

The Gift of Time:

How Workplace Flexibility Transforms Employee Health

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Introduction



I'm passionate about the benefits of an active and healthy lifestyle, but ongoing improvements to your lifestyle often demand a time commitment. For many, the modern 9-5 just doesn't allow that flexibility — or that certainly used to be the case.



As an NHS GP, I've seen first-hand the crushing impact of COVID and the knock-on effects of the pandemic and lockdown on the health of society. Lockdown was brutal on so many people; while key workers bore the brunt of keeping the nation running during the most trying of circumstances, for the vast majority of the white-collar working population, working from home (WFH) became mandatory, something that was unknown to most of the public until early 2020.

We're still feeling the negative mental, physical and economic impact of COVID to this day, but could some good have come from the pandemic? Has working from home or local workspaces and the flexibility offered by a hybrid working culture benefited the average office worker physically and mentally? The data would suggest a resounding "yes", and the fundamental reason? Time.

The concept of working from home is familiar and yet, until recently, frowned on by most global employers. So, what changed?

There have always been examples of people working from home; take the artisans of

ancient Mesopotamia who would operate their businesses from their homes. People would produce pottery, textiles, or metalwork and sell or trade them from their dwellings, allowing them to combine their work and living spaces, reducing costs and travel times. Or artisans in Europe's Middle Ages, where weavers, shoemakers, and blacksmiths had their workshops attached to or within their homes. These individuals would trade from their residences for greater convenience and flexibility.

However, with the emergence of office culture, especially post-Great War, the prevailing viewpoint was that working alongside colleagues in an office environment was the only efficient way to conduct business. Offices became essential for management to monitor the workforce and ensure productivity. Then various global lockdowns changed the dynamic again, and workers were expected, nay forced, to work from home where possible.

Since COVID, the NHS and other organisations have examined the physical and mental health benefits of hybrid working while highlighting the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Throughout this chapter, we will





79% of employees say they have been more productive since adopting the hybrid model

47% say this is because of less work-related stress

46% say it's because they have more time to relax and unwind

explore the pillars of health that have been improved through a hybrid model, including sleep, stress management, physical activity, nutrition and social connections.

Both local and home working offer unique advantages, emphasising different aspects of wellbeing. Local working promotes social interaction and provides designated spaces and ergonomics for work, while home working prioritises flexibility, reduced commute-related stress, and personalised environments. As the concept of work continues to evolve, a hybrid approach that combines the benefits of both options may offer the most comprehensive solution for employees' holistic health and wellbeing.

As workplaces continue to evolve, we can start to dispel employers' lingering doubts about the continued adoption of this practice, as there is a level of reluctance from some quarters when offering hybrid working to employees.

Some very high-profile naysayers include Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta — “Remote work can lead to a loss of productivity and a decline in employee engagement.” And Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon — “We believe that the best way to build a strong company culture is to have everyone in the same place, working together.”

There are potential risks, and employers have every right to feel nervous when adopting such a seemingly radical long-term business decision. Still, hybrid working is also delivering productivity gains. Almost four in five employees (79%) say they have been more productive since pre-2020 because of less work-related stress (47%) and having more time to relax and unwind after work (46%). Research from Nicholas Bloom, an economist at Stanford Graduate School of Business, states overall productivity is up 3% to 4% due to hybrid working, showing a tangible benefit for both businesses and staff.¹



The Evolution of Hybrid Working

Hybrid's flexible work model combines remote work with in-person collaboration. Its growing adoption post-pandemic showcases its effectiveness in meeting the needs of both employers and employees. I believe this approach aligns with the future of work-life balance because it provides flexibility, reduces commuting stress, enhances productivity, improves mental health, promotes workforce inclusion, and enables individuals to integrate work and personal life more effectively. Embracing hybrid working as organisations adapt to the changing work landscape should pave the way for a balanced, fulfilling, and sustainable approach to work — and ultimately make us all healthier. A combination of societal, technological, and cultural factors paved the way for making the global adoption of hybrid working possible; without these, office work would have stalled entirely in 2020.

The modern concept of remote work has a rich history that spans several decades, influenced by various factors and advancements. In the 1980s and 1990s, technological advances set the stage for remote work. The rise of

personal computers, the internet, and new communication tools enabled the development of email, video conferencing, and virtual collaboration platforms. These innovations gradually made it possible to perform work tasks anywhere with power and internet access. During the 1990s, the concepts of freelancing and telecommuting gained traction. Most freelancers embraced the flexibility offered by remote work. At the same time, some forward-thinking companies allowed employees to work from home on designated days, marking a shift towards more flexible work arrangements and showing an understanding of the modern demands of family life.

Globalisation also played a significant role in driving the adoption of remote work; as businesses expanded internationally, distributed teams became essential for coordinating and collaborating across different regions and time zones. Remote work became a necessity for fostering effective teamwork and communication. As workforce demographics evolved, younger generations sought flexibility and autonomy in their work arrangements.





Technological advancements have made hybrid work arrangements possible and efficient. Communication and collaboration tools, such as instant messaging platforms, video conferencing solutions, and project management software, have bridged the gap between remote and in-person collaboration. Cloud computing and virtualisation technologies have revolutionised hybrid working, allowing secure access to work-related resources and applications from anywhere. The proliferation of mobile devices and high-speed internet connectivity has empowered employees to work remotely and instantly access emails, documents, and productivity apps.

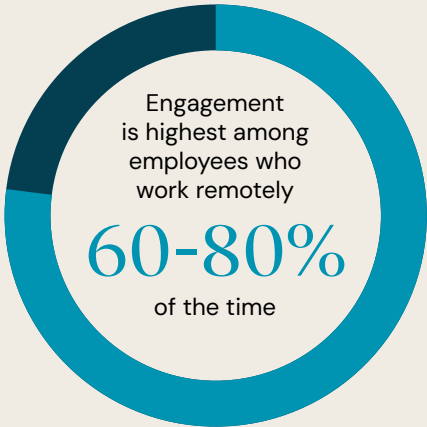
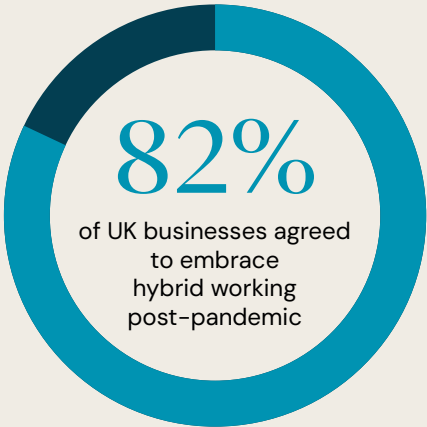
The factors above enabled the relatively smooth transition from in-person to remote working during and post-pandemic. Both employers and employees then had the opportunity to witness the benefits and challenges of remote work, leading to a newfound appreciation for the flexibility and autonomy it afforded. As pandemic restrictions

eased and personal freedoms were restored, businesses began to appreciate the value of a hybrid work approach. This model provided the sought-after work-life balance and flexibility employees had come to appreciate during remote work while still fostering in-person collaboration and social interaction in the office, creating a beneficial balance for the company and its workforce.

Notably, the pandemic-driven changes have had a lasting impact on work practices in the UK. According to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) survey, 82% of UK businesses agreed to embrace some hybrid working post-pandemic, indicating a widespread recognition of the benefits and potential of this adaptable work model.² A survey by PwC found that 77% of UK employees said they were more productive when working from home,³ and a study by Harvard Business Review found that hybrid workers were 22% more likely to meet or exceed their goals than those who worked exclusively in the office.⁴ This finding underscores the positive influence of flexible

work arrangements on productivity levels, cementing the case for hybrid working as a viable long-term solution. Despite its evident advantages, the ideal extent of hybrid working remains subjective, varying based on industry and job roles. Studies conducted by Gallup reveal that employees who spent 60% to 80% of their time working remotely experienced the highest levels of engagement, suggesting that a balanced approach is crucial to employee satisfaction and commitment.⁵

The post-pandemic world witnessed a significant shift in mindset, with businesses increasingly recognising the potential of hybrid working as a sustainable solution. This approach has proven to enhance productivity, improve overall employee wellbeing and job satisfaction, leading to a more motivated and engaged workforce. Embracing hybrid working can revolutionise workplace wellness, paving the way for a future of work that empowers employees and drives organisational success.



The Hell of the Commute



One of the most significant advantages of hybrid working is the reduced commuting time and associated stress. Whether office workers would typically be travelling on public transport or personal vehicles, thanks to hybrid working, they can reclaim valuable time, energy and money for self-care activities, exercise, and relaxation by eliminating or reducing daily commutes. Any daily commute reduction will likely improve physical and mental wellbeing.

Reduced Commuting Time and Associated Stress

One of the most significant benefits of hybrid working is eliminating or reducing daily commutes. This newfound freedom enables office workers to reclaim valuable time, energy, and money, redirecting them towards self-care activities, exercise, and relaxation. The removal of daily commutes has shown promising improvements in physical and mental wellbeing. Moreover, the average UK worker experienced three hours more sleep per week, highlighting the positive effects of hybrid working on sleep patterns.⁶

Risk of transmission

The daily commute, especially in densely populated urban areas, significantly contributes to the spread of illness. Public transport can increase the risk of infectious disease transmission due to close contact and limited ventilation in crowded spaces.⁷ A study found that commuters on busy trains and buses were up to six times more likely to catch a respiratory infection than those who travelled by other means or worked from home. Additionally, the increased exposure to surfaces and shared spaces during the commute can facilitate the spread of germs and viruses. Addressing this issue by promoting hybrid working and implementing measures to reduce congestion and improve ventilation on public transport can help mitigate the risk of illness transmission during the commute and enhance public health.



Environmental Benefits and Reduced Health Risks

Fewer road commuters result in reduced traffic congestion and carbon emissions, leading to a cleaner environment and improved air quality. According to the UK's Carbon Trust, remote working reduced carbon emissions by over 3 million tonnes per year,⁸ mainly due to the decline in commuting. By reducing exposure to harmful pollutants found in urban areas during peak traffic hours, individuals can lower their risk of respiratory problems, cardiovascular diseases, and mortality rates associated with long-term exposure to air pollution. Additionally, fewer vehicles on the roads translate to a reduction in commuting-related accidents and injuries. In 2019 alone, the UK reported over 150,000 road-related casualties.⁹

Impact on Mental Health and Sedentary Lifestyle

Commuting in heavy traffic or crowded public transportation can significantly increase stress levels, adversely affecting mental health. An in-depth study has consistently linked longer commutes to higher stress, anxiety, and symptoms of depression.¹⁰ Furthermore, the passive nature of most commutes, involving prolonged sitting or standing, contributes to a sedentary lifestyle and, in turn, causes various health issues, including obesity, cardiovascular disease, and musculoskeletal problems.

Disruption of Sleep Patterns

Early morning commutes or long travel times can disrupt sleep patterns, leading to chronic sleep deprivation or inadequate sleep. Chronic sleep deprivation is associated with a weakened immune system, impaired cognitive

function, and an increased risk of chronic conditions such as obesity and diabetes.

Daily commuting presents various health issues and mental stressors, and adopting hybrid working offers a promising solution to many of these concerns. Reducing commuting time and associated stress provides numerous health benefits, including improved mental wellbeing, better sleep patterns, and reduced exposure to harmful pollutants. However, further efforts, such as alternative transportation options, flexible work schedules, and improved commuting infrastructure, can help minimise the negative health consequences associated with commuting.



The Dark Side of Presenteeism



37%
of businesses
reported problems
with 'presenteeism'
in 2023

We need to shed light on the detrimental effects of presenteeism, something that hybrid working can combat under the right circumstances. Presenteeism is a global counterproductive workplace phenomenon in which employees attend work despite being unwell or not fully productive. While often perceived as a sign of commitment, presenteeism poses significant risks to individual wellbeing and organisational productivity. The Centre for Mental Health calculated that presenteeism from mental ill health alone costs the UK economy £15.1 billion per annum.¹¹

From a mental health perspective, presenteeism perpetuates a toxic work culture that places undue emphasis on hours worked rather than the actual output. It creates an unhealthy environment where employees feel compelled to show up regardless of their productivity. Pre-COVID studies have shown that over 60% of employees have attended work while sick, rising to 90% in some studies of occupations such as physicians, indicating the prevalence of this detrimental culture.¹²

Studies show that employees who come to work while sick or mentally fatigued experience reduced productivity, increased stress levels,

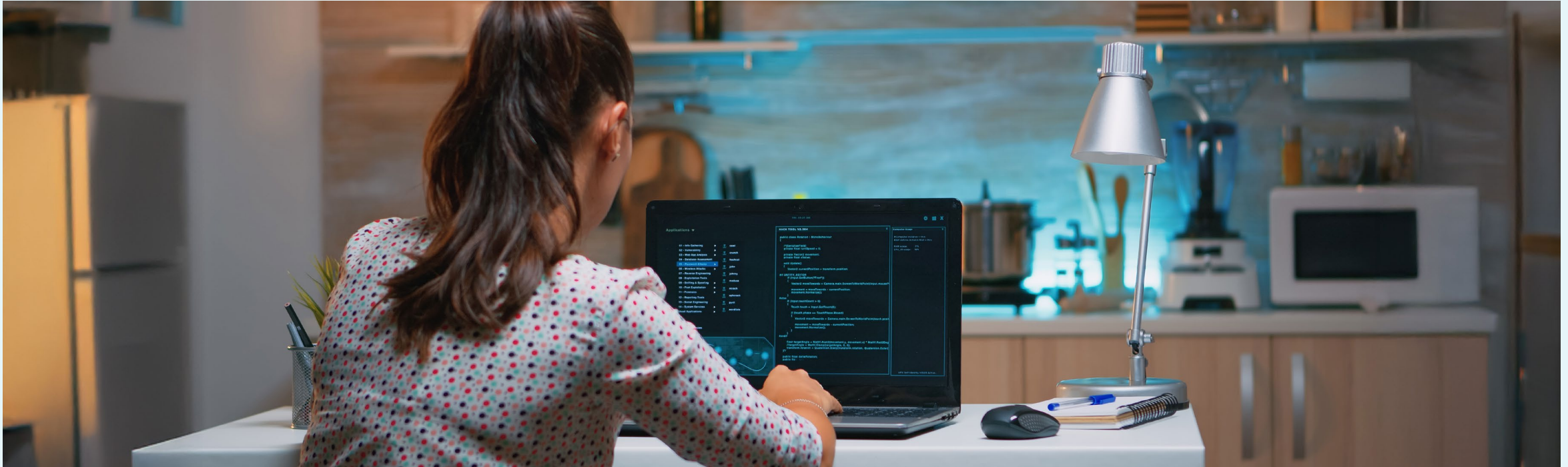
and slower recovery from illness. A study from Warwick Business School found that 37% of businesses reported problems with 'presenteeism' in 2023, a marked increase from 21% the year before and exceeding pre-pandemic levels for the first time, and that more than a quarter of firms also said staff had missed work due to mental health-related sickness.¹³

The impact of presenteeism extends beyond the affected individual. I've seen first-hand the risks of workers spreading illnesses to their colleagues by attending work while unwell, amplifying the negative consequences on the workplace. Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the USA revealed that presenteeism contributed significantly to the spread of contagious diseases, resulting in increased sick leave and reduced productivity across industries.¹⁴

Organisations prioritising employee health and fostering a supportive work environment observe higher levels of creativity, innovation, and overall performance. The UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) survey reported that many organisations observed equal or improved productivity among hybrid workers compared to



and its Impact on Workforce Health



pre-pandemic levels.¹⁵ Promoting a culture that values output over hours worked encourages employees to take necessary breaks, seek rest when needed, and engage in activities outside of work, ultimately enhancing their productivity and job satisfaction. Organisations can create a healthier, more productive work environment by addressing this counterproductive practice and prioritising employee wellbeing. Recognising the importance of work-life balance, valuing output over hours worked, and fostering a supportive culture will improve employee engagement, reduce burnout, and enhance overall organisational success.

However, employers must address some

reported issues to mitigate the downsides of hybrid and WFH culture regarding presenteeism. According to UK Parliament research on the impact of hybrid working during and post-pandemic, remote and hybrid work arrangements can lead to work extension, blurring the boundaries between work and personal life.¹⁶ This work extension can result in 'digital presenteeism' where workers feel compelled to be constantly available online through video calls, phone, email, and chat. There may be a sense of obligation to work online even when sick, leading to decreased performance and productivity. Additionally, remote work can contribute to an increase in unpaid overtime hours. According to an

analysis conducted by ONS, individuals who engaged in remote work logged an average of six hours of unpaid overtime weekly. In contrast, those who never worked from home reported an average of 3.6 hours.¹⁷

Studies also reveal that remote workers tended to work in the evenings more frequently than their office-based counterparts. Certain findings might be specific to lockdown situations, with parents, especially mothers, facing challenges finding dedicated time and space for work during lockdowns. A significant number of women reported increased responsibilities in housework and caregiving. Moreover, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, only around

50% of mothers and 58% of fathers could secure uninterrupted time for work during the lockdown period, with only 15% reporting clear boundaries between work and family life. Additional findings from the study suggest that some employees felt work intensification due to perceived organisational expectations.¹⁸

The autonomy provided by remote work can sometimes lead to work intensification, with workers needing to put in more hours and effort in exchange for the flexibility granted. Evidence from the pandemic presents a mixed picture. Employers and employees must find a happy balance to achieve optimum results.

Breaking down Hybrid Working's

Hybrid working has facilitated significant health benefits for office employees around the globe. The pillars of health include sleep, diet, exercise, stress management and social connections. New data from International Workplace Group suggests that each pillar is stronger due to the extra time afforded by a hybrid working model. Hybrid working allows individuals to work closer to home and make more time for family, friends, and stress-busting hobbies, contributing to mental wellbeing.

With increased productivity and more free time outside of work, it is no surprise that two-thirds of workers (66%) feel that their mental health is good due to the shift to hybrid working. 81% say they feel they have had more personal time than pre-2020. The majority spend this time promoting their health and wellbeing by spending time with family and friends (55%) and exercising (52%) or taking a short walk during the day (67%), all of which have a positive knock-on effect on mental health.¹⁹

Exercise

Hybrid working allows employees to incorporate physical activity into daily routines.²⁰ With more control over their schedules, individuals can allocate time for



exercise, promoting improved cardiovascular health, reduced stress, and increased energy levels. Exercise, in general, means workers can recharge, improve resilience, and reduce their risk of burnout. I cannot emphasise enough the numerous health benefits that daily physical activity can offer to individuals. Regular exercise is a cornerstone of maintaining good health and wellbeing, with the NHS recommending a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week for adults. Hybrid workers are now exercising for almost 90 mins per week longer than before the pandemic.²¹

Aerobic activities, such as brisk walking, cycling, or swimming, have been shown to boost cardiovascular health. Research from the British Heart Foundation indicates that regular aerobic exercise can reduce the risk of heart disease by up to 35%.²² Furthermore, engaging in resistance exercises, such as weightlifting or bodyweight exercises, improves your muscle strength and bone density, promoting overall physical function and reducing the risk of osteoporosis, as suggested by studies conducted by the National Osteoporosis Society.²³ Stretching exercises like yoga can also bring improvement in muscle strength, flexibility, balance and offer relaxation and breathing techniques to further improve stress.

Diet and weight loss

Hybrid working has remarkably impacted employees' eating habits, leading to positive

Health Benefits

changes in employees' nutrition, weight management, and overall wellbeing since adopting hybrid working. Proper nutrition is essential for brain health, cognitive function, and emotional balance.

A diet low in saturated fats and high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can support cardiovascular health, and a balanced diet with low glycaemic index foods can help stabilise blood sugar levels, which is crucial for diabetes prevention and management. The fibre from fruits, vegetables, and whole grains aids digestion and supports a healthy gut. A poor diet can significantly impact mental and physical health, leading to nutrient deficiencies, weight gain, an increased risk of chronic diseases, mental health problems, and reduced energy levels. Diets lacking essential nutrients weaken the immune system and

contribute to mood swings, fatigue, and a higher susceptibility to mental health disorders like depression and anxiety. Additionally, diets high in processed foods, sugars, and unhealthy saturated fats lead to weight gain, obesity, and an increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers. Poor dietary choices can also result in low energy levels and decreased productivity.

Your healthy diet should comprise essential components such as fruits and vegetables, which provide vital vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants for overall health and wellbeing. Whole grains offer digestion-supporting fibre and help maintain stable blood sugar levels; lean proteins, like fish, poultry, legumes, and nuts, supply amino acids for tissue repair and muscle building. Healthy fats in avocados, olive oil, nuts, and seeds benefit heart health and brain function.



Additionally, including dairy or dairy alternatives in your diet provides calcium and other essential nutrients that support bone health.

Since transitioning to hybrid working, people have experienced a significant improvement in their eating habits. A staggering 70% reported having the time to prepare a healthy breakfast daily, which was previously challenging. Moreover, more than half (54%) now have the opportunity to cook nutritious meals during the week, contributing to a positive shift in their dietary choices. Adopting hybrid working has resulted in a notable increase in the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables, with 46% and 44% of employees, respectively, incorporating them into their daily diet. Additionally, one-fifth (20%) of individuals reported increased fish consumption, highlighting a conscious effort towards a more balanced and nutritious meal plan. Encouragingly, a quarter of employees have reduced their intake of sweets since the pre-2020 period.

Building on the positive impact on physical health, more than a quarter (27%) of workers reported weight loss since the beginning of the pandemic. Astonishingly, 42% of individuals experienced a weight loss ranging from 5 to 9.9 kilograms, while an impressive 23% shed more than 10 kilograms. The key factors driving this weight loss have been the increased time available for exercise (65%) and the ability to cook healthy meals (54%).²⁴ A healthy weight reduces the risk of chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers, promoting better long-term health. Workers at a healthy weight often experience increased energy levels, improved focus, and better mood, enhancing their performance and efficiency in the workplace. Additionally, a healthy weight supports better physical endurance, reducing the risk of work-related injuries and absenteeism.

Sleep

By avoiding the commute, hybrid working enables millions of Britons to get more valuable shuteye. The NHS suggests that the average adult needs 7–9 hours of sleep each night. Appropriate amount and quality of sleep are necessary for our mental and physical health, allowing your body to recharge and your mind to process information. The right amount of sleep improves performance; as we sleep, active brainwaves help our ability to learn.²⁵ Compelling evidence from UC Berkeley researchers suggests that ‘sleep spindles’ (bursts of brain waves) play a crucial role in facilitating learning by facilitating communication between essential brain regions. These electrical impulses transfer fact-based memories from the hippocampus, a region with limited storage capacity, to the prefrontal cortex, which acts as the brain’s ‘hard drive’. This process effectively frees up the hippocampus to absorb new information, creating a path to enhanced learning and memory consolidation during sleep.

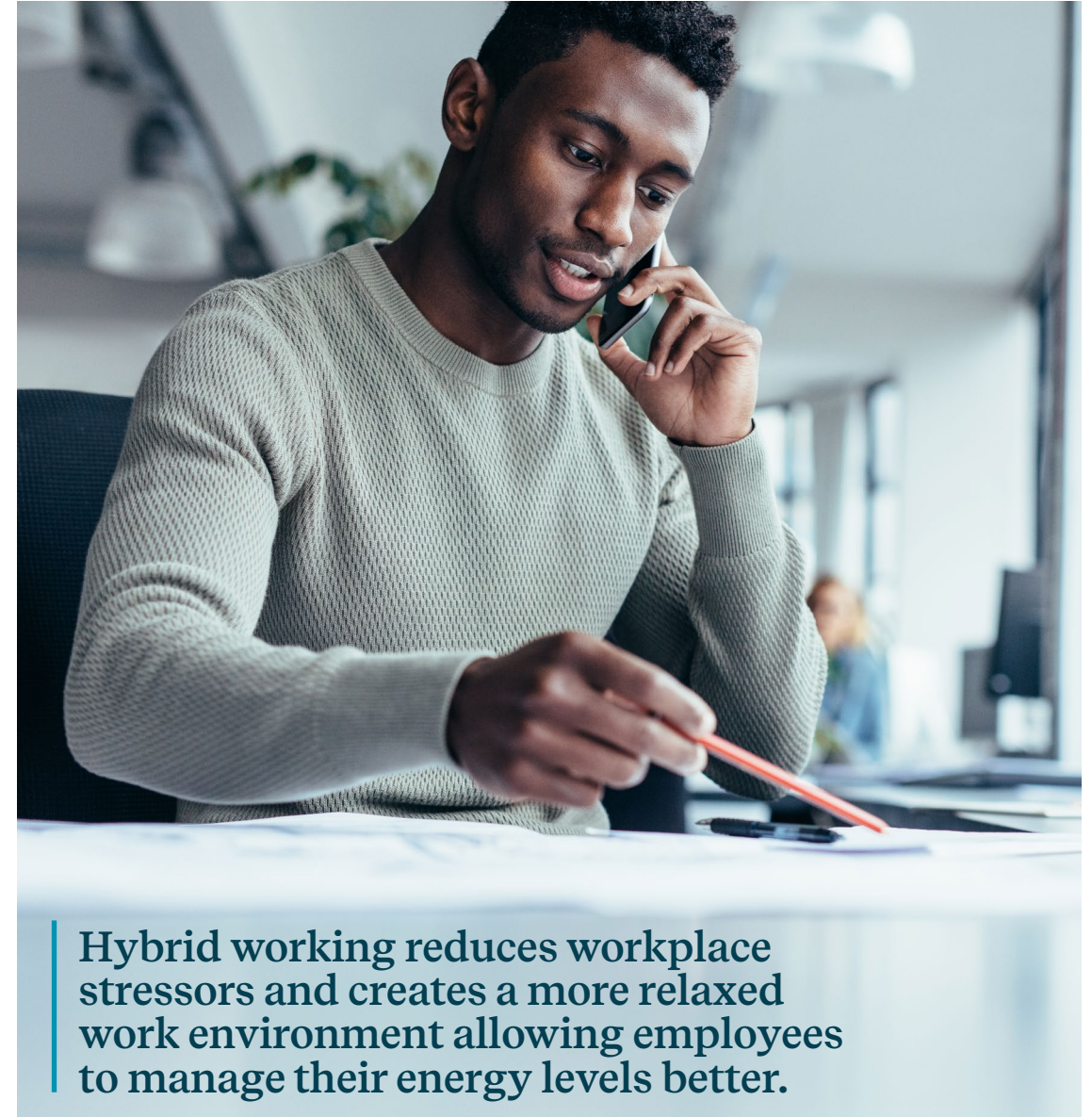
Those who consistently get less than the recommended amount of sleep are at increased risk of stroke, heart disease, diabetes and early death²⁶. Poor sleep also affects your mental health, reducing concentration and increasing irritability. When International Workplace Group surveyed hybrid workers in the UK, many reported they slept more than before the pandemic, amounting to an extra 71 hours in bed in the morning per year.

Mental health and stress management

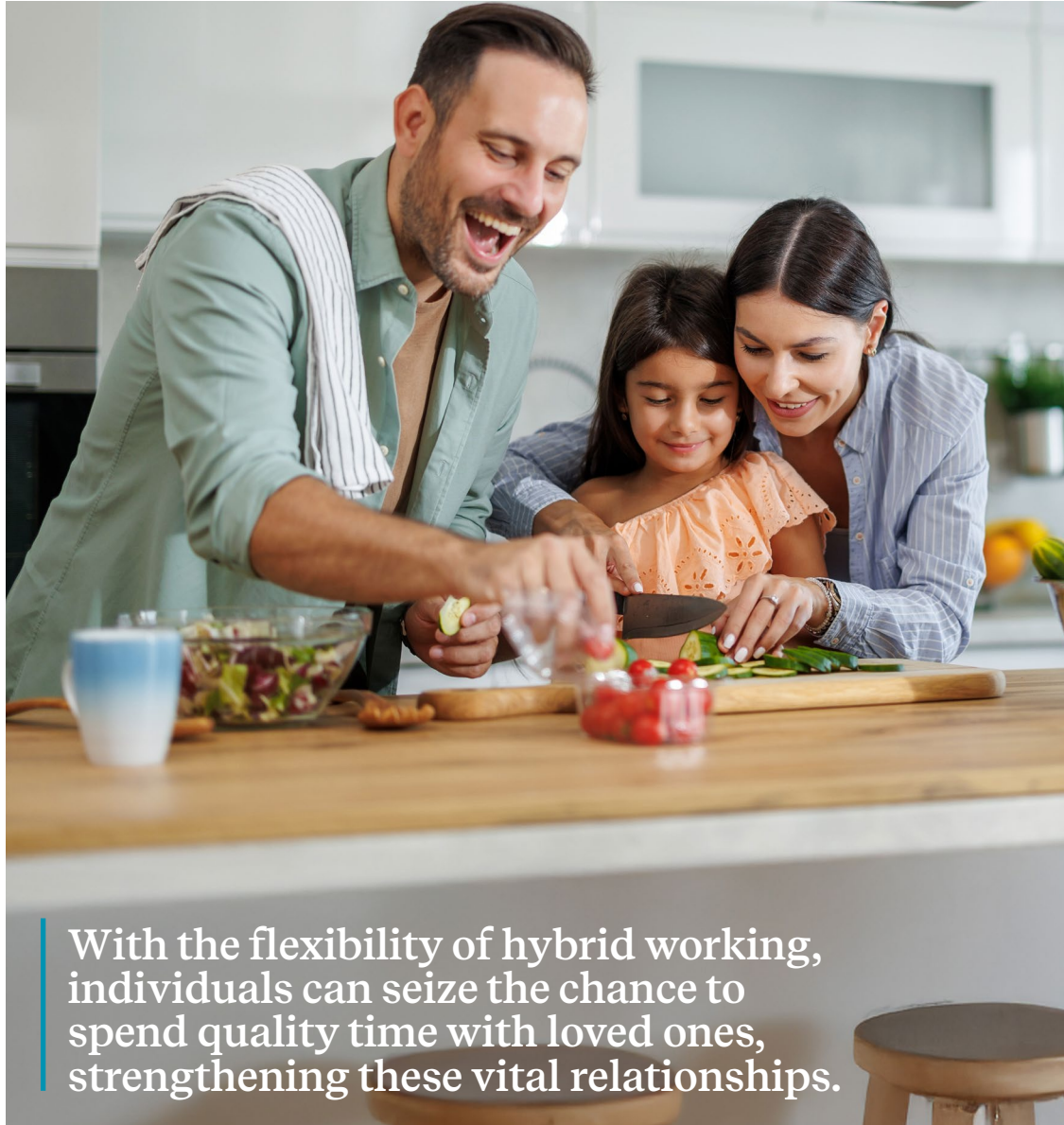
Hybrid working reduces workplace stressors and creates a more relaxed work environment allowing employees to manage their energy levels better, take necessary breaks, and

prioritise self-care. Stress is a natural and essential response that prepares our body for ‘fight or flight’ situations. In acute stress, the body releases hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, increasing heart rate, boosting energy, and sharpening focus. This response can be helpful in short-term, life-threatening situations, enabling us to respond quickly and effectively. Chronic stress occurs when persistent and prolonged stressors (such as in an intense office environment) can harm our health. The prolonged activation of the stress response and the constant release of stress hormones can take a toll on our physical and mental wellbeing.

Chronic stress can have a wide range of physical health implications. It can lead to cardiovascular problems, raising blood pressure and increasing the risk of heart disease, heart attacks, and stroke. Stress hormones can weaken the immune system, making individuals more susceptible to infections and illnesses. Furthermore, chronic stress is associated with an increased risk of mental health disorders like anxiety and depression, diabetes due to its impact on blood sugar levels and insulin sensitivity, and autoimmune conditions as the weakened immune system becomes more susceptible to these conditions. Stress can also exacerbate respiratory conditions such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and worsen gastrointestinal disorders like peptic ulcers and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). Moreover, stress can affect appetite, leading to weight gain or loss and causing muscle tension, resulting in headaches, back pain, and other physical discomforts. Sleep disturbances, like insomnia or poor sleep quality, are common effects of chronic stress. Managing and reducing chronic stress through



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With the flexibility of hybrid working, individuals can seize the chance to spend quality time with loved ones, strengthening these vital relationships.

relaxation techniques, regular exercise, social support, and seeking professional help is essential to prevent and alleviate these health issues and promote overall wellbeing.

The Mental Health Foundation conducted a study on the impact of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that 56% of UK workers reported reduced stress levels and improved mental wellbeing when working from home.²⁷ The hybrid work environment also gives people more time to participate in activities like yoga and mindfulness-based exercises to reduce stress and anxiety. Data from the Mental Health Foundation suggests that physical activity can lower the risk of developing depression by up to 30%. Moreover, regular exercise stimulates the release of endorphins, contributing to a positive mood



and enhanced cognitive function, as the Royal College of Psychiatrists reports.²⁸

Social connections

Hybrid working offers a promising opportunity to improve social connections and enhance mental health by giving individuals more free time. In the traditional work environment, one might need more time to foster meaningful connections with friends and family. However, with the flexibility of hybrid working, individuals can seize the chance to spend quality time with loved ones, strengthening these vital relationships.

Research has shown that loneliness is a significant risk factor for various health issues. A study published in the Journal of Gerontology associates social isolation and feelings of loneliness with an increased risk of developing dementia. At the same time, the British Medical Journal (BMJ) reports that loneliness coincides with an elevated risk of premature death.³⁰ Having a robust support network is essential for maintaining good mental health. Studies have consistently shown that social support can protect against mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. Research published by the UK government revealed that individuals with more robust social connections experienced fewer symptoms of depression and had better overall mental wellbeing.³¹

Social connections can positively impact other aspects of health, such as physical fitness. Engaging in exercise with friends or groups has increased adherence to exercise routines. The NHS recommends participating in group exercise programs to improve fitness and wellbeing.

Inclusivity and diversity

Hybrid working also fosters inclusivity by providing equal employment and career advancement opportunities to individuals with physical or mobility challenges, caregivers, or those living in remote areas promoting diversity and accessibility within the workforce. It also enables individuals to create personalised workspaces that suit their preferences and needs, contributing to a more comfortable and productive work environment and positively impacting mental wellbeing. on the impact of flexible working on diversity and inclusion in the UK revealed that companies with flexible work policies experience a higher representation of women in senior leadership roles. Flexible working arrangements enable better work-life balance, making it easier for women to advance in their careers while managing family responsibilities.³²

Control and productivity

In response to a small strata of business leaders who think that hybrid negatively

impacts productivity, with Gary Vaynerchuk, Chairman of VaynerX claiming that, "Hybrid work is a euphemism for 'no work'." Research has shown that hybrid working allows individuals to structure their work schedules around personal commitments like family responsibilities, childcare, and personal interests and allows them to be more productive. Remote or hybrid work often boosts productivity due to reduced distractions and the ability to work in a personalised environment, enhancing concentration and task completion rates. A study by Stanford University found that remote workers exhibited a 13% increase in performance, attributed to fewer distractions and a quieter work environment.³³ Hybrid working empowers employees with greater control over their work environment and schedule, leading to a better work-life balance, saved time, and increased wellbeing. This autonomy fosters trust, empowerment, job satisfaction, and engagement while lowering staff burnout risk.



Hybrid working empowers employees with greater control over their work environment and schedule, leading to a better work-life balance.



Mitigating the Potential Risks of Hybrid Working and Creating a Healthy Hybrid Work Culture



As we've seen with digital presenteeism, creating a healthy hybrid work environment requires organisations to find modern solutions to a new set of challenges. Organisations can foster a culture of wellbeing and productivity by establishing clear boundaries between work and personal life, promoting ergonomic workspaces, encouraging regular breaks and physical activity, and providing mental health support and resources. A healthy hybrid work environment contributes to employees' overall wellbeing and enhances their engagement, satisfaction, and performance, ultimately leading to organisational success in the new normal of hybrid work.

By its very definition, hybrid working reshapes organisations' structures, allowing them to tackle geographic and economic disparities, enhance diversity and inclusion, and unlock untapped talent pools in the UK and globally. This remodelling endeavour opens doors to address inequality and foster broader accessibility. By maintaining effective communication and collaboration, preserving company culture and team cohesion, and ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities, we can create a thriving work environment prioritising all employees' health and wellbeing. Setting clear expectations is the first step in creating a sustainable work-life balance. As a doctor, I understand the importance of effective communication; encouraging employees to establish dedicated workspaces and define specific working hours can help separate work and personal life. By openly discussing expectations regarding work hours, availability, and response times, we can cultivate an environment that respects personal time and fosters a sense of wellbeing.

Leadership training

Hybrid working, while offering numerous benefits, presents its own set of challenges. Technological obstacles, communication gaps, and managerial challenges can negatively impact remote workers' mental health and productivity. The stress caused by inconsistent internet connectivity, lack of access to essential tools and software, and inadequate home office setups can impede remote workers. Communication and collaboration gaps arise due to differences in physical presence and reliance on virtual communication channels. Managers may need guidance in effectively overseeing and evaluating the performance of remote and hybrid teams while ensuring equitable treatment for all employees. When leaders prioritise their wellbeing, it sends a clear message to the rest of the organisation, encouraging employees to follow suit and emphasising the importance of personal wellbeing in the hybrid work environment.

Communication Guidelines and Boundaries

Offering clear communication guidelines and establishing expectations regarding response times, availability, and preferred communication channels ensure staff are all on the same page and manages expectations across the work hierarchy, reducing stress and confusion. Regular check-ins, virtual team meetings, and collaborative platforms promote open communication and maintain a sense of connection. Virtual collaboration, including brainstorming sessions, document sharing, and real-time collaboration, ensures remote employees have everything they need to contribute and participate in team

projects. Encouraging regular breaks and physical activity is fundamental to sustaining focus, productivity, and overall wellbeing. As a doctor who understands the importance of movement, I advocate for implementing break reminders and encouraging employees to step away from their screens. These breaks allow them to rest their eyes, stretch their bodies, and engage in brief physical activity, revitalising their energy and enhancing their overall health. Integrating physical activity into breaks can yield significant benefits. By encouraging staff to partake in stretching exercises, short workouts, or even walking during breaks, we can all maintain physical fitness and reduce the harmful effects of sedentary work. Supporting fitness apps and providing access to virtual exercise classes further incentivises employees to prioritise their wellbeing and stay active, regardless of location or schedule.

Company Culture

Preserving company culture and team cohesion is crucial in a hybrid work environment. Regular team interactions through team-building activities, virtual social events, and in-person gatherings foster a sense of belonging and promote relationships while staff work predominantly from home. Clarifying expectations regarding values, goals, and company culture is vital to maintain alignment across remote and in-person teams. Regular reinforcement of the company culture through communication channels and recognition programs reinforces a sense of unity. Cross-team collaboration encourages employees from different teams and departments to work together, fostering a strong sense of unity and strengthening relationships across the organisation.



Equal Opportunities For All

Ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities is essential for all employees, regardless of their work location. Providing necessary resources such as essential tools, technologies, home office allowances, training, and technical support ensures that employees can perform their roles effectively and minimises stress. Equal opportunities for development, including professional development programs, mentoring initiatives, and accessible career advancement pathways, should be accessible to all employees, irrespective of their work arrangements. Fair workload distribution considers individual circumstances and availability, avoiding overburdening remote workers or excluding them from critical projects, which may impact their mental health.

Equipment and Ergonomics

Creating ergonomic workspaces is paramount for ensuring employee comfort, productivity, and physical health, whether working from home or in the office. As a healthcare professional, I recognise the significance of proper desk and chair positioning, monitor height, and keyboard placement in maintaining good posture. By providing guidance and education on these ergonomic principles, we can empower employees to prioritise their physical health and take regular stretch breaks, reducing the risk of discomfort and injury. Employees need support in establishing ergonomic home office setups. Offering resources such as ergonomic equipment or stipends for purchasing ergonomic furniture or standing desks demonstrates a commitment to their wellbeing. By proactively addressing these

concerns, we can help employees maintain a healthy work environment, regardless of location.

Mental Health Support

Prioritising mental health in a hybrid work environment is crucial for the wellbeing and performance of employees. Recognising this, I advocate for implementing Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that provide confidential counselling, mental health resources, and support for employees facing personal or work-related challenges. These programs demonstrate our commitment to their mental wellbeing, fostering a culture of care and empathy. Allowing employees to take mental health days and accommodating personal appointments or self-care activities

is essential to promote mental health further. By openly encouraging conversations about mental health and normalising seeking support when needed, we create a safe and supportive environment that values the overall wellbeing of employees. Human Resources departments might consider offering free mental health or meditation app subscriptions to further aid staff in their hybrid work journey.

The rise of hybrid work has brought new challenges for employers and employees alike — “Hybrid work can be difficult to manage and can lead to confusion and miscommunication.” — Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase. On the one hand, hybrid work offers many benefits, such as increased flexibility, improved

work-life balance, and reduced commuting costs. On the other hand, maintaining a healthy work-life balance can also be problematic when working from home or the office with the accompanying risk of burnout, and there is the unavoidable suspicion from some senior managers that with no ‘eyes on’ staff may not pull their weight.

A survey by Deloitte found that 45% of UK workers experienced difficulties collaborating and communicating with colleagues while working remotely or in a hybrid model, highlighting the importance of effective communication and collaboration strategies in hybrid working environments. We can help employees create structured routines by

setting clear boundaries between work and personal time and ensuring that employees take breaks throughout the day. Workload management for home workers is also essential, and training can help employees to prioritise tasks and set realistic goals. Forward-thinking companies encourage employees to engage in self-care activities, including regular exercise, relaxation techniques, and hobbies. Finally, employers and employees must establish clear goals and expectations to ensure alignment and productivity communicating employees’ performance expectations, project goals, and key performance indicators (KPIs). It also means scheduling regular check-ins between managers and employees to align goals, provide feedback, and address challenges.



Effective communication and collaboration strategies are essential when working in a hybrid model, ensuring clear boundaries and regular check-ins to align on goals, provide feedback and address challenges.



The Future of

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a new era of work, marked by the widespread adoption of hybrid working models that combine remote work with in-person office time. As we embrace this new normal, it is crucial to consider the future of workplace wellness. What might we see in the coming years as the long-term impact of hybrid working on employee wellbeing emerges? What innovative technologies and tools to support the hybrid work arrangement will be necessary and will keep the best talent in your business? What new workplace policies and practices to aid flexibility and productivity will become second nature? To support this new work regimen, this GP and people manager recommends human resource departments implement new tools, policies, and practices to keep staff happy and healthy and reduce churn. Here are my predictions for successfully navigating the hybrid transition:

Mental health focus

The long-term impact of hybrid working should place greater emphasis on employee mental health support. Remote work can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection, while in-person office time may induce anxiety due to increased exposure to crowds. To address these challenges, employers should invest further in mental health resources, including telemedicine mental health consultations, employee assistance programs, virtual wellbeing workshops and mental health app subscriptions for staff. A dedicated app that offers guided mindfulness and meditation



A Deloitte study revealed that for every dollar invested in mental health, businesses see an average return of \$5.70 in reduced medical expenses and increased productivity.

exercises specifically designed for remote and hybrid working scenarios would be beneficial in the long run. Platforms like Headspace for Work or Talkspace for Business provide access to mental health resources, counselling, and stress management tools. Employees can participate in virtual therapy sessions or access mental health content tailored to their needs. A Deloitte study revealed that for every dollar invested in mental health, businesses see an average return of \$5.70 in reduced medical expenses and increased productivity. Workplace wellness programmes must focus on teaching employees stress management techniques to cope with the challenges of hybrid working. Mindfulness practices, resilience training, and stress reduction workshops will become integral to employee wellbeing initiatives.

Virtual health platforms

Innovative technologies such as virtual health platforms will become crucial to supporting employees' physical health and wellbeing. Companies should organise regular occupational health screenings for employees, including on-site or remote health checks, to monitor overall health and identify potential health risks early on. These platforms will enable remote health assessments, monitoring of chronic conditions, and access to health-related resources, ensuring that employees receive adequate medical attention, even in a remote working environment. Apps like Fitbit or Apple Health allow employees to track their physical activity, sleep patterns, and

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overall health. These apps can integrate with wellness programs and provide data-driven insights to support healthier habits. Telemedicine will remain crucial to healthcare delivery, allowing employees to access medical consultations and prescriptions. Companies may partner with telemedicine providers to offer employees virtual access to healthcare services for routine medical needs.

Provide even more flexible work hours

For most businesses, flexible work hours will become the norm to accommodate employees' diverse personal commitments and productivity preferences. Companies should implement policies that allow employees to design their work schedules around peak productivity hours or personal obligations, promoting a healthier work-life balance. In the future, an AI-powered tool that analyses employees' preferences, workloads, and productivity patterns to create optimised hybrid work schedules would be a boon and drive efficiencies. This app could help ensure a balanced distribution of remote and in-office work, taking into account individual needs and team collaboration requirements.

Ergonomic support stipends

With employees spending more time working from home, ergonomic support will prevent musculoskeletal issues and promote physical wellbeing. A study found that proper ergonomics intervention reduced work-related musculoskeletal disorders by 59%³⁵. Employers should offer stipends for home office setups, conduct virtual ergonomic assessments, and provide resources to improve employees' home working environments. Apps like the 'Ergonomics' can guide employees through a virtual assessment of their home office setup, providing



A study found that proper ergonomics intervention reduced work-related musculoskeletal disorders by 59%.

recommendations for ergonomic improvements to prevent musculoskeletal issues.

Hybrid training and development

Companies must adapt their training and development programs to cater to hybrid work models. Virtual workshops, webinars and online training will become standard, allowing employees to upskill and progress in their careers while working remotely or in the office.

Greater emphasis on physical activity

As remote work reduces commuting time, employers should encourage physical activity to combat a sedentary lifestyle; incorporating wellness initiatives like virtual fitness classes, step challenges, and exercise incentives is a significant first step to employee wellbeing. Again, the onus should be on HR departments to provide tools and benefits to staff to maintain fitness levels, including gym memberships or access to keep fit apps.

Ongoing development of collaboration tools

Collaboration tools with video conferencing, project management software, and instant messaging enable seamless communication and collaboration between remote and in-person teams. Employee engagement platforms are equally essential in cultivating a sense of community and connection among employees, regardless of their physical location. These platforms facilitate social interactions, recognition programs, and knowledge sharing, contributing to a profound sense of belonging and engagement. For instance, according to a study by Harvard Business Review, virtual team-building activities can elevate team

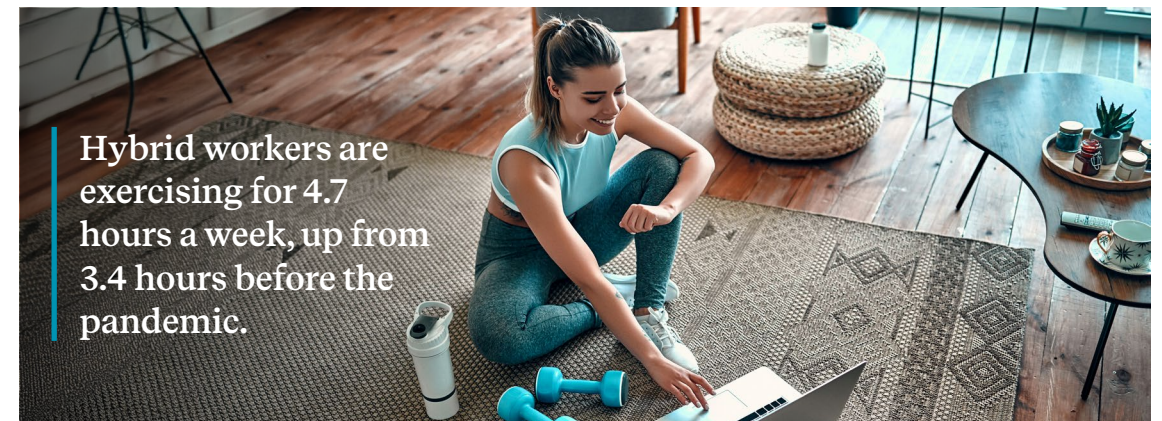


cohesion by 71% and productivity by 50%.³⁶ Platforms like Slack and Microsoft Teams also provide real-time communication and collaboration features, including virtual team-building activities like online trivia games or escape rooms. Furthermore, platforms that enable managers and team members to recognise and appreciate each other's contributions in a virtual setting foster a culture of appreciation and recognition, uplifting employee morale and motivation.

As a healthcare professional, I firmly believe that the future of workplace wellness lies in embracing hybrid working models and leveraging innovative technologies. Organisations can create a work environment that fosters wellbeing, satisfaction, and productivity by considering the long-term impact of hybrid working on employee wellbeing, adopting supportive technologies and tools, and prioritising flexibility in workplace policies and practices. As we navigate the evolving landscape of hybrid work, employers need to recognise that their employees' wellbeing directly contributes to

the success and resilience of organisations and allows them to keep their best talent. Recruiting new staff to replace churn is resource intensive and costly. Ultimately, we should see a long-term reduction in employee churn thanks to the ongoing adoption of hybrid work practices — UK-based research by Hays showed that 61% of employees considered hybrid working options when deciding whether to stay with their current employer.

Performance evaluation processes should account for the unique challenges and circumstances of hybrid working, focusing on outcomes rather than hours worked and offering regular feedback and support. Organisations should implement policies that prevent remote employees from feeling excluded or isolated in fostering a culture of inclusion and equity. Ensuring all employees have equal growth, development, and recognition opportunities is crucial. By prioritising employee wellbeing and implementing these strategies, organisations can create a thriving work environment that supports the health and success of their workforce.



Hybrid workers are exercising for 4.7 hours a week, up from 3.4 hours before the pandemic.

Time to Take Stock

Hybrid working isn't just a trend; it's a seismic shift that is key to unlocking sustainable improvements in employee mental and physical health in 2025 and beyond. It's a movement that understands the preciousness of time — the linchpin of an improved work-life equilibrium. By blending the best of both worlds, hybrid working empowers individuals to master balancing personal and professional pursuits, dismantling stress and forging a fortress of wellbeing that shields against anxiety, depression, and burnout. A staggering 76% of US employees are clamouring for a concoction of face-to-face and remote work — a clear call for a new era of work dynamics.³⁷

Bid farewell to the grind of soul-sapping commutes and welcome a new dawn of vitality and vigour. The statistics paint a compelling picture: health and fitness surge as commuting hours plummet. The hybrid workforce embraces an energetic embrace of life, clocking in an impressive 4.7 hours of exercise each week, up from a paltry 3.4 hours pre-pandemic. Walking, running, and strength

training have become the rhythms of their daily lives. We're getting more blessed sleep, with an extra 71 hours — a generous three days — of sleep per annum. As the dreary days of commuting fade, new possibility unfurls more sweat-drenched workouts, shared laughter with loved ones, and a canvas for passions that enrich both body and soul.

The hybrid revolution is here, but it's an ever-evolving process that demands ongoing inquiry and adaptation. While a trove of knowledge celebrates its merits, the story is far from finished. Researchers, teams, and organisations will continue to grapple with the ripples it casts across wellbeing, team cohesion, and enterprise success. A spirit of innovation should guide us to craft policies, tools, and strategies that resonate with the evolving workforce's rhythm.

Embrace this evolution: it's more than a response to pandemic-induced chaos; it's a clarion call for reimagining the very fabric of work and by extension, our own health.



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Appendix

- 1 [What we know about the business impact of hybrid work, September 2022](#)
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- 12 [Sickness Presenteeism Today, Sickness Absenteeism Tomorrow? A Prospective Study on Sickness Presenteeism and Future Sickness Absenteeism](#)
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