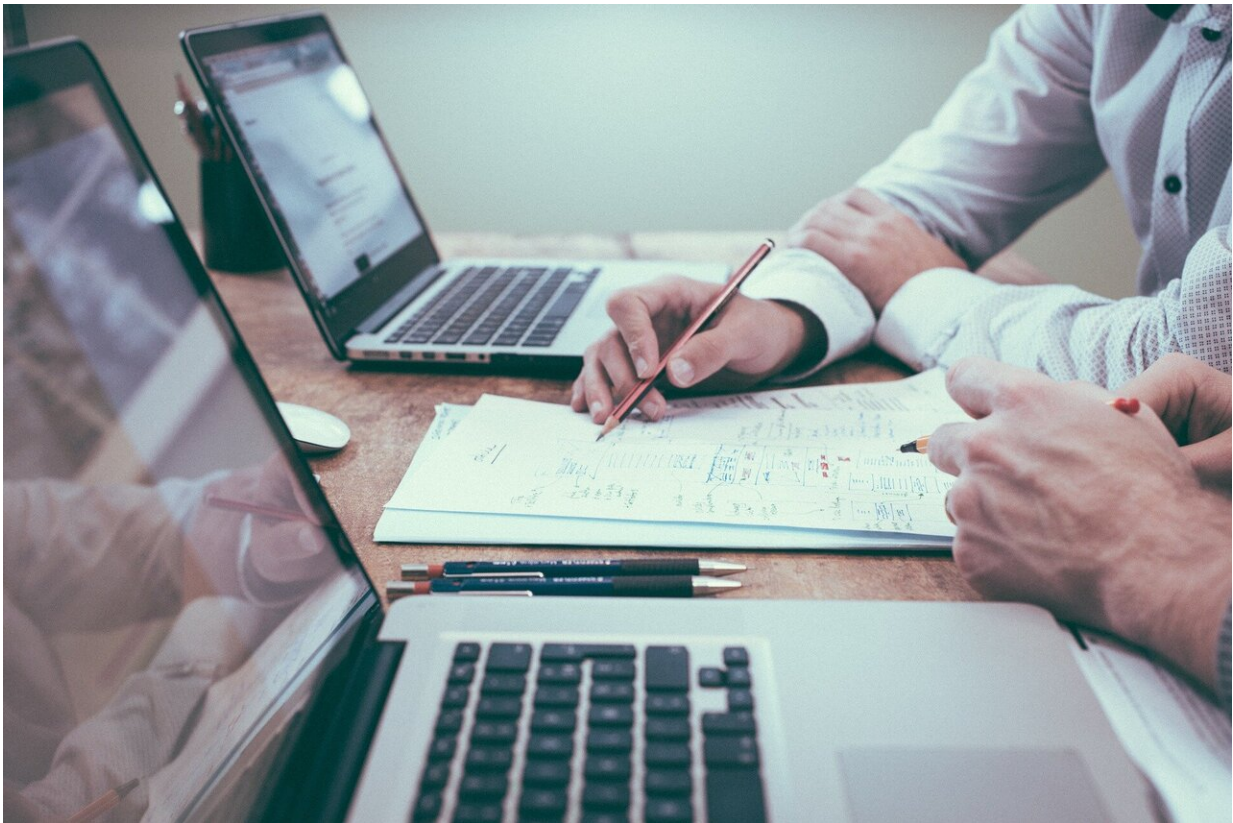# Employers must act now to make a success of hybrid working across the North of England

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New research from the Work Foundation and Newcastle University Business School has found that over a quarter of workers across the North of England were still working remotely in 2021, and that hybrid

working is set to become a feature of northern workplaces in the future.

Researchers reveal that employers across the North of England are now actively preparing for a shift to a hybrid working model over the coming months, with many employees unlikely to return to 'on-site working' five days per week. However, they also identified a series of challenges for employers, workers and places across the North in doing so—with particular risks around workplace culture, health and wellbeing and the potential displacement of economic activity out of town and city centers:

Key challenges

- Managing blurred boundaries between work and personal life, supporting workers to 'disconnect' from work
- Building and maintaining meaningful communications between team members and re-establishing corporate culture through a hybrid model
- Building trust within teams to allow colleagues to manage their own workloads, and shifting to an outcomes-focussed approach to measuring performance.

Rebecca Florisson from the Work Foundation said: "Our recent findings suggest there are many positives to take away from the experience of working throughout the pandemic, such as the greater levels of trust between managers and employees, and the greater sense of autonomy that many workers felt while working from home.

"However, employers can't risk the bad habits—such as staff feeling unable to take breaks or step away from their computers—becoming a legacy of the pandemic. New policies need to be introduced quickly, with employees' health and wellbeing front and center. A 'right to disconnect' policy developed with staff and trade unions would be an extremely useful starting point, to clearly set out expectations around

working hours and technology use, and encourage open and honest conversations between managers and their teams about what is expected."

Based on a study of the Understanding Society survey data and 33 in-depth interviews with employers in manufacturing and professional service firms, along with local stakeholders from across the North of England, the new report offers the following recommendations to make hybrid working a success:

Key recommendations

For employers:

- Help employees manage their work-life balance and consider introducing an organizational right-to-disconnect policy.
- Consult with staff and trade union representatives on broader preferences for flexible work, taking account of the importance not only of flexibility in where employees work, but also how and when they work. This should be aimed at providing access to flexible work particularly for those in jobs that cannot be carried out remotely.

For policymakers:

- Government's Flexible Working Taskforce should set out proposals to amend legislation around flexible work, for example introducing a day-one right to request flexible work; narrowing the range of reasons employers may give to deny such a request; and shoring up avenues for workers to appeal decisions without fearing reprisal.
- The taskforce should also develop clear guidance for employers around their duty of care towards employees while they are

working exclusively remotely, or in a hybrid model.

"With 31.5 % of UK employees working from home earlier this year in comparison to just 5.7 % pre-COVID-19, and with 85% of those working remotely saying they would expect a mix of remote and on-site working—or 'hybrid' working—in future, there is no doubt that the future of 'work' will look different to many in the UK", Dr. Laurence Vigneau from Newcastle University Business School said. "But, to make this effective and sustainable in the long run, employers need the right support from the Government's to guide them through this massive change now, when decisions are being made about future working arrangements. Legislation also needs to be updated, starting with giving employees the right to request to flexible working from day one of employment."

Researchers also suggest workforce segregation is a real risk in future—with certain roles lending themselves to hybrid work far easier than others.

"With furlough ending and firms that had to temporarily close now getting back up to speed, there's a real chance that an 'us and them' divide could be felt within some organizations, with manual workers forced to be in the workplace while other roles work off site, for example," adds Rebecca Florisson.

"To make this sustainable and fair for the long term, all workers need equitable access to some form of flexible work and workplace opportunities—so employers need to be mindful of all roles when planning for the future."

More information: Hybrid and remote working in the North of England: Impacts and future prospects: www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-found … and-future-prospects

Provided by Lancaster University