



Institute for the
Future of Work

Policy Briefing

Making Flex Fair

*Policy Insights on Hybrid Work, Wellbeing
and Good Work Design*

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This policy brief is based on research conducted by Abigail Marks, Oliver Mallett, Lila Skountridaki, Gustav Bösehans, Danny Zschomler and Mei Xuechun, prepared as a Working Paper by Kester Brewin, and published by IFOW [here](#).

A toolkit to help organisations understand the implications of this work and deploy best practice is also available [here](#). We are grateful to Graeme Burns for his review and feedback on these recommendations.

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

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Introduction - is hybrid work always good work?

The ability to have a mix of office-based and remote working can often be presented as synonymous with flexibility, yet the research presented here surfaces a more complex picture:

Hybrid work can create autonomy and improve access, but - when organisations fail to redesign how work is managed, measured and supported - it can also lead to intensification and extensification of work.

Intensification means work getting faster and more dense, with more meetings, more messages, more task-switching, tighter deadlines and fewer natural breaks.

Extensification concerns the spread of work across space (into different areas of the home, for example) and time (into evenings and weekends).

Both of these processes can impact wellbeing and lead to work-life conflict (for example, with pressures to finish emails while children are asking for play).

But these impacts are not felt equally by all people, and may be experienced differently according to gender, home situation or seniority.

Importantly, moves to hybrid arrangements often leave intact organisational systems that continue to privilege certain ways of working, and certain people working within those systems.

However, current policies – and the guidance for organisations that flows from them - tend to be based on a view that hybrid work is always a good thing, and thus on the rights that people have to request hybrid working practices.

These rights are important, but the findings that arise from this research point to an urgent need for:

- **the risks to wellbeing that hybrid work can present to be actively assessed** and managed alongside the benefits,
- **the potentially unequal impacts of flexible work on wellbeing to be considered**, as not all people will experience the same positives or negatives,
- **inclusion to be achieved through an anticipatory, whole-organisation work design approach**, rather than one based on accommodations to working practices focused on the individual requesting them. IFOW has [published detailed cross-sector case studies](#) on delivering ‘good work design’, in collaboration with the CIPD.

Ensuring that hybrid work helps *Keep Britain Working*

This agenda has become more urgent following Sir Charlie Mayfield’s Keep Britain Working Review. The Review identifies health-related economic inactivity and barriers to work as major challenges for the UK labour market, and calls for a fundamental shift towards prevention, earlier intervention and shared responsibility between government, employers and employees.

Central to this is a proposed Healthy Working Lifecycle, designed to improve retention, return to work and the participation and inclusion of disabled people.

The findings presented here suggest that the design of work itself needs to form part of that preventative agenda. Hybrid work can enable people with different needs or caring circumstances to enter and remain in employment. But flexibility in where work happens will not necessarily support healthy working lives if it is accompanied by excessive workload, digital intensification, weak boundaries, poor management or performance systems that reward constant availability. Thus, **policy needs to move beyond improving access to hybrid work, towards promoting the redesign of work that enables people to thrive**. (See [IFOW's cross-sector case studies on 'good work design'](#), produced in collaboration with the CIPD.)

The recommendations in this paper therefore offer a practical contribution to the *Keep Britain Working* agenda, showing how the emerging Healthy Working Lifecycle and Healthy Working Standard could incorporate the quality and design of hybrid work.

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.**

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. IFOW has [published detailed cross-sector case studies](#) on this, in collaboration with the CIPD.

Policy context and recommendations

Current Policy Context

The Working@Home project surfaces that hybrid work isn't a simple question of working more flexibly, it is embedded in 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.

'Making flex fair' will mean **going beyond accommodation of individual requests** for hybrid working to **collective work design and governance** focused on equality and health and wellbeing.

The UK's current existing policy and guidance frameworks (see Appendix) provide important but fragmented protections for people undertaking hybrid and flexible work.

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 that need addressing can be summarised as:

The particular specific risks to wellbeing that hybrid working introduces are currently being left unaddressed

Hybrid work is framed as 'flexible', and this embeds assumptions about it being wholly positive, without interrogating the potential of hybrid work to impact health and wellbeing, and to do so differently, for different groups.

How hybrid work is deployed is currently determined by individual, discretionary employer-worker arrangements

This sets it in the domain of private discussions and agreements between individual managers and workers. This can make outcomes contingent on the quality of this relationship, and the proficiency of the individual manager. It fails to account for power differentials, and the risk that some workers will perceive about being stigmatised.

Absence of inclusion by design

Currently, equality is procedural (equal access to flexible work, pay, etc.). However, different people may experience hybrid work differently because they have different caring responsibilities, space at home, or digital infrastructure). These are currently addressed in a reactive approach, which has to be initiated by the worker – rather than through a proper work design process. Where there are consultation rights, they don't represent a meaningful role in work redesign, and can be impacted by power differentials.

The recommendations that follow seek to address these gaps.

Policy Recommendations

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.

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. IFOW has [published detailed cross-sector case studies](#) on delivering this in practice, in collaboration with the CIPD.

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.

1. Background to this work

1.1 A brief history of homeworking

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. These later developed into street-facing shops with private living spaces.

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 rise of schools and universities also shaped a shared understanding of labour and activity happening in separate spaces beyond the home.

The familiar pattern of work 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.

This remained pretty much unchanged until the rise of digital collaborative and video conferencing software tools (CVCS) in the late 20th Century allowed remote arrangements to begin to permeate this established pattern. Rapid acceleration of CVCS use was catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a forced reconfiguration of how work could be done. Tasks and activities that were traditionally positioned as ‘impossible’ to conduct online were quickly and effectively enabled via teleconferencing software.

The success of this could be measured by many employees wanting to continue working from home at least some of the time once the pandemic had passed. The long commutes and imposed routines that had marked working lives suddenly felt constraining, compared to the potential for greater flexibility and this shift was hailed as a way to improve work-life balance and provide workers with more time for leisure and family. 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. Hybrid work reduced commuting, increased autonomy and was seen to support work-life balance, but 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 was evidenced by firms increasingly mandating workers to return to in-office work, creating a post-COVID struggle between employers and employees over flexible working. This struggle played out in public, with policies supporting the right to request flexible work, while some politicians demanded that civil servants should stop working from home.

1.2 Problems with hybrid work: intensification and extensification

Although remote working practices was seen to support wellbeing through increased flexibility and autonomy, it also became clear that it could increase stress and negatively impact wellbeing through two mechanisms: intensification and extensification.

Intensification means work getting faster and more dense, with more meetings, more messages, more task-switching, tighter deadlines and fewer natural breaks.

Extensification concerns the spread of work temporally - into evenings and weekends, but also spatially – into homes and other non-traditional spaces.

1.3 How can we make hybrid work fairer?

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. But 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?

This is the evidence gap that the surveys and interviews conducted as part of the Working@Home project sought to address. Responding to the findings generated, this briefing then set out policy recommendations to support making flexible work work better for people, and to do so fairly.

2. Research overview

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.

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 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.

3. Summary of research findings

3.1 Evidence on intensification¹

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

For those working hybrid (Survey 2):

- 26% 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.

The efficiency gains that hybrid work delivers for organisations come at a cost to workers, who are at greater risk of burnout and exhaustion:

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)

1. Marks, A., Bösehans, G., & Mallett, O. (2026). *The Intensification–Extensification Dynamic: Hybrid Work and Digital Connectivity*. *Work, Employment and Society*, 40(4), 801–824

3.2 Evidence on extensification

Beyond intensification, the research also revealed how ICT leads to extensification too.

- 35% of participants reported working during annual leave because CVCS (collaborative and video conferencing software) 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
- 37% of people felt that CVCS had hurt their personal lives – increasing Work-Life Conflict (WLC).

Some saw benefits

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)

Others rationalised longer hours:

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)

Others 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)

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... It's exhausting.

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

Longer hours do not simply extend productivity; they erode it, replacing sustained focus with diminishing returns.

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. These demands are not equally felt.

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

Office spaces can be more democratic – similar spaces for similar roles – but, through extensification, hybrid work mirrors existing socio-economic inequalities. It 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.

3.3 How hybrid work impacts wellbeing

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

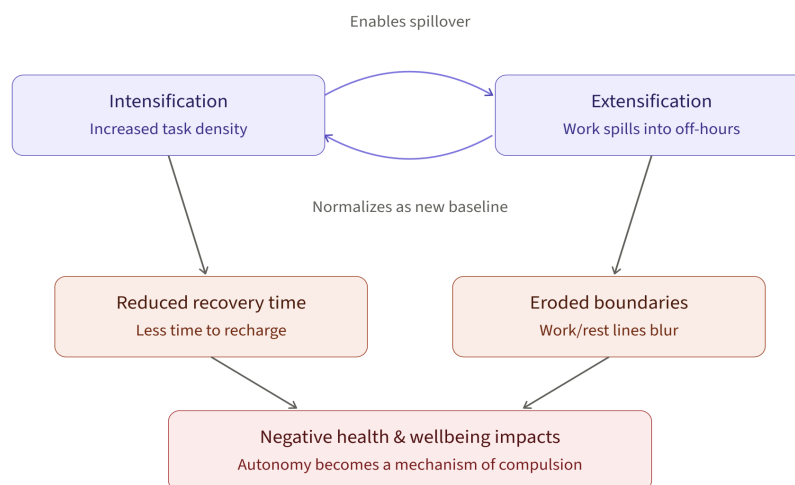
Regardless of setting, the surveys showed that intensification has a statistically significant relationship with work-life conflict. The relationship between ICT-driven intensification and work-life conflict is strongest in the mixed pandemic/post-pandemic sample, remains strong among hybrid workers,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

For hybrid workers specifically, further analysis shows that the same mechanism remains firmly in place. ICT-related intensification increases work-life conflict, and work-life conflict reduces wellbeing.

This is the flexibility paradox of hybrid work. 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: it increases work-life conflict, manifesting 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.

Diagram 1 - The Intensification-Extensification Cycle

3.4 Missing buffers

Whilst intensification is still impacting work-life conflict for those working in office, the relationship is weaker, and the research suggests that this is due to their 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.

Reintroducing these has even become part of advice to boost wellbeing and productivity.

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’.

3.5 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.

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.

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.

Although we are now some way beyond the pandemic itself, these 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.

3.6 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.

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.

3.7 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.

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.

3.8 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.

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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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