Then and now: how to make the most of your remote and hybrid workforce

Introduction

The workplace is radically different to that of only a few years ago. Pre-Covid work was, on the whole, something you left your home to do. It was conducted in a specific place where other people, dedicated to the same objective, worked alongside you. Diverse people and talents came together in one place, or in specific locations, to achieve common aims.

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Such was the importance of place that some employers went to town on making the working environment as attractive as possible, with the hoped-for knock-on effects that their workforce would be more productive. Break-out rooms, table-tennis, company bars, extravagant decoration and even slides between floors were the order of the day. The workplace was somewhere to be proud of, somewhere to be you, somewhere to live every aspect of your life. There was even a Google employee who never went 'home'.

But that's all changed.

The pandemic forced people away from the workplace. Remote working became one of the only ways to work, with employees linked by IT systems and video screens. Sometimes hating it, and inevitably accepting it, employees discovered how much – or how little – they could do given the new status quo, and employers discovered how well – or not – they could manage their workforce when they were always somewhere else.

However, as the pandemic subsided there was not a unified movement back to the workplace. Indeed some employers chose to mandate a return to the office, and received criticism (and a negative response from employees) as a result.

The pandemic opened the door to a more flexible approach to work – an approach that reflected employees' individual needs and working preferences and one that they did not want to give up. Rather than presenting a 'there or not there' binary approach to the workplace, it introduced the idea of choice as to how, where and when work could be carried out, positioned alongside other life commitments and desires.

Statistics bear this out: in 2019, just 4.7 per cent of UK employees worked from home, according to research institute WISERD. By April 2020 (a month after lockdown) ONS identified 46.6 per cent of employees carrying out at least part of their job from home with 86 per cent of those doing so specifically because of the pandemic.

Two years later, the same source found a quarter of UK employees working from home at least some of the time and 13 per cent working there all of the time.

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Since the end of the pandemic both remote and hybrid working patterns have continued and developed and in doing so they have presented HR leaders with particular challenges. While there are clear advantages, making

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these models work is by no means straightforward. Remote and hybrid working is not for everyone and even where employees are enthusiastic, HR professionals need to apply specific consideration, support and management to make it happen.

The pandemic forced the employer's hand on flexible work and everyone had to make the best of it. Now there is no absolute necessity for working in this way, it is up to HR leaders to make sure their organisations get maximum value from staffing arrangements.

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What are remote and hybrid working?

Remote

An employee works away from the company's main office. This has been done for many years – in the 1970s employees could still be linked to mainframe computer systems. Aside from employee preference, employers may consider remote employees in order to gain talent which is unavailable or expensive within their own countries. This trend has therefore grown for reasons other than the pandemic, and independently from the rise of hybrid work.

Hybrid

A mix of working in-office and from locations away from the office. The employee/employer can determine times on an ad hoc basis for this or it may follow a regular timetable. It may be that the employee stays remote and comes in for specific team meetings/briefings etc.

How popular is remote and hybrid working in the UK?

A survey by Owl Labs suggests 46 per cent of UK employees are currently working a hybrid employment model. ONS say 44 per cent of UK workers worked in some form of remote capacity in 2023. 16 per cent were

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full-time remote workers and 28 per cent were hybrid workers splitting their time between office and home.

There was a 14 per cent decrease in the number of fully remote workers in the UK between 2022 and 2023.

The option to take hybrid work has become a key factor in attracting and retaining workers. Among employees Owl Labs found 38 per cent would give up 10 per cent or more of their salary for working flexible hours, 21 per cent would give up 15 per cent or more for flexibility in their working location, and 10 per cent would quit their job entirely if they were no longer able to work remotely or hybrid.

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What are the benefits to business?

Without doubt, hybrid and remote work is now a staple part of the UK workplace. It enables a better balance between work and personal life which in turn leads to increased job satisfaction and thereby reduced attrition. For the HR sector, hybrid and remote work has played an important part in opening up the talent pool from where it can draw the people they need. Candidates can be found and incorporated into the business without being limited by geographical location or dependence on everyday attendance.

Simon Watson, global head of innovation at AV and UC business Kinly confirms this, saying: "Ultimately, effective hybrid working makes a real, tangible impact on talent acquisition and employee retention that cannot be discounted."

Both hybrid and remote work can reduce the costs associated with physical office spaces and can deliver a lower carbon footprint. While the extent of this benefit depends on the home/office time split and the resulting need for organisations to maintain an office location, it means the arrangement is attractive for eco-conscious employees.

But that's not all. "Hybrid and remote working can boost productivity, as employees can create personalised work environments and eliminate commute times, resulting in more focused and efficient work periods," says Bjorn Reynolds, founder and CEO of Safeguard Global, a workforce solutions provider. For HR, the ability to save money while enhancing productivity is extremely attractive.

What are the key considerations?

Just as employees will want to set their own personal ways of working, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for companies who wish to create and make a success of hybrid and remote working. Moreover, getting it right is not just a question of maximising the positive side of hybrid and remote work, but of avoiding the potential drawbacks.

Prianka Jaidka, HR business partner at CPI, warns: "if hybrid [working] is not managed well it can be a source of stress and create a division across the workforce, particularly in today's world impacted by the additional pressures of the cost of living."

Elsewhere, a report from engagement company United Culture found 50 per cent of workplace respondents thought hybrid working had a positive impact on workplace culture, while 15 per cent felt it was negative. They quoted one interviewee as saying: "We have two junior roles who started a year ago and neither have developed as I would have expected. Because we have

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lost the ability to develop through collaboration and from learning in the moment."

Establishing and managing hybrid and remote work must be done with care and attention – perhaps especially for those who are early on in their career and who have no previous experience of life at work. Without that some very important aspects of the workplace can be lost.

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Considerations for employers

1. Systems and technology

Without the right systems and technology in place, remote and hybrid working is unlikely to work for anyone. "Technology lies at the heart of remote work efficiency," says Lydia Kothmeier, vice president of operations at content management system company Storyblok. "Opt for tools and platforms that can streamline communication, collaboration, and project management. From our experience cloud-based solutions for file sharing and real-time collaboration, project management tools like Notion, and communication platforms such as Slack are indispensable assets."

Employees need to be able to easily access the information and tools they require, whenever they need them. Such systems need to be reliable and have the capacity to enable the type of work being undertaken. Weak links or low bandwidth can spell frustration and kill productivity. No remote or hybrid employee wants to spend time trying to fix tech issues.

2. Security

While easy system access is crucial, a business network cannot be used without appropriate safeguards and security. Employees need to be able to use systems, find and work with the data and information they need, but none of that can be put at risk of outside interference. Any connections to business systems must be secure at whatever time the employee requires access and through whatever device they choose to use.

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3. Management approach

Managing remote and hybrid employees is a different task from managing those on-site. Many organisations have now made the switch to 'managing by output' where work is judged by what is done rather than by the hours put in. HR leaders and managers need to understand how to communicate to their hybrid workforce effectively, how often and when.

Getting this right means being ready to be flexible and to adapt when necessary, as Ruth Wilkinson, Head of Policy at the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) explains: "Leadership with people at its heart will always explore and learn by continuing to experiment, adjust, and adapt, ready to take in constructive dialogue with workers and ensure health and safety, work-life balance and flexibility are a normal part of performance conversations."

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HR professionals should also be aware that there can be a tendency for hybrid and remote workers to be overlooked for projects and promotion compared to employees who are on-site. There should therefore be processes in place and a conscious awareness to counter this tendency.

4. Third-party support

If a business wants to take full advantage of remote workers – especially if this extends to accessing talent overseas – they may wish to use third-party service suppliers to manage the administration around employing such staff. An employer of record (EOR) service can help position an employee anywhere in the world with an employer, ensuring compliance with all jurisdictions, meeting legal and tax requirements. A third party can also help control the cost of accessing such talent – employers do not have to spend time and resources dealing with individual and sometimes complex employment arrangements.

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5. The potential of artificial intelligence (AI)

While technology has long been the backbone of hybrid and remote work, the advent of AI is being seen as a way to drive yet more value from this type of workforce. AI and automation more generally can take care of lower value-adding work, like admin and 'tick box' activities which can hold back and frustrate employees. AI may also be deployed to help improve areas such as customer services, offering quick and easy access to information and data required.
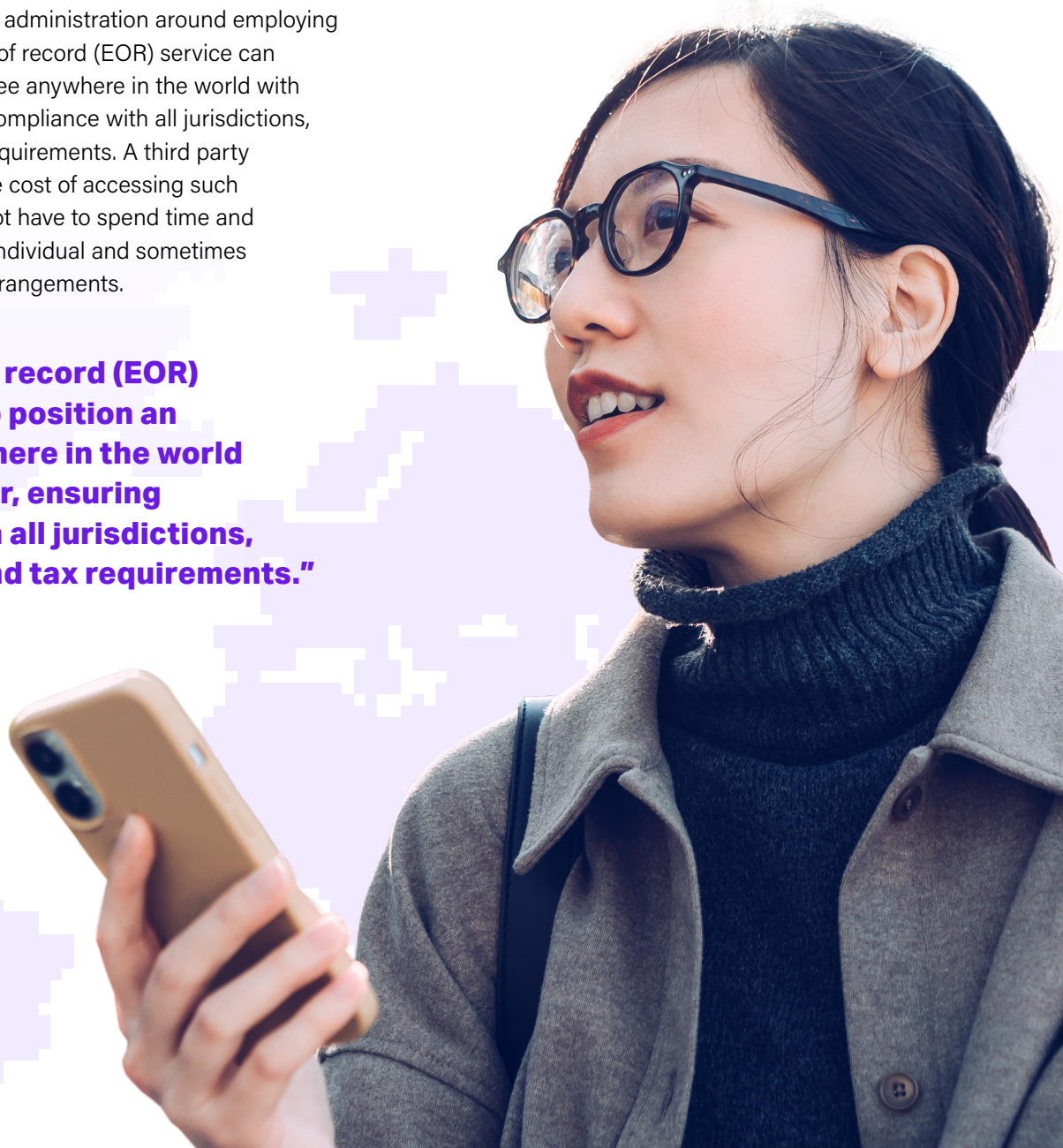
Considerations for employees

1. Working preferences

Remote and hybrid working is not for everyone. To be successful both sides need to understand what is expected of each other and there needs to be trust between each party that they will deliver. That means employees taking responsibility for the work they do. "Remote and hybrid employees need self-discipline,

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time management, and communication skills to thrive." Reynolds of Safeguard Global says. "The ability to stay motivated and maintain a healthy work-life balance is also crucial." At the same time HR professionals must recognise that being remote isn't easy for everyone. Not everyone will have the space required for a nice quiet home office and, to not limit the talent pool, they must guard against this becoming a role requirement.

2. Training support

Training and resources should be offered to help employees develop remote work skills even if they are naturally able and motivated to work this way. It is also important to recognise that some roles need an individual to be physically present due to the nature of their work. Flexibility can be offered where possible but it should not prevent the job from being done. It's important that HR leaders provide the right support and resources to help employees maintain their health and wellbeing while away from the office with suitable channels being open for their feedback and requests.

3. Work boundaries

Recognising boundaries around work is something for both HR professionals and employees to do. There should be clear rules in terms of when it is acceptable for employees to be contacted, when 'working hours' should be and for how long employees should work. Expectations must be firmly set out before work commences.

4. Culture

A remote and hybrid workforce requires additional and different support in order to appreciate and feel the culture of an organisation. "Culture can be promoted through offering casual virtual hangouts and regular team-building activities," Reynolds says. "Virtual coffee breaks, online game sessions, or themed video calls could all help ensure employees have a sense of being together wherever they may be. Similarly, some options for informal interactions can be created, such as dedicated chat channels for non-work-related conversations, to help remote employees feel more connected and engaged." Regular check-ins and

ongoing support from managers and colleagues are also vital to ensure the employee feels connected and supported in their remote work environment.

Naturally some sectors and their underlying cultures will lend themselves to these kinds of work patterns more easily than others: "Hybrid working is very effective in the PR industry; in fact we have had people effectively working remotely for over 10 years now," says Ana Williams, co-owner and director, Spark Communications. "The key to success is in building relationships with the team so that a solid rapport is established for when collaborating or brainstorming remotely."

Building relationships and other 'soft touches' created by HR teams need to go alongside a more formal offer of access to employee health and wellbeing resources. This kind of support will help counter any sense of loneliness associated with this kind of working and help employees with any mental health issues they may experience.

Ways of working in the future

Hybrid and remote work are here to stay: employees are already insisting on these kinds of employment models before they accept jobs, and flexibility is enshrined in employment law. However, as technology and working patterns evolve, employment models will change and develop too. The HR sector as a whole needs to be ready to make the necessary investment to adapt.

AI will no doubt take an increasing role in the workplace, creating further opportunities for employees to add value to their organisations without being on-site. "AI-driven tools can already help in monitoring and maintaining employee wellbeing by analysing work patterns and suggesting adjustments to prevent burnout," explains Reynolds from Safeguard Global. "Moreover, augmented and virtual reality could create more immersive remote collaboration experiences, bridging the gap between remote and in-office workers."

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Measuring ROI from hybrid and remote work is also set to rise in importance. Similarly, in other areas this is achieved through studying the cost of implementation compared to the benefits realised. The crucial part of achieving success here will be that businesses pay as much attention to aspects such as employee wellbeing and work-life balance as they do to the technology behind the workplace.

Richard Taylor, senior vice president, people experience & diversity at Nasdaq believes that organisations are now more than capable of giving employees the individual flexibility they need and that doing so can unlock extra benefits for employees: "We can work asynchronously as well as remote, and it really can work very well," he notes. "This isn't a problem as much as it is an opportunity to rethink and offer an even improved employee value proposition."

Companies that embrace these innovations and the possibilities of hybrid and remote working are the ones who will be ready to achieve further success in attracting and using the best talent of the future.

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To find out more about how Safeguard Global can help you make the most of your remote and hybrid workforce, visit

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