

# WORKING FROM 'HYBRID'

by Karl Boos



As the United Kingdom endures yet another nation-wide lockdown, millions of employees around the country must continue working from a makeshift kitchen, bedroom, or even conservatory office indefinitely. Loved by some, loathed by others, working from home has become a forced way of life for many in already trying circumstances. When we do begin to think about a return to normalcy though, whenever that might be, we must ask the question: “what will a return to the office actually look like?”

For many, the answer is simply to return to the pre-COVID way of life as the pull of face-to-face meetings, free coffee and a regular daily routine prove too strong. For others though, a more nuanced answer is required, and one which could benefit employers and employees in equal measure – the hybrid approach.

According to the Office for National Statistics, in April 2020, when lockdown had just come into force, 47% of people in employment in the UK did some work from home, but a staggering 86% did so as a direct result of the coronavirus pandemic. This meant that for a national work force of 32 million people, just over 13 million were working from home full time, many of them for the first time in their careers. Naturally, this shift in working patterns presented new challenges for employees, and lead to a variety of problems that had never been an issue previously. Over exhaustion as a result of spending extended periods of time on video calls, a feeling of not being able to step away from desks at the end of the working day, and even a national sense of loneliness brought on by a lack of consistent socialising with colleagues every day. It has even been theorised that these negative impacts on employees could generate a long-lasting economic slump due to reduced productivity.



It would seem obvious then, that a return to the office is exactly what the nation needs. However, with the increase of working from home there have been some noticeable benefits, which muddies the water somewhat. Understandably, those working from home no longer have to commute, which has meant the elimination of the, on average, 56-minute daily journey. In turn, this can lead to improved mental and physical health according to [a study undertaken by the Royal Society for Public Health](#). Furthermore, this new way of working life has provided employees with young families a greater ability to balance work and familial responsibilities (although admittedly, working and parenting at home full time comes with its own additional difficulties). It is fair to say then that these benefits cannot be forgotten simply because it is safe for workers to return to the office.

This is where a hybrid approach to working comes in and by allowing staff to choose the amount of time they spend in the office per week, making up the rest of the time from home, could provide excellent benefits to both employers and employees. Workers can choose how many times they face the Underground at rush hour, or alternatively, could decide that they only wanted to come into the office for meetings and presentations, avoiding the need to join video conference calls. With this greater flexibility inevitably comes [improved employee mental health](#) in addition to a [more productive workforce](#).

Certainly, there will be some employers opposed to this hybrid approach, particularly in industries such as PR and marketing which traditionally thrive on face-to-face communication and meetings. Undoubtedly, the question will be raised that if employees are allowed to work from home whenever they choose, will this defeat the point of generally returning to the office if there will always be colleagues missing? Again, the answer would seem to be yes, however, on closer inspection this fails to consider the nuances of employees and the notion that what works well for some won't always work for others. Instead, the focus should remain on the fact that despite an expected fall in productivity, a study undertaken by academics at Cardiff and Southampton Universities found that ["homeworking on the whole in the lockdown did not appear to have had a significant effect on productivity levels."](#) As such, it would seem that there isn't a need for all employees to be in the office simultaneously, and encouraging staff to return to the office on a more permanent basis would be doing so just for the sake of it. Instead, the continued benefits (for both parties) of a more flexible approach outlined previously should prevail.

Over the last 10 months, employees have shown that they are willing to change their working habits in the face of unprecedented uncertainty, while maintaining the levels of productivity expected pre-lockdown. The results have clearly shown that now is the time for employers to trust their staff and give them the chance to succeed in an environment of their choosing. The way we work has changed for good, and while that certainly doesn't mean the end of the office, it could, and perhaps should, lead to working from home flexibility becoming a staple employee benefit, rather than an occasional perk.