

HR STRATEGY

When WFH turns into a tug of war

As some employers seek to impose a full-time return to the office, disgruntled workers are starting to vote with their feet. What can HR do to balance their conflicting interests?

Cath Everett

As the disparity between what employers and employees want from hybrid work grows, the practice has arrived at something of a crossroads. Most companies have come to accept that some sort of hybrid model is appropriate and have been experimenting with various methods. But a growing number of firms have hit the headlines recently by rejecting the concept entirely. For instance, the CEO of Goldman Sachs, David Solomon, urged all staff to return to the office on a full-time basis as soon as the firm was able to open its US premises after an omicron-enforced closure at the start of 2022. The fact that only half of the 10,000-strong workforce at its Manhattan headquarters turned up on reopening day spoke volumes about their thoughts on the matter.

Jacob Rees-Mogg, minister for Brexit opportunities and government efficiency, similarly caused consternation a few weeks later when he left notes on civil servants' empty desks with the message: "Sorry you were out when I visited. I look forward to seeing you in the office very soon." He also warned that he would consider selling government buildings if employees failed to make enough use of them. Rees-Mogg's rhetoric aroused a strong response from the Public and Commercial Services Union. "Evidence shows that hybrid working improves workers' wellbeing and boosts productivity," it said in a letter to the minister, accusing him of "deliberately prioritising your ideological approach to Covid safety over civil servants' welfare

and the quality of public service they deliver". An October 2021 research report, *The Great Executive-Employee Disconnect*, highlighted several other cases in which firms had tried to impose higher levels of office working against most employees' wishes. Published by Slack, a provider of remote communications tools, it was based on an independent international poll of more than 10,000 executives and employees. The survey revealed that 68% of executives wanted to work at HQ for all or most of the time – and 59% of that group expected their staff to follow suit. By contrast, 76% of employees wanted flexibility in where they worked and 93% wanted flexibility in when they worked. Such findings indicate that "we're at a delicate moment", according

to Alexia Cambon, director of research in Gartner's HR practice. Now that it's possible to plan a full-time return to the office, "employers must decide how strongly they want to mandate this", she explains. "Asking people: 'What is your time worth?' is a very personal question. This is also about who should get to answer that question – is it the person living with the consequences or those who believe they know what's best for other people? It's hitting a nerve." Until recently, productivity used to be the key factor for advocating a return to the office. The received wisdom is that high performance is easier to achieve when everyone is located in the same place, because this makes it easier for them to collaborate and innovate. But an emerging argument in favour of summoning everyone back to base centres on the cultural damage that remote working could have on an organisation. "Much of the drive by leaders to get employees back to the workplace is based on a fear of not being in control and of people taking the mickey," argues Mike Thackray,

principal consultant for organisational development consultancy OE Cam. The problem is that many people are reluctant to lose the enhanced work/life balance they gained when they were obliged to work remotely at the start of the pandemic. They also consider themselves more productive at home and resent the implied lack of trust, he says. Such factors could become corrosive in the longer term. As Dr Janet Ahn, chief behavioural science officer at MindGym, warns: "Distrust and resentment can quickly become toxic, creating an environment where employees don't want to be, productivity and performance sink, and morale and wellbeing hit rock bottom." Moreover, in sectors where skills shortages are widespread, the danger for employers is that workers, with the balance of power shifting in their favour, simply vote with their feet should the desired flexibility not be forthcoming. A research report published in March 2022 by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) called *Work After Lockdown: no going back* has indicated the most popular hybrid working models among employees in the UK. Unsurprisingly, absolute flexibility tops the list. In second place is attending the office only when specific tasks necessitate it, as opposed to going in for an arbitrary number of days each week. Claire Campbell, director of HR research and consulting at the IES, says of the findings: "Although some workers, especially younger people, have been desperate to

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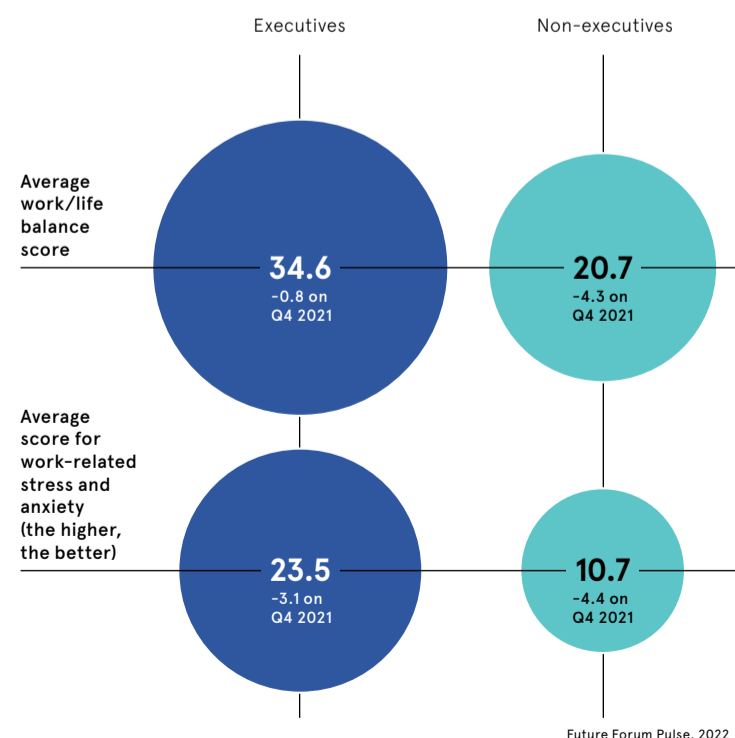
return to the office, many employers feel that they've had to push quite hard to get employees back there, even for part of the week." Given all these factors, how can HR chiefs ensure that both business leaders and employees are as happy as they can be if compromises are necessary? Cambon believes that it's important for all parties to end their "obsession" with location-based flexibility. Instead, she argues, the focus should be on deciding how, when and where people work based on the tasks at hand and the needs of teams and their members. Success has to be measured by outcomes rather than inputs. "The most important question we can ask ourselves here is how we can get the work done in the best way based on teams' and individuals' circumstances," Cambon stresses. "So you need to ask teams to look at the work they're doing and where they are in a project's lifecycle to see the days on which it makes sense for them to be together. Think of the office as just one possible tool in the toolbox." Campbell agrees that it's crucial to get employees involved in this decision-making process rather than subjecting them to rigid arbitrary policies. "HR has a role to play in developing some guiding principles and also in encouraging teams and their managers to discuss what's right for them. This will have a positive effect on their wellbeing and productivity," she says. "It might not look the same across the board, though, so people will have to learn to be comfortable with that." As part of this process, other key roles for HR will be to recruit more empathetic managers and help existing ones to develop better people skills. Such qualities are becoming increasingly important in a hybrid working environment to create the trust and psychological safety required to get the best

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out of employees and ensure that teams work together effectively. On the one hand, this is "about ensuring that leaders develop a clear understanding of what outputs they're seeking and also the confidence to handle ambiguity", according to Thackray. On the other, Cambon says, this is about adopting a more tailored approach to people management. It may take more effort than handling traditional, homogeneous ways of working, but the potential benefits will make it worthwhile. "Because employees can shape their own experience, they'll be better adjusted in terms of health and wellbeing, which leads to higher performance," she says. There is a danger is that the complexities created by adopting this new model may fuel a further management backlash against hybrid working if they are deemed too hard to handle. But Cambon urges employers to hold their nerve. "We are still very much in the experimental stage and will be for some time," she says. "Things will need tweaking as the work continues, but the best starting point is to roll out an employee listening strategy, because companies will live or die based on their people. ●

THE EXECUTIVE-EMPLOYEE DISCONNECT

Executives' employee experience scores versus non-executives' scores in Q1 2022

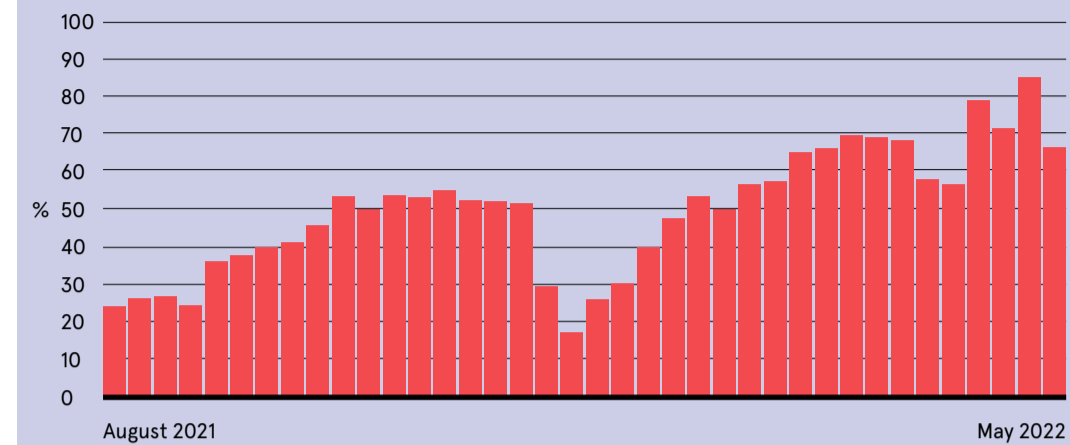


Future Forum Pulse, 2022

Commercial feature

OFFICE UTILISATION IN TODAY'S HYBRID WORKPLACE

Desk bookings show that the average hybrid worker is only coming into the office twice a week yet overall utilisation is increasing due to office downsizing



SMEs' hybrid work demands agile desk booking

Traditional tools and processes, used by smaller businesses for managing desk and meeting room spaces, are no longer fit for purpose. Post-Covid office management requires adaptable and smart booking systems

Since the relaxing of coronavirus rules, many businesses have settled with hybrid working, a move that has often increased productivity but greatly complicated office management. For SMEs, efficiently allocating workspaces and meeting rooms has become a major challenge. Typically, smaller businesses have needed to juggle ever-growing spreadsheets to allocate seats to each of their employees and to set meetings. Others rely on expensive enterprise systems that pre-date the pandemic; but those tools tend to incorporate a labyrinth of unnecessary functions and are priced beyond the budgets of most SMEs. "It's become incredibly complicated for anyone assigning desk space to keep track of who is in and when, and ensure they can work efficiently when they arrive," explains Tony Gibson, co-founder and managing director at the technology company Clearrooms. "The systems that have typically been available are just not fit for purpose when there are so many factors changing constantly."

In the wake of the pandemic, appetite for office space varies greatly by industry. For example, many legal firms typically expect staff to be present wherever possible, while digital startup teams are generally operating remotely. Most small businesses are somewhere in between, but hybrid working has become so widely established that employees now expect to make last-minute decisions on their attendance.

"This can create big problems when someone turns up and they can't have the desk they want, or there isn't a space for them at all," Gibson explains. "It can also be near impossible to arrange meetings when it's unclear who will be in an office."

Dedicated tech businesses are supporting smaller companies in dealing with the challenges of hybrid working. Among them is Clearrooms, a system created to enable SMEs to assign desk space more easily, to know who is in and when, and to set meetings when the right people will be present. The system allows managers to set simple automated rules on desk allocation, while employees can intuitively book spaces whenever needed.

Businesses typically use Clearrooms office plan and setting any rules they need. They can quickly integrate the platform with other management systems, such as calendars, single sign on and access control. Staff can then easily log on and see the available desks and who is in, in one step choosing their workspace or setting meetings. The system is priced per desk, not per user, so most companies will pay much less, especially when members of their staff only work in the office occasionally.

"Hybrid working has changed so much that businesses need software that reflects their current ways of working and that adapts to their varied, emerging requirements," explains Alex Wight, Clearrooms' other founder and its chief technology officer. "Smaller businesses can no longer manage space with old spreadsheets or expensive and complex enterprise management platforms."

Looking ahead, there is huge potential for desk- and room-booking software to become smarter and more responsive, Wight notes, with functionality extended to update employees as available office space changes. "We are working on proactive assistance, so users receive notifications based on factors such as a desk becoming available, or 80% of a team due to be in the office so a meeting can be set," he says. "It's about making sure the technology is at the forefront of the hybrid, adaptable ways that SME teams operate."

The scope and scale of change to ways of working, provoked by the pandemic, means SMEs are wise to avoid juggling workspace spreadsheets, or worse, costly enterprise systems that become unwieldy. In order to effectively assign desks and meeting spaces, many are turning to dedicated software that is agile, responsive and can be quickly implemented to support positive, effective workspaces.

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To find out more about agile desk and room booking for SMEs, visit clearrooms.com



Workspace management made easy, fast & affordable

Agile software for flexible working

Quick setup

Simple pricing

No contracts