

Is the dream of flexible work fading?

Stefanos Nachmias, David McGuire and Rajashi Ghosh

National lockdowns and social distance measures seem to be a distant memory. We have all been affected by the pandemic and its consequences for work, life and beyond. A central feature of national lockdowns was to protect the public, hence many of us had to work fully from home. This is an experience that we will probably never see again in our lifetime.

Most certainly, working from home has shifted the debate on organisational life regardless of industry, role and national context. We have now significant experience of remote working (Li, Ghosh & Nachmias, 2020) with specific desires regarding future work patterns. As we emerge from the pandemic, remote working has become more normalised, more entrenched, and more desired by most professionals. Many scholars highlighted the transition to flexible online working caused by the pandemic and the benefits associated with this form of working (i.e. Shirmohammadi, Chan Au & Beigi, 2022; Teevan, 2021; Li, Ghosh & Nachmias, 2020; McGuire, Germain & Reynolds, 2020). The pandemic and stay-at-home orders created uncharted territory for remote working and how to manage employees in a hybrid working environment. It puts Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals at the centre of organisational design to address unprecedented changes at work.

As the dust settles, the question is to what extent this emerging, novel form of organising work can be maintained in the longer-term. We have all seen reports in the news that many organisations have called employees back to the office, indicating a desire to revert to the 'normal way of working'. There is certainly a strong desire to normalise the working environment, with some organisations endorsing the productivity benefits accruing from physical interactive working environments. For example, the CEO of Goldman Sachs expressed his scepticism about the efficiency of remote working whilst others have shown a longer-term openness to embracing flexible working through redesigning their work settings.

This shows that the business environment is currently a frenzied zone. A state of excitement for some and a state of fear for others. On the one hand, we have the newbies (new to work-life balance) who have shown an unwillingness to compromise. After months of remote working, they have now become veterans (experienced in flexible work) (Li, Ghosh & Nachmias, 2020) with a desire to maintain a flexible working pattern post pandemic. Interestingly, working remotely for a long time has created several work habits that many professionals are not willing to give up easily. We all know that remote working reduces distractions and commute times, thus providing greater flexibility to employees. For some others, remote working has helped satisfy personal lifestyle goals by relocating to more affordable locations. For others, flexible working offers a more productive pattern of work. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) (2022) highlighted that half of people in the United Kingdom want to maintain a flexible work pattern as the number of people working flexibly raised from 13% in February 2022 to 24% in May 2022 with high earners being more likely to hybrid

work. The level of people working exclusively from home dropped from 29% to 14% in June 2022. So, hybrid work is trending amongst most professionals.

On the other hand, organisations have not figured out long-term plans on how flexible, hybrid working is going to operate or what it should look like in the workplace. Apart from some technological companies and a few other cases, flexible policies are generic and poorly defined. Employment data from across the globe including the United States, clearly shows a very interesting shift in contractual power (McKinsey & Company, 2022). It seems that employees now have the control to define the terms of flexible practices as most organisations are not able to fill job vacancies, or simply do not have enough jobs to satisfy the increasing level for flexible work. This uncertainty has been used as leverage by employees to seek further flexibility or simply move on to a different organisation (Turits, 2022). The lack of clarity has created a high level of anxiety amongst organisational leaders as to what to expect in the future. This might explain the increased number of reignitions across the globe (Ferrazzi & Clementi, 2022) and questions about the utilisation of knowledge transfer and capabilities.

There is little doubt that current frenzied environments raise important questions for academic, professionals and organisations. To what extent have we actually utilised the knowledge gained during the pandemic to inform new strategies and what does the future hold in terms of working patterns? It seems that the time spent learning new technologies to complete work and to adjust to repeated changes in work procedures might not have been fully 'exploited' to inform future changes. Online activities implemented to support employees; the creation of virtual socialisation activities; and the use of technology to increase flexibility and cut down bureaucracy seems to have fallen out of favour. What is certain is that we have been fully trained and psychologically prepared over the course of the last 32 months to use effectively remote, flexible practices. It was not an easy process, but we managed to find a way to balance work and life while working remotely.

It seems logical to argue that the transition to post COVID-19 work environments might have not been as progressive, smooth, and effective as many scholars, professionals, and policy makers had hoped for. Of course, we should not underestimate the power of knowledge and capabilities, but most organisations have struggled to define the 'new norm' post-pandemic. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, there exists a high level of indecisiveness amongst managers in trying to satisfy diverse employee needs combined with a fear of disappointing certain employees. In this regard, managers simply lack an understanding of how best to utilise the learning gained during the pandemic and manage effectively different expectations. Some people want to work three days a week from home, others one day per week and others not at all (ONS, 2022); they simply want full ownership to make the decision. This is not ideal when you need to develop an effective strategy.

Secondly, there is the small matter of managerial authority and how managers can effectively exercise control in a flexible, hybrid environment with limited physical interaction. Many managers still hold onto certain stereotypes about the

value of working from home; assumptions about employee behaviour and attitude while working from home, and how to balance organisational and employee needs. Similarly, leaders have expressed concerns about the lack of consistency in building work relationships in a virtual space and how to facilitate effective online conversations that lead to greater innovation. Flexible working can lead to isolation from colleagues and isolation negatively impacts work outcomes (Golden et al., 2008). Going back to a physical work environment might be the 'best' solution to address current challenges. It seems that there has not been an open, honest conversation about the future of flexible organisations and how to utilise acquired tacit knowledge related to organisational culture (Asatiani et al., 2021). One might argue it is business as usual.

Thirdly, we need to recognise the power of the socio-economic environments. Several governments have encouraged employees to go back to the office (some offer incentives) to support the economy. Travel, food and childcare costs have driven many to maintain more flexible working patterns, especially with the current economic outlook. However, the 'normal model' of office activities has encouraged a number of social and business activities that fuelled the economy. This is now much needed as many office spaces and hospitality/service businesses have not still recovered from the pandemic.

These are alarming trends that makes the dream of flexible working fragile. The HRD community has been encouraged to develop effective core strategies for hybrid working (Yawson, 2020). The field offers a useful knowledge base for leaders to re-imagine a range of organisational, developmental, and leadership solutions and offer voice to remote employees' concerns and needs (Bierema, 2020). There is a plethora of academic and professional HRD frameworks that organisations can utilise to enable a successful hybrid working environment. However, HRD professionals and scholars have been slow in responding to current needs and have been less bold and brave in offering solutions. We might share some responsibility for the current uncertain environment. It is now the right time to offer a more critical perspective on how organisations should move forward in a post pandemic era. HRD has a great responsibility to record and research the real impact of COVID-19 on individual and organisational learning. The success of flexible work practices is not only linked to managers' understanding but also to employees' ability to learn and adopt to the new work realities. Therefore, it is now the time to offer employees the possibility to work flexibly within a more targeted HRD framework that enables organisations to address the challenge of reskilling and upskilling the workforce. It might sound clichéd that organisations need to develop training programmes that address the new reality and consider flexible work practices. It is not a matter of quick operational changes to temporarily fix learning needs. Training programmes should ensure a long-term transition towards new working practices. It is about changing behaviours, mindsets, and attitudes. It is about creating a better workplace that does not rely on 'old fashioned practices' but enables a hybrid working environment. This is not a one size fits all solution. Regardless the flexible practices, any changes should provide the possibility to encourage a flexible physical presence to foster connectivity, creativity, and innovation

combined with individual needs. We should not get involved in a game to predict whether the blur surrounding flexible work boundaries is temporary or not. Evidence suggests that a hybrid working environment offers the best of both worlds (remote and office work) with positive impact on work performance (Choudhury, 2022). Therefore, it is better to dedicate our time to utilise the knowledge gained from the pandemic to effectively inform decisions on future workplaces.

As a result, HRD is not only about the reactive response to change but is also a proactive force that can facilitate effective discussions and address challenging situations in an ever-changing working environment. Whether organisations are willing to develop a hybrid working environment is a different story. Hybrid work is here to stay long-term. The HRD role is to provide critical solutions to effectively shape up the future working place. We need to be present in examining ever-changing work patterns and offer in-depth knowledge to avoid the gradually fading of flexible working. This might sound optimistic. Nonetheless, history has shown us that organisations that have HRD at the centre of any strategic changes, they tend to grow, progress and succeed in the longer term. It is now time to act.

References

- Asatiani, A., Hämäläinen, J., Penttinen, E. and Rossi, M. 2021. *Constructing continuity across the organisational culture boundary in a highly virtual work environment*. Information Systems Journal, 31(1), 62-93.
- Bierema, L.L. 2020. *HRD research and practice after 'The Great COVID-19 Pause': The time is now for bold, critical, research*. Human Resource Development International, 23(4), 347-360.
- Choudhury, P. 2022. *Does Hybrid Work Actually Work? Insights from 30,000 Emails*, Harvard Business Review. Accessed September 19, 2022: <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/does-hybrid-work-actually-work-insights-from-30000-emails>.
- Ferrazzi, K. and Clementi, M. 2022. *The Great Resignation Stems from a Great Exploration*. Accessed 19 September, 2022: <https://hbr.org/2022/06/the-great-resignation-stems-from-a-great-exploration>.
- Golden, T.D., Veiga, J.F. and Dino, R.N. 2008. *The impact of professional isolation on teleworker job performance and turnover intentions: does time spent teleworking, interacting face-to-face, or having access to communication-enhancing technology matter?*. Journal of applied psychology, 93(6), 1412-1421.
- Li, J., Ghosh, R. and Nachmias, S. 2020. *In a time of COVID-19 pandemic, stay healthy, connected, productive, and learning: words from the editorial team of HRDI*. Human Resource Development International, 23:3, 199-207.

McGuire, D., Germain, M.L. and Reynolds, K. 2021. *Reshaping HRD in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Ethics of Care Approach*. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 23(1), 26–40.

McKinsey & Company. 2022. *Americans are embracing flexible work and they want more of it*. Accessed 19 September, 2022: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/real-estate/our-insights/americans-are-embracing-flexible-work-and-they-want-more-of-it>.

ONS, 2022. *Is hybrid working here to stay?* Accessed September 19, 2022: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/ishybridworkingheretostay/2022-05-23>.

Shirmohammadi, M., Chan Au, W. and Beigi, M. 2022. *Remote work and work-life balance: Lessons learned from the covid-19 pandemic and suggestions for HRD practitioners*. *Human Resource Development International*, 25:2, 163-181.

Teevan, J. 2021. *Let's Redefine "Productivity" for the Hybrid Era*, Harvard Business Review. Accessed September 19, 2022: <https://hbr.org/2021/09/lets-redefine-productivity-for-the-hybrid-era>.

Turits, M. 2022. *Millions of workers are on the hunt for remote jobs. But there may not be enough flexible positions for all of them*. Accessed 19 September, 2022: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220421-are-there-enough-remote-jobs-for-everyone-who-wants-one>.

Yawson, R. 2020. *Strategic flexibility analysis of HRD research and practice post COVID-19 pandemic*. *Human Resource Development International*, 23:4, 406-417.