

The Future of Work

A trends forecast for 2026

IWG International
Workplace
Group



Continuous improvements in technology, including AI and new approaches to training and development, will be significant drivers of productivity, engagement and loyalty in 2026, enabling companies to create a future-ready workforce and working environment that propels business growth.

“We will continue to see a fundamental shift in the geography of work with the centre of gravity moving towards local communities. The remarkable advances in cloud technology and videoconferencing software – both vital to enabling effective hybrid working – mean workers no longer need to travel long distances on a daily basis. Innovations in technology will continue to advance in years to come and will radically underline and fuel the flexibility of location.

“The rising demand for more localised working has led to the majority of our new IWG centres opening in the heart of local communities, suburbs and rural areas, enabling many people around the world to say farewell to long daily commutes.”



Mark Dixon

Founder and CEO,
International Workplace Group plc

The year ahead will see businesses doubling down their focus on their people – not just as their biggest asset, but also as one of their greatest investments. That means ensuring their teams are being offered the wellbeing, training, development and new technology-driven learning opportunities that they need to thrive.

With this increased priority on their employees, companies are also recognising that productivity and engagement are driven by how, when, and with whom their people collaborate rather than solely where they work.

New advances in technology, in particular AI, will continue to accelerate the shift to flexible and hybrid working models for organisations of all shapes and sizes. This will enable smarter collaboration and more dynamic ways of working, as businesses also invest in data-driven workplace design and AI-powered personalised experiences. Increasingly, career pathways will be defined by skills rather than traditional degrees, and human-AI collaboration will become a valuable means to business success.

In 2026, focus will shift from where work happens to companies' profitability and productivity, and the wellbeing of their teams. Businesses will continue to invest in technology as well as in flexible workspace memberships, allowing employees to work closer to home where they will be most productive, avoiding costly, unnecessary commutes. For many, this will mean working from suburban commuter hubs, small towns or emerging 15-minute cities, with occasional visits to city centre HQs. Work will become more local, more personal and more intelligent than ever before.

In this white paper, International Workplace Group (IWG), the world's largest platform for work, with brands including Regus and Spaces, reveals the 12 top trends that are set to shape global working in 2026.

The Rise of AI: Your Work Copilot

“Potentially more transformative than electricity or fire” is how Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google, has described artificial intelligence.

His words are no exaggeration, and AI is already beginning to have a huge influence on the world of work. But how will humans and AI best collaborate, and how can business leaders reimagine how they view skills, productivity, management and more?

In 2026, teams will more regularly integrate AI copilots into their daily operations. These systems will significantly reduce the need for humans to carry out simple tasks such as admin, knowledge retrieval and scheduling, meaning employees will find themselves with more time for higher-impact work. Research by IWG has found that more than a third of workers are already using this AI time bonus for creative or strategic work, learning and development, in-person collaboration, and networking.

The role of managers will increasingly be one of orchestration, focusing on fostering human-AI collaboration, and finding ways to blend AI insights with human skills such as empathy and strategic thinking.

AI in workplace hardware is increasingly blurring the divide between those working in a central HQ and those working remotely. Cisco has coined the term ‘distance zero’ to describe a scenario in which all participants in a meeting, regardless of their location or device, feel equally present, visible and integral to the conversation. Its collaboration devices include features such as AI-powered tracking for cameras and intelligent microphone systems that adapt to the room.



Nudge Nudge...

The nascent science of ‘nudgetech’ is using AI to deliver personalised prompts at scale. This will revolutionise the way that a company communicates with its employees and help to strengthen company culture among distributed workforces. Rather than just broadcasting the same information to everyone, managers and internal comms teams can instead send more nuanced, personalised communications to individuals that can adapt over time depending on how each employee responds. Think of an employee portal that doesn’t just display the latest news but actively learns what kind of updates an individual engages with most.

Not RTO, but RTSO

Companies of all sizes are moving away from loosely defined hybrid policies to more structured, multi-location models with teams increasingly empowered to work from more convenient places closer to home. Rather than insisting on a "Return to the Office", it's a case of a "Return to Several Offices".

Microsoft recently announced that by 2026 many of its US employees will need to be in their closest Microsoft office at least three days per week while many corporates are empowering their teams to work from a network of coworking or flexible workspace locations.



Micro-Certifications as Currency



Hybrid workers will stack “micro-certifications” (bite-sized, skill-focused credentials) instead of relying on traditional degrees or annual performance reviews. Employers will support this by funding on-demand learning platforms, creating more agile talent pools. This trend will change internal mobility, with skills becoming more portable and accessible.

Workers will need to get used to continual relearning as the rate of change in workplace technology grows ever quicker. According to the World Economic Forum, two-fifths of workers’ current skill sets will be transformed or become outdated within the next five years. Amazon recently announced a \$2.5 billion ‘Future Ready 2030’ commitment aimed at addressing just this issue. Its target is to help prepare at least 50 million people for the future of work through a wide range of programmes, including upskilling initiatives for its employees.

When it comes to new hires, companies are increasingly looking beyond academic credentials and focusing instead on individuals with skills and practical experience. These so-called New Collar Workers may not have spent three years at university earning a degree, but they nevertheless can bring vital expertise to the workplace, especially in areas such as coding and AI.

Skills Sharing on the Rise

Organisations are putting a greater focus on skills sharing across teams to propel business success. This has the double benefit of pooling knowledge and best practices while also strengthening company culture. The practice is especially common when it comes to the use of AI in the office. Research by IWG found that tech-savvy younger workers are actively assisting older, more tenured colleagues to adopt and learn to use AI, bringing considerable added value to their enterprises.

“Organisations that encourage employees across all generations to share skills and knowledge will outpace those that don’t,” says Dixon.

Onboarding Gets More Intentional



Employers hoping to get the most from new hires will place less emphasis on admin and more on hands-on work training and mentoring.



Insufficient onboarding can set workers – and their new employers – up to fail, including driving many workers to leave the organisation as soon as they've arrived. This leaves employers back where they started, with additional costs. As companies seek ways to improve operations and their bottom lines, they will put greater emphasis on properly onboarding new hires to provide them with the resources, skills and relationships to do their jobs well and grow with the organisation. For many businesses, this will include more in-person trainings and relationship building opportunities.

Employers hoping to get the most from new hires will place less emphasis on admin and more on hands-on work training, setting clear performance expectations and offering practical mentoring from established employees.

The New Workforce Demographic: Why Business Leaders Need to Know What Gen Z Wants at Work

Gen Z is entering the workforce with clear expectations that go beyond pay: they prioritise wellness, mental health, flexible hours and meaningful work that aligns with their core values. With an ageing global population, rising retirements and widening talent gaps, it is critical that business leaders understand and react to these changing priorities in order to stay competitive and secure the best talent.

Research by IWG found that nearly nine-out-of-ten (88%) of the emerging Gen Z workforce favour a hybrid working model rather than commuting to a central office on a daily basis, which is seen as a time-consuming hassle by more than a third (37%). "For Gen Z, flexibility isn't a perk, it's a necessity," says Dixon. "Companies that don't offer hybrid working will find the talent pool is severely limited. And those who currently employ Gen Z are likely to see them depart to employers who offer them the flexibility they require."



88% of Gen Z favour hybrid working over commuting daily to a central office

Reversing the ‘Quiet Crack’

Unlike “quiet quitting”, where employees deliberately do the bare minimum, “quiet cracking” describes something subtler: employees who are still performing but feel mentally and emotionally checked out, resulting in burnout, stalled progression and a lack of purpose.

Evidence that this is more than just a social media craze can be found in Gallup’s latest State of the Global Workplace Report, which found that both mental wellbeing and employee engagement levels fell in 2024. This has huge repercussions: Gallup estimates that lack of engagement alone cost the world economy \$438 billion in lost productivity.

Research by IWG has found that more than half (57%) of workers are more likely to disengage from their jobs when they feel undervalued or micromanaged. One way for companies to remain competitive and keep their people engaged is by placing more emphasis on employee wellbeing and flexible work options. Wellness technology can play a significant role in this, with employers increasingly looking



to tools such as stress-tracking wearables, AI mental health reminders and wellness challenges that gamify healthy habits and make them more engaging.



Well-Tech Integration

In the year ahead, wellbeing will go beyond perks such as yoga classes and meditation apps. ‘Well-tech’ tools will be integrated into hybrid workplace design as core infrastructure rather than as optional add-ons. Expect to see more innovations such as:

Neuron Activation Pods

Low-frequency vibrations in the pods activate the autonomic nervous system, boosting the body’s natural restorative properties.

Virtual Skylights

Help to regulate circadian rhythms in windowless environments, improving mood and reducing stress.

Galleri Micro-farms

Growing sustainable produce on-site offers the twin benefits of nutritious food and a connection with nature.

Nook Huddle Pods

Sensory-safe environments with adjustable lighting and visual buffers are especially beneficial for neurodivergent individuals.

Fractional C-Suite and Executive Talent



As they navigate ongoing economic uncertainty, more companies will turn to fractional executives, opting for part-time or contract-based C-suite talent who bring in laser-focused expertise without the cost of full-time appointments.

With nine-out-of-ten (87%) CEOs and CFOs concerned about the impact of ongoing macroeconomic instability and two-thirds (67%) already reducing operating costs, businesses are looking for smarter leadership models. This flexibility allows companies to secure world-class strategic insight when needed, while enabling experienced professionals to work across multiple organisations.

Unlike consultancy, fractional leadership sees an expert embedding within a company, attending leadership meetings, managing teams and taking responsibility for outcomes. While the company's core executives will be full-time employees, these fractional executives can be used as and when necessary to achieve specific objectives.

This kind of fractional hiring is particularly helpful for startups and small businesses, who may lack the resources to hire an entire full-time C-suite. It also plays well with flexible working policies. Fractional executives are likely to rely on remote teams in order to achieve their targets.

Two CEOs – A Rising Trend?

In a growing trend, some of the world's most dynamic companies, including Spotify, Comcast and Oracle, are now run by co-CEOs. The thinking goes that two minds really can be better than one, and contrasting viewpoints at the top can create a sharpened and more balanced overall company vision.



Building 15-Minute Cities from the Ground Up

The 15-minute city concept is entering a new phase in 2026. Until recently, this revolutionary concept in urban planning has generally been a process of adaptation: modifying existing neighbourhoods or legacy developments to create a network of communities where all of life's daily requirements – from work to leisure – are within a short walk or cycle ride. But now, these neighbourhoods are increasingly starting from the drawing board and being built from the ground up.

Take the historic site of the former Ellinikon International Airport in Athens, where the first phase of a new development designed around 15-minute city principles is well on the way to completion. One of the largest urban regeneration projects in Europe, the \$8 billion development will combine residential spaces, shopping, workplaces, leisure, entertainment, and cultural activities, all centred around a sprawling two million-square-metre park.

In London, the site of the famous Olympia exhibition centre is undergoing a £1.3 billion development into a world-class arts, entertainment, exhibition and creative district. Its state-of-the-art One Olympia office building will be home to an IWG workspace across an entire floor. The development will also benefit from new restaurants, bars, hotels and a purpose-built co-educational senior school.

The 15-minute city brings multiple benefits – for health and wellbeing, for local economies and for the climate. As Dixon puts it: “Why would we not embrace it?” The rapid expansion of IWG's network is helping to power the trend in cities, suburbs and smaller towns – in the first nine months of 2025, a record-breaking 831 new locations were signed to its global network.



The Local Loyalty Effect

Hybrid work will foster a renewed connection to local communities now that people are spending more time working close to home. Companies may encourage employees to integrate volunteerism, local partnerships, or skill-sharing into their workweek, strengthening employer brands while supporting civic engagement.



“It makes sense,” says Dixon. “When you’re spending more time in your local area, you’re far more likely to want to give something back to the community. And on top of that, once people are freed from the long, daily commute, they have more time to dedicate to community involvement.”

The Hospitality-Infused Office



Comfortable, high-quality furnishings. A well-equipped gym. Plush and expansive recreation areas. It sounds like a luxury hotel, but in fact these features common to the upmarket hospitality sector are increasingly being found in the workplace.

The 'hotelification' of workspace design is a direct result of changes in our patterns of work. Because large numbers of people now work in hybrid and more flexible ways, the onus is on companies to provide central HQs that are worth commuting to. (Recent research by workplace experts Leesman found that just under half of workers travel between 30 minutes and an hour to get to their city centre office.) That means creating comfortable, inviting and experience-centric environments that are more likely to both attract and retain top talent.

Leading companies such as Deloitte, PwC and Spotify are leading the way, offering upgraded

facilities such as barista-run coffee bars, meditation rooms, and concierge desks that handle everything from dry cleaning to dinner reservations.

Many of IWG's flex spaces boast design concepts that would look equally at home in one of the finest luxury hotels. Bahnhofplatz by Signature, a luxury flex space located in an iconic 19th-century building in Zurich, Switzerland, features a large roof terrace, a fitness room with personal trainers, gaming rooms, a bar and a luxury restaurant.

"Today it's essential that offices are places where people want to be, not where they have to be," says Dixon. "The hospitality sector has centuries of experience in making spaces appealing and enticing, and we're now seeing that more and more in the design of workspaces."

A New Design Partnership

IWG has partnered with leading hotel and residential design company YOO to bring beautifully designed spaces that adapt to both work and life to key markets globally. Each location will reflect its local market and deliver a cohesive experience centred on innovation, functionality and community.



"Through this partnership, we're blending YOO's standout design innovation with our unrivalled flexible workspace and office expertise, to provide beautiful, functional spaces that meet the demands of the future," says Dixon.

The 'Day Office' in Even Greater Demand



Natural light and on-site wellness amenities will differentiate day offices.

Day offices are set to become a key part of the working landscape, providing a professional and productive office space whenever and wherever it is needed. Whether employees are seeking quiet focus rooms or collaboration spaces for ad-hoc team days, these "on-demand" options eliminate the need for long-term commitments while offering all the amenities of a traditional office.

With wellbeing firmly on the agenda, features such as natural light and on-site wellness

amenities will differentiate day offices, helping employees work efficiently, flexibly, and with purpose.

"We're seeing significant demand for day offices from companies of all shapes and sizes, from startups to multinationals with thousands of global employees," says Dixon. "Our day offices are available on-demand in thousands of locations worldwide – from small town and suburban hubs to central business districts."

Data-Driven Workplace Personalisation

Employers will use AI and workplace analytics to create “personalised hybrid plans” for employees – tailored schedules, optimal collaboration days, even preferred office locations. Just as Spotify personalises playlists, work will be algorithmically customised for individuals and teams. Personalisation can play a key role in creating a culture where employees feel valued, boosting both engagement and talent retention.

IWG’s app enables employees to instantly choose their nearest and most convenient location to work, with everything they need at their fingertips. “At a time when companies are finding it harder and harder to recruit and retain the very best talent, it’s crucial to let your people work in the way that makes them feel happiest and most productive,” says Dixon. “Using technology to optimise their working days can play a vital part in allowing them to do just that.”



IWG’s app enables employees to instantly choose their nearest and most convenient location to work.

The Part-Time Productivity Boom

Not every job will remain a full 40-hour commitment. Hybrid work will drive the growth of “work-light roles”: jobs designed at 15–25 hours a week for caregivers, retirees or side-hustlers. This model widens the talent pool and lets organisations flex capacity cost-effectively.

The trend benefits companies as much as individuals: employees who work part-time generally have a better work-life balance, making them more energetic, more engaged, and less likely to be absent. A study by the IESE Business School in Barcelona found that a ten percentage-point increase in the share of employees working part-time at a company leads to a 2% increase in productivity. In the professional, scientific and technical industry sectors, this increase is as high as 3.3%.

Recent research by IWG found that hybrid and more flexible ways of working can be key to attracting and retaining part-time workers, who tend to be disincentivised by the amount of their time and pay taken up by commuting long distances to a central HQ daily. Nearly half

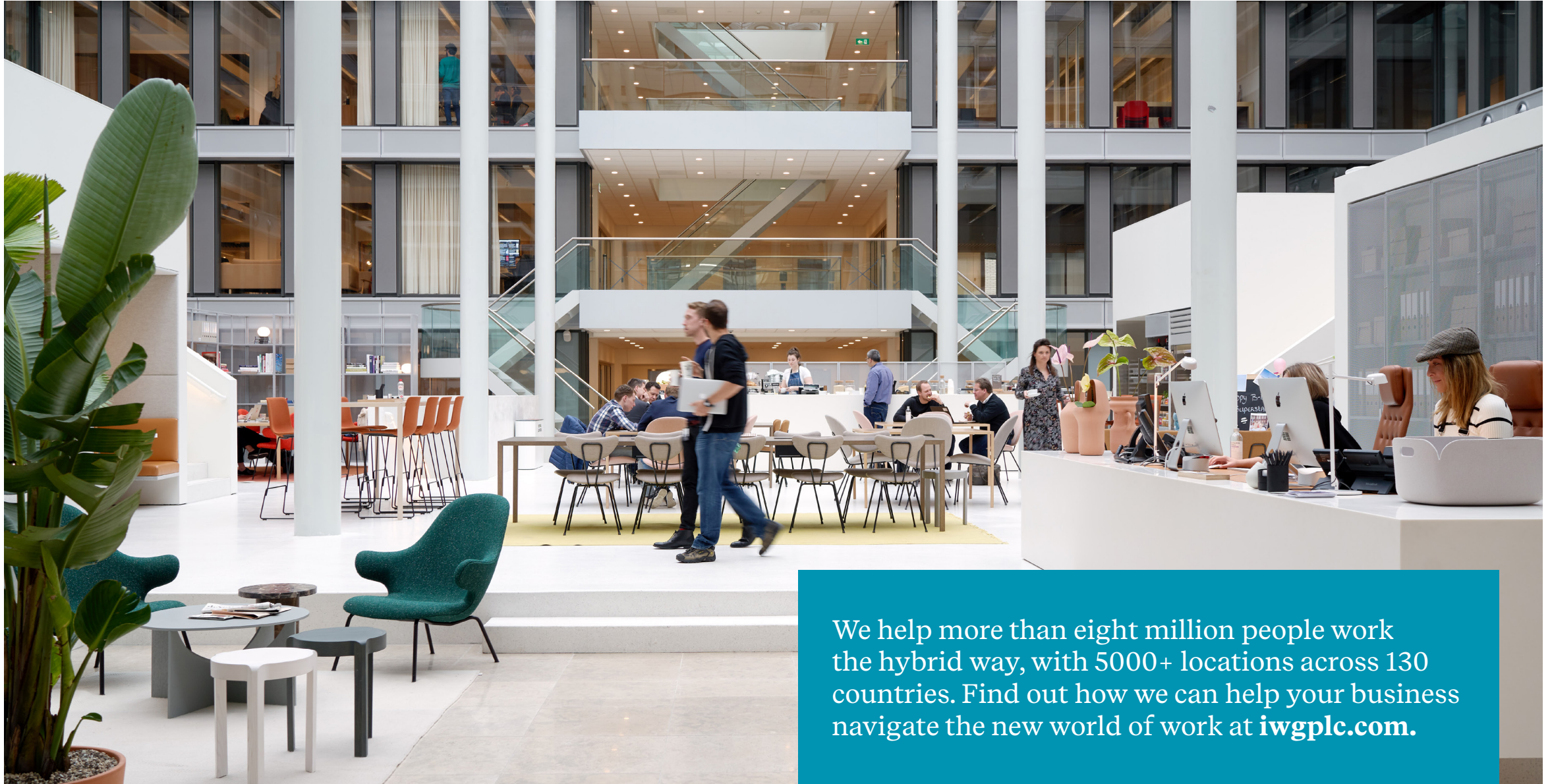
of former part-time workers say they would actively consider rejoining the workforce if they could work in a hybrid way. In contrast, four-out-of-ten part-time workers say they would leave the workforce entirely if required to commute to a city centre every day they work.

“By offering greater flexibility over how and where work is done, businesses can not only retain these valuable team members but also attract talented individuals back into the workforce,” says Dixon.



The Rise of Flexi-Retirement

Phased retirement will start to replace the traditional “hard stop” at 65+, with a smoother, more flexible transition becoming an increasing reality thanks to the rapid expansion of top-class flexible workspaces in the heart of communities, closer to where people live. Instead of leaving the workforce abruptly, employees can gradually reduce hours or shift into part-time, project-based or advisory roles, without the need to travel long distances. The advantages are wide-ranging: organisations retain critical skills, labour shortages are eased, older employees remain active and purposeful, and local communities benefit from their expertise.



We help more than eight million people work the hybrid way, with 5000+ locations across 130 countries. Find out how we can help your business navigate the new world of work at [iwgplc.com](https://www.iwgplc.com).