

# Flexible working is here to stay

How HR can systematically develop the new WFH<sup>1</sup> culture

By Joyce Gesing, Elke Hofmann and Dirk Mundorf

It seems as if years have passed since we last commuted daily to the office. Many things that were still fixed constants just a few months ago are now variable and fluid: the workplace, working hours, certain office conventions like getting together for meetings or coffee breaks. The pandemic suddenly made things possible that had been controversial or even unthinkable before. In calls with us, several CHROs reported that people are now finding solutions in a matter of days where negotiations previously used to drag on for years – bringing significant changes to working practices. Across most business activities, flexible working has now become the norm – not least because productivity, for all the dire predictions, has actually stayed constant or even increased. Ninety percent of employees estimate that flexible working has had no or only limited impact on their productivity, and more than two thirds welcome the new-found flexibility. Which is why now is the time to lay the groundwork for the best working practices of the future – because we can safely assume that this new working reality is here to stay. So here is our best crystal-ball forecast for 2030.

<sup>1</sup> WFH = Working From Home

## **Agility, blending and co-working spaces: the reality of work in 2030**

All the experts agree on one future trend in particular: work will become more self-directed. Mandatory physical presence came to an abrupt end with the COVID-19 pandemic and won't experience any major comeback even by 2030. Work is loosening its ties with physical presence. In its place, a more flexible approach to space and time is taking hold: The linear eight-hour routine is no more than a fast-fading memory. The same applies to classic office culture: Rather than being concentrated in a central workplace, the office workers of the future are spread across multiple locations – in co-working spaces, cafés, their own homes. Work-life blending is becoming reality. Corporate boundaries are blurring, encouraging greater collaboration and cross-functional dialog, and powerfully impacting leadership and HR roles. While this uncoupling from office and building structures brings cost savings, it also means that companies are held together almost exclusively by their corporate culture. Leadership is about far more than just planning and organization – it now focuses on guiding and coaching employees, and on communicating the corporate culture. The leaders of the future are motivators, mentors and networkers, empowering their staff to manage themselves.

Back to 2021 – and New Work still has some growing pains to contend with. Although many leaders are already feeling the benefits of this newly acquired flexibility and quality of life, not to mention falling costs, they are also noticing that some employees find the new working conditions difficult. The challenges they experience range from isolation through to difficulty concentrating, higher stress levels, insufficient interaction with colleagues, and a lack of coaching. These negative impacts and the appropriate countermeasures depend to a large extent on the various types of personality involved. For today's HR professional, recognizing these personality types is vitally important:

### **Time management heroes**

This personality type describes those organizational talents who are not just able to organize their tasks and working hours effectively, but positively need to do so – only then are they happy. The advice for them would be to get up at their usual time and not allow anything to disrupt their normal working hours or break times, even at home. Leaders can support these organizational talents by agreeing timetables and milestones with them and introducing fixed rituals as a structure for the working day – but also as a way of maintaining regular contact.

### Team players

For these gifted communicators, working at home on their laptops is a genuine ordeal. They are most productive and engaged when taking part in team sessions. Without direct, spontaneous interaction, they quickly feel isolated. For these personalities, video calls are essential and something they even like to spend their breaks on. They value online get-togethers in their leisure time, too – especially virtual team dinners, when takeaways are delivered to all team members simultaneously. The key issue here, say the various HR leaders, is finding the right balance. If too many informal digital formats are offered, people quickly tire of them – or else become distracted as the range of online activities starts to proliferate. It is important to systematically manage all the options on offer – for small groups, teams, management teams, but also across the organization as a whole. These options play an important culture-building role and should, wherever possible, be combined with formats based on physical presence once circumstances permit.

### Designers

Designers often have a strong aesthetic and visual sensibility. Their desks are rarely untidy. For them, the best advice would be to wear their usual work clothes even at home, and to arrange their personal workspaces so they are calm, attractive and tidy. A comfortable chair, pot plants or a cup of tea often have just as positive an influence on their productivity as the latest collaboration software. Some CHROs have turned into fully-fledged digital champions, trying out virtual lean and Kanban methods with their teams and setting up online whiteboards so that all team members can work together virtually and in real time. HR departments can act as trailblazers here, setting an example for the wider organization to follow – what works for them might well inspire the rest of the company.

### Tightrope walkers

With flexible working arrangements, many people find it difficult to properly separate work and leisure time. Tightrope walkers find this especially challenging – they tend to rapidly jump back and forth between the two worlds. Rituals such as morning kick-off calls or a weekly debrief on Fridays can help them; scheduled leisure times are also advisable. Whether this involves sports, choral singing, Spanish lessons or planned mealtimes with the family – the main thing is that these times are fixed in advance. One CHRO noted how important it is to clearly articulate

the employer's expectations with respect to these break times. Flexible working can easily produce the feeling of being permanently on call. Here, rules need to be introduced that allow performance to be monitored but also retain something like core work times and break times. Break times can also be actively agreed and scheduled into the calendar, giving them a status on par with scheduled meetings. Managers can set an example here – the more they take actions like this and transparently discuss them, the easier it is for employees to adopt similar behaviors.

### **HR's role: understanding and guiding**

Of course only a handful of employees will be a perfect match for any one of these categories: People don't fit into boxes. But this typology can help to tailor HR management to diverse individual needs when it comes to flexible working.

Employees' individual responsibility is essential to the success of flexible working in particular. Team members should be given the chance to ask themselves which personality type they most closely match so they can optimize their working environments accordingly. In turn, managers need to be able to identify these needs, understand them and respond to them. This calls for a sensitive approach: Good managers empower individuals to take responsibility, recognizing strengths and building dialog within the organization, while keeping a looser rein on delicate issues like the monitoring of working hours. Especially at times of physical distancing, such cross-functional networks will become increasingly important for collectively identifying trends and staying agile.

Thomas Perlitz, Managing Director & Chief Human Resources Officer at BestSecret/Schustermann & Borenstein, on the mobile working euphoria during the initial phase of the pandemic:

*“Things happened that weren’t previously conceivable. Organizations found the dynamism and drive to do what had to be done: getting the required number of laptops, ensuring IT security, arranging for the necessary broadband and software. Companies with participatory cultures rapidly found pragmatic, focused solutions.”*

Dr. Martina Lambeck, Chief Human Resources Officer at Bilfinger, on the challenges of workplace flexibilization:

*“While many people are praising mobile working to the skies, there are some long-term effects we haven’t yet fully taken into account: How will the loosening of ties between employer and employee play out in the future? How do we guarantee top performance if teams can no longer meet up in person? This is where we need HR experts to develop sustainable solutions and approaches.”*

Christoph Grandpierre, Managing Partner and founder of Metakomm Partnergesellschaft, on his findings regarding flexible collaboration:

*“We were able to facilitate mobile and flexible working for 95 percent of our employees at short notice. The biggest step forward is management’s acceptance of different working practices and forms of cross-functional collaboration. It also united us as a company and showed us what can be achieved when everyone focuses on a common goal for the organization and its employees. Now it’s up to us to embed these arrangements over the long term.”*

Dr. Thorsten Schlüter, Member of the Group Executive Board at REHAU Group, on conclusions drawn by management:

*“Trust is the basis – in this exceptional situation, we had to trust our managers and our employees – and it worked. At top management level, we recognized that virtual leadership is the new reality. This is probably the biggest cultural challenge: How can we motivate our employees, maintain our cohesion, and provide effective leadership with a much lower level of physical presence? We need to redefine our leadership and collaboration models and build our virtual leadership capabilities.”*

*This article is part of our “What next, now that everything’s changed? HR and New Work” series, which reports core insights from our regular Zoom calls with HR leaders.*

*For more information, contact:*



**Joyce Gesing**  
Düsseldorf  
[joyce.gesing@egonzehnder.com](mailto:joyce.gesing@egonzehnder.com)



**Elke Hofmann**  
Munich  
[elke.hofmann@egonzehnder.com](mailto:elke.hofmann@egonzehnder.com)



**Dirk Mundorf**  
Munich  
[dirk.mundorf@egonzehnder.com](mailto:dirk.mundorf@egonzehnder.com)

## About Egon Zehnder

Egon Zehnder is the world's preeminent leadership consulting firm, sharing one goal: to help people and organizations transform. We know what great leaders can do and are passionate about delivering the best solutions for our clients.

Our more than 500 Consultants in 68 offices and 40 countries form one powerful, collaborative team. Our services include: leadership development, individual, team and organizational effectiveness, CEO search and succession, executive search and assessment, Board advisory, and cultural transformation.

For more information visit [www.egonzehnder.com](http://www.egonzehnder.com) and follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).