HAS HYBRID HAD ITS DAY?

For the past couple of years, the world of work has been in constant flux.

We began 2020 the same way we always had done - commuting to the office 5 days a week, maybe the occasional work from home day, if you were lucky.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, we had to switch how we worked overnight. Home offices were erected on kitchen tables, in the corners of cramped bedrooms, and everywhere in between. And for a large portion of the following year and a half, that is how things remained.

As the world began throwing open its doors again, the workforce was divided. Some people never wanted to return to the office again, finding that remote working enriched their lives. Others found the opposite; that the lines between work and home began to blur and they were chomping at the bit to get back into the office. And many sit in the middle, embracing the world of 'Hybrid Working', a blend of in-office and remote working.

However, Hybrid working - whilst solving some problems - has led to new ones. Communication issues, proximity bias, poor onboarding, a culture void... not a day goes by without us seeing a post on social media about a new challenge to the world of remote work.

Because of this, some businesses have decided that enough is enough and it's time to bring everyone back under the same roof.

WHAT'S CHANGING?

We have started to notice a shift. As little as 3 months ago, most job vacancies citied flexible or hybrid working as a part of the role. Now a significant number of businesses require their employees to work from the office 5 days a week.

The most high-profile of these is, of course, Elon Musk's demand to his Tesla employees to get back to the office or 'pretend to work' somewhere else. Whilst most other businesses aren't being quite so brash about it, it is happening. And more often than you may think.

Supporters of remote and hybrid working will no doubt say that the reason these businesses are recalling their employees to the office is due to managements failure to adapt. But we don't think that's the case. From our experience, and the conversations that we have been having with clients and HR teams across the UK, there appears to be a myriad of reasons hybrid working isn't, well... working.

SO, WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH HYBRID?

COMMUNICATION

Communication has been cited as a remote working challenge from day one. Teams used to communicating in person had to re-learn how to approach their colleagues. Gone were the water-cooler chats, quick problem-solving meetings, and shouting a question across the office. Instead, we had Teams status', hundreds of emails flying back and forth over a simple issue, and what seemed like endless Zoom meetings. Decisions took longer to be made. Problems that could once be solved in 2 minutes by getting everyone's heads together now took days to figure out. And teams just didn't get to know each other anymore.

MANAGEMENT

The elephant in the room – maybe your managers just aren't the right people to lead a hybrid workforce. With hybrid working, you cannot manage people the same way that you always have. Managers must adapt their leadership styles, leaning more on soft skills than in the past. Unless your managers are provided with training on how to properly lead a hybrid team, it is likely issues will arise. Trust is also a big issue between managers and teams. Traditionally, a manager has been able to see their entire team working during the workday. With hybrid work, this isn't the case, and so managers default to not believing their employees are working as hard as they would if they could be seen.

DEVELOPMENT

Whilst it's widely believed that the younger generation are the ones crying out for remote work, this isn't always the case. In the early stages of your career, incidental learning is crucial. By watching your co-workers, you are absorbing their knowledge and skill – this simply cannot happen as smoothly when teams are split between homes, offices, and co-working spaces. Onboarding processes are struggling to catch up to hybrid working, and those crucial first weeks in a role have been affected, meaning that younger and newer workers are being left behind.

PROXIMITY BIAS

Have you ever thought that a colleague got a promotion simply because they were more visible to the boss? You might not be wrong. Proximity bias is a very real phenomenon within the business world, and it oft leads to favouritism. With a hybrid working model, proximity bias is allowed to thrive. The worker that comes into the office 4 days a week, and is therefore more visible to the boss, is more likely to get that promotion than the worker who only goes to the office one day a week – even if the latter produces better quality work.

CULTURE VOID

Company culture is incredibly important as an employer. Nobody wants to work in a soulless organisation, and younger workers especially look for vibrant, social workplaces, where they can create relationships, network, and grow.

Many leaders have said that hybrid working has obliterated their company culture, and are bringing their employees back to collaborate and socialise as they once did.

ENGAGEMENT

How do you keep an employee engaged with your business when you only see them once or twice a week? This has been one of the biggest challenges leaders have been faced with.

Some business leaders believe that a hybrid working model is the reason behind their unengaged workforce, leading to poor retention and productivity.

DOES THIS MEAN HYBRID WORKING IS OVER?

Absolutely not.

Despite some businesses deciding that hybrid just isn't for them, the overwhelming majority are embracing a hybrid working model.

For starters, there can be no denying that workers want hybrid. The figures vary from study to study, but around 57% of workers want a hybrid working model – the majority of the workforce. And it's been heavily publicised that some workers won't think twice about quitting a role if they are forced back into the office.

The debate around remote work is often polarising. Yelp's CEO, Jeremy Stoppelman, has said that hybrid working 'is a hell of half measures', and therefore plans to take his workforce fully remote. Musk is joined by those such as Netflix CEO Reed Hastings, who 'doesn't see any positives' to remote work. And even though Slack CEO Stewart Butterfield is still figuring hybrid working out, he's a big supporter.

The truth is, despite the many outspoken leaders decrying hybrid work on social media and in Op-Eds, the science actually shows that, when done properly, hybrid working... works. And it works well.

A joint study from MIT and Webex by Cisco showed that rather than destroying a company culture, hybrid working can enhance it. The number of employers reporting increased productivity is still growing. Hybrid working attracts seven times the amount of applications for open positions.

And to top it all off, it leads to happier employees.
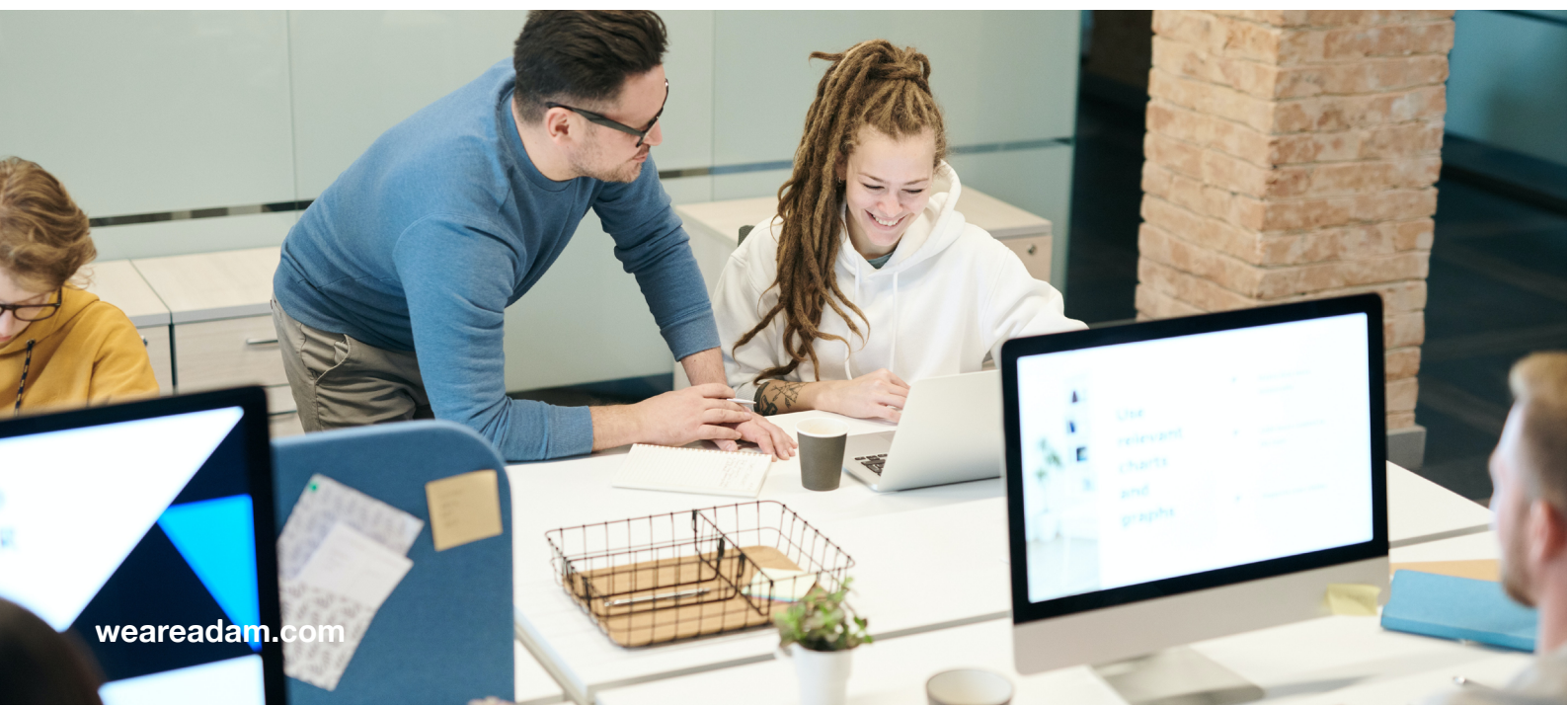
HOW TO MAKE HYBRID WORK FOR YOU

The long and short of it is – what works for your business and your employees? Every business, every industry, and every leader is different. What works for one business will not necessarily work for another, even if the two businesses seem similar on the surface. If hybrid working isn't working for you and your team, then it isn't working. But what makes some businesses so successful with their hybrid working policies? We took a closer look at the companies where Hybrid is King.

ASDA

ASDA allow employees based in their Leeds & Leicester offices to choose where they work, but they are encouraged to attend certain team meetings and training sessions in person.

"Our staff will have the flexibility to work from home when it's more productive to do so, such as tasks that involve planning or research."

Nationwide Building Society

The building society announced a permanent transition to a hybrid model, with 13,000 of their employees working where they want.
"Our associates and our technology team have proven to us that we can serve our members and partners with extraordinary care and a large portion of our team working from home." - Kirt Walker, Nationwide CEO

grammarly

Opting for a remote-first hybrid model, the company has transformed their offices into 'hubs', places where teams can work or hold face-to-face meetings as required, withmost team members working remotely as standard.

EY

International Accountancy firm EY told its entire 17,000 strong workforce that, post-pandemic, they would be allowed to work from home for at least 2 days a week, dedicating to a hybrid working model.

Revolut

All of Revolut's 2,000 employees work on a permanent remote working model.
"Our employees asked for flexibility, and that's what we're giving them as part of our ongoing focus on employee experience and choice". - Jim MacDougall, VP of People, Revolut

Uber

Uber confirmed in April 2021 that they would be moving towards a hybrid working model. Employees choose from a list of dedicated team hubs, and are required to spend at least 50% of their time there.
This decision was made after several rounds of employee feedback.

weareadam.com

WHAT'S NEXT FOR HYBRID?

We suspect that hybrid working is here to stay. But not everywhere.

Whilst it will not work for every business or employee, the science doesn't lie. For a lot of businesses, hybrid isn't only doable, it's beneficial.

There will be pushback, and very vocal pushback at that. Just look at Elon Musk. But at the end of the day, dissenters are almost always the vocal minority, and those that are content with how things are rarely speak up and kick up a fuss, content to just let things continue on as they are.

It's important to consider industry, too. Some industries, for example manufacturing, make hybrid working completely impossible, and trying to shoehorn a hybrid working policy into a business like that would have nothing but detrimental effects. Sure, your office staff may be allowed to work from home, but that will breed resentment between them and the workers that are required on-site.

Hybrid is a balancing act. Business needs, employee needs, and a myriad of other factors can influence how effective it is for you.

Adam
we are adam.com

Want to share your own Hybrid Work story?
Drop us an email to hello@weareadam.com and we'll feature you on our blog.