

# Increased hybrid working and redefining the way professional firms do business post-pandemic

April 16 2021, by Luke Lambert



Defining characteristics of a professional service firm Note: Adapted from Figure 1.1 originally published in Empson et al. (2015). Credit: *Journal of Management Studies* (2021). DOI: 10.1111/joms.12697

The move to hybrid working will have significant and unintended consequences for professionals and professional work.

A new article by Laura Empson, Professor in the Management of Professional Service Firms at the Business School (formerly Cass), examines how the shift to hybrid working—made more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic—among professional service firms in sectors such as accounting, consulting, and law, may have a negative impact on junior [professionals](#) and professional-client relationships.

The shift risks undermining these firms' long-standing reliance on cultural control and weakening professionals' ties to their organizations.

Professional firms have already announced plans to change the way they work in future, with PwC announcing more flexible working arrangements, KPMG converting more of its London offices into meeting rooms, and law firms such as Linklaters allowing staff to work at home 50 percent of the time. By contrast Goldman Sachs has reaffirmed its commitment to office-based working.

Professor Empson believes leaders of professional firms may need to fundamentally rethink issues such as knowledge, governance, and identity within their firms, as hybrid working becomes more commonplace post-pandemic. These foundations of professional work will be shaken by the move to hybrid working, creating important unintended consequences. She argues that, while the potential risks of these changes are significant, so too are the potential opportunities that accompany them.

## Knowledge

The shift to hybrid working means in-person interactions will be fewer and digital interactions more common, with the likely consequence being more transactional relationships. Junior professionals will potentially lose out on close person-to-person observation of senior colleagues and the mentoring relationships which have formed the basis of their professional development. At the same time, professionals may find it harder to develop the personal relationships with clients, on which their ability to develop ongoing business has traditionally depended.

## **Governance**

Professional firms have traditionally relied upon peer control and mutual monitoring among colleagues to reinforce established norms of cultural control. Hybrid working potentially undermines this practice. As cultural control lessens it will be riskier to allow professionals the degree of autonomy they have traditionally enjoyed. If nothing is done to reinforce cultural control in the hybrid environment, opportunities for progression will be negatively impacted and professional wrongdoing may become even more commonplace.

## **Identity**

A strong identity helps ensure security, compliance with organizational and professional norms, and provides reassurance for the client. Hybrid working may weaken professionals' ties because the organization has less to offer by way of status signifiers. At the same time, it may be harder for the firms themselves to present a distinct organizational identity to clients, when client-professional interactions take place online in the confines of each other's home offices.

Professor Empson, also Director of the Center for Professional Service Firms at the Business School who teaches the MBA elective "Succeeding

in Professional and Financial Services," said: "The pandemic has accelerated numerous changes already underway within professional [service](#) firms. Many of these changes potentially challenge our foundational assumptions about the distinctiveness of these firms.

They pose very significant risks for professional firms, but alongside the risks lie significant opportunities, as professionals work out how best to adapt to the post-pandemic world."

"Researching the Post-Pandemic Professional Service Firm: Challenging our Assumptions," by Professor Laura Empson, is published in the *Journal of Management Studies*.

**More information:** Laura Empson. Researching the Post-Pandemic Professional Service Firm: Challenging our Assumptions, *Journal of Management Studies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/joms.12697](https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12697)

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