THE GREAT
RETURN

THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL
WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION

OT GROUP
PART OF PARAGON GROUP

CONTENTS.

FOREWORD.

In recent years, no area has undergone such rapid transformation than the workplace – not least in relation to when, where, and how people work. And while there's no denying that remote models enabled considerable levels of productivity and purpose amid the height of COVID-19 restrictions, the time has come for employees to transition back to physical spaces.

Through bespoke research carried out with its customers, OT Group discovered that, despite an ongoing narrative in the media about the permanency of working from home and hybrid structures, 44% are planning a full or phased return to the office – of which 65% are already back and a further 30% are planning to do as such completely within the

> **We've collectively hailed hybrid as the future for quite some time, but this working model isn't on the horizon for every organisation – with extra costs, presenteeism, and disconnect at risk for some.**

As such, it's important to bang the drum for a return to the office, too. Even for those who wish to maintain a sense of hybridity, we can't forget that even this means some time spent in the office – of which 94% of our surveyed customers indicated to be on the agenda.

However, with a once-in-a-lifetime chance to rethink the workplace, it's crucial that employers take a holistic approach to any essence of transformation. Whether you're working on a completely new strategy or redefining core principles and processes, reinventing the future of work is about intentional decision-making to favour employee and business outcomes in equal measure.

That's why, key to this transition, is compromise. Gone are the days when organisations could lead with perks such as pool tables and 'beer Fridays' to entice employees into the office – today, forward-thinking leaders must consider a whole spectrum of changes to fine-tune their culture, as well as attract, retain, and grow talent. The proposition you offer today will determine just how much employees contribute to your enterprise's ambitions.

In the next 16 pages, this guide shares insight from industry leaders across the worlds of HR, finance, procurement, manufacturing, operations, IT and tech, as well as commentary from OT Group's own experts, as they delve deeper into the current working landscape alongside our own research findings, the shift in needs and expectations of both employees and employers, plus tips to help plan and implement a successful workplace transformation strategy.

We wish you every success. And of course, OT Group is here should you require any further support.

Andrew Jones
CEO, OT Group

AN OVERVIEW OF THE WORKING LANDSCAPE.

Models of work are constantly evolving, but one thing that's for sure is the market is rapidly becoming an employee-driven space. A watershed moment in the history of work, COVID-19 forced teams indoors to work from home, and in doing so brought wide acceptance for remote models.

For many, the benefits are significant – increased flexibility, location independence, enhanced productivity, and reduced time and money spent on commuting to the office. For employers, a wider talent pool, quicker onboarding processes, and lesser issues of absenteeism are just some affordances that have become apparent.

The trouble is, one size doesn't fit all.

Across the globe, there are a range of industries which heavily rely on 'feet on the ground' to operate – think healthcare sectors, retail trade, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing. Even for those who can work at home, remote models can often have a detrimental impact on both individual wellbeing and team performance.

Decisive results from research conducted by Silicon Reef reveal loneliness as a problem for 36% of those who work away from the office, with 48% also expressing feelings of disconnect from colleagues. But often more damaging than this is the impact that fragmented workforces can have on engagement and collaboration.

Although the value of coherent, high-performing teams is obvious, creating them in a digital environment presents a significant challenge. Studies have found that the most creative and synergistic levels of collaborations occur when employees are in a group flow, which can be difficult to create remotely – think about internet connection struggles and difficulties in reading body language, for example.

Microsoft research also demonstrated that the onset of remote work had a crucial impact on collaboration networks during the pandemic, with on-screen distractions and lack of spontaneity rendering technology unable to fill the gap. And for those planning a hybrid approach or full return to HQ in our own research, collaboration was equally listed as a key factor in bringing teams back to the office.

So, how do organisations champion the benefits of hybrid working, while mitigating the damaging effects of working from home? And how can workplaces become better equipped with the product, skills, and know-how to make life at HQ more enticing?

Increasingly, HR departments are a key driver in workplace transformation. To usher in the organisation of the future, leaders should do nothing less than reimagine basic tenets of purpose and culture.

FIVE KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR HR TEAMS.

1. Combine flexibility with guidance and structure

Fully autonomous working from home – no matter which industry you're in – is neither desirable nor sustainable for both employers and employees. The variable interpretations of the term 'flexibility' tempts the fate of miscommunication, which can have a severe impact on culture. But with employees increasingly seeking control, it can be difficult to know where to tread.

By enforcing principles over policies, restrictions such as, "you must come into the office on these set days" could be reframed into advice-led guidance such as: "there is inherent value in regularly engaging with colleagues face-to-face, which is why we strongly encourage employees to consider carrying out activity in the physical office where they see fit."

Plus, it's important to reiterate that HR teams are available to help with structuring and balancing work/home routines, should individuals need support.

2. Offer time to adjust

It would be a huge pitfall to oversimplify any kind of return to work strategy. Employees won't – and shouldn't – make an overnight transition. They've gotten used to their own space and routine, so naturally an adjustment period will be essential in making a success of any transformation project – in relation to manager expectations and business objectives, as well as employee comfort.

What's important to remember, is that this might manifest in different ways from one member of staff to the next. While some may be rooting for a fully-fledged return, others may be intertwined with personal commitments that tie them to the home – such as childcare and other caring responsibilities, commuting difficulties, or wellbeing concerns.

Curating individualised plans that offer room for flexibility, for example by piloting transformation through a phased return and seeking input from employees on suitability, is a great place to start if you haven't already.

3. Adopt a human-centric approach

The pandemic has not only spurred employees to rethink their relationships with employers, it has also inspired values to traverse the boundaries from personal to professional. Yes, teams want to maintain flexibility and autonomy in their work arrangements, but people are also increasingly seeking a more human touch to employment – they want to know that their physical and emotional wellbeing is a priority, and are ready to walk if their needs are not met.

Research conducted by Gartner found that 82% of workers agree that it is important that their organisation sees them as a person, not just an employee.

Every step of your workplace transformation project should therefore be driven by the needs, desires, and pain points of your employees, and integrated into your wider business objectives to create harmonisation.

4. Consider workplace design

For colleagues at all levels, the workplace should be more than a central hub to tick off a to-do list and receive an attendance mark, but a productive place for collaboration, creativity, learning, and belonging. As such, interior design is playing a crucial role in fostering human-centric workplaces – not least when it comes to neurodiverse employees.

As highlighted in a recent article by HR Magazine, leaders that wish to promote an inclusive space for workers must consider an interior overhaul that accounts for multifaceted aspects such as light, colour, and sensory escape. By switching from a competency-based culture to one that caters for a diverse range of needs, recruiters can not only attract and retain a wider talent pool, but reap the benefits of that human capital too.

5. Maintain open lines of communication

For employers who want to build a robust, future-ready workforce, it's imperative to focus on the personal and professional development of others. And the onus will increasingly be on HR departments to improve the working lives of their teams – no matter where they're located.

The most transformative impact on an organisation's work culture will be a result of open dialogue throughout every element of the workplace transformation process. What could be a small step for a company – think granular detail surrounding policies, inviting discussion and requesting feedback around changes, or even 24-hour access to mental health support services – could translate into a giant leap for wider wellbeing, satisfaction, and retention.

Helen Wellock
Business Partner, OT Group

THE BLURRING OF THE LINES BETWEEN HOME AND OFFICE

Organisations across the globe are continuously making moves to find their 'new normal' – whether that's conducting a phased return to the office, or fostering a flexible, hybrid structure to suit the needs of their company and colleagues.

Those companies who are smarter, are taking a look at the longer-term horizon, too – revaluating how different models and structures can work better for the needs of the business and employees alike, and preparing for an agile, resilient, and sustainable future accordingly.

But this evolution is not as straightforward as the headlines might make it seem.

> **For the most part, the pandemic has accelerated the blurring of lines between the home and office. This is not necessarily a bad thing – providing organisations are equipped with the right products, skills, and know-how to suit teams in every environment they operate, with efficiency, productivity, and cost in mind.**

However, organisational leaders must remain aware that by encouraging people to work remotely as and when they wish without structure, they risk damaging a culture of collaboration, employees' mental wellbeing, as well as potentially neglecting junior generations who learn via exposure to their peers' expertise.

As people return to the office, there will continue to be discussions between employers and employees. While traditional working models are outdated, the notion of having no physical office space at all seems equally unfeasible, if not impossible for many professions. The truth is, there's a place for both – it's about getting the balance right for everyone.

With flexibility now seen as a pre-requisite for employment and retention and recruitment high on companies' agendas, it is important businesses have a clear strategy regarding the new workplace – which is well communicated and strikes the right balance between digital and physical.

Amy Hutchinson
CEO, BOSS Federation
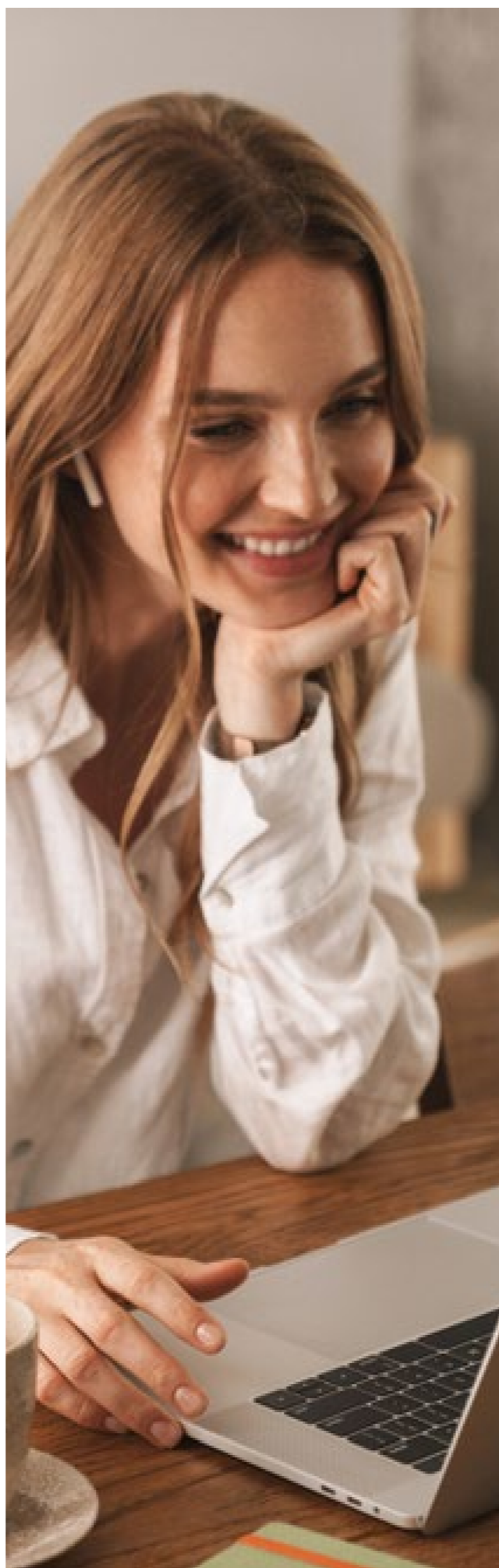
HYBRID VS. HOME VS. HQ

Trying to navigate today's working landscape can often feel like a game of luck – not least because each model is becoming increasingly multifaceted. And in a twist of fate for employers, companies which once saw remote and hybrid options as a strategy for increasing performance are now forced to consider employee retention and talent acquisition through this lens too. That said, it's not just a case of enforcing a working model and watching it play out.

According to a bespoke piece of research conducted by OT Group, 94% of X customers are planning a return to the office in some form – whether full, phased, or hybrid.

To be a frontrunner and help foster a fruitful future of work, organisations of all shapes and sizes must therefore curate a plan bespoke to the needs and requirements of their own workforce. But how do companies decide which option is best for them? And with expectations of colleagues changing beyond recognition since pre-pandemic, how do organisations best equip for it all?

There's no denying that the planning process will be nothing short of a challenge, because a successful workplace transformation must allow for all we've learned over the past two years and then some. To get you started, here's a consolidated guide of the trade-offs between remote, office, and hybrid work, and advice on how business leaders can prepare for each. The hybrid era is here to stay.

The hybrid working model is seemingly the most popular amongst companies worldwide at present, and of the OT Group survey participants planning some form of return to a physical office space, 50% indicated they were planning such an approach.

Crucially, however, what "hybrid" actually means can vary significantly from one person to the next. That's why, whilst each workplace configuration should be unique, a shared understanding amongst employees and line managers is absolutely essential in managing expectations across the board – whether your teams have the freedom to choose where they work and when, or designated structures and policies to inform their routine.

> **There is no perfect ratio, but instead clarity and preparation is key.**

For the most part, decisions about hybrid work will be affected by our trajectory of learning. It goes without saying that none of us anticipated such a drastic change in the form of a global pandemic, nor have we been forced to navigate new working structures on this scale, so it's wise to admit that we're still building experience and understanding.

But striking the right balance between home and HQ, and maintaining a sense of agility to switch from one environment to the next and avail the successes of both, has become an evident highlight in strategies across many organisations.

On the flipside, some careful considerations do need to be made for those who are hyper-focused on hybrid – particularly in the realm of cost. Maintaining a successful hybrid model isn't merely a case of advising employers how to split their time between the home and the office. In fact, sustaining such an approach could prove an expensive decision for all. That's why business leaders must explore the true cost of hybrid in assessing its longevity for their organisation.
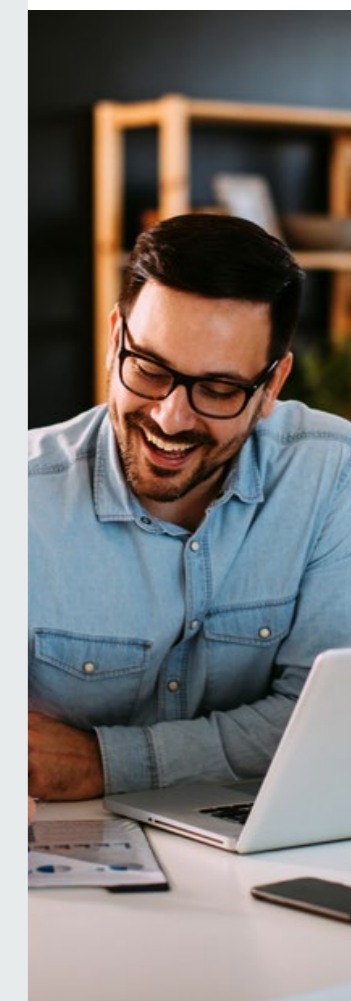
It's about embracing the balance

While Kimberly Clark has established that employees can be productive in various environments through its Flex Work scheme – offering a blended approach to working from home and in the office – it's important to appreciate that the latter can bring significant benefits to both team collaboration and client relationships. Of course, emails are useful for quick correspondence, and ad-hoc digital collaboration brings diversity to the table too in a geographical sense, but nurturing face-to-face connections is one of the key drivers in organisational success – not least throughout the manufacturing sector.

It's about living and breathing everything from a clients' warehousing space and logistical networks to the underlying values and ethos of a team, understanding the market on a granular level, and building credibility and trust in every encounter – which isn't always the easiest of feats when you're behind a computer screen.

That's why getting the balance right and ensuring the right strategies and processes are in place to suit a quick switch from one environment to the next – whether that's collaborative tech infrastructure to streamline conversations and enable mobility, or a well-designed office space to promote a culture of forward-thinking and innovation.

Kevin Buchanan
UK&I Channel Manager, Kimberly Clark

Hybrid working is a flexible model whereby employees work in a variety of different locations – commonly a split between office and remote productivity.

FOUR HIDDEN COSTS OF HYBRID WORKING

1. Maintenance of the existing office

The benefits of the office are touted by employers, employees, and workplace experts across the globe. But while there are certainly many pluses to the duality that hybrid has to offer, having both a physical and remote presence isn't always the most cost-effective option.

While workers are happy to continue spending some time at home, office spaces sit empty, yet businesses still bear the ongoing costs to keep the physical workplace up and running – including ground rent, utilities, and technical support for idle assets.

2. Reconfiguration and relocation

Many organisations, large and small, have no option but to redesign or downsize to accommodate hybrid working, which present yet more expenditures. The trouble is, not everyone will have the flexibility to add a host of new collaborative spaces or relocate on a whim, as they may have budget constraints or be tied to a multi-year lease.

At the same time as fronting the costs of a full-capacity office space, employers also have the responsibility of maintaining robust infrastructure to support workers at home – think internet connectivity, cloud services, and IT security, for example.

3. Rogue spend for home workers

For CFOs and financial controllers, one of the biggest challenges of hybrid and home working is maintaining their position as 'gatekeepers' of spend.

With purchasing teams operating from multiple locations, it can be difficult to monitor and control all procurement expenditure – particularly when it comes to contingent, 'off the book' negotiations and the kneejerk implementation of non-essential items.

To gain better visibility and improve bottom line, state-of-the-art technology with pre-defined authorisation routes are now playing a crucial role in the strategies of forward-thinking organisations.

4. Soft costs

It's easy to think of costs as something tangible, but often the financial impact of hybrid working can not be so easily measured. While some employees will thrive in a mixed environment, others will need help to maintain productivity levels and counter the effects of isolation. The workplace is more diverse now than ever, therefore a one-size-fits-all approach is simply not feasible. If culture and camaraderie is not nurtured, retention may suffer and lead to hard cost implications.

Andrew Spooner
Group Finance Director, OT Group

CYBER SECURITY RISKS OF WORKING FROM HOME

In addition to the potential impact on finances, company culture, and employee wellbeing, which some organisational leaders may have already begun to consider, there are a host of other home working implications that shouldn't be overlooked.

Not only do employers need to ensure remote workers have the appropriate software and hardware to undertake their work effectively, they also need to ensure any arrangements don't introduce an element of cyber-security weakness into an organisation.

Without many of the protections afforded by an office network, coupled with the increasing sophistication of malicious digital attacks, remote working should have introduced the perfect opportunity to evaluate posture and process. Instead, eye-watering statistics have emerged in recent months to suggest that attacks are still a major risk in such working models – more importantly, defences are not where they should be.

And with evidence to show that results of a data breach are far more detrimental when a remote workforce is the causal factor, this is a major concern.

Remote working is an arrangement in which employees of a company do not commute to a central place of work, such as an office building, site, or store.

> One report by IBM revealed that the cost of a data breach increased by over $1 million when home workers are responsible, as well as 58 days longer to identify and contain in comparison with office-based organisations.

The trouble is, the true cost of securing remote workers extends far beyond financial payments – the carbon impact must also be examined closely.

The legacy systems in place to protect traditional corporate networks require significant amounts of power to operate, in turn generating a high volume of greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, in enabling remote working, businesses often fail to recognise the impact outdated security models have on the planet.

While the answer here is not necessarily to eliminate the remote workforce, mounting factors show that bringing teams back to one central location – at least some of the time – is a great way to enhance not only culture, collaboration, and employee wellbeing, as well as productivity and budgets, but a sense of digital vigilance and corporate social responsibility too.

As well as enabling an easier way to regulate security measures, reduce appliance stacks, and monitor a variety of prolific attack vectors in the office, it's also easier to implement and empower policy training across the entire scope of your organisation. Think about how receptive an employee would be to a face-to-face update on technical concerns and collaborative upskilling as opposed to a quick 'watch this video' style email.

Dave Harvell
IT Director, OT Group

THE GREAT RETURN, AS IT SHOULD BE.

While the pandemic raised the stakes for companies looking to build thriving cultures and attract and retain top talent – whichever industry they operated in – the crisis also highlighted something even more significant.

The office design trends that steadily emerged to facilitate better collaboration, improved mental and physical wellbeing, the needs of a multi-generational workforce and a greater emphasis on corporate purpose, had been needed long before the shift in working models. And now, organisations are under heightened pressure to get things right if they want to see their teams make an autonomous return to in-person working.

When you're investing in workplace design that's fit for the future, you want it to retain its quality long term. That means placing emphasis on not just styles but substance too – think durability, ergonomics, and technology that's built to last.

There's no denying that it can be a challenge to keep up to date with the pace of innovation, but one thing that's for sure is employees are more climate-conscious than ever.

So, sustainability should be woven into as many elements of your workplace reconfiguration as possible – just as much for your bottom line as your people and the planet.

When approaching interior design, it's important to consider how your employees will use the space to help foster sustainability as part of a second-nature routine. For example, placing recycling facilities throughout the premises to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill.

But promoting sustainability in the workplace doesn't just involve encouraging employees to make better choices, it means making them from the point of design too – constructing a greener office using a circular economy to set an example for others. Think upcycled furniture, FSC-certified produce, and pieces that can be disassembled to be used elsewhere.

Of course, curbing carbon habits falls under energy efficiency as well. Rather than being solely a receiver of resources, revamped spaces should bring giving to the forefront of the agenda in terms of energy production. This could manifest in various ways, including micro-harvesting through the use of solar panels or turning waste streams into new produce.

Most importantly, organisational leaders should look to employees to drive workplace design. Reverting to the status quo won't be an option for most – people will expect better flexibility, infrastructure, and incentives to welcome them back. Whether they want teams-focused spaces that afford better collegial interaction, improved catering facilities, breakout spaces for socialising, or more ergonomic desks to enhance wellbeing, companies must heed that input if they want to see feet on the ground once again.

Andy Shears
Furniture Director, OT Group

Working from HQ denotes the physical presence of employees in a central company location.

THE RISE OF THE MACHINES.

The paradigm shift to remote working was an initial struggle for many, particularly from a tech point of view. But fast forward to 2022, and most teams are equipped with the infrastructure they need to not only operate, but collaborate and thrive no matter their whereabouts. Right?

In theory, yes. Employees are able to get online using a variety of devices, send emails, conduct video and audio calls, access documents, and then some. But how many organisations implemented a little more than a sticking plaster solution, when they were forced to close their doors? And is the equipment that was implemented into day-to-day practice at this time even still fit for purpose? Not necessarily.

Once a lifeline for businesses seeking to maintain 'business as usual', tech stacks now risk leaving organisations large and small out of pocket – with many tools now rendered redundant.

And then there's network access. Are remote workers still connecting to corporate environments via their home broadband, using a domestic router with the same password it had when it was installed years ago? What does this mean for their bandwidth? Scarier still, what does this mean for companies' network security?

When it comes to the IT implications of hybrid working, all of this – and so much more – is just the tip of the iceberg. The list of questions goes on and on, but the gist is clear. This has been – and continues to be – a complex situation that organisations and their tech teams have dealt with as best they can, often in the face of unmanageable time pressures, budget constraints, varying degrees of digital literacy among the workforce, cultural resistance, mental wellbeing challenges, and of course stretched resources.

To prevent incurring unnecessary costs through lack of use and placing security and productivity at risk for those who maintain a sense of hybridity, modern workforces must therefore be able to drill down into their data to better understand not only which tools are being used, but for how long and at what level.

Better still, having a seat at the table during conversations surrounding workplace transformation means IT leaders can work on aligning their tech strategies with other departments, and ensuring investments aren't made where they shouldn't be for employees either at home or HQ.

Technology and the Loneliness Epidemic

A 2022 report by Silicon Reef uncovered some of the negative emotions that come to the fore for employees who work hybrid, with 36% reporting a sense of loneliness, 48% identifying feelings of disconnect, and 49% recognising lack of motivation as a problem.

With two fifths of employees taking to working in a "third workplace" to stave off such effects, many workers feel as though technology could be better leveraged in flexible working structures to improve opportunities to engage with their team (29%), join meetings remotely without interruptions (19%) and share documents quickly and securely (17%).

The bottom line is, while refining technology is a key driver in successful workplace transformation, making strategic decisions to reduce the severe social disadvantages for hybrid workers is equally as important.

Implementing and maintaining collaboration tools such as video conferencing, cloud infrastructure, and portable tech can provide employees with the flexibility they need to easily transition from one place of work to another – and work happy.

That's not to say software is a silver-bullet solution to negotiating the negative effects of hybridity, but offering practical and tangible help to navigating a variety of available working environments is a good place to start in any workplace transformation project.

Tim Mercer
CEO, Vapour

THE ROLE DATA CAN PLAY.

In the return-to-work agenda, unified communications (UC) data analytics plays a key role in both business and employee satisfaction.
With real-time, must-know metrics, organisations can make decisions on performance, outline future opportunities, analyse each department's use of their tech stack, tackle technical debt, and then some.

One of the most significant investments for an organisation is its people, so this is a great place to start when tapping into analytics. Unified communications and collaboration (UC&C) data, for example, can provide a glimpse into staff engagement levels amid the 'great return', how UC&C tools are being used, and whether staff are engaged or may require further support – even on the days they tune in remotely.

This isn't a case of employee surveillance though. By uncovering and interrogating usage data and contextualising it, this helps to empower workforces because they're maximising tools they're actually utilising.

Crafting a business and budget policy that's fit for the future also becomes plausible thanks to data input – fostering a workplace centred on strategic thinking.

However, it can be easy to get lost in metrics if you don't have the right tools at your disposal to help make sense of it all. That's why finding the right data partner or platform is essential.

Caroline Lewis
Sales Director, Tiger

IS THERE REALLY SUCH THING AS A ONE-STOP-SHOP?

We'd be ignorant to think that traditional full-time office working will make a full return. In today's landscape, work is everywhere and everywhere is work – and people have already been tempted with the merits of flexibility that they won't want to let go of. And they shouldn't have to.

As a people-centric business that focuses on workspace health and wellbeing, Fellowes was at a slight advantage when our doors had to close and employees were forced to undertake work at home. Having a full appreciation of workstation set-ups and ample supplies of ergonomic solutions, we were able to speedily provide our teams with the right equipment to ensure a smooth – and comfortable – transition to effective homeworking. And as we know, when we're comfortable at our desks, we're much more likely to deliver good quality work and high levels of productivity.

However, just because one approach worked well at the time, doesn't mean it will forever.

When studying the insights from our 2021 New Way of Working Survey, it was clear to see that homeworking was having a detrimental impact on mental and physical health on many employees from a varied range of industries across the UK. Over a staggering one third of workers admitted to feeling stressed or anxious, lonely and isolated, tired or lacking in energy, while working from home.

So, while many adapted to homeworking in a very positive way – believing the flexibility of being at home, coupled with the absence of long commutes, actually boosted their creativity and productivity – others did not take to it so well. Catering to the needs of every employee in this sense was crucial, when we were able to head back to HQ once again.

A survey we conducted at Fellowes suggested that 89% of respondents were still keen to continue to work from home – at least for some of the working week – so we knew it was important to take this on board in our strategy, where we now operate a mix of office and home working.

Employees can undertake projects at home without interruptions – with access to software such as Microsoft Teams to stay connected – while still being able to access the office space for collaborative projects, brainstorm sessions, and creative thinking, to inspire new lines of thought and bring innovative ideas into fruition as a collective.

Across our customer base, this impression remains the same. Yes, employees want to maintain the sense of flexibility that they're used to, but equipped with the right equipment, resources, and support, teams share the same desire to unite in a central location when their routine allows. Choice has never been so important. And beyond the physical needs of staff, we need to be placing a close eye on emotional wellbeing too.

As a result of these workplace changes, we've also found a shift in the type of roles we now need to fill at Fellowes. Over the last two years, we've seen a massive escalation of business through online retailers – which means new opportunities for ecommerce experts, digital marketers, and specialist content creators, to ensure we have the best presence online to maximise sales opportunities for our partners and ourselves. Evidently, nurturing existing talent is essential in spearheading growth in terms of both people on the ground, partners, and revenue and sales.

Jeremy Cooper
Marketing Manager UK & Ireland,
Fellowes Brands

HOW MARKETPLACES CAN AUGMENT YOUR RETURN TO WORK STRATEGY

No matter the size or scope of your business, a varied range of products and solutions – from general office supplies and furniture, to more diverse services such as print management and data archiving – are crucial to help keep things streamlined.

And the multifaceted procurement needs of teams today – with some employees working from home, some in the office, and some even further afield – is testament to the need for simplicity. Consolidation can not only combat the risks of a disparate supply chain – limited insight, volatility, and weakened supplier relationships, to name just a few – but can also help manage compliance throughout your teams and reduce costs.

> **In our own research, there was a fairly even split of customers who are looking to provide hybrid workers with office supplies at home (46.5%) vs those who are not (53.5%), with the majority planning to drive this through an ad-hoc product need (61.5%).**

By implementing an easy-to-use, intuitive procurement system, organisations can maintain control of costs and eliminate rogue spending – making it easier to manage purchasing on the occasions employees are not in the office. Of 77% customers who already have such processes in place, 89% confirmed that spend leakage is no longer as much of an issue as during the pandemic.

By defining and digitising workflows and implementing authorisation routes, organisational leaders can ensure the right people procure the right things at the right time, whilst providing procurement and finance teams with full expenditure visibility.

And with valuable data available at the touch of a button, the strategic value of a one-stop procurement shop – such as our industry-leading digital procurement platform SmartPad – really comes to life. Business intelligence functions not only to transform raw insight into meaningful visualisations to power maximum value from the supply chain, but to identify untapped trends that will empower C-suite executives to make data-driven decisions too.
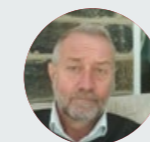
Trevor Weldon
Director of Business Development
and Services, OT Group

HERE'S WHERE THE ONE-STOP PROCUREMENT SHOP COMES IN...

Reinventing the value proposition

While many organisations naturally struggled to keep their heads above the water over the course of the pandemic, others managed to successfully keep the wheels turning – albeit to the detriment of productivity and profits in some instances – despite adversity.

As such, individuals can be forgiven for posing the question, "Why do I need to be in the office, if I can carry out my day-to-day work adequately, at home?"

From a sustainability and ESG perspective, we're increasingly seeing employers consulting and listening to employees' views, and establishing an Employee Value Proposition (EVP) as a result – which reinvents the view of employees as people, not workers, and commits to establishing what is important from one member of the team to the next.

Organisations that create and deliver an effective EVP can decrease annual employee turnover by just under 70%, and increase new hire commitment by nearly 30% (Gartner, 2019).

Only when organisational leaders deliver on all aspects of the 'human deal', can maximum impact be achieved and, in turn, a level of trust and fulfilment to facilitate a productive return to work be implemented, thus feeding into the long game of talent acquisition and retention.

By embracing this shifting relationship between employer and employee, progressive organisations are not only able to translate core business purposes into tangible values for workers – therefore transforming the performance, engagement, and loyalty of the team as a collective – but gain wider buy-in on important business decisions, such as sustainability initiatives and the importance of heading to HQ for at least a portion of the week.

Why? Because individuals can be confident that initiatives have been made with employees, and not for them.

By delivering radical flexibility, fostering deeper connections, empowering personal growth, driving a shared purpose, and providing holistic wellbeing offerings, employers can simultaneously cater towards the needs of employers and employers, and curate a return to work strategy that's fit for the future.

The purpose of a successful ESG strategy is to demonstrate the environmental, social, and governance factors that your organisation believes to be intrinsically important to consider within your business operations – now and in the future.

Returning to work presents a perfect opportunity to rethink commitments, not just for the benefit of the environment, but for your people too.
While some would argue that the new way of working isn't perfect, few would deny that traditional models weren't either. Just because it's 'the way things have always been done', doesn't mean they still should be.

It's no longer a case of covering the cracks with shiny incentives or proposed commitments to improving wellbeing, but about matching what employers say with what they do and making people feel like they truly matter. By factoring in this all-encompassing approach and reinventing the value proposition, businesses can augment a new level of trust and credibility that spurs change at every avenue.

If we can seize this crucial juncture in the history of work to see how not only our supply chains, tech, and workflows, but our culture impacts operations, we can start making better choices to turn a successful workplace transformation project from a pipedream to a deliverable that can, and will, be achieved over time.
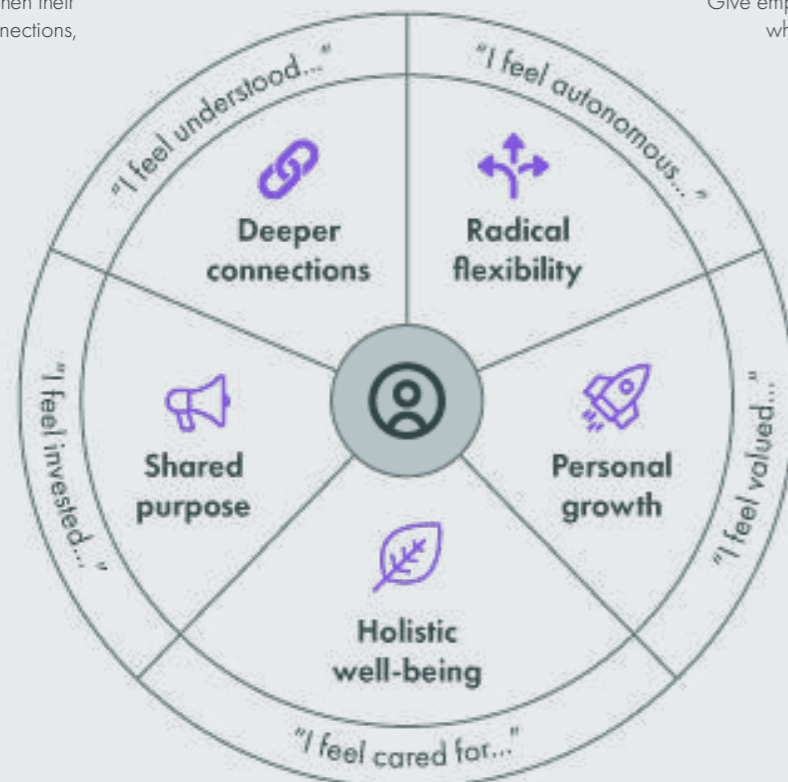
Debbie Wall
Head of Responsible Business,
OT Group

THE HUMAN DEAL.

Help employees to strengthen their family and community connections, not just work connections.

Give employees flexibility over where, when, how much, how and with whom they work.

"I feel understood..."

"I feel autonomous..."

Deeper connections

Radical flexibility

"I feel invested..."

Shared purpose

Personal growth

"I feel valued..."

Holistic well-being

"I feel cared for..."

Take actions on societal and cultural issues; don't just make statements about "purpose."

Provide employees with opportunities to grow as people, not just as professionals.

Don't just provide employees with holistic well-being offerings; make sure they use them.

CONCLUSION.

Look at any one of the contributions to this guide, and you'll see the sentiment that there's no one-size-fits all approach to facilitating a successful return to work.

Ultimately, employers should educate the importance of face-to-face interactions on customers and colleagues alike, while implementing the appropriate measures to meet the needs of their teams with nods to budget, culture, sustainability, and innovation.

In what is increasingly becoming an employee-centric landscape – where flexibility, autonomy, trust, and wellbeing are seen as pre-requisites to any contractual agreement – it's incredibly challenging to know how to strike the right balance between company culture and commercial objectives. But when the two align, it produces an environment that thrives like no other.

The idea of workplace transformation is, of course, nothing new, but recent events certainly raised the stakes for workplaces to become more than just a place of employment. And the sooner organisational leaders realise that the pursuit of profit, growth and innovation, company culture, and wellbeing, go hand-in-hand, the better.

As we continue the transition back to in-person spaces – which we know is on the horizon for some **94%** of surveyed customers at least some of the time – ensuring the right plans and procedures are in place to be a front-runner has never been so crucial.

Get it wrong, and risk losing the most valuable business asset of human capital. Embrace the readiness for change – whether implementing a full on site return or a hybrid model – with the appropriate guidelines and level of input from employees, and see a successful transition back to the office with an ever-engaged and increasingly productive workforce.

Those who are getting it right are placing employees in the driving seat and listening to their needs and requirements, and that's because people want to be heard, understood, and appreciated – whether that's enabling a seamless transition between office and other spaces, or placing greater emphasis on sustainability. At the same time, it's about being firm with emerging strategies – because no-one knows your business like you do.

But, others are catching up, and offering incentives that steal a march on those who were previously positioned as trailblazers on the employment front. That's why it's crucial to understand that your strategy should manifest as a malleable roadmap, not an endpoint. And the initiatives you implement today to meet current business and workforce requirements, will no doubt need attention on an ongoing basis.

By placing the return to work as a constant on the agenda, and continually evaluating progress, company leaders can deliver plans to reduce concern and resistance, retain trust and confidence from wider teams, and augment productivity and efficiency throughout the entire scope of your organisation.

There's no denying this will be a challenging feat, but this is a shift that has been bubbling under the surface for quite some time. And, while the coming months, if not years, will continue to stimulate historical changes to our working landscape, embracing the responsibility to shape a workplace fit for the future – for the benefit of commercial objectives and employee wellbeing alike – has never been so crucial.

Andrew Jones
CEO, OT Group

OT GROUP
PART OF PARAGON GROUP

THE GREAT RETURN