

Flexible Working Bill: The key to getting hybrid right lies in the office

2 years ago



Insight from Simon Eastlake, managing director at Office Space in Town

After years of formulation and months spent making its way through Westminster, the Flexible Working Bill has finally entered UK law with the support of the Royal Assent. For employers and employees, the bill's arrival marks a significant shift in the ongoing debate between those calling for flexibility and those who want to retain a traditional, in-person way of working.

Now, with flexibility set to become more than just a perk of the job, the question of how this debate can be settled looms larger than ever.

In its essence, the new Flexible Working Bill means that employers must now consider every flexible working request they receive, and prove that granting flexibility would pose a significant disadvantage to their company before rejecting a request. The practical implications of this change, however, and just how employers can prepare for it are less clear. In order to ensure that hybrid works for their business and that they can make the most out of the new legislation, companies should reflect on the object at the very centre of debates around flexibility – the office itself. By ensuring their workplaces are ideally suited to a hybrid style of business, companies can face the new flexibility laws with the confidence that this new way of working can work for them. By providing suitable offices and amenities, building managers can facilitate this transition.

A new bill, but what changes?

The first step for businesses wondering how to address the new flexibility laws is to understand what this bill *really* means. With regulations around flexibility part of UK law since 2014, this isn't the first time that

workers will have legal backing in their choice of workplace.^[1] More than that, the bill doesn't constitute the introduction of limitless flexibility for all UK employees – companies still have the opportunity to deny flexible working requests where this would have a significant detriment on an individual's effectiveness.

The Flexible Working Bill by no means marks a total upheaval in how Britain does business, or a radical step away from the office and towards a world of Teams calls and virtual coffee mornings. In truth, much of this progress had already been made: the rise of technology over the past decade and the catalyst that was the Covid-19 pandemic have combined to drive a surge in flexibility so that, by winter 2022-23, 44% of all working adults in the UK were doing so on a remote or hybrid basis.^[2] What changes with this recent bill is the level of control that employers will enjoy over the working patterns of their staff. With workers no longer obliged to explain the effect that flexible working would have on their role, the onus is now on a company to prove that granting such a request would pose a meaningful threat to their business interests.

Making flexible work – how offices can help

It might be counterintuitive to think that the solution to flexible working lies in the office. Certainly, it would be misguided to say that flexible working is a problem that needs to be solved. With 62% of workers feeling happier under a hybrid model, and 58% saying that a flexible working style made them more productive, there's little doubt that this trend brings with it myriad opportunities to improve the way we work. Even amongst managers, 62.5% believe that flexible working bolsters the productivity of their more junior staff members.^[3]

That being said, the remote nature of hybrid working does pose challenges for companies. With employees spread far and wide, businesses risk sacrificing cohesion and a sense of community as a high number of staff continue to work from home. To fully benefit from flexibility, companies will need to ensure their employees have the support they need to work collaboratively and effectively at home, as well as the incentive to come together when they can. This is where offices can play a strong role.

Serviced, flexible offices provide companies with a tailored workspace that simultaneously pulls staff together and facilitates remote working. Advantages such as pay-as-you go meeting rooms and adjust day schemes (where companies can choose which days they rent an office) mean that businesses won't need to devote unnecessary expenditure to unused floorspace. This alleviates pressure on companies to force their workers into the office. At the same time, workspaces which provide amenities such as gyms, on-site coffee shops, or bespoke social spaces offer employees the sort of office that earn the commute. At Office Space in Town, for example, we equip our offices with facilities such as games rooms, roof-top social spaces, and café-bars to make sure our buildings are somewhere workers want to be. Indeed, with 81% of under-35s citing loneliness as a consequence of long-term home working, office buildings which host regular events such as parties and pub quizzes can draw in employees and restore a sense of community within a company.

For employers, the Flexible Working Bill is only the latest step in an ongoing trend of hybrid working. To make the most of this new professional landscape, companies should endeavour to bring staff together where possible, and accommodate remote working when it's desired. For facilities managers at office spaces, this means providing businesses with individually-curated offerings, with flexibility in mind. Now more than ever, in a world of hybrid working, the office will be central to preserving collaboration. Businesses should recognise this growing importance, while facilities managers should embrace the ongoing relevance of the office, and ensure that their buildings have the policies and amenities needed to

make the most of the rise in flexible working.

[1]

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicspending/articles/workingflexiblyinthepublicsector/2019-09-20>

[2]

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/characteristicsofhomeworkersgreatbritain/september2022tojanuary2023>

[3]

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2023/jan/09/most-managers-believe-flexible-working-helps-productivity-uk-study-shows>