

THE FUTURE OF HYBRID WORK IN POST-PANDEMIC TIMES

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Abstract: *The form and nature of the labor process have always been shaped by the economic, political and cultural characteristics of the society. The story of all that means work process is unfolding and adapting to the major changes happening around the world. A crucial turning point in this story was the year 2020, when COVID-19 required everyone to leave the office and work from home. From 2021, the opportunity to return to the workplace was gradually offered. The need for this "return to the office" in conditions of still increased uncertainty has forced the rethinking of work models, and, on this background, has emerged the hybrid work, a flexible model with high efficiency. This paper aims to explore the new reality of the workplace, presenting hybrid work and the opportunities that come with the adoption by companies of this way of working, which is proving to be embraced by more and more employers as a sustainable and efficient one.*

Key words: *Hybrid work, Office, New normality, COVID-19, Sustainability.*

JEL Classification Codes: J24, J28.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, there have been periods when the way of working underwent radical changes. The year 2020 represented such a turning point, with the health crisis forcing employees to change their work environment, and with offices "moving" at home. The data validates that the work-from-home model has worked, passing the test and helping companies overcome the Covid-19 crisis. [20]

The year 2021, still marked by uncertainty, relaunched the opportunity to return to work, but with an urgent need to develop a new and more efficient work model. [14] Thus, the term "return to work" takes on many nuances. Encompassing all the lessons that companies have been forced to learn in order to survive and that have radically changed the pre-crisis perceptions of quality of life at work, the employee expectations from employers and the business organization models, the workplace hybrid is emerging as a flexible model, seen by many as a key strategy for ensuring workplace productivity for years to come. [6]

2. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON WORKPLACES

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the labor market, bringing disruptions globally. The short-term consequences were severe, with many companies and industries facing problems such as economic slowdowns, reduced demand and temporary business closures. This led to the loss of jobs for millions of people and to a rise of the unemployment (*Table no 1*). [18]



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Table no 1 Yearly unemployment rate, 2019 - 2021

Country /Year	2019	2020	2021	Country /Year	2019	2020	2021
Argentina	9,84	11,46	8,74	Iceland	3,51	5,48	6,02
Austria	4,49	5,36	6,18	Israel	3,80	4,33	4,32
Bulgaria	4,23	5,12	5,27	Japan	2,35	2,80	2,80
Brazil	12,10	13,93	13,34	Lithuania	6,26	8,49	7,11
Canada	5,66	9,46	7,46	Luxembourg	5,59	6,77	5,25
Colombia	9,96	15,04	13,90	Latvia	6,31	8,10	7,51
Germany	3,14	3,86	3,57	Mexico	3,48	4,45	4,09
Denmark	5,02	5,64	5,06	Montenegro	15,13	17,88	16,87
Spain	14,10	15,53	14,78	Netherlands	3,38	3,82	4,21
Estonia	4,51	6,96	6,18	Norway	3,69	4,42	4,37
Finland	6,69	7,76	7,61	Portugal	6,46	6,80	6,58
United Kingdom	3,74	4,47	4,83	Romania	3,91	5,03	5,59
Croatia	6,62	7,51	7,61	Sweden	6,83	8,29	8,72
Hungary	3,42	4,25	4,05	Ukraine	8,19	9,48	9,83
Ireland	4,95	5,62	6,19	United States	3,67	8,05	5,35

Source: The World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS>, retrived at 21.06.2022

This period has left its mark in different ways on various industries, and the most affected industries, due to travel restrictions and assembly bans, were: air transport, public transport, tourism, restaurants, retail, automotive, constructions, entertainment, sports and events.

But there were also sectors, such as technology and health services, delivery services, which saw an increase in activity and needed more employees to cope with the increased demand, but in accordance with the new protocols to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. [18]

According to the DECISION MAKER PANEL [12], which gathers information from financial officers of UK companies operating in a wide range of industries, and which provides a direct insight into the expectations and uncertainty in the business world, in certain cases such as the health crisis, during April 2020 - March 2021, the impact of the crisis on employees was different depending on the industry. The percentage of those who are still employed but not required to work any hours ("on furlough"), of those who are unable to work (due to sickness, self-isolation, childcare, etc.), and of those who are continuing to work from home or on business premises, is presented in *figure no. 1*.

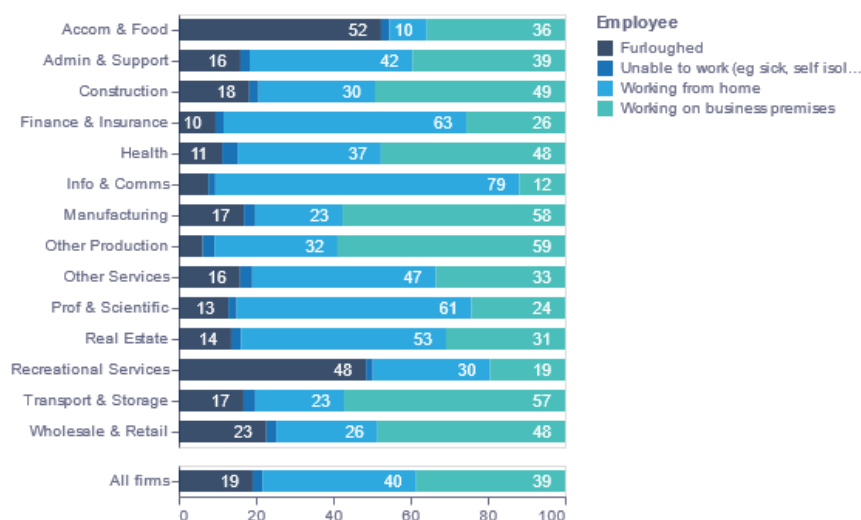


Figure no 1 The percentage of employees by categories

Source: DMP in Anayi Lena, Bloom Nick, Bunn Philip, Mizen Paul, Oikonomou Myrto, Smetanka Pawel, Thwaites Gregory, *Update: Which firms and industries have been most affected by Covid-19?*, BUSINESS, BIG & SMALL, 5 May 2021, <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/update-which-firms-and-industries-have-been-most-affected-by-covid-19>, retrived at 20.08.2022

In conclusion, we can say that the pandemic has had a major impact on jobs, with severe negative effects for employees in certain industries. In this context, companies have been looking for solutions to protect jobs and support the employees affected by the pandemic. Thus, as offices became unaffordable, many people quickly adapted to working from home. [18]

3. HYBRID WORK – A NEW WAY OF WORKING. BUT WHAT DOES IT MEANS?

The hybrid work is a relatively recent concept, which gained popularity during the pandemic and which turns out to be the strategy most often adopted in the post-pandemic period, being one of the categories that fall under the umbrella of flexible work forms.

The flexible working refers to a range of agile working practices that enable fruitful collaboration between teams whose members are located in different locations and incorporates all types of part-time work, including flexitime, compressed hours, annual hours, and job-sharing, remote work - anywhere outside a standard office -, freelance careers and even changes to the standard five-day week. Some of these types are, in Romania, still proposals to make labor legislation more flexible. [3] (Figure no. 2)

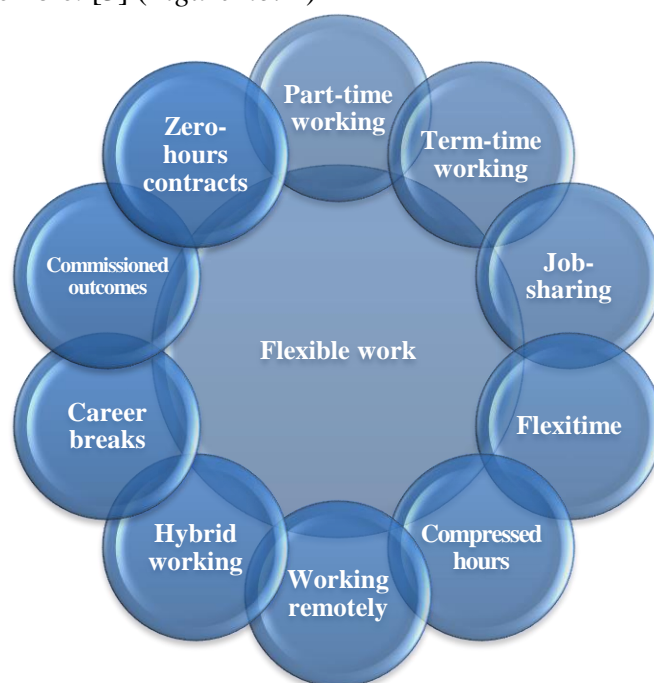


Figure no. 2 Flexible work forms

Source: CIPD, *Flexible working practices. Explores the benefits of flexible working, the types of arrangements commonly used and gives practical tips on implementing flexible working practices*, 2022, <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/reasons/flexible-working/factsheet#ref>, retrieved at 20.07.2022.

Hybrid working is a form of flexible working that involves the employer requiring employees to physically come to the employer's office only a few days a week, giving them the freedom to choose how to work the remaining working days (usually, but not necessarily, at home), depending on their needs and job requirements. [22] Hybrid work can take many forms. Depending on the organization and the nature of the work undertaken, this may mean, for example, that employees come to the office most days, a few days a week, or only meet once a quarter [9].

Hybrid work is therefore a flexible approach to getting work done and achieving positive results, and starts from the premise that the most important thing is not where or when the work is done, but that it is done. [16] As a result, in hybrid work, employees are typically measured by

results achieved and productivity, rather than hours physically spent in an office. *Figure no 3* shows 4 possible major hybrid work models.

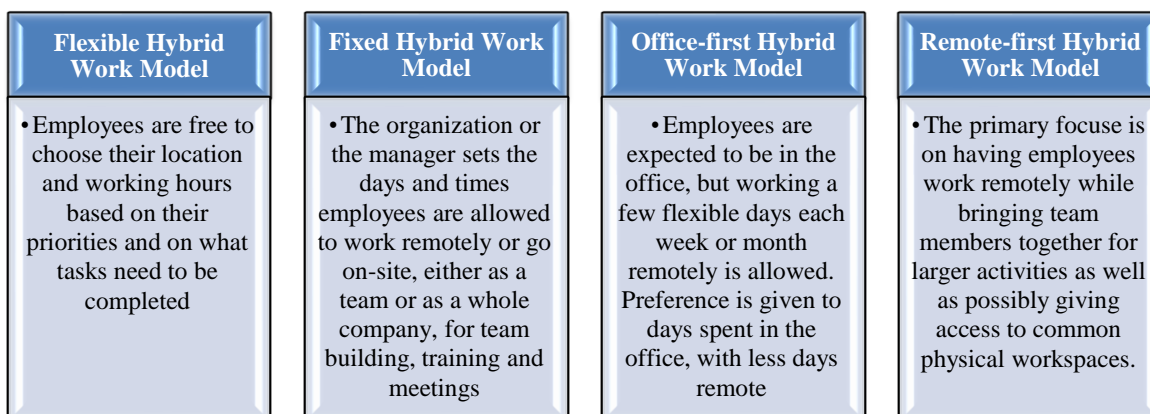


Figure no. 3 Hybrid work models

Source: Moffitt Drew, *What Is Hybrid Work And Why Employees Like It So Much*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.kumospace.com/blog/what-is-hybrid-work>, retrieved at 22.08.2022; Dale Nikki, *Hybrid Work Statistics: What The Future Of Work Looks Like*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.picked.ai/magazine/hybrid-work-statistics-what-the-future-of-work-looks-like/>, retrieved at 30.10.2022.

According to the Work Trend Index Annual Report published by Microsoft, 38% of employees in the hybrid system say they don't know when and why to come back to the office. This can be a wake-up call for employers, who should rethink the role of the office and present a clearer hybrid work model. Microsoft points out that there is no one-size-fits-all approach: some companies may establish team agreements to define hybrid work, others may try experimenting with "team Tuesdays" or with office hours between 12:00 and 14:00, two days a week. [19]

To successfully adopt a hybrid work model, some adaptations need to be made, with a special focus on the four dimensions of hybrid work (*figure no 4*). In a study conducted by Cisco, respondents rated the degree to which their organization focuses on four dimensions: policy, people and work culture, technology and facilities. According to the responses, the area of greatest interest was the technology (51%), followed by people and work culture (33%), policies (12%) and facilities (4%). But to successfully adopt a hybrid working model, the action does not have to be taken only on one dimension. For example, while investments in technology are critical to the success of hybrid work, they must be paired with investments in transformative work policy, culture and facilities [10].

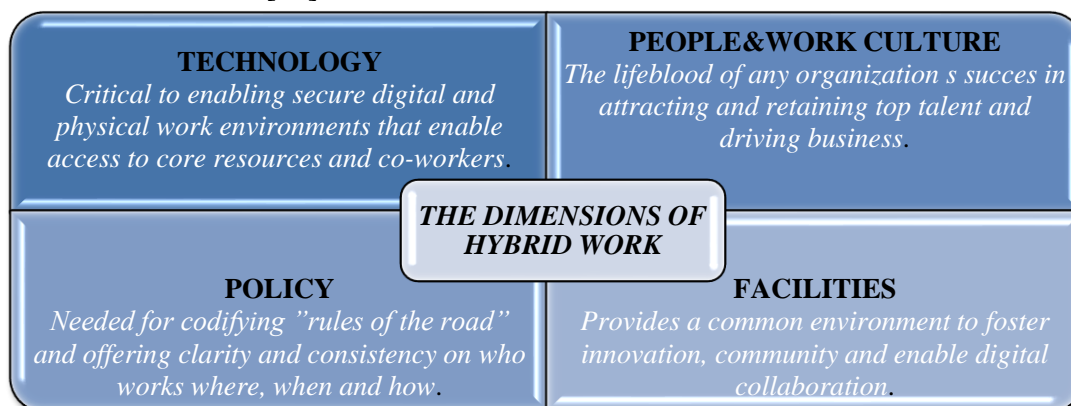


Figure no. 4 The dimensions of hybrid work

Source: CISCO, *Hybrid Work Maturity Study: Executive Summary*, <https://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/solutions/hybrid-work/hybrid-work-maturity-study-executive-summary.html?tid=ossdc000283>, retrieved at 22.09.2022.

According to the Microsoft study, although companies are making efforts and progress in terms of investments in technology and space, things are far from being very clear when it comes to organizational culture. Thus, 43% of remote workers and 44% of hybrid workers say they don't feel included in meetings. As a result, while only 27% of organizations have established a new hybrid work meeting label, 54% of leaders are currently redesigning meeting spaces for hybrid work or plan to do so in the next periods [21].

In conclusion, we can say that there is no hybrid work model that suits every organization or employee, and adapting to this work model can prove to be an ongoing process that requires constant monitoring and adjustments to adapt to the needs and the challenges specific to each company.

4. THE HYBRID WORK – BETWEEN PROS AND CONS

When it comes to hybrid work, it can offer a number of benefits for both the employee and the employer, but it also brings a number of challenges that must be overcome (*table no 2*). Among the advantages that the health crisis, respectively the hybrid work, have brought to the professional life of employees, we list [4]:

- ✓ **Flexibility:** Hybrid working allows employees to plan their working time flexibly, combining work from home with work in the office, which can improve the quality of their personal life.
- ✓ **Productivity/Efficiency:** Employees can work in more comfortable and controlled environments, which can lead to increased productivity, especially because they have more freedom and less pressure to focus on work. A study [2] shows that remote workers are 22% more productive than their colleagues who are working in the office. Moreover, when they are not working in the office, employees can choose the best time to be most productive, even if that means they decide to work outside the classic working hours, which is all about effective time management [22]. Hybrid working can improve employee efficiency by reducing the time that they spent in traffic and eliminating other distractions from the office.
- ✓ **An improved quality of life:** Hybrid working can improve the quality of life of employees because it allows them to work from home - a more comfortable environment and to focus on family and personal activities, which can reduce stress. Additionally, having the freedom to choose gives to an employee a greater sense of happiness. These benefits also reach the employer, translating into higher levels of employee retention and loyalty [22].
- ✓ **Cost and resource savings:** Hybrid work can bring substantial savings to the employee, considering the fact that a number of expenses are reduced, such as: those with transportation, those with food, considering that, working from home, allows them to shop at the supermarket, thus avoiding meals taken out, in restaurants or cafes. For the employer, the hybrid work model can reduce costs related to office space, maintenance, utilities and other expenses related to the office location because employees no longer need work space every day. Furthermore, resource utilization is optimized as employees can work from home with their personal equipment and have access to the necessary resources through technology.
- ✓ **The connection with the colleagues:** Hybrid work allows employees to connect with their colleagues at the office and maintain personal relationships, while relieving the stress associated with working in a busy office environment.
- ✓ **Wider talent pool** [5]: Companies can attract employees from outside the geographical area where the main office is located, which can lead to a wider range of talent and skills.

Among the problems/limitations that the health crisis, respectively the hybrid work, have brought to the professional life of employees and implicitly within the companies, the studies highlight the following:

- **Difficult communication and collaboration:** Hybrid work can make communication between colleagues and between employees and managers more difficult because employees may be in different locations: some may be in the office while others work from home. This also leaves its mark on intercollegiate collaboration, which can turn out to be more difficult, especially in the case of projects that require direct interaction.
- **Lack of direct interaction with colleagues and the emergence of a feeling of social isolation:** Hybrid work can deprive employees of direct interaction with their colleagues and managers, which can affect personal relationships and team dynamics.
- **Difficulty in separating work and personal life:** Employees may have trouble separating work and personal life when working from home or in overlapping environments. This can also reflect on how the employee manages his time, as difficulties may arise for the employee who also has family or personal responsibilities while working.
- **Digital presenteeism** - workers may feel like they have to be always available online. [9]
- **The risk of burnout.** Employees who work remotely find that they often work longer hours than they would in the office, whether or not they are more productive. This could be a way of showing that they don't slack off when they're not at the office [11].
- **The imperious need for a solid technology infrastructure:** Hybrid work requires a solid technology infrastructure to enable employees to work effectively from home, which may require investment in technology and equipment to facilitate hybrid work, and can arise many technical issues.
- **Difficulty in monitoring productivity and evaluating performance:** Managers may have difficulty monitoring employee productivity in a hybrid environment.

Table no. 2 Advantages and disadvantages of hybrid work

Advantages / Disadvantages	Percentage respondents	
	OpinionWay Survey	CIPD Report
Perceived advantages		
More flexibility of working hours	28	41
Better work-private life balance	24	69
More efficient use of technology	23	
More effective communication and better working relationships	20	19
An increase in productivity	19	43
Better sharing of knowledge and documents	17	
Increased Performance/Efficiency	17	19
Implementation of new effective software	16	
Faster execution of tasks	16	
Closer contact with colleagues	15	
Greater technology competency	14	
Better communication with customers or consumers	12	
Improved employee satisfaction		48
Improved employee wellbeing		36
Increased ability to retain employees		29
Increased ability to attract new employees		28
Perceived disadvantages		
A feeling of isolation from peers	27	
Increased stress or mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression		44
A loss of quality in communication	23	
Less work-private life balance	18	
Difficulty in working as expected for employees who lack space or privacy		43
A drop in productivity	17	20

Advantages / Disadvantages	Percentage respondents	
	OpinionWay Survey	CIPD Report
A slowdown in the speed of execution of tasks	15	
Decreased efficiency	14	
Difficulties in communicating with customers	14	
A deterioration of the exchange of knowledge and documents	14	
Difficulties in using technology at work	11	
Installing unnecessary software	11	
Less flexibility of working hours	10	
Less efficient use of technology	9	28
Employee conflict due to challenges of communication and team relationships		34
Difficulty of conducting appropriate workplace risk assessments		31
Concerns over cyber/data security through employees using non-secure systems		28

Source: *Sondage OpinionWay pour Slack - Les employés de bureau et les technologies* - Juillet 2021, pg. 11, 15; CIPD, *An update on flexible and hybrid working practices Report*, April 2022, pg. 7, 9

5. HOW WILLING ARE THE LABOR MARKET ACTORS TO ADOPT THE HYBRID WORK MODEL?

The willingness of labor market actors to adopt the hybrid work model varies, depending on the individual needs and preferences of each employee and on the culture and policy of the company in which they work.

Those at Microsoft show that employees no longer place so much value on perks like free food and a corner desk, but prioritize family, personal life, health and well-being. [19] Thus, 47% of respondents say they are more willing to prioritize family and personal life over work than they were before the pandemic. What's more, 53% of them say they are more willing to prioritize their health and well-being over work than before. [21] Several surveys show that a large part of employees would like to continue to work at least partially from home even after the pandemic (*Figure no. 5*).

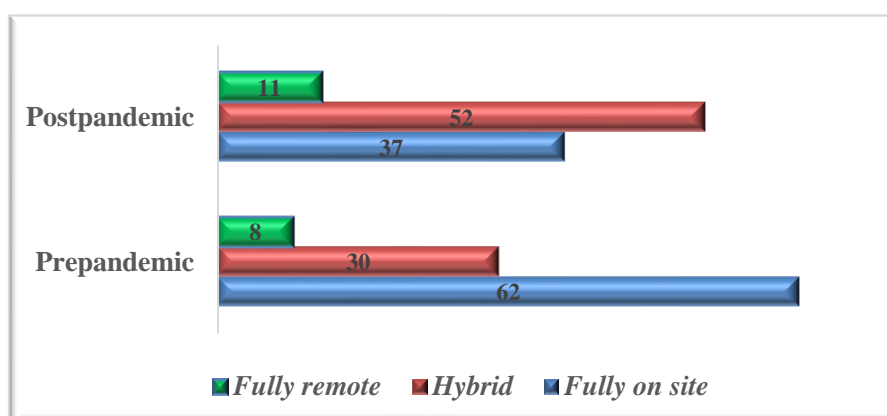


Figure no. 5 The Working model before and after COVID-19 pandemic and the preferred Working model after COVID-19 pandemic

Source: De Smet Aaron, Dowling Bonnie, Mysore Mihir, Reich Angelika, *It's time for leaders to get real about hybrid*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/its-time-for-leaders-to-get-real-about-hybrid>, retrieved at 05.10.2021.

Several sectors, where technology plays an important role, are likely to adopt hybrid working models, even after the COVID-19 pandemic. Among them we mention: *Technology and IT*

services; Financial and insurance services; Research and development; Marketing and advertising; Professional services (ex: Accounting and consulting companies).

After the COVID-19 pandemic, many companies have retained the hybrid work model, giving employees the option to work from home or from the office depending on their preferences and needs. Some of these companies include [27] [28]:

1. **Spotify** - the music streaming platform launched, in February 2021, Spotify's "Work From Anywhere" program, which offers employees remote, in-person and hybrid work options, as well as more flexible living options if an employee wants to relocate. Thus, they have provided more flexibility to employees by introducing My Work Mode, as well as flexibility when it comes to the workplace. My Work Mode assumes that employees will be able to work full-time from home, from the office, or a combination of the two. The exact mix of how to work at home and in the office is a decision that each employee and their manager make together. Location options provide more flexibility as to which country and city each employee works from. Furthermore, if someone chooses a location that is not near a Spotify office, the company supports them with a co-working space subscription if they want to work from an office. [26]
2. **Google** is one of the companies that adopted a hybrid work model after the COVID-19 pandemic. The company announced that in 2021, employees have the option to work from the office or from home, depending on personal and business needs. Google has adopted a hybrid work model, offering employees flexibility and freedom in choosing the way in which they carry out their activity, while also preserving its office values and culture. The advantages of hybrid working at Google include [15]:
 - ✓ Considering that 60% of employees want to work in a hybrid schedule at a fixed location. Then they come to work three days in the office and two days in any other place where they work efficiently, having the freedom to decide which days and from where they work.
 - ✓ If Googlers decide to come to the office, they can reserve a desk through an internal tool and will automatically be seated next to or in close proximity to their team members.
 - ✓ 20% of Googlers continue to work remotely full-time.
 - ✓ 20% of the employees work in the newly established office space.
 - ✓ Up to 4 weeks per year may be spent temporarily working from a different location, anywhere in the world, than the head office.
 - ✓ Additional fixed "reset" days for all employees so they can recover even better. Google designates several days a year for Googlers to rest and take a day off.
 - ✓ Concentrated hours, which means that employees work on priority projects at certain times.
 - ✓ Google has also made changes to the layout of the workplace to refine this model in practice. The purpose-built 'Campfire' meeting spaces in offices - circular meeting spaces with seating and large screens at eye level. [25]
3. **Apple** announced that its employees would work from the office 3 days a week and had the choice to work from home 2 days a week. Such companies with hybrid work models will be even more attractive to employees.
4. **Microsoft** - Employees can work from anywhere for 50% of the week. Employees can go 100% remote with management approval.
5. **Quora** – Most of its employees opted to not come back to the office so the company adopted a remote-first hybrid model.
6. **BP** - In 2021, the energy giant informed its office-based employees that they would only have to be in the office three days a week and they get to work from home for the other two days.

7. **American Express** - allows its U.S and U.K employees to work a three-day week in the office and to choose if they want to remain in the office for the next two days or work from home virtually.

In conclusion we can say that some people are very interested in this option because it allows them to combine their professional and personal lives, while others would feel more comfortable in an office environment or would need direct interaction with their colleagues to feel productive.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic has provided both employees and employers with many lessons, and one thing is certain: that employees, even if they will not return to a world where they are allowed to work from home, will be encouraged to be flexible. Even though the office will no longer serve as the only place where work is done, it will not be completely abandoned, as it is the place where people come together to collaborate, innovate and build culture, with face-to-face interactions being a valuable part, necessary to maintain a healthy and positive employee culture. [20]

If before the pandemic the perspective of employee productivity was paramount, nowadays the financial, mental, physical and relational dimensions are important parts of the equation. In this context, hybrid working models will be essential in the coming years and, in this organizational revolution, the winners will be those who can inspire and support real change to meet both the aspirations of employees and the strategic challenges of productivity and business growth [17], ensuring more chances to keep their employees motivated, regardless of their work environment [24], transforming themselves into agile, adaptable and future-ready organizations [13].

Firms do not yet fully understand the nuances of hybrid work, and it remains to be determined which models will work better and which will not. For that, the pros and cons must be weighed to help inform any company's decision [5].

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