

# MANAGING A TEAM OF HYBRID WORKERS

## A 10-POINT GUIDE FOR BUSINESS OWNERS AND MANAGERS

GET IN TOUCH TO FIND OUT HOW WE CAN HELP...



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# INTRODUCTION

As Coronavirus restrictions lift and increasing numbers of offices and places of work re-open, surveys strongly suggest many organisations will have a mix of home and workplace employees for months to come, if not indefinitely.

This hybrid working model, with teams in different places at different times, brings challenges that are distinct from those that mass homeworking brought upon us during the pandemic.

Employers who intend to “go hybrid” will need to think carefully about their working practices, people policies and the implications for their organisation and its teams. Fortunately, while mass homeworking was forced upon us at short notice in 2020, we have time to plan this latest change more carefully.

We hope this guide will help with that process. If you need support with changed ways of working, the Reality HR team are here to help – just get in touch.

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# 01

## THE FUNDAMENTALS - ARE YOUR PROCESSES AND POLICIES IN PLACE?

During the pandemic, getting the job done with teams working from home may have been a higher priority than thinking about your HR policies and processes. However, if hybrid working is to become part of your organisation's culture, it's important to take a step back and return to the fundamentals of good people management and the compliance framework that supports that.

Check that the Terms and Conditions of employment you have in place with your employees are up to date and robust, and correctly reflect the way they will now work. Review your people policies to ensure they are not only compliant with the latest statutory guidance but are developed to suit the way your organisation works and provides the right structure and guidance for your line managers and your employees. Some changes may be needed if more of your staff will be working remotely some or all of the time.

As well as the policies and procedures that you use to manage life in the workplace, you should develop and publish a Homeworking Policy. This will set out the key arrangements for those working remotely; the "ways of working" to make hybrid working successful for both parties. It also clarifies expectations of those working within and away from the usual workplace as well as your responsibilities to your people, and the sources of support available to them.

It's very good practice to ask staff who work remotely to regularly complete a homeworkeer's self-assessment which will highlight any issues they are facing around equipment, IT access, remote work and working alone. Arrange a time to talk through their self-assessments and help them resolve any issues raised.



Keep homeworking policies, guides and other helpful information in an easily-accessible place such as an intranet page or cloud-shared folder, and make sure everyone on your team knows where that is.

# 02

## MANAGING RISK, HEALTH AND SAFETY AND WELLBEING

Employers have a legal duty to protect the health and safety of all their employees in the workplace – even if that workplace is at home or another remote location. That responsibility extends to making sure they have the tools and systems of work they need, and any safety equipment. The usual safety checks still apply; make sure everybody completes a health and safety workplace assessment and a DSE (Display Screen Equipment) assessment for any location they work regularly, and that any issues flagged up by them are addressed. For workers who use screens and keyboards, this may mean supplying items such as risers and wrist supports to make sure their desks are set up safely, helping to minimise problems such as back pain and repetitive strain.

It can be very hard for employees to adjust to working in the same place as they live, with the ability to access their work systems at all times. The line between home and work can be blurred. Discuss and agree expected work hours, when they can be contacted, offering flexibility wherever possible and regularly check that they are not working for too many hours. Don't let them feel as if they are obliged to be checking emails or work platforms at all hours of the day. Be a role model and set the example that it is ok to switch off at the end of the day and not be expected to respond to emails out of hours.

Encourage staff to take regular breaks, even if it's just to leave the room to make a cup of tea. Be mindful of the NHS's recommended "five pillars to wellbeing" which include maintaining connections with colleagues, friends and family, being active as far as possible, taking notice of the natural world, learning new things, and giving support and time to others. People who have been used to working from home but are now hybrid workers are facing yet another change after a challenging year. Be supportive and don't underestimate how stressful this latest change could be.



Recognise that working remotely can be difficult and stressful for some people, as they may feel lonely, isolated or forgotten. Make time for your team to talk to you regularly, and encourage them to share any mental health issues they may be suffering from, and do everything you can to support their wellbeing and safety.

# 03

## SECURITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Employees who are splitting time between the home and workplace may be handling sensitive and confidential information and transferring it between systems or locations. It's important that your policies, training and guidelines for handling these are robust. Ensure that all employees really understand how to securely manage business information, and ensure they have been provided with training and written policies to include advice on confidentiality when away from the normal workplace, including how documents should be stored securely in your IT system and on devices.

Discuss with your IT provider whether your systems are equally secure for remote workers as they are when staff are office-based. Home broadband connections are often less secure than business-grade ones, so you may wish to consider the use of a Virtual Private Network (VPN) – your IT provider can help with this. Remember that the usual data protection and GDPR regulations still apply, so check that your systems are compliant and that your team understand their responsibilities.

When employees are making video calls at home, they should ensure the connection is secure and that they cannot be overheard discussing any sensitive information. Workers should understand that they are responsible for ensuring the security of all information they handle on behalf of their employer. This applies to paper documents and those kept on a computer. Employees should ensure that nobody else in the household has access to sensitive files – particularly if they are working from a shared computer. Screens should not be overlooked when working in public places, and they should make sure their work accounts are password-protected and that they lock their screens when taking a break and log out at the end of each working session to maintain security.



Computers and devices are potential weak points when they are part of a hybrid working setup – make sure your IT provider understands how your team is working and enhances security.

# 04

## TRUST PEOPLE TO DO THEIR JOBS

The biggest perceived barrier to flexible or homeworking for most businesses is often trust, and a fear that people will not perform as well or be as committed when they are away from the workplace. Managers are often wary of remote working, and unsure how they will manage their team if they are not physically with them on a day to day basis. This may be even harder to keep track of if team members vary their place of work from day to day or week to week. We have heard many recent stories and anecdotal evidence where teams and individuals have stepped up and achieved more than ever from home, and the research supports it – according to data analysed by Rescue Time, **knowledge workers, software developers, and IT professionals are all more productive when they work from home**. This was true both at small and medium businesses and large companies (over 500 employees).

To manage a hybrid workforce effectively, line managers will need to build and nurture relationships built on trust and transparency, with a focus on leading, guiding and coaching rather than directing. It's the responsibility of managers to provide clear guidance on the tasks set, expected results, standards and timescales and who the remote worker can contact for information and support. Performance should be measured by output and results, and not necessarily how many hours the employee sits at their desk working. Measures should be discussed and agreed in advance so everyone is clear on expectations.

Use calendars so colleagues understand when people are working or not, where they are working on any particular day, when they have meetings and when they are available to contact and respond. This is not only important for managing expectations, communication and collaboration, but also ensuring everyone has downtime. Remember, good managers always focus on achievement rather than just working hours.



The more you let go and concentrate on leadership rather than micro-management, the more your team will thrive. Focus on achievement, not hours worked.

# 05

## USE TECHNOLOGY TO KEEP TEAMS IN TOUCH

We're all now used to holding work meetings and conducting personal calls through video platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and FaceTime. If your people are hybrid working, with some at home and some in the workplace, it makes sense to keep many of these meetings online so everyone has the same experience wherever they are. For people who will remain working at home, it can make a world of difference to see the faces of people they know even if it's just for a quick team catch up.

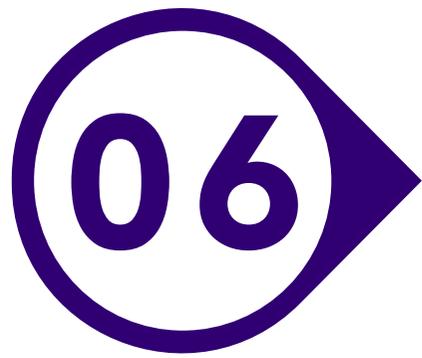
It also makes it easy for team members to share projects and documents they are working on, to keep everybody updated and get the input they would normally receive in the office. Many teams have embraced instant messaging platforms for informal communications, and more IT solutions are coming out regularly to support collaboration when team members are in different locations.

To ensure regular team meetings don't fall off the radar and potentially leave staff feeling isolated, it makes sense to put a regular schedule into everyone's calendars – daily or weekly depending on how your business or team works.

If your team are used to working together in the office and can't yet come together, they will be missing out on the little day-to-day interactions previously taken for granted. Consider having a social channel on your work or instant messenger platform where people can check in with each other, share personal updates and ask each other the quick questions they might usually call across the office. Remember also that some people may want to switch off from instant messaging platforms after hours or on days off, so they can wind down and focus on their personal life, while others will find it comforting to keep in touch.



Remember that people may be missing the regular social interactions that come as part of being a team – try as far as you can to give people a virtual channel where they can let off steam.



## PERSONAL INTERACTIONS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

People who are working from home as part of a hybrid model can still experience loneliness and frustration on their days away from the office, even if they themselves have opted to work this way. Don't forget about involving these people if others are returning to the office. Likewise, don't underestimate the stress and anxiety some people will feel upon returning to the workplace, even if it is just for part of the working week.

As well as team calls, don't forget to continue one-to-ones with all your team members so you can talk on a more personal basis. For all team members, wherever they happen to be working, keep up the opportunities to talk individually and to ask how they are – and really mean it! It's not always a comfortable conversation and can be easy to move on if they just say "fine".

Make it a personal interaction – remember what they've told you previously and show an interest. Asking "How did your FaceTime with your mum go last night?" or "How are you feeling about being back at work?" demonstrates that you understand them as an individual and not just an employee. Asking a more specific question like this will help to move past the answer of "fine" when you ask how they are, and enable you to offer support if they really need it but are reluctant to say.

As far as possible, stick to your normal programme of both work and personal support for your team – for example, if you have Wellness Action Plans in place with your team members then keep up regular review sessions, especially in light of changing work practices.



Although restrictions are lifting it's important to acknowledge that for many people a return to the workplace, even for part of the time, will be a cause of stress and anxiety.

# 07

## HOW CAN I MEASURE PERFORMANCE OF HYBRID WORKERS?

While you need to support your employees and their wellbeing, you do have a business to run and you will want to make sure that you are getting the best out of your team wherever they are working. This can be more difficult to do remotely than it is face to face, and you are more likely to miss some of the signs of poor performance that would be obvious in a physical environment. It can also be difficult to keep track of where people are and what they are doing if they are working between locations or have flexible hours.

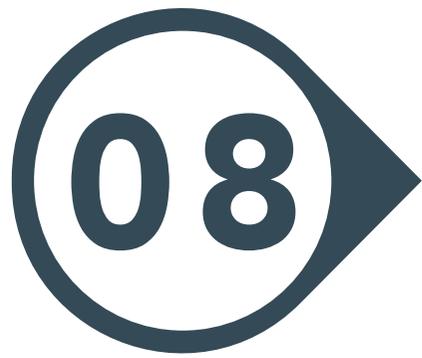
However, if you focus on results of work rather than hours of work, then managing a hybrid working team is very similar to managing a purely workplace-based one – it's about everyone involved understanding the expectations of them and their responsibilities. Set very clear expectations about the standards of work expected and the timescales for completion.

Make sure your team members understand and agree when they should be available for team catch ups and client contact – and how. Are they expected to be monitoring their emails during office hours, or at certain times of the day? Should they be available for in-person meetings and video calls during certain hours, or just at pre-arranged times? Use online tools for workflow management and task lists, so that everyone is clear about what needs to be done and who by, and make sure everybody keeps them up to date.

Create a culture in which you meet team members regularly to review progress and update goals, and ensure you measure (and celebrate) outputs and achievements rather than time spent on tasks. Some people will naturally work at different speeds and in different ways – most of the time it's the result, not the process, that's important.



Online tools such as Slack, Microsoft Teams and task list apps can help you set expectations and monitor progress wherever your teams may be.



## HOW SHOULD I MANAGE POOR PERFORMANCE IN A HYBRID TEAM?

If you've followed the advice in the previous section, your teams should have a very clear understanding of what is expected of them, regardless of where they work. If you spot any of them falling short, then it's important to act as soon as you can to avoid the issue getting worse.

As soon as you identify an issue:

- Define the issue simply and clearly. What was expected? What should have happened, but didn't?
- Ask yourself how well the task was set – did you communicate it effectively? Is it possible that your employee simply didn't understand what was expected of them?
- Was it a realistic task? Check that the employee had the time, resources and training to complete it.
- Are there any external factors – illness, stress at home, anxiety about changed ways of working or IT problems – that may have contributed to the poor performance?

Once you have been through this thought process, schedule a time to discuss it with them. Consider whether this is best done in person at the workplace, or via phone or video call, but don't delay. Ask the employee whether they realised that they have missed your expectations. What do they think went wrong? Give them time to explain what has happened, and what the reasons may be.

Find out what you can do to help them in completing the tasks allocated to them. Agree a way forward – including a new deadline and a review date to catch up and check that the issue has been resolved. If the poor performance persists, then look to your formal procedures to address it, and seek external HR support to guide you in conducting them correctly.



Before discussing a performance issue with an employee, check that you did everything you could to set expectations and communicate the task effectively.

# 09

## FLEXIBLE WORKING - HOURS AS WELL AS PLACE?

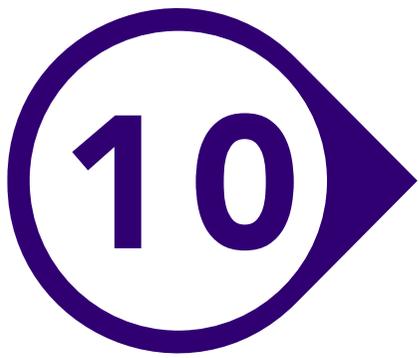
While we were all working through the pandemic, life was far from normal. For many the lines between home and work were blurred and the different commitments may have clashed at times. Remember that it won't be a case of just switching back to normal as restrictions lift – the experiences during the pandemic will have changed many people and for some it is not clear what "normal" is. Your people may now have a whole new set of challenges to manage including constant access to information, physical changes to the workplace for safety reasons, and perhaps changed situations at home.

All of this can conspire to make the usual 9am to 5pm working day difficult to stick to for many people. As a manager you may be experiencing some of these difficulties yourself. It's important to let your team know that you understand the pressures they are under and support them by offering flexibility wherever possible. For some, depending on roles and the nature of their work, this might include being more flexible about working hours as well as where they work. They may wish to take a break during the day to care for dependents, or to exercise in daylight, or to carry out home chores, and then pick up some work in the evenings or at the weekends. If they are in a role where they are not necessarily needed between 9am and 5pm each weekday then let them know that is ok and that it's results rather than rigid working hours that you are interested in.

At the same time, make it clear when you DO need employees to be available – for example for a regular team catchup over video call, or that one day a week when you expect everybody to be in the office. Shared calendars and work lists with tasks clearly allocated will help cope with situations like this. With hybrid teams working different hours it is also important to create a culture in which people don't feel they have to be working when others are; just because one person chooses to send emails late at night doesn't mean the rest of the team have to check and respond outside their own working hours – it is important to protect downtime too.



Be as fair and as flexible as you can. Your employees will appreciate you sticking by them and being supportive during this next phase of changes



## LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCE AND CHANGE!

We all learned a lot during 2020 when we had to change the way we work and live our lives. However, not all the experiences were negative – some found positives such as a renewed sense of teamwork and community spirit and an appreciation of the time we spend with friends, family and colleagues. Many welcomed the opportunity to “trial” working from home, although in less than ideal circumstances.

Many of these lessons can be taken forward to great benefit as your organisation considers the most appropriate working model - and we know that many businesses are planning for a hybrid combination of office and remote working on a permanent basis.

This may be an opportunity to reconsider the cost of your office space, the environmental and personal impacts of long commutes and the necessity (or not!) of business travel for customer and client meetings. Do you really need to do things the way you’ve always done them? May be in your particular business you do, but maybe there is scope for change too.

However you intend to work moving forwards, the team at Reality HR wish you the very best for the future, and we hope you have found this guide useful.

Keep supporting and rewarding your people and take advice on how best to support them now and as life goes on.



We’ve all learned different ways of working through this crisis. Some of them may be helpful to retain once life begins to get back to normal.

## CONTACT US TODAY

If you're a manager or business owner and looking to introduce hybrid working temporarily or permanently, please get in touch to learn how we can support you.



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