

# The nuts and bolts of hybrid working

A practical guide to the hotly discussed, but rarely defined, new way of working

It seems like everyone is talking about hybrid work - and they should be! It represents a huge change in the basic assumptions about what work looks like, and it's clear that it's here to stay. With the drumbeat of a different major company announcing its hybrid work plan every day, it's unsurprising that nine out of ten industry executives told McKinsey that they will combine remote and in-person working.<sup>1</sup> Something is missing, though, from the articles and company announcements: how to actually do it.

The past year has created a clear sense of the benefits and challenges of both onsite and remote work, even though individuals' experiences differ. When Microsoft surveyed its employees, some people listed "focus" and "well-being" as advantages of remote working whilst others listed the exact same advantages for onsite working.<sup>2</sup> Because the cultural discourse has been so focused around these discoveries, most people think they understand hybrid work. When they start planning or talking about details, however, they start to realize that they're not sure how this will work in practice.

Hybrid work is its own beast, distinct from entirely remote and entirely in-person. It has specific challenges and benefits, in addition to the remote and in-person ones that we've become familiar with since the spring of 2020. For this paper, we've assembled expert industry knowledge to offer some ideas about the nuts and bolts of hybrid working. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to hybrid work, but we've found several tools and ideas that we hope will be helpful.



<sup>1</sup> [www.wired.co.uk](http://www.wired.co.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [www.fastcompany.com](http://www.fastcompany.com)

## When to work where?

The key question for any hybrid work plan is why employees go to the office. What do employers want from in-person work? What do employees experience? (Hopefully, you can bring those two answers into alignment.) Is there a type of work that's better suited to the home? It differs from person to person, but there are some prevailing ideas.

Many proponents of hybrid work prefer their home office for focused work or calls. Many of the reported productivity gains from the beginning of the pandemic came from people who'd been distracted at the office getting to work in a space that was entirely their own. It's also not an effective use of space or time to have employees come in to do something they could better do at home. As Daniela Dexheimer, Senior Product Manager Collaboration Technologies at Sharp NEC Display Solutions Europe, pointed out: "It doesn't make sense for me to come to the office and just sit at my desk on one call after another. That should be a home day."

There is some work, however, that is difficult to replicate from the home office: collaboration, brainstorming and the small social interactions that build up to company culture. Dexheimer continued, "At Sharp/NEC, we want to go back to the office for the relationships. We're not concerned about productivity – in fact, statistics show that remote work can be better. We want to spend time with our colleagues again." Employers and researchers who are versed in hybrid working suggest that the primary role of the office is to facilitate in-person meetings, both structured and informal. Management should arrange their company's schedule, physical footprint and workstyle to build the office into a place for collaborative work.



## Let's talk about schedules (yes, schedules!)

Scheduling may seem like the most mundane of chores, but the decision of how to arrange your team's schedule will have a profound effect in a few different ways. Even before the pandemic, remote workers were vulnerable to proximity bias, in which their work went unseen when they did. Ad hoc or at-will hybrid scheduling could mean that some managers never see some of their team or team members don't see each other.

Proximity bias leaves companies vulnerable to cliques and silos, which have a damaging effect on culture, inclusion and creativity. Wired magazine, which has been investigating the phenomenon, points out that cliques lead to groupthink and influence gaps, which often disproportionately damage diversity and inclusion.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, anyone who's ever been on the outside of a group knows how drastically this kind of exclusion can affect morale and talent retention.

There is also significant evidence for the importance of what sociologists refer to as "weak ties", people who you know but don't regularly interact with. Interacting with colleagues that you don't work closely with can spark discoveries, as they are more likely to be working with different information or ideas.<sup>4</sup> Major innovator and Nobel laureate breeding ground Bell Labs was literally designed to encourage contact between different specialities.



They didn't just compose working groups out of experts in different fields, but they also built an HQ that physically brought people together.<sup>5</sup>

It's important to thoughtfully find a balance that will allow hybrid employees some freedom whilst also ensuring that there is communication and collaboration both between and across teams. It may mean setting some structure to the hybrid workflow, but it will be better for the company in the long run. As Rutger Barczuk, Head of Talent Development at KPN, put it: "We look for a way of working that is effective for all parties. 100% satisfaction is maybe not possible, but 80% is good."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> [www.wired.co.uk](http://www.wired.co.uk)

<sup>5</sup> [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

<sup>4</sup> [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)

<sup>6</sup> [www.fd.nl](http://www.fd.nl)

## What does hybrid scheduling look like?

There's a pretty wide range of hybrid schedules. A lot of current conversations are debating about whether it should be two days at home and three at the office or vice versa, but there's no reason it has to be either of those two. TUI currently asks just one day a month from its staff,<sup>7</sup> though it's hard to imagine that would facilitate enough connections between weak ties. If you make a system that's easy to navigate, you can set guidelines and let your teams fine-tune for themselves.



One popular solution is setting a meeting-free day for focused work and/or a meeting-heavy day. That gives people a default and pushes everyone's schedule traffic to the same day. One popular method is to make Monday an in-office day and start the week with a team check-in. Some people do quick stand-up meetings whilst others give extra time for socialising, brainstorming and information-sharing.

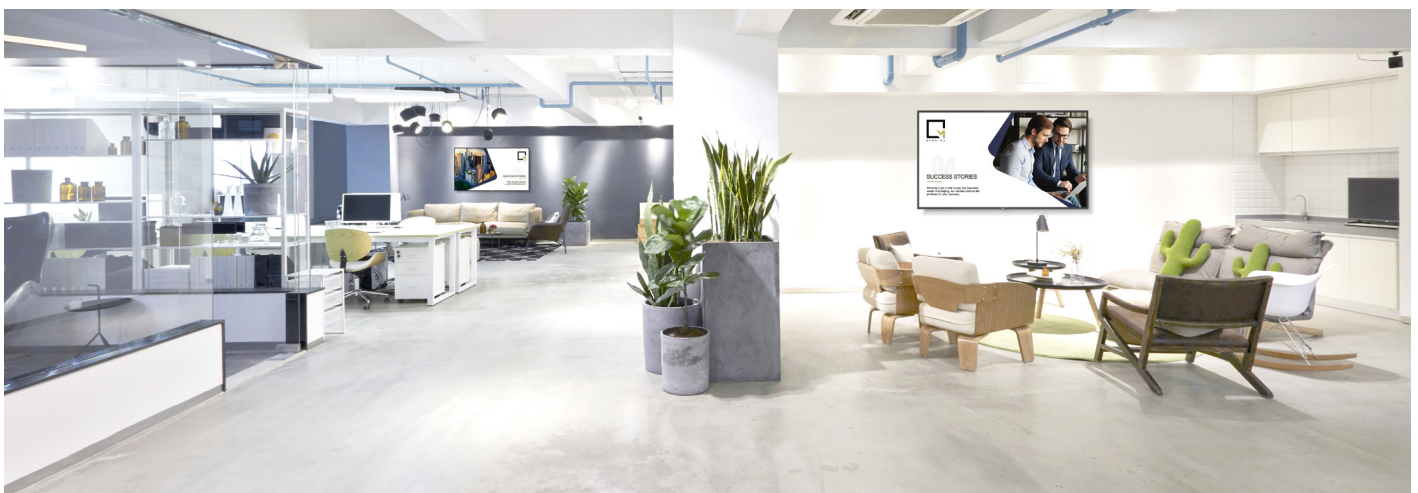
Several different software solutions help teams keep schedules updated. This is especially important if a company reduces its footprint and switches to hot-desking. As Dexheimer noted, "I don't want to commute to the office only to find there's no free desk and end up

back at the kitchen table!" It's important to have a system in place so that employees aren't stuck exchanging messages to find out who's going to be where. They need a place they can check as their week changes.

There is a worry that this software could gum up an already crowded landscape. One study found that the average full-time worker spends 10 hours per month on digital communication, with 52% using four or more digital tools in the average workday.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of team scheduling software, companies need to streamline their communication tools as much as possible. There's nothing worse than wading through your email, Slack, Zoom, Teams and WhatsApp when you're trying to find time-sensitive information.

## The physical office

The layout of the office and its physical design can and should be adapted to reflect this new orientation. If the goal of the office is to create collaboration and community, then the office should have spaces to facilitate that. It's no longer enough to have a coffee pot in the corner. Companies need to think carefully about designing spaces to encourage socialising and collaborating.



One way to do that is through spaces that are clearly set up to mimic social spaces, such as coffee houses or cafés. Another is to use information displays to spread culture as well as information. Many companies have been using displays in the common areas to spread pandemic information, internal communication and company messaging, but that's just the beginning of what they can do. They can help get people motivated, share good results and let people know more about their colleagues.

<sup>7</sup> [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com)

<sup>8</sup> [www.wired.co.uk](http://www.wired.co.uk)

## Meeting spaces

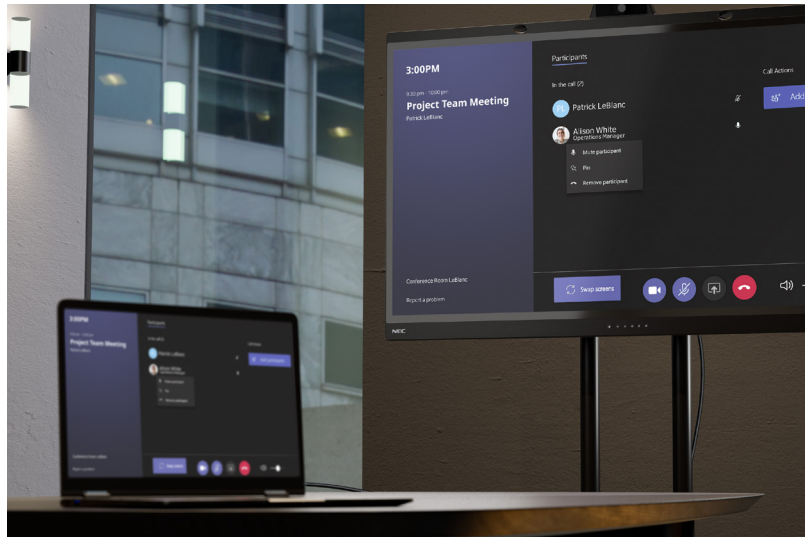
Meeting and collaboration spaces play a large role in the hybrid office, though their design varies by office. It could mean lots of breakout rooms for brainstorming. It could mean big conference rooms for large meetings. Both will need technology to encourage communication and collaboration.



The most important factor of this technology is its ease of use. If employees know that they're going to be fiddling with cables and calling IT, it suppresses the very kind of spontaneous interactions the rooms are supposed to facilitate. Sharp/NEC focuses on "Bring Your Own Meeting" (BYOM), in which the displays easily connect to and deploy programmes on users' laptops. One advantage to this is that it's easier for the less tech-savvy to just use their own laptops, and it's less hassle for anyone to continue using the programmes or devices they're most comfortable with. The new NEC MultiSync WD551 Windows Collaboration Display has one cable that connects to the notebook and uses the laptop's Wi-Fi, making IT security and oversight simpler. The USB-C connectivity even allows the screen to charge laptops as they're connected.

In fact, the WD551 is a good example of several necessary components to hybrid working meeting rooms. The display has IoT room sensors that automatically turn the screen on and off, which is convenient for the employees and energy-efficient for the company. The room sensors also look at air quality and can be set up to adjust temperature or lights, as well as sending a message to open a window for air quality. Most importantly for brainstorming, its touchscreen can make it a digital whiteboard laptop-run collaboration programmes.

For the meeting function, it's essential to optimise every aspect of the video meeting. Choose the right audio for the meeting room size and décor. For example, the in-built speaker and microphone on the 55-inch NEC WD551 display will be great for a smaller room with carpets, but a larger glass and concrete room would likely need specially placed speakers and microphones. Larger rooms also need larger displays with clear images, such as the high brightness and high contrast 70-inch Sharp PN-CD701 Windows Collaboration display, to make sure every person in the room can clearly see the content displayed and all guests attending by video. All displays need to clearly show the nuances of guests' expressions. Likewise, highspeed bandwidth can help latency, as can Sharp/NEC displays that are optimised to use bandwidth well.



## Hot-desking

Some companies are planning to take advantage of hybrid working by reducing their physical footprint. The cost of office space per square meter is quite high, so it makes sense to reduce unused space. It's important that these cost savings, however, don't come at the expense of company morale or employee buy-in.

There are a couple of tools that make hot-desking more pleasant. The most important is an ergonomic set-up that's easy to adjust. As with the meeting, if it's onerous to set the desk, computer stand and chair to the right height, some employees won't bother. Over time, that will make them less likely to want

to work in the office, as they'll associate it with the aches and pains of bad posture. Likewise, it's important to offer height-adjustable monitors that have low blue light, so employees won't leave with a headache.

Companies should also make it easy to get started when you arrive at the office. Scheduling software can help employees see where their teams are sitting and where desks are available. Lockers or personalised file cabinets can give employees a place to pick up whatever they need to get started with their day.



## Conclusion

Whether they want to or not, many companies will need to explore hybrid working. In a time when competition for talent is fierce – 77% of UK employers are currently struggling to filled skilled roles<sup>9</sup> – only 25% of jobseekers are looking to be in the office full-time.<sup>10</sup> The past year has equipped workers and managers alike with a clear picture of both the benefits and drawbacks of remote work. Employers who find the balance between remote and in-office will have a significant advantage over their competitors.

There is no single way to do hybrid working. With good planning, specifically chosen tools and conversations with team members, companies can lay a basis for years of success. “It’s not easy to solve these questions,” Sharp/NEC’s Daniela Dexheimer mused. “How do you make sure that people are engaged and inspired? How do you keep the company attractive to its employees in the midst of the Great Resignation? These are big questions we’re trying to answer. We’ve been getting by, but now, how do we thrive?”

It takes attention and time, but addressing these questions can get at the key drivers for your business. When a company finds the best hybrid model for its work, the rewards in employee morale, productivity and creativity can be huge.



<sup>9</sup> [www.hrsolutions-uk.com](http://www.hrsolutions-uk.com)

<sup>10</sup> [www.wired.co.uk](http://www.wired.co.uk)