lies in the combination of digital as well as physical spaces, and in intimacy as well as reach.

Coach top management in their new communicator roles. Authentic, simple communication is crucial.

A practical case study

“Our CEO communicates with the entire A1 team at least twice a month in the Workplace Live Update. He gives a short update on the company and answers the employees’ questions in a live chat - questions that the team is currently concerned about. He has established a valuable exchange format here for himself and also for the team.” Says Britta Schindler, Head of People & Change at the telecommunications company A1.
The enforced home office experiment promoted a new form of ownership and self-organisation in the organisations we interviewed: “There was a feeling of ‘Hey, we’re all in this together now and have to manage it together.’ This created a strong sense of ownership in the team – or perhaps it was always there, and we managers just didn’t see it,” recalls Sandra Raßfeld from Thermondo. Employees are not only committed to their work, they also take on responsibility, despite reservations at management level. Self-organisation – the distribution of responsibility – and a change in management requirements happened overnight. “Working in the Corona pandemic has been a bit like a boot camp of ‘on the job’ leadership development.” (‘Working in the Corona Pandemic – Towards the New Normal’, Fraunhofer ILO, 2020)

To make hybrid work successful in the future, leadership must be redefined and established. Lenka Kaciakova, VP Human Resources at mobile games developer Wooga, puts it this way: “People managers definitely need to rethink how to manage a remote team, how to inform, how to document information flow. They just need to put much more effort into consciously building trust with team members, so that they proactively share their concerns with managers.” Leadership logic is moving from push to pull.

Employees must actively demand help and feedback because managers no longer have any insight into their actions and can only control a digital section at best. 46% of those we surveyed said that they see the increased autonomy and personal responsibility as the main advantage of remote working. At the same time, 18% of employees in small companies with 10 to 49 employees feel that they are less trusted in the home office.

The challenge of ‘letting go’ and handing over responsibility is observed by many of our interviewees, including the personnel manager of a large health insurance company: “The leadership issues were there before, but with remote work we definitely need to lead more consistently, clearly and transparently now.”

Leaders of hybrid teams face different challenges, therefore, and often more frequently than ever. It is necessary to have trust, to make the implicit explicit, to consciously and actively connect team members, to proceed in an agile manner and to learn together (cf. Crushman & Wakefield, 2020). Companies need to support their leaders in consciously reflecting on this need and in training the corresponding competencies. Miriam Schilling, personnel manager at the outdoor sports supplier Vaude: “I believe that it is a good time to say: I am changing my behaviour. I am changing how we work together.”

Do you feel that you are given the same level of trust when working at home or remotely as in the office?

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<th>Company Size</th>
<th>No, less.</th>
<th>Yes.</th>
<th>No, more.</th>
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<tr>
<td>2-9 employees</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-49 employees</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-249 employees</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>81%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1,000-9,999 employees</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10,000 employees or more</td>
<td>12%</td>
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Promote trust and acceptance of responsibility in teams. Team workshops on strategy, decision-making processes and feedback culture lay key foundations.

Offer coaching on leadership attitudes. Reflection on leadership styles helps to actively create a new, people-oriented leadership culture.

Provide methodological tools. Hybrid teams require new techniques and tools for facilitation, dialogue, task management and creativity.
Hybrid work & equality
one step forward and one step back?

Granted: This has been the most challenging thesis of them all. Because we have noticed from study information and personal experience that hybrid work has noticeable effects on diversity and equality. That said, causes and effects are difficult to grasp and cannot be interpreted clearly using our data, and this is a complex and sensitive area generally. We are therefore sharing some of the observations we have discussed on the opportunities, and also risks, which need to be delved into and better understood far beyond this study.

Starting small, hybrid work has an observable positive effect on equality in everyday meetings as the HR manager of a large IT company describes: "Before Coronavirus, there had always been a two-tier society in meetings: those who had to work in the office and those who were there digitally under an alternative working model and were at a disadvantage in conversation. That’s now over with."

So remote meetings are not only more natural, but technology can also level out differences: on a screen, we’re all the same – big or small, loud or quiet, taking up space or ceding space. The video tile always has a standard size, and the mute button is power. There is potential in that. And there is no doubt that flexible working hours and locations (see also our Thesis 4 on Flexiwork) make it easier to reconcile different lifestyles or childcare, for example, with participation and one’s career. This is also confirmed by our survey data, that shows hybrid working models are particularly popular with women and minorities. A step in the right direction?

There is a further striking aspect to our survey with regards to gender differences: men more often work in the study, while women are more likely to set up their home office elsewhere in the home. The extent to which this is based on the availability of such a room, individual preferences or roles and assumptions, is not clear from our data. For this reason, it is better to consider the studies on the structural level, which urges caution: because hybrid work seems to simultaneously exacerbate existing differences and even undo progress towards equality. The McKinsey study ‘Vision for the Post-Pandemic Workforce’ from 2020 shows remote work is mainly feasible for workers in academic, managerial and professional positions. Simpler activities or social contact professions are often tied to physical places and meetings, and are therefore excluded from this degree of flexibility.

According to the McKinsey study, this unequal distribution regarding educational level is compounded by the fact that women in particular work in contact occupations such as nursing or the education sector. Role-related demands and remote working are rarely compatible. And so precisely for those who would not only wish for hybrid work, but also gain freedom by it, are prevented from doing so by environmental conditions. A step backwards?

Hybrid work sometimes has contradictory effects on diversity and equality, and these need to be addressed. We must be careful how we can exploit the opportunities and minimise the risks. For those who are free to choose their working model because their job or employer allows it, hybrid work offers freedom and self-fulfilment. The challenge for teams, companies and our society is rather to make this freedom of choice accessible to as many people as possible, and to develop methods of compensating people according to their different environmental conditions.

According to the McKinsey study, this unequal distribution regarding educational level is compounded by the fact that women in particular work in contact occupations such as nursing or the education sector. Role-related demands and remote working are rarely compatible. And so precisely for those who would not only wish for hybrid work, but also gain freedom by it, are prevented from doing so by environmental conditions. A step backwards?

Our recommendation

1. Create transparency and awareness of structural inequalities and their effects. This is the first step towards not reinforcing them.

2. Regularly evaluate how your hybrid work models promote or hinder equality and share this with other companies – many organisations face this challenge.

3. Link your diversity and hybrid work initiatives to develop inclusive and creative solutions with stakeholders.
Shaping the employee experience – creative formats for digital working

Before the pandemic, designing the employee experience was a central task for HR departments. Lockdowns put this to the test.

In our interviews, several executives shared their experience of how challenging it is to onboard new hires remotely. Feeling part of the team is extremely difficult if you don’t find a point of connection with similarly minded colleagues at a new job, at the team lunch or in the hallway. In some cases, this can even lead to resignations after just a few weeks. – The diagnosis: foreign body sensation.

It turns out that almost all touchpoints of the employee experience need updating for hybrid work. In addition to hiring and onboarding or offboarding, our analysis shows elements such as personal development, career planning or feedback/performance need a particular rethink. On the other hand, deliberate changes can quickly produce positive results. The HR manager of a software company explains how she successfully digitised the onboarding process for thousands of new employees, making it more efficient and innovative: “We have invested significantly in the most important touchpoints of our employee experience, created new touchpoints, and improved existing ones. We can tell it’s paying off: our Employee Experience Score, which we’ve been measuring for years, is currently at a record high.”

As the office can be increasingly less relied upon for culture- and identity-creating moments (see Thesis 2), there is a new desire for digital cultural formats as well as new tools that record and analyse feedback and needs through pulse checks. People analytics apps are booming: the Berlin-based company Peakon, for example, was recently sold to the US cloud service provider Workday for 700 million US dollars. Microsoft has developed Microsoft Viva, a new all-in-one platform that works in combination with MS Teams and partners with external service providers.

No hybrid work without a hybrid employee experience. HR teams are faced with the task of adapting their touchpoints to the new working day and have the opportunity to completely rethink outdated approaches. Continued employee retention in a digital world must be the backdrop of any consideration – and through the complete lifecycle journey.

5 practical tips for hybrid onboarding

Onboarding new employees is one of the most important touchpoints in the employee experience that needs to be rethought for hybrid work. We have compiled five simple, practical tips from our analysis:

1. **Onboarding package** to be sent directly to incoming employees at home in a culturally fitting way. Digital set-ups such as smart phones and notebooks can be sent at the same time.

2. **Digital welcome formats** that connect various newcomers and make corporate culture a digital experience through gamification.

3. **Virtual Lunch-Dates** to connect future employees and the existing team in one-to-one meetings, and to get to know each other personally.

4. **Onboarding buddy** to provide all newcomers with a set contact person to help them navigate the digital space.

5. **Leadership toolkit** for managers to design an onboarding experience tailored to the role and developed with a good mix of technical, cultural and content-based work.

Our recommendation

1. Integrate a people analytics tool that – while respecting data protection – provides you with regular data on the mood, status and productivity of your organisation.

2. Develop a hybrid employee experience strategy defining touchpoints in a hybrid work environment.

3. Design prototypes for the most important hybrid touchpoints and develop them into innovative solutions.
Empathic & conscious communication – essential for hybrid teams

Communication is key. While this has always been the case, hybrid set-ups give it a whole new dimension – it runs through each of our theses, therefore, and should be emphasised again here. Even hybrid working models can mean team members don’t meet in person for days or even weeks. Our quantitative survey shows that it is precisely this personal exchange with colleagues (74%) and managers (48%) that is missing in a hybrid work environment. Sandra Raßfeld, CCO at Thermondo, sees this as dangerous: “The freedom you have working from home is great. But it also means that it’s easier for you to fall into a slump because you lack structure and a colleague who asks, ‘How are you doing really?’”

The random chat at the coffee machine, the brief update in the stairwell, or overhearing a frustrating phone call are all missing from the home office. Communication must be designed even more consciously in hybrid teams, therefore. This is important for exchanging information and functional – especially written – communication, for which many digital tools are already integrated (such as MS Teams or Slack, see Thesis 5). Conscious communication is even more vital to facilitate informal communication, relationship-building with colleagues and, ultimately, protecting mental health. Lenka Kaciakova, VP Human Resources at the game company Wooga in Berlin, describes it like this: “There are just some things you don’t see, and will realise too late. That’s why we need to talk about it explicitly.”

The goal must be to create moments of emotional connection on a regular basis, because informal communication shapes culture and is identity-forming. Less in-person activity and more digital meetings demand a proactive design. “That’s why I hope we can change this extreme back into a healthy hybrid model that allows for both the flexibility of mobile working and the communication of values and culture within the company,” wishes Norbert Janzen, Head of HR at IBM. Another software company’s HR executive affirms: “Face-to-face exchange is an important social adhesive. In the office or on offsites, social batteries can be recharged allowing us to better communicate with each other digitally again.”

1. How frequently is employees’ well-being discussed in your company?
2. How satisfied are you with your work in general?

Questions from the conducted survey, combined analysis
y-axis well-being
x-axis satisfaction

Of the participants in our survey, 84% are generally satisfied with their work (18% are dissatisfied or neutral). The evaluation also underlines that satisfaction correlates with how often employees’ well-being is discussed in the company. Check-ins, retrospectives, feedback rounds as well as special team meetings or surveys are cited as common mechanisms for an open exchange about well-being in everyday work.

Our recommendation

1. Never underestimate informality – even in leadership teams. Cohesion and healthy motivation come from personal relationships, not from rational transactions.
2. Invest time in getting together informally. Check-in and check-out, team rituals, scheduled virtual coffee meetings, close-knit one-on-one meetings provide the space for nuance.
3. Build trust in teams. Team development workshops on non-violent communication and high-performance teams promote honest exchange.
List of sources

Studies

Alipour, Jean-Victor; Fadinger, Harald; Schymik, Jan (22.06.2020). Ab ins Homeoffice; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. https://www.ifo.de/node/56298


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