

Organisations will also need to find their own specific formula on flexible working

COVID-19 has triggered a change in the way work is viewed around the globe. It has given both employees and employers the impetus to experience “flexible working” on a scale never seen before. This experience has occurred in almost all employees and in all industries, including those for whom remote and flexible work were previously rare or non-existent.

Going forward, companies across the globe have released statements committing that a substantial percentage of their employee population will continue to work from anywhere (home) even post the pandemic period. This percentage has varied from 30% to 50% and the trend has transcended geographies, nature of business and industry.

What are the possible challenges?

The challenge is different for different stakeholders. From an organisation’s perspective, increased flexible working has had a largely positive impact. Willis Towers Watson’s Flexible Work and Rewards Survey found that 48% of organisations reported that they had observed higher productivity. However, it has come with wellbeing and engagement related challenges, particularly at the Manager and Employee level.

From a Manager perspective, leading people and businesses remotely has been a challenge as many are not trained or experienced to adjust to the virtual work environment.

So what can organisations do to address this challenge?

1. Recognise and acknowledge the paradigm shift – this could be permanent, if not long term

- a. It is no longer an “if” question, but more of a “when” question from an implementation and

communication perspective and therefore the focus of planning needs to shift from “Restoring stability” to “Realigning for the future”.

- b. Organisations will need to find their own specific formula on flexible working. No one solution will work for all. The process to identify headline flexible work percentage will need to be validated with a bottom up understanding based on suitability and readiness, with consideration to the type and nature of the work, operational requirements, job level and role. While all roles may flex to a degree, there will likely be variation in how, when and where work is done due to the requirements of the roles.
- ## 2. Reset the leadership mind-set, expectations and involvement
- a. Resilience, Agility and Empathy have emerged as key leadership differentiating competencies. For many, this will require awareness, training and ongoing support to develop or hone these competencies. This presents a need for organisations and their HR teams to reconsider their capability and learning programmes.
 - b. Leadership has become more distributed with lesser direct oversight. The mindset required to lead in this environment is often not the same as pre-pandemic. What will work better in the future is to set clear performance outcomes and be flexible with team members on the process to achieve those outcomes. This is a difficult objective to achieve and will require time.
 - c. Move to a cadence of more regular and possibly shorter check-ins. This will potentially support more real-time understanding and responsiveness to changes in business and people priorities.

- d. Set clear boundaries between work time and non-work time. Lead by example and create the culture.
- e. Ensure an inclusive environment. Involving and respecting differences and needs across the team. This can include remote team meetings where it is important to ensure time and space for all opinions to be heard.

3. Revitalise people policies to boost employee wellbeing

- a. Technology infrastructure is key to make flexible working successful. Ensure that best in class tools are available to employees to work and collaborate and for managing performance.
- b. Set clear guidelines on core hours that employees are expected to work and how much flexibility they have.
- c. Clarify policy on leave, travel and allowances to align with new way of working.
- d. Mitigate risk for employees (e.g. health risk) and organisation (e.g. cyber risk) with suitable risk assessment and insurance cover.
- e. Define the ideal work infrastructure at home and support employees in setting up new or assessing existing physical workspaces to support safe and productive work practices.

4. Reimagine employee engagement

- a. Redefine the role that the organisations want the physical office to play. For example, the office will likely play a key role in bringing people together at key moments, to collaborate and innovate, for on-boarding of new joiners, celebrations of key milestones, and potentially key meetings (e.g. strategy and business planning) etc.
- b. Prioritise social and human connection. Consider ways to keep people connected, when working remotely. This can include conducting regular one-to-one check-ins and organising “social events” across geographies and locations.

- c. Provide avenues to listen and communicate more. This can include regular two-way communication amongst employees and leaders.

- 5. **Repeat and respond** – Getting flexible working right will be an iterative process. The sooner you begin, repeat desired behaviour and communication and effectively respond to course correction requirements, the faster you will be able to revolutionise remote working.

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