

Hybrid:

Where are the risks
hidden in the hype?

Foreword

It's been more than two years since the world of work was turned upside down by the Covid pandemic. This brief but intense period started by exposing the limitations of the average pre-pandemic office and went on to reveal that while full-time remote working may be good for many, it doesn't work for everyone.

Hybrid working now looks like the solution many organisations are seeking to make the most of both worlds. Some voices say it's inevitable. Yet, for organisations with a stronger attachment to pre-pandemic ways of working, it is the silent threat they are dreading. But what does the data say? Are hybrid workers better off than their office-based or remote-based colleagues?

Where are the risks hidden in the hype?

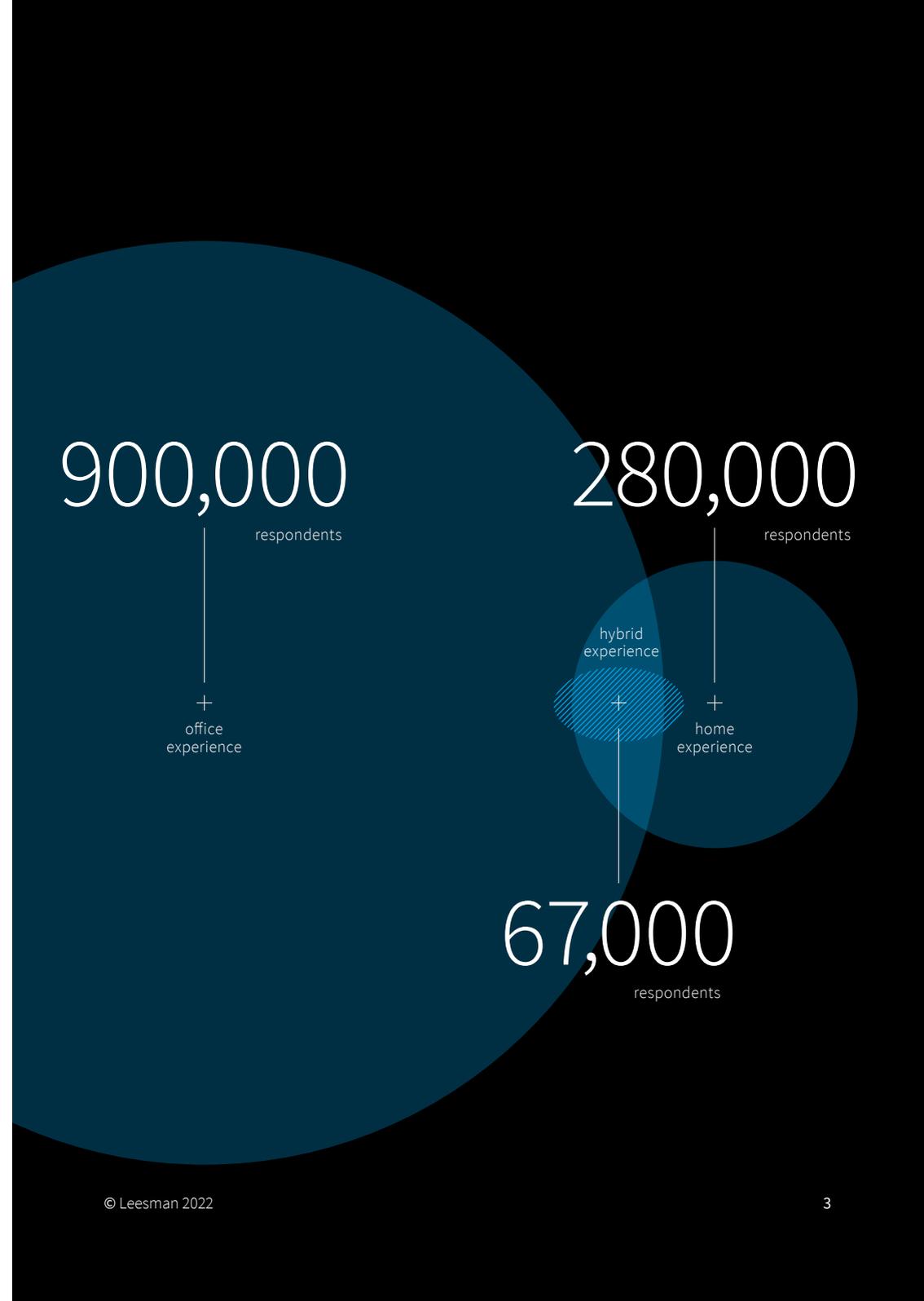
Since 2010, we've maintained the largest employee workplace experience database of its kind. By the end of 2021, we had surveyed the office experience of more than 900,000 employees, and measured the home working experience of nearly 280,000 workers. Some of these employees were hybrid workers who used more than one location for work, with office and home the most prevalent. The experience of this latter group is perhaps the most relevant right now.

The insights included in this report are drawn from the 67,000 employees who responded to our surveys in the second half of 2021 – the first time since the pandemic when access to the workplace became possible in many places across the world. While this data was collected while Covid was still present, it provides useful insights into what a hybrid future may look like post-pandemic.

This report addresses some of the burning questions around hybrid working. First, we zoom in on the experience of those we surveyed to understand what hybrid working looked like in the second half of 2021. We then revealed the two sides of hybrid working: the opportunities it provides and the associated risks. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the future implications for the world of work.

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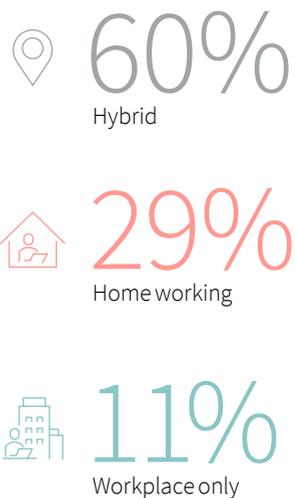


Hybrid working: A recent x-ray

‘Hybrid’ is the buzzword of the moment. In the world of work and workplace, there is no shortage of opinions on the potential opportunities and threats of hybrid working, but how is it actually working? What does the data say?

The majority of the 67,000 employees we’ve surveyed in the second half of 2021 were hybrid workers: they used more than one location for work. Many also shared their views on returning to the office, including how often they are likely to work there, what concerns they have, or how trusted they feel to do their job. We’ve zoomed in on their full hybrid experience and extracted the key lessons to be learned.

60% of the employees we surveyed in Q3-4 2021 worked in a hybrid way. Amongst those who used a single location, home workers were most common (29%), with the remaining 11% working exclusively in their organisation’s workplace.



The most likely to work exclusively from home were the younger employees

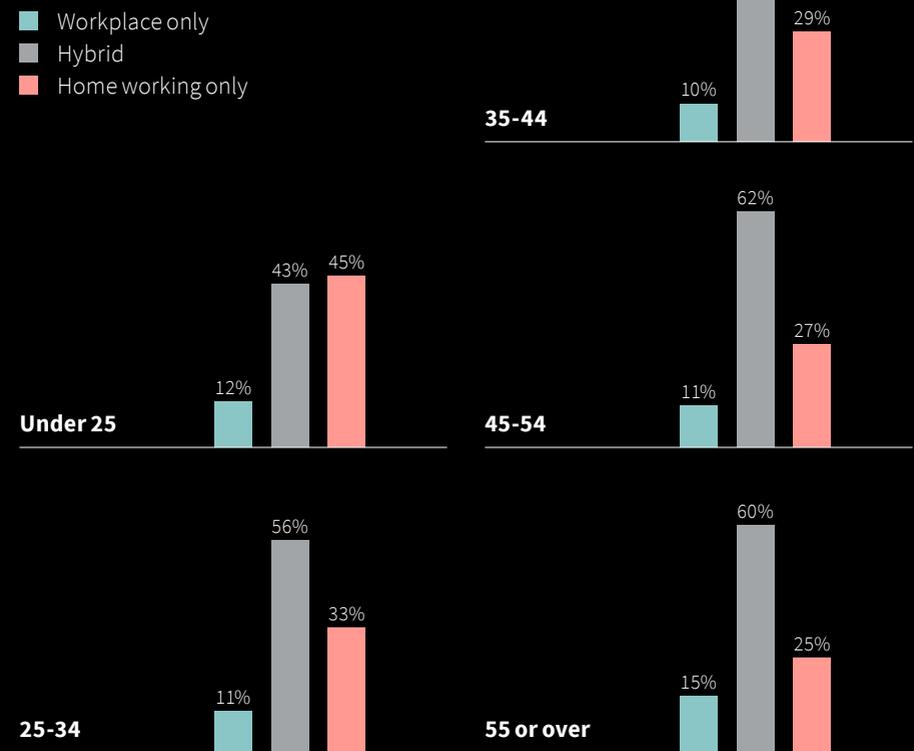
Demographic differences

Demographic factors may play a role, but it may not be the expected one. It's been widely speculated in the media that women may be more inclined to continue working remotely (which may affect their career progression), but our data suggests the opposite. Surprisingly, male employees were more likely to work exclusively from home (32%) and less inclined to be fully workplace-based (10%), compared to the female employees we've surveyed (27% and 13%). But this is not the only surprise revealed by our hybrid working scan:

The most likely to work exclusively from home were the younger employees: 45% amongst the under 25s and 33% for the 25-34. In contrast, just 27% of the over 65s were fully home-based, while 23% worked only in the workplace (the highest proportion across age groups). (Figure 1)

The age difference is unexpected, as younger employees are the least likely to have access to adequate work settings in their home, unlike the older age group. Yet, many of the youngest employees would have started their role during a period when home working was the de facto rule, so it may be really what they know best, in contrast to the more senior employees accustomed to a workplace-centric landscape. Moreover, people managers and senior leaders (who generally are more likely to belong to the older age groups) were also the least likely to work fully from home.

Figure 1.
Hybrid and non-hybrid workers by age group



37% of the respondents said they are likely to use the workplace for less than a day per week

Workplace occupancy

Amongst the hybrid workers we surveyed, the proportion of time that the workplace was used varied: 38% worked there for up to 25% of their time, while 23% did so for more than 75% of their time. While these results may still be influenced by the different restrictions in place in some parts of the globe, they may anticipate future patterns. Based on recent data from more than 23,000 employees¹, we know that flexibility is key:

37% of the respondents said they are likely to use the workplace for less than a day per week, while 12% indicated a 5 day per week pattern. However, almost a quarter indicated they don't have a fixed routine (22%).

Even in a post-pandemic world without restrictions, managing how – and how often – workplaces will be used will have to balance organisational priorities, employees' role demands, personal circumstances and choices.

Just over half of the employees who answered a set of questions about return to office² said they need access to their workplace on a regular basis (55%). This proportion is higher amongst people managers (64%) than it is amongst individual contributors (50%) but in a hybrid future, role requirements are just one of the many aspects to take into account.

Data collected from the 23,000 employees who told us how often and on which days, they are likely to use the workplace based on their role, circumstances, and preferences, demonstrates the drastic decrease in space need that organisations may have post-pandemic. If those responses are used to calculate load estimates as if the group together represented one large organisation, which pre-pandemic had enough space to accommodate all employees working in the workplace, it becomes clear how organisations may be sitting on significant amounts of surplus real estate.

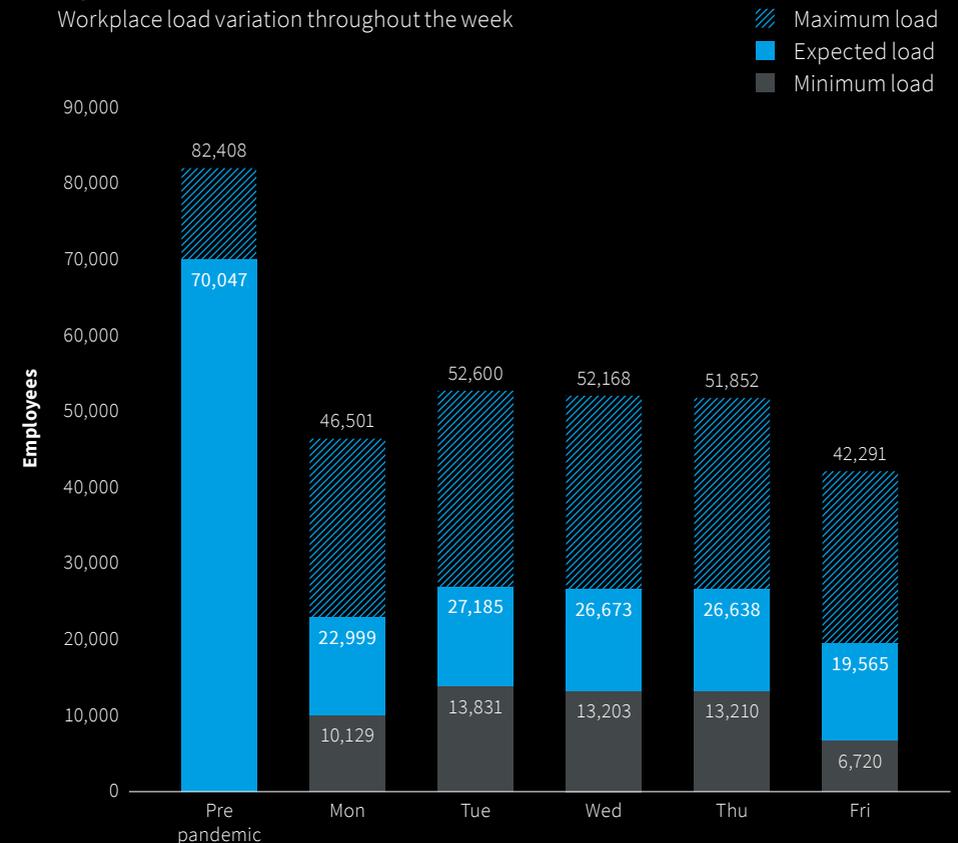
¹ Leesman Days in Workplace Module, N=23,120 as at 15/02/2022.

² Leesman Return to Office Module, N=8,099, Q3/4 2021.

While workplace load estimates vary from day to day, with Friday and Monday chosen by the fewest employees, and Tuesday to Thursday chosen by the most, both the maximum and expected loads remain far from those pre-pandemic (Figure 2). Here, the maximum load represents the number of users to attend the workplace if every employee who expressed interest for a particular day, or who did not have a fixed routine,

were to be in the office on the same day. The expected load is the most realistic estimation of how many employees may be in on a particular day, based on the frequency and likely weekdays that employees have indicated. If this is true on a larger scale, much of the pre-pandemic workspace will now become very inefficiently used, especially in workplaces that employed a concept that provided an assigned workstation to every employee.

Figure 2. Workplace load variation throughout the week



The hybrid opportunity: Optimal experience

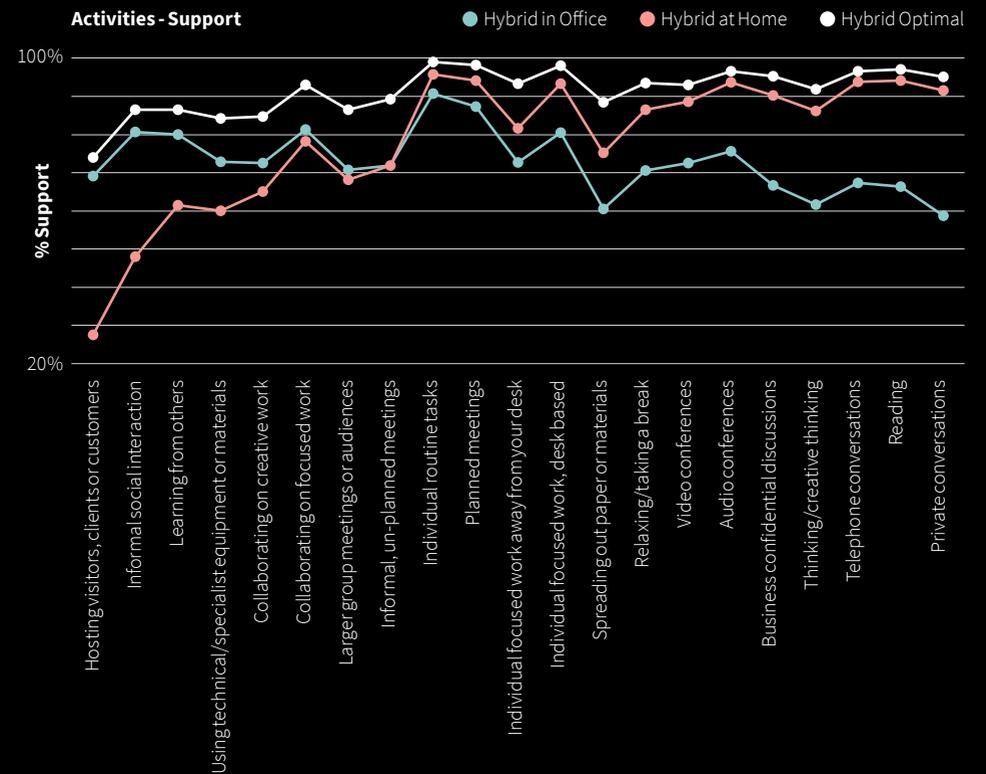
The biggest opportunity that hybrid working provides is the chance to optimise employees' experience across the different locations they use for work.

We've looked at the experience of hybrid workers, zoomed in on how well each activity was supported in the office and at home, and calculated the proportion of hybrid employees for whom at least one environment supported the activity ('optimal hybrid'), in order to show how hybrid working is combining the best of both worlds. (Figure 3)

97% of the hybrid employees agreed that at least one of the two environments they used enables them to work productively. This is more than the proportion measured across employees who worked exclusively from home (91%) or only in the workplace (71%).

When comparing the hybrid employees' 'optimal' experience to the experience of those who have worked exclusively from home or exclusively in the workplace, the benefit of hybrid becomes even more clear. An immediate outcome of this optimised dynamic is productivity. Knowledge work is generally complex and requires a lot from a single work environment, so using multiple settings – that may each have different pros and cons – may be beneficial overall.

Figure 3.
Hybrid workers' activity support: Home, Office and Optimal

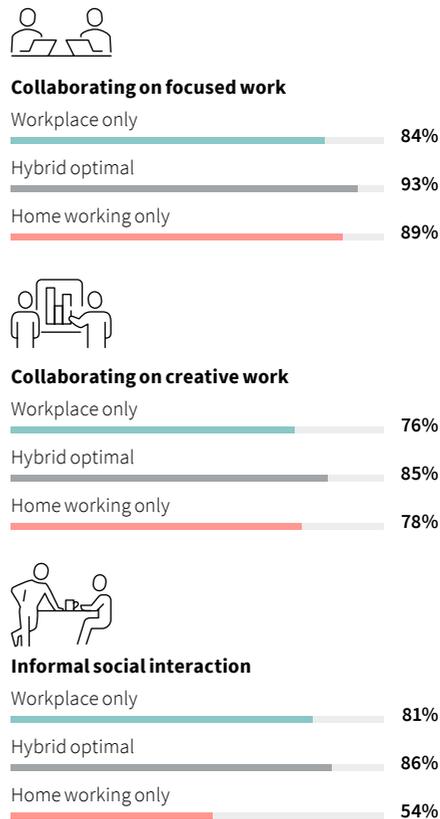


93% of the hybrid employees stated that at least one of the environments they used supports them when collaborating on focused work.

Maintaining social connection and supporting the collective dimensions of work have been under serious threat since the start of the pandemic, when organisational dynamics based on physical proximity were suspended and replaced with remote practices. Now that the return to pre-pandemic habits seems possible, a full-time office scenario may be seen by some organisations as the only solution able to repair the damage done. Yet our exploration of recent hybrid working experience has revealed that when it comes to the social dimensions of work, a maximised hybrid scenario can provide better outcomes than a single-location solution.

93% of the hybrid employees stated that at least one of the environments they used supports them when collaborating on focused work. Across non-hybrid workers, the proportions are 89% and 84% (home working only, workplace only). Collaboration on creative work and informal social interaction follow the same pattern. (Figure 4)

Figure 4. Collaboration and connection for hybrid and non hybrid workers



The hybrid risks

Hybrid working has the potential of delivering an optimal experience across a variety of work environments, but nonetheless, not every hybrid experience will be optimal. The success of hybrid working depends largely on how well a few key risk factors are managed.

Trust

Hybrid working can't work without trust. Trust was granted at the start of the pandemic when employees were sent home to work, out of sight of the perhaps in some cases the watchful eye of their manager. As we all know by now, it turned out that work did not stop or slow down, and most worries about a stagnation in employee effort were unfounded.

This trust will need to continue as we're finding our way in a new hybrid reality, and our data suggests that trust is in fact currently not one of the biggest challenges.

89% of our respondents currently perceive that their employer trusts them to do their work regardless of when they work, and an even larger proportion at 93%, say that their employer trusts them to do their job regardless of where they work. In a world where employees are by now used this high degree of trust, the biggest risks are perhaps for organisations who intend to impose a mandate on office use (or remote working). Such decisions could potentially impact on talent attraction and retention.

A photograph of a man in a light-colored shirt sitting at a desk in a dimly lit office at night. He is looking down at a laptop. The room is dark, with some framed pictures on the wall and a lamp providing a soft glow.

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Technology

Hybrid working can only work if the necessary technology infrastructure is in place to support the flow of work across different locations and, possibly, time zones. Also here, our data suggests that technology may not currently be one of the biggest barriers, as 93% of employees say that they have the software applications/programs they need to work from home, and 87% are satisfied with remote access to files and networks.

Where technology may become a risk is in how well pre-pandemic workplaces will be able to support work patterns developed throughout the pandemic. For example, video conferences have become more prevalent at home: at the end of 2021, 53% of the home workers found them important, compared to the 37% of office workers who did so by the end of 2019. Yet the average workplace doesn't support this activity as well as the average home (67% vs 90% as at Q4/2021).

Health concerns

In the context of a still ongoing pandemic, the decision to work in a hybrid way may be at least in part determined by health concerns about physical proximity to other people. Based on data from more than 8,000 employees³, we found that:

7% have health concerns about working in the workplace, 10% are concerned about their commute and 24% have health concerns related to both. The remaining 59% report no health concerns with regards to these two aspects.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these concerns vary according to hybrid workstyle.

Hybrid workers include the largest proportion of people with no health concerns (62%), and the smallest proportion with both workplace and commute concerns (21%). For non-hybrid, home-based employees, these proportions were 52%, and 30%. (Figure 5)

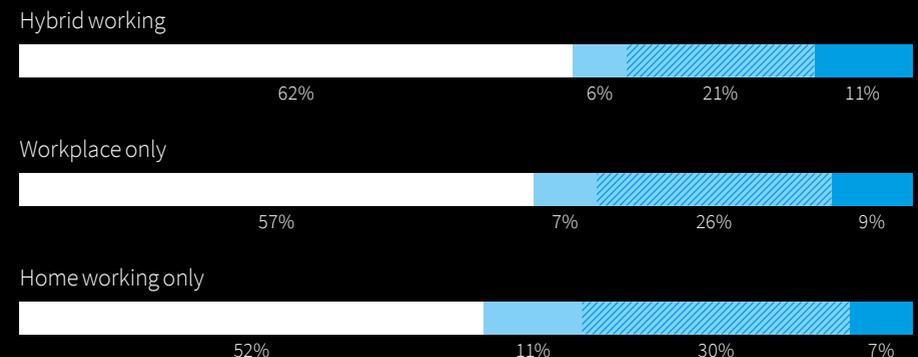
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Our findings suggest that the 'post-pandemic' future is not here yet: health concerns are still on people's minds, and for as long as they remain there, they may play an important role in where employees choose to spend their work time.

Figure 5.

Health and safety concerns for hybrid and non-hybrid workers

- No health and safety concerns
- Workplace concerns
- Workplace and commute concerns
- Commute concerns



Commute

Before Covid-19, the commute was a widely accepted component of working life for most people. The pandemic is likely to have changed that. In a hybrid future, the commute may be one of the key factors determining an employee's likelihood of going into the workplace.

Our data shows that currently 41% of those who answered a set of questions about their journey to workplace⁴ are dissatisfied with their commute, and the duration of the commute seems to be a key dealbreaker. On a smaller sample of employees, we also noted that commute length is associated with how likely employees are to adopt a hybrid workstyle.

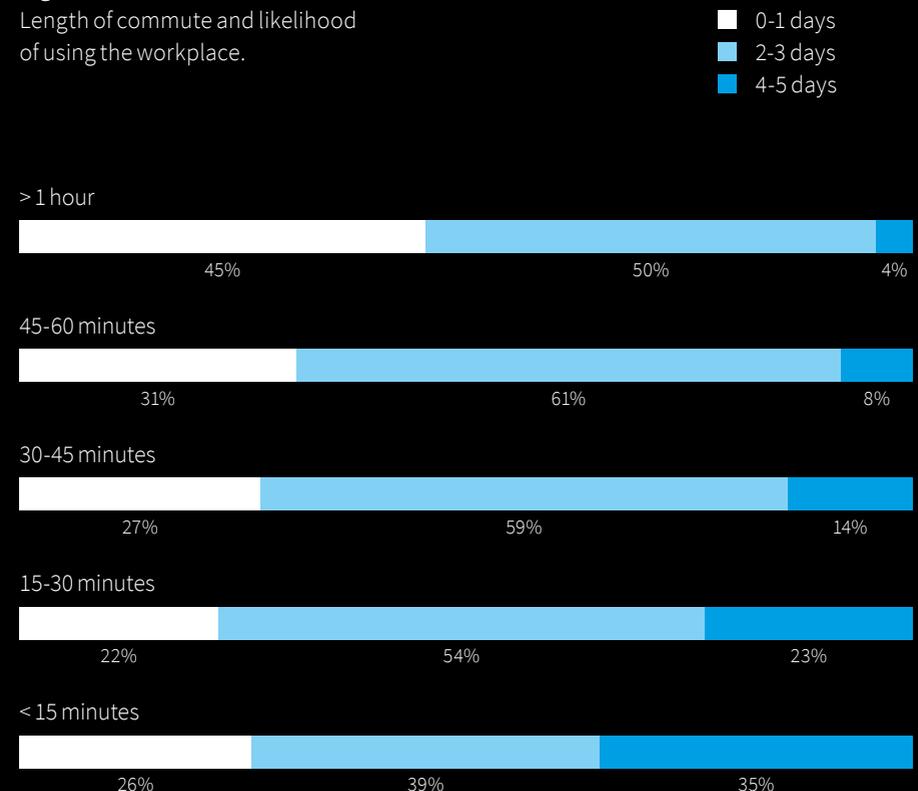
Those with the longest commute (over 1 hour) included the largest proportion of employees likely to use the workplace rarely or not at all (45% said 0-1 days per week). In contrast, those with the shortest commute (15 minutes or less) includes the largest proportion of employees likely to use the workplace full-time (35% indicated 4-5 days). (Figure 6)

Those whose commute is longer than an hour may be missing out on the full hybrid experience, by not making much use of the workplace component, although they may be in need of it. Granting these employees access to office spaces located closer to their homes could be a good solution, albeit only a partial one: the sense of community created by working together with colleagues would still be missing.

⁴ Leesman Journey to Workplace Module, N=6,981, Q3/4 2021

Figure 5.

Length of commute and likelihood of using the workplace.



Key considerations

Our scan of recent hybrid working experience revealed that it can provide a good solution moving forward although it is not free of risks.

The key benefit of hybrid working is that it can optimise employees' experience across multiple work locations, making the most of each. The main risk, however, is that pre-pandemic mentalities, infrastructure, and routines do not, or will not, match the new habits developed during the pandemic.

Hybrid working will likely look, feel, and operate very differently to the workplace-centric model that some may be used to. For one, the office workplace may not be the default location of work anymore, but instead, become a destination that people actively choose. It follows that some may choose to avoid it.

1. Some demographic groups are wary of the office

Younger employees and new-starters are the most likely to work fully remote and least likely to work in a hybrid way. This is worrying because they generally have a poorer experience at home due to their limited access to adequate work settings. If this is not addressed, they may be missing out on the full benefits that hybrid working can offer, feel isolated and overlooked. Having an entire demographic group absent also means a less diverse workplace.

2. Trust matters greatly but must be maintained

Feeling trusted to work away from the workplace is the fuel of any hybrid future. This trust was granted at the start of the pandemic - it had to be, since home working was mandated by many governments across the world - and our data shows that for 9 in 10 employees it still is.

However, as restrictions to use and travel to the workplace are being phased out, most organisations now have a choice in whether they mandate where employees work. Those who do may risk talent attraction & retention problems, especially within demographic groups reluctant to commit to the office.

3. Commuting cannot be ignored anymore

Before the pandemic, commuting used to be part of the 'normal' work-life balancing act of most employees. This perspective may have changed since. Commute satisfaction may now be one of the crucial factors in determining likelihood of using the 'main' workplace, especially if the office is located more than an hour away from home. Granting employees access to 'third spaces' located within a reasonable commuting distance may be a good option for many organisations seeking to retain talent.

4. Health concerns are still on people's minds

Preparing for a post-pandemic future is what most organisations are (or should be) doing, but unfortunately, we're not fully over the Covid-19 episode yet. Health concerns about using the workplace or the commute are still very present in people's everyday lives and play a crucial role in how 'hybrid' they are likely to work. Until these concerns are understood and addressed by organisations, workplaces will not be anywhere near pre-pandemic occupancy levels.

The key benefit of hybrid working is that it can optimise employees' experience across multiple work locations, making the most of each

5. Surplus real estate is a real risk

Employees' presence in the workplace is no longer a given: it will likely be the result of an equation balancing role-related requirements, commuting distance, health concerns and other factors. This will potentially leave many workplaces underutilised. Moreover, the number of people likely to use the workplace will fluctuate throughout the week, with potentially near-empty Mondays and overcrowded Wednesdays. How to manage this surplus real estate, how much to cut, and how much to keep and improve – all of this will have to be thought through properly by each organisation, and decisions may be different from one workplace to the other.

The future of hybrid

Our analysis shows how hybrid working can deliver a better experience than each of its components – i.e. fully office working or fully remote - but it is certainly not without risks. We also found that most of the assumptions that the pre-pandemic workplace relied on must be urgently revisited.

When it comes to hybrid working, one size doesn't fit all – there is no magic recipe. Instead, understanding the current requirements, circumstances, and concerns of your employees is more pressing than ever.

Talk to our experts and use data to inform your future work strategies