



Institute for the
Future of Work

Working Paper

Making Flex Fair

Hybrid Work, Wellbeing and Good Work Design

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This working paper is based on research conducted by Abigail Marks, Oliver Mallett, Lila Skountridaki, Gustav Bösehans, Danny Zschomler and Mei Xuechun, and has been prepared for IFOW by Kester Brewin.

A toolkit to help organisations deploy best practice is also available [here](#), and a brief for policymakers [here](#).

IFOW's cross-sector case studies on good work design and technology adoption are available [here](#).

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Executive Summary

Is hybrid work always ‘good’ work? The ability to have a flexible mix of office-based and remote working tends to be seen as synonymous with flexibility, yet the research presented here surfaces a more complex picture, one where hybrid arrangements remain embedded in organisational systems that continue to privilege certain ways of working.

Research that has been done on hybrid work has tended to focus on productivity and work-life balance, rather than on how it interacts with often unspoken conventions about what good work – and good worker behaviours – look like.

In short, hybrid work can create autonomy and improve access, but – when organisations fail to redesign how work is managed, measured and supported – it can also intensify work, stretch it across time and space, and reinforce inequalities across different social, economic and demographic backgrounds. Good Work Design ameliorate these impacts, and IFOW has [published detailed cross-sector case studies](#) on this, in collaboration with the CIPD¹.

As such, the findings here offer important perspectives for the *Keep Britain Working* agenda, highlighted in Sir Charlie Mayfield’s recent report². This makes clear that poor health – and mental health for younger people – is one of the biggest drivers of economic inactivity in the UK. If we can improve wellbeing at work, there are gains for people personally, and for employers and the wider economy too.

Surfacing the ‘moral architecture’ of Human Resource Management (HRM) – the implicit standards of presence, responsiveness and predictability through which organisations allocate autonomy, credibility and opportunity – this report attempts to understand how inclusive hybrid work can be designed for all groups. This will move us away from assumptions about what is normal, and the individualised ‘reasonable adjustment’ regimes that currently leave too many disproportionately excluded. Such a move would be part of the ‘system reset’ that Mayfield’s report calls for, “keeping people in work, improving health, promoting inclusion, boosting growth and saving billions”.

Reflecting on these findings, this report offers recommendations for policymakers and guidance for organisations on how to deploy hybrid working practices in ways that support good work.

This report produced by the Institute for the Future of Work (IFOW) draws on the work undertaken by the Working@Home project team (initially funded by ESRC ES/V003976/2 and Newcastle University) led by Professor Abigail Marks on home-based and hybrid work, including research on digital connectivity, wellbeing, working hours and gendered inequality. The Working@Home project drew on repeated longitudinal interviews with eighty participants over a five-year period and three large-scale surveys between 2020 and 2025, with the final phases capturing the shift back to offices and the rise of hybrid working.

1. IFOW has published detailed case studies on work design and technology adoption across different sectors: <https://www.ifow.org/publications/good-work-design-ai-adoption>

2. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-britain-working-review-final-report/keep-britain-working-final-report>

Key Findings and Implications

1. **Hybrid work does not automatically mean that work is more flexible or inclusive.**

Current policies and practices tend to present a crude picture of the benefits of hybrid work. Both need to be adapted to take account of the full range of potential impacts of moving to hybrid work – and how these effects vary across different groups of workers.

2. **Hybrid work can lead to both intensification and extensification.**

Intensification means work is marked by increasing pace, interruptions and expectations of responsiveness.

Extensification means work spreading across both time (evenings, weekends and recovery time) and physical space (non-office areas of the home such as kitchens, bedrooms or living rooms).

3. **This process of intensification and extensification impacts wellbeing.**

Over a quarter (26%) of those surveyed felt that Collaborative and Video Conference Software (CVCS) forced them to work harder than they were used to.

When digital intensification spills into extensification, it causes an increase in work-life conflict (WLC), which has a statistically significant negative impact on wellbeing.

These impacts are not felt equally, and are more significant for women, those with caring responsibilities, and those with less space at home or fewer resources.

4. **Hybrid work can improve wellbeing by offering greater autonomy, but better management is needed to ensure that these gains aren't lost through greater work-life conflict (WLC).**

More training for Line Managers and greater trust between workers and managers are needed to effect this.

5. **Institution-wide processes of work design and fairer systems of performance management focus - built on a foundation of better line management - will help maximise the benefits of hybrid work.**

This will mean moving beyond approaches focused on individuals' rights to request flexible working arrangements.

Redesigning work to fit hybrid arrangements must also include reflection on what 'good work' looks like, and ensuring that organisational systems aren't privileging certain ways of working, such as fast response times.

6. **Well-designed hybrid work should be understood as part of the UK's preventative workplace-health infrastructure.**

The Keep Britain Working Review calls for employers to act earlier to prevent ill-health-related labour-market exit and improve retention and inclusion.

The Working@Home findings suggest that flexible work can contribute to these goals, but only when flexibility is accompanied by good work design.

Poorly designed hybrid work may itself create conditions – including overload, work-life conflict and technostress – that undermine sustainable employment.

1. Introduction

1.1 A Brief History of Homeworking

It is easy to forget that, in the longer sweep of history, working from home has been the norm. For the medieval working class, home was often a single-story, one-room house that served as bedroom, kitchen and living room. For many, such as potters, bakers, brewers etc., this space also served as workshop, and this work was undertaken by men and women alike.

Later, these developed into street-facing shops with private living spaces, and then the rise of schools and universities shaped a shared understanding of labour and activity happening in separate spaces beyond the home.

For the majority of UK workers, the Industrial Revolution precipitated the most profound change in the development of work outside the home. The expanded scale of industrial work – and the technologies that drove this – created the need for women and men to leave the home and work within dedicated, employer-owned factory premises.

The pattern of work that we are most familiar with today started to become established in the late 1700s, with working hours determined by the employer, who was also the provider of the tools to undertake the work. This was also facilitated by the rise of affordable mass transportation, so that workers were able to commute from home to work.

1.2 The Impact of Covid-19

While the rise of digital tools allowed remote arrangements to permeate this established pattern of office-based working, the Covid-19 pandemic forced a rapid reconfiguration – a ‘mass experiment’, some claimed (Gratton & Stern, 2020) – of how work could be done. Tasks and activities that were traditionally positioned as ‘impossible’ to conduct online were rapidly and effectively enabled via teleconferencing software, and the popular media hailed this as a success (e.g. Hern, 2020).

Success could be measured by many employees wanting to continue working from home at least some of the time (Bartik et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2020). The long commutes and imposed routines that had marked working lives suddenly felt constraining, compared to the potential for greater flexibility (Felstead et al., 2002; Sullivan & Smithson, 2007), and this shift was hailed as a way to improve work-life balance and provide workers with more time for leisure and family (Crosbie & Moore, 2004; Powell & Craig, 2015).

1.3 Post-Pandemic Hybrid Work: Promises and Problems

From the employers’ side, the hope from the shifts seen during the pandemic was that this new normal could deliver on promises to improve both employee wellbeing and productivity. However, tensions soon emerged. Although hybrid work reduced commuting, increased autonomy and was seen to support work-life balance, these gains couldn’t be equally experienced as they were dependent on role type and management culture, as well as home situation.

Moreover, employers’ anxiety about this new level of autonomy – and the associated impacts on workplace cohesion and esprit de corps – was evidenced by increasingly firm mandates for workers to return to in-office work (Fortune, 2025), which created a post-COVID struggle between employers and employees over flexible working (Decker et al. 2025).

This tension was picked up on by Parliament, which saw a House of Lords enquiry explore ‘Is working from home working?’, with evidence given by Professor Abigail Marks.

1.4 Intensification and Extensification

More technically, hybrid work could increase stress and negatively impact wellbeing through two mechanisms that were identified as part of the Working@Home project (Marks et al., 2026): **intensification** and **extensification**.

Intensification refers to heightened effort and task density within bounded timeframes (e.g. Marks et al., 2026; Green, 2004; Green et al., 2021) – which means work getting faster and more dense, with more meetings, more messages, more task-switching, tighter deadlines and fewer natural breaks.

Extensification is less well studied, especially in digital contexts, and concerns the spread of work temporally - into evenings and weekends, but also spatially – into homes and other non-traditional spaces (e.g. Marks et al, 2026; Perrons, 2003; Rubery et al., 2005).

Importantly, the Working@Home project found that intensification and extensification are dynamically interrelated. Technology accelerates tasks while dispersing them across time and space, creating conditions where intensification flourishes.

But how does this interrelation function, and what are the different impacts on different groups of workers? It may be that some experience hybrid work as liberating and positive for their health and wellbeing, whilst other demographic groups find the opposite. Are the advantages worth the costs, and how should policymakers and businesses think about balancing them?

The question is no longer whether hybrid work is possible. New technologies have dramatically altered what can be achieved by those working in remote or hybrid ways, with the development of new tools reconfiguring again the relationship between work and home, mirroring the event of the earlier Industrial Revolution.

That earlier transformation brought clear gains for many, but it also carried profound health and wellbeing costs for others, and it fundamentally reshaped society and community. What needs to be understood is how the benefits and burdens of this new configuration are distributed across different groups of workers, and whether that distribution is fair.

2. Methodology, Data and Research Focus

The evidence base for this report draws on a mixed-methods research programme examining remote and hybrid work in the UK during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

An initial study combined three large-scale online surveys of UK workers with longitudinal qualitative interviews.

The quantitative evidence came from three online surveys conducted between late 2020 and mid-2023, examining how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) -enabled remote and hybrid work affected work intensification, work-life conflict (WLC) and wellbeing. The first survey, conducted between late 2020 and early 2021, included remote, hybrid and office-based workers. Two subsequent surveys, conducted in mid-2023, focused separately on hybrid workers and office-based workers.

Each survey targeted around 1,500 UK workers, recruited through online panel platforms using eligibility criteria requiring participants to be UK-based, in paid employment and working in the relevant arrangement. Recruitment and monitoring sought to support socio-demographic coverage across geography, gender, socio-economic position and occupational group. Although the surveys were not probability samples, the use of established online panels enabled the researchers to capture a large and diverse cross-section of UK workers.

The qualitative element comprised five rounds of semi-structured interviews with UK workers between spring 2020 and January 2025, allowing researchers to explore how experiences of remote and hybrid work changed as pandemic homeworking evolved into more established hybrid arrangements.

Intensification was measured using an adapted version of Tarafdar et al.'s (2007) technostress scale, reworded to focus on collaborative and videoconferencing software and technology-based intensification – the ways digital tools increase pace, workload and pressure. Example items, rated on a seven-point Likert scale, include: 'This software forces me to work faster than I am used to', 'It has increased my workload' and 'It makes me feel as if my personal life is being invaded'.

Work-life conflict (WLC) was assessed using Carlson et al.'s (2000) scale, which distinguishes three dimensions: time-based conflict arises when work time prevents engagement in family life; strain-based conflict occurs when pressures at work spill over into home life; and behaviour-based conflict appears when behaviours required at work are incompatible with those expected at home.

Wellbeing was measured using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) (Goldberg, 1972) - a widely validated measure of psychological distress used in workplace research.

The quantitative analysis tested the reliability and validity of these measures using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted and discriminant validity checks, before using structural equation modelling to examine whether the relationship between technology-driven intensification and wellbeing was mediated by WLC.

The qualitative element of the research programme added depth, with interviews conducted remotely by Teams, Zoom or telephone and covered workspace, technology use, wellbeing, work-life conflict and productivity. Ninety participants took part across the first four interview rounds in 2020 and 2021, with a follow-up subgroup interviewed in the summer of

2022, 2023 and January 2025, as hybrid work became more established. Participants came from a range of sectors and occupations, including IT, teaching, social work, public health, finance, academia, retail and the voluntary sector. Interviews were transcribed and coded by multiple researchers using inductive content analysis, supported by a structured coding framework. This enabled the researchers to identify how work intensification and work extensification were experienced in practice, including how digital work spread across time, domestic space and non-work life.

The initial and follow-on studies shared a common goal: to assess whether remote and hybrid work should be understood as flexible work arrangements, or as deeper changes in the temporal, spatial and organisational conditions of work.

If it is the latter, delivering equality across different demographic groups will require policies and practices to reflect a more fundamental rewiring of HRM processes and organisational culture, offering an improved fit for workers whose needs may not be well served by traditional office-based models.

3. Hybrid Work, Intensification and Extensification

(Based on Marks, et al., 2026)

3.1 Evidence on Intensification and Extensification

The interviews with UK workers surfaced how people are subjectively experiencing hybrid work.

Evidence from Survey 2 – which focused on those working in a hybrid manner – found that 26% of participants felt that collaborative and video conferencing software (CVCS) forced them to work harder than they were used to, 24% believed that CVCS forced them to undertake more work than they could handle and 33% felt that CVCS forced them to work to increasingly tight time schedules.

Whilst these CVCS digital technologies are used to facilitate hybrid work flexibility, it is clear that this comes at a cost of intensification.

There is just stuff coming at you, messages all the time because we are collaborating via Teams and people want to get a message to you and I do it all the time, have you looked at this and you forget they're in a meeting. Because you are in meetings and you'll see them think, oh shit, that's come in and then they will get distracted and it's like, oh god, I've got to do that . . . you're constantly just interrupted with other stuff that's going on by all these pop-ups . . . it's just constant bombardment.

(Female, Programme Support Officer, Welsh Borders, hybrid, 50s)

The technologies being used to facilitate hybrid working multiply interruptions, and the result of this is a working day that is fragmented, with attention constantly being diverted. This is more than just an inconvenience; it is a structural form of intensification. Efficiency is achieved by atomising the worker's focus and reorganising their labour into endless micro-demands, which is then accompanied by an expectation of constant availability.

But this increase in efficiency comes at a cost, which is absorbed by the worker, who is put at greater risk of exhaustion and burnout:

People seem to be working harder than they've ever worked at the moment. [. . .] I think a lot of businesses have done really well out of this. If you're measuring productivity in relation to wellbeing and whether people have got the ability to maintain that, I think there's some real worries from a burnout perspective. [. . .] I think I'm on the verges of that burnout point.

(Male, Freelancer, London, hybrid, 40s)

I've got more minor back complaints than I ever had and, I've suddenly realised, I've been sitting at the bloody screen for 8 hours, you know, which I would have never have done in a work environment, in an office, sorry, environment. So, there's an element there about dry eyes, tired eyes, switching off and, you know, those sort of elements.

(Male, Part-Time Charity Worker, Scotland, remote, 60s)

Again, intensification isn't shown here as just a by-product of ICT. The technology that affords hybrid work is reconfiguring power in the employment relationship, one that privileges organisational output over individual wellbeing.

Beyond intensification, these interviews also revealed how ICT leads to extensification too. Some saw benefits in this:

We communicate or work with clients all over the world so you might be on a call at nine o'clock at night, for instance, or first thing in the morning. So, the world's changed and the virtual world has enabled us to do that. Relationships developing. You're not writing a letter or a telegram to someone. You're face-to-face with people, so I think we do have to change to become more efficient.

(Male, Sales Director, NW England, hybrid, 50s)

Here we see how normalised extensification has become - a longer, less bounded day is simply the price of global competitiveness. Others, however, saw real downsides:

I can work 12 hours straight . . . However, what I have noticed, . . . by the third day, I'm like the walking dead. I cannot tell in some meetings I will understand half of it and I cannot produce any work.

(Female, Business Change Specialist, London, hybrid, 20s)

This participant's exhaustion demonstrates the physiological limits of extensification. Longer hours do not simply extend productivity; they erode it, replacing sustained focus with diminishing returns. Remote workers often linked extensification to the collapse of temporal boundaries between professional and personal life.

In the survey, 35% of participants reported working during annual leave because CVCS afforded them the opportunity to do so, 32% felt that they had had to sacrifice holiday time because of the additional demands placed by CVCS and 37% of people felt that CVCS had had a negative impact on their personal lives – increasing WLC.

From the interviews, an IT worker admitted that working from home made her more accepting of early and late calls, rationalising that finishing later 'didn't matter' when no commute was required:

I've not minded working later or earlier because I've been there... So, yes I've been more open to having earlier and late calls because I'm at home, so it doesn't matter if I finish at 18:30, 19:00, because I'm here.

(Female, IT, NW England, homeworking, 50s)

Here, ICT reshapes not only work practices but also workers' perceptions of time: later hours become acceptable because the boundaries between work and home are already blurred.

Spatial boundaries were similarly eroded. One participant outlined how her work spread to colonise areas of domestic space:

I usually just go downstairs, I can actually be anywhere, ... so I just, I take my laptop anywhere and whenever, I can email in my bed to be honest, ... or I go downstairs, out to the kitchen if I want a cup of tea and I just stay in the kitchen with my laptop.

(Female, Advisor, Northern England, homeworking, 30s)

This is a vision of the home as an always-available workplace. However, the consequences of this great flexibility and availability are increased demands, leading to exhaustion.

I think the work from home flexibility has been used as an excuse to force people to do more because the boundary between working life and personal life does not exist anymore. So you're always expected to be available in some respects, and you're always expected to deliver on certain things that in the past were clear cut, you know, impossible, unachievable, we cannot do them within working hours and you need extra resources –

but now, there has been this paradigm shift that if people are more productive at home, they can afford to get more done at home because they have less meetings and they have less responsibilities, but the reality is something else entirely. It's exhausting.

(Male, Production Technologist, Scotland, mainly remote, 30s)

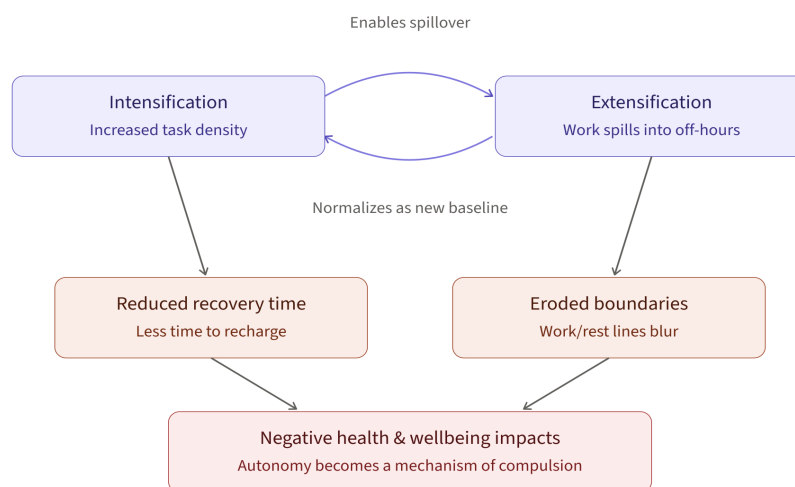
Removing the spatial and temporal boundaries of the office, erases the spatial and temporal boundaries of the home. The technologies that liberate work from physical space exact a price for that freedom, intensifying the working day and stretching it further.

3.2 A dynamic interaction

The stress experienced by those interviewed was not created because digital tools were themselves demanding to use. Instead, these collaboration and videoconferencing platforms mediated both intensification and extensification by encoding expectations of acceleration and availability.

In this way, we see that intensification and extensification feed off one another in a dynamic manner. Constant interruptions and a sense of being ‘always on’ intensified working days by increasing task density. But this — coupled with the easy availability of digital tools to simply continue working — then pushes tasks into evenings and weekends. Impenetrable working days extend tasks into all hours of the week, and into weekends and even periods of sickness or leave. This normalisation of spillover then feeds back into making the intensity of the working day itself feel normal.

Diagram 1 - The Intensification-Extensification Cycle



This intensification–extensification cycle then leads to both reduced time for recovery from work, and an erosion of the places that might normally be firewalled from work to facilitate that recovery — all of which has potentially negative impacts on health and wellbeing. This supports Hassard and Morris’s (2022) argument that digitalisation extends the reach of work, blurring the spatio-temporal boundaries necessary for wellbeing. Hybrid work is not a simple balance between autonomy and control but a reconfiguration in which autonomy itself becomes a mechanism of compulsion.

‘Technostress’ and WLC brought about by hybrid work should therefore be understood not as an individual-level strain but as an expression of this spatio-temporal regime created by digitally mediated labour.

However, as evidenced by the different responses above, intensification and extensification, and their associated impacts on health and wellbeing, may not be being experienced uniformly across different groups of workers. What may be a benefit for some, may carry greater costs for others.

4. Who Bears the Cost? Inequalities in Hybrid Work and Wellbeing

The interviews identified that extensification became an even more pressing problem for workers who had little space and had desks that were also dining tables or dressing tables and, at the extreme, ironing boards in the garage.

As would be expected, those with less space or fewer digital assets found hybrid work harder. As Felstead and Reuschke (2020) argue, the ability to homework effectively is stratified by material resources.

Rather than the democratising effect of a physical office, findings highlight how the impacts of extensification mirror existing socio-economic drives. The process is akin to those with less wealth being forced to come to work in more cramped offices with slower internet speeds and less comfortable office furniture. By implication, those with fewer resources are less able to generate advantage by being 'free' to work in hybrid ways, thus further entrenching the pattern.

The three surveys of UK workers conducted between 2020 and 2023 offer further detail on the costs and benefits of hybrid work, and also on the inequalities experienced by different groups.

4.1 Hybrid Work, Intensification and Work-Life Conflict

Results from the surveys revealed that, when located in their employer's workspace, respondents spent much less time engaging with collaborative and video conferencing software (CVCS) during a typical working day, signalling a return to face-to-face engagement post-Pandemic. Importantly, when work was dominated by ICT, and in particular CVCS, the study found a significant impact on the pace of work and employee well-being.

A significant proportion of survey participants not only felt that CVCS negatively impacted their working lives but also transferred to problems in their non-work experiences. As already quoted, 35% of participants reported working during annual leave because CVCS afforded them the opportunity to do so, 32% felt that they had had to sacrifice holiday time because of the additional demands placed by CVCS, and 37% of people felt that CVCS had had a negative impact on their personal lives.

This affirmation of the contribution of ICT-enabled remote work to intensification was supported by the interviews:

I've just like sit nine o'clock and I don't move from there. Like, not even to, most of the time I don't even stop to have lunch, it's like okay I want to get it out and sometimes I realise and it's like I'm supposed to finish at five and suddenly it's like six thirty and there is still like things to do. So, I believe that at least for my case, productivity is like way higher. I don't know if it is the same for the rest of the team, but there is like part of the team that I do feel that do like really work a lot and others that, I don't know if they are working or if they are having a beer with their flatmates. So, it is a bit of a – I also had – like I had that fear that it would be perceived from my bosses that I wouldn't, like I'm not working and I'm just like having a chat with my boyfriend or with my flatmates and that was like a big fear because it is like okay I am working like crazy, like I'm not getting paid for all the hours that I am over working and you don't even know that I'm actually over working.

(Female, reception and reservations manager)

Well, it's supposed to be that all together I will work 16 but I usually end up working more, I do. Because the casework takes much more like things I could do on the phone during the day I usually do in writing at night and send it over. So, I could get it quickly done you know, if I raised a complaint with someone on the phone on behalf of a client it takes me five minutes. If I have to do it in writing officially it takes me like half an hour to draft a proper good letter. So, I think it's hard to manage the time because in the evening time I am like more tired. And it's usually that I end up like you know going to bed like midnight. And I really wish I could get back to normal [laughing] hours and to be back to the office.
(Female, Citizens Advice advisor)

However, addressing the second research question, the surveys all showed that **the direct effect of intensification on wellbeing was not statistically significant in any of the models**. Thus, the mechanism is not simply 'ICT-enabled remote work is more intense and has an impact on wellbeing.' Instead, the data shows that **digital intensification undermines wellbeing when it spills across the boundary between work and life**:

Table 1 - Summary of interactions between intensification and work-life conflict across the three surveys

Survey	β value (standardised effect)	Signifying...
Survey 1 (mixed remote, office and hybrid)	0.60	Strong positive relationship
Survey 2a (hybrid workers)	0.52	Strong positive relationship
Survey 2b (office-based workers)	0.36	Moderate positive relationship

Regardless of setting, the surveys showed that intensification has a statistically significant relationship with work-life conflict (WLC). The relationship between ICT-driven intensification and WLC is strongest in the mixed pandemic/post-pandemic sample, remains strong among hybrid workers, and is weaker but still statistically significant among office workers. This suggests that hybrid work does not eliminate intensification pressures.

For hybrid workers specifically, the data shows that the same mechanism remains firmly in place. ICT-related intensification increases work-life conflict, and WLC reduces wellbeing. This indirect pathway from intensification through WLC to wellbeing is significant and negative, while the direct relationship between intensification and wellbeing isn't significant.

Table 2 - Path coefficients of the mediation model (Survey 2a, hybrid, N = 1496)

Independent variable effects	b / β	z-value	p-value	CI
Direct effects				
Gender → WLC	-0.06 / -0.02	-1.04	0.30	-0.06 ; 0.19
Intensification → WLC	0.56 / 0.52	22.26	<0.001	0.51 ; 0.61
Gender → Wellbeing	0.08 / 0.05	2.51	0.01	0.02 ; 0.15
WLC → Wellbeing	-0.41 / -0.65	-27.02	<0.001	-0.38 ; -0.44
Total direct and indirect effects				
Total effect (direct and indirect)	-0.24 / -0.35	-13.97	<0.001	-0.20 ; -27
Intensification → WLC → Wellbeing	-0.23 / -0.34	-18.03	<0.001	-0.20 ; -0.26
Intensification → Wellbeing	-0.01 / -0.01	-0.56	0.57	-0.04 ; 0.03

The data suggests that hybrid work may offer flexibility, but it does not remove the core risk that CVCS systems compress work, increase the sense of pace and responsiveness, and means that work is harder to contain within ‘normal’ temporal and spatial boundaries.

What this surfaces is the flexibility paradox (Chung, 2022) that hybrid work introduces. The same ICTs that allow people to work flexibly also enable work to become more intensive and extensive: more messages, more meetings, more interruptions, more responsiveness, and more work displaced into evenings, weekends, domestic spaces or even sickness time.

Intensification and extensification reinforce each other: crowded digital working days leave less time for focused work, which pushes unfinished tasks into personal time; that spillover then normalises denser and more available working patterns.

The impact of this is real, as evidenced by the interviews. The dynamic increases WLC, which manifests in greater tension within families, within shared households, with children seeing their parents distracted, partners feeling more alienated from one another, and trust being eroded between colleagues.

4.2 Missing Buffers

What is driving these impacts? There is clearly still an intensification question in play for those working in offices. This is to be expected, since the same digital tools that facilitate remote work are just as likely to be in use in the office: email traffic, messaging tools such as Teams, video calls, and so on.

Whilst this intensification in the office is still impacting WLC, the relationship is weaker, and the research suggests that this is due to there being more ‘buffers’ in place. These can be informal – the conversations in corridors or shared walks to get lunch, or material – like natural transitions between in-person meetings, time spent commuting, or having coffee breaks. It is these activities that form a key part of the natural change of pace during the day and that mitigate, to some extent, overload and intensification.

However, in the homeworking environment, these buffer activities are often missing. This problem was made very clear by several interview participants:

One of the things that we’re all finding is that lack of personal interaction, that – specially the school, you go from one class to another class, you meet colleagues, that social personal interaction is a big part of the working day.
(Male, modern language secondary teacher)

I definitely miss the having a coffee break and running into someone random and having a chat and seeing how they are getting on. I think I also miss socialising just with my friends so outside of office is also definitely one thing that I am missing.
(Young female graduate, financial services)

Reintroducing these buffers must become part of advice to boost wellbeing and productivity. For example, a study published by the British Journal of Sports Medicine found that taking five-minute breaks every hour helped boost wellbeing without losing efficiency – and researchers found that ‘a five-minute stroll each hour led to the biggest and most feasible improvement in productivity, mood and alertness’.

4.3 The Unequal Impact of Hybrid Work on Wellbeing

Digging deeper into the data, the impacts of hybrid work on wellbeing – mediated by WLC – are not distributed equally. This is important, especially as policymakers and firms look to learn from this work about how to ensure that the offer of hybrid work.

Evidence on gender

Analysis of the data reveals that gender has little significant effect on levels of WLC experienced. However, there was a significant, direct association with wellbeing.

In the first survey – undertaken in June 2020 – 56% of women and 47% of men reported that they felt constantly under strain: a difference of 9%. During the period from December 2020–February 2021, 42% of women and 36% of men reported that they felt constantly under strain: a difference of 6%. In the most recent survey, 42% of women and 35% of men reported that they recently felt constantly under strain: a difference of 7%. All of these results were statistically significant.

Data from the first survey (from the start of the pandemic) also showed a statistically significant difference by gender in terms of access to homeworking spaces. Only 51% of women reported that they had a dedicated room, compared to 65% of men.

This gendered impact is also evidenced by interviews, where women described the layering effect of hybrid and remote work, which was added on top of unpaid caregiving. Women with caring responsibilities were more likely to experience the cumulative burden of simultaneous paid work, childcare, household management and digital availability. Many women described performing paid and unpaid labour simultaneously, taking calls during childcare or working late at night after completing domestic tasks.

In contrast, several men discussed extensification in more positive terms, with more flexibility and greater control over their schedules. These accounts suggest that gender differences in wellbeing reflect both the simultaneity of care and paid labour for women and the cultural legitimacy men may feel in claiming flexibility. Hybrid work thus risks reproducing, and in some cases intensifying, long-standing gender inequalities in the organisation of time.

This is a pressing issue. Women make up 49.6% of UK workers at entry level, but this falls to 21% of ‘C-suite’ workers, according to data released by LinkedIn on behalf of the World Economic Forum. There are multiple factors contributing to this fall, but it is vital that hybrid work does not contribute to it. Women’s wellbeing is being disproportionately impacted by intensification and extensification of hybrid working arrangements. But these impacts can be amplified by blanket return-to-office mandates, which can be less achievable for those – very often women – who are caregivers who, despite the strain, are able to access better jobs through hybrid working arrangements.

Evidence on housing

Several comments pointed to the tensions that arose when multiple adults were trying to work in the same home – not so much an extensification of work into new physical spaces, but an intensification of the use of a shared home space, with the density of ‘workspace’ increased.

Workers with cramped housing or poor digital infrastructure found extensification disruptive and stressful, while those with dedicated home offices and reliable broadband integrated it more easily.

So, I have got to recognise what people are going through, it is really tough for them. And quite a lot of them have said that what they have found really hard was their husband working from home. Because their husband seems to have decided that he can go into their office as well. And they say, you’re so loud on the telephone.

Evidence on caring responsibilities

With nurseries and schools shut, the pandemic brought with it some very specific issues that caused added burdens on homeworking. Data highlighted that, at the start of the pandemic,

those with children under the age of ten reported significantly poorer work–life balance than those with no children or older children.

This was clearly articulated by interview participants. One male project manager interviewed in spring 2020 noted:

We're a family of four, so my wife and my two young boys. So they're not at nursery, obviously, so they've been at home the whole time. So I work in our bedroom, it's not the greatest setup either. I don't feel totally – I don't feel like it's a workspace at all really, and I can always hear [laughs] I can always hear the kids, basically. If they're having fun in the garden I can hear them, but if they're crying I can hear them as well. So, it just – it's just a niggle all the time... But – and that's the bit that I'm finding difficult when I work from home, is if I go and make a cup of tea and he asks me to play cars, I get that guilt straight away of – my natural reaction is, I've got to go and do my work. But if I've not got a call, or if I've got a video call, or something really important to come back to then I'll have to tell him, no, I've got to get on with my work and I have to just come back upstairs and shut the door. But if it is I'm just coming back to a spreadsheet, or a document I'm working on, then I might just say, yeah, I'll give in – you know?

Home-based working became much easier when children returned to school, as noted by a female administrator participating in interview three during Spring 2021:

So, they're all back at school. So, that makes it a little easier. Obviously, for, well, for one of them, they're still doing the school run because things like school clubs aren't really running.... well, I'm still, yeah, I'm probably doing more hours of actual work whereas before, you know, I might lose two or three hours of a workday to do home schooling or childcare or whatever.

Although we are now some way beyond the pandemic itself, the digital tools and blurred boundaries that hybrid work relies on are here to stay, so the pressures of juggling childcare within this framework are likely to persist, and need to be factored in as better policy and practice is developed.

Interactions with seniority

For those in more senior roles, hybrid work can produce intensification and extensification not only through greater task density, faster task switching and more time spent on CVCS, but also through the added responsibility of coordinating this greater number of tasks (and who will do them), and the need to be seen to be responsive and visible to others across the organisation. They are not just doing more; they are also more continuously available and more continuously legible to others.

In summary – hybrid work and embedded privilege

Where hybrid work is treated as synonymous with flexibility, there is the risk of obscuring the extent to which hybrid arrangements remain embedded in organisational systems that continue to privilege certain ways of working, and thus certain groups better able to perform in this way.

Hybrid work may influence not only where work is carried out, but also how competence and contribution are assessed. Much of the existing research on hybrid work focuses on productivity, coordination and work-life balance, with limited attention to how these hybrid arrangements interact with underlying organisational norms about legitimate work and worker behaviour (Lindberg and Christensen, 2026).

By reducing the centrality of physical presence, hybrid arrangements can change expectations around availability, autonomy and performance – but also introduce new

expectations around digital responsiveness, boundary management and technostress. These changes – which are often actioned without deeper thinking around their impacts – create a new landscape of performance, which is likely to benefit some far more than others (Fan and Moen, 2025).

Hence, because the assessment of competence and contribution in this new landscape of hybrid work isn't actively reflected on and negotiated, and the underlying organisational norms about what 'good work' looks like remain an implicit standard, certain sections of the workforce are likely to see hybrid work consolidate privilege. Those who don't naturally fit this implicit standard – perhaps those who are assumed to lead on domestic duties and/or caring responsibilities, or don't have the physical space available to perform as well – may be problematised or managed as exceptions, leading not just to greater impacts on their wellbeing, but to progression and pay as well.

5. Hybrid Work, Human Resource Management and Good Work Design

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5.1 The Bounded Moral Economy

Hybrid arrangements appear to weaken traditional assumptions about how work should be organised by allowing greater flexibility over scheduling and boundary management. For some employees, this flexibility may reduce penalties associated with non-normative ways of managing energy, recovery and domestic responsibilities. However, for others, norms around competence and legitimacy continue to privilege certain modes of working.

This is surfaced through the approach of the 'bounded moral economy', which asks us to think about whose ways of working are considered normal, credible and productive. Rather than operating as diffuse cultural expectations, moral judgements are channelled through HR policies, eligibility criteria, performance metrics, attendance rules and accommodation pathways.

Reduced sensory intensity, greater environmental control, and increased flexibility of hybrid work may support participation and wellbeing. However, this shift to hybrid work reorganises rather than removes the moral judgements experienced in the workplace. Physical presence becomes less central, but new signals of commitment emerge: digital trace, responsiveness, constant availability and disciplined self-management. This reorganisation of what counts as commitment matters because many barriers faced by workers are not overtly discriminatory. They can appear as 'normal' expectations: respond quickly to messages, be visible online, stay available.

The bounded moral economy lens surfaces that these are not neutral standards. How then to offer ‘good’ hybrid work to those who don’t fit these traditional norms?

A ‘medical model’ individualises responsibility for inclusion, positioning difference as a deviation requiring correction or mitigation (Goodley, 2016; Roulstone and Barnes, 2005). In contrast, in a ‘social model’, exclusion is produced through workplace cultures and performance norms which are structured around assumptions of what is ‘normal’. (Kwon and Raghunathan, 2015)

Both perspectives risk partiality. While medical models individualise disadvantage, social models structuralise it, hence, neither fully captures the relational character of managing difference at work, which emerges through ongoing interactions between individuals, colleagues and organisational systems.

In short, hybrid work isn’t simply a question of working more flexibly. It remains embedded in performance systems and workplace cultures that privilege communicative fluency, availability, and autonomy.

As a result, hybrid work arrangements may reduce certain pressures on face-to-face interactions, while simultaneously intensifying expectations of digital responsiveness. This recalibration is unlikely to be felt equally by different groups.

5.2 The Importance of Line Managers

Line managers are pivotal because they sit at the point where policies are turned into lived experience for workers. Line managers are very often where workplace culture and trust are developed and become embodied – and provide that first link through the chain to senior strategic leadership.

One of the big things about having a team that work from home is, you do have to trust them. There has to be trust. You will drive yourself mad as a manager if you are trying to monitor what people are doing when they’re at home, because actually you can’t do that. And I do it, I go and make a cup of tea and go and put the washing machine on. Why shouldn’t I? If I was in an office, I’d probably stand and have a 10-minute chat with someone by the water cooler, and I don’t have any issue with people doing – and people will ping me and say, you know, ‘The dog’s ill, I need to take it to the vet’, and it’s like, that’s fine, because I know they’ll make the time back, because they appreciate the freedom they have from working from home. You get far more work out of people who work from home than you do from people in an office, because they appreciate it.

(Female, senior team manager)

The role of the line manager must go beyond supervision of attendance and task completion or delivery. Managers and workers - and workplace representatives - must cultivate the trust that will be central to any successful deployment of hybrid working policies. Attuned to risks of reproducing normative assumptions about what good work looks like, managers need to be equipped to design work, setting clear expectations on availability, protecting recovery time, managing meeting load, supporting asynchronous work, recognising different communication needs, and evaluating performance by the quality and sustainability of contribution rather than by presence or speed of response.

5.3 The Importance of Good Work Design

Good work design will be how managers get hybrid right. For outcomes tied to exercising discretion over time, hybrid work could be more problematic, since these outcomes require greater management of boundaries and sustained attention. However, for outcomes tied to constant connectivity, productivity and resilience under strain, hybrid work could appear to enhance performance, since it tends to valorise these connectivity-based behaviours.

This contrast — between outcomes that reward boundary management and those that reward constant connectivity — is why this study matters for both policy and practice. The issue is not whether hybrid work is inherently inclusive, but whether it selectively reshapes the organisational conditions through which workplace inequalities are produced.

Overcoming this will need engaged design processes that are both structural, and personal. Achieving good hybrid work across an organisation will not mean giving individuals permission to work differently while leaving the ‘normal’ system intact. It will mean redesigning the system so that different ways of working are expected, legitimate, accommodated and supported.

Creating inclusive and fair hybrid work will require good work design: structural interventions in workload design, digital communication practices and performance evaluation systems, alongside broader cultural shifts that recognise diverse working practices.

5.4 Interactions with the Keep Britain Working agenda

The significance of these findings extends beyond the debate about flexible working. The Keep Britain Working Review, led by Sir Charlie Mayfield, identifies health-related economic inactivity and the exclusion of disabled people from employment as major labour-market challenges, and places particular emphasis on prevention, early intervention and helping people to remain in work. It proposes a Healthy Working Lifecycle and new Stay-in-Work Plans through which employers and employees can agree appropriate adjustments and flexibility before difficulties lead to prolonged absence or labour-market exit.

The findings from the Working@Home project suggest that well-designed hybrid work could form an important part of this preventative infrastructure. The key is not just to stop people falling out of work, but to design work to enable people to stay.

Greater control over working environment, sensory demands and pacing, together with the substantial autonomy benefits identified in this study, may make employment more accessible and sustainable for people for whom conventional office arrangements create barriers. However, the results also provide an important qualification to the Mayfield agenda: flexibility in where people work will not necessarily keep people healthy and in employment if the work itself remains poorly designed and produces higher technostress, digital intensification and work–life conflict.

This points towards a more anticipatory approach to inclusion. Rather than waiting until employees report reduced wellbeing, or fall out of the workforce, employers can design jobs around greater predictability, environmental control, communication choice and genuine discretion from the outset. Such an approach could help deliver both sides of the Keep Britain Working challenge: enabling more people to access employment in the first place, while reducing the risk that work itself contributes to people subsequently leaving it.

6. Making Flex Fair: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The Working@Home project surfaces that hybrid work isn't a simple question of working more flexibly – a private arrangement between individual workers and managers about where work takes place. Instead, hybrid work is embedded in – and interacts with – cultures and systems of workplace performance and value. As hybrid work changes how time, space, availability and communication are organised – and how these are valued within the moral economy of the workplace – its impacts are experienced differently by different groups.

Women, carers, those with additional needs and workers with poorer housing or digital infrastructure may experience hybrid work differently, especially where organisational norms continue to privilege constant availability, communicative fluency, visibility and self-management.

Managing hybrid work and 'making flex fair' needs to **go beyond accommodation of individual requests** for flexible working (or requirements for it) to **collective work design and governance** focused on equality and health and wellbeing.

This has implications for both government policy, and for institutional best practice. Guardrails will be needed to ensure that hybrid work is also good work, and employers should redesign work so that flexibility supports autonomy, wellbeing and inclusion rather than intensification, extensification and work-life conflict.

Gaps in the current policy and organisational guidance landscape

As evidenced by the policy and organisational guidance landscape review (see Appendix), the UK's existing policy and guidance frameworks provide important but fragmented protections for people undertaking hybrid and flexible work.

In summary: the Employment Rights Act 1996 gives employees a right to request changes to their hours, working pattern or place of work, while health and safety legislation requires employers to assess risks to workers' physical and mental health, including for those working from home.

The Working Time Regulations and Display Screen Equipment Regulations also apply to remote and hybrid workers, and the Equality Act 2010 protects workers from discrimination and requires reasonable adjustments for disabled employees. Alongside these statutory provisions, guidance from ACAS, the Health and Safety Executive and the Equality and Human Rights Commission encourages employers to manage flexible-working requests fairly, monitor work-related stress, support home workers and make adjustments for disabled and neurodivergent staff.

However, these provisions primarily regulate access to flexible work, procedural fairness and responses to identifiable risks. They do not establish a substantive standard for what well-designed, healthy and inclusive hybrid work should look like. As a result, the quality of hybrid work is largely determined through discretionary arrangements between individual workers and their managers.

The most important policy issues are summarised below.

- **The particular wellbeing risks that hybrid working introduces remain unaddressed.** Hybrid work is framed as “flexible,” which embeds an assumption that it is wholly positive, without interrogating its potential to affect health and wellbeing differently for different groups.
- **How hybrid work is deployed is currently determined by individual, discretionary employer–worker arrangements, which sets hybrid and home working in the domain of private discussion rather than policy.** This can make outcomes contingent on the quality of that relationship and the proficiency of the individual manager, fails to account for power differentials, and creates a risk that some workers feel stigmatised for raising concerns.
- **There is an absence of inclusion by design.** People’s experience of hybrid work varies depending on their caring responsibilities, space at home, or digital infrastructure, but these variations are currently addressed only reactively, initiated by the worker, rather than through a proper work design process. Where consultation rights exist, they do not represent a meaningful role in work redesign and can themselves be affected by power differentials.
- **These issues are compounded for those with additional needs.** Reasonable adjustments are reactive and individualised, with outcomes dependent on positive employer–worker relationships. Adjustments for disabled or neurodivergent workers can be seen as “exceptional,” implicitly measured against a neurotypical standard that is often also white and male. Even where procedural access is equal, structural inequalities continue to shape outcomes.

In short, current policies — and the organisational guidance that flows from them — fail to deliver an anticipatory, equitable approach that requires employers to consider the wider dimensions of impact when designing hybrid work. The recommendations that follow are aimed at delivering such an approach.

The publication of Keep Britain Working creates an important opportunity to address these gaps. Its proposed Healthy Working Lifecycle, Healthy Working Standard and Workplace Health Intelligence Unit provide potential institutional mechanisms through which government can move from a predominantly reactive system towards one focused on prevention.

However, prevention cannot be reduced to earlier health intervention. It must also include the prevention of harmful or exclusionary conditions of work. The evidence presented here demonstrates that the organisation of workload, digital communication, working time, autonomy, performance assessment and workplace location can promote wellbeing and inclusion. As government develops the Keep Britain Working proposals, good work design should sit alongside workplace health provision as a core preventative mechanism.

6.1 Recommendations for future policy

1. **Treat fair, hybrid work as a good work standard, not simply as an employment entitlement**

Flexible working policy should move beyond the question of whether an employee can request hybrid work, towards whether hybrid work is being designed in ways that protect wellbeing, equality and job quality.

Government guidance integrated into fact sheets on flexible work that accompany the Employment Rights Act should make clear that hybrid work can create risks as well as benefits, including digital intensification, work extensification, technostress and work-family conflict.

Rather than the new Fair Work Agency (part of the Department for Business and Trade, acting to protect workers, support fair competition and ensure employers comply with the law) developing a separate framework, government should ensure that the design and quality of flexible work forms an explicit component of the Healthy Working Standard proposed by the Keep Britain Working Review. The Standard should recognise hybrid working as both a potential enabler of labour-market participation and a potential source of work-related risk.

This standard should build on the new requirement for employers to consider requests for hybrid work (and offer detailed reasons in cases where requests are rejected) but also to strengthen the proposed consultations with employees to become proper impact assessments that consider:

- How to mitigate the risks of hybrid work increasing workload, meeting load or responsiveness expectations;
- How to ensure that employees have adequate recovery time and clear boundaries;
- Whether hybrid workers have access to fair progression, learning, visibility and voice.

The Fair Work Agency should work with the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Business and Trade, the Department for Health and Social Care and the proposed Workplace Health Intelligence Unit to ensure that flexible-working guidance reflects these standards.

2. **Rethink the ‘right to disconnect’ in the light of the framework of intensification and extensification**

Hybrid work becomes harmful when intensification and extensification lead to work-life conflict, and employers should be expected to manage digital work as a specific source of stress and health risk. Hybrid work should not be allowed to normalise a longer and less bounded working day.

Going beyond a simplistic ‘right to disconnect’, the Health and Safety Executive should expand their guidance on digital workload and availability, including expectations around:

- out-of-hours communication;
- meeting density;
- response-time norms;
- asynchronous communication;
- protected focus time;
- recovery breaks;
- work during leave, sickness or caring time.

3. Strengthen the equality lens in flexible working guidance

Building on the greater emphasis on equality in the Employment Rights Act, Government should make clear that hybrid work can reproduce existing inequalities where workers have unequal home space, caring burdens, digital infrastructure, sensory needs or informal power to negotiate boundaries.

While sustaining the right to request flexible working arrangements, and emphasising the positives of hybrid work, the new requirement for larger employers to undertake full Equality Action Plans should be extended to all firms, and specifically assess whether hybrid work is producing differential effects on:

- wellbeing;
- work-life conflict
- technostress
- access to progression;
- workload;
- performance ratings;
- pay and promotion
- access to training and mentoring.

4. Move from reasonable adjustment to anticipatory work design

Hybrid work can offer meaningful benefits through greater environmental control, reduced sensory demands and more autonomy. But these gains are limited if organisations continue to judge contribution through normative assumptions about responsiveness, communication style, visibility and constant availability.

Government guidance should therefore encourage employers to move beyond a case-by-case reasonable adjustment model towards anticipatory inclusive design. This means building flexibility, predictability and communication choice into default working arrangements, rather than requiring those with additional needs to request exceptions.

This should include guidance on:

- predictable hybrid schedules;
- work-life conflict;
- sensory-aware workplace design;
- meeting-free focus time;
- alternatives to rapid verbal processing;
- clarity on expectations and deadlines;
- pay and promotion;
- performance assessment based on contribution rather than visibility.

This would directly support the objectives of the Keep Britain Working Review, which identifies structural barriers faced by those with additional needs.

However, the Healthy Working Lifecycle should go further than improving the process through which individual adjustments are made. Its preventative ambition provides an opportunity to shift the policy model upstream, towards removing predictable barriers through work design before an individual needs to disclose a condition or demonstrate difficulty. IFOW has [published detailed cross-sector case studies](#) on this, in collaboration with the CIPD.

The proposed Healthy Working Standard should therefore include explicit expectations around anticipatory inclusive work design, including flexible location and scheduling, sensory accessibility, communication choice, predictable working patterns and fair performance assessment. These expectations should be understood not simply as accommodations for particular individuals, but as features of healthy and inclusive work.

5. **Encourage a focus on investment in line management capability**

Line managers are pivotal to whether hybrid work supports autonomy or becomes a source of anxiety and surveillance. Government, sector bodies and employer organisations should incentivise investment in the development of management capability around fair hybrid work.

The role of line managers is especially important because the same formal hybrid policy can produce very different outcomes depending on the capability, confidence and assumptions of individual managers, and their skills in building trust with employees.

Training and guidance should include a focus on:

- trust-based management;
- output-focused performance management;
- recognising signs of intensification and burnout;
- supporting disabled and neurodivergent workers;
- managing hybrid teams inclusively;
- protecting boundaries and recovery;
- avoiding proximate bias and digital presenteeism;
- performance assessment based on contribution rather than visibility.

This advice aligns directly with Keep Britain Working's identification of a 'culture of fear' around health and disability in the workplace. Policy should equip line managers to conduct constructive conversations early, before problems develop.

However, managers should not be expected to become health professionals. Their role should be to recognise emerging problems, create psychologically safe routes for workers to raise concerns, redesign aspects of work where appropriate, and connect workers quickly to occupational health or other specialist support.

Line-management capability should therefore form an explicit component of the Healthy Working Standard, including competency in workload design, flexible work, disability and inclusion, early intervention and sustainable return to work.

6. **Require work design impact assessments for major changes to digital work**

Where employers introduce new digital tools, AI systems, collaboration platforms or major hybrid work policies, they should assess likely impacts on job quality and equality. These assessments should not focus only on data protection, security or efficiency. Policies should also consider impacts on autonomy, workload, job demands, skill use, learning, relationships, wellbeing, work-life conflict and equality.

Government should encourage the development of a practical "good work design impact assessment" that can be used by firms when introducing new tools or new hybrid arrangements. These should form part of the preventative infrastructure promoted by Keep Britain Working.

7. **Strengthen worker voice in hybrid work policy**

Hybrid work is experienced at the level of tasks, teams, households and bodies.

Government should encourage employers to involve workers in the design, review and adjustment of hybrid arrangements.

This is not only good employment practice. It is necessary for effective policy design.

Workers are often best placed to identify where flexibility is creating hidden costs, where boundaries are breaking down, and where policies that look fair on paper are producing unequal outcomes in practice.

8. **Ensure the Workplace Health Intelligence Unit measures the quality of work, not only absence and employment outcomes**

The Keep Britain Working Review proposes a new Workplace Health Intelligence Unit to build the evidence base on what works in preventing ill-health, improving retention and supporting disabled people to participate in employment.

Measures such as sickness absence, return-to-work rates and labour-market exit all ‘lag’, and by the time they are observed an employee may already have experienced significant deterioration in their health or relationship with work.

The Workplace Health Intelligence Unit should therefore also develop and test ‘lead’ indicators sustainable work, including:

- work intensity and workload;
- work–life conflict;
- technostress;
- autonomy and control;
- recovery time;
- out-of-hours work;
- meeting and digital communication load;
- perceived manager support;
- access to flexibility;
- job satisfaction and wellbeing;
- access to training, progression and good-quality work;
- differential outcomes by disability, neurodivergence, gender and caring status.

This would support understanding of which features of work make staying possible and sustainable.

6.2 Recommendations for organisational guidance and best practice

Treating hybrid work as part of workplace health protection

The Keep Britain Working Review calls for a shift towards prevention, with employers taking a more active role in helping people remain healthy, participate in work and avoid unnecessary movement into sickness absence or economic inactivity.

Hybrid work should be understood as part of this workplace health infrastructure. Well-designed flexibility can help workers manage health conditions, disability, neurodivergence, caring responsibilities and changing circumstances while remaining productively connected to work.

The Review's challenge to employers is to move from asking "who should be able to work flexibly" to asking "how can we design work so that more people can thrive, even as they face life's struggles."

These recommendations below translate that preventative approach into the design and management of hybrid work.

1. Equip line managers to manage hybrid work fairly

Good line management is potentially the most fundamental factor in whether hybrid work is deployed successfully.

Managers need to be trained and supported to treat hybrid work as a good work issue.

This means moving away from surveillance and towards actively building trust (both with workers and their representatives), clarity and support.

Managers should be expected to:

- set clear expectations;
- manage workloads actively;
- monitor whether work is spilling into personal time;
- support asynchronous work;
- protect recovery time;
- recognise different communication needs;
- focus on outputs rather than visibility;
- create psychologically safe routes for workers to raise concerns.

Managers should also be given enough time and authority to redesign work with their teams, rather than being left to implement hybrid policies inconsistently. This aligns directly with Keep Britain Working's identification of a "culture of fear" around health and disability in the workplace.

Training should equip line managers to conduct constructive conversations early, before problems develop. However, managers should not be expected to become health professionals. They should be trained to recognise emerging problems, and connect workers quickly to occupational health or other specialist support.

2. Create meaningful employee voice mechanisms

Building on the steer on consultation in the Employment Rights Act, firms should involve workers in designing and reviewing hybrid arrangements. This should include workers from different seniorities, genders, neurotypes, disability statuses, caring situations and job roles.

Useful mechanisms include:

- team-level hybrid work reviews;
- pulse surveys on workload, wellbeing and boundaries;

- employee forums, and focus groups with those who have additional needs;
- co-design workshops;
- hybrid work champions;
- safe spaces for experimentation and feedback.

Employee voice should not be a one-off consultation. Hybrid work should be treated as an ongoing design process.

3. **Start with work design, not office attendance**

Organisations should look to begin by asking what different forms of work require, rather than always starting with fixing a number of in-office days and designing work around these days. IFOW has [published detailed cross-sector case studies](#) on delivering this in practice, in collaboration with the CIPD.

A good hybrid work design process should map:

- which tasks require collaboration;
- which tasks require focus;
- which tasks benefit from co-presence;
- which tasks can be done asynchronously;
- where digital tools are increasing workload
- where work is spilling into evenings, weekends or leave;
- where different workers experience different barriers or unequal costs, with particular attention given to whether mandating in-office days will have impacts on women and other care-givers;

A task-level approach is more likely to produce fair and effective hybrid work than blanket attendance mandates.

4. **Redesign boundaries deliberately**

Boundaries should not be left to individuals to defend alone. Firms should set clear team-level norms around availability, meetings and recovery.

Practical steps include:

- “no meetings” blocks for focused work;
- default meeting lengths of 25 or 30 minutes;
- protected lunch breaks;
- clear expectations that messages sent outside working hours do not require immediate responses;
- agreed “quiet hours” for focused work;
- escalation rules for genuinely urgent issues;
- regular review of meeting load and digital communications volumes;
- discouraging work during leave, sickness or caring time.

The aim is to prevent flexibility becoming a mechanism through which work expands into every available spaces.

5. **Manage digital tools as sources of workload**

Collaboration and video-conferencing tools shape how work is paced, interrupted and evaluated. As such, they should not be treated as neutral infrastructure.

Firms should audit how digital tools affect:

- task switching;
- interruptions;

- workload;
- meeting volume;
- response expectations;
- information overload;
- monitoring and visibility;
- wellbeing;
- work-life conflict.

Where digital tools are increasing intensification and extensification, employers should change the system rather than expecting individuals to become more resilient.

6. **Evaluate contribution, not visibility or responsiveness**

Hybrid work can shift the signals through which competence is judged. In office-based work, visibility and presence often become proxies for commitment. In hybrid work, the risk is that speed of response, online availability and digital trace become new proxies.

Firms should therefore review performance systems to ensure they do not reward:

- being constantly online;
- replying quickly outside work hours;
- attending unnecessary meetings;
- performative busyness;
- proximity to managers;
- comfort with dominant communication styles.

Performance should be judged by the quality, value and sustainability of contribution, not by visibility.

7. **Design inclusive hybrid work by default**

For workers with additional needs, hybrid work can support autonomy, sensory regulation, pacing and recovery. But this depends on how work is designed.

Firms should build inclusive practices into everyday hybrid work, including:

- predictable routines and advance notice of changes;
- written agendas and follow-up notes;
- options for asynchronous input;
- reduced reliance on rapid verbal processing;
- clear priorities and deadlines;
- fewer unnecessary meetings;
- explicit communication norms;
- access to quiet and low-stimulation places;
- flexibility over camera use, where appropriate;
- clarity on when immediate response is genuinely required.

These practices should not depend on individual workers repeatedly disclosing or proving need. They should be part of normal good work design.

8. **Make office days purposeful and accessible**

In-office work together in teams still matters, but should not encourage performative attendance. Firms should make clear what office time is for: collaboration, mentoring, social connection, learning, problem-solving or access to equipment.

Office design should support different needs, including:

- quiet spaces;

- private rooms for focused work or decompression;
- predictable desk booking;
- alternatives to hot-desking for workers who need consistency;
- accessible equipment;
- sensory-aware spaces;
- reliable technology;
- access to storage for equipment, and control over workstation;
- meeting rooms that support hybrid participation.

9. **Measure hidden costs, not just productivity gains**

Firms should not judge hybrid work only by office attendance, productivity, cost savings or employee preference. Organisations should also measure whether flexibility is creating hidden costs.

Useful indicators include:

- meeting hours per week
- out-of-hours messages;
- work during leave or sickness;
- reported work-life conflict;
- technostress;
- burnout risk;
- Good Work measures, including:
 - autonomy;
 - job satisfaction;
 - access to development;
 - fairness, in particular performance and promotion outcomes by gender, disability, neurotype and caring status;
- use and perceived fairness of adjustments;
- quality of manager support.

This data should be used to redesign work, not to monitor individual workers.

10. **Make hybrid work iterative**

Hybrid work should be reviewed regularly because roles, technologies, team norms and worker needs change over time.

Firms should adopt a cycle of reveal, reflect, reimagine and realise:

- reveal how work is actually being enacted
- reflect on where hybrid arrangements are helping or harming;
- reimagine work with employees;
- realise changes through practical redesign;
- review impacts on wellbeing, equality and performance.

This approach helps firms avoid treating hybrid work as a settled policy, treating it instead as a continuing process of good work design.

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Appendix

Review of current policy landscape to inform policy recommendations and guidance for organisational best practice

Area	Summary of relevant policy and guidance content, and concise assessment
Flexible / hybrid work in general	
Policy recommendation link: “Treat fair, flexible work as a good work standard, not simply as an employment entitlement”	LEGISLATION Employment Rights Act 1996, Part 8A (flexible working) and Employment Rights Act 2025 - Gives employees a statutory right to request a variation of their contract terms relating to hours, timing or location of work. - The employer must deal with the request in a reasonable manner and within the statutory timeframe, and may refuse only on specified business grounds. - Coming into force in 2027 are stronger laws to make it “more likely that reasonable flexible working requests are accepted...” Government is consulting on reforms regarding how employees should be consulted when reviewing these requests, and on how new demands for explanations of why a request has been denied should work. - Cf. ACAS statutory Code of Practice on flexible working requests ASSESSMENT - Employees’ rights merely centre around access to flexible work; no regulation of the content or quality of flexible-working arrangements that result. - Government Factsheet on Flexible Working (2026) offers an only-positive view that “Flexible working helps people achieve a better work life balance, which can lead to happier, healthier and more productive employees. This is good for employees and good for businesses. It is also particularly valuable for those with health conditions and caring responsibilities, including parents with young children.” - ACAS guidance is concerned with the fairness of the request process and not the substance of the arrangement. - There appears to be an opportunity for consultation on how flexible working requests are considered. - No instrument of law/regulation/guidance specifically addresses the design of good hybrid work - Risks are not directly addressed and are instead handled in a patchwork manner across other themes (diversity/inclusion, wellbeing, management guidance)

Flexible and hybrid work and wellbeing

Policy recommendation link:

“Rethink the ‘right to disconnect’ in the light of the framework of intensification and extensification”

“Require work design impact assessments for major changes to digital work”

LEGISLATION

Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 + Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (reg. 3)

- Employers must protect the health, safety and welfare of employees so far as reasonably practicable.
- Reg. 3 requires a “suitable and sufficient” risk assessment, which must be reviewed where there is a significant change to processes or work equipment
- [HSE Guidance ‘Managing Home workers’ health and safety’](#) extends this to home/hybrid workers and states work-related stress and mental health must be assessed like other hazards
- suggested additions to home-worker assessments to include stress and poor mental health, use of DSE and the working environment.

Working Time Regulations 1998

- Set limits on weekly working time and provide entitlements to rest breaks and daily/weekly rest.
- [The same rules apply to home and hybrid working](#)

Display Screen Equipment Regulations 1992

- Require assessment of DSE workstations and measures to reduce risks (e.g. breaks)
- For home workers, assessment is self-completed
- C.f. HSE guidance [‘Working safely with DSE at home’](#)

GUIDANCE

HSE Management Standards for work-related stress

- identifies 6 areas of work design that drive stress work: demands, control, support, relationships, role, and change
- used as benchmark against which HSE judges whether employer has taken reasonable steps under their statutory duty

ACAS

[Supporting mental health at work](#)

[Wellbeing when working from home](#)

[Managing work-related stress](#)

HSE

[Stress risk assessment](#)

[Managing home workers’ health and safety](#)

- Restate the duty of care and recommend regular check-ins (“regularly ask workers how they’re doing”), wellness action plans, and simple changes such as more rest breaks and more consultation for workers with mental-health conditions.
- Employers must carry out risk assessments to protect workers from stress

	ASSESSMENT - Rules are identical for remote and in person work, so there is no accounting of how workload/availability/rest are experienced differently in hybrid arrangements - This fails to recognise intensification/extensification as a fundamentally distinct harm produced by hybrid work itself - Home workers' wellbeing safeguards are left to employer discretion (to be privately agreed upon) - Guidance is vague on what constitutes sufficient rest or protection (it merely vaguely recommends employers to add more rest time or similar) - Self-assessment (of one's wellbeing, suitability of working environment...all to be communicated with manager) model shifts responsibility on the worker, and adequacy is left to employer discretion - E.g. clear employer-worker communication about workers' specific situations at home and encouraging managers to proactively 'ask workers how they're doing' + to adopt an open-minded and flexible attitude to their specific conditions. - In short: rather than focusing on good work design, the substance of wellbeing protection is determined by employer-worker communication and on the employee's willingness to disclose personal circumstances.
Flexible and hybrid work and equality	
Policy recommendation link: "Strengthen the equality lens in flexible working guidance" "Require work design impact assessments for major changes to digital work"	LEGISLATION Equality Act 2010 - On top of protections against direct discrimination, there are also protections against indirect discrimination. Indirect discrimination occurs where a provision, criterion or practice (PCP) applied to everyone puts people sharing a protected characteristic at a particular disadvantage, and puts the individual at that disadvantage - unless the employer shows the PCP is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim (objective justification) Employment Rights Act 2025 - Currently voluntary, from Spring 2027 it will be mandatory for large organisations to "detail the evidence-based actions they are taking to improve gender equality..." - Establishes the Fair Work Agency, which – as its remit matures – "creates the flexibility to bring in additional legislation to respond to future challenges." ASSESSMENT Hybrid-work PCP can produce indirect discrimination This could arise through, for example: - Proximity/visibility biases in pay, promotion and assignment to 'better' work packages (which could penalise home-based disabled workers and carers) - Expectations on response times - Rigid core hours even when remote - Expectation of high digital fluency - However, these equality protections are defeated whenever the employer 'objectively justifies' the PCP.

	- Enforcement is reactive, and focused on individuals. Effects are tested only after harm has happened, for example when a worker brings a claim - Does not address structural inequalities (e.g. unequal domestic space, caring burdens, digital infrastructure) that shape how hybrid work is experienced. - The new Employment Rights Act could – through the requirement for gender equality reviews – serve to narrow gender-based inequalities around hybrid work. - The new Fair Work Agency could function as a body to oversee better guidance on hybrid working, and monitor its impacts on different groups. In short, individual outcomes – whether positive or negative – are currently too dependent on the state of individual employer-worker communication and arrangements, rather than being codified in proper policies or guidance.
The role of management in hybrid work	
Policy recommendation link: “Encourage a focus on investment in line management capacity”	LEGISLATION Employment Rights Act 1996 HSAWA 1974 (duty of care) Information and Consultation of Employees 2004 What managers are legally required to do: - carry out risk assessments - consult the workforce on changes and on the arrangements made - handle flexible-working requests reasonably - take all reasonably practicable steps to protect health, safety and welfare GUIDANCE ACAS statutory Code on flexible working Managing employees who work from home HSE Management Standards for work-related stress - managers should be trained to handle flexible work requests fairly - guidance on supporting home workers is discretionary in tone: “be understanding and flexible”, “find the right balance and be clear” ASSESSMENT - Duties are procedural - Management style is left up to individual judgement (the guidance language is overwhelmingly framed as “should”) - The substance of what fair management of hybrid work looks like (how to support home workers, building an inclusive environment, making people feel safe to speak up) is not clearly outlined. Suggestions are made (e.g. examples on reasonable adjustments, example of increasing rest time away from DSE at home) but these are vague, and framed as suggestions rather than clear guidelines.

Worker participation in work policy design	
Policy recommendation link: “Strengthen worker voice in hybrid work policy”	LEGISLATION ICE Regulations 2004 - Give employees (in qualifying undertakings) a right to be informed and consulted about certain business and employment developments. The employer informs and listens on organisational issues and changes. Health and safety consultation — Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996 - Require employers to consult employees (directly, or through trade-union or elected representatives) on health and safety matters, including changes that may affect health and safety, and the arrangements made (e.g. appointing a competent person) HSAWA, 1974 - Duty to reassess risk when there’s a significant change to processes or work equipment.
	ASSESSMENT - Consultation is potentially one-sided, and impacted by power relationships in the workplace. It does not represent substantive stakeholder engagement to shape work - Too much discretion is left to managers - Worker participation is currently only activated via a health and safety lens, and enacted through a representative body such as a union. There is no requirement to involve workers in work design processes.



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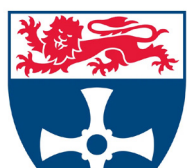
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