

Outdated attitudes risk widening inequalities in hybrid workplace, think-tank warns

October 14 2021



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Employers could undo the progress made over the last 18 months and deepen workplace inequalities if organisations fail to override the deep-rooted perceptions of 'office culture', a leading think tank has warned.

New research, led by the Work Foundation and the Chartered Management Institute, finds that 'traditional' views of the workplace still stand with managers expecting that access to stretch projects and workplace networks will decrease with remote or hybrid working, and exacerbate already existing inequalities in the workplace.

Results also suggest women are less comfortable than men in discussing a remote work request with their manager, and less likely than men to feel their organisation is inclusive of remote workers.

The new data, derived from surveys of 964 Chartered Management Institute managers, 1,000 UK workers and interviews with organisations representing women, disabled people and those with parenting or caring responsibilities within the workplace, also reveals more than half of managers currently have the power to decide which employees can work remotely (55%), when staff should be present at the office (63%), working time during the day (53%) and expectations for staff responsiveness (53%).

However, one in five (20%) employees whose line managers make the decision for them are not happy with their working arrangement. More worryingly, only 59% of workers whose line manager has formal decision-making powers over remote working requests are comfortable to ask to work remotely.

Although [remote work](#) and other forms of flexible working can be vital to enable some to manage work alongside their own wellbeing or caring responsibilities, researchers say the study uncovers outdated attitudes that could exacerbate existing workplace inequalities.

Research findings indicate disabled workers, female workers, parents and carers could face particular challenges when working remotely, due to isolation from the office and potentially missing out on opportunities

for learning and development.

Ben Harrison, Director of the Work Foundation, said: "Our survey results suggest that the attitudes surrounding remote or flexible working may be stuck in the pre-pandemic world, rather than really grasping the opportunities a brand-new hybrid working model could present, which is cause for alarm.

"There is a real risk that 'office culture' is so ingrained that even organisations that pursue flexible or hybrid arrangements could end up introducing inequalities between those who primarily work on site and those who work remotely. Doing so would jeopardise the opportunities that hybrid working could bring to so many—particularly parents, carers and disabled workers—who have benefited from increased flexibility since 2020."

Ann Francke, Chief Executive of the Chartered Management Institute, said: "This research highlights a real mismatch in attitudes to hybrid-working between some managers and their teams and it seems that some managers need to wake up and smell the coffee. Managers need to take account of the new reality of employees wanting to work in more flexible ways, they need to support it, vocalise their support and ensure that remote workers aren't disadvantaged, especially given the increased competition for talent employers face.

"We've seen during the pandemic how greater flexibility in working practices can boost productivity, help with everyone's [work-life balance](#) and [worker](#) wellbeing.

"Engaging with employees to understand and then implement best-fit working practices is a prime example of good management. Managers will have happier, more productive, more loyal teams—and a healthier business—as a result."

In the 'Making hybrid inclusive: Key priorities for policymakers' report (published today, Thursday 14 October), the Work Foundation calls on the Government to:

- **Develop an employer campaign and accreditation programme to promote inclusive flexible working practices.** This should include strategies for consultation and engaging with staff around how time is spent when on-site, training for managers in managing a hybrid workforce, and the introduction of measures such as an organisational 'right to disconnect' policy. Employer case studies should be used to promote innovative practices in ensuring organisational changes are inclusive for different worker groups.
- **Require that large employers share information on their approach to flexible work and their progress in encouraging take-up across their organisation.** Employers with more than 250 staff should be required to publish their flexible and hybrid working policies externally, monitor take-up of flexible working practices within their organisation across different worker groups, and regularly publish this data along with action plans to drive improvement.
- **Support the development of management capability in providing inclusive hybrid work.** For example, modules on equality, diversity and inclusion could be added to the Help to Grow: Management programme, to ensure managers and leaders are trained on how to build and foster inclusive working environments.
- **Make flexible working the default position for all employees, with flexible options included in all job adverts,** unless employers have a sound business reason for an exemption. The range of reasons employers may give to refuse making a job more flexible should be narrowed; and workers already in post should be adequately supported to appeal decisions without

fearing reprisal.

- **Prioritise inclusive employers within funding and procurement exercises**, by requiring that organisations with more than 50 employees and a turnover over £10m produce an up to date hybrid and flexible working strategy and action plan which prioritises inclusion as part of the application for any public procurement or Government grants.

In 'Making Hybrid Inclusive—A Guide for Employers' published today alongside the report, the Work Foundation calls on managers and leaders to:

- **Consult with staff to develop an approach to remote and flexible work.** Consultation should be a continuous exercise aimed at developing a thorough understanding of employees, and the kinds of responsibilities and pressures they deal with that impact their work. This will help managers and leaders to better adjust conditions to help workers be more productive.
- **Experiment and engage with staff to find an approach that works.** Where a shift to hybrid working involves some degree of experimentation, it is important that employers check in regularly and are responsive to employees' feedback. This can include holding an open dialogue with employees around contact hours, disconnecting from work, and how the workplace is best used.
- **Consider introducing an organisational "Right to Disconnect" policy**, aiming to establish a shared approach to work communications that supports workers to fully disengage from work outside of core hours and while on leave in a way that supports wellbeing and productivity.
- **Be a role model.** Where managers and leaders are supportive of remote working and role modelling this behaviour, this makes workers significantly more comfortable in requesting access to

this form of flexible work.

- **Increase take-up of flexible working arrangements among men**, which would help absorb flexible work into the working culture, reduce misconceptions and associated career penalties and could achieve important progress towards achieving equality at work.
- **Ensure managers are adequately trained and prepared to manage hybrid teams and role model hybrid working.** This could include a focus on capacity to support performance and wellbeing of workers who are working remotely, effective communication and appropriate use of technology to support collaboration.
- **Develop action plans around hybrid and remote working which prioritise diversity and inclusion**, and publicise your goals and policies on hybrid working to foster greater transparency and provide a leading example for other organisations. This could include monitoring the take-up of [flexible work](#) among staff by characteristics including gender, age, disability, sexuality and gender identity, and developing mechanisms to embed flexibility into the working arrangements

More information: The full report and employers guide will be published on the Work Foundation website: [www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-found ... loyer-and-Government](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-found...loyer-and-Government)

Provided by Lancaster University

Citation: Outdated attitudes risk widening inequalities in hybrid workplace, think-tank warns (2021, October 14) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-10-outdated-attitudes-widening-inequalities-hybrid.html>

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