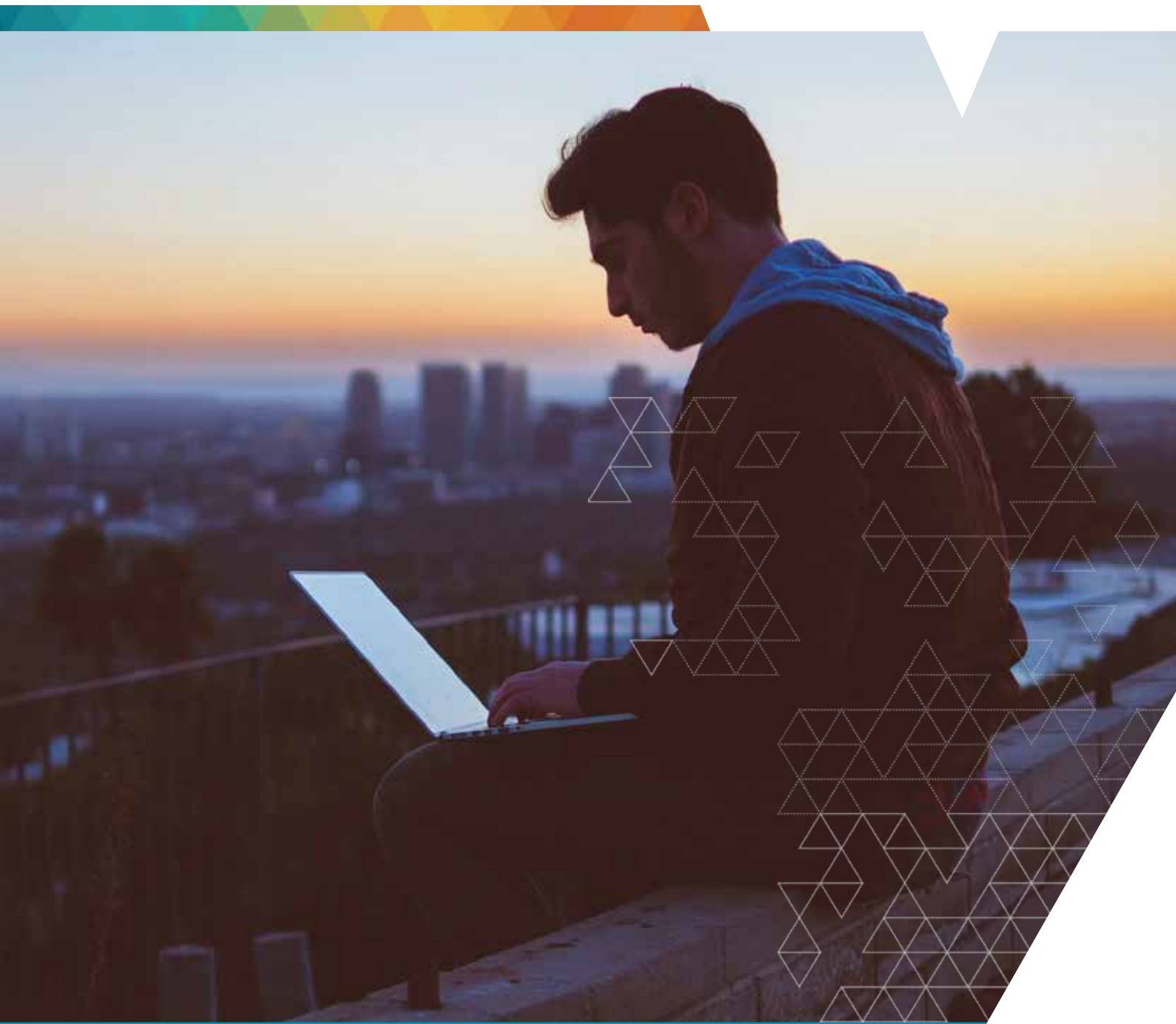


# The AGN Guide to Hybrid Working and 'Flex Culture'



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## Introduction

It's sometimes said about homeworking that the 'Jeannie is out of the bottle' – and increasingly it appears it's unlikely to go back in. It seems that 'Presenteeism' is a thing of the past and where there's the vaguest possibility that a job needn't be done from an office location it probably won't be – at least not all the time. This GBV explores the practical do's and don'ts of introducing your own hybrid or flexible working policies and 'Flex Culture'.

Of more than 500 C-level executives in the U.S. and the U.K. surveyed by LinkedIn, 81% said they are changing their workplace policies to offer greater 'flexibility'. The majority of recruitment posts for professional office roles now feature 'flexible working' as a critical staff employment benefit.

### WHAT IS HYBRID WORKING?

A basic definition of hybrid working is that it's a way of organizing your workforce by balancing time spent in central offices with remote working, whether at home, in satellite offices or in "third space" coworking locations. It constitutes a massive socio-environmental change from the working practice of the last 70 years. It has consequences for innovation, collaboration, knowledge transfer, training, organisational culture and personal well-being and working conditions.

### THE BENEFITS OF HYBRID WORKING TO EMPLOYERS ARE CLEAR

- Potentially increased productivity
- Opportunity to reduce office costs
- Clear appeal to existing and potential talent
- Potential talent pool not restricted by geography
- Creates a more level (recruitment) playing field with competitors

There is some evidence that enforced home working (not hybrid) generated an initial spike in productivity but then employees began to struggle with the lack of social interaction. But it's been known for some time that a more flexible approach combining office and home working can result in increased productivity and a happier more satisfied workforce.

An early 2015 study by Connect Solutions (US) found that 77% of those who work remotely at least a few times per month show increased productivity, with 30% doing more work in less time and 24% doing more work in the same period of time. And a more recent study by Stanford University (US) of 16,000 workers over 9 months found that working from home increased productivity by some 13%.

*And so flexible or hybrid working seems to be here to stay and many firms are abandoning their attempts to revert to 100% office working as they are swimming against the tide of a significant social change.*

The recruitment market is tight and more and more firms are tempting candidates with their own version of something that's now become known as a 'Flex Culture'. Particularly within professional and financial services flexible or hybrid working is now almost a 'standard' requisite for attracting and retaining employees.

## A quick Practical Guide to Hybrid Policy for Managing Partners



### **Step 1 – Set up a new formal hybrid working policy and procedure**

Consider existing flexible working arrangements, impact on IT policy, expenses and data protection. Define roles and responsibilities.

### **Step 2 – Take account of the legal implications of hybrid working**

Think about T&C's of employment? You're responsible for health and safety of people working from remote environments as well as those working in-office.

### **Step 3 - Focus on manager training and development**

Up-skill your managers in: communications, remote performance management, team building, employee engagement, management by outputs, detecting signs of poor well-being or mental health issues.

### **Step 4 – Move to output based performance and reward management**

Place a greater emphasis on productivity, management by outcomes, and deliverables. Do you have the appraisal and reward systems to cope with this change?

### **Step 5 – Invest in internal communications**

Communications are now hugely important to maintaining a sense of 'one-firm'. Use the latest communications technologies and budget for more firmwide social events.

### **Step 6 – Provide the latest collaboration software and equipment**

Are the collaboration software platforms you provide ubiquitous and homogenous with all clients and stakeholders? Think about security and staff training.

### **Step 7 – Don't leave anyone behind**

'Out of sight out of mind' - is a risk. Who are the staff on the fringes of the policy? How do you ensure that your policy doesn't prejudice those not present?

### **Step 8 – Leverage the benefits**

Hybrid policy has great talent appeal – so ensure that it's maximised in your recruitment offer. Review your office space requirements with a view to reducing your footprint and associated costs.

## WHAT EFFECT DOES HYBRID WORKING HAVE ON THE CULTURE OF FIRMS?

For decades organisational cultures have tended to evolve from an amalgam of the values and behaviours of the owners and managers, firmwide tacit knowledge ('how things are done around here'), internal and external messaging, policies and standards, the tone of voice of communications, corporate rituals and ceremonies and the particular mix of benefits and rewards offered to employees.

Until very recently all of these factors were aimed at engaging and influencing the behaviours of a 'workplace community' usually sitting within the boundaries of an office, factory or location. Staff have become familiar with the signposting of these cultural factors and generally respond accordingly.

Many business pundits have talked about the erosion of corporate culture due to flexible working – but a review of the published material and research available suggests that it's a more complex issue than this would indicate.

A firm's culture can't simply vanish. It might change, it might evolve, it might even become negative, but firmwide beliefs and norms are still being created, they're just not being contained by the old 'in-office' protocols.

*Culture development is subject to a range of new factors associated with technology and flexible working policies (Flex Culture) along with the non-work factors that employees experience at home.*



### Leaders still set the tone of the culture

The move to hybrid working is actually a positive opportunity to re-shape a firm's culture, to start afresh, to reset. A firm might approach this very much like they would a re-branding or strategy exercise where they consider their 'purpose, vision, mission and values'.

A firm's particular Flex Culture should be closely linked to the firm's values set, so the challenge is to consider what particular mix of conventional and hybrid working policies represent the firm's values, ideals and style.

All firms will be different.... For example, a firm that wants to reinforce an agile, innovative culture, might have regular online events that prompt creative engagement, such as improv activities, and showcase collaboration tools that enable online brainstorming and sketching.

A firm whose culture has a paternal caring emphasis might consider a structured approach to offline and online mentoring, an open-door professional staff counselling service, routine 'check-ins' with homeworkers and a lively face to face social program.

The mix should be led a firm's particular vision and values – what they want their business to represent internally and externally. But there are common pitfalls, do's and don'ts that should be taken into account when devising a hybrid flex culture.

## **AS FOR THE FUTURE**

In 2020 Future Forum's (futureforum.com) 'Remote Working Employee Experience Index' – a survey of 9000 knowledge workers (inc professional services) across six major countries found that most workers are happier working remotely than in the office. Only 11.6% say they want to return to full-time office work, while 72.2% want a hybrid remote-office model.

It would seem that most employers have also accepted and are adapting to the reality of flexible hybrid working. Home working may have started as a necessity to ensure some form of business continuity through the pandemic, but since then we've seen a shift from a binary choice of home or office working to a system that offers advantages for both employers and employees. The challenge as we move forward is to take a more considered and strategic approach to the new model, to finesse the policy and to harness the new elements of the employee offer into a new firmwide operational culture.

## APPENDIX A

### The Do's and Don'ts of Hybrid Working Policy

The Do's	The Don'ts
<p>Do install a formal 'hot-desk' or at least have a policy of over provisioning of work space so that no staff are excluded when choosing to come into the office. They're unlikely to try again if you can't guarantee them a place to sit.</p>	<p>Don't fall into the trap of thinking that all staff want hybrid working to replace office work. Some feel disadvantaged by the move to hybrid; trainees miss out on the tacit transfer of knowledge and opportunities to create business relationships. There's research indicating that women feel excluded from management meetings and key decisions when working from home</p>
<p>Do remember, despite the above, that staff sit down all day (on their own) when working from home – design your office to have plenty of collaboration spaces. Dispose of cubicles and isolated desks and offices – make social interaction more likely.</p>	<p>Don't let any digital inequality or a digital class system evolve. This means ensuring all of the flexible working technology and all of the office facilities are ubiquitous and available equally to all staff, no matter who they are, all of the time. The alternative will lead to jealousy and resentment.</p>
<p>Do encourage (not enforce) teams to be in the office on the same days to ensure they get face time at some point during the working week. Coordination is helpful as team members will feel abandoned if they make efforts to be present in the office and their colleagues don't bother.</p>	<p>Don't require people to be 'present' in the office (on certain days) unless there is a genuine and unavoidable business reason to do so (that is also recognised by the staff member). The essential 'gift' of the policy is showing that you trust staff to optimise their working week.</p>
<p>Do try and be imaginative about what might make your office a more attractive place to be than home. In the end the appeal will probably be about the interaction with other humans, but you might consider some of the following;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permanent in office 'dress down'</li> <li>• Subsidies for commuting costs</li> <li>• Free food and drink</li> <li>• A social space with TV, perhaps a coffee bar...</li> <li>• Concierge services, dry cleaning, parcel acceptance service</li> <li>• Even the office table football and gaming platforms are making a return!</li> </ul>	<p>Don't forget to provide all the hardware and tech for homeworking – ensuring all staff have high quality screens, a broadband subsidy, laptops, ergonomic seating – much as you would do in the office environment.</p>
<p>Do provide all the relevant home working software and frequently experiment with new software developments – this communicates that you are seeking to improve the staff work experience. Try virtual reality, augmented reality and relevant social media and messaging platforms (provide training). Be guided by what the staff use – to use anything else adds complexities and distractions from what staff have clearly found ...works!</p>	<p>Don't exclude any groups or individuals from an energised social activity program. Recognise that your firmwide and department social activities have become an absolute essential. Fund these properly and ensure there is balance between online and face to face activities.</p>

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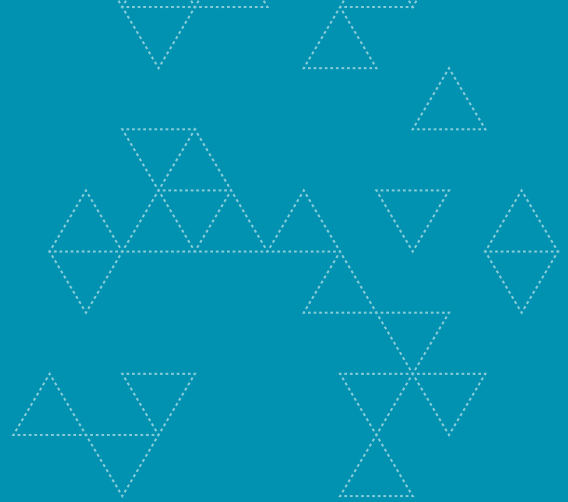
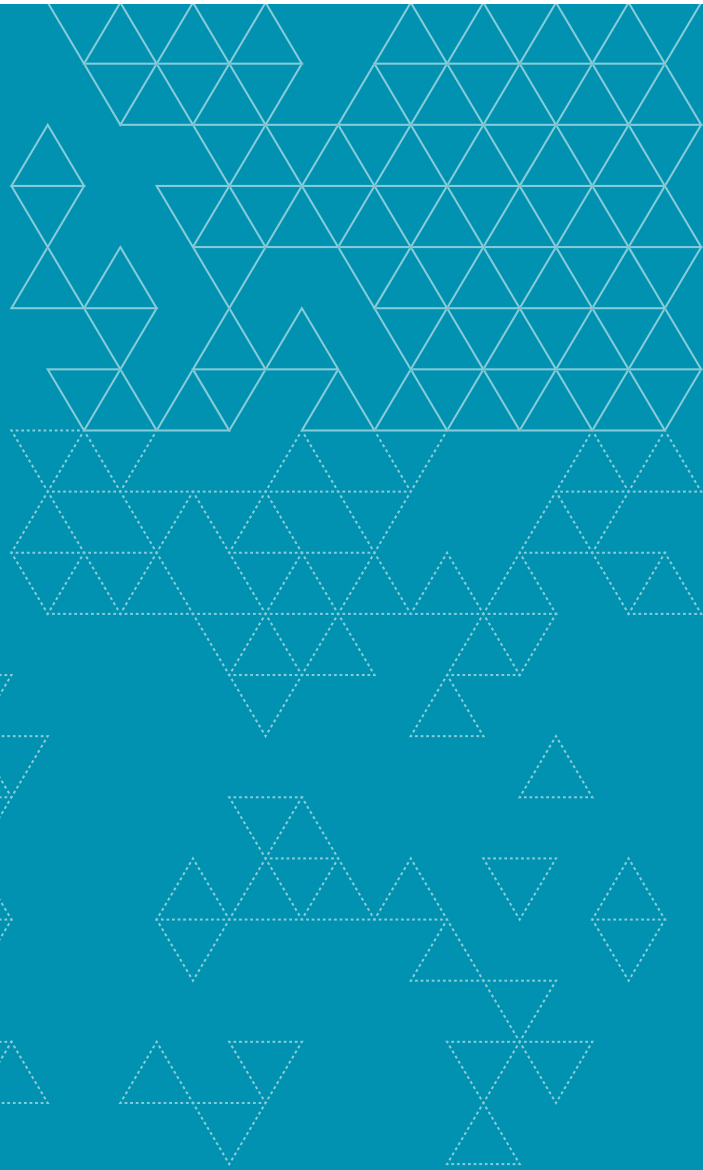
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Do encourage teams to run an 'always available' (office hours) or 'drop-in' Zoom/Teams meeting which staff can join whenever they feel like, to catch up with whoever else is in the meeting at the time. No agenda. No set time. Sometimes these meetings will run in the background of homeworkers just so they can see someone else working.	Don't overhype your hybrid policies. Be clear about your approach and don't be tempted to exaggerate the generosity and flexibility of your system (if you don't really mean it). This will only lead to disappointment and distrust, particularly amongst the newly recruited.
Do measure hybrid workers performance in terms of objectives achieved, outputs, efficiency and delivery.	Don't try to impose the 9 to 5 working hours convention on those working away from the office. One of the single biggest factors that influences a positive remote experience is the ability to break free of the 9 to 5 and instead work a flexible schedule.
Do recognise the research that indicates middle manager team leaders are more negatively impacted by home working than any other group. They feel particularly disconnected and often don't have the skills or experience to manage their newly fragmented cohort of workers.	Don't cut out personal connection time. With less opportunity for casual coffee machine chat (UK) or watercooler chat (US), Zoom/Teams casual conversations are particularly important for relationship development and mental health.
Do make safety a priority. Whilst an individual is at work, whether in their home or not, they are under the employer's duty of care. This means you need to consider the sort of work people are doing, whether they have the equipment needed to carry out their role safely, what communication mechanisms are in place, what mental health support they might need, and how they can report any issues.	Don't tolerate a 'them and us' – office workers v home workers dynamic to develop. Encourage a range of working locations, style and options for everyone. Ensure that you can mix it up while coalescing when productive and useful.

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