Designing Mentally Healthy Hybrid Work

Guiding Principles for
a Thriving Workplace

2024

▶ **Guide 2**

Australian Government

National Mental Health Commission

Contents

This 2-part series shares new and emerging insights to support organisations to thrive using hybrid work arrangements. The guides present key principles and considerations for choosing, establishing and designing the best hybrid work arrangement.

The information contained in these guides is based on integrated research conducted in 2022 including insights from published peer-reviewed research, primary research conducted in mid-2022 and grey literature.

Both guides are written for leaders, human resources professionals, senior managers and those responsible for designing organisational policy and guidelines.

With these guides, we hope to give Australian employers insights and inspiration that enable them to thrive using their chosen hybrid work arrangement.

▶ Guide 1
Choosing Your Hybrid Work Model: Implications for a Mentally Healthy Workplace

The first guide provides an overview of the different hybrid work models and the key considerations for each.

▶ Guide 2
Designing Mentally Healthy Hybrid Work: Guiding Principles for a Thriving Workplace

The second guide focuses on supporting organisations to establish and design quality hybrid work through ongoing action.

Why these guides exist

Developed by the National Mental Health Commission in partnership with Swinburne University of Technology, these guides emerged as part of the National Workplace Initiative (NWI). The guides were commissioned as a result of early research and consultation which highlighted the unintended consequences of hybrid work on the mental health of workers and the lack of research-informed guidance to assist organisations to address these consequences. We thank everyone who contributed to these guides, including the workers who shared their perspectives through the nationally representative survey conducted in 2022.

The guides aim to:

- share insights on the state of hybrid work in Australia, including the range of hybrid work models currently in place
- recognise the impact of hybrid arrangements on all facets of work
- inform workplace leaders and individuals on the impacts of the hybrid work on their organisation
- support leaders and managers to address any negative impacts so that their organisation can thrive in hybrid work.

A note on language

The term 'hybrid work' has become synonymous with a combination of working styles and is widespread among mainly knowledge workers in Australia. It typically involves a combination of:

- working 'on site', usually an office location on certain days and
- working remotely (that is, at home or a third place) on other days.

While the location of work is at the core of hybrid work, other flexible arrangements (mainly around work hours) are often entangled with the flexibility of the work location.

References to 'organisations' or 'workplaces' are limited to jobs and industries that can employ hybrid work models. Not all jobs can be performed remotely, so may not have the potential to be organised in a hybrid way. The most obvious examples are frontline workers, client-facing roles, production workers and trades. Therefore, while not exhaustive, the guides target industries with primarily knowledge workers and administrative workers.

About the research

The key insights, opportunities, challenges and actions outlined in these guides were based on extensive research conducted by Swinburne University of Technology in 2022. Data was integrated from a variety of sources, including:

- established insights from published peer-reviewed research
- new insights based on primary research conducted in May 2022
- emerging insights put forward by thought leaders and subject matter experts.

	Established insights	Current insights	Emerging insights
Research methods and data sources	Rapid systematic review of 25 peer-reviewed articles	Empirical data sources • Nationally representative survey of 1,000 working Australians (May 2022) • 25 stakeholder interviews (variety of industries and organisation sizes) • 2 design and feedback workshops with 10 senior strategic HR and People and Culture managers • Market scan of 49 available resources and services for mentally healthy hybrid work	Extensive search of grey literature – 129 articles from the following sources / outlets • Popular literature shared by consultancy and advisory businesses • Harvard Business Review • MIT Sloan Management Review • The Conversation • White papers, Future of Work Institute, Curtin University • Business and Australian media (SMH, Daily Mall, New York Times, The Economist, Forbes) • Individual and business blogs
Data collection and analysis	• Systematic search of 6 scientific databases from a variety of disciplines (psychology, social sciences, business and management) • Systematic selection of studies based on inclusion criteria • In-depth content analysis of 25 articles focusing on hybrid work (2022 up to July 2022)	• Statistical analysis survey data • Content analysis stakeholder interviews (including member checking) • Observation and content analysis workshops (including member checking)	• Snowball search and retrieval of 129 articles (published up to July 2022) • Structured summaries

Hybrid work:
A new reality for
many workers

Hybrid work: A new reality for many workers

The impact of COVID-19 irreversibly changed how we work in Australia and across the globe. These changes are reflected in how we think, how we manage our work and lives, where we work, and how we engage with our colleagues. Arguably, the biggest change relates to 'where' we work–remotely, on site, with flexible schedules or a combination of all of these.

The sizable increase in hybrid work provides a unique opportunity to gauge and understand its impact. This is because a substantial number of workers have fulfilled the same job role in both non-hybrid and hybrid modes.
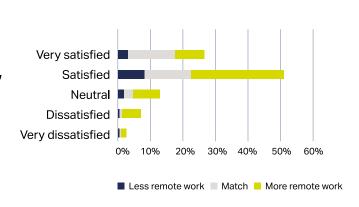
In the nationally representative survey informing this guide (see 'About the research', p 5), 80% of respondents reported working in a hybrid arrangement and 67% said the adoption of hybrid work has increased since they started with their current employer.

Employment recruiters reported that job seekers were increasingly looking at workplace flexibility as a condition of employment, implying that they expect greater flexibility.

A curious pattern emerged when comparing workers' satisfaction with their current hybrid working arrangements with their preference to work remotely more often. 77% of the survey respondents indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their current work arrangements yet about half of these respondents also indicated that they would prefer to work remotely more often.

Figure 1 represents this phenomenon visually, as shown by the green portion of the bars for the 'Satisfied' and 'Very satisfied' responses.

Figure 1. Desire to work more remotely given satisfaction with current hybrid work arrangement

> **"**
> In the current market, where there is a war for talent that won't let up anytime soon, organisations can't afford to not embrace flexibility or new ways of working.
>
> **Ben Hamer, Adjunct Professor, Edith Cowan University**

Hybrid work creates benefits and challenges: A delicate balance

Despite many organisations realising hybrid work is here to stay, many aspects of hybrid work are still not understood. While positive benefits such as improved work–life balance and increased autonomy are apparent, hybrid work can create new challenges and stressors for employers and workers.

Analysis of the survey informing this guide identified the common benefits of hybrid work as well as the challenges that workers and employers are experiencing after working in a hybrid way in 2021 and 2022.

Overall, the research showed that hybrid work might disturb the delicate balance between the demands of a job and the available resources to do that job. Despite the increased control a worker has, action needs to be taken to support workers who are working hybrid.

> " Hybrid work has truly revealed itself as a double-edged sword for employer and worker alike; for every opportunity it brings, there is a challenge to deal with.
>
> **Professor Eva Kyndt, Project Leader, Swinburne University of Technology**

⊕ Benefits

- **Ability to work undisturbed**
  (principle 4, research insight 1 and research insight 3)

- **Increased autonomy**
  (principle 4, research insight 10)

- **Digital learning opportunities**
  (principle 4, research insight 9)

- **Work–life and work–family dynamics**
  (principle 1, research insight 1 and principle 4, research insight 18)

- **Within-team coordination**
  (principle 2, research insight 2)

- **Efficient instrumental interactions**
  (principle 4, research insight 13)

- **Less exposure to negative interpersonal behaviours**
  (principle 4, research insight 14)

- **Increased job resources**
  (principle 4, research insight 19)

⚠ Challenges

- **Decline in social learning**
  (principle 2, research insight 2)

- **Role ambiguity**
  (principle 1, research insight 2 and principle 4, research insight 4)

- **Digital competence**
  (principle 3, research insight 2 and principle 4, research insight 7)

- **Blurred work–life boundaries**
  (principle 4, research insight 17)

- **Distance between workers and managers**
  (principle 4, research insight 15)

- **Knowledge management**
  (principle 2, research insight 2 and principle 4, research insight 8)

- **Proximity bias**
  (principle 4, research insight 16)

- **Job complexity**
  (principle 4, research insights 4 and 5)

- **Onboarding**
  (principle 4, research insight 6)

> **"** We need to shift from asking: 'Flexible working or not?' to 'How do we design quality work (SMART work) when remote and when in the office?

Professor Sharon Parker, ARC Laureate Fellow, Future of Work Institute, Curtin University

Regardless of location and level of flexibility, senior managers must manage psychosocial hazards and respond to the mental ill-health and wellbeing of their workers. Legislation still requires organisations to meet obligations regarding work health and safety, workers' compensation, discrimination and privacy.
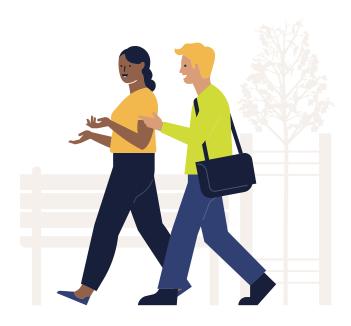
Many organisations realise sustainable hybrid work models require different solutions than those used as a short-term, reactive response to COVID-19. With less frequent face-to-face communication, there is pressure on managers to implement hybrid work including monitoring and responding to signs of mental ill-health or changes in worker behaviour. To better support managers, organisations may need to introduce different protection mechanisms, guidelines and mental health initiatives that reflect operational needs and workforce needs.

It is important to bear in mind that there is not one 'best' hybrid work model. Each hybrid work model has its own benefits and risks that must be considered when choosing the model that best suits your organisations – see Guide 1: Choosing Your Hybrid Work Model for further details on the different models and their strengths and risks.

> **"** The stronger the team culture and social cohesion, the more likely it is that the team will support each other with the flexibility needed to work together successfully in a hybrid work environment.

Jacinta Moses, HR Leader, Infosys

Guiding principles for designing mentally healthy hybrid work

Once you have chosen the hybrid work model best suited to your organisation, some common principles guide how to embed hybrid work into your operations and design quality hybrid work for your workers.

This guide outlines 4 key principles for creating mentally healthy hybrid workplaces:

1

Establish clear parameters for hybrid work

Provide workers with clear, unambiguous parameters for hybrid work that reduce uncertainty and create clarity on the new way of working. The guidelines should clarify when and where individuals are expected to work and how much flexibility individuals and teams have within this. These guidelines are best developed in consultation with workers and might differ across areas of the organisation.

2

Implement effective communication and consultation

Workers reported that, in general, the quality of communication decreased in hybrid work, yet the quantity increased. With workers potentially on different time schedules, and based in different locations, rethinking company communication is crucial. This includes establishing a disciplined approach to knowledge management.

3

Implement enabling technology

In a successful hybrid model, technology is vital for workers to perform their jobs optimally and avoid technology frustration (a common occurrence reported in the research informing this guide). Technology must allow workers to move seamlessly between their primary workplaces (that is, remote and on site). Advances in digital wellbeing apps also offer new opportunities for supervisors to monitor and support worker wellbeing. However, it is crucial to critically review their validity and effectiveness and safeguard workers' privacy.

4

Design meaningful and motivating work

Work design practices significantly affect individuals, teams and organisations. This guide draws on the SMART (stimulating, mastery, agency relational and tolerable demands) model for work design. The research analysis indicated that under hybrid working arrangements, elements of work design require additional attention including facilitating workers to work in the location that best suits the tasks at hand, supporting learning and cultivating working relationships digitally, providing autonomy and clarity on the expectations of a worker's role, and actively managing job demands and boundaries.

See "SMART model for work design".

The guiding principles and suggested actions in this resource will help you support workers in a hybrid work environment. You will better understand how to set your organisation up for hybrid work and facilitate work that is mentally healthy.

Navigating the following chapters

The remainder of this guide is divided into 4 chapters, one for each of the guiding principles. Each chapter follows the same structure consisting of:

1 Why the principle is important for creating a mentally healthy hybrid work environment

2 Core research insights relating to this principle as identified in the research conducted (see p 5)

3 Recommended guidelines and actions to address this principle

4 Recommended further reading.

Establish clear parameters for hybrid work

Principle 1

Establish clear parameters for hybrid work

Creating guidelines or policies around your organisation's hybrid work model (or models) is key to initiating a suitable rhythm for workers and managers. Defining the parameters around hybrid work reduces uncertainty, and grounds everyone in the new way of working.

Research conducted for this guide identified several insights that support the need for clear guidelines.

💡 **Research Insight 1**

Workers want a voice in designing hybrid work policies.

Especially in large organisations, a philosophical division was noted between top management and workers.

Top management were seeking to fill on site occupancy to achieve collective outcomes. They wanted to onboard new talent effectively. They wanted to foster company culture, collaboration and working relationships. Some wanted actual visibility of their workers.

In contrast, workers wanted flexibility. Having gained more time at home, and repurposed commuting time, workers generally wanted more opportunities to work remotely.

" There is a conflict between what workers want and what leaders think their people want. There's never been a more important time for leaders to check in with their workforce, understand their experiences and expectations, and consult the people who are impacted by decisions.

**Dr Ben Hamer, Adjunct Professor,
Edith Cowan University, Head of Future of Work,**

💡 **Research Insight 2**

More flexibility can mean more stress.

Workers with the most flexibility and freedom in deciding where they work are most satisfied with their current work arrangement, but they also reported the strongest increase in various job stressors, most notably poor role clarity.

"

Hybrid work removes the assumption that 'in the office' = 'working'. As managers, it is important to reflect on our expectations and then have clear conversations about what those expectations are, and what that looks like for workers.

Anonymous, HR Manager, Sports and Community

💡 **Research Insight 3**

Workers have different needs.

Workers want a say in shaping hybrid work arrangements, so they work for them. Their preferences must be considered alongside organisational needs. Because hybrid work can alter psychosocial risks, consulting with workers is a legal requirement. Ensuring guidelines include workers' views also supports successful implementation of your organisation's hybrid work model.

"

Workers are demanding flexible working arrangements. There is a need to understand the motivation of employers and workers – what do they want to get out of 'hybrid' working arrangements.

Ashley Lazaro, Former Senior Executive, Telecommunications

▶ Guidelines for establishing clear work parameters

1 Evaluate any existing hybrid work arrangements

Many organisations currently work with hybrid work arrangements that grew organically throughout 2020 and 2021. As such, it is important to know which work arrangements exist and review them to understand how they are working and if they are fair and equitable.

Having a flexible mindset and a willingness to pivot along the way allows your organisation to enjoy a productive, successful hybrid work style. It also fosters a better dynamic for protecting mentally healthy work.

⚑ Examples of activities

- **Pulse surveys:** Conduct an organisation-wide survey to assess which hybrid work models are prevalent and preferred in your organisation (see below). By collecting demographic and job level characteristics, you can review if differences are equitable across the organisation. It is critical that you consider anonymity in any survey that you design.
- **Manager consultation:** Ask managers how their teams work in terms of location and flexibility.
- **Existing engagement surveys:** Include questions on satisfaction with current hybrid work arrangements and what could be improved.
- **Existing annual reviews:** Discuss current hybrid work arrangements in annual development and performance reviews.

2 Consult workers

You will likely encounter competing demands when developing your organisation's hybrid work policy. Specifically, the policy must balance:

- the needs of individual workers, including their job tasks and responsibilities

- your organisation's responsibilities, the dynamics of various teams and the need to coordinate hybrid work.

While organisational responsibilities may be clear, workers' needs may not be as clear. So, it is important to consult broadly with workers using a variety of activities.

⚑ Examples of activities

- **Working groups:** Set up a working group with representatives from across the organisation to test iterations of your hybrid work policy.
- **Diverse opinions:** At various stages, test the proposed policy with a broad cross-section of workers to avoid biased insights.
- **Town halls:** Organise town halls to get input from a variety of workers.

Hybrid work models that lean heavily towards the needs of individuals or teams risk destabilising operations because inconsistencies create discontent. Across the organisation, consultation, collaboration, consistent communication and real transparency help set the right hybrid work policy for your organisation.

▶ Guidelines for establishing clear work parameters

Remember: One size does not fit all, especially for larger organisations. Identify which hybrid work models best suit your needs (see Guide 1: Choosing Your Hybrid Work Model), and whether different approaches are needed across the organisation. Each team or department may have different operating rhythms, so nurturing inter-departmental relationships and normalising regular communication will be key.

3   Develop a hybrid work policy

A transparent hybrid work policy clarifies when workers are on site or remote, and how much flexibility individuals and teams have.

The policy should include factors such as:

- the number of days and/or types of activities for which the worker is recommended to be on site
- the number of days and/or types of activities the worker can perform remotely
- team or organisation anchor days, such as specific days of the week, or weeks of the month when the worker must be in a specific location
- how much flexibility and decision latitude workers have around where and when they work.

In addition to these factors, the policy must:

- remove ambiguity or confusion for workers and managers. Be clear, precise and consistent to avoid confusion, misinterpretation or worker discontent.
- use language that reflects your organisation's branding: it will feel right, to workers especially, if the tone and phrasing is familiar and true to your organisation's brand and culture.
- be clear and interpretable—but not overwhelming. Provide enough detail to engage and educate, but not too much that you lose audience interest.
- be applicable. The policy must feel achievable and realistic, not lofty or out of touch.
- be accessible. Relevant policies (including recorded information sessions) should be available to access by all workers at any time.

> **"**
> We need to balance the expectations of workers with the expectations of the workplace when it comes to hybrid and flexible work.
>
> **Anonymous, HR Manager, Sports and Community**

> **"**
> We hear from our clients that hybrid work is here to stay. The key to successful hybrid working arrangements is the creation of unambiguous, equitable policies and the effective communication of these policies to all employees.
>
> **Jovita Gartlan, Partner, Flinders Growth Partners**

▶ Guidelines for establishing clear work parameters

4 Provide guidelines to managers about the level of discretion allowed to choose the right hybrid work model

Managers need decision making authority to develop hybrid work arrangements for their workers. And the level of discretion they have must be clearly communicated to all workers. Give your managers adequate latitude and autonomy to set the hybrid work rhythm for their team. Establish this latitude at a team, or departmental, level, but do not merely push down the responsibility. Research shows hybrid work substantially increases the job complexity and role conflict for managers.

Enable managers to set rules for their team, supported by an organisation policy that provides direction on how to balance organisational needs against workers' needs.

Empower leaders to communicate this authority and discretion to teams. Managers may also need training in communication skills for hybrid work and managing a hybrid team.

✤ Examples of activities

- **Policy:** Have an organisation policy that managers and workers can consult.
- **Sounding board:** Discuss with managers how the organisation policy translates at a team level. Be available as a sounding board.
- **Training:** Train managers on how to manage hybrid teams (also see Principle 4 – Learning and development).

▶ Further reading

Free

Employment Hero

- Flexible working policy template
  https://employmenthero.com/resources/flexible-working-policy-template/

Gartner

- Redesigning work for a hybrid future
  https://www.gartner.com/en/insights/seven-myths-about-hybrid-future-of-work

- Evolve culture and leadership for the hybrid workplace
  https://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/trends/evolve-culture-and-leadership-for-the-hybrid-workplace

Implement effective communication and consultation processes

Principle 2

Implement effective communication and consultation processes

Communication at all levels of an organisation is arguably more critical in a hybrid work environment than under a in a work model where everyone is on site. Workers on different time schedules and in different locations increases complexity about how your organisation communicates and manages knowledge.

💡 **Research Insight 1**

Hybrid work increases the frequency of communication but decreases the quality.

Team communication has increased, creating advantages at the team level for coordination and planning. But workers are also dissatisfied with 2 main aspects of communication:

- The quality of communication has deteriorated. For example, some workers find self-regulating during online or video meetings difficult. Multiple distractions are increasingly at play: email, instant messaging, SMS, phone calls. Concentration can breakdown, and meeting participants become frustrated.

- Online meetings are often back to back (sometimes interfering with lunch breaks) resulting in meeting fatigue. In addition, these online meetings offer few socialising opportunities.

💡 **Research Insight 2**

Asynchronous communication and the lack of visual cues raise the bar for knowledge management.

Hybrid work has fundamentally changed worker interactions. Getting feedback, guidance or asking for directions on a project in a quick, easy, informal setting is crucial for getting work done.

Unfortunately, workers indicated managers provide less guidance. Nor can workers simply pass a colleague's desk and discuss a report or document, leading to increased latency on project information. Fewer interactions with colleagues can make it challenging to retrieve, access and use information and knowledge, and reduce energy and excitement to complete work. So, not surprisingly knowledge and information gaps can arise.

When on site, workers are regularly reminded of organisation goals, department goals and team goals through visual cues. Roadmaps, project journeys and team progress are frequently displayed visually, giving workers direction and often a sense of purpose about what they are contributing to. By contrast, remote workers lose these visual cues that add meaning and purpose to their work.

Consequently, the need for knowledge management (including digital documentation) has risen: digital apps and tools have replaced traditional brainstorming and collaboration tools (Box 1). However, the sudden expansion of digital records means organisations need to improve knowledge management practices.

Box 1

▶ The rise of asynchronous communication and digital records

FROM THIS...
On Site Meeting Documentation

- Physical whiteboards
- Physical kanban boards
- Post-it notes
- Stopping by a colleague's desk
- Server-network drive documentation storage

TO THIS...
Off Site Meeting Documentation

- Dynamic online whiteboards
- Online kanban boards
- Online to-do lists and notes
- Email, instant messaging, team channels, SMS
- Cloud-based documentation storage e.g. dynamic knowledge management toolsets

▶ Guidelines for effective communication and consultation processes

1 Establish a manageable, structured meeting schedule

Assess weekly and monthly objectives and map the frequency and timing of meetings—ideally in advance—in a way that does not overwhelm workers. Sometimes a phone call or an email can circumvent a meeting. A schedule that is too heavily dominated by calls, emails and meetings can be distracting and disengaging. And initial research shows a range of benefits of meeting free days.

Workers need think time for deep concentration work as well as 'down time' for lighter tasks. So, consider who really needs to be in a meeting. Avoid presenteeism for workers not needed to achieve objectives.

2 Enable face-to-face and well-timed, synchronised communication

Bring people together regularly—ideally in person, but remotely via videoconference if necessary.

Bringing people together adds value by:

- reminding individuals of their place in the team dynamic
- providing an opportunity to discuss team activities as a group
- letting you reiterate team direction.

Informal 'drop in' catch-ups with managers or senior staff can be useful. Workers can ask for guidance, direction or clarification about their work. They can also engage on topics related to their development and job functioning, or more intangible aspects of the organisation, such as atmosphere and culture. This initiative also helps counter reduced access to informal learning opportunities from senior people (see Principle 4 – Learning and development for more information).

⚑ Examples of activities

- **Training:** Provide training to help workers better manage communication. Effective communication in hybrid work does not come naturally to everyone.
- **Review of habits:** Do a deep review of your communication habits across the organisation.
- **One-on-one sessions:** Establish regular structured one-on-one sessions with your direct reports, and consider establishing informal 'coffee catch-ups' with (senior) managers (Box 2).

> "
> Organisations will need to be much more intentional and purposeful in creating the space for workers to connect with one another in meaningful ways. Technology will always be an enabler, but we must not forget there is still a place for (and a need for) genuine, face-to-face connection.
>
> **Karen Oldaker, Senior Executive Wellbeing and Community, Medibank**

▶ Guidelines for effective communication
and consultation processes

3 Provide knowledge management tools and guidelines

Organisations need high-quality information and communication systems to manage and document activities. Setting up a logical digital management system gives everyone access to vital work, no matter what their schedule. Workers need access to meeting minutes, decisions, team actions or feedback documents to perform optimally.

Too often, organisations solely focus on the technical aspects of knowledge management. It is essential to have clear guidelines on the 'who, how, where and what' of documentation, and develop a culture that fosters knowledge creation and sharing.

Examples of activities

- **Motivation:** Pressuring workers to share knowledge will probably backfire. Rather, help them see the value in sharing knowledge. Storytelling can be powerful, but understanding your workers' needs and demonstrating how knowledge sharing is useful provides an even stronger incentive for them to engage in this process.
- **Connection over storage:** Do not focus on elaborate document databases. Systems which enable workers to identify and connect with the internal experts are more likely to result in better organisational knowledge management.
- **Training:** Provide training and guidance on what is worth storing and how to uniformly save and house work

▶ Guidelines for effective communication and consultation processes

Box 2

▶ Inspiration for managers: topics for regular one-on-one meetings

Hybrid work tempo: Is it working for the individual? Does the ratio of on site and remote work suit them personally and professionally?

Working schedule: How does the individual manage their work schedule in a hybrid setting? Factors to reflect on include the following:

- Is the worker regularly in back-to-back meetings?
- Can they clearly delineate work life and home life?
- Can they self-regulate, so they do not experience burnout and mental fatigue?
- Do they take lunch breaks every day? What about morning and afternoon coffee breaks?
- Do they delegate work, where appropriate?
- Do they take on additional job tasks purely because of the hybrid work schedule?
- Do they have adequate tools and apps to do their job optimally?

Wellbeing: You will need a subtle approach to explore signs of poor mental health, or poor wellbeing. Supportive conversations will help you probe for signs of fatigue or burnout. Approach these discussions without judgement and with an open mind. For example, see The relationship between mental health and work module.

Performance: Review the worker's performance and KPI achievement. Discuss goal setting and how these goals can be measured. Provide feedback on performance and work together to remove roadblocks and advance towards goals.

Learning and development: Discuss opportunities for learning and professional development.

Organisational contribution: Provide clear, unambiguous direction on tasks the worker performs. Explain how they contribute to broader organisational goals.

▶ Further reading

Free

Curtin University Future of Work Institute

- How to manage virtual teams for success: A guide for managers
  https://www.thriveatwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/How-to-Manage-Virtual-Teams-for-Success-A-Guide-for-Managers-2022.pdf

Atlassian

- 7 ways a hybrid model could fail (and how to avoid them)
  https://www.atlassian.com/blog/leadership/hybrid-work-model-premortem

Implement enabling technology

Principle 3

Implement enabling technology

Technology must support your workers, not obstruct their productivity. So, select platforms, tools and apps carefully based on the nature of the work and suitability for your organisation. Moreover, ensure that workers acquire the necessary digital competencies that enable them to work smoothly with the technology. Otherwise, you risk worker disengagement due to technology frustration.

Technology also creates the opportunity to monitor and support workers' wellbeing by tracking digital activity or collecting information via pulse or micro surveys. It is important to acknowledge the ethical considerations and the effectiveness of apps designed to support wellbeing.

💡 **Research Insight 1**

Hybrid work needs an expanded and improved technology infrastructure.

A healthy hybrid workplace requires a new technological approach.

- First, technology infrastructure must support workers on site and remotely.
- Second, it must protect data security, which can be more easily compromised in a hybrid work setting.

With no control over connections between workers' computers and the external firewall, the technology infrastructure must protect your organisation's internal network services.

The specific technology support workers need may include:

- secure and reliable internet connection
- easy access to a VPN (virtual private network) that encrypts data and protects online identities
- high quality audio and video tools
- intuitive and interactive tools for team collaboration and planning project outputs
- access to knowledge management and project planning tools, with document storage and search capability (also see Principle 2 – Communication)
- support services to help workers when they encounter difficulties
- hot desk booking systems to facilitate team collaboration when in the office.

"

Greater focus on intentional innovation and collaboration is needed in hybrid work environments. Developing future forward thinking and innovation capability with technology at the centre will be the differentiating factor to embed innovation in a hybrid workplace.

Nadine Castle, Director, The Culture Group

Research Insight 2

Hybrid work increases technology frustration.

Workers report being frustrated when they cannot complete job tasks because technology is not fit for purpose. They also struggle to master multiple digital tools and platforms, and many feel overwhelmed.

"

For hybrid work to be successful, people must be fully equipped with the right technology that works seamlessly across both office and remote locations. This includes hardware, software, performant internet, stable videoconferencing platforms, instant messaging platforms etc. that are reliable, intuitive and easy to use, to mitigate potential technology stress.

Anonymous, Senior Executive, Management Consultancy

Research Insight 3

Digital wellbeing apps are becoming more prevalent, but effectiveness is unknown.

Worker wellbeing is at a critical juncture, reflecting workers' COVID-19 experiences coupled with adjustments to hybrid work. Some workers have flourished in this new working order; others have struggled.

Some organisations are testing 'taking the pulse' of worker distress through worker surveys and trialling wellbeing apps. These mechanisms monitor wellbeing through repeated surveys and support wellbeing by providing access to digital resources or telehealth (such as chats, virtual coaching). Wellbeing apps can alert employers about worker distress, so they can provide the assistance workers need. In theory, these digital apps can encourage worker wellbeing. However, evidence about their effectiveness is limited and uncertain, with reports of steep drop off in user rates within 3–7 days. In addition, tools must be valid and secure, and protect workers' privacy.

▶ Guidelines for implementing enabling technology

1 **Review your current technology infrastructure to identify where to improve your approach**

Without fit-for-purpose tools, workers will disengage. Review your organisation's current technology infrastructure (hardware and software) to determine its suitability.

Tools workers use must be:

- intuitive
- easy to learn
- easy to use
- able to offer seamless integration between on site and remote locations
- suitable for roles and job tasks
- fit for purpose for your organisation (evidenced via industry uptake).

Consider which tools (Box 3) could optimise your hybrid work arrangement.

Box 3

▶ Technology infrastructure options to support hybrid work

Office workspace management tools

These tools allow for the efficient management, allocation and booking of workplace desks and meeting spaces. AI technology can ensure that teams can continue to benefit from co-location when in the office, even when hotdesking. Further, data gathered on the work patterns of hybrid teams or individuals helps better organise teams when they are on site.

HR content management tools

These tools keep workers connected with employers when remote working. With intuitive interfaces, these platforms offer key HR functionality, such as:

- policies and guidelines
- HR forms and worker documentation
- onboarding processes
- news and upcoming events.

Box 3 continued

▶ Technology infrastructure options to support hybrid work

Remote connectivity tools

Remote connectivity tools (for example, Slack, Microsoft Teams, Webex, Google Workspace) provide secure, private and uninterrupted digital connectivity. Optimal internet speeds for a dispersed workforce provide a positive hybrid work experience for workers and managers.

Communication platforms

- Desktop videoconferencing
- Instant messaging

Suitable for both in-office and off site working, videoconferencing meetings have become more prevalent for workers, no matter where they are located.

Project management tools

These tools enable teams to manage projects, from concept to completion, via a central online hub. Dispersed workers can work in-sync and undertake functions such as planning, delegating, tracking, reviewing, providing feedback and reporting. These tools are becoming a vital fundamental of hybrid work and an essential way of working especially in Agile project delivery.

Online learning tools

Hybrid work has inspired the development of a host of online learning tools. The opportunity to learn across most technical and interpersonal topics is now available. From personal development to compliance or even how to manage hybrid teams, hybrid work is inspiring a broader uptake of online learning.

Collaboration tools

- Interactive whiteboards and digital mind mapping tools
- Document collaboration tools
- Digital asset management tools
- Cloud storage tools

These tools have a role in helping hybrid teams to plan, problem solve and brainstorm.

▶ Guidelines for implementing enabling technology

2 Identify potential security vulnerabilities in your digital environment

Sharing data outside your organisation's intranet increases security risks, so it is important to have an explicit strategy and plan to manage cyber security across all technologies and work locations. Select a high-performing, scalable cloud security product that delivers a technologically robust hybrid work model. Workers must be able to operate at speed, with few—if any—interruptions or frustrations. And as a front-line defence, regularly remind and train workers on the impacts of viruses, malware, hacking and scams (like phishing).

⚑ Examples of activities

- **Streamlined inventory:** Which technology is currently available and who uses it? Examine if people with similar job tasks use different technologies and if this can be streamlined. For example, you can stimulate uptake by sharing best practices.
- **Fit-for-purpose technology:** If needed, replace technology that does not match key criteria or work with the vendor to improve their product. It might seem like a step back or painful investment but it will reduce technology frustration and increase productivity.
- **Training:** Help workers recognise phishing, malware and viruses. Communicate explicitly with workers (existing and new) about what your organisation will never ask them to reveal or do over email, phone, etc. Examples include "We will not ask you to buy last minute gift certificates" and "We will never ask you to share bank details over email".
- **Testing:** Organise worker phishing tests (and similar) to remind workers to remain vigilant. Test your system by working with professional ethical hackers.

3 Help workers master the technology they need

Several elements lead to technology frustration, including having to master the influx of new technology tools. So, allocate resources and budget for support, training and ongoing learning opportunities. This approach fosters engagement from the start and builds necessary digital skills. Importantly, match learning opportunities with workers' needs. Unsuitable or unnecessary training contributes to frustration. So, consider creating alternative learning opportunities by nominating 'super users' or assigning buddies workers can reach out to.

⚑ Examples of activities

- **Learning needs:** Assess workers' technology needs, via development conversations, through surveys or by encouraging workers to contact managers.
- **Training and connection:** Offer formal training where needed, but also think outside the box by appointing internal experts, connecting people to buddies or creating an internal (digital) form where people can post practical 'how to' questions.

▶ Guidelines for implementing enabling technology

4 Ensure software is easily accessible and maintained

Another source of technology frustration is difficulty accessing necessary software and relevent updates. Allowing workers to select software from various options fosters autonomy, eliminates rogue apps or downloads onto organisation hardware and servers, and protects workers from viruses or hacks. Also, automating software rollout and updates saves time and minimises disruptions to productivity.

Technology is harder to manage for organisations with a bring-your-own-device model.

Providing detailed policies about software downloads and virus control on the intranet can help prevent technology breakdowns.

⚐ Examples of activities

- **Self-select platform:** Create a self-service software platform that makes it easy and quick for workers to download and update software available in the organisation.

5 Consider the ethics, privacy and legalities of using technology to monitor worker wellbeing

If your organisation is going to explore the use of technology to track the wellbeing of workers, there are ethical and legal considerations.

As an employer, you must strictly adhere to the *Australian Privacy Principles* under the *Data Privacy Act 1988* to protect workers' confidential and personal information:

1. You must have workers' consent to collect their personal data. They must have full insight about the collection, use, disclosure, quality and security of their personal data being collected.

2. Workers must consent to data about their wellbeing or behaviour being shared with managers.

Ethical behaviour extends beyond transparency about what data is collected, why and who has access. Data (especially about distress or mental health) must not prejudice or negatively impact the worker (for example, affect career advancement, result in stigma, etc.).

6 Review the validity and effectiveness of digital wellbeing apps

The validity and effectiveness of many wellbeing apps has not been established. You might consider engaging an expert on the use of wellbeing apps to help inform your decision.

If you are considering a wellbeing app, critically review whether it was founded on evidence-based principles and if validity and effectiveness testing went beyond user experience and engagement. While user experience and engagement are important, they are not the strongest indicators of validity and effectiveness.

⚐ Examples of activities

- **Charter:** Draft a charter for ethical data behaviour and offer training on how it translates to workplace practices.
- **Reporting:** Create a central point for reporting potential breaches or ethical misconduct. If your organisation already has a privacy officer or chief ethical officer, train them in ethical data behaviour and potential misconduct.
- **Selection:** Use only wellbeing apps that match your organisation's culture. If organisational trust is low, do not select an app that shares information about workers' wellbeing with others. The level of trust required for that app may not be present. A more suitable alternative may be an app that offers anonymous access to quality digital resources.
- **Expertise:** Review the validity and effectiveness of any wellbeing app before implementing it. Make sure you have the right expertise available to conduct this review.

▶ Guidelines for implementing enabling technology

Box 4

▶ Monitoring wellbeing using digital surveys: Pulse or micro surveys?

Conducting regular surveys to test the pulse of your workers and their assimilation to hybrid work helps keep you informed about worker wellbeing and engagement. You gain insight into workers' attitudes towards hybrid work, their views on effectiveness of the model and whether the split of time between on site and remote work is appropriate.

However, to date, there is no consensus on the frequency and length of surveys. Two different approaches exist: pulse surveys and experience sampling (or multiple micro surveys). A combination of both may be the best approach.

Pulse surveys

A pulse survey can take up to 10 minutes and—if designed well using scientifically valid scales—provides in-depth insights on the wellbeing of workers and their perception of job demands and resources.

While these surveys can provide guidance on how you can make work design 'smarter', they are less suited to capturing dynamics of wellbeing and proactively identifying distress. Generally, pulse surveys should be issued at least 60 to 90 days apart to avoid survey fatigue.

Micro surveys

Micro surveys are very short—typically 1–5 questions— and collected every couple of days or even daily. They provide insight into changes in worker mental health and wellbeing across shorter periods. The data can be used proactively to alert workers, their managers and work buddies about their current state and changes, which is valuable in times of mental distress. Their short nature makes it difficult to include work design factors that might contribute or hinder wellbeing, making them less suitable for designing wellbeing strategies and actions.

▶ Further reading

Free

Curtin University Future of Work Institute – Centre for Transformation Work Design

- How to manage virtual teams for success
  https://www.thriveatwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/How-to-Manage-Virtual-Teams-for-Success-A-Guide-for-Managers-2022.pdf
- How to lead flexible work
  https://www.thriveatwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/How-to-Lead-Flexible-Work-A-Guide-to-Successful-Policy-and-Practice-for-Managers-2022.pdf

Limited subscription

Harvard Business Review

- 5 Practices to make your hybrid workplace inclusive
  https://hbr.org/2021/08/5-practices-to-make-your-hybrid-workplace-inclusive

Design meaningful and motivating work

Principle 4

Design meaningful and motivating work

This principle focuses on designing work to optimise workers' experience of hybrid work.
These guidelines draw on the SMART work model developed by the Future of Work Institute at Curtin University.

Table 1: SMART Model for Work Design

S	M	A	R	T
Stimulating	**Mastery**	**Agency**	**Relational**	**Tolerable Demands**
Stimulating jobs rely on a variety of skills, involve different tasks and require workers to 'think outside the box' (i.e. problem solving).	Workers with role clarity clearly understand what is expected of them. This enables them to develop, grow and complete tasks from beginning to end.	Different jobs offer workers different levels of control over how and when they do their work, and freedom to make judgements and decisions by themselves.	It is important for workers to experience support and appreciation as well as a sense of purpose in their role; the feeling that work matters for others or society more broadly.	Jobs place a variety of demands on workers, so it is important that time pressure and emotional demands are manageable, and workers are not confronted with inconsistent requirements and instructions.

Table 2: Areas of the SMART work model that require explicit and intentional focus in a hybrid work environment

In a hybrid work environment, understanding of 'how and why things are done' is more difficult to communicate to workers. The research conducted to develop this guide identified that for each element of job design needed for mentally healthy work, hybrid work presents unique challenges which require an explicit and intentional approach to address. Table 2 summarises these challenges.

As with previous chapters, the remainder of this chapter will provide further detail on each of these challenges in the form of core research insights, recommended guidelines and actions, and further reading.

Element of the SMART model	Challenge
Stimulating	
Work location suitability	Assessing the best location for performing specific job tasks optimises workers' hybrid work experience. Some tasks are better performed on site, others remotely. In general, tasks requiring deep concentration, routine tasks and information exchanges are best performed in quiet environments, which is the remote location for most workers. By contrast, tasks requiring collaboration (that is, problem solving, brainstorming, feedback, etc.) are better suited to the workplace. Striking the right balance is key.
Mastery	
Role clarity	Role clarity can become uncertain under a hybrid work model. When workers are in scattered locations, the expectations of a worker's role, their specific tasks and timelines can be unclear. Working remotely offers fewer opportunities to interact with others and verify role requirements and expectations. This can be the case for both existing and new workers.
Learning and development	The frequency and style of learning has evolved under hybrid work. New digital platforms provide workers with access to personal and professional development opportunities. But there are fewer learnings from social and informal interactions. With less opportunity to interact with managers, workers have fewer options to learn established ways of working.
Agency	
Autonomy	Having some control over when, where and how they do their job is crucial for workers in a mentally healthy hybrid workplace. In general, workers report more autonomy in a hybrid work arrangement. However, there is also a fear of being micro-managed. The level of autonomy workers have to decide their work schedule and location must be in the best interests of the worker, their department, their colleagues and their job responsibilities.
Relational	
Workplace relationships	The relationships people hold at work are important for a healthy functioning workforce. Adjustments may need to be made when transitioning to a healthy hybrid work environment; fewer face-to-face interactions change the nature of relationships. Research showed task based relationships became more prevalent and social relationships need more intentional fostering.
Tolerable demands	
Work–life boundaries	Hybrid work can contribute to a better work–life balance, giving workers more time to exercise and be with family, friends and pets. But it can also upset a healthy balance if individuals find it harder to 'switch off' between home and work activities. The lines can blur when home and work occur in the same location, making managing work–life boundaries more pertinent.

S M A R T

Stimulating

Work location suitability

Since the widespread uptake of hybrid work, workers have reported both benefits and risks when it comes to completing their job tasks. Optimising productivity involves deciding which tasks and interactions should be done remotely and which ones should be done on site.

Stimulating jobs are motivational and engaging because workers can apply their skills and abilities to successfully complete various tasks. Jobs that are not stimulating create risks for workers and organisations. Workers tend to have lower job satisfaction, feelings of demotivation and anxiety. Organisations risk wasting talent and resources, reduced performance and higher attrition.
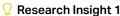
"
The hybrid work conversations have become very polarising. People talk about it as if it's the home versus the office, which completely misses the point. Because that makes it all about place, which is only an enabler. It needs to be about the task at hand and then choosing the optimal work environment to get it done.

Dr Ben Hamer, Adjunct Professor, Edith Cowan University

S M A R T

💡 **Research Insight 1**

Location matters for job tasks.

Where workers conduct their work can be successfully split in a hybrid work model, based on the type of tasks (see Box 5). Tasks best completed remotely are notably different from those best completed on site. In general, workers' ability to work uninterrupted on tasks requiring deep concentration improved under hybrid work, allowing them to deliver work on time. But, workers' ability to collaborate decreased, suggesting working on site is better for some forms of collaborative work.

"

We found tasks that are autonomous in nature or where minimal interaction is required are better suited to a home environment whereas tasks that require greater collaboration, communication touchpoints and frequent interaction— brainstorming, problem solving and planning—are better undertaken in the office.

Anonymous, Senior Executive, Management Consultancy

Box 5

▶ Inspiration for managers: Optimal location for different elements of work and job tasks

The on site workplace as a space for collaboration

- Complex problem solving
- Networking with colleagues, managers and other departments
- In-depth discussions
- Project collaboration
- Providing and receiving immediate feedback on project tasks
- Onboarding new workers

Home or third place as a quiet environment

- Deep concentration work
- Administrative tasks
- Small group meetings
- The transfer of information and other non-time sensitive feedback in documents
- Routine tasks

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◯ Research Insight 2

Organising where to perform tasks can be taxing.

Sometimes, despite the best laid plans, workers find it difficult to regulate where they perform key tasks. Often, workers are confronted with last minute meeting requests, conflicting schedules with colleagues, or unexpected demands from managers. This makes it difficult for them to plan and maintain their ideal work schedule, leaving them feeling frustrated over wasted time.

Further, the more flexibility workers have over when and where they work (that is, the Fully Flexible model), the higher the reported increase in job stressors.

A case example:

A worker commutes to the office to participate in project teamwork, provide feedback on work tasks and collaborate on complex project problems. But when they get to the office, they find their colleagues in dispersed locations, and end up on video calls all day.

◯ Research Insight 3

Office spaces do not always support job task needs.

Workers must feel time in the office is well spent, useful or fulfilling. The office can be stimulating and uplifting, especially when performing collaborative, team-based tasks. But the office can also be distracting. Open-plan facilities are noisy and in stark contrast with the relative quietness workers can experience remotely. Without suitable spaces, workers generally consider the office is not appropriate for complex work.

Feedback from stakeholders and thought leaders suggest not all offices offer the equitable or enhanced worker experience needed to justify the commute.

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for deciding on work location suitability

1 Engage with workers to understand where tasks are best completed

Collaborate with workers to decide the best location to perform specific tasks. Workers want a say in their ideal work location, so include them in the conversation. But, it will be difficult to please everyone, so be prepared to make the final call, starting with evidence-based insights like those presented above. Be open and transparent about why some tasks are better performed in certain locations.

2 Understand and mitigate potential resistance to time on site

From a task perspective, it makes sense to commute to the workplace to perform complex work that needs intensive interaction or visual communication between colleagues. But some workers will resist coming on site for personal, practical or work-related reasons.

While generally some tasks seem to be better performed in certain locations, it can vary for individuals. For example, workers might have family commitments or personal concerns that make a regular commute untenable. Or they may not have a quiet place to work (for example, they may live in a share house or have small children at home).

So, it is important to reflect on the following questions:

- Where does the worker feel most comfortable performing specific tasks?
- Are there personal circumstances that may dictate the best work location?

> "
> COVID-19 has left a lasting impact. There is a still level of anxiety displayed by some when contemplating working from the office. As people managers, we need to recognise this fact and take all measures to reassure that the workplace is a safe place to work.
>
> **Jovita Gartlan, Partner, Flinders Growth Partners**

⚐ Examples of activities

- **Experiment:** Set up experiments where workers work on similar tasks in different environments and exchange experiences on what worked well and what did not.
- **Monitor:** Set up daily micro surveys (see Box 4) on which tasks workers performed that day, capturing the work location and if the worker considered it ideal.
- **Charter**: Record shared understandings in a team charter that all members support. For example, what tasks are best conducted where and why.
- **Mitigation:** In part, mitigate resistance to working on site by:

  - highlighting the efficiencies of doing planning or other complex work in the same location
  - appealing to workers' sense of teamwork and the motivating engagement that comes from working directly with colleagues
  - discussing the 'greater good' of the team's mission when undertaking work together.

- **Job crafting:** Make hybrid work arrangements part of job crafting and job design. If personal circumstances lead to a situation where certain workers best work on site or remotely, consider reviewing job tasks at the team level and redistributing tasks.

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for deciding on work location suitability

3 As flexibility increases, so should the effort devoted to coordinate work locations

Help workers organise their work schedules including where they will perform specific tasks. For example, design formats, procedures and protocols around workload planning and inform managers and workers on work location. This avoids workers showing up to empty offices or missing colleagues they wanted to see.

However, aim not to bureaucratise hybrid work. The level of coordination will differ depending on the hybrid work model. Coordination efforts will be higher when workers' flexibility is higher. For example, in a work model where people are in the office at fixed days, workers will naturally have more overlapping time in the same location.

Examples of activities

- **Support:** Counsel workers on having leeway to occasionally pivot on a day's tasks, if colleagues are not available, or things do not go according to plan.
- **Templates:** Develop a format for planning meetings that includes discussing the type of collaboration and who will perform which tasks when, and where.
- **Reporting:** Design procedures to plan and inform managers and workers about work locations (for example, shared documents indicating location or timeframes for informing colleagues).
- **Continuous improvement:** Review your processes regularly.

4 Adapt your office space to provide an equitable or better work experience

Think about delineating office spaces for different tasks. Rethink your office set-up, so it is more conducive to team collaboration. Create a physical environment that encourages social interaction, teamwork and learning. But also factor in spaces for workers who need to concentrate or participate in video calls.

Examples of activities

- **Visual cues:** For project work, for example, use journey maps on a central wall to show the team their progress as well as the project target.
- **Spaces:**

  - Collaboration spaces: Have a dedicated space for team collaboration. Make it open and inviting, with comfortable furniture and lighting, and offer digitally enabled whiteboards and other tools to encourage group activity. Upload meeting outcomes to knowledge management systems.
  - Quiet spaces: Provide a quiet area for workers who need to conduct deep concentration work in the office.

- **Booking systems:**

  - Room booking: Have adequate meeting rooms available and establish a room booking system for fair and equitable access.
  - Desk booking: Have a desk booking system, so workers can sit together.

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for deciding
on work location suitability

▶ **Further reading**

Free

Curtin University Future of Work Institute – Centre for Transformation Work Design

• How to manage virtual teams for success
  https://www.thriveatwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/How-to-Manage-Virtual-Teams-for-Success-A-Guide-for-Managers-2022.pdf
• How to lead flexible work
  https://www.thriveatwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/How-to-Lead-Flexible-Work-A-Guide-to-Successful-Policy-and-Practice-for-Managers-2022.pdf

Swinburne University of Technology

• Hybrid working 2.0: Humanising the office
  https://www.swinburne.edu.au/research/centres-groups-clinics/centre-for-the-new-workforce/our-research/hybrid-working-australia/

Gartner

• Redesigning work for a hybrid future
  https://www.gartner.com/en/insights/seven-myths-about-hybrid-future-of-work

McKinsey

• Three types of modern flexibility today's workers demand
  https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-organization-blog/three-types-of-modern-flexibility-todays-workers-demand

S M A R T

Mastery

Role clarity

Mastery is important for performance, efficiency and agility of organisations, but also for worker wellbeing. Role clarity is a fundamental aspect of work that enables workers to feel that they are mastering their work and delivering to their potential.

Giving workers clear expectations on their role clarifies:

- your expectations of outcomes
- the timeliness of outcomes
- how outcomes will contribute to broader organisational objectives
- how the worker is expected to achieve outcomes with their colleagues
- available resources including support systems, toolsets and training.

This is important for all workers, and critical for onboarding newcomers as they integrate into your organisation's culture and ways of working.

S M A R T

💡 Research Insight 4

Hybrid work reduces role clarity.

Workers report diminished role clarity under a hybrid work model: they are less clear about what they are supposed to do. And this is happening at all levels of the organisation: roles have become more complex and role conflict (that is, incompatible work demands) has increased.

As flexibility increases, so can uncertainty. People need clarity about what is expected of them.

> First, understand which roles can be managed in different work models: remotely, hybrid or in-office, and tailor your offerings to suit those different models. You need to be flexible, but also to have ground rules that give everyone some structure and certainty around the expectations.

Jacinta Moses, HR Leader, Infosys

💡 Research Insight 5

Managers experience increased pressure in hybrid work.

While all workers report increased job complexity and role conflict under a hybrid work model, this increase was significantly stronger for managers. Meeting the needs of both workers and bosses is impacting managers and their own role clarity.
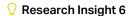
First, managers are stuck in the middle of competing demands. They are under pressure from top management to urge staff to work on site; at the same time, they experience upwards pressure from staff wanting flexibility, autonomy and to work remotely. Workers feel top management is not listening to their needs regarding hybrid work, which can lead the worker to disengaging and doing just enough to get by.

Second, managers must coordinate increasingly complex work (due to frequent change and external disruptions) across a dispersed workforce. Trying to coordinate job responsibilities of a remote team is becoming increasingly complex and fraught.

S M A R T

Research Insight 6

Onboarding newcomers is challenged by hybrid work.

Onboarding newcomers introduces them to job tasks, their colleagues and the organisation's culture. During this phase, new workers develop job-specific skills and learn about the requirements of the role (including hybrid work arrangements), norms and organisational values. Usually, they also acquire organisation-specific 'language' (for example, jargon, systems names).

The cultural and community aspects of onboarding are especially challenging in a hybrid work environment. Newcomers lack visual cues and (informal) social interactions that are often a valuable source for learning more tacit aspects of their role.

"

Ensuring new starters understand how the organisation operates is critical in the first months of onboarding. We have a guideline that recommends new starters spend a higher ratio of time in the office during their first month of employment.

This enables them to understand the organisation's cultural elements while getting to know their colleagues.

Thang Huynh, Managing Partner, 460Degrees

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for establishing role clarity

1 Reassess roles and improve role clarity

Take a step back to reassess the roles in your organisation and the likely changes to these roles in a hybrid work context. Engage your workers in the conversation about job specifications, and how they have changed under hybrid work. Gather this information across your workforce, and look for incompatibilities, duplications and gaps so you can identify the complexities. This information helps you make the best decisions about resource allocations, responsibility changes and any other arrangements affecting individual workers.

⚐ Examples of activities

- **Role analysis:** Review your workers' hybrid work schedule to clearly understand impacts to their role. Then, establish a plan to address current and potential future concerns.
- **Development reviews:** Organise worker development conversations to discuss how hybrid work has changed job roles. By undertaking a self-rated performance process, workers can best understand how their performance is tracking against KPIs. Factoring in feedback from managers establishes an open, constructive and nurturing feedback loop and creates greater role clarity. Keep transparent, ongoing notes and rating of KPIs throughout all discussions. Do not leave these reviews to end-of-year assessments.

2 Review managers' roles

Managers' roles are expanding in this new hybrid context. And they need clear boundaries and guidance around their roles. Understand how managers' roles have expanded and review if their tasks are still compatible and feasible. If needed, equip them with the necessary technical and people skills to successfully fulfill their changed role.

⚐ Examples of activities

- **Manager expectations review**: Gauge what workers need from their managers to function well in a hybrid work environment and how this differs from earlier and current organisational practices.
- **Manager development reviews:** Conduct development conversations with managers to understand their expanded role, challenges and learning needs. Allocate resources accordingly.
- **Training**: Consider offering specialised training for managers of hybrid teams, such as:

  - new technologies, platforms and applications
  - role-specific technical education
  - soft skills including empathy, listening and workforce support
  - communication with and better understanding of workers based in remote locations (that is, not micro-managing)
  - developing hybrid work guidelines at the team level.

S M A R T

► Guidelines for establishing role clarity

3 Inform and intentionally connect new workers

During 2020 and 2021, many organisations organically developed processes and resources (which are often digital) for onboarding newcomers in a hybrid work environment. The time has come to review these processes.

On top of clarifying job requirements and tasks, newcomers also need information about their team's hybrid work model and what it means for them. In addition, research shows newcomers benefit from connections with mentors and peers. These connections must be forged more intentionally in a hybrid work environment, especially with peers. Allocating new workers both a mentor and 'buddy' or peer, and scheduling regular check-ins, is useful.

♟ Examples of activities

- **Peer connection:** Assign a buddy to guide the new worker during the onboarding period. This may help to compensate for the lack of informal learning that usually takes place during onboarding in the workplace.
- **Face-to-face contact:** Organise for the new starter, their manager and colleagues to be on site more regularly during the early stages of the worker's tenure (for example, 2–4 weeks).
- **Guidelines:** Provide clear, documented guidelines on the hybrid work model for the organisation (or team), including recommendations on tasks split by location and communication protocols.

► Further reading

Free

Curtin University Future of Work Institute – Centre for Transformation Work Design

- How to lead flexible work
  https://www.thriveatwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/How-to-Lead-Flexible-Work-A-Guide-to-Successful-Policy-and-Practice-for-Managers-2022.pdf

Limited subscription

Harvard Business Review

- 5 Practices to make your hybrid workplace inclusive
  https://hbr.org/2021/08/5-practices-to-make-your-hybrid-workplace-inclusive

S M A R T

Mastery

Learing and development

 Research Insight 7

Hybrid work requires digital competence.

Successful hybrid work requires many workforces to master new technical skills. Since COVID-19, adapting to working remotely and learning new digital and technical skills has been mandatory. Learning to use new platforms and technologies is now an ongoing requirement for all workers. In fact, there is still a substantive need to master (new) digital skills.

Nurturing skills, knowledge and new competencies keeps workers engaged and improves organisational performance. While most workers reported hybrid work created more opportunities to use a greater number of skills, it also altered what and how workers need to learn. In short, learning and development must be more intentional and purposeful.

 Research Insight 8

Support for (informal) learning must be more explicit and intentional in hybrid work.

It has always been important to have the right conditions to foster learning. A healthy hybrid workplace may call for a rethink of how to support informal learning. Creating a continuous learning environment under a hybrid work model involves shifting interpersonal conditions that foster learning. Under hybrid models, offering encouragement, establishing trust and demonstrating appreciation for workers may be even more important for workers' learning and development. Thus there may be a need for these activities to be more intentional and explicit.

S M A R T

💡 **Research Insight 9**

Hybrid work creates digital learning opportunities but hinders social learning.

Workers are increasingly embracing learning via online and digital channels. On the one hand, these learning opportunities offer a formal (that is, structured with pre-set goals) and typically more technical contribution to the worker's knowledge.

On the other hand, working remotely means workers lose informal social learning opportunities available when on site—those spur-of-the-moment, unofficial learning interactions that can enhance knowledge. For example, hybrid work often involves online meetings, with set agendas and timeframes. Workers have little or no opportunity to have side conversations about the topic at hand or undertake spontaneous problem solving.

While the location itself does not matter for workplace learning, research shows proximity—created by an office or joint workspace—facilitates learning and tacit knowledge transfer. Proximity drives social interactions, where colleagues ask for advice, provide feedback, observe each other, and give or receive coaching.

"

Hybrid work has reduced the amount of informal contact time and apprenticeship learning opportunities with senior leaders across many organisations.

Anonymous, Senior Executive, McKinsey

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for promoting learning and development

1 Assess and, where needed, enhance digital competency

Do not assume you are across your workers' learning needs, or that they have sufficient digital competence after an extended period of remote and hybrid work. Engage with them to understand their training needs and establish a structured personal development plan for them. Continuous training in digital skills counters technology frustration (see Principle 3 – Technology) and facilitates digital learning and smooth adoption of new applications and tools.

⚘ Examples of activities

- **Development conversations:** Discuss workers' required digital skills, their current level of mastery and how the gap can be best closed.
- **Survey workers' skill levels:** Determine which (digital) skills are needed for job roles and then design a survey where workers can self-rate their competence. If possible, use behavioural indicators (that is, ask about behaviours and actions that demonstrate competence) rather than ask them to score a skill on an abstract scale from 'poor' to 'excellent'. Workers can also ask a peer to give them feedback on their skills using the survey questions as a conversation starter.
- **Technology:** Explore new technologies, such as AI, to support skills gap analysis. For large organisations, AI can infer skills from data workers generate while doing their jobs (especially when their jobs are characterised by using various digital systems).

2 Review and test digital tools and online platforms for learning to identify those that match your organisation's development needs

Multiple online learning platforms are available for world-class education, but there are also many unsubstantiated and ineffective tools on the market. Critically review available, widely used platforms and digital tools to assess the quality, effectiveness, user experience, user engagement, and breadth and relevance of topics (Box 6). If needed, engage a learning and development expert to help assess tools and platforms, starting with evidence-based principles. Consult with workers to understand their preferences, past learning experiences and future learning needs.

⚘ Examples of activities

- **Online learning tools:** Critically evaluate tools and programs to make sure they follow basic evidence-based principles for effective learning:

  - alignment between learning goals and activities
  - integration of context into the tool, platform or offered program
  - acknowledgement that learning is a process and not an event (that is, learning is not a one-off action but requires continuous investment)
  - acknowledgement that any program or tool must be implemented in a trajectory (that is, implementation is prepared and post-training support is provided).

- **Workers' experiences:** Use various consultation processes to understand workers' preferences, needs and experiences about learning tools, platforms and programs on offer. Different consultation processes ensure findings are not biased towards the opinions of vocal employees. Consultation can include focus groups, surveys, interviews or formal conversations.

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for promoting learning and development

▶ 10 questions to ask your learning and development provider

1. Is your offering an integrated approach that includes pre- and post-training support?
2. How does the tool or platform facilitate transfer of learning?
3. Which (learning) needs does this offering address?
4. What learning goals does your offering address?
5. How does the offering match those learning goals?
6. How do you (or can we) evaluate learning outcomes?
7. Which workplace factors are considered and how are they accounted for in your tool, platform or program?
8. How does this approach fit our work environment?
9. How do you spark participants' motivation and self-efficacy?
10. How do you encourage continuing engagement with your tool, platform or program?

3 Purposely create opportunities for workers to learn from each other

Create opportunities for your workers to learn informally from colleagues across the organisation. The daily work environment is filled with tacit learning opportunities that largely stem from interactions with colleagues and managers. Encourage workers to seek advice and help from each other, but also consider appointing workers in more formal roles such as mentors, coaches or internal subject matter experts.

⚑ Examples of activities

- **Problem solving:** Institute a daily 30-minute session for workers to participate in unstructured problem solving, hosted by an internal subject matter expert.
- **Blogs:** Encourage (top) management to write regular blogs on problem solving and critical thinking, providing real-world examples.
- **Buddies and networks:** Create a worker buddy or mentor system to increase opportunities for informal learning. Exchanging ideas on ways of working and problem solving stimulates growth and development.
- **Knowledge sharing sessions:** Establish knowledge sharing sessions with specialist groups to share insights on topics from technical skills to communication skills.
- **Drop-in sessions:** Schedule (senior) managers for regular drop-ins, where workers can ask technical and leadership questions.
- **Internal rotations and secondments:** Give workers opportunities to work in other parts of the organisation to help them build their knowledge, skills and internal networks.

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▶ Guidelines for promoting learning and development

4 Intentionally create interpersonal learning conditions

Interpersonal learning thrives on trust, encouragement and appreciation. In a hybrid environment, be aware of how dynamics and interactions differ virtually and face to face, and actively create psychological safety.

Psychological safety refers to an environment where workers feel safe to take interpersonal risks such as sharing incomplete ideas, suggesting out-of-the-box solutions and showing personal vulnerabilities. Building psychological safety in a hybrid work environment requires a heightened awareness of interpersonal dynamics, intentionally including all workers in meetings and other interactions, as well as role modelling interpersonal risk taking.

⚐ Examples of activities

- **Meeting ethic:** Give all parties opportunities to have a voice and weigh in during meetings. Implement turn taking or raising (virtual) hands to ensure workers do not 'talk over' each other and all workers have their ideas heard. This way, you get wide, comprehensive and diverse ideas that can fuel innovation.
- **Sharing:** Encourage workers to share incomplete or new ideas and role model this behaviour. Also, shut down negative and disrespectful reactions, and make it clear that behaviour does not fit the organisational culture.
- **Experts:** Bring in external subject matter experts to provide another perspective on their journey, learnings and ways of working.
- **Scheduling:** Align calendars and schedule important meetings when all relevant workers are on site to reap the greatest possible advantage of in-person meetings.

S **M** A R T

▶ Guidelines for promoting
learning and development

▶ **Further reading**

Free

Globesmart

- Creating psychological safety in the hybrid workplace
  https://www.globesmart.com/blog/creating-psychological-safety-in-the-hybrid-workplace/

Limited subscription

Harvard Business Review

- Make learning part of your daily routine
  https://hbr.org/2021/11/make-learning-a-part-of-your-daily-routine
- What psychological safety looks like in a hybrid workplace
  https://hbr.org/2021/04/what-psychological-safety-looks-like-in-a-hybrid-workplace

MIT Sloan Management Review

- The practices that set learning organisations apart
  https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-practices-that-set-learning-organizations-apart/

S M A R T

Agency

Autonomy

Having some control over and allowing workers to organise when, where and how they do their job is crucial for a mentally healthy workplace. It also lets workers determine the most effective way for them to work. Autonomy helps workers organise work schedules so they can accomplish their tasks and manage work–life responsibilities.

Autonomy sits under the 'Agency' theme of the SMART model. Enabling agency leads to better mental health among workers but also fosters engagement, skills development, productivity and improved safety outcomes.

"

Drawing on lessons learnt over the past few years of the pandemic and our already progressive approach championing flexible work and choice, we have continued to transform the way we work. For us, work is something we do, not somewhere we go.

We empower our people to make decisions on where they work, based on what they are doing and where it is best to get that work done.

Karen Oldaker, Senior Executive Wellbeing and Community, Medibank

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💡 **Research Insight 10**

Hybrid work fosters autonomy.

Job autonomy or perceived control over job-related activities is considered a significant benefit of hybrid work. Workers in hybrid work arrangements report greater control over how they do their job.

However, organisations also have collective outcomes to achieve, which must be balanced against workers' independence on when, how and where they complete tasks.

💡 **Research Insight 11**

Hybrid work can induce micro-management.

Some workers genuinely fear being micro-managed in hybrid work arrangements. And it is a reality for some, with surveillance measures and reports of worker activity being provided to managers.

Because workers are not as 'visible' to managers, hybrid work fuels concerns about micro-managing tactics such as excessive contact and reporting from workers. It is important to contemplate what drives micro-management inclinations, whether managers' concerns are valid, and what more productive and healthy leadership approaches may look like.

"
Providing autonomy to workers and trusting them to do their role to the best of their abilities is our mantra. We do not monitor or evaluate the number of hours worked, rather the outcomes that people produce.

Thang Huynh, Managing Partner, 460Degrees

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for fostering autonomy

1 Co-create what autonomy looks like in practice

Acknowledge and communicate from the outset that it will likely be difficult to develop a work arrangement that is favoured by all. On the one hand, some workers may have additional reasons to work remotely, such as carer duties, child care, or they work more productive remotely. On the other hand, some workers may be more inclined to work on site. These workers may lack an appropriate home office or a domestic situation conducive to working from home. Be prepared to negotiate so you can arrive at the best outcome, and remember equity and fairness across the organisation is pivotal.

A joint outcome requires both:

- consulting workers on their individual preferences and needs
- clearly communicating and explaining organisational drivers and needs.

While managers play a vital role in consulting with workers, they should not bear all the burden. Provide guardrails (for example, by establishing a hybrid work model) and clear expectations on collective outcomes, and actively support these additional management responsibilities.

⚑ Examples of activities

- **Expectation management:** Inform managers on expectations about collective outcomes and how they are achievable in a hybrid work environment (preferably based on data-driven insights on recent ways of working and outcomes).
- **Consultation:** Encourage and support managers to discuss work schedules and tasks with their teams. They must balance the needs of the organisation, the team and individuals. Support managers and be prepared to make a 'captain's call' if necessary.

2 Support managers to step back and reduce micro-management behaviours when needed

It is important for both managers and workers that managers do not micro-manage. The reasons for micro-managing may include the manager struggling to run a dispersed team, induced by a lack of clarity from the organisation and combined with upward and downward pressures. The output and merit of work are more important for organisational outcomes than attendance schedules. Help managers focus on achieving work outcomes and supporting workers to do their best work, rather than insisting on a specific work process (Box 7).

To support changes in behaviours, balance formal training with informal learning opportunities. Training can provide managers with insights into the basic principles of supporting autonomy, while social learning opportunities help them apply those insights.
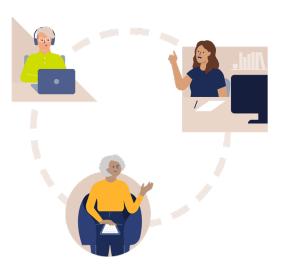
⚑ Examples of activities

- **Structure:** Design principles that guide workers' decisions and help them navigate their freedom. Rather than formulating generic ideas, describe behaviours that align with organisational values and goals.
- **Trust issues:** Have open discussions with managers about trust in their teams, and if there is mistrust, investigate why. Do not automatically assume their mistrust is valid or invalid but examine together the urge to micro-manage and how to address trust issues.
- **Examples:** Give managers concrete examples of what a work focus versus a time focus looks like for their team. Illustrate how they can focus on work rather than time and how they can check in with workers rather than check up.

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▶ Guidelines for fostering autonomy

- **Development conversations:** Organise a personal development conversation or 360° feedback session focusing on management behaviours in hybrid work. Identify if managers have changed their behaviour and if hybrid work has caused them to focus excessively on monitoring worker time instead of outputs and reporting.
- **Training:** Organise formal, instructor led training on supporting autonomy. It can entail strategies on moving away from a blame culture to a solution-focused approach, distilling key learning from organisational change, and engaging with workers to become unstuck.
- **Connection:** Establish peer groups or buddy pairs. Connect managers so they can exchange experiences, best practices and act as sounding boards for each other.

Box 7

▶Inspiration for managers: avoiding the micro-management trap

- Make sure workers have all the information they need to best understand how their role and their output contributes to broader organisation goals.
- Provide feedback to the team about why their work helps contribute to organisation goals.
- Ensure workers have all the resources they need to do their job successfully.
- Focus on workers' output, rather than time management.
- Demonstrate to the teams that you and the organisation trust them to do their jobs. Let them decide where, when and how to complete the work, within reasonable timeframes.
- If something fails with team output, focus on what you, as a team, have learnt. Do not assign blame to anyone. And encourage the team to identify how they would improve and do things differently next time.
- Praise the team and individuals when they succeed or show positive behaviours. Motivate the team, encourage these behaviours, and recognise them at a personal and team level.
- Ask workers for honest feedback without judgement about whether they feel micro-managed (perhaps via an anonymous survey if necessary).

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▶ Guidelines for fostering autonomy

▶ Further reading

Free

Curtin University Future of Work Institute – Centre for Transformation Work Design

- How to manage virtual teams for success
  https://www.thriveatwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/How-to-Manage-Virtual-Teams-for-Success-A-Guide-for-Managers-2022.pdf

Gartner

- Micromanaging your remote workers? Own it, then fix it.
  https://www.gartner.com/en/articles/micromanaging-your-remote-workers-own-it-then-fix-it

Limited subscription

Harvard Business Review

- Structure that's not stifling
  https://hbr.org/2018/05/structure-thats-not-stifling

S M A R T

Relational

Workplace relationships

The relationships people hold at work are important for a healthy and productive workforce. Workplace relationships are vital conduits for a large variety of resources which are both instrumental (that is, information, advice) as well as affective (that is, social support, encouragement, energy).

The 'Relational' theme of the SMART model emphasises the importance of social support and appreciation from managers and co-workers. Healthy workplace relationships are associated with lower levels of job stress and higher levels of job satisfaction, organisational commitment and wellbeing.

♡ **Research Insight 13**

Instrumental relationships dominate social relationships in hybrid work.

There are typically 2 broad categories of workplace relationships:

- Social relationships: the relationships a worker establishes in the workplace that do not always involve technical aspects of their job
- Instrumental relationships: the relationships a worker establishes with colleagues that are specific to the requirements of their job.

Hybrid work emphasises instrumental relationships, to the detriment of social ones. Positive social relationships at work are a very important ingredient for mentally healthy work. The relationships that focus on roles or tasks are now more prominent and more keenly upheld. In addition, hybrid work can lead to work groups becoming more siloed.

S M A R T

Research Insight 14

Hybrid work reduces workers' exposure to both positive and negative interpersonal interactions.

Hybrid work has created a different relationship dynamic compared with traditional models of working. On the upside, hybrid work isolates workers from negative working relationships, and reduces exposure to poor behaviours like gossiping, offensive behaviour and aggressive acts. On the downside, hybrid work can create a sense of isolation for workers. Being socially insulated from peers and managers can leave workers feeling lonely and alone. Social connectivity is vastly reduced. Also, workers can still feel lonely even at the workplace, for example, if their colleagues work remotely that day.

"
There is an emergence of research into loneliness, and more recently the impact of loneliness in the workplace. What we saw during the peak of COVID-19 was an exacerbation of what was already becoming a significant, but misunderstood health issue in Australia and in fact globally. Loneliness is not the same as social isolation, but rather a lack of meaningful relationships

Karen Oldaker, Senior Executive Wellbeing and Community, Medibank

Research Insight 15

Hybrid work increases the distance between managers and workers.

Hybrid work has shifted the crucial relationship between workers and their manager. And there are changes on both sides of the relationship. First, the worker can perceive a greater distance, less feedback and less support from their manager in decision making. Second, with less visibility, some managers struggle trusting workers and may attempt to micro-manage (see Autonomy).

Managers can also feel uncertain about how to support the health, safety and wellbeing of direct reports under a hybrid work model. Their typical leadership style may be challenged. For example, when on site, a manager may display a supportive style, where they are visible and accessible to their staff. This can be difficult for managers to achieve when workers are off site.

In addition, a lack of visual cues about workers' health, safety and wellbeing can undermine the manager's ability to recognise potential issues and offer support.

S M A R T

Proximity bias is a real risk and potential gender issue in hybrid work.

If managers work predominantly on site or their team works on site, they can show bias to workers in close proximity; 'out of sight, out of mind' prejudice leans in favour of workers in the workplace. Whether conscious or unconscious, it is a perceived behaviour that workers in close physical proximity to managers are afforded greater inclusion (at meetings and in discussions), influence and opportunities for career advancement than remote counterparts. And this is concerning to workers.

In addition, research suggests proximity bias may be a gender issue. The survey informing this guide showed that men are more represented in hybrid work models that emphasise working on site (that is, Office Only, Office First).

It seems women tend to embrace flexible working opportunities more than men. In addition, when comparing survey responses from men and women, women reported more negative impacts of hybrid work on visibility, recognition and manager support.

A case example:

A worker who chooses to work remotely more frequently than their colleagues is not aware of spontaneous or last-minute collaboration opportunities with peers and managers— simply because they are not in the office. With less involvement in team activity, they may get overlooked for promotions or other opportunities.

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for nurturing workplace relationships

1 Create opportunities for people to build social relationships with colleagues

Organise and stimulate informal gatherings and celebratory moments within and across teams. Discuss with workers which activities and timing fits the culture and worker preferences, to ensure your well-intended efforts are genuinely enjoyed and appreciated. Once you get the conversation started, commit to the agreed actions and resource them appropriately. Coordinating social events requires time and effort; so it is important to formally recognise this in role descriptions of those taking on these additional tasks.

⚐ Examples of activities

- **Share experiences:** Set up rituals for sharing achievements and setbacks, such as a dedicated virtual channel where members can ring a digital bell or give each other digital pats on the back.
- **Lunch breaks:** Organise regular team lunches when on site together.
- **Social events:** Organise appropriately resourced out-of-hours social events. And recognise the work and costs involved in organising these events.
- **Celebrations:** Celebrate birthdays, cultural festivies and milestones.

2 Be aware of potential isolation and loneliness

As an organisation, support managers in recognising signs of worker isolation and loneliness. Do not assume that merely bringing workers back on site solves all issues. Workers might come on site and still have no colleagues to connect with because they or their colleagues might not be present or rushing between (online) meetings.

⚐ Examples of activities

- **Rituals and habits:** Create consistent connections through rituals and habits that allow the space for appreciation and energising interactions. For example, rather than asking the standard 'how are you' or 'how was your day', start meetings with the questions such as 'what made you laugh today' or 'what gave you a feeling of purpose this week'.
- **Time to recharge:** Enable time for recharging and connecting during the workday. When workers are in back-to-back meetings and struggling to meet deadlines, they do not have time or mental space to take a break. No time to recharge means no time for coffee breaks and friendly chats (face-to-face or via the phone).
- **A 'paying it forward' culture:** Make it easier to ask for support by fostering reciprocity and 'paying it forward'. Encourage workers to share stories about how other colleagues have helped them and to actively offer their support.

S M A R T

► Guidelines for nurturing workplace relationships

3 Train managers in human-centred leadership behaviours

A more human-centred approach to people management is key for thriving relationships in a hybrid work setting. Empathy, listening and demonstrating trust are more important when workers are based remotely. Without the visual cues of the office, communication can be compromised. Managers may need upskilling and training in soft skills, including:

- emotional intelligence
- empathy training
- listening skills
- facilitating virtual meetings and engaging participants
- encouraging workers to talk to create a deeper relationships
- recognising signs of declining mental health and when to refer a worker to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or other professional support (for example, see Box 8).

Box 8

► Inspiration for managers: How to spot distress in workers

Keep your eye on workers and be aware of signs of distress, such as:

- disengagement from their role
- changes to their appearance
- changes to their attitude
- sudden or unexpected changes in emotions
- atypical reactions to certain situations
- changes to their body language (such as slumped shoulders or repeatedly turning off the camera during video meetings, if that is out of character).

Upon recognising any of these signs, talk to the worker about their state of mind, to understand why they feel unwell or distressed. Reassure workers of the availability of EAP services without judgement if they show signs of mental ill-health or stress.

"

Invest in your people managers and help them connect with their workers in meaningful ways. Regardless of the working model, managers remain the most important link with workers.

This means giving managers training, advice, coaching, platforms—whatever they need to maintain work and human interactions with their team members. And not just work-related, but maintaining the personal touch and those random, informal water cooler conversations that give workers a safe space to share their thoughts and feelings.

You also need to have structures in place like Mental Health First Aiders and Worker Counselling services so that managers have somewhere to go if they sense that a worker needs some extra support

Jacinta Moses, HR Leader, Infosys

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for nurturing workplace relationships

4 Create awareness and provide guidelines on how to tackle proximity bias

Often biases sneak into the workplace in unconscious ways and with unintended consequences. Managers can address proximity bias in several ways:

1. Make workers aware of what proximity bias is and how it may look or be experienced.
2. Proactively train managers to recognise proximity bias and make decisions based on objective criteria.
3. Ask workers if they perceive proximity bias themselves or observe it happening to colleagues. If needed, enable workers to provide their feedback anonymously or discuss it with a trusted advisor who can safeguard their anonymity if they fear reprisals.
4. Ensure procedures are fair and clear, so they do not enhance proximity bias.
5. If proximity bias is reported, act on it. It is important to right a wrong and ensure it does not happen again. At the same time, be mindful—given the often-unconscious nature of biases—that penalising the manager may not be constructive or productive.

⚖ Examples of activities

- **Awareness:** Use storytelling to illustrate how proximity bias can sneak into the work environment.
- **Performance management:** Review formal and informal performance management and promotion processes to minimise the potential impact of proximity bias.
- **Presence of proximity bias:** Collect information on perceived proximity bias in annual worker engagement surveys.
- **Best practices:** Share internal best practices on countering proximity bias.
- **Consistent communication:** Keep your communication and contact schedule frequent and consistent across all workers and use different channels to ensure all employees receive all information.
- **Process for making opportunities available:** When an opportunity arises (for a promotion, a secondment, to attend a conference), ensure there is a clear and transparent process for workers to express their interest and be considered for the opportunity.

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for nurturing workplace relationships

▶ **Further reading**

Free

TLNT: Talent management and HR

- Fight the proximity bias urge with consistency of experience
  https://www.tlnt.com/fight-the-proximity-bias-urge-with-consistency-of-experience/

TechSmith

- Proximity bias and hybrid work: What you need to know
  https://www.techsmith.com/blog/proximity-bias/

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MIT Sloan Management Review

- The loneliness of the hybrid worker
  https://sloanreview-mit-edu.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-loneliness-of-the-hybrid-worker/amp

Harvard Business Review

- Practices to make your hybrid workplace inclusive
  https://hbr.org/2021/08/5-practices-to-make-your-hybrid-workplace-inclusive
- How leaders can build connection in a disconnected workplace
  https://hbr.org/2022/01/how-leaders-can-build-connection-in-a-disconnected-workplace

S M A R T

Tolerable demands

Work-life boundaries

Work–life boundaries are critical for separating work life and personal life. It helps to avoid issues such as job burnout, disengagement and resentment towards the organisation. Workers must be able to psychologically detach and recover from work. It helps workers do their best work, it keeps them engaged, and it delivers the best results for the organisation.

Work–life boundaries are one aspect of the 'Tolerable' demands theme from the SMART model. All work entails demands—effort is invested to achieve goals. However, demands become problematic—or intolerable—when they exceed the worker's capacity to meet them. Negative consequences include burnout, physical illness, turnover and higher accident rates.

♀ **Research Insight 17**

Hybrid work blurs work–life boundaries.
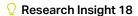
There are both opportunities and shortcomings of working in a hybrid model, especially when the hybrid work involves a split between a worker's home and an on site location.

The widespread uptake of hybrid work across Australia has resulted in the ever-present usage of digital technologies. The 'always on' risk for hybrid workers is very real. Working and living in the same environment means workers can check emails, receive notifications and undertake work outside traditional work hours. The boundaries between work and home life have become more unclear with many workers reporting they increasingly respond to communication, no matter the time of day or day of the week. As such, work interferes with home life.

However, boundaries are also blurred in the opposite direction; home life interferes with work. When on site, workers typically experience few family or personal interruptions. But when they work at home, these interruptions can be more frequent, and impact the efficient flow of their workday. As a result, job tasks get completed during personal time.

S M A R T

Research Insight 18

Hybrid work changes work–family dynamics.

The work–family dynamic is greatly impacted by hybrid work, although the effects vary for different workers. Some workers have additional freedom and regain lost time from commuting—time that can be spent with loved ones, pets, etc. It also means workers can undertake caring-giving responsibilities (such as caring for children or ageing parents). Conversely, increasingly excessive work hours have impacted family time and carer responsibilities.

At the same time, employers question the impact of hybrid work on productivity and performance, with home interfering in work. In other words, hybrid work can both negatively or positively affect the work–family dynamic. These altered dynamics must be managed to benefit both work and family.

"

We set boundaries that actively encourage workers to disconnect during non-work times so that they can recharge and refresh and devote their whole selves to the non-work facets of their lives that enrich and sustain them as people

Jacinta Moses, HR Leader, Infosys

Research Insight 19

Hybrid work increases both job demands and resources.

Hybrid work both positively and negatively affects mental health. On the one hand, workers regain lost time from commuting and flexibility during the day, increasing opportunities to exercise, relax and reflect. These opportunities are a major source of comfort and incentive for workers, and more importantly, let workers replenish mental and physical resources.

On the other hand, job demands can swell under a hybrid work model. The workload and pace of work (for example, 'busyness' due to back-to-back online meetings) can increase. Time regained from commuting, or moving between meetings, is often being replaced with additional responsibilities and job tasks. This increase may also reflect inefficiencies created by hybrid work (for example, the need for greater coordination, information latency). Generally, workers indicated hybrid work made their job more complex.

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for supporting work–life boundaries

1 Establish policies and norms that guide workers in managing work–life boundaries

As an organisation, setting work–life boundary principles guide workers to stop working when the workday is done. By not intervening when you note 'always on' behaviours, you can inadvertently and passively endorse and encourage the practice.

Set policies and norms in consultation with workers so you can establish clear expectations and balance organisational needs and workers' work–life values. This approach also supports managers in setting work expectations for teams. Workers look to managers to guide to the team's appropriate working rhythm. They will follow your lead to fit into the organisational culture. Seeing you as a manager who is 'always on' carries through to their behaviours.

"

Managers need to be the role model for their teams around healthy work–life balance choices. Things like logging off at a reasonable time, avoiding after hours emails and the other ground rules. When managers model those behaviours, it builds those into the team culture.

Jacinta Moses, HR Leader, Infosys

🪧 Examples of activities

- **Norms:** Establish organisational norms about using communication technology outside standard working hours. Make those norms concrete by describing the behaviours that reflect those norms.
- **Policy:** Establish a policy about when, where and how meetings occur, for example:

  - meetings occur between a specific timeframe (such as 10:00am and 4:00pm) with an allocated time for lunch every day
  - face-to-face meetings are held on a specific day of the week only, to help workers plan their location
  - meetings finish 5 minutes before the hour (or even half-hour) so workers can gather their thoughts for the next meeting.

- **Role modelling:** Lead by example. Encourage workers to balance their work and personal lives, by decoupling from work yourself through hobbies and activities outside work (like sport, music, photography, writing, creativity, education) and sharing your experiences (Box 9).
- **Manager training:** Managers may inadvertently expect or unconsciously signal their team to be 'always on'. Provide support materials to managers so they regularly stop and consider their expectations of workers, and which signals they given them:

  - introspection techniques (for example, self-monitoring, mindfulness)
  - objective analysis of workers' optimal work–life balance
  - recognising organisational attitudes that induce blurred boundaries.

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▶ Guidelines for supporting work–life boundaries

Box 9
▶ Inspiration for managers: Lead by example

- Share non-work experiences to demonstrate how you install boundaries between work and life.
- Use the 'send later' email option if you work outside standard work hours.
- Add a tag line to your email signature stating you do not expect others to respond outside their work hours.
- Take annual leave and schedule an out-of-office message when you are on leave. Also, respect your own out-of-office message and do not respond to emails when on leave. If you do respond, be aware this undermines your own behaviour. It sends a signal to your correspondents that you will actually respond to emails despite having stated otherwise.

2 Evaluate the support services in place to support work family dynamics

Work–family dynamics have many different shapes and forms. For some, children are at the forefront; for others it is their parents, partners or close friends. For the range of work–family dynamics, consider what supports and facilities may be appropriate and available. Ensure equity in terms of the supports and facilities that are offered across workers' circumstances.

Balancing family and work responsibilities is not unique to hybrid work, but some support services might not be as effective as they used to be. So, you may need to critically evaluate which support makes a difference.

Examples of activities

- **Support services usage:** Collect data on which direct support services (for example, some organisations offer direct service supports such as access to child care, dry-cleaning subsidies, meal vouchers) are still used and if their uptake has increased or decreased.
- **Worker consultation:** Consult workers about what type of support would be most effective for them and encourage them to think beyond the support services that were typically offered when workers were mainly on site.
- **Leave policies:** Regardless of increased flexibility hybrid work brings, flexible time does not equate to more personal time. As such, leave policies (that is, part-time employment, job sharing, flexible leave policies, parental leave and carers leave) remain important.

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for supporting work–life boundaries

3 Ensure workers have a reasonable workload and work pace

In a hybrid work environment, it has become more challenging for managers to gauge the pressures workers experience. For example, when working in the same location, managers have more opportunities to observe emotional and physical responses to excessive job demands. As such, in a hybrid environment, it is increasingly important to check in with workers to see if their workload and work pace is reasonable and manageable (Box 10). Have an honest conversation about work demands and the ability to manage time. If required, reduce work demands and/or better support workers to manage their time (Box 11).

Examples of activities

- **Work–life blurring:** Have regular informal face-to-face catch-up meetings to check in with workers. Look for cues of blurred work–life boundaries and discuss them with workers. Examples include:

  – emails sent across a wide range of hours
  – reports of completing work over the weekend
  – excessive disruptions from the home environment into work
  – difficulties contacting people during work hours
  – work taking longer than usual without reason.

- **Data:** Examine if the expected and realised KPIs have gone up or down. If possible, compare this with data from other teams, departments or competitors to see if the changes in KPIs are reasonable

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Box 10

▶ Inspiration for managers: Checking in on your workers

In a less formal setting, check on workers about:

- their overall wellbeing: are they okay?
- the execution of their role: do they need assistance or guidance with their role, or specific tasks?
- barriers: are they experiencing any blockers or barriers to conducting their job?
- workload: are they successfully delegating or sharing workload with colleagues?
- hybrid rhythm: are they comfortable with the split of time between on site and remote work?
- support: do they feel they are getting enough support from management and colleagues?

Box 11

▶ Inspiration for managers: Helping workers manage their time

- Suggest the worker block out dedicated 'thinking time' in their diary, every week.
- Suggest workers block out time in their diary for business-as-usual activities, such as writing and responding to emails, to ensure job tasks are not done in personal time.
- Create set rituals to signal the start of their workday (for example, making a coffee) and the end of their workday (for example, shutting down their laptop).
- Change into work clothes at the start of the workday, and into other clothes at the end of the workday.
- Suggest going for a walk or doing exercise at the end of the workday, to signal work is over until tomorrow.

S M A R T

▶ Guidelines for supporting work–life boundaries

▶ Further reading

Free

Safe Work Australia How to manage virtual teams for success

- Working from home – Managing risks
  https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/managing-health-and-safety/working-home/managing-risks
- Psychosocial hazards
  https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/managing-health-and-safety/mental-health/psychosocial-hazards
- Resources on workplace mental health
  https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/managing-health-and-safety/mental-health/resources
- Psychosocial hazards contributing to work-related stress
  https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/psychosocial-hazards-contributing-work-related-stress

Inc.

- 3 Ways leaders can reduce burnout and improve retention for their hybrid workers
  https://www.inc.com/marcel-schwantes/3-ways-leaders-can-reduce-burnout-improve-retention-for-their-hybrid-workers.html

Glossary

Our approach to language adheres to the conventions outlined in the <u>Life in Mind National Communications Charter</u>, where applicable.

Terms	Description
Hybrid work	A combination of working on site usually at an office location on certain days and remotely (that is, home or a third place) on other days within a given time period, normally a week.
Job crafting	The process through which a worker shapes the way they do their work, in a way that makes their job more engaging and meaningful.
Knowledge worker	A worker whose job involves developing and using knowledge rather than producing goods or services.
Leadership	The act of leading or championing change in an organisation. In this sense, anyone can be a leader when they champion efforts to create mentally healthy workplaces.
Manager	The person in the organisation responsible for managing a group of workers. The manager is also known as team lead, direct supervisor, line manager or middle manager.
Mental health	A positive concept and more than just the absence of illness. In this guide, it refers to a state of wellbeing where a person can realise their own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully and contribute to their community.
Mental ill-health	A term that encompasses both mental illness and changes in emotion or behaviour that can impact a person's cognitive, emotional or social abilities but not to the extent that it meets the criteria for a mental illness diagnosis. These changes can result from life stressors and often resolve with time or when the individual's situation changes. They may develop into a mental illness if they persist or increase in severity.
Mental illness	A disorder diagnosed by a health professional that significantly interferes with a person's cognitive, emotional and/or social abilities. Mental illness can vary in both severity and duration. Mental illness refers to a wide spectrum of diagnosable conditions that affect how a person feels, thinks, behaves and interacts with other people.

Designing Mentally Healthy Hybrid Work

Glossary

Terms	Description
Mentally healthy workplace	In line with the *Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces*, this guide uses the term mentally healthy workplace to broadly describe workplace experiences that protect, respond to and promote mental health.
Psychosocial hazard	Hazards that arise from aspects of work such as the design or management of work, the work environment, equipment or behaviours and interactions in the workplace that may cause psychological distress or harm.
Remote work	Work performed at a location other than the workplace (typically an office or work site) provided by the employers. This can entail working from home or a third place (that is, café, holiday home, co-working space).
Top management	An organisation's senior leadership team, usually consisting of a CEO or managing director, other executives or department heads, and the board of directors.
Wellbeing	A combination of feeling good and functioning well that has both physical and psychological aspects; the experience of positive emotions such as happiness and contentment as well as the development of one's potential and having a sense of purpose.
Work design	The process through which an organisation optimises work health and safety, human performance, job satisfaction and business success. See Safe Work Australia's *Principles of Good Work Design*.

Further recommended reading

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