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HOW HYBRID IS CHANGING THE EXPERIENCE OF WORK

Lynda Gratton is a professor of management practice at the London Business School and founder of the advisory practice HSM. She is an award-winning author on the future of work and the role of the corporation. Her 10 books have sold over a million copies and have been translated into more than 20 languages. Her latest book, co-authored with Andrew J. Scott, is “The New Long Life – a framework for flourishing in a changing world.”

Global recognition of her work includes the Indian Tata prize, the Australian AHRI prize, and the US Fellow of NAHR, she has also received the LBS Best Teacher Award. Lynda served on former Japanese Prime Minister Abe’s “Council for Designing 100-Year Life Society,” is a member of the Council of the World Economic Forum, has chaired the WEF Council on Leadership, and is currently co-chair of the WEF Global Future Council on Work, Wages, and Job Creation, as well as a member of the international advisory board of Equinor.

Hybrid has changed how we think about the office

The pandemic has sparked a global shift in the way work gets done. We are seeing a move away from the traditional, time-synchronized, fixed-place, 9–5 work pattern – towards a hybrid way of working. But how, when and where we work isn't the only thing that's changing. So is our experience of work.

I reflect on my discussion with Fujitsu's Global Head of HR, Hiroki Hiramatsu. By May 2020, only 15% of Fujitsu's employee base considered the office to be the best place to work, with the majority favoring a mix of the home and office – a hybrid model. "We are not going back," he told me this past September. "The two hours many people spend commuting is wasted – we can use that time for education, training, time, with our family."

It is especially relevant now that hybrid working has created additional opportunities for upskilling. As Hiramatsu notes, the time that was previously used for commuting can now be used for something else. With the increasing accessibility of training opportunities through low-cost training and upskilling platforms such as Coursera, the emergence and normalization of hybrid work has created a prime opportunity for employees to develop their skillsets.

Hybrid working has freed up time for upskilling

Jeff Maggioncalda, CEO of the online education platform Coursera, discusses how needs are changing as people become more familiar with online learning delivery following the COVID-19 pandemic – stating, "There has been an amazing amount of sharing and a new spirit of accepting new things." People around the world are embracing digital and being more innovative, creative, and collaborative. There is an opportunity now to leverage new learning habits to really boost the skills agenda – opportunity that has, in part, been created from the freeing-up of people's time.

Most adults are motivated to learn and develop skills to build resilience against current challenges and guard against future shocks – in empowering employees to make use of this free time, managers can create a skill-rich, engaged workforce. Employees may even re-skill in the hope of securing better, or higher-paying roles. Take IBM, whose in-house chatbot, Myca (short for “my career advisor”) uses real-time internal and external data to describe employees’ current skill profiles, show them gateway job opportunities, and highlight how skills gaps may be filled.

If organizations seize this opportunity, they create opportunities for enhancing their workers’ career trajectories. AT&T, for example, is investing over \$200m annually to develop a suite of training programs tailored for higher-value digital jobs, resulting in over 4,200 career pivots, and 70% of open roles being filled internally. In this sense, leaders have a real opportunity to harness hybrid working as an enabler to upskilling their people; time may now be repurposed and invested in formal training, micro-learning, mentoring, or networking. Of course, different employees will have different preferences as to how often they should work from home.

Different preferences to home working have emerged

The pandemic caused a mass shift to hybrid and remote working around the world, giving rise to conversations about work-life balance, well-being, inclusion, and individual preferences. The office is not the single best option for work, but we have also gained an understanding of the types of work best suited for different working arrangements. As one of our clients put forward, “we have the opportunity now to redefine the purpose of the office.”

Our capacity to operate at peak productivity and performance varies dramatically according to our personal preferences. In designing hybrid work, consider the preferences of your employees – and enable others to understand and accommodate these to maintain engagement and productivity.

For British telecom company BT, COVID-19 has created an opportunity to hone and accelerate its long-established home working principles. Principal Innovation Partner, Nicola J Millard, discusses BT as an early adopter of large-scale, experimental work-from-home trials in 1992, where call center operators experienced a positive impact on their engagement, reporting higher energy, well-being, and productivity. The key enablers to this successful work-from-home environment were having a dedicated office “space”; a separate room, large computer screen, and a good chair; “rituals” – such as having a “getting ready” routine – to prepare employees for the workday and create mental barriers between work and home for lack of physical ones; and technology, used to maintain boundaries between collaborative “on” time, and energy-boosting “off” time.

Where some of these enablers simply do not exist, engaging and motivating remote employees may present some challenges, which leaders must be empathetic to.

“The home office” is not a universal experience

With whole families quarantined, the boundaries for workers are dissolving. In place of two transitions (home to work, work to home), there are now multiple transitions (work, look after a child, work, prepare lunch, work, play with infant, etc.). Each transition adversely affects concentration and productivity and, ultimately, creativity.

Executives are becoming more empathetic to these challenges, however. In the past, there has been a veil of ignorance about the challenges, in the sense that the executive could well have had a team of support people (e.g., a nanny, a housekeeper, a cleaner, a gardener).

Now shorn of this team, thanks to varieties of quarantines, lockdowns, and work-from-home orders, executives are experiencing more viscerally the stresses and strains of the work-home challenge. That creates a sense of understanding and empathy that many executives had previously lacked.

It is perhaps this emergent empathy that is proving particularly engaging for employees and levelling the playing field for working parents. Hybrid working allows for greater inclusivity towards employees who may have home and caring responsibilities. The pandemic has caused significant disruption to people's lives, bringing about a greater desire for empathetic leadership, trust, and fairness. In conversations with our clients all over the world, we are finding that an appreciation for empathetic, fair leadership really resonates – people are seeing a different side to their colleagues. Employees feel more at ease to discuss caring responsibilities and non-work commitments – and balance them with the needs of the whole team in relation to the tasks at hand. Brit Insurance has done admirable work on inclusion and fairness.

CEO, Matthew Wilson, and its chief engagement officer, Lorraine Denny, began the design and implementation of new ways of working. Identifying a random selection of 10% of their employee population, who worked together over six months to co-create what became known as the "Brit Playbook" – groups pitched a set of ideas and ways of working in the new hybrid reality.

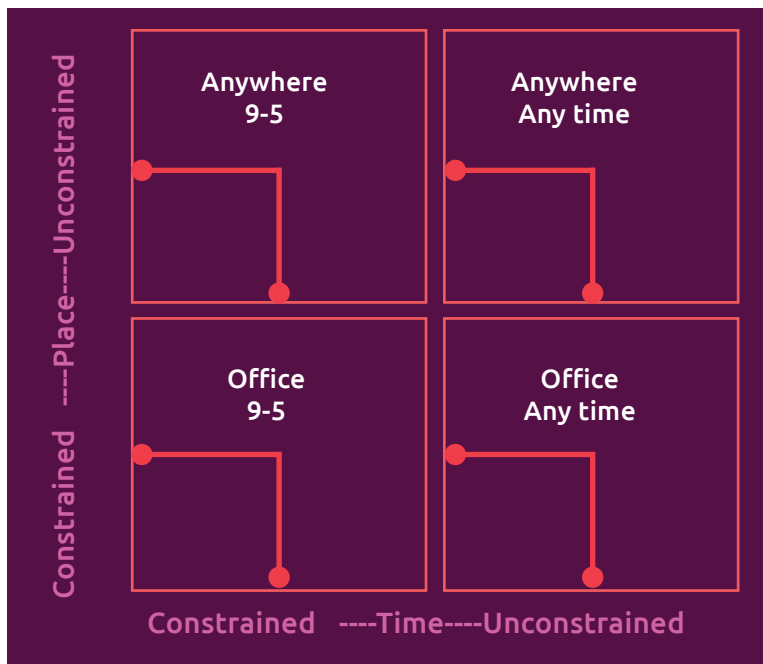


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This balancing act between the individual and the team is key in maintaining and building engagement in hybrid workplaces.

Work arrangements in time and place



When thinking about jobs and tasks, start by understanding the critical drivers of productivity: energy, focus, coordination, and cooperation required for each. There are some jobs for which focus is a primary productivity driver – where working from home allows employees to focus entirely on the task at hand with minimal

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disruptions. Others are more collaboration-driven, where visits to the office provide opportunity for idea sharing and teamwork. Creating a schedule that allows employees to disconnect for extended periods, in sync with their natural energy rhythms, can be hugely beneficial, regardless of where they carry out their work.

To ensure that a hybrid work arrangement works, leaders have to build a context of place and time that accentuates rather than depletes productivity. Working in an office aids cooperation and the cultivation of trusting relationships; but can deplete energy if it involves a long commute and hours sitting at a desk.

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The key message here is to start by identifying key jobs and tasks, determine what the drivers of productivity and performance are for each, and think about the arrangements that would serve them best.”

So how can managers ensure that they harness this changing experience of work?

- **Be open to experimentation:** Individual preferences will take time to become clear; in the early stages of the BT experiments, the productivity of home workers fell sharply before rising.
- **Discuss preferences and role-based performance drivers with employees and review these over time:** Hybrid work is not the only thing evolving, so will employees’ own individual circumstances.
- **Keep the trade-offs in mind:** Working from home will boost energy and focus but hinder colleagues’ ability to collaborate, and employees will have different preferences.
- **Remain open and empathetic to individual work-from-home requirements:** Not everyone has access to an ideal work environment. While some employees will be glad to boost their focus with working from home arrangements, others’ focus may be inhibited for lack of an appropriate home office setup, for example.
- Finally, really make use of the free time made available through hybrid working. **Allow employees to leverage new learning opportunities**, making significant investments in providing resources that support those who are motivated to learn.

