



Institute for the
Future of Work

Toolkit

Making Flex Fair

*Recommendations for Organisational
Best Practice in Hybrid Work, Wellbeing
and Good Work Design*

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Contents

Introduction: is hybrid work always good work?	03
Key findings and implications	04
Recommendations for organisational best practice	05
1. Background to this work	10
1.1 A brief history of homeworking	10
1.2 Problems with hybrid work: intensification and extensification	11
1.3 How can we make hybrid work fairer?	11
2. Research overview	12
3. Summary of research findings	13
3.1 Evidence on intensification	13
3.2 Evidence on extensification	14
3.3 How hybrid work impacts wellbeing	15
3.4 Missing buffers	16
3.5 Who bears the cost? Inequalities in hybrid work	16
3.6 The importance of line managers	17
3.7 The importance of good work design	18
3.8 Interactions with the <i>Keep Britain Working</i> agenda	18
References	19
Appendix: Review of current policy landscape	20

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A briefing to help policymakers understand the implications of this work is also available [here](#).

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? Is it good for employees, or does it serve employers well too?

Coming into force in 2027 are stronger laws to make it more likely that requests for flexible working are accepted, and consultation is happening now on reforms to how employees should be consulted when employers review these requests.

Hybrid work is one form of ‘flex’, and is the specific focus of this work. However, it is worth noting that the recent [Government Factsheet on Flexible Working](#) (2026) offers a very positive position on flexible work more generally:

‘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.’

Focusing on hybrid work, the research presented here surfaces a more complex picture. Hybrid work can create autonomy and improve access to better jobs. But if organisations put in place hybrid working arrangements without careful thought as to how this work is managed, measured and supported, they can also lead to significant negative impacts.

These include:

- **Privileging certain ways of working** (for example, fast response times to emails, or messages on Teams or Slack, etc.) leading to impressions of stronger performance and increased likelihood of promotion or reward,
- **Intensification of work**, with collaboration and video conferencing software (CVCS) leading to more meetings, more messages, more task-switching, tighter deadlines and fewer natural breaks,
- **Extensification of work**, with CVCS allowing the spread of work across space (into different areas of the home, for example) and time (into evenings and weekends).

This research highlights that intensification and extensification both impact wellbeing and lead to work-life conflict (WLC). But these impacts are not felt equally by all people, and may be experienced differently according to gender, home situation or seniority. The benefits of hybrid work are genuine. But there is an urgent need for:

- **active assessment of the risks to wellbeing** that hybrid work can present, so that these can be managed alongside the benefits,
- **active consideration of the potentially unequal impacts** of hybrid work on wellbeing, as not all people will experience the same positives or negatives.

This work intersects with the priorities surfaced in the recent *Keep Britain Working* report, which helpfully emphasises the roles that employers, employees and government all have to play to improve the currently unsustainable situation that disproportionately leaves those with additional needs disproportionately excluded from work.

The key is to move beyond ‘how do we stop people falling out of work?’ to ‘how do we design work that helps people stay?’

This work builds the case for ‘good work design’ as the best way to achieve this. IFOW has published [cross-sector case studies](#) in collaboration with the CIPD on this process.

Key Findings and Implications

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

Both government policy and organisational practice need to evolve to take account of the full range of potential impacts of moving to hybrid work – and how these can be different for different people.

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 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. **Investment in good line management is crucial.**

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. Managers are crucial to ensuring that organisational systems aren't privileging certain ways of working, such as fast response times, and that employees' voices - and the voices of workplace representatives - are heard.

5. **The current focus on individual rights to request flexible working arrangements is inadequate.**

Redesigning work to fit hybrid arrangements must include reflection on what 'good work' looks like. What is needed are organisation-wide approaches centred on work design, better line management, clearer systems for employee voice and fairer performance management processes.

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 better line management and work design. IFOW has [published detailed cross-sector case studies](#) on how to deliver this in practice, in collaboration with the CIPD.

Recommendations for organisational best practice

Making Flex Fair

The Working@Home project shows that hybrid work isn't a simple issue of working more flexibly. How we work is tied up with what 'good' looks like in an organisation: the policies, cultures and systems of workplace performance and value. Because hybrid work changes how people organise time, space, availability and communication, its impacts are experienced differently by different groups.

So 'making flex fair' will mean really good management to ensure that trust is built and expectations are clear when people are working hybrid. Moreover, it will mean **going beyond accommodation of individual requests** for hybrid working to **collective work design and governance** focused on equality and health and wellbeing.

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 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.

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

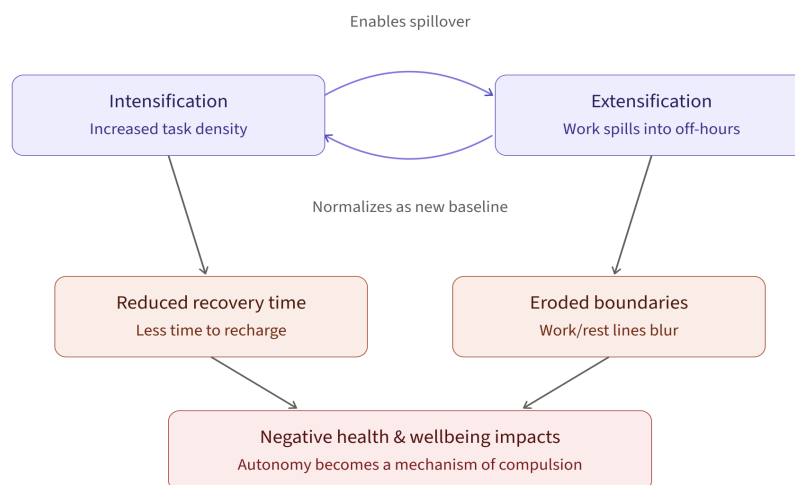
Regardless of setting, the surveys showed that intensification has a statistically significant relationship with work-life conflict. The relationship between ICT-driven intensification and work-life conflict is strongest in the mixed pandemic/post-pandemic sample, remains strong among hybrid workers, 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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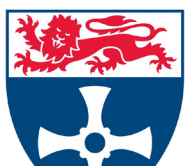
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