

New needs, new opportunities.

How hybrid working works.

EXPERT ARTICLE

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Better work-life balance, greater flexibility, and more purpose. That's what today's employees want. The pandemic has accelerated transformation in the workplace. It has shown us that a distributed organisation works. Employees and employers alike reap the rewards. Hybrid working is the future. But how does it function best? And what kind of an effect does it have?

The pandemic transformed our working environments from physical to virtual overnight. Nowhere was this more true than IT. What effect has this upending of everyday life had on those actually doing the work? Even working-from-home [WFH] sceptics found that remote models not only function, but also empower. There's nothing new in that, of course. Flexible working models have long been popular, perhaps preferred.

Many companies were already on the cusp of hybrid working before the pandemic brought them to a real turning point. Now they were to gain real-life experience of the home/office mix. Microsoft's 2022 Work Trend Index reveals that hybrid working is gaining ground and will continue to do so. That is because more than half of generations Y and Z are prepared to look for a new job if their employers do not allow them enough flexibility.

Ergon has always put a great effort into offering employees not just attractive employment terms but also an environment that makes them want to come to work. Choosing their own hardware is just one example. Even more important is a culture built on transparency, participation, profit-sharing and equal opportunities, with part-time positions and hours counted annually, not weekly. Ergon employees used to spend much of their time working together in the office. With the arrival of the pandemic, we suddenly had to ensure that everyone could contribute remotely.

Habits have shifted, and our teams now work on site much less. Many people also want to keep this WFH option in the future. Ergon wants to learn from the experience of the past two years. How can differing needs be reconciled with the company's objectives? Management and employees will work together on a framework that allows individuals and teams to develop their own ideal setups while ensuring that Ergon's corporate targets are met.

Towards the ideal

The trick in future will be to blend various forms of working. As the name implies, 'office first' means that people will generally work in person on site. The hybrid model, meanwhile, combines in-office working with other workplaces

such as the home or other mobile co-working spaces. There is a distinction here between flexible and fixed hybrid models. With a flexible hybrid, the employee changes their workplace in the course of a week, whereas the fixed hybrid option means that some people are always in the office, while others always work remotely. The fully flexible model lets employees decide their physical workplace for themselves. Regardless of where they work, companies can also let people decide when they want to work on a given day. Or they can set blocks such as 10-12 or 2-4, when everyone is working at the same time and thus synchronously.

Each of these models naturally has its pros and cons. Working at one location is good for communication, not to mention those in-passing corridor conversations. It builds a sense of belonging to the team and the company. On the other hand, mobile working improves work-life balance, makes it easier to reconcile a job, personal life and family, allows for deep focus work, and cuts commuting time and cost.

Distributed working is demanding

It's clear that employees benefit from models that let them mould their work around their life. Distributed working also has its challenges, though. How do you organise meetings when everyone is working online, maybe to their own schedule? How do meeting chairs make sure that each person gets a say? And how can you take the emotional temperature of the 'room' when some people are there in person, others online? What about knowledge-transfer and team spirit if you aren't crossing paths by the lift or in the canteen? Are staff at home actually doing the work they're supposed to? You need good communication, coordination, trust, respect, personal responsibility and clearly defined targets for hybrid working to be successful.

Companies also need to take better care of their employees' mental health. There is a real danger of overload that should not be underestimated. Numerous studies and personal experience show that the virtual working day is more full-on, and carries the risk of burnout. Being constantly available, the lack of boundaries between work and home life, and a flood of messages on different

A photograph of two men in a meeting. They are sitting at a table with a laptop, a glass of water, and a coffee cup. The man on the left is wearing a blue shirt and is looking towards the man on the right. The man on the right is wearing a white shirt and is looking at the laptop. The background is dark and out of focus.

"Consciously combining the various ways of working means making the most of each model's individual upsides."

— Gabriela Keller, CEO,
Ergon Informatik AG



TOGETHER, TOGETHER OR ALONE, APART? ERGON COMBINES
DIFFERENT FORMS OF WORKING TO MAKE SURE THAT EVERYONE CAN
WORK WITH FOCUS AND THAT NO ONE FEELS LEFT OUT AT HOME.
PICTURE: GABRIELA KELLER

channels at the same time is a lot to handle. It can be hard to tell via Zoom when someone is struggling, so line managers should actively try to hold regular one-to-ones with their team members. Conversations need to be rethought and more time needs to be invested in the human side of the workplace, but managers must still make sure that they can maintain their own balance.

From the corporate perspective, regular online networking ideas such as random coffee chats, a surprise package of WFH goodies, or shared activities such as team days, team lunches and quiz nights can all be very effective.

WFH makes separating work and home life much harder. Shared end-of-day rituals and a clear understanding of who is available when can help. It's also useful to be aware of generational differences. Video calls and chats have long been natural ways of communicating for younger people, but there is the risk of disconnection for those less up to digital speed. You can stop this happening by regularly reaching out, or setting up a buddy system that allows younger and older team members to benefit from each other's capabilities.

Presence is not performance

These new ways of working pose a particular challenge to companies that retain traditional structures. Going virtual is a paradigm shift that requires a rethink from line managers and a whole new leadership culture. In Switzerland especially, working hours are still the primary performance metric. The time you put in during the week determines what you get paid. It's easier to track attendance in an office, so how do you make sure that people are actually working from home? It is possible to check up by tracking what websites people visit, but is it worth it? And what kind of message does it send about trust and personal responsibility?

Studies prove that mobile working results in a consistently higher output than being tied to the office. Presenteeism as the ultimate proof of performance is a long-debunked cliché. Those who tend to cheat with their hours will find ways and means of doing so under any model. It is much more important to identify these individuals than to micro-manage the conscientious and loyal majority.

Modern employers don't go checking up. They rely on self-management, personal motivation, and opportunities for growth. This meets the employee's need for meaningful work and personal development. If you take responsibility, you are more motivated and engaged than someone who is simply following orders. This intrinsic motivation has a lasting positive effect on the company's fortunes. The workplace of the future is talent-centric, not performance-oriented. If all of your talent can reach their full potential, they will automatically achieve. Companies that nurture trust as the key to success, giving staff flexible working hours and allowing them to register those hours themselves, are at an advantage. We saw the proof of this during the working-from-home phase of the pandemic.

Long-term gain

Each firm must decide what ways of working suit it. What is clear, however, is that distributed working has much to recommend it to employers, too. They can save on office space, and therefore rent costs. Where allocated desks are no longer wanted, the space can be used for original meeting points and workshop spaces to encourage more collaboration. And the reduction in commuter traffic is a good thing for people and the environment alike.

Numerous studies have found that employees are willing to accept a smaller pay packet or change jobs in return for flexible working. But if the employment terms are right, there is less incentive to look around, and that is especially important amid the huge lack of qualified candidates at present. Attractive terms include trust, respect and investment in employees' training and personal development. Time in the office should be structured so that staff see it as adding value for themselves and others. Simple things like regular events for stakeholders, for networking or just after-work drinks can achieve a great deal.

Successful hybrid

Consciously combining the various ways of working means making the most of each model's individual upsides. Time together in the office sparks creativity, collaboration, social conversations and a sense of solidarity. The flip side of this is being able to focus on work without interruption, and whether at

home or in the office, this needs the right infrastructure. You also need a shared understanding of which elements of the work the team will do together, and which its members will do for themselves. There are big benefits when everyone spends a certain proportion of their working hours in person in the office. That way, nobody will be excluded or forgotten at home. />

Co-located

Teams work together at the same time in the same place, e.g. a physical workshop in a creative space. This produces an important sense of solidarity, shared experiences, and helps bring new colleagues on board faster. Corporate culture becomes tangible and relationships are cultivated. It is important to have functional meeting rooms, creative and workshop spaces, and inviting break areas and shared zones.

Working together, together

Working together, apart

Synchronous Work

Teams work at different locations but are connected with the appropriate co-working and communication tools. Employees are not tied to their desks. They can also discuss an issue while going for a walk. Important here is quality hardware, a seamless system landscape, and the right tech infrastructure. Meeting rooms to which online participants connect must be fully fitted with the AV equipment for hybrid meetings.

Distributed

Employees work on laptops or PCs in an office, but individually. This works if you have quality, ergonomic, adjustable workstations that meet standardised core needs and permit concentrated work. Rooms with several workstations must have additional pods for online calls. Employees must also have attractive break rooms and shared zones that encourage social conversations and support networking beyond the team.

Working
alone,
together

→ #bestofeverything

Working
alone,
apart

Asynchronous Work

Work is distributed, with each employee conducting deep focus work. This works if internal meetings are kept to a minimum during this period, and interruptions from emails and chat messages actively avoided. Workstation ergonomics are also a factor here to safeguard physical health.

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