

# How is hybrid working essential to attracting and retaining top talent?

## Great expectations – The rise of hybrid working

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust businesses into a frenzy. Many closed entirely and of those that didn't, only those with exemptions were permitted to stay on site. Others were forced to adapt to remote working, with staff logging in from their kitchen tables and adapting to virtual meetings.

Initially, this was a strange period for everyone. Against the broader backdrop of fear and uncertainty over a new virus, employers felt unprepared and untested that an entire workforce could operate remotely. Employees discovered a newfound experience of working alone and collaborating with colleagues in new ways.

People worked remotely from laptops, smartphones, and tablets, and many discovered they were more productive from home without the distractions of the office. The benefits started being touted from all directions: companies could save a lot of money by reducing their overheads without the need for sizable offices, staff were both more productive and able to implement a stronger work/life balance, and everybody was happy to save time and money from not commuting.

Instead of a predicted rush back to the office when lockdown restrictions eased, there was demand for remote work to stay - the [Dutch government even passed legislation](#) to establish remote work as a legal right.

This resulted in two new types of practice:

1. **On-site practices** – Workers return to the company premises, usually with prioritisation of who must attend, and safeguarding against contracting and spreading the COVID-19 virus.
2. **Remote practices** – Employees work from home, a coffee shop, or wherever they choose, collaborating through technology and finding space for focused work as well as mental well-being.

Life for office-based employees has never been more entwined, and we've witnessed a rise in hybrid working, where staff can split their time between the office and home. With higher productivity, lower expenses, the environmental benefit of fewer cars on the road, and more flexibility, it's no wonder that talent around the world is standing firm in wanting hybrid work to become the norm.

## For workers, it seems to be a no-brainer

Even with lower COVID-19 cases and restrictions being lifted, a lot of people don't want a permanent return to the office. Research quoted on [Forbes](#) from [FlexJobs](#) discovered:

- 58% of people said that they would absolutely look for a new job if they weren't allowed to continue working remotely in their current position
- 55% said their productivity increased while working remotely
- The top two benefits of remote work are not commuting (84%) and cost savings (75%)
- 65% want to work remotely full-time post-pandemic
- 33% prefer a hybrid work arrangement over going back to the office full time

For Sara Sutton, founder and CEO of FlexJobs, this outcome is expected: "I'm not surprised to see that more than half of people working remotely during the pandemic ... appreciate its benefits to such a strong degree that they would leave their current jobs in order to keep working from home."

## Flexibility versus collaboration

Although most employees are looking to continue working remotely, with [research from Microsoft showing that over 70%](#) of workers want flexible remote work options to continue, that doesn't mean people want to avoid human interaction. In fact, more than 65% of people crave more in-person time with their teams.

Nor is remote work without its challenges. FlexJobs found that these include:

- Issues with overworking or an inability to unplug
- Managing non-work-related distractions
- Disruption due to technology problems
- Unreliable WiFi connections
- Video meeting fatigue
- Real-time communication preferences
- Difficulty managing working relationships
- Difficulty with collaborating and interacting with colleagues

This highlights that the answer isn't to be fully office-based or fully remote, but to find a balance between the two. The flexibility needs to be there for individuals to choose when to go into the office so that collaborations, human interaction, and mental wellbeing can thrive and enrich productivity for businesses and their people.

Considering that the shift to remote work occurred rapidly and through necessity, rather than being a decision businesses gradually adopted on their own terms, disruption and trial-and-error are to be expected at first. [As Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella explained](#), "no area has undergone more rapid transformation than the way we work. Employee expectations are changing, and we will need to define productivity much more broadly".

## What does hybrid working look like for companies?

For both governments and organisations, navigating through an array of economic, operational and environmental challenges is now the priority. The solution to these challenges is in the hands of the workforce and the technology it has access to.

Organisations will have to evolve on-site and remote practices into a permanent way of getting the most from their people and attracting the best talent.

But how?

[Research from Gartner](#) champions a “third way” that provides businesses with a completely reinvented option to engage workers and increase productivity, rather than the “on-site plus remote” option that many companies defaulted to.

One of the standout recommendations from Gartner is that executives look to emerging technologies and new regulations that can be beneficial for both in-office and remote workers. They should also explore brand new opportunities on the horizon, the trend Gartner calls “hybrid everything.”

This involves merging the two types of practices into a “best of both worlds” situation. By taking the aspects of on-site and remote operations that work the most effectively, you can create a hybrid solution that satisfies employees and organisations alike.

## Moving forwards

The genie is out of the bottle and it can't be put back in. The global workforce has experienced working outside of the office and expects requirements to adapt.

With more than half of employees prepared to leave their job in search of location flexibility, businesses have no choice but to incorporate hybrid working if they want to attract and retain top talent. And if others drag their feet, the company that incorporates hybrid working will be a beacon for those dynamic workers looking for somewhere better. In other words, hybrid working arrangements have become a significant competitive advantage.

The advantage is also there for the business itself: Karin Kimbrough, Chief Economist at LinkedIn, [explains that hybrid working increases the talent pool](#) because companies aren't limited to hiring people in the local area. Rather, “companies in major cities can hire talent from underrepresented groups that may not have the means or desire to move to a big city. And in smaller cities, companies will now have access to talent that may have a different set of skills than they had before.”

Adding to this, [Accenture found](#) that companies gain a 7.4% revenue growth boost per year when people feel highly connected to each other, their leaders and their work - so creating a culture that reflects worker needs is powerful. Speaking of an “omni-connected experience” Accenture highlights four areas of focus:

- Modern leadership that leads with empathy, transparency and trustworthiness
- Nurturing a culture that prioritises purpose, authenticity and psychological safety
- Enabling the agile organisation by scaling new ways of working
- Empowering people through technology

Hybrid working has been embraced by companies of all sizes, including household names. Matt Sinnott, People and Property Director at Lloyds Banking Group, has said their mantra will be “Home, hybrid or hub” for empowering people to work most effectively. Joe Garner,

Chief Executive at Nationwide, has said employees are in control of where they work and they're invited "to 'locate for their day' depending on what they need to achieve." And Alan Jope, Chief Executive at Unilever, is forthright in saying that returning to five days a week in the office "seems very old-fashioned now."

## Final thoughts

Attracting and retaining top talent requires flexibility and hybrid working options to be part of the company's culture. Rigid commitment to the traditional office-based approach will repel a significant portion of the workforce, and making office attendance mandatory may even have a negative impact that leads to toxicity in the team.

To thrive in this new environment, it's important to recognise that hybrid working is a competitive advantage and to consider how your offering differs from your competition. Think about how the office can deliver the best possible experience for when people and teams need it. The office should be viewed as having a positive impact for when people need to visit it, rather than a mandatory request.

If you're looking into employee-driven solutions, discover how [Freespace](#) can help you build your hybrid work environment and develop a workplace culture that attracts and retains top talent. With our technology, you'll understand how spaces are being used, have a methodology for measuring usage, and understand what employees need to thrive in the office.