

Connected Work Innovation Hub

Insights, ideas and concepts for a
successful design of a hybrid working world

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English
management summary

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Management Summary

1. Objective, idea and topics

The Connected Work Innovation Hub initiative was initiated by the Fraunhofer IAO with the aim of investigating cause-effect relationships in the context of the new hybrid ways of working on the basis of scientific findings and entrepreneurial expertise. In addition, open questions (so-called white spots) were described and model solutions, so-called blueprints, for the new challenges of hybridity were developed. To realize this project, the Fraunhofer IAO project team worked with 22 partner organizations over a period of 6 months (from July 2021 to December 2021) on the following six topics within the framework of sprints, each lasting 4 weeks:

- Shaping dialogue with works councils, social partners and legislators
- Ensuring innovative capacity and promoting learning from each other
- Retaining employees and attracting talent
- Leading organizations, divisions, and teams in hybridity
- Adapting office infrastructures (and designing mobile workplaces)
- Measuring and managing performance

The findings presented are the result of intensive cooperation between the researchers at Fraunhofer IAO and the experts from the participating organizations.

In addition to the research and development process, numerous new practices in dealing with the virtual, hybrid way of working were shared.

2. Content-related findings

- The innovation performance in the organizations during the pandemic was high despite difficult underlying conditions. It will be a challenge to build on this innovation performance and capacity in the period after the pandemic is over. Nevertheless, the conditions are good: the pandemic has ensured that employees have familiarized themselves with a wide range of new possibilities and routines of virtual collaboration. This includes, in particular, the use of virtual tools to involve experts in innovation developments with few obstacles and at short notice. Virtual and hybrid formats also facilitate low-threshold forms of further training or participation, e.g. in innovation communities, which can offer new networks and inspiration. In addition, a significant proportion of employees are willing to invest the time gained through omitted commuting time in attractive learning opportunities or inspiring programs – in the project, this was addressed through a customized Blueprint (see Blueprint “Using time gained for inspiration and further training” in Chapter 4).
- There are some central challenges that need to be solved in the future – specifically, how informal, spontaneous, and unplanned encounters and communication can be adequately ensured and promoted, even in hybrid contexts with spatially dispersed workforces. The organization of the office or shared space plays a key role in the hybrid working world. In the future, booking systems for workplaces and workspaces will not only be responsible for controlling the economic utilization of space or ensuring the availability of optimal workplaces for different tasks; at least as important are their »social« functionalities, which ensure a high probability of encounters within teams, but also for interdisciplinary and cross-functional encounters. Equipped with a digital layer, the office becomes a place for spontaneous meetings and informal exchange. Hybrid meeting

rooms, as described in the Blueprint “Hybrid Working in Meetings” in Chapter 8, ensure hybrid collaboration between groups that are present and distributed participants or colleagues who connect from home or from a work location abroad.

- The employees’ wish for individual flexibility includes not only the possibility of working from home or at different locations, but also to be able to extend this mobile work to working abroad. Employers face this demand pressure to varying degrees depending on the sector and the labor market situation. Within the project, the legal framework conditions were worked out and a pragmatic operational regulatory approach for a maximum of 30 days of this form of work abroad in the EU was developed. The topic of mobile working from abroad will undoubtedly be established. In the medium term, increased pressure is to be expected in the direction of politics with regard to the harmonization of the social security and wage tax framework conditions.
- Leadership and its execution by managers is subject to considerable pressure to adapt, as is the underlying leadership system. Hybrid work – and this is confirmed by the Connected Work study (see chapter 12) – requires managers to have the competence to shape relationships positively: the competence to give trust and to receive it in return, as well as the competence to communicate actively through all media channels and to achieve a satisfactory understanding. It will become essential to develop one’s own leadership presence in the hybrid context and to use it well for the benefit of the whole. This also includes handing over responsibility and giving both the individual employee and the whole team more opportunities to participate in shaping things, but at the same time also demanding more self-responsibility and team responsibility. An important tool

for this increasingly decentralized self-organization in the hybridity is described in the Blueprint “Team Charter” (see Chapter 7). Some of the partner organizations in the project are already successfully using this methodology.

- Numerous empirical surveys conducted during the pandemic show an average increase in productivity when working from home, although some respondents also reported a decrease in productivity. This variance can be found in the Connected Work study carried out as part of the project (see Chapter 12). The study shows that there are design options that are not optimally implemented everywhere or framework conditions that can definitely impair productive work at a distance (e.g. insufficient support in the use of collaboration tools, inadequate networking within the organization and decreasing commitment to one’s own team). Productive work in hybridity of course requires the appropriate infrastructure and tools for virtual collaboration. Even more important for an increase in productivity, however, is an exceptionally good user experience in terms of support and effective, goal-oriented use of the collaboration tools. Hence, two blueprints on employee performance were developed within the framework of the project for the hybrid working world (see Chapters 9 and 10). On the one hand, they include a set of early indicators that can provide clues to the development of performance and thus enable timely intervention and countermeasures on the part of management. On the other hand, it contains a method for evaluating data that is generated, for example, when using virtual collaboration platforms, in order to be able to use it to manage performance jointly in the team. After all, around a quarter of the people surveyed in the Connected Work study said that they would like to use such data to assess and optimize their own work.

- In the design of working environments, which are subject to highly dynamic change and, moreover, are implemented in close cooperation with all those involved, it is extremely important to establish secure, reliable, but also highly adaptable forms of cooperation between the social partners. This also includes agile methods of solution development, which always live from step-by-step, rapid changes with simultaneous high fault tolerance. The good design of hybrid work requires a lot of knowledge on the one hand, which on the other hand can only be developed in the application of new things and in constant experimentation. Therefore, a culture of cooperation between management and employee representatives or social partners based on agile principles, i. e. on dynamics and iteration, is of decisive importance for an economically and socially successful design of the new hybrid working world.
- The Connected Work study in particular shows that the hybrid world of work offers considerable potential for an economically and socially successful design of work in the organizations and additionally for society as a whole. At the same time, however, it is also evident that different forms of organization have different effects and, for example, positively or negatively influence the retention of employees with their employers. A large proportion of respondents indicated that the past two years had a positive retention effect, but an almost equally large proportion reported decreasing retention of employees with their employers. The consequences for the working society in connection with its hybrid design in the future are to be observed accordingly and the respective forms of design consciously created and used.
- The productive and socially balanced design of hybrid work situations is an essential design task for the subsequent success of the company. This is because a large part of the workforce, especially the white-collar workforce, will continue to work at home or mobile for a significant part of their working hours. Purely virtually organized companies already existed in individual cases before the pandemic and their number is likely to increase in the future. Nevertheless, the majority of organizations will use hybrid forms of work in the medium or long term. Hybrid working models, while complex in their design, are more likely to be the favored working model for the next post-pandemic years compared to purely virtual or purely presence-based models.

3. Methodological-structural findings

Methodologically, the project with its format of research in successive sprints has shown that a lot of knowledge can be shared, experiences exchanged, and concrete networks established in a short time. This practical and at the same time co-creative methodology delivers quick results, security in one's own actions and at the same time new approaches. For such a dynamic time, this experimental project design seems to be appropriate and successful. We as the Fraunhofer project team have not only worked on essential aspects of the hybrid working world together with the participating organizations, but at the same time moved into an experimental space by linking science and the sprint approach together.

Imprint

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