The future workplace is hybrid: are you ready?

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How would you answer the question 'Are we clear yet what the problem is that hybrid working is trying to solve?' It came up in the webinar chat the other week when I and some other panel members were discussing a related question, 'The future workplace is hybrid – are you ready?' (You can listen to the full discussion here)

What's interesting about hybrid working is that has leaped into full view as one of the outcomes of the pandemic experience. For office workers, the pre-pandemic 'working from home' practice, has become much more widespread (among certain types of workers), accepted, and facilitated by technologies. (See the UK's statistics on this here)

Currently, every consulting company and business journal in the world (ok maybe that is an exaggeration) is offering, advice, opinion, how-to, how-not-to, white papers, reports, frameworks, pointers, and so on, on hybrid working. It's getting very confusing. Language use/terminology adds to the confusion. Some see hybrid as 'remote' or working from home i.e. place-based, others include in the definition flexibility i.e. time-based.

To design a hybrid workplace first means recognizing that time and place are two different, non-comfortable dimensions but they are not mutually exclusive. One of the points emerging from our discussion was that organizations should agree on a clear and specific definition of what hybrid working is – just place, just time, time and place, etc. for their organization. Lynda Gratton, in her HBR article How to do hybrid right, offers more on this place/time question.

If you can clearly define what hybrid working is for your specific organization then you might be able to work out what problem it is trying to solve. But I'm dubious about looking for a solution to a complex issue – usually, there are multiple possible solutions and the temptation is to leap into the first one that presents.

Additionally, if we take a view that hybrid working is not trying to 'solve a problem', rather it has already solved a problem – that being the pandemic lockdown prohibitions of people going to a desk-based job in an office – then we can ask what have we learned from this so far, and what are the

opportunities hybrid working offers going from here?

An evidence-based research paper, 'Why Working From Home (WFH) Will Stick', offers some start-points. (Note the term they use is working from home, rather than hybrid). The research found five reasons why WFH will stick:

First, they found the WFH experiences were better-than-expected. Many people enjoyed the experience of being able to live in a place of their choosing and still be at work. They found they had a better work/life balance and the rates of sickness dropped.

Second, they noted organizations were making new investments in physical and human capital that enable WFH and organizations would be keen to foster a good return on that investment.

Third, researchers observed that because so many desk-based office workers were WFH during the pandemic that the stigma of doing so was greatly diminished (compared with pre-pandemic times). When leaders were seen to be grappling with WFH in the same way others were it became a more normalized way of working.

Fourth, researchers highlighted the lingering concerns people have about crowds, commuting, and contagion risks. Many office work spaces are being re-designed to maximize the health and safety of their employees and visitors, again an investment that must see some return on it.

Finally, they noted that there had been a pandemic-driven surge in technological innovations that support WFH. (Indeed there has been a surge in patent applications in technology for hybrid working).

The research survey data also projected three consequences of more widespread WFH,

'First, employees will enjoy large benefits from greater remote work, especially those with higher

earnings. Second, the shift to WFH will directly reduce spending in major city centers by at least 5-10 percent relative to the pre-pandemic situation. Third, our data on employer plans and the relative productivity of WFH imply a 5 percent productivity boost in the post-pandemic economy due to re-optimized working arrangements. Only one-fifth of this productivity gain will show up in conventional productivity measures because they do not capture the time savings from less commuting.'

The findings and the consequences of these are all opportunities to design organizations that will make hybrid working work well minimizing the downsides

From an organization design perspective, in thinking about hybrid working consider it not as looking for a problem to solve, but rather as an opportunity-state we are now in and have to carefully reflect on in order to apply what we have learned in the past year.   Going back to the panel discussion the key points on maximizing hybrid working opportunities centered around each organization getting good answers to these questions:

 'What are we trying to accomplish?', be critical and consider what could work for your organization and how it affects the entire workforce, avoiding the bandwagon effect.

What does hybrid working mean for our organization? Unless there is a clear definition, it's very difficult to design your organization around it. Webinar participants warned of the dangers of a blanket policy-driven approach or focusing only on the proportion of homeworking to office-based days. They also homed in on the 'fairness' aspect. In mixed workforces of desk-based and frontline workers e.g. hospitals, retailers, how can (or can) all employees have access to hybrid (and flexible) working?

To be successful in hybrid working what needs to be designed and/or redesigned? Consider the multiple aspects – the formal/hard ones including policies, workspace, systems, processes, protocols, and technology and the informal/soft ones including leadership development, interactions, attitudes, and behaviors.

How do we develop/maintain a healthy organizational culture in hybrid working? Consider your culture: how can we design those cultural norms, interactions, and experiences that people have when they're in the same space together, in a hybrid world?

SIDEBAR: One point that I'm curious about is the actual proportion of a nation's workforce who are in desk-based/office located roles. Given the volume of information about hybrid working, it's tempting to assume that it's a high proportion, but I don't know that it is. I asked the ONS if they could provide a rough estimate of the proportion of UK workers in desk-based jobs compared with those in non-desk-based jobs. They came back saying: 'Unfortunately, we don't publish anything on desk-based jobs. However, estimates of employment by occupation from the annual population survey (APS) are available through the NOMIS website. If you are happy to make assumptions on which occupations are desk-based, you could probably use these estimates. We have also published employment by occupation estimates on our website. However, these estimates are not up-to-date, as the dataset was discontinued following a user consultation.'

What's your view of hybrid working? Let me know.

*The post "**The future workplace is hybrid: are you ready?**" was first published by Dr. Naomi Stanford here* https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/future-workplace-hybrid-you-ready-naomi-stanford/

About Dr. Naomi Stanford

Dr. Naomi Stanford is an organization design practitioner and author. During her earlier UK career, Dr Stanford was an employee of large multinational companies, including Price Waterhouse, British Airways, Marks & Spencer, and Xerox. She moved to the US mid-career working as an organization design consultant to a range of organizations in the government, non-profit and private sectors. She then returned to the UK to work in the government sector. Naomi is now free-lancing as an organization design consultant/adviser. Additionally, she writes books, articles, and a weekly blog (over 800 so far). Naomi speaks at conferences and tweets regularly on organization design. Currently, she is writing the third edition of her Economist book 'A Guide to Organisation Design', to be published in March 2022.

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