NO GOING BACK: New report shows workers reject return to office grind

3 years ago

No going back to the 9-5 office grind say British workers. That's the message of a new report published today. The pandemic has changed how people view work, which offers opportunities for organisations to adopt more considerate and efficient work practices as offices reopen.

A new study led by the University of Southampton and funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) considered the longer-term implications of working from home and which new working practices should remain and be encouraged. Its findings offer vital lessons from lockdown that will guide organisations as they seek to make hybrid working a success.

The research suggests that there has been a permanent mindset shift about how work is organised among the UK's formerly office-based workforce. While people have missed the informal connections of the office, their default position has shifted, and they no longer want to be travelling into offices every day. Neither they nor their managers think that this is an efficient way of working and want to hold onto some of the gains from the past two years, such as improved workforce trust and better quality meetings.

A future area of potential difficulty could be where organisations stop listening to staff's different working preferences and needs. Therefore it is the responsibility of managers to ensure corporate strategies are accommodating hybrid and flexible working practices that suit their teams' needs.

Principal investigator Dr Jane Parry, Director of the Centre for Research on Work and Organisations at Southampton Business School said: "We looked at people who mainly worked in the office previously and weren't used to working from home."

"Over the course of 18 months, we conducted online employee surveys as well as deep case study research with four organisations."

The research included speaking to a combination of leaders, managers, and employees without management responsibilities to understand how change affects the whole organisation.

Finding the right balance is at the heart of successful hybrid working. Employers will want to keep control of employees' output, whilst employees will want to choose when and where they work, so they are productive and achieve a healthy work-life balance.

The research has identified six areas organisations need to work on to help achieve success:

- Inclusion: there must be parity of opportunity for those who are working from home and those who are in the office on any given day. Employers must make sure that their policies and processes for hybrid working are fair to all. One example: any meeting must be an inclusive hybrid meeting with quality video access and led by a chair who need not be in person, but makes sure everyone can contribute
- Job Analysis: employers should analyse and group jobs into different work styles based on their time and location needs and make this information available to new recruits and current employees. Not every job can be done off-site, and so clarity about what hybrid means for each role is crucial to build trust
- Technology: there needs to be continued investment in the right digital tools to support collaboration and communication. As a minimum, when people work in two places, they need to have easy access to IT at both locations
- Well-being: employee well-being should be top of the list for managers as workers prepare to work differently, and empathetic listening is a key skill that mangers need to understand the diverse needs of their staff
- Leadership and communication: hybrid working needs a different style of leadership. It will be another period of change and uncertainty. Leaders were tested during the pandemic and those who had an inclusive style and involved their people and listened to them, created safety and stability, and motivated their workforce. Communication needs to be personal, nuanced and planned. Organisations should keep up the frequent check-ins with staff that happened during the pandemic period
- Human resources management practices: Induction and on-boarding of new starters has been a weak spot during the pandemic. More needs to be done to help new joiners feel they fit in and know what's expected of them to do their best work.

Applying these lessons will help change the world of work for good.

Dr Parry added: "Our research shows that what began an accidental experiment around working from home is becoming the mass hybridisation of the workforce. Organisations are still feeling their way around this new world of work, but if they apply the lessons of lockdown and tap into the goodwill and adaptability that workers have shown during the pandemic there is the prospect of decent work for all that preserves gains around autonomy, flexibility, and work-life balance, as well as enhancing those around workforce collaboration".

Co-Investigator, Dr Zoe Young, of Half the Sky said: "Before the pandemic, workers who needed to work

differently were often the odd ones out and had to negotiate their individual work pattern. As the default flips to hybrid, organisations need to carefully analyse each role and how and where it can be done. Combined with a focus on managing performance by output and making work fair and inclusive will help organisations move smoothly to a hybrid future of work".

Professor Stephen Bevan of the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), who was also involved in the study said: "Our research has shown that employees' productivity and well-being is better when it matches closely to their work preferences. Given that this will be a new period of change and uncertainty, management must keep a close eye on their teams and actively monitor and manage their well-being".

Work After Lockdown: No Going Back – what we have learned from working from home through the COVID-19 pandemic – was funded by the UKRI/ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council)

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