

## **How the pandemic kickstarted hybrid working**

The pandemic did not create hybrid working. In fact, Boris Johnson's announcement on the 23rd March 2020 that everyone should "stay at home" was the antithesis of flexibility. Suddenly, employers and employees alike were faced with the challenge of switching to entirely remote working, in home environments full of distractions (yes, we mean that full hamper of laundry you've been avoiding all week).

### **H2 tag: the pandemic not only demonstrated that online working was possible, but also that for many companies, it had real benefits**

Online working had previously been a rarity, best suited to tech companies and innovative, but cash-strapped start-ups; and while companies were used to working partially online, this was a whole new experience, requiring quick adaptation of technological infrastructure and processes. However, the pandemic not only demonstrated that online working was possible, but also that for many companies, it had real benefits. As we move out of the pandemic, there is a divide between those in favour of remote work and those in favour of traditional office spaces, with opinions ranging by age, occupation and lockdown experience. It is in this chasm between opinions on remote working vs the office that hybrid working offers the real solution.

No one will deny that the pandemic brought radical change to the way we work. Before the pandemic, the advantages and disadvantages of remote working were little understood. Even though tools, such as Zoom and Asana, existed, only a few companies were exploiting them effectively. Employees were rarely given the choice to work remotely and employers were dubious about how to monitor productivity and engagement. Nonetheless, the opportunities of 21st century technology and the demands of a global economy were beginning to create the 'hybrid working' trend.

### **H2 tag: Many of the tools which facilitated continuing economic activity during the pandemic already existed in March 2020**

Start-ups and tech firms that could not afford city office space searched for new ways to effectively collaborate online. Writers, artists and social-media content creators rejected traditional office jobs, but still needed spaces for creative hubs, where they could work synergistically. Multinational corporations required teams in different time zones to adapt the working day to maintain 24/7 efficiency. More broadly, our smartphones and laptops allowed endless notifications, whether we were sitting at our office desk or not. Even those working in the ever-popular open plan office might prefer to send an email to their colleague rather than walk to the other side of the room. Many of the tools which facilitated continuing economic activity during the pandemic already existed in March 2020.

Remote working, forced by lockdowns, produced instant practical problems, including the most challenging, such as juggling homeschooling and online work to the more mundane, such as trying to access company files from a home computer. Initially, long-standing assumptions that remote working was automatically less productive seemed proven right. Yet, over the pandemic, as companies streamlined their processes and employees figured out the best way for them to work, productivity rose to match pre-pandemic levels. Everyone

had been thrown in at the deep-end, but most quickly learnt how to swim. As the advantages of remote work became more apparent, the debate shifted. Suddenly, the question was not whether remote working was possible, but rather, whether it was here to stay.

## **H2 tag: Even after the basic infrastructure was in place, work from home had its own challenges**

One of the most notable advantages of remote-working was no more commuting. For the every-day office worker, accustomed to expensive train commutes, frustrating traffic jams and sweaty cycle rides, this was a significant silver-lining to lockdown. Surprisingly, for employers as well, the time saved by the commute was not exclusively spent on leisure or household chores. In the US, employees spent an average of [35%](#) of their saved commute time on their primary job. The ease of organising a Zoom meeting, or working on shared documents simultaneously further underlined that remote working offered new opportunities to make previous processes more efficient.

Yet, remote working should not be viewed through rose-tinted glasses. Even after the basic infrastructure was in place, work from home had its own challenges. From an employee's perspective, it problematised creating strict boundaries between work and leisure time. For those whose bedroom became their office, this lack of compartmentalisation, both mentally and physically, was compounded. [Good sleep hygiene](#), including no work and no electronics in the bedroom, was no longer an option.

For employers, tracking productivity without intrusive monitoring of 'online' hours was difficult. Moreover, despite providing regular online meetings, well-being sessions, and many awkward Zoom socials, teams struggled to replicate the connection and 'knowledge spillover' of an office environment.

## **H2 tag: lockdown underlined to organisations and their leaders the value of employee collaboration and physical working spaces that collaboration happened in**

Technology existed to facilitate remote working, but lockdown underlined to organisations and their leaders the value of employee collaboration and physical working spaces that collaboration happened in. With restrictions easing, leaders can only harness the benefits of remote working, if they recognise these challenges.

After the pandemic, it is clear that we cannot return completely to pre-pandemic traditional office hours. However, a complete rejection of office spaces is not on the cards either. Hybrid working is increasingly the solution that companies and individuals are turning to. Flexible working is more competitive in the talent market. Utilising some remote work offers companies access to a wider pool of talent, while allowing employees to live outside of expensive city centres. The use of office space can be streamlined, focusing on the core advantages of office space that we missed in the pandemic, such as creative team-working sessions and networking.

## **H2 tag: The real benefit is when employees are given the choice of where to work.**

For employees, moving towards an 'Empowered Day', where they can finish slightly earlier/later and where they only spend between 40-60% of the working week in the office,

as [PwC's New Deal](#) suggests, is an attractive perk. This is not the 4-day week, but it does include some of its major benefits. Concentrating on greater efficiency for interactive work time makes it more productive. Carefully considering how to create work life balance avoids burnout and keeps talent in-house. The most important take-away from hybrid working is not that employees can work effectively anywhere. The real benefit is when employees are given the choice of where to work. In one study of patent examiners, who all worked remotely, those given the ability to move outside of the city centre saw [their productivity rise by 4.4%](#). Hybrid working is not just about attracting talent, but also getting the most bang for your buck.

The key debate after the pandemic remains how companies ensure that hybrid working is not only as productive as their previous model in the long-term, but more so. Matt Mullenweg, the co-founder of Wordpress, gave his three most important tips for 'distributed working', back in January 2019, underlining that the pandemic only accelerated what was becoming the best solution to modern work. He advised documenting everything on shared platforms, so that different work schedules did not impede collaboration and efficiency. Strikingly at a tech start-up, Mullenwork instituted regular physical team meet-ups at Wordpress, which were half-work/half-play, as well as offering a co-working stipend to his teams. This stipend facilitated office meetings and was given to individuals. Mullenweg finished his [TedTalk](#) on the subject of hybrid working by emphasising the advantage of giving people autonomy over their own work.

That autonomy is relevant not only to employees but also to employers. The pandemic enforced a one-size-fits-all approach, just as much as the previous emphasis on traditional office spaces had. In the future, the real challenge, and opportunity, of flexible working, is tailoring the model to fit your business.