

What do London employers really think about hybrid working?

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The long-anticipated return to the London office is underway—but this does not mean a return to the traditional office-based working culture. Working practices are now predominantly characterized by a hybrid

approach, and this transformation of at least some sectors to a "new normal" constitutes a significant paradigm shift in the world of work.

In a new paper, written with our research colleague Jiyoun Chang, we look at how employers in the London area experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and how this has affected their perceptions of remote working and their intentions towards managing employees' locations and methods of work going forward.

We carried out in-depth interviews with 12 major London employers, in both the public and private sectors between May and August 2022, complementing and drawing on two other strands of the Work/Place research program at King's College London: a large-scale two-wave quantitative survey of London employees, and desk-based research on specific topics. We believe our work delivers important insights both for [senior managers](#) and for policymakers.

What did we find?

1. On balance, organizations prefer 2-3 days of hybrid working per week

For organizations, the experience of the pandemic has induced a permanent shift in perceptions and working behaviors towards a more widespread (but not universal) [hybrid model](#). The evidence suggests that we have reached a "tipping point" where norms no longer support traditional office working. While it would be premature to posit a specific "[new normal](#)" or "steady state," there is evidence currently of convergence at around 2-3 days per week in the office for hybrid workers.

2. The onus for justifying work location is now on the

employer, but employees' and employers' perceptions may differ

Norms and expectations of workers have changed, leading to a recognized shift in the power dynamic between employers and employees. Employers may now need to justify office working rather than employees having to justify a need to work remotely. But while recognition of the potential benefits of hybrid working is shared by employers and employees, contrasting perceptions of the benefits of office work exist between employees and employers particularly with respect to its impact on employees' well-being, productivity, and development.

Though debated, there is also growing recognition that hybrid working may benefit some previously marginalized employees (women, young people, those with dependents, with disability), but disadvantage those who previously thrived in an office environment.

3. Managers' perceptions of hybrid working are largely positive, but they face notable challenges, such as balancing equity and support with flexibility

Most managers generally accept that this change is inevitable and are taking steps to develop appropriate strategies to harness the benefits and mitigate the challenges of hybrid working within their organization. Attitudes from our (admittedly limited) qualitative interviews with employers are generally similar across sectors.

Local authority employers are particularly conscious of the need for equity between those who can and those who can't work from home. They also retain the need to be visible to the local communities they serve and to elected politicians to whom they are accountable. These

employers must blend hybrid working practices with the perceived importance that employees must remain aware of what is going on "on the ground" in the local area.

Changes to working practices also put increased pressure on middle and line managers who manage staff performance and outputs. These pressures include both dealing with under-performance in a hybrid or remote setting (although there is consensus between employees and employers that most employees continue to work at least as hard in a remote setting) and providing appropriate support.

For example, employees performing contact center work may struggle with reduced motivation and/or difficult and aggressive customers to a greater extent without the benefit of proximity to colleagues and supervisors.

Human resources departments also face challenges. They must encourage adherence to organizational policies, often including a drive for increased office presence, while at the same time trying to create a [work environment](#) that is inclusive and attractive to new recruits, which often requires the provision of autonomy and flexibility over working location.

There is also a delicate balance to be struck between encouraging sufficient office attendance for reasons of community, interaction, and innovation while not being coercive or counter-productive for those with working preferences and real needs which are best supported by the option to work remotely. Managing the gap (real or perceived) between management and [employee](#) expectations entails enhanced two-way communication channels. A successful shift to hybrid working requires flexibility and adaptability as much as it requires technology.

Managers and HR need to continue to be aware of and mitigate the

downsides of hybrid working such as work/home blurring, overwork, and isolation. At the same time, they need to harness the benefits of hybrid working for employees and the organization, such as enhanced well-being and employees' greater ability to concentrate on certain tasks at home.

4. A 'one size fits all' policy is unlikely to be sufficient and ongoing adjustment is inevitable

There are also implications for policymakers of this is a profound structural shift in the world of work. Many impacts will not become clear for a while yet—for example on overall productivity, on the balance of well-being benefits and disbenefits, on career progression and networking. "One size fits all" policy approaches and a priori ideological preferences either for fully remote or for fully in-place working are not helpful or practical.

It may be possible to use lessons learned from the pandemic to try to provide enhanced opportunities and access to high quality work for disabled employees. There is a lot of untapped potential in the disabled workforce which could be valuable to employers during a time of recognized skill shortages.

While the power balance between employers and workers seems to have shifted, at least for some groups of professional workers, we do not yet know what impact a recession and possible growth in unemployment will have on this and on employee and [employer](#) attitudes.

5. Increased hybrid working does not signal the death of city-based working

Finally, what impact will hybrid working have on cities? We focused on

a single city, London, but there will be implications for other cities with similar economic structures, challenges, and opportunities.

In London, jobs remain highly centralized in the Central Activities Zone, and we do not expect this pattern to change significantly. Both firms and employees will adjust and adapt to the realities of hybrid working. Rather than hybrid work signaling the "death of the city," we expect London's CAZ to continue to be a dynamic source of economic activity and employment growth, with increases in footfall and mobility back to and probably beyond pre-pandemic levels.

This is driven by a gradual increase in office occupancy, as well as the return of international and domestic tourism, and growth in leisure, retail, and other activities.

But there will be important long-term consequences for commuting patterns, public transport pricing and sustainability, housing markets and patterns of land use. Policymakers will need to respond to these changes, even though behaviors and outcomes are in flux: hence flexibility, adaptability and real-time evidence will be key.

More information: Report: [www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute ... rking-april-2023.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute...rking-april-2023.pdf)

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