

by Mike Thackray

# The Unintended Consequences of Hybrid Working

'Hybrid' – the long-awaited sequel to 'Remote'... Many of us are anticipating a number of pros and cons to this set-up, but this modus-operandi might also have some unintended consequences we should be mindful of in the drive to enable a balance of office and home-working.



## The Predicted Pros

Many people have reported upsides to the greater freedom and possibilities that remote working has afforded us, and the shift to hybrid working will be no different. Meetings have tended to become more efficient and more focused. We are now all sat 'next' to each other in effect, and the importance of physical presence and size have been reduced as Zoom does its best to make us all equal in the eyes of the webcam. The absence of a daily commute has saved millions time and money, not to mention the associated positive environmental impact of lower emissions, which anecdotally appears to be a large driver for the continuation of remote working. Working patterns have adapted to fit the needs of families, albeit in strange and unfamiliar circumstances. New parents have been spared the difficult decision of whether to take more leave or go back to work, and the advantages to the new family unit of having both parents on-hand in the early months of parenthood could have real positive benefits for all.

The main benefits can therefore be summed up by arguing that greater choice of *where* and *how* we work, will make lives easier and lead to happier and more productive people.

## The Cons

On the other hand, in the rush to embrace hybrid working we are potentially heading towards ways of working that few organisations truly experienced 'at scale' pre-pandemic. I believe that this means we're likely to see a number of challenges which can be grouped into three categories: reduced business benefits, amplified divisions and psycho-social impact.

### 1. Reduced business benefits

The first challenge is largely the result of 'remote' rather than hybrid working, but will remain for those of us who are able to, and *choose* to conduct the majority of our business from home.

The reality is that despite our best attempts, there are simply fewer unplanned interactions than there used to be - with almost all of our contact with colleagues now planned via the tech of choice. The last time I checked it was impossible to accidentally bump into someone on Zoom the way we once might have done in a corridor or over a coffee – so all the spontaneous encounters have largely been eliminated.

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Whilst this has undoubted upsides for the less socially inclined of us, it inevitably has an impact on the types of conversations we have, and the views we are exposed to. Meetings didn't always start and end formally in the old world, and there is now greater emphasis on the meeting itself, at the expense of the wash-up or informal chats where further progress could be made, ideas sparked or loose ends addressed after a period of reflection. When meetings finish and we feel inclined to ~~mean~~ offload about what we've just experienced, we are limited to an echo-chamber of our own choosing that simply feeds our biases. We don't accidentally overhear another view that might provide extra information for us. Some might have argued that all this can be replicated in a virtual world, but scheduling a call with someone to make a minor point or ask a quick question still *feels* wrong for most of us. The quick face-to-face ad-hoc enquiries or comments have been replaced by planned interaction where points are accumulated, and then offloaded. My colleague [Gary Ashton's article explains](#) more about the impact of echo chambers on decision-making.

Similarly, we have heard anecdotal evidence of cross-fertilisation and developmental drawbacks in the remote world. The chance that we might gain exposure to a distant team and discover some mutual benefit, or a cross-silo solution to a long-standing problem is greatly reduced. The new world requires us to 'know what we don't know', and where we can find it.

Neither are we afforded the opportunity to observe or mimic those who are great exponents of what they do. So much of personal development comes from watching and learning from others as they go about their business. We are now less able to play the role of fly-on-the-wall and learn from the way others respond, the way they hold themselves, or the way they speak to others when the camera has stopped rolling.

## 2. Amplified divisions

Being afforded a degree of choice about where and when we work could also have unintended consequences and amplify divisions in ways we haven't even considered along gender, personality, socio-economic and generational lines.

A number of articles have referenced the fact that women have been much more likely to drop out of work during the pandemic, with women in academia submitting fewer papers for example. No doubt the home-schooling necessity has played a large role in this, but assuming that gender dynamics haven't been completely upended in the last 12 months, then women will still be taking on the lion's share of childcare and work related to the household. This in itself leads to very different experiences of working from home.

It will be interesting to see how hybrid working plays out along personality lines too. Will our offices be populated by extraverts enjoying the hustle and bustle that it affords, with introverts choosing to stay safely at home in a more controlled environment that suits their style of working? And if so, how will this impact on the dynamic of the workplace? [Julie Brophy's article](#) talks more about the formation of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'.

The personality variable also plays a huge role in the perceived *need* to be physically present at least some of the working week. In a recent discussion with a client and healthy debate about those circumstances that would necessitate a physical get-together rather than virtual chat, it was no surprise that preference was playing a huge role in the views people held, with the strong extravert arguing that almost everything needed to be conducted face-to-face, whilst her opponent argued that there was never really any need to get together ever again. No doubt generational divisions will play a role here too, and we will need to understand the extent to which these polar opposite views are driven by reality, or simply *preference*.

We also need to consider the *socio-economic* factors that will play a significant role on individual decisions about when and how often to visit the office. Will they be populated by those for whom the home-working environment is less than optimal, whilst those fortunate enough to enjoy the benefits of separate home offices stay away? The divide between remote and office-based working has traditionally correlated to some degree with seniority in an organisation, but will now exist *within* teams potentially leading to unintended divisions. The opportunity and attractiveness of home-working is reduced when it is limited to a sofa, or a temporary location in the corner of a sometimes-occupied living room. How will fairness be perceived when some teams are required to be present, and others not?

## 3. Psycho-social factors

Perhaps least understood are the ways in which the fact that there will be a permanent reduction in the separation of home and work lives for most of us. When we go to bed at night, the report we are struggling with is literally in the next room, or even in the same one if our home set-up requires us to work in a make-shift office in the main bedroom. This lack of separation makes it much more difficult to switch off, and again is much less of an issue for those with spacious home offices.

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We are coming to realise that the much-maligned commute actually played a significant role for some. Granted, many people will be more than happy to see the back of the M25/62 or Jubilee line at rush hour, but that commuting time also allowed us to reflect and process the events of the day before we got home, contributing to the feeling of separation between home and work life. Perhaps of most concern is for those for whom the office is a welcome break or even an escape from whatever is going on at home, as the need to go to work has been taken off the table as a legitimate reason to get out of the house.

Finally, it is always easy to talk about increased choice as a good thing. But often with choice comes added stress and increased awareness of the path not taken. When we decide to stay away from the office, we also become acutely aware of how things might have played out if we had gone in, and what is happening in the office whilst we are not there. I recall a scene from the sitcom ‘Friends’, where Rachel takes up smoking specifically because all the real decisions are being made in the smoker’s alleyway after the formal meetings have ended. We may become more conscious about what’s actually happening in our absence, how work is being allocated, and who is actually listening to who – leading to a heightened sense of anxiety for those who have a real stake in what is really happening at work. My colleague Toni Marshall’s article looks at the impact that isolation can have on our ‘self-limiting beliefs’.

Present privilege is a real phenomenon, and it is not hard to imagine us feeling a similar pull to be present in the office for Fear Of Missing Out.

## What can we do?

Clearly for such a wide range of potential issues there is no one solution, but two things immediately spring to mind.

In the longer term, the **requirement for emotionally intelligent leadership will be even more critical in the hybrid environment**. We may have thought we knew our people before the pandemic, but we have just added a whole range of new variables that we need emotionally intelligent leaders to be fully attuned to if we are to understand and get the best out of our people.

In the immediate term however, leaders can **simulate these scenarios and how they play out in your unique setting**. OE Cam has begun to do this with a number of clients – whereby we facilitate a ‘hybrid simulator’ workshop, using a range of constructs to consider how your plan for hybrid working is likely to play out in the workplace, and anticipate or head off problems before they arise – ensuring you reap the benefits that hybrid working affords, and mitigate the losses.



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