

Understanding healthy remote and hybrid work: developing a framework for practitioners

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1. Introduction

As a mitigation against the spread of Covid-19 the government mandated working from home resulting in an unprecedented level of remote work (also known as ‘teleworking’). By the end of April 2020 46% of the UK working population was working from home compared to just 5% who worked mainly from home in December 2019 (ONS 2020). Similar patterns were observed globally.

Prior to the pandemic the adoption of flexible working practices had been slow. Remote work had grown by only three percentage points in the 40 years prior to 2020 (Felstead and Reuschke (2021). However, early into what became known as the ‘great working from home experiment’ (Bloomberg, 2020) research identified a strong employee preference for future remote work (Alexander et al, 2021; ONS, 2021, Taneja et al, 2021, Chung et al, 2020). The majority of employees identified a preference for a hybrid work arrangement – a combination of office and home working (Barrero et al, 2021). Key drivers of this emerging remote work preference included the ability to spend more time with family and the opportunity to reduce commuting time (Chung et al, 2020). One estimated suggests that by the end of 2022 up to 30% of all full paid working days will be worked from home (Bloom et al, 2022).

These new ways of working present challenges and opportunities for organisations and their employees, and human resources professionals and people managers in particular. The extant literature currently draws predominantly from a time when remote work was undertaken by the minority and often limited to specific job roles, or from during the pandemic when homeworking was enforced and taking place during a time of global crisis and personal restrictions. The impacts of hybrid work (which is a new concept at scale) are currently unknown, presenting a broad scope for future research, including the need to understand the steps that must be taken to mitigate any potential downsides to hybrid work for (Felstead, 2022). The proposed study will focus on the issue of employee wellbeing in hybrid work.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between remote work and wellbeing is complicated. As highlighted in the poster accompanying this extract, extant research has identified both positive influences of remote work on health and wellbeing as well as negative ones. A range of factors influence the extent to which remote work is a positive or negative influence on employee wellbeing including personality type (Clarke et al, 2012) preference for home/work segmentation (Nippert-Eng, 1995), gender (Song and Gao, 2019) and work design (Kossek and Lautsch, 2009).

Remote work has been found to improve opportunities to spend time with family and reduce commuting (Chung et al, 2021), a reduction in exhaustion (Sardeshmukh et al, 2012) and day to day positive emotions (Anderson et al, 2014). It has also been identified as a method for supporting disabled employees in managing their health and wellbeing (Taylor et al, 2022). In contrast, remote work has also been found to increase the risk of musculoskeletal issues (Jodi et al, 2022), increased stress (Song and Gao, 2019), social isolation and negative emotions (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003) and is associated

with sedentary behaviour (Almarcha, 2021). Some facets of wellbeing, such as work life balance have the potential to be influenced positively and negatively as a result of remote working (Golden, 2021).

Despite this complexity, four out of five organisations who intend to introduce or increase opportunities to work in a hybrid way post pandemic include the potential to improve employee wellbeing as a key reason for implementation (ONS, 2022).

3. Research Objectives

Kossek and Lautsch (2009) identify the need for ‘good teleworking’, defining it as ‘teleworking where use is likely to be related to favourable outcomes for the workers’. From a wellbeing perspective this research will aim to support good teleworking and hybrid work by:

- Developing a detailed understanding of the positive and negative impacts of hybrid forms of remote work on employee wellbeing as identified by previous research.
- Exploring the experiences and perspectives of employees undertaking hybrid work and identifying the extent to which hybrid workers believe that their subjective wellbeing is influenced positively or negatively by undertaking a hybrid working pattern.
- Developing an understanding of how organisations are supporting the wellbeing of hybrid workers and the effectiveness of these approaches.
- Developing an organisational framework to ensure that hybrid work is healthy work.

4. Research Methods

This study will take a multi-method qualitative approach to understanding the complexities of wellbeing whilst working in a hybrid way. Stage one will consist of both a qualitative survey of and semi-structured interviews with hybrid workers which will be analysed thematically, followed by a focus group of selected HR professionals. Results will be triangulated to support the development of the framework, a validation of which will take place with a group of senior HR leaders.

5. Practical importance of the study

Hybrid forms of remote work are predicted to increase and become a core feature of the labour market. Employee wellbeing is a complex issue, and currently mental health conditions account for 50% of work related ill-health cases (HSE, 2021). This study will advance knowledge on the issue of employee wellbeing and remote work in a post-pandemic context where remote work is taking place at higher levels. The development of this framework will enable organisations (and their Human Resources professionals and people managers) to both manage and mitigate the potential for negative impacts upon employee wellbeing, providing both insight and practical opportunities for action.

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