



The Future of Work in a Post Pandemic World: A Guide for HR Managers



A report by WorkJuggle in conjunction with Dublin City University.

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This report was written by;



Dr. Peter Robbins,
Assistant Professor
of Business,
DCU



Dr. Roisin Lyons
Entrepreneurship &
Innovation, University of
Limerick (previously DCU)



Muskan Sahdev
Research Officer,
DCU



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NTMA

Origin Enterprises

Revolut

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WorkJuggle

Welcome

Welcome to the WorkJuggle report on The Future of Work written in conjunction with DCU. When we first commissioned this report it was in a very different world. Initially we had wanted to explore trends around flexible and remote working. These are non traditional forms of work which at WorkJuggle we have been passionate about ever since we were founded in 2018. What no one could ever have envisioned is the global remote working experiment which kicked off with a bang in March 2020. It is not an exaggeration to say that Covid has changed everything from a working pattern perspective. Companies which would never have dreamed of working remotely suddenly found themselves with an entirely remote workforce. It has been the largest shift in the working world since the Industrial Revolution and it has also been the fastest. The Industrial Revolution spanned an eighty-year timeframe. The shift to remote and flexible working happened within a week in most organisations.

And yet in many ways the last eighteen months have not been remote working at all. It has been pandemic working. We have been in crisis mode robbed of our normal support systems. We have been trying to grapple with anxiety, caring responsibilities and a constant stream of often terrifying news. For those parents with children the pandemic was an unprecedented time with creches and schools closed. It is simply not possible to do a normal days work with three primary school aged children in the house and a laggy broadband (I know, because I have tried). Anecdotally we were hearing about the stresses on working parents and mothers in particular. We asked DCU to explore this further in their qualitative research and the findings in this area are particularly interesting.

I want to thank everyone who responded with such honesty and frankness in both our surveys and focus groups. Reading through the quotes it felt like a window into peoples lives. DCU were taken aback by how much people wrote and shared but I think people needed an outlet to share their own experiences and challenges in these extraordinary times and I am so grateful that you did.

Thank you to all our contributing companies as well. At a very challenging time for HR practitioners in particular you all took time out of your day job to contribute your thoughts and experiences.

As we slowly emerge into a post pandemic world I sincerely hope this report will be a guide and a help to all those grappling with the new challenges in a post pandemic world.

Sincerely,



Ciara Garvan

Founder,
WorkJuggle.com



Welcome

The Future of Work was on the HR community's radar long before Covid hit. A digital mind-set, the fourth industrial revolution, relentless focus on the customer and remote and flexible ways of working were all high on that agenda. But then Covid struck and all these concepts became an immediate reality. Now, as companies, cities and corporate HQ's begin to reopen, organisations face not only the question of how to return to offices, but whether to do so at all. They also face bigger questions about the configuration of roles and the optimal design and distribution of workloads across their teams.

Much has been written about the Future of Work and much of it seems to fall into one of two camps. First, we get a sensationalist headline about one company - such as Twitter or Facebook - and what they're planning, in terms of return-to-work, for their particular workforce. Or, on the other hand, we read generic, elementary, one-size-fits-all recommendations from state or umbrella bodies. In short, the insights are either too specific to be of practical use - or too general. Also, the focus has been largely on binary choices, addressing logistical questions of how many days will employees be expected to spend in the office. Will they have a 2:3 ratio or a 3:2?

For this project we have taken an evidence based, real-time approach. We have polled over 200 people in Irish organisations to take the pulse on this issue. This report aims to deliver some double-loop learning by looking at issues that delve a little deeper into the configuration of roles; of flexible working and of reduced load working rather than merely examining the logistics of hybrid working.

110 of our study participants elected to share some of their insights and personal learnings from the experience of remote working over the last 18 months. What's certain is that there is a balance to be struck between the positives and negatives of not being in the office. On the plus side, people don't generally miss the commute to work and many have found far more productive things to do with that time. But even spending time in traffic has its benefits as people reported the valuable role commuting plays in effectively bookending both ends of the day. It gives time, in the morning, to subconsciously plan what needs to be done and on the return home, it allows time to process the events of the day.

Some respondents reported learning new skills and, indeed, getting to know themselves a little better. They mention adaptability and resilience as discoveries crystalized through Covid.

Some reflect on how the experience has helped them identify and overcome their preconceptions and unconscious biases about remote working. Many were opposed to it instinctively but have learned that they can be even more effective and efficient from home, particularly if I have a focussed piece of work to do.'

Others had the converse unconscious bias, thinking that work-from-home was the Holy Grail, and now believe more firmly in the benefits of co-location with colleagues. Respondents acknowledge the benefits of working alongside colleagues; of casual corridor conversations which are no longer possible.

These two ends of the spectrum illustrate the balance that so many organisations are now designing for their return-to-work policies. There are benefits to working from home and, equally, there are advantages to the proximity and access to colleagues in the office. The optimal solution will be to balance these in a way that is customised to the role and the role holder.

We also asked the question has Covid discriminated against women?

In our survey, those respondents declaring their gender as either female or male skewed towards the former by a ratio of 2.5:1. Within our group, there was very strong agreement with the sentiment that women have been hit harder by the impact of Covid than men. One respondent felt so strongly about the pandemic impact on her role that she declared 'women have jumped back 20 years in time' because the responsibility for childcare, home-schooling and housework has been largely borne by them. One refers to this as the 'third job' - picking up from creche, preparing lunches, attending the school activities and minding the kids when they get home. This adds to the work related stress as some tasks for work get relegated to the evening time as home-schooling monopolises the afternoons. Some report, at the extremes, the consequence of this is that many women have left their roles to manage the home-schooling required. Others acknowledge an increase in stress, a loss of work-productivity and a general decline in sense of wellbeing. HR managers trying to navigate this terrain face considerable challenges. Some of the fault lines in their organisations, issues around flexible, remote and hybrid working, have been exacerbated by COVID and the decisions they make now will have enduring consequences for their organisations but, just as importantly, for their people.



One thing is emerging with certainty: in the design of flexible working, the clue is in the title. Managers will need to be flexible and sensitive to the particular needs of their roles and their people. Managers who seek to impose some mechanistic, generic solution are likely to fail. This will require less of a command and control management style and more of a facilitative one.

As part of our research, we investigated some published guidelines which might be helpful to managers looking for some coordinates to navigate this journey. As with many issues connected with change, and to a lesser extent with innovation, any manifesto will have to include an overarching mindset underneath which should sit some design principles which are then customised appropriately for each individual. The mindset is one of positive flexibility.

We hope this report, the first of its kind in Ireland, will help HR managers as they navigate this post pandemic world.

Your Sincerely,



Dr. Peter Robbins

Assistant Professor
DCU Business School

Introduction

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus had a profound and immediate effect on workplaces¹. Prior to 2020, most workers had little remote working experience and their employers were ill prepared for large-scale remote working. Now, millions of people across the world have pivoted to home working, inadvertently leading to a massive global experiment in telecommuting². The pandemic has also accelerated changes in a world that is becoming more and more digitally connected³. The future of work is here.

There is much to like about that future. Teams are more agile, adaptable and better able to prioritise since COVID-19 hit. These positive experiences—perhaps unexpected to some—have quickly elevated working from home to a credible, sustainable, long-term option for organisations and their staff. Bain and Co estimate that as many as 70% of managers are now working from home, while Mercer estimates the number to be 75%. Now, as companies and cities begin to reopen, organisations face not only the question of how to return to offices, but whether to do so at all. Additionally, the modern organisation faces bigger questions about the configuration of roles and the optimal design and distribution of workloads across their teams.

Much has been written about the future of work - from sensationalist headlines about a large tech companies to elementary, one-size-fits-all guidance from state bodies. These insights are either too specific or too general to be of any real use. This report will present real time insights and evidence based recommendations, gleaned from high level HR professionals who are based in Ireland who are actually living the future of work.

¹ McGuire, D., Germain, M.L. and Reynolds, K., 2020. Reshaping HRD in light of the COVID-19 pandemic: an ethics of care approach. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, pp.1523422320973426.

² Kniffin, K.M., Narayanan, J., Anseel, F., Antonakis, J., Ashford, S.P., Bakker, A.B., Bamberger, P., Bapuji, H., Bhawe, D.P., Choi, V.K. and Creary, S.J., 2021. COVID-19 and the workplace: Implications, issues, and insights for future research and action. *American Psychologist*, 76(1), pp.63.

³ UNDP, 2021. Coronavirus disease COVID-19 pandemic, UNDP. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/coronavirus.html>.

Report Outline

This report includes research and analysis on the future of both flexible, remote and hybrid working in the post-pandemic era. This report begins by defining key terms and outlining relevant trends. In particular, the report explores perceptions the corporate sector may have in relation to flexible workers, and the challenges managers face in embracing flexible working arrangements for their staff. These insights are presented in a series of short conclusions and recommendations, created with the busy professional in mind.

A detailed overview of the qualitative research excerpts is available [here](#)

This report was commissioned on behalf of WorkJuggle in conjunction with researchers at Dublin City University.



What is 'Flexible Work'

Flexible work arrangements are defined as 'any policies and practices, formal or informal, which permit people to vary when and where work is carried out'⁴.

Flexible working is increasingly helping people to access the labour market, and stay in work⁵.

Defining flexible work has been complex, as there a variety of different arrangements in the area, and terms can tend to be used interchangeably.

Flexible work can relate to⁶:

- How long people work
- When people work
- Where people work
- Training to assist with work-life balance management
- Flexible start/finish and break time

These practices were born from a realisation that the traditional '9 to 5' working structure is an impediment to many workers, and a limiting factor for organisations. Flexible working is not new. Before the war, W. K. Kellogg piloted alternate work shifts for their employees, moving from three shifts of eight hours to four shifts of six hours. In 1972, Hewlett Packard offered flexible working arrangements at its Waltham MA plant. In 1978, West Germany coined the term "flex time" and began establishing policies to balance work and life for workers⁷.

In recent years, flexible work arrangements have captured the attention of both employees and employers alike⁸. The growing use of flexibility in the workplace is linked to the emerging focus on work-life balance⁹. The 2016/2017 Smith & Williamson survey of Irish law firms found that "the number one reward firms will be implementing over the coming three years is flexible benefits (45% of all firms, 77% of top 20 firms, 31% of firms outside of Dublin)"¹⁰.

Globally, Finland is a firm leader in the adoption of flexible work arrangements. As early as 2011, it was reported that 92% of companies in Finland offered flexibility to their staff (with Sweden 86%, and both Australia and Thailand at 85%). In the same study, Ireland was noted in the top 10 countries for flexible work arrangements with 77% of participating companies offering flexible work¹¹. However, considering the EU as a whole, the 2018 EU Family-friendly Workplaces study found that the majority of EU employees do not have flexibility in their working hours and that family-friendly legislation is inconsistent across member states¹².

I think flexibility is becoming more the expectation. ...I can't see things going back to normal or having everyone back in the office on a full time basis anytime soon."

Flogas

⁴ Maxwell, G. et al. 2007. The incidence and impact of flexible working arrangements in smaller businesses, *Employee Relations*, 29(2), pp. 138–161.

⁵ cipd.co.uk, 2020. Information on Flexible Working, CIPD. Available at: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/flexible-working>.

⁶ (as above)

⁷ Santovec, M.L. 2013. Creating flexible work policies: One size does not fit all. *Women in Higher Education*, 22(8), pp.1-2.

⁸ Giannikis, S. K. and Mihail, D. M. 2011. Flexible work arrangements in Greece: a study of employee perceptions, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 22(2), pp. 417–432.

⁹ Maxwell, G. 2005. Checks and balances: manager responsibility for work-life balance in the UK service sector, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 179-89.

¹⁰ <https://www.lawsociety.ie/globalassets/documents/committees/younger-members/guide-to-flexible-working-2017.pdf>

¹¹ Irish Life 2021. Flexible work and remote work are the present, not the future, <https://www.irishlifecorporatebusiness.ie/pensionparity-flexible-work>

¹² EU 2018. Family Friendly Workplaces, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20128&langId=en>

Terms of Note

It is important to define our key terms carefully, as these are often misunderstood and used interchangeably.

FLEXIBLE EMPLOYMENT/WORK:

refers to non-traditional working arrangements that take into account an individual's personal needs, sometimes involving a degree of working from home.

PART TIME EMPLOYMENT/WORK:

occurs when hours worked per week are at a reduced rate to typical full time hours (for example working less than 40 hours per week). Voluntary part-time employment is instigated by the employee, while involuntary part-time employment is a cost cutting exercise instigated by the employer¹³. Part time employment is a) regular and within a continuing formal employment relationship; b) is not independent nor unpaid; and is c) substantially shorter in hours worked to full time employment¹⁴.

REDUCED-LOAD EMPLOYMENT/WORK:

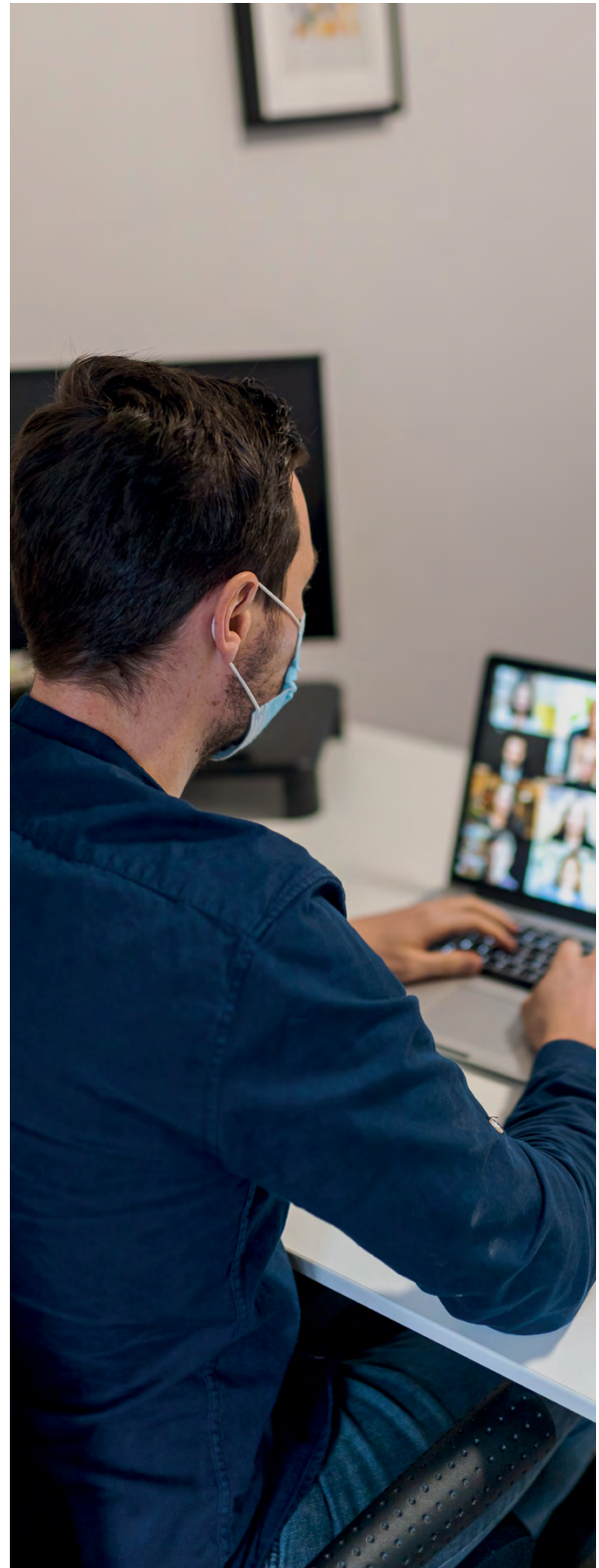
is a relatively new form of part-time work in which a full-time job is re-designed to reduce the workload¹⁵. It is a specific type of part-time work that reduces the workload of professional jobs, and challenges historical norms that associate career advancement with uninterrupted full-time work.

Essentially, organisations allow staff to flex the intensity of their workloads to align with the rhythm of family life or other professional or academic commitments.

Reduced load working can be difficult to implement, especially in small organisations or businesses where quick turnarounds and agility are expected.

HYBRID WORKING:

A hybrid workplace combines aspects of an in-person workplace with a fully remote one¹⁶. In hybrid working companies, it is common to designate certain days for in-office meetings and collaboration, and remote days for work involving individual focus. Physical presence might be required for orientations, team-building and project kick-offs, but not necessarily for other work (Ro, 2020).



¹² EU 2018. Family Friendly Workplaces, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20128&langId=en>

¹³ Smith, N. and McDonald, P., 2015. Facilitating sustainable professional part-time work: A question of design?, *Journal of Management & Organization*, 22(2), pp.205-223.

¹⁴ (as above)

¹⁵ Kossek, E.E. and Ollier-Malaterre, A., 2019. Desperately seeking sustainable careers: Redesigning professional jobs for the collaborative crafting of reduced-load work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 117, pp. 103315.

¹⁶ Pelta, R. 2021. Defining the Hybrid Workplace for Companies, *Flexjobs*: <https://www.flexjobs.com/employer-blog/hybrid-workplace-for-companies/>

Flexible Work Arrangements: Considerations for the Employer

Benefits

- Quality flexible work programmes can help organisations attract talent, improve employee job satisfaction and loyalty, reduce absenteeism, and improve well-being; it can also make businesses more responsive to change¹⁷.
- Noted benefits include improved recruitment, retention, productivity, motivation, and employee commitment²³.
- Employees are given greater autonomy and freedom to fit work around caring responsibilities or leisure in order to achieve a better work-life balance.
- More flexible forms of employment can also offer new opportunities and a stepping-stone to full-time, open-ended employment for some, including young people and many low-skilled workers.
- Part-time work models are associated with workforce participation, increasing household income, reduced work-life conflict & improved organisational retention¹⁸.
- Managers of professional services flexible employees have noted they are fresher for work, have greater maturity, can read people better and have excellent organisation and time management skills that positively influence colleagues¹⁹.
- A study of over 1000 employed adults in Switzerland over two years noted perceived career adaptability in their organisation related strongly to job and life satisfaction²⁰.
- Reduction of physical and psychological stress of workers²¹. Almost 38% of workers in the EU (2018) reported difficulties in fulfilling family commitments because of time spent at work.

Challenges

- There can be considerable gaps in pay, training opportunities and career prospects between comparable full-time and voluntary part-time roles, even after controlling for observable personal and job characteristics²².
- Access to social protection can be difficult for all workers in non-standard employment. Forms of non-standard employment (e.g., part-time and temporary work) are in theory well covered, but in practice, many workers on such contracts still struggle to gain access²³.
- For high-level professional staff moving to part-time roles, there can be much bias and a reduction in promotional opportunities. For example, in an interview, one female was advised that despite achieving the same targets as in her former full-time role, she could no longer receive the highest performance rating while she was working part-time²⁴.
- Intangible or indirect work resources and systems may be reduced or limited. Opportunities to network may decrease due to time constraints²⁵.
- In the context of smaller businesses, the combination of minimised staffing levels and lean production lines may be problematic, particularly with regard to sickness and holidays²⁶.

“Have extensive experience working freelance and found it rewarding and empowering to be able to flex the workload. Less positive experience within a corporate setting where it was not well applied or supported”

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent

“My job is flexible enough. I am working 9-5 in theory but it is mostly about things being done rather than the number of hours working. I love this”

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent

¹⁷ cipd.co.uk 2020. Information on Flexible Working, CIPD. Available at: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/flexible-working>.

¹⁸ Higgins, C., Duxbury, L. and Johnson, K.L., 2000. Part-time work for women: Does it really help balance work and family? *Human Resource Management*, 39(1), pp.17-32.

¹⁹ Smith, N. and McDonald, P., 2015. Facilitating sustainable professional part-time work: A question of design?, *Journal of Management & Organization*, 22(2), pp.205-223.

²⁰ Urbanaviciute, I., Udayar, S. and Rossier, J., 2019. Career adaptability and employee well-being over a two-year period: Investigating cross-lagged effects and their boundary conditions, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 111, pp.74-90.

²¹ Hill, J., Martinson, K.V., Vjollca, K., Ferris, M., and Baker, Z.R. 2004. Beyond the Mommy Track: The Influence of New-Concept Part-Time Work for Professional Women on Work and Family, *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 25, 1, pp.121-136.

²² OECD 2014, 2014 Report on the implementation of the OECD Strategy on Development, pp. 63.

²³ (as above)

²⁴ Smith, N. and McDonald, P., 2015. Facilitating sustainable professional part-time work: A question of design?, *Journal of Management & Organization*, 22(2), pp.205-223.

²⁵ Durbin, S. and Tomlinson, J., 2010. Female part-time managers: networks and career mobility. *Work, employment and society*, 24(4), pp.621-640.

²⁶ Dex, S. 2003. Flexible (or family friendly) work arrangements in the UK. Are they a good thing?, Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, London University, London and Judge Institute of Management, University of Cambridge.

Remote Work: The 'new normal'?

Remote working is defined as “a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, the worker has no personal contact with co-workers there, but is able to communicate with them using technology”²⁷.

Due to the COVID 19 pandemic, remote working has, in many sectors, become the “new normal”. Uncertainties about employment and employability, the configuration of workplaces, the future of some careers and the possibilities for new opportunities will weigh heavily on individuals as they navigate these challenges²⁸. Before the pandemic, the conventional wisdom had been that prestigious offices buildings were critical to productivity, culture, and winning the war for talent. Since the crisis broke, managers were forced to quickly adapt to the crisis and lead teams virtually²⁹. Multiple lockdowns and remote working transitions have shown that roles and industries previously considered unsuited to flexible work can adapt. Organisations have reported greater team agility, zero commute time and a better ability to focus on “deep thinking work” as reasons for improved productivity. In a survey of more than 7,000 individuals across five industry sectors conducted by Six Ideas by Dexis from May to July 2020, 74% of respondents, regardless of tenure or gender, said they would be interested in working from home at least one to two days per week on average in future³⁰.



“It appears to be a more difficult model to implement in organizations, because I think either an onsite model is easy or a remote model is easy. But the one in between, at least from what I’m reading, appears to me the most difficult. But I do wonder about what I’m reading is relevant in this world. Given how much we’ve all learned in the last six months or so. So, my most pressing point probably would be, the future in terms of a hybrid model and in the very short term, how we keep people connected and maintain the culture of the NTMA while we are working remotely. So, we’re putting huge effort into that at the moment.”

NTMA

²⁷ Di Martino, V., & Wirth, L. 1990. Telework: A new way of working and living. *International Labour Review*, 129(5), pp. 529– 554.

²⁸ Streitfeld, D. 2020. The Long, Unhappy History of Working From Home, *The New York Times*, 29 June. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/technology/working-from-home-failure.html>.

²⁹ Clark, T. R. 2020. 8 Ways to Manage Your Team While Social Distancing, *Harvard Business Review*, 24 March. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2020/03/8-ways-to-manage-your-team-while-social-distancing>.

³⁰ Gross, A., Morphet, S. and Lyons, L. 2020. Flex for Success: Five Practices That Build a Flexible Workforce, *Bain*. Available at: <https://www.bain.com/insights/flex-for-success-five-practices-that-build-a-flexible-workforce/>.

Traditional organisations, which have just switched to a remote working are facing new challenges, which may require revisiting team norms, cultivating morale, and adapting a team's approach to coaching³¹. Such remote working at scale is unprecedented, and will continue to have a lasting impression on the way people live and work for many years to come³². These are high stakes; done right, remote working can boost productivity and morale; done poorly, it can breed inefficiency, damage work relationships, and demotivate employees³³.

"For Remote Leadership we've started focusing on the tone from the top with our leadership team and our management team."

Revolut

These issues will become all the more critical, as according to Government policy, employees in Ireland will soon have the right to request remote working as part of a National Remote Working Strategy³⁴. In December 2019, the Government published [Remote Work in Ireland](#), a report on the prevalence and types of remote working solutions in Ireland, the attitudes towards them and influencing factors for employees and employers when engaging with these solutions³⁵.

"It's a matter of maintaining human dignity in a lot of cases and making sure that employees get upskilled, feel relevant and can contribute to society. Upskilling and training are becoming much more of a priority within organizations due to COVID-19. It is all about finding a balance between people and technology. Automation in the workplace is only accelerating now due to COVID-19."

Professor David Collings, DCU, 2020³⁶

"What I've learned about myself is that I had many unconscious biases about remote working which dissipated significantly or even have been eradicated completely. I've also learned that I can be even more effective & efficient from home particularly if I have a focused piece of work to do"

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent



"As much as remote working is helpful for family life there are key benefits to working with colleagues in an office from a social perspective. I had definitely underestimated this."

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent

³¹ Gardner, H. K. and Matviak, I. 2020. Coronavirus Could Force Teams to Work Remotely, Harvard Business Review, 5 March. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2020/03/coronavirus-could-force-teams-to-work-remotely>.

³² McKinsey & Company 2020. Reimagining the office and work life after COVID-19 | McKinsey. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/reimagining-the-office-and-work-life-after-covid-19>

³³ (as above)

³⁴ rte.ie 2021. Employees to have right to request remote working. Available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/2021/01/15/1189819-remote-work-strategy/>.

³⁵ <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Remote-Working/>

³⁶ Comment provided at TRANSFORM 'Future of Work' conference series, Dublin City University (2021): https://twitter.com/IIIDB_ie

Hybrid Working: The best of both worlds?

Although flexible working systems had been a part of organisations for many decades, the massive dynamic impact of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many organizations adopting a remote working model.

As organisations reconstruct how they work, and identify what can be done remotely, they must make decisions about which roles must be carried out in person, and to what degree. Such roles can be classified into employee segments by considering the value that remote working could deliver³⁷:

- Fully remote
- Hybrid remote
- Hybrid remote by exception
- On site

“I need and like structure. I love remote working but not working from home. I would like to work from a remote hub with hybrid options.”

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent

For many, the results have been better than imagined. According to McKinsey research (2020), 80% of people questioned report that they enjoy working from home, 41 % say that they are more productive than they had been before and 28% say that they are as productive³⁸. Many employees liberated from long commutes have found more productive ways to spend that time, enjoyed greater flexibility in balancing their personal and professional lives, and decided that they prefer to work from home rather than the office^{39,40}. According to an Adecco Group study published in June 2020⁴¹, roughly three quarters of French employees say they would like to adopt a hybrid work method.

“It’s a matter of maintaining human dignity in a lot of cases and making sure that employees get upskilled, feel relevant and can contribute to society. Upskilling and training are becoming much more of a priority within organizations due to COVID-19. It is all about finding a balance between people and technology. Automation in the workplace is only accelerating now due to COVID-19.”

Indeed

These remote work and hybrid contexts can be problematic for many workers too. The literature on remote working discusses a wide range of issues such as lack of work-life boundaries⁴², autonomy⁴³, productivity⁴⁴, and challenges for social roles⁴⁵. A central part of the literature is the discussion on the paradoxical effect of this type of work context has on wellbeing. A survey in April 2020, conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management found that two out of three employers say that maintaining employee morale during the pandemic has been a challenge, especially in large companies with over 500 employees⁴⁶.

³⁷ Larson, B. Z., Vroman, S. R. and Makarius, E. E. 2020. A Guide to Managing Your (Newly) Remote Workers, Harvard Business Review, 18 March. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2020/03/a-guide-to-managing-your-newly-remote-workers>.

³⁸ McKinsey & Company. 2020. Reimagining the office and work life after COVID-19 | McKinsey. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/reimagining-the-office-and-work-life-after-covid-19>.

³⁹ (as above)

⁴⁰ Ro, C. 2020. Why the future of work might be hybrid, BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200824-why-the-future-of-work-might-be-hybrid>.

⁴¹ <https://www.groupe-adecco.fr/articles/une-etude-internationale-du-groupe-adecco-revele-les-attentes-des-salaries-et-des-entreprises-en-matiere-de-modalites-de-travail-post-pandemie/>

⁴² Golden, T. D. 2012. Altering the effects of work and family conflict on exhaustion: Telework during traditional and non-traditional work hours. Journal of Business and Psychology, 27(3), pp. 255–269.

⁴³ Dimitrova, D. 2003. Controlling teleworkers: Supervision and flexibility revisited. New Technology, Work and Employment, 18(3), pp. 181–195.

⁴⁴ (as above)

⁴⁵ Marsh, K. & Musson, G. 2008. Men at work and at home: Managing emotion in telework. Gender, Work, and Organization, 15(1), pp. 31–48.

⁴⁶ Horch, A. J. 2020. How major companies are responding to employee needs in a remote work world that has no end in sight, CNBC. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/08/20/its-month-six-of-remote-work-for-many-and-theres-no-end-in-sight.html>.

The Future of Work

The nature of work has changed radically since March 2020. In order to assist managers and HR professionals navigate this complex new world, we conducted detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of the future of work.

Qualitative primary data was collected using two focus groups. We had a total of 18 participants, all HR professionals from various high-profile companies. Each focus group was approximately two-hours long.

Quantitative primary data was collected using a study hosted on the Qualtrics platform. The aim of the study was to explore current perceptions of varying work practices, including remote, flexible, reduced load working, and hybrid work. The primary audience for this research study was HR professionals and managers, while the secondary audience was the general workforce (including students, part-time workers, and the unemployed).



Our Findings

1. Remote Working: positives and negatives for employees

There is a clear balance to be struck between the positives and negatives of office life.

On the plus side, workers no longer commute to work and many have found more productive things to do with that time. However, even spending time in traffic has its benefits as respondents noted the valuable role commuting plays in effectively “bookending” both ends of the day. Respondents reported planning their work on their commute in, and processing their day on the commute home, allowing for a clear separation between work life and home life.

Some respondents reported that home working encouraged learning new skills and, that they ‘got to know themselves’ a little better. They mention personal adaptability and resilience as discoveries crystalized through lockdown. Others reflect on how the experience has helped them identify and overcome their preconceptions and unconscious biases about remote working. Many were opposed to it instinctively, but have learned that they can be ‘even more effective and efficient from home, particularly if I have a focussed piece of work to do’.

“I found I missed meeting my colleagues and now recognise I need group dynamics on occasion to help invigorate my work life. So balance is needed between remote and being physically present.”

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent

"I think flexibility is becoming more the expectation on how we ensure that, how do we facilitate remote work and as a continuous expectation? I can't see things going back to normal or having everyone back in the office on a full time basis anytime soon."

Flogas

Some had the converse unconscious bias, believing that work-from-home would be a panacea for all the organisation's HR issues, now believe firmly in the benefits of co-location with other workers. Respondents acknowledge the benefits of working alongside colleagues, of casual conversations and serendipitous collaborations that do not happen remotely.

These two ends of the spectrum illustrate the balance that so many organisations are striving for in return to work policies. There are benefits to working from home and, equally, there are advantages to the office. The optimal solution will be to balance these in a way that is customised to the organisation, the role and the role holder.

2. Flexible Working: Not always flexible

Over 60% of our respondents had not experienced any form of flexible working prior to the pandemic. Of those who had, for many the experience was a positive one. The themes that respondents focused upon included flexibility, accountability, a supportive culture, setting boundaries and having strong and clear communication and expectations. When these conditions are met, it appears that the arrangement works well.

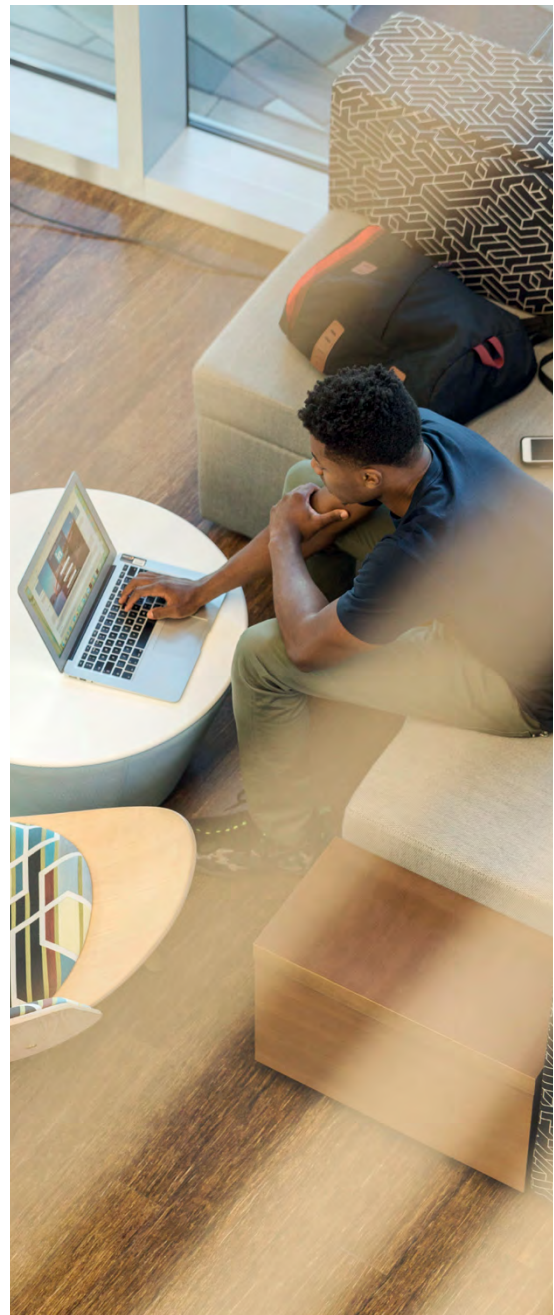
However, others - who were on a reduced hours arrangement - had a less positive experience. Their 'day off' was not respected and they were expected to take calls and even take meetings. Others felt pressure to compensate for their special arrangement by taking on too much work and shoehorning a full time job into four days instead of five. Some felt that working part time or

"I've had flexible work 3 days a week but my workplace didn't really know how to handle it. They don't know how to manage this for a senior executive level."

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent

flexibly signalled to the organisation that one was not ambitious nor looking for promotion.

Organisations who implement flexible working in name only will not improve workers loyalty and employee satisfaction. In fact, the opposite is likely to be true, as staff become frustrated with their false flexible arrangements.



3. Reduced Load Working: Under researched and misunderstood

It is clear from our studies that the topic of reduced load (RL) working is under researched and misunderstood. Our respondents could see the benefits of RL working for certain phases of a career. The capacity to flex the intensity of workloads to align with the rhythm of family life was intuitively appealing for our sample. They referred to it variously as sensible, mature, valuable, progressive and smart.

Naturally, the barriers to this approach were also clearly perceived by the respondents. They noted its attractiveness in theory but many were sceptical and their jaundiced view usually arose from personal negative prior experience with organisations.

"It's exactly what I am searching for. I am highly educated, highly motivated and still want to have a professional career. However it is not viable with 3 kids to work a 9-5 Mon-Fri role. As a result I am employed in an entry level position at very low pay and zero challenge. I really am heartbroken."

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent

High among the perceived hurdles to RL working was the likelihood that anyone choosing this option might be overlooked for promotion. Another concern is that in the construction of a new, reduced workload, one could find oneself stripped of all the interesting, strategic work and stuck with only the mundane tasks which are not skill-enhancing. This could lead to an inadvertent career atrophy in the organisation.

In summary, respondents were intuitively drawn to this approach. It promises desirable benefits but further reflection inevitably stimulated considerable reservations about whether such an idea could really be realised in practice.

However, any organisation that could develop a viable blueprint in which reduced load working could be implemented would have a significant edge in attracting and retaining talent.

4. Work/life balance, a career limiter?

Respondents noted that the issue of progression or promotion was a major barrier to availing of flexible working arrangements. Respondents felt that over time, flexible working would be normalised and consequently less of a barrier to progression. It is clear, however, that there is strong perception that availing of flexible arrangements signals equivocal commitment to senior management and effectively rules people out of conversations about talent management across the organisation.

"My own experience is very much of an espoused culture of flexibility. The organisations I work for brand themselves very well as being flexible but it is clearly not genuine. This damages culture because there is a clear disconnect between what is said and what is experienced. I would much prefer real empathy to be conveyed by senior management and I would have much more respect for genuine messages."

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent

"One of the cornerstones of what I do throughout all of my work is around having happy employees." Like actually the research tells us that if people are happy, they're 30 percent more productive. We know this, but the pandemic's not making people happy. It's making people kind of miserable. So, what can we do to increase happiness, joy, celebration, positive things? I think we just need to do more of that. Would be my thoughts on that."

Network Ireland

5. The role of gender in flexible working

It was noted that men rarely avail of flexible working arrangements, leading to discussions on the role of gender in perceptions of flexible workers. (respondents who declaring their gender as either female or male skewed towards the former by a ratio of 2.5:1 in our survey).

“Show support from senior leadership. Showing people on flexible work arrangements getting promoted when deserved.”

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent

The organisational culture is a defining element in whether flexible arrangements can be successful. The tech industry, for example, came up in our study to be particularly hostile to job sharing and to flexible working, and it is regularly reported to be a male-dominated working environment. Despite national conversations about gender diversity in tech, women are still underrepresented, underpaid, and often discriminated against in the tech industry, according to White (2021).

The gender bias in flexible working may further compound perceptions that flexible work is career limiting. Companies should be mindful of the message their organisational culture send in this regard.

Our research indicates that pre-existing gender biases were exacerbated by the pandemic. Respondents believed that females were more negatively impacted than males by economic consequences of COVID 19. One response in particular provided detailed insight on the matter:

“Research conducted by Advance HE into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has found that globally, more women have lost their jobs, taken on more domestic and caring responsibilities and have been subject to an increase in domestic violence (UN, April 2020 and Blasko et al. 2020). Research into the impact on staff within the higher education sector, focuses on domestic and caring responsibilities, mirrors this finding and as higher education institutions are a microcosm of our society, it is likely that other trends identified including job losses and domestic violence will be mirrored too. Research by Vitae found that women are more concerned than men about contract renewal or cessation (Vitae, 2020) and women’s publication rates have been impacted (Thackery, 2020). The latter is concerning when many academic recruitment and promotion exercises take the quantity as well as the quality of research outputs into consideration.”

DCU WorkJuggle Survey Respondent



Amongst professionals, our respondents felt that lockdown driven childcare responsibilities fell disproportionately on women, even in those households with two working parents.

The pandemic highlighted that traditional gender perceptions still exist. Organisations that wish to be truly flexible and truly diverse need to shed these historic preconceptions.

6. Designing flexible, remote and hybrid working policies

HR managers designing new flexible work policies face considerable challenges. Although there are many unknowns, the decisions they make now will have enduring consequences for their organisations but, just as importantly, for their people.

"We are getting quite a lot of requests and feedback around the fact that people now want to continue with some flexible work and working from home, in the future. We are looking at the future now and what that's going to look like for us and how we can work more flexibly, because actually what we found is that it works. I think previously there was probably a little bit resistance to that. But I think even managers now are of the view that it does work and that they would like to do a little bit more of that going forward."

Origin Enterprises



One thing is emerging with certainty: in the design of flexible and remote working, the clue is in the title. Managers will need to be flexible and sensitive to the particular needs of their roles and their people. Managers who seek to impose some mechanistic, generic solution are likely to fail. This will require less of a "command and control" management style and more of a facilitative one.

"We need to reformulate the way people's performance is assessed."



Recommendations for HR and Business managers

It is clear from the research findings that organisations are looking for solutions on how to help their employees adapt to the remote and flexible work culture, adopt new talent into a positive working culture, use technology efficiently, and to keep employees motivated and engaged. Our participants who work in HR at a high-professional level have noted that a hybrid-work model will require much thought and strategic planning before it could be considered in the best interest of both the organisations and its employees. Below are some recommendations from both respondents and academic professionals, derived from the results of this DCU study.

1

Start with a purpose-led culture

Overwhelmingly, our respondents said that they want to be measured on the quality of their output and not on the hours they work to produce it. HR plays a vital role in creating, shaping and maintaining a culture aligned with their business strategies and higher-level purpose. Companies have a new opportunity to reimagine how and where work is done, thinking through specific working models, workload design and distribution.

2

Design the employee experience

Additional thought must be given to designing working models - remote, reduced, flexible and hybrid. HR and business managers need to be open to all the possibilities. They need to be able to offer workload solutions to employees without the associated assumption that the employee is simultaneously foregoing their expectation of progression within the organisation.

Role models for the new working patterns need to be visible at all levels in the organisation and should be representative of the organisation's demographics.

3

Recognise the value of physically interacting with colleagues while also investing in technology

Many employers are devising hybrid remote-working strategies for the long term to expand access to talent, increase employee satisfaction, and reduce real-estate costs. Doing so will require careful analysis to determine which activities can be done remotely without a loss of productivity, and then devising an intentional approach to when teams of workers are remote and when they are in the office together. Creativity needs collaboration but some tasks will be more productively and efficiently tackled away from the office and firms will need to invest in appropriate technologies to facilitate this blended working approach.

4

Consider mental health

Flexible working is a major change to traditional work practice, and staff will need to be supported through this change. Faced with new realities of working from home, flexible working and the lack of supervision and physical contact with colleagues, it is important that we look after their staff's mental health (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020b).

5

Get the basics right – especially when working remotely (Fan et al., 2020):

When offering home working it is important to deliver on the motivators and ensure the hygiene factors are in place:

- Create a healthy workspace—encourage, and if possible financially support, workers to create a healthy workspace at home.
- Maintain a routine—encourage employees to stick to a routine and to maintain boundaries between their “work” time and “home” time.
- Do not forget to be social—communication with colleagues is a great stress reliever.
- Encourage well-being practices—organisations should care about their employee’s well-being; it can help reduce absenteeism, boost engagement, and performance.
- Invest in technology— communication tools

6

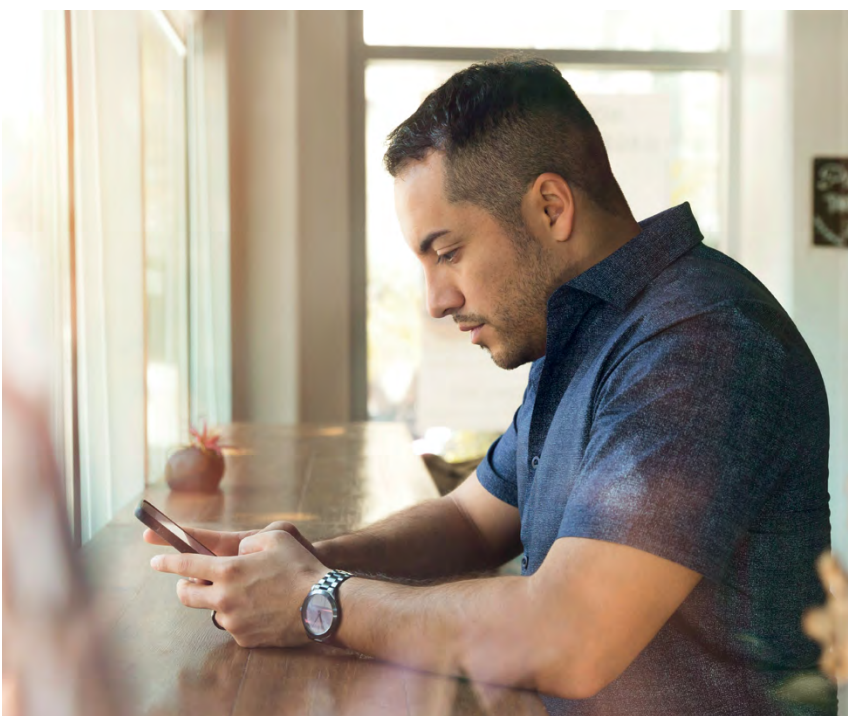
Plan strategically, think long term

It is clear from the research findings that organisations are looking for solutions on how to help their employees adapt to the remote work culture, adopt new talent into a positive working culture, use technology efficiently, and to keep employees motivated and engaged. Our participants who work in HR at a high professional level have noted that a hybrid work model will require much thought and strategic planning before it delivers for both the organisation and its employees.

7

Equip your leadership

Flexible working practices are as new for most managers as they are for employees. Psychological empowerment, positive reinforcement and appreciation for work, and communication are essential for leaders managing non-traditional working arrangements. Organisations must ensure their leadership are trained in these core competencies.



Final Thoughts

By embedding flexibility in their culture, organisations can better understand the core issues of employees and, eventually, respond efficiently to challenges by taking appropriate strategic decisions⁴⁷. The future of work is being shaped by many forces currently. The growing adoption of artificial intelligence in the workplace, and the expansion of the workforce to include both on- and off-balance-sheet talent among these⁴⁸. Digitalisation and globalisation have sparked radical shifts in how we live and work, accelerated beyond anything we could have imagined due to the Covid-19 pandemic. These changes raise essential questions about the viability of our jobs, the support available if we are unable to work or retire, the skills we need for current and future jobs, and what voice we have in shaping these outcomes⁴⁹.

In addition to changing employee needs, new forms of work have emerged due to innovations in business models and work organisation, as well as technological developments (and policy choices). These include an expansion of other non-standard forms of work, such as on-call or zero hours contracts, as well as various forms of own-account work. Atypical and flexible working arrangements can emerge in response to real needs of both employers and workers, and these can be leveraged if considered with an open-mind at a management level. Companies need broader support too in a changing workplace setting, and governments will need to provide more enhanced social protection provisions “to ensure better coverage of workers in non-standard forms of employment and to take into account a reality where jobs are evolving and long-term employment is disappearing”^{50, 51}.

For whichever work context you are currently operating in, we applaud you for furthering your commitment to your organisation and staff by reading this report. The action to learn more, to remain curious, and to take efforts to develop your management practices during this challenging time is no small feat.



⁴⁷ Dirani, K. M. et al. 2020. Leadership competencies and the essential role of human resource development in times of crisis: a response to Covid-19 pandemic, Human Resource Development International, 23(4), pp. 380–394.

⁴⁸ Caminiti, S. 2020. How the Coronavirus Crisis Has Elevated the Role of HR Chiefs in the C-suite, CNBC, April 22

⁴⁹ Deloitte, 2020. Workforce strategies for post COVID-19 recovery. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/technology-and-the-future-of-work.html>

⁵⁰ OECD, 2020. The Future of Work. <https://www.oecd.org/future-of-work/#a-world-reshaped-by-digitalisation>

⁵¹ OECD, 2019. Future of Work report 2019. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/oecd-employment-outlook-2019_9ee00155-en#:~:text=The%202019%20edition%20of%20the,megatrends%20are%20transforming%20the%20labour

Toolkits for HR professionals

As part of our research, we investigated some published guidelines that might be helpful to managers. These resources contain valuable advice on flexible and remote working practices.

Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD): [Responding to the Coronavirus](#)

International Labour Organisation (ILO): [The future of work](#)

McKinsey: [The future of work after COVID-19](#)

Bain & Co: [The future of work is change](#)

WorkJuggle connects highly skilled professionals with flexible, remote and contract work. Please read more about what we do here: <https://workjuggle.com/what-we-do/>

We also provide training on how to implement hybrid working from an inclusive perspective: <https://workjuggle.com/training/>

If you are interested in Recruiting highly skilled professionals please reach out to Alison on Alison@WorkJuggle.com

If you would like to hear more about our Training Programmes please contact Aoife on Aoife@workjuggle.com

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 01-5649211