



TYLER WILSON

HYBRID – WORKING?

A VIEWPOINT ON THE FUTURE OF WORKING FROM HOME

“For many people, the case is now made for a permanent shift to hybrid working. We can see the benefits but we think there may have been an over-correction.

In this Viewpoint, we present the case for and against hybrid working, and offer our thoughts on how it might evolve.”

RECOVERED TIME

For professionals, one of the benefits to emerge from the pandemic was the recovery of lost commuting time. Anyone accustomed to an outsized working day could teleport between work and home, creating a new work-life balance and a whole new way of living. Back bedrooms were commandeered as offices. Exercise was taken in daylight. Families were reacquainted around the lunch table. Mental health, measured as self-reported contentment, soared.

More than this, sceptics who protested that productivity would suffer were, largely, shown to be hasty in judgement. Most people donated some of their recovered time to the employer's side of the ledger, leaving everyone in credit. Non-specific 'business reasons' for refusing previous home-working requests began to look shaky.



SHIFTING TERRITORY

From this realisation emerged a bandwagon. Hybrid working was commandeered by recruiters as a must-have for candidates, and as an opportunity for employers to cast a wider net and to fill urban posts at rural rates. Employers, feeling bounced into something they weren't sure about, kept their own counsel, nursing the nagging doubt that they were giving away useful ground. Until now, it had always been their prerogative to stipulate a worker's place of work.

From here, the debate shifted to a virtual plane. Amid talk of Zoom fatigue and the difficulties of generating group discussion, there grew an acknowledgement that something was lost by translation online. Video conversations mirrored an awkward sidewalk dance with another walking straight at you – embarrassed pause followed by simultaneous blurring; problems with muting and unmuting; then an increasing tendency to retreat behind that black rectangle. For those of a more extravert demeanour, garish backgrounds became the Hawaiian shirt of Teams calls. Worse still, we might be treated to glimpses of domestic undress or idiosyncrasy that crushed a carefully curated professional demeanour.

TUNING IN AND OUT

Efficient? Yes. Effective? Not so much. Sure, banal watercooler moments were avoided, but it's arguably harder to fake 'nice' and 'interested' on a Zoom call. Those who habitually dominate airtime are even less able to read a virtual room, it seems, exacerbating the urge to tune out. Via Zoom, we have all seen too much of what we cannot unsee. The momentary slipping of the professional veneer in mid-livestream. The blatantly flickering attention. The unconcealed yawn. Those interventions by pets or family requiring an abrupt choice between the domestic and the professional.

Stepping back, there is ample justification in the idea that any change in working practice is to be welcomed if it mitigates the 24/7 treadmill. As cautious supporters of the move to hybrid working, what surprises us most is not how its enthusiasts wish to present WFH as a fait accompli, as if there is nothing left to talk about, but that home set-ups have largely been left to operate as a Wild West.

UNIFORM STANDARDS

For reasons that are not their fault, some people's homes are not fit to be offices. Where are the standard issue firm-branded backgrounds? Where are the dress codes? Where are the core hours of availability? Most of all, where are the minimum specification broadband speeds and phone signals? Where is the research into client

preferences? Where is the research into the work types (and ergo the job roles) more suited to be done face-to-face or in solitude?

There are already signs that employers want to recoup some of the 'commuter premium' from their payrolls, calling into question whether employees will continue to share the benefit of their recovered time. There is an emerging consensus of a 3/2 weekly split between work and home – but on what basis was this decided, and for whose benefit? For professionals required to be perpetually on call, the commute used to be the only time when you could reliably be incommunicado. It is reasonable to suppose that some may conclude they were better off the way things were.

GENERATIONAL DIVIDES

Equally, we have seen only light-touch suggestions about co-ordinating days spent in the office. From the sprawling masses outside pubs in the City and Central London, two things are apparent. First, Thursday is the new Friday, suggesting that employees are shortening their weeks to suit their own lives rather than their employers. Second, anyone under the age of 35 seems in no rush to return to their domestic idyll once the work day is ended.

For them, the office is where they watch, listen, learn and develop through close supervision. It is where they have others' experience on tap to answer their questions. It is where they can become immersed in complex transactions without taking on a prominent role. It is also the fulcrum of their social lives. Who is taking care of the next generation? Who is taking care of the new joiners?

CHANGING ROOMS

If hybrid working is here to stay, it must surely follow that the future of offices will be very different. Instead of dividing time between work and home, a division according to task would require a more radical transformation of space. There might be fewer single-occupant boxes (since solitary work is better done at home) and more collaborative spaces. There might be more cameras, to allow others to sit in on calls or meetings from remote locations. There might be dedicated training spaces – one of the few things generally accepted to be less successful online. There might be more breakout and informal catch-up spaces. As a few firms have already pioneered, there might be free food and drink in more copious outlets and choices. Above all, you should understand what work your staff are here to do and how it will get done.

If hybrid working is to survive, it must be a benefit to employers as well as a perk for employees. The aroma is alluring but there is some way to go before the blend is perfected.



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