The hybrid model of working:

What is it and why it matters to your employees' mental health

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unmind

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Introduction

In March 2020, everything changed.

Seemingly overnight, employers and employees were forced to adapt to the most significant change in working conditions since, well, forever. WFH – an acronym you'd never heard of that we now don't need to explain – became the new reality for many of us.

While for some, it meant a better work-life balance, for many, it meant loneliness and isolation – as the safe space of home became a daunting prison of always-on working. And it was all done against the frankly terrifying backdrop of a pandemic.

Now, just as some of us are finding ways to take this all in our stride, another significant change is lurking around the corner. Hybrid (or blended) working is the next big buzzphrase many of us will commit to memory as we split our time between WFH and our physical workplaces.

But here's the proverbial spanner in our work: hybrid has an unlimited number of variables that will change by the type of job you do, where you do it, and who you do it for.
It may liberate families bringing up a young child or further entrench more profound gender inequality.
Encourage flexibility or penalize those working remotely. And it has the potential to squash shared experiences and workplace laughs – a crucial cog in everyone's wellbeing.
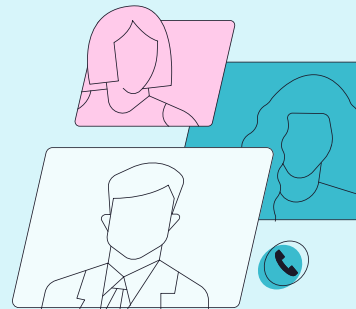
In this handbook, we'll explain the basics, examine employers' responsibilities and point out the challenges of hybrid. We'll also provide practical advice for developing an HR strategy that harnesses this new reality, mixing research with guidance from the pros. And while we'll point out some of the symptoms to watch out for from those who may be struggling, we'll also move the conversation beyond a binary notion of employees with a mental health 'problem' versus those who are happy.

Mental health is something we all have all the time. Only by proactively working to help everyone be the best they can be, all the time, can we prevent more serious mental health problems from occurring further down the line.

Meet the experts

To help, we've enlisted the advice of professionals with top-notch knowledge in HR, psychology and workplaces themselves.

Gemma Dale is an experienced HR director and chartered fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Britain's premier body for all things HR. Gemma is also a lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University's Business School.

Kate Daley is Unmind's Psychology Lead, as well as a clinical psychologist. Kate's a champion of how technology can help transform mental health care for the better.

Enrico Sanna is the co-founder and CEO of FORA, which leases co-working and private office space. Enrico is at the forefront of a global revolution in how we work and understands the importance of human interaction for our mental health and creativity.
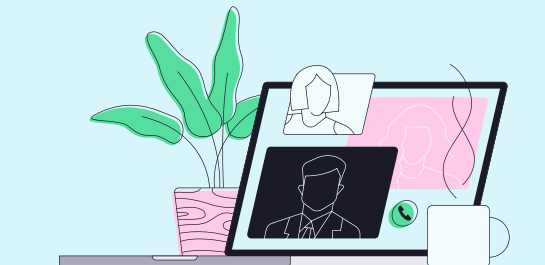
How to pick a hybrid structure that works for everyone

Hybrid working can be rolled out in many ways. For instance, it could mean three days in the office and two from home, certain days where we all meet up, or whole weeks on and off commuting. It's not realistic to think everybody's going to have the kind of job that allows complete choice.

Less than 50% of our working population are office workers. Although an estimated 27% will still be working from home through 2021, 36.2 million Americans (22% of the workforce) will be working remotely by 2025. **Source: Upwork's Future Workforce Report**.

When people can work completely within their personal preferences, it can generally be a predictor of good wellbeing. But too much choice can trigger stress and anxiety. There are practical problems you may not have considered, too. For instance, if you have everyone at home Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and on Thursday you all come in, that could be a stress factor if you don't have enough desks. HR managers and employers, therefore, have a responsibility to create bespoke policies based on listening to staff concerns. Try to meet in the middle: allowing flexibility within a structure often makes the most sense.

"

"Routine is important. It's having that basic feel for what the day looks like."

– Gemma Dale, HR Director.

The WFH revolution: here to stay?

Is the hybrid model a temporary plaster or a new, lasting normal? Of course, it's impossible to say, for sure, if WFH alone is here to stay, because it's been conducted from the vantage point of most of us still living and working through a global pandemic, with its unique challenges. But, nonetheless, most research seems to indicate that it has been hugely popular among employees.

> **"Agile and flexible working is here to stay. The distributed workforce isn't going to go away once the pandemic ends."**
>
> – Enrico Sanna, CEO & Co-founder, FORA.

A report by Adecco that quizzed 1,000 US employees alongside workers in eight other countries found 75% of employees thought a hybrid approach was the best way forward. Employers, too, seem to have been impressed by the productivity of their workforce during the last year. A survey from CIPD, the professional association for HR professionals, found that almost two-thirds agreed it either has no negative impact or, in fact, a positive impact on efficiency.

18% The proportion of people WFH, pre-Covid

22% The proportion of people likely to be working from home all the time, post-Covid

**37%** The proportion of people likely to be WFH regularly, post-Covid

(Source: CIPD report on employer expectations, July 2020)

There are other, more tangible, benefits for employers too. Soon, businesses will be able to hire staff from a much wider geographic area, while the reduction in time and money spent commuting will take pressure off our transport infrastructure and boost spending in local communities. It will, therefore, encourage employers to recruit and retain a more diverse workforce.

But these changes will mean companies have to be proactive in adapting, too. That same CIPD survey we mentioned showed 44% of employers are putting in place new measures to support home working, and 66% will change their policies to adapt to this new reality, too.

There will of course be doubts. The Monday to Friday, 9 to 5, has been hardwired into our very souls since the Industrial Revolution. There's a very distinct possibility we'll fade back. The priority for a progressive, people-first employer should be not to ignore the dissenting voices as such but to shape what the future looks like based on the needs of the business and its workers.
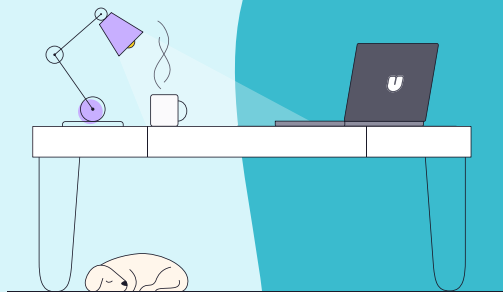
3 ways to mentally prepare for returning to the office

> **"People have had a consistent message over a year now: stay at home, stay away from other people, don't go out, don't go on public transport. Unpicking that is going to be difficult."**
>
> – Gemma Dale, HR Director.

The transition to home working was done in an emergency and it was done at speed. It involved the complexities of a pandemic, homeschooling children, possibly having Covid yourself or losing a loved one who had it. The advantage of the move to hybrid is that this time there's breathing space to form a strategy, but there will be caveats.

For example, employers need to cater for workers who return mentally, socially and perhaps physically wounded by the last year. The implications of the pandemic, from a mental health point of view, will have a very long tail.

That's not even considering the very real physical condition that is long Covid, which, according to non-profit group FAIR Health research, affects nearly 25% of Covid-19 patients.

How we can prepare:

1. **Educate leaders.** Hybrid working strategies should teach managers to be empathetic and individual. Make sure leaders understand Covid's long-term mental health implications, how to spot the signs of mental ill-health, and the right way to talk about wellbeing. Your strategy should be proactive – geared towards prevention rather than cure.

2. **Create a safe space.** Make it easy for managers to check in on people's worries and see how they're faring – even if it's mere watercooler chatter via Zoom. It's about good communication. Sometimes these things can be lost digitally when you're not in person. Try to avoid micromanaging because it can be stressful when you're on the receiving end of it. And be careful about the language you use to avoid causing a divide.

3. **Make digital tools accessible.** Some employees may initially feel more comfortable seeking help online, rather than approaching a manager in the office. And in a hybrid world, many employees won't have the option of approaching someone, or may find video platforms intimidating for what can be sensitive conversations. Digital platforms can both provide advice and bridge the gap to making that physical connection.

Early intervention: How to spot the signs of struggling

> **"Getting emails at all times can be stressful. In writing, people can also come across as more abrupt."**
>
> – Dr Kate Daley, Psychology Lead, Unmind.

It can be hard to spot if the team aren't coping when they're in front of you, harder still if they're WFH, but perhaps even more muddled when we're in the middle. You're looking for people who are different from their baseline selves. For example, if you've got someone who is always the first to volunteer for something, but then they suddenly become withdrawn or turn off their webcam, that can be a physical or psychological sign.

You also want to see how people are managing their time. Are they emailing constantly outside of work hours or at the weekend, or are they responding immediately to WhatsApp messages when they're on leave? The best approach is to start asking, "Are you okay?" and then allowing staff to talk. It should be understood that it won't be stigmatized; it will be welcomed.

Here, we identify the most common flashpoints.

Blurred lines between work and home

WFH during covid led some employees to feel that they were sleeping at work, with no separation between the two fundamental elements of their life. People would sometimes work longer hours because they felt they had to be online, and the time they would have spent commuting, they were instead working. But the ability to cut off distractions from colleagues can have huge benefits, too. "I used to work in the UK's National Health Service as a therapist," says Kate. "And people would come to my desk all the time and say, 'Can I ask you something?' Of course, you can get Slack messages like that, but you've got the choice as to whether to respond immediately, so it can enable you to be more productive."

Action plan

- **Help people set their own boundaries.** Discuss the times employees will be on and offline in advance, and encourage them to stick to that.

- **'Real life' conversations can save time.** If possible, try to focus shared days in the office on collaboration, so WFH offers people time to focus on longer, solo tasks, while days together can be used for creativity and problem-solving.

- **Tool up with the right tech.** You wouldn't stuff someone in a dark corner of the office away from their colleagues, so make sure everyone is equipped with the tech they need both at home and in the office. A good camera and lighting can make video calls far more effective.

Them and us office split

> **"Those at home are more likely to feel a strong emotional pressure to perform and prove themselves."**
>
> – Enrico Sanna, CEO & Co-founder, FORA.

One of the biggest dangers of hybrid is creating two classes of employees, the lower class WFH versus the upper class of physically visible workers in the office. Gemma reveals this is nothing new. "When we see people working in an office, especially long hours, we subconsciously assign traits such as 'committed' or 'motivated'," she says. "We end up with the real potential that being in the office will be seen as a badge of honor. Managers will default to those who are in more often – and there's also gendered implications of that."

Action plan

- **Rethink how you Zoom.** During a hybrid meeting, the moderator should draw in the people 'on screen' so that they are part of the conversation, and ensure everyone dials in separately, remotely, so there are no fuzzy faces at the back of the boardroom table.

- **Use of language is vital.** Referring to Team Office or Team WFH (or however you word it) will subconsciously have an impact, no matter if it's well-meaning or in jest.

- **Ensure office perks are equal.** Make sure there's no over favoritism towards those working onsite. How about a gym membership that can be accessed around the city, or team bonding nights in evenings, when more people can attend?

Gender and diversity issues become ingrained

On paper, hybrid working has the potential to provide further flexibility to everyone. In particular, it could support women who still find themselves taking on gendered roles such as being the primary caregiver to children or taking a larger share of domestic responsibilities. However, an investigation by **Oxford, Cambridge and Zurich** universities showed working women did more childcare and homeschooling compared to men with similar earnings. The wellbeing bounce from working from home can end up becoming lost.

Action plan

- **Acknowledge.** Having open conversations with employees who might experience the challenge can, in itself, help enormously for people's mental wellbeing.

- **Check in regularly.** Situations for those taking on gendered roles change constantly. Consider monthly check-ins to see if anything else can be provided.

- **Offer support where possible.** This could be offering those affected more flexibility than regular hybrid employees or providing more digital tools to help.

Culture and camaraderie

> **"We shouldn't ever underestimate the experience of physical human connection and its impact on fostering both culture and creativity."**
>
> – Enrico Sanna, CEO & Co-founder, FORA.

A whole-person approach to mental health means understanding that how we socialize is crucial to happiness. Or, to put it another way, it's great to have a natter in the office kitchenette. But these moments are spontaneous by nature and, in any home or hybrid-based future, will likely remain so.
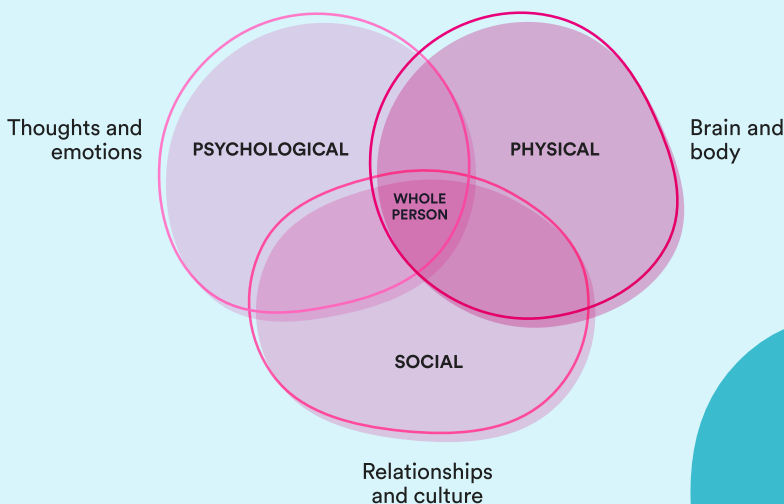
Action plan

- **Don't underestimate physical contact.** Accept some interactions are just best in person and embrace that. Shared days in the office, even if they are ad hoc, can help creativity and give shared references for when we're chatting over Slack the rest of the time. Plan them at times that suit as many people as possible.

- **Find novel ways to recreate the spark.** At Unmind, team members dial into a video call individually and are allocated a random partner in the company to have a 15-minute chat. "We just share something that happened in our week," says Kate. Understand early teething problems can often be ironed out with time.

- **Nights out, weekends away and team bonding** events will take on far more importance in a hybrid world. Take time to design them to amplify the opportunities for members to bond and laugh.

Moving beyond symptoms to a proactive approach

Research has shown that in the US, 1 in 5 workers will experience mental ill-health each year. And while reactive support such as EAPs and mental health aids can be helpful for those experiencing challenges, relying on those alone leads to a tendency for us to associate mental health with only mental illness.

Instead, we need to reframe the discussion. Mental health is something we all have, and it's also the key to making us feel productive, effective and happy. By focussing on the mental wellbeing of all employees all of the time, we can take a more proactive approach, preventing more serious issues from occurring.

We brush our teeth to stop a root canal, so why not measure and improve mental health regularly to halt a more dramatic collapse?

Thoughts and emotions

PSYCHOLOGICAL

PHYSICAL

Brain and body

WHOLE PERSON

SOCIAL

Relationships and culture

A whole-person approach

The whole-person approach is how Unmind helps people thrive in life and work, and it will be vital during the bumpy journey from WFH to hybrid. It's a clinically backed method that recognizes the connection between mental and physical health and brings a third sphere into play: our social environment. Combined, this represents the 'whole person'. A proper, proactive mental health platform will address and nurture all three.

Each sphere is separate but very much connected. They interact, overlap and evolve over time. No one area is enough to deliver a balanced and healthy life on its own. If we face a challenge in one sphere, it may quickly spill into another. And right now, we'll have to reintroduce or re-evaluate that social sphere more than ever as we begin to move back into physical workplaces.

The seven aspects of life

The right employee mental health provider also knows several fundamental aspects that affect a person's mental wellbeing. We think there's seven. These are:

😄	**Happiness**	Contentment and zest for life. The inverse of low mood and depression.
🧘	**Calmness**	The absence of worry and rumination. The inverse of anxiety.
◈	**Coping**	Our ability to manage the demands of life and handle any stressors.
🛏	**Sleep**	The quality of, and satisfaction with, sleep and its impact on our functioning.
💗	**Health**	Overall satisfaction with physical health and its impact on daily life.
⚬	**Connection**	Quality of social relationships and the sense of feeling supported and valued.
🤲	**Fulfillment**	Our sense of accomplishment, growth and purpose.

And as the logistics of hybrid themselves can be bespoke and ever-changing, so can our seven fundamentals, as all crossover, collide and blend together to create our whole-person. If any one of these factors is lacking, it doesn't matter how well-served every other area is – this alone could be enough to represent mental ill-health. By measuring and keeping an eye on each one, we can help employees to lead a balanced and happier life whether they're at home, in the office or anywhere else, for that matter.

Your digital solution for a happier workplace

Digital already plays a vital role in managing our health and will play an even greater role in the future. Digital services are generally easily accessible for free, or at low cost, and are available online via desktop and apps, meaning anyone can access tools, resources, and support when they need it.

Digital platforms, such as Unmind, have the advantage of being available around the clock and available to those WFH. Organizations such as Uber, Virgin Media and Centrica trust Unmind to help their employees live more balanced and fulfilling lives. As for workers themselves, the stats say it all:

92% of users report higher confidence, awareness and understanding of mental health.
76% feel in a better position to support the mental health and wellbeing of those around them.
88% of employees experience an improvement in mental wellbeing, work or relationships.

Unmind is built to scale. Wherever your hybrid employees are based, they're free to access the platform with any device. Whatever your staff's need, Unmind is ready to deliver the right care at the right time.

This makes for a workforce that's happy, effective and connected.

About Unmind

Unmind is a workplace mental health platform. We empower employees to live more fulfilling and balanced lives by changing the way organizations think about mental health.

Proactive support for all areas of life

We work with clinicians, authors, and academics to provide digital tools that nourish all aspects of mental wellbeing. From sleep to calmness, fulfillment to happiness.

What gets measured, gets managed

Empower employees to track, assess, and understand their wellbeing – and how it changes over time. Enable leaders to make more informed decisions with aggregated and anonymous data.

The right care at the right time

We all have mental health all the time. So wherever your employees are based – in the office, on-site, out in the field, or at home – they can access Unmind from any device, whenever they need.

An ongoing campaign for cultural change

Launch day is when our partnership begins. We'll help you to engage your people with the platform, and to continue experiencing the benefits of nurturing a healthy mind.

Organizations we work with

Uber · BRITISH AIRWAYS · asos · centrica · Hogan Lovells

NHS · wework · THALES · arm · Medallia

Want to find out more? Book a demo today.   **www.unmind.com**