THE JOURNEY TO HYBRID WORKING

TWELVE CONSIDERATIONS

A Poly report in partnership with Worktech Academy
INTRODUCTION

As the world of work shifts on its axis, Poly is working with the research team at Worktech on a rolling program to create new thinking, define the main challenges and explore emerging opportunities around hybrid working. We would encourage our partners and customers to become involved in this work. The picture is changing quickly and in bringing people, spaces and technology together to form a new corporate landscape for hybrid work, there is much to discover.

In this scene-setting whitepaper, we trace the contours of this emerging landscape through an examination of twelve key things that companies will need to consider on the journey to hybrid working. Hybrid is a complex new model which constitutes a fundamental challenge to how we will work in the future. This paper charts some of the pivotal decision points and dichotomies that employers will face en route to making a successful transition. Many of the issues and themes raised here will be addressed in subsequent phases of our collaboration with Worktech as we seek to provide answers to the questions about hybrid working that everyone is talking about right now.
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The Journey To Hybrid Working

HYBRID IS HAPPENING, AT LAST

More than two years on from the start of the global pandemic, the developing story around the future of work is all about hybrid. After an initial phase of speculation and conjecture about what hybrid working might look like – and some early experiments with mixed results – organizations around the world are now getting down to serious strategy work to make hybrid happen as a long-term option.

According to Microsoft’s latest Work Trends Index, launched in late March 2022, we are now passing the point of no return on the journey to hybrid working. The Index is based on a large-scale study of 31,000 people in 31 countries, with an additional analysis of productivity signals in Microsoft 365 and labor trends on LinkedIn. It reports that 38 percent of the workforce are now hybrid workers (an increase of seven points on 2021) and that more than half of all workers (53 percent) are likely to consider transitioning to hybrid this year.

This means we have reached an inflection point in how we should view hybrid working, not as a coming thing but as an increasingly permanent fixture. Other studies suggest a similar picture. Worktech’s own survey of its Academy membership of workplace professionals in January 2022 was unequivocal: more than two-thirds (68 percent) said hybrid working would have a major or extreme impact on work and the workplace in 2022; only 6 percent said there would be little or no impact.

And Poly’s Global Segmentation Research 2021 showed how work locations are set to be more flexible with more work from home, more use of coworking spaces and less time in the office.

So, there is a growing consensus that hybrid is here, but there is also a general understanding that making the new model work will not be easy. There are many moving parts and some organizations are struggling to implement the right strategic approach.

According to research by Poly, six out of ten firms believe they will lose new and existing talent if they do not figure out hybrid work, but less than half of all organizations are fully prepared with a strategy for hybrid working and 37 percent are only prepared in the short term.

Here we map the journey to hybrid working through twelve considerations that companies will need to resolve to achieve a successful transition, addressing the dichotomies and decisions points that sit along the way.

WORKTECH Academy survey of members 2022
To what extent do you think hybrid working will impact work and the workplace in 2022?

- Major Impact 55%
- Moderate Impact 26%
- Extreme Impact 13%
- Little Impact 5%
- No Impact 1%
1. RETURNERS V. CHOICE-GIVERS

It is important to acknowledge at the outset the different and diametrically opposed positions that large employers have taken in response to hybrid working. Hybrid sits on a spectrum. Some companies are ‘hardly hybrid’ while other are ‘hyper hybrid’. Most firms sit somewhere in the middle and are constantly shifting their position.

If you work in finance or law, it’s quite possible you have already been mandated to return to the office full-time. These employers are ‘resolute returners’ worried about the impact of remote work on culture, collaboration and training. They’re keen to get back to the over-the-shoulder mentoring of junior staff by senior partners. Big US banks such as Goldman Sachs have led the charge on this approach.

But if you work in technology or life sciences, it’s likely that you’ve been given more freedom to work the way you choose. These employers are ‘choice champions’ who are learning to trust their people to make the right decisions on how best to get work done. Companies in software and social media, such as Twitter, Slack and Salesforce, have been the early movers on giving more autonomy.

Between the returners and the choice-givers, there are many different permutations. Sometimes different divisions of the same company will display opposing hybrid traits. The challenge is in providing the right tools, setting and support that can adapt to highly populated offices at one end of the spectrum and highly distributed teams at the other. Getting the formula right is likely to bring huge benefits in terms of meeting business objectives in a fast-changing environment. Implemented properly, hybrid working can give companies greater agility and resilience in volatile markets as well as improve talent attraction and retention.
2. IN-PERSON V. DIGITAL PRESENCE

As workplaces become more flexible and our ability to work from anywhere more commonplace, the traditional idea of workplace ‘presence’ is shifting. The implementation of hybrid working has seen a tension arise between physical and digital presence in the workplace – particularly around the equality of experience.

Before COVID-19, most work activities were based on co-location in physical space. In many cases, career advancement and building professional networks were generally considered to depend entirely on physical presence in the workplace for a mandated period of time – in plain sight of managers and senior leadership. In a recent survey by Poly of over 2,500 corporate decision makers, 60 percent agreed that if employees are not in the office, they will not build the relationships they need to progress in their career.

For digital or remote employees to compete against physical presenteeism they must be constantly available to their teammates and leaders, otherwise they are perceived as being absent. And when they are available to collaborate in hybrid meetings, digital participants are often met with a second-class experience whereby their audio or visual presence in the meeting is overshadowed in the physical space by poor meeting room infrastructure.

A recent survey of 500 corporate employees by Australian flexible workspace provider Hub Australia found that almost one in four employees never feel connected to the workplace when they work virtually. There is a vital opportunity now for organizations to invest in their culture and technology to bridge the experience gap between physical and digital presence. While digital collaboration tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams have played a significant role in making hybrid collaboration possible, investment in the right hardware technology such as speakers, headsets and cameras will be critical.
At the start of a prolonged global health crisis, corporate attention pivoted towards supporting the mental and physical wellbeing of employees. Now, as the immediate dangers of COVID-19 subside, employee’s perception of their organization caring about their wellbeing has dropped to the lowest percentage in nearly a decade, according to new survey results from Gallup based on 15,000 US employees.

Hybrid working has offered many opportunities to protect and support employee wellbeing through flexible hours and improving work-life balance. But it has also eroded the boundaries of ‘traditional’ working hours. The absence of guidelines has created a culture whereby the employee is ‘always on’.

Results from Poly’s own survey found that half of organizations (49 percent) do not take steps to prevent people feeling like they need to be always on. Almost half of the respondents commented that there is an unhealthy culture of overworking at their company, and two-thirds (67 percent) said that ‘the move from the traditional 9-5 towards anytime working means that we have a moral duty to protect our employees from working too much’.

Microsoft data clearly shows an increase in the working day and a rise in after-hours work. The average user of Microsoft Teams, for example, has spent 252 percent more time in online meetings than before the pandemic in February 2020. The challenge is to balance wellbeing with the expectation of digital employees to be constantly available.

More generally, organizations will need to clearly outline their expectations regarding the etiquette of communication in a hybrid world of work where time and place are increasingly blurred and there is an absence of cultural norms. This will involve greater investment in digital tools to schedule work times, as well as a greater focus on culture, trust and cooperation – a new etiquette of behavior that meets the needs of both office-based and remote participants in the workplace.
One of the most contentious challenges of hybrid working for many organizations is defining what their hybrid model should look like. The global pandemic has brought about a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reset work, but many companies are struggling to press the reset button. Poly’s research study, Recruit, Retain and Grow, reveals that nearly 60 percent of firms believe they will lose new and existing employees if they don’t figure out hybrid work.

Research from Lynda Gratton, Professor of Management Practice at London Business School, has framed new working practices in a model which highlights the relationship between time and place.

As the matrix here shows, before the pandemic companies were already experimenting with offering their people more flexibility in where they work, or more flexible hours, but very few were fully embracing hybrid working which combines both dimensions. The shift from the traditional 9-5 office, which constrained employees in terms of both time and place, to a hybrid ‘anytime, anywhere’ approach can boost productivity and employee satisfaction. But time and place need to be in sync.

Lynda Gratton’s model works on the basis of a close understanding of employee preferences through a combination of surveys, interviews and work personas, which is essential to ensure that any hybrid model chosen will be a good fit. Organizations should also pay close attention to jobs and tasks, projects and workflows to make hybrid a success, as not every role has the capability of being truly flexible.
Hybrid working not only reshapes time and place – it also redraws the rules of collaboration between office-based and remote workers. Traditional collaboration in the office building was typically formal, scheduled and synchronous – happening at the same time with everyone physically present in meetings, workshops and so on. The hybrid model is set to increase asynchronous collaboration which occurs more informally at different times across different time zones with a mix of physically present and remote participants. This type of ad hoc collaboration will require special planning and protocols to be effective.

Everyone knows from experience that some of the most fruitful collaborative exchanges happen at the fringes of the formal meeting – whether that meeting is in-person or hybrid. Informal conversations over coffee or lunch can be highly productive, so how can video and audio technology expand its repertoire to bring people together in an informal ‘social space’ (rather than a formal meeting) when they are not co-located?

Innovation in this area, whether always-on video or spatial audio, will be critical.

A further tension arises between routine collaborative tasks such as reporting, which can be formally organized, and creative tasks such as developing new ideas and products, which can often rely on iteration, improvisation and informality to succeed. Mapped against the shifting balance between synchronous and asynchronous activity, this dichotomy exposes the need for careful understanding of how different employees behave and perform in the workplace.

Poly’s work in developing personas over several years has revealed insights into six different collaborative workstyles – the ‘office communicator’, for example, requires only a third of the communication devices needed by the ‘connected executive’ and operates at a lower intensity of communication over fewer work settings. When it comes to collaboration, know your workforce is the mantra.
One of the standard and uncontested responses to hybrid working is that the central office becomes a hub for collaboration while the home or third space provides the setting for solo work tasks. The idea is that employees attend the workplace solely for the vibe, the connection to culture and brand, and the opportunity to feed off the energy of colleagues and be together. Deep, focused work is done alone outside the office.

But while at least some of that thinking rings true, hybrid working is more complex. There is growing evidence to suggest that people returning to the office want privacy for solo work as well as settings for collaboration. According to a Steelcase survey of almost 5,000 global office workers across 11 countries, four of the five top priorities for employees in the workplace were related to privacy and places to do individual work. These priorities included single-person enclaves for video conferencing and workstations with full or partial enclosures. A Gensler Research Institute study of 2,300 office workers tells a similar story – six out of ten employees would like an assigned desk to carry out work tasks.

The message is clear: offices need a variety of spaces to meet a wider variety of needs than at first anticipated (see framework above). Open, high-energy settings for collaboration and communication (‘together’ space) must co-exist with closed, calm areas for concentration and contemplation (‘alone’ space). This complex landscape needs close attention in terms of technology enablement so that people can focus, connect or learn. Some spaces might be high tech and high intensity, others the opposite.
Many organizations have made investments to improve the physical comfort and wellbeing of employees returning to the office through the installation of new ventilation systems, plexiglass partitions and social distancing signs. But fewer have invested in the overall psychological comfort of their hybrid workforce in terms of enhancing trust, belonging, identity and relationships.

The flexibility offered by hybrid working can enhance wellbeing, but it comes with a compromise. According to data from the US job seeker website Indeed, flexible working has had a detrimental on workers' sense of belonging because they are no longer experiencing social encounters with colleagues. A report by real estate service firm JLL describes a ‘shadow pandemic’ which refers to the long-lasting psychological impacts of the pandemic on mental health. There is a growing need for organizations to not only keep their employees physically safe, but also to protect their mental wellbeing and sense of psychological comfort.

As hybrid models develop, the conversation around employee wellbeing will intensify. While employees might feel physically comfortable in their home environment, they might lack elements of psychological comfort such as sense of belonging and identity within the company. Hybrid work environments will need to consider both physical and psychological comfort – this means investing in the right digital tools for people to extend their sense of purpose and belonging outside the physical office boundaries.
Diversity and inclusion – now on the radar of most companies following the COVID-19 pandemic – are usually bracketed together or used interchangeably. But they actually mean different things and can even be in tension with each other in the hybrid era.

Diversity is about the make-up of the workforce, measuring characteristics that differentiate one person from another, whether along the lines of age, ability, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Inclusion is about creating a work environment in which everyone feels welcomed and valued irrespective of their differences. Or as Kay Sargent, Director of Workplace at US architects HOK, told a Worktech conference in 2021: ‘Diversity is about counting the people, but inclusion is about making the people count.’

Diversity, then, can be described as the ‘what’ and inclusion as the ‘how’. It remains possible to create a workplace that is diverse but not necessarily inclusive of that diverse workforce. Conversely, some offices are inclusive by design but the workforce itself is not diverse. Hybrid complicates the picture because we know that some groups in the workforce – women, for example, or people from certain ethnic backgrounds – suffered a worse experience with remote and home working in the pandemic than other groups. A recent survey by New Zealand national bank ASB and the Institute of Economic Research found that women are largely still expected to take on responsibility for the bulk of domestic chores and childcare while maintaining a full-time paid job while working from home. This research underlines the raw and unequal deal women have faced over the past two years. Equality of experience lies at the heart of an inclusive organization, and requires real intent with the right tools and systems so that everyone feels included irrespective of their diverse characteristics.
While organizations traditionally operated in operational silos, the complexity and gravity of hybrid working has forced workplace decision-makers from IT, HR and real estate departments to come together to take ownership of the entire process. It cannot just be an IT issue but a business decision driven by the company’s most senior leaders and involving all the key departments working in unison.

The roles of IT, HR and real estate are now entering a period of flux, and new job titles such as Chief Experience Officer (CXO) or Chief Happiness Officer are entering the lexicon. Hybrid working sets a new priority for all decision makers within IT, HR and real estate as they need to collaborate closely to promote team efficiency and collaboration and maximize fairness and equality across all work channels.

HR needs to have a fundamental understanding of the workforce to inform what spaces and technologies are required to make employees feel comfortable, safe and productive. Real estate and HR teams need to work with full transparency on office lease requirements and the new structure and personas of the hybrid workforce, while digital teams need to underpin all decisions to ensure flexible work is effective. Collecting data on how different people within the hybrid workforce behave, alongside the technologies they use and spaces they occupy, will form part of a new holistic approach to hybrid.

A survey conducted by Poly highlighted that more than three-quarters of decision makers (77 percent) agreed that the pandemic had forced their organization to get smarter about how they use space, people and technology. Hybrid is about work as a continuum of the behavioral, physical digital and behavioral, so facilities, IT executives and HR teams need to work from the same playbook. Is it time to replace these departments with a single unified service department for employee experience?
The global pandemic allowed employees to design their working day around their personal commitments and preferences. By nature, the rise of hybrid working has personalized the workplace experience and shifted the balance of control from employer to employee. This leaves employers with a key decision to make — to create a standardized approach to hybrid or give employees the levers to create the workday that’s just right for them?

One of the biggest areas of contention is the equality and fairness of this process. A standardized approach means that every employee is on the same playing field, whereas allowing employees complete choice over the spaces and technology they use and the hours they work could lead to disparities between employees of different levels and positions.

The equality question is particularly critical in relation to technology. Some organizations have opted to give employees a budget to choose their own tech. This approach allows employees to dip into the consumer market for their professional equipment, but what is popular in the consumer market is not always most beneficial for the business. Not only do a myriad of different technologies cause a challenge for IT teams to manage, but they can also create inequalities in how employees work and collaborate.

Personalization of work is increasingly becoming an expectation of hybrid work and organizations who ignore this shift could lose out on talent. So, there is a balance to strike between being prescriptive and allowing employees an element of choice and personalization. Nobody said this would be easy.
As hybrid working gives employees more choice in terms of where and how they work, the purpose of the office is set for redefinition. So too are the metrics by which office space is valued. The tried-and-trusted formula of renting space on the basis of how many people can be fitted into how many square feet is deeply entrenched in the real estate industry. But is office headcount still an accurate measure given new, more distributed ways of working?

Space-efficiency metrics might reflect who is present in the workplace but fail to capture what people actually do at work and how they perform – such measures don’t calculate how office space contributes to company culture, innovation and productivity, for example. Companies are now demanding a richer picture of office use beyond mathematical ratios of space occupancy and utilization as the sole determinants of workspace value.

There are calls to supplement space-efficiency metrics with more human-centric measures related to experience. These might include measures related to employee wellness, carbon or energy use reduction, learning, team performance and social interaction. As the efficiency-driven office is challenged by a vision of a more people-centered workplace focused on experience and service, organizations will want to develop expanded valuation metrics that give a better picture of what their office space is contributing to the business.
Many of the dichotomies and decision points discussed in this paper relate to the way that offices are set to be repurposed. No longer the dominant channel for working, the office is now viewed as one of several options for employees in a hybrid ecosystem of work encompassing a range of both physical and virtual settings. One can describe this transition in working life as moving from a monocentric model (having a single center) to a polycentric one (with several centers).

Polycentricity is evident in a range of fields, from chemistry to city planning. The polycentric city connects several urban nodes, such as London which has grown organically out of many towns and villages. Compare that with a monocentric North American grid city planned with a single downtown central business district. Already, the future value of the monocultural central business district is being questioned as developers eye up the desirability of more mixed-use districts and campuses. In the hybrid era, the polycentric approach, with its large and complicated web of interdependent relationships, will increasingly challenge the traditional monocentric corporate HQ.

Polycentric working is necessarily complex and demanding, and it asks that organizations think hard about the support infrastructure that will be required to ensure that hybrid working is a success: home internet, remote diagnostics and a myriad of end user tech options will be part of the story. A rethink will be needed on how employee support is organized and also some reallocation of budgets from real estate to IT.

Above all, polycentric working implies a richer and more expansive set of values and relationships. This vision is mirrored in Poly's 'all together' approach to providing the technologies, innovations and services that enable work to be democratized for people wherever they are located. Work equity will be central to seizing the opportunities of the hybrid model.
CONCLUSION

This scenesetting whitepaper has set out twelve things to consider on the journey to hybrid working. In summary, first it is important for organizations to examine where they plan to sit along the spectrum of hybrid working – are they ‘hardly hybrid’ mandating a return to the office for all, or ‘hyper hybrid’ advocating greater flexibility and choice?

Second, they should reassess what ‘presence’ means in the workplace and ensure that employees have the digital tools to feel ‘connected’ in the broadest sense when working remotely. Third, organizations should balance the ‘always-on’ aspect on the hybrid model against the need to protect employee wellbeing and guard against overwork – building culture is important here and a new digital etiquette should be set in the absence of established cultural norms.

Employers will need to match flexibility of place with flexibility of time – fitting different combinations to different job roles as part of a comprehensive approach to hybrid. There should also be a drive to facilitate collaboration in a way that expands the repertoire from the formal, routine and synchronous meetings of the traditional office to collaboration that is informal, creative and asynchronous across time zones.

The offices of newly hybrid organizations will need to provide a greater variety of settings for tasks ranging from collaboration to deep work– people will work together and alone. Companies should also aim to provide a level of psychological comfort for their employees, not just physical safety, and create workplaces that are truly inclusive and not just diverse.

It is important to ensure that company HR, IT and real estate functions can work more closely together and share a holistic vision on hybrid– this may entail some ‘rewiring’ of the organization. Another key decision to be made is whether employees are equipped with standardized technology, creating a level playing field, or are allowed to personalize tech to suit their own preferences.

In the hybrid model, companies will want to measure the value of office space in a new way – not just in terms of space efficiency and headcount per square meter, as in the past, but by using more experiential and human-centric metrics. The twelfth and final consideration on the journey to hybrid involves taking a polycentric rather than a monocentric approach to organizing work, accepting that there are now several centers for working, not just one, and there should be a rethink of the end user support infrastructure.

Addressing the various dichotomies and decision points identified in this paper is part of the journey to hybrid working. Poly intends to provide insights and solutions to help you chart your course every step of the way.

Learn how to achieve Meeting Equality across your organization, so all meeting participants can be heard with greater clarity and seen with equal power, no matter where they work.
SELECTED RESEARCH SOURCES

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