Your HR plan for hybrid working (UK)

ViridianHR

About Viridian HR

If you need support for your leadership or HR teams in a way that makes commercial sense and is people-centric, look no further. Working closely with diverse organisations and industries, we understand a wide range of business environments.

We believe that well-rounded HR professionals are driven by high levels of integrity, commercial awareness, and pragmatism, all of which allows them to gain a deep understanding of business objectives and challenges. We apply these values in our day-to-day practice.

We are regularly reminded that our Anglo-French experience is hard to find. Some clients initially reach out to us because they are looking to outsource their French HR for peace of mind, while others require due diligence audits before the acquisition of a French entity. To find out if we can help, please contact us.

We tend to support medium to large organisations, and we focus mainly on employee relations, compliance work, HR audits (including for mergers and acquisitions), people strategy, complex change projects for large organisations, and HR outsourcing for SMEs.

Meet Karine Lipinski, Founder of Viridian HR

With almost 20 years of experience in Human Resources and people management, I founded Viridian HR to provide Senior Leaders with people-related expertise that helps them achieve their goals.

A Chartered Fellow of the CIPD, I have extensive international business experience. I am also culturally integrated in both the UK and France, with a French Law degree and Master's degrees in Human Resources in both countries.

During my career, I am proud to have supported a number of well-established organisations, including Photobox, Pandora, The Wellcome Trust, EnGlobe, Landsec, GoDaddy and Renault.

I am comfortable working in post-merger and acquisition environments, with all the challenges that these bring.

Clients tell me that I am highly organised, pragmatic, approachable, and transparent (which makes me – hopefully! – easy to work with.)

I also like to involve myself in furthering HR in as many different areas as possible. As such, I am the Vice-Chair of the CIPD Chiltern Branch and regularly mentor other HR professionals.

Please visit my LinkedIn profile for further details, and feel free to get in touch with me directly for an informal chat about your HR needs

Introduction

2020 has seen mass homeworking take businesses by storm – forcing employers to adapt at very short notice whilst maintaining productivity and employee satisfaction.

Over a year later, it is important to reflect on how the pandemic has shaped new ways of communicating, interacting, and even behaving.
One positive aspect is that companies now have more time to prepare and plan, as we take tentative steps along the road to lockdown easing and a full re-opening for businesses.

Hybrid working has become a hot topic in recent months, with many commentators and global employers touting this system as the future of work. However, as hybrid working is a brand-new concept for many businesses, getting it right is of paramount importance.

This guide will provide you with:

- Definition and insight into hybrid working
- Benefits and limitations of hybrid working
- Important steps to consider when introducing your own hybrid working model

1. What is Hybrid Working?
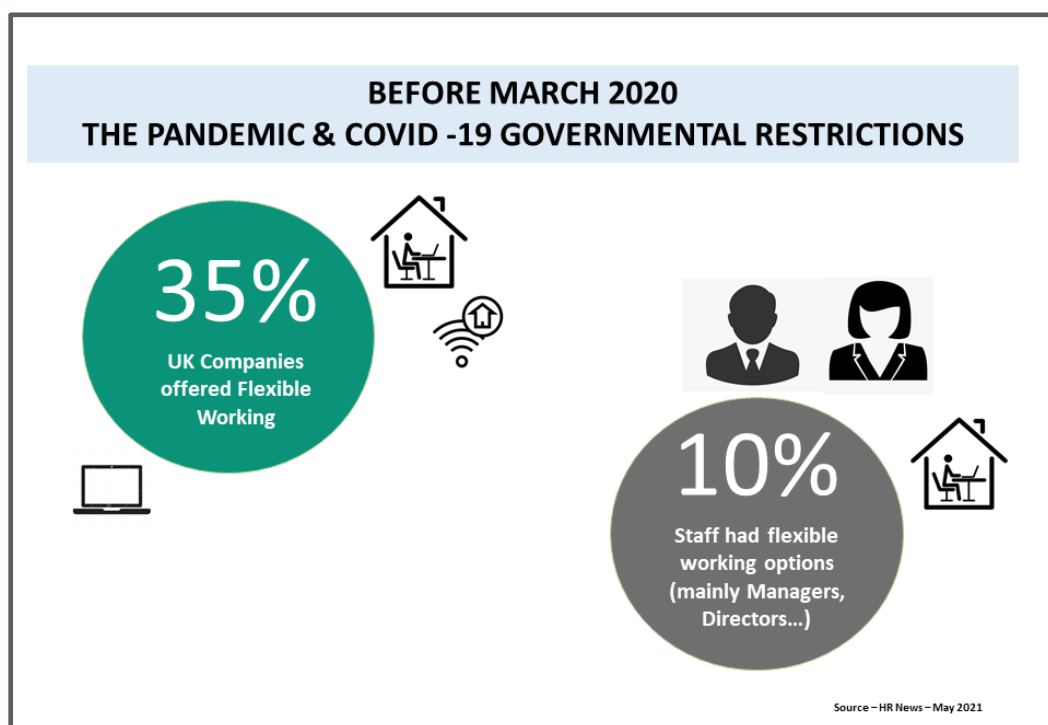
From the ashes of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown, a new term – 'hybrid working' – has emerged.

As a simple definition, hybrid working is a form of flexible working that allows employees to share their time between their physical workplace and a remote location (typically home). Other forms of hybrid working can include flexible working hours outside of the 'traditional' 9 to 5, or altering the length of the working week (e.g. 3 or 4 days instead of 5).

Following the official government announcement on 14th June, July 2021 should mark the end of UK lockdown restrictions, leading to most companies getting ready to welcome their staff back to the workplace.

However, the 'new (working) norms' have seen many employees looking for better 'work - life balance', where they work in the office for some days of the week, and at home for the remainder.

WHERE DO YOU WANT TO WORK ONCE LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS EASE?

8% Full time back in the office

26% Work from home permanently

21% 3 days a week in the office

45% 2 days a week in the office

Source – Working the Future – May 2021

2. Benefits and Limitations of Hybrid Working

Since the pandemic, remote working has afforded many new possibilities for companies and their employees to completely re-structure the way they do business.

However, certain limitations have also been identified for some organisations. So before considering a hybrid working model, companies should carefully evaluate the pros and cons to check that the proposed policies and practices will work with their unique business culture and set-up.

The table below summarises the benefits and limitations of hybrid working, as experienced by companies and employees since the start of the pandemic.

Benefits	Limitations
➢ Cost saving on office spaces	➢ Can experience communication issues leading to wasted time in projects and resources
➢ Better Work – Life balance	
➢ Reduced absence rate	➢ Problems with staff development and training
➢ Reduced commuting time and costs	
➢ Greater level of engagement and productivity	➢ Difficulty separating home and work life
	➢ Employee isolation and its impact on well being
➢ Improved staff retention, trust and loyalty	
	➢ Not convenient for all's jobs
➢ Attract new recruits and new talents	
	➢ Home distractions
➢ Encourage diversity and inclusion	
➢ Opportunity to upskill IT and training skills	
➢ Less need for regular holidays	

HOW WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE WHILE WORKING REMOTELY DURING THE LOCKDOWN?

EMPLOYEES

28% Felt happier

57% Felt more productive

20% Experienced loneliness

54% will resign if they cannot continue working remotely

EMPLOYERS

34% experienced comm issues with staff

66% Still undecided about hybrid working or working on a model

52% Will follow gvt guidance & conduct surveys for hybrid working model

Sources – Indeed / HR news / Business Wire / Linkedin / BBC News (April – June 2021)

Working remotely has positively shaped employees' mental health and productivity. And despite the fact that some companies faced communication issues with staff, the majority of them are aware that returning to the 'old norms' would have a damaging impact on their business and company image.

3. Check List & Steps for the implementation of a Hybrid working model

Clearly, the best option for your organisation will depend on a number of unique factors.

However, one thing is certain – planning and testing will be key to the successful implementation of a new working model.

To make the process easier to follow, and to provide a deeper insight into what to consider, we have prepared a simple <u>checklist</u>.

While you may find that not every step can be applied to your business, the checklist can be used as a comprehensive guide to key hybrid working considerations.

Each step will be detailed further in this guide, with additional tips and advice.

Hybrid Working Implementation Checklist

1. REVIEW EXISTING REMOTE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

- Gather needs from senior management for the business and its customers
- Agree on a strategy and a framework to roll out the project

2. MAKE YOUR PREMISES SAFE

- Ensure social distancing rules are in place e.g. a one way system, cleaning stations, etc…
- Review Health & Safety assessments for remote working, including Lone Working, DSE, equipment needs,…

3. UNDERSTAND YOUR EMPLOYEES' VIEWS OF HYBRID WORKING

- Listen to what your employees have to say using surveys / focus groups
- Ask for volunteers to take part in a 'Back to the Office' test trial

4. SET CLEAR AND EQUAL PRACTICES FOR REMOTE AND OFFICE TEAMS

- Consider equivalent benefits for remote staff
- Make sure both teams understand how to keep communication consistent

5. ENSURE APPROPRIATE ACCESS TO EQUIPMENT AND IT SUPPORT

- Besides broadband and other IT support, think about physical aspects such as stationery and office furniture
- Run regular training to keep teams updated on IT and office support

6. CONDUCT ONGOING WELLBEING MANAGEMENT

- Each employee is different and requires individual attention – listening is key
- Review case by case for reluctant or resistant employees, and agree alternative options if necessary

7. COMMUNICATE CLEAR AND OFFICIAL 'RETURN TO WORK' RULES

- Adapt HR procedures to enable effective remote management (performance management, catch ups, inductions, etc.)
- Review and sign new employment contracts reflecting new terms – include a trial period
- Set clear rules regarding days in the office and expectations

8. BE ACTIVE, BE PRESENT, BE SUPPORTIVE

- Facilitate regular catch ups and activities
- Organise feedback channels

9. REVIEW NEW POLICIES AND FOLLOW UP

- Be realistic – understand that the new policies and working arrangements might need to be updated or improved to keep staff safe and happy.
- Keep in mind that there is no such thing as too much communication!

Steps to Implement Hybrid Working

1. Review existing remote working arrangements

By now, your HR and Senior Management team should have a clear idea of how remote working has impacted on your productivity as an organisation, and the resulting pros and cons for the business and its customers.

It is now important to gather each department's feedback and needs, e.g. understanding who should come back to the office first, any new responsibilities and role clarification, measures already put in place to facilitate remote working, what worked well and what didn't.

Once you have collated this feedback, you can agree on an overall strategy together, and then develop supporting guidance to reflect it.

2. Make your premises safe

It is your responsibility to make sure your premises are Covid secure, and that staff can feel safe once they return to work.

Consider making changes to your working space, such as a one-way system, clear entry and exit points, free desks, hand sanitiser stations, and reduced communal areas, to keep social distancing rules in place and consistent.

You may also have to agree on new shift patterns and new health and safety practices to support the changes.

Full risk assessments must be conducted for people working from home, and you must provide help if needed.

Try to create a fun working environment in which people can feel productive and continue interacting with each other in ways they couldn't achieve at home.

This could involve regular catch ups, Friday lunch gatherings, or regular free food and drinks. Your employees should feel that coming to the office means joining a collaborative and

social environment, rather than just 'going to work'.

3. Understand your employees' views of hybrid working

Do not assume that just because lockdown restrictions have been eased or lifted, your staff will be ready to return to work without any concerns.

Be mindful that some will be eager to return to the office, while others will feel anxious about issues like commuting via public transport, or unvaccinated colleagues.

Each employee is unique, and it will require a level of attention and understanding from your organisation to maintain their loyalty, wellbeing and levels of productivity.

Offer your employees a full say on proposed options, or discuss your initial thoughts and listen to their experiences about remote working before you propose any new working practices. You could learn that some important points have been missed in your original approach.

Depending on the size of your organisation, gathering feedback may take the form of a staff survey, a one-to-one discussion between manager and employee, a focus group, or a more formal committee representative meeting.

Whatever method you decide to put in place, always remember that listening is key. Some employees might like to be part of the first to return to the office for a 'Test Trial'.

4. Set clear and equal practices for remote and office teams

One of the most important things you can do when considering hybrid working is to strengthen its foundations – your company culture. Therefore, it is crucial that you keep working on providing equal practices and benefits for both teams. Bear in mind that it may not be possible for all staff to work remotely, so it will be important to consider other flexible opportunities and positive new opportunities for them.

Examples include designating 'out of hours' email restrictions for people working from home, so they have the chance to switch off at the end of their day, or providing free coupons / discounts for food and drinks, while people in the office get free lunches.

You could also create 'wellbeing' guidelines for remote workers, highlighting the importance of breaks, set working hours, and activities to stay productive.

Your overriding objective should be for both teams to understand what is required from them, as well as the tools and support they can rely on to help them stay in touch.

In other words, don't allow a corrosive 'them and us' mindset to develop.

5. Ensure appropriate access to equipment and IT support

Office-based employees have immediate access to their Line Manager, the IT support team, and a variety of productivity-enhancing equipment at their desks.

Unfortunately, all this is rarely the case when employees work remotely, and these employees can get frustrated very quickly if they cannot access internal folders, or their broadband is slow.

Set a list of mandatory and additional equipment, stationery, and other Health and Safety measures to maximise the home or remote working space for your employees. Creating a priority helpline or chat room with the IT support team could be an appreciated bonus.

Do not forget that since the pandemic, virtual and digital are part of the standard daily routine for employees.

Ask yourself: what platforms or software are the most efficient to keep both teams in contact? Do teams require training? When should you set up regular updates? Consider starting mobile group chats to provide an added sense of community.

Finally, think about putting in place appropriate security measures to ensure system and data integrity even when no employees are on site**.**

6. Conduct ongoing wellbeing management

There could be a number of reasons why some employees might feel concerned or reluctant to return to work.

These include:

- Not being fully vaccinated
- Family or close friends experiencing Covid-19-related issues
- Feeling anxious about commuting via public transport
- Uncertainty about colleagues who have decided not to be vaccinated, or who have visited at-risk countries
- Anxiety about safety measures in place
- Concerns over sending children to out of school childcare
- Worries about delegating caring responsibilities

Each individual reason must be listened to carefully and taken seriously, so that you are best able to find a solution that works for both parties.

If an employee is more reluctant and refuses to return to work, alternative options such as unpaid leave, part time working, continued furlough, or a permanent working from home policy could be explored.

7. Communicate clear and official 'return to work' rules

Once all new information and feedback have been gathered, it is important to consider if the new working policy and practices will be incorporated into your existing HR handbook, or if you would rather create a separate guide for hybrid working.

Regardless, certain legal implications and procedures must be highlighted, e.g. updating existing contracts, insurance for equipment used at home, locations covered by remote work, updating working hours, other flexible working options, health and safety, data and IT security protection, and so on.

Informality should not be an option, as both the company and its employees must understand the new working conditions and the changes related to them.

Official documents to be signed and agreed by both parties will help to provide clarity, and avoid any future issues.

8. Be active, be present, be supportive

When (almost!) everything is set up, consider that staying in touch is likely to become the most challenging part of your new hybrid working process.

Good communication has to be at the heart of the action, and HR team and managers alike must ensure that each individual employee feels involved and included wherever they are working from.

Creating a routine in which both office-based and remote teams can interact will help to instil a sense of community.

For example:

- Set weekly virtual calls during lunch breaks, to catch up on work and social topics
- Create challenges, competitions or quizzes to enhance team spirit and team building
- Organise Friday afternoon drinks to talk about weekend activities
- Provide an internal forum in which employees can share their latest updates i.e. pictures, funny stories, etc.

Employees must also feel encouraged and supported to come up with new suggestions and new principles for the hybrid working model themselves.
As an example, a suggestion box in the office can be provided to collect comments while forums or webpages can be set up to gather feedback from remote staff.
Remember that your employees will live the agreed process day-to-day, so their feedback must help determine what should be improved, reviewed, or even removed.

9. Review new policies and follow up

As with any new strategy or large-scale project, there are always lessons to be learned from experience. So, don't feel frustrated if you don't get it right straight away!

Three to six months is a good amount of time to schedule follow up activity with your employees, to determine their experiences in that first period of change.

It is always easier and better to act upon feedback from the beginning, rather than doggedly sticking with a model that isn't working, just because it is now too late or difficult to change.

Conclusion

2020 took the world by storm, and all sectors, businesses, large organisations and small companies alike had no choice but to adapt and evolve in unchartered territories.
2021 has provided a sense of hope and improvement, that our working lives can co-exist more harmoniously with time spent at home.

Hybrid working is proof that companies can provide the best of both worlds to their employees, and that working together virtually or face-to-face will bring out the best in everyone – as long as clear and appropriate practices are put in place.
Most employees still enjoy the social interactions that work provide, and some have missed being in the office. However, the majority of people don't want to be back at work so much that they compromise on other comforts, such as a lighter commute and more time at home.

When devising your hybrid working model, it may be tempting to let people choose what they want to do. After all, they have managed well since March 2020, haven't they? However, it is essential for businesses to take charge of resetting their individual 'new normal' whilst taking into account other social factors within their business.

As a final note, here are three considerations that illustrate why ownership of the rules is key for each organisation:

- You may have employees coming in to work, only to be met with a full schedule of Zoom calls with colleagues working at home – what's the point?
- Women are often the primary carers at home (although this is changing, albeit slowly) – so, would more women feel pressured to stay home and risk being under-represented in the office? In this case, what might happen to their career and salary progression?

- With senior management spending more time in meetings than other employees, what would happen if they were coming into the office every day? Would other employees continue working from home, or might they be tempted to follow suit?

If you need support in designing or implementing a hybrid working model, or you have any questions regarding this guide, please feel free to contact me at
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