

HYBRID: WORKING IT OUT

Roundtable notes

Wednesday 28th June 2023

Introduction

On Wednesday 28th June 2023, 25 professionals from across Real Estate Balance's membership - representing a variety of job roles and types of organisations within the UK real estate sector - came together to discuss their successes and challenges relating to hybrid working.

It is a topic our members wanted us to look more closely at from a Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) perspective, and we decided that providing a forum where people can share their thoughts openly was a good place to start!

Our Industry Survey and NextGen Survey, both conducted in 2022, found that, broadly-speaking, hybrid working is viewed as overwhelmingly positive for work-life balance, mental health and productivity by employees, with access to development opportunities, the ability to connect with colleagues and a lack of social interaction its most challenging aspects.

As well as facilitating a conversation for our members to tackle some of these issues, the purpose of the online roundtables was to clarify our thinking around the dramatic societal and professional impacts the widespread adoption of hybrid working is having.

The discussions were enlightening and we came away with further food for thought as we develop more ways we can support our members with working out hybrid.

Many thanks to everyone who contributed to the conversation.

We hope these notes represent the insights you shared in three key areas:

- **Implementation**
- **Training and development**
- **The modern workplace**

The participants represent the Real Estate Balance members listed below. We have not attributed quotes or views to any individuals as we wanted everyone to be able to share their opinions in a safe space.

Barclays Real Estate / British Property Federation / Brookfield Properties / Canary Wharf Group / Clyde & Co / Cromwell Property Group / CMS / Davitt Jones Bould / Heitman / Herbert Smith Freehills / ING Media / Lambert Smith Hampton / Norton Rose Fulbright / Osborne Clarke / Savills Investment Management / Shepherd & Wedderburn / The Arch Company / Urban&Civic

Implementation

The roundtables revealed that there are different ways that companies are implementing hybrid working, with these ranging from giving people complete autonomy to decide what works for them to mandating specific days and more informal options in between.

One participant said:

“

Most people don't want to work from home all the time and if you give people their own agency to make their own decision, what will probably shake out is most people wanting to come in two or three days a week because they want the social connection.

”

Another participant, who works for a company without a formal hybrid working policy, said their organisation was struggling to implement it in a way which was productive and fair for all. Clarity was cited throughout these conversations as being a key driver of harmony with hybrid. They said:

“

Everyone must be in three days, two days, whatever it is, but there's always going to be that time when people kind of take advantage of that because they haven't got any kind of rules. They then feel it's all a bit wishy washy and don't really know what to do. We're in a bit of a no man's land at the moment.

”

The participants also discussed how hybrid has been implemented by their employers, which included having specific anchor days where everyone must be in the office and having a three-day minimum requirement which means employees are overlapping with every other colleague at least one day a week.

For one participant, having a specific hybrid working policy is vital. They said:

“

If you want to have fairness and clarity, you need to put in place a policy, and that can include it's three days a week for everyone, and that policy can also include things like exceptions that trainees need to spend a bit more time in the office and also their managers so that there is that transfer of knowledge.

”

They added that before the policy, some managers were relaxed on monitoring attendance and others were very strict, which led to a feeling of unfairness. One of the senior leaders in the conversation said that they often go to the office on Fridays because they mandate that day for only a few employees.

Training and development

The conversations touched upon generational divides when it comes to hybrid working, with most participants feeling that preference for hybrid over in-office or vice versa was most likely to be a matter of personal preferences and situations rather than strongly correlated to age.

Participants also engaged in debate about what was best for the training and development of young and also new employees. Some feel colleagues are missing out on crucial in-person learning opportunities in the early stages of their careers because of hybrid working. As one said:

“

One thing we focus a lot on is the concept of learning by osmosis. We all have an affinity with our own experience; I learned by sitting in a room with people and listening to what was going on and so it is natural for me to tend towards teaching people the way I learnt. In a hybrid environment you can't do that and so the teaching of juniors and bringing them on is something we think about a lot.

”

Another participant agreed:

“

Not overhearing conversations and seeing how people are dealing with others, in an osmotic way, and just sitting in your room and having access to these things through Teams, means that we're seeing a bit of a skills gap in our newly-qualified colleagues in terms of just dealing with clients, just being able to interact in a confident way when they're taken to client meetings and being in a room where you can't just be invisible.

”

One participant suggested manufacturing online watercooler moments in a hybrid world can help foster a sense of inclusion and belonging. They added:

“

We recruited a whole team during lock-down and they worked together as a cohesive, creative team. You just have to think differently about how you do your training and how you do your onboarding and make sure that they get the same sense of your culture and your values as an organisation if you were all in the office. That takes a bit more preparation and thought, but it's not impossible.

”

Another participant said that providing high-quality, high-volume feedback to junior members of staff was a problem which pre-dated hybrid working.

The modern workplace

Although participants had differing views on the lived experiences of hybrid working, there was a broad agreement that it is a positive development. As one said:

“

I genuinely think that for us as a family, this change has been completely transformative. It's really important that our children are brought up in a way where they are equally co-parented and there isn't the gender imbalance as it would have been, say, even five years ago.

”

Another participant said that having focus groups with employees has been beneficial in terms of how they do hybrid, with another adding that they provide training for how to make the most out of online meetings, for example.

One participant viewed hybrid working as a means of overcoming the so-called 'secret sector' perception that the industry has, and also as a way to widen access to the sector for people from non-traditional backgrounds. They said:

“

We have to think about balance. The hybrid way is a good solution as you can broaden out your offering to more people and maybe get people who wouldn't consider going into the industry and they can make it work, and it means that people get that work-life balance and also facetime in the office as well.

”

Participants also discussed some of the potential negative long-term developments of hybrid working. Although our research suggests people generally think of it as a positive for their mental health, some companies have found that more and more of their staff are reporting mental health issues. While this could be because of societal and workplace developments making it more acceptable to be open about such issues, it could also be because some employees live in properties ill-suited to hybrid working, lack social connection or benefit from the structure provided by fully in-person employment.

Some participants also questioned whether hybrid working will be of long-term benefit to women. Will women, who tend to be more likely to prefer hybrid working than men, be less visible and get fewer opportunities than their male counterparts? Will this hinder their career progression in the future?

One participant said that the most important thing that employers should aim to provide for their staff is reasonable flexibility – regardless whether their employees are fully in-person, hybrid workers or only work from home.

Additional resources

These resources were valuable to us as we considered how to support our members in making hybrid work and as background reading ahead of the conversations captured on the previous pages.

HBR - *5 Practices to Make Your Hybrid Workplace Inclusive*

<https://hbr.org/2021/08/5-practices-to-make-your-hybrid-workplace-inclusive>

McKinsey - *Hybrid work: making it work with your DEI strategy*

<https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/hybrid-work-making-it-fit-with-your-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-strategy>

HBR - *Don't Let Hybrid Work Set Back Your DEI Efforts*

<https://hbr.org/2021/10/dont-let-hybrid-work-set-back-your-dei-efforts>

FT - *Will hybrid working be a turning point for diversity and inclusion?*

<https://www.ftadviser.com/your-industry/2021/07/02/will-hybrid-working-be-a-turning-point-for-diversity-and-inclusion/?page=3>

Guardian - *Covid era graduates struggle with communication, say Deloitte and PwC*

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/may/02/covid-era-graduates-teamwork-deloitte-pwc?ref=biztoc.com>

Landsec - *The future office - rising expectations in a hybrid world*

[The future office - rising expectations in a hybrid world.pdf \(landsec.com\)](https://www.landsec.com/media/press-releases/2022/hybrid-hotchpotch-negatively-impacting-uk-workers)

CIPD - *Hybrid working practical guidance*

[hybrid-working-practical-guidance-2021_tcm18-103709.pdf \(cipd.org\)](https://www.cipd.org/~/media/insights/articles-reports/2021/hybrid-working-practical-guidance-2021_tcm18-103709.pdf)

Forbes - *The AI Revolution Transforming Hybrid And Remote Work And The Return To Office*

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/glebtsipursky/2023/05/09/the-ai-revolution-transforming-hybrid-and-remote-work-and-the-return-to-office/>

EY - *How to make hybrid working a success in your organisation*

https://www.ey.com/en_uk/workforce/how-to-make-hybrid-working-a-success-in-your-organisation

Landsec - *'Hybrid Hotchpotch' negatively impacting UK workers*

<https://www.landsec.com/media/press-releases/2022/hybrid-hotchpotch-negatively-impacting-uk-workers>

