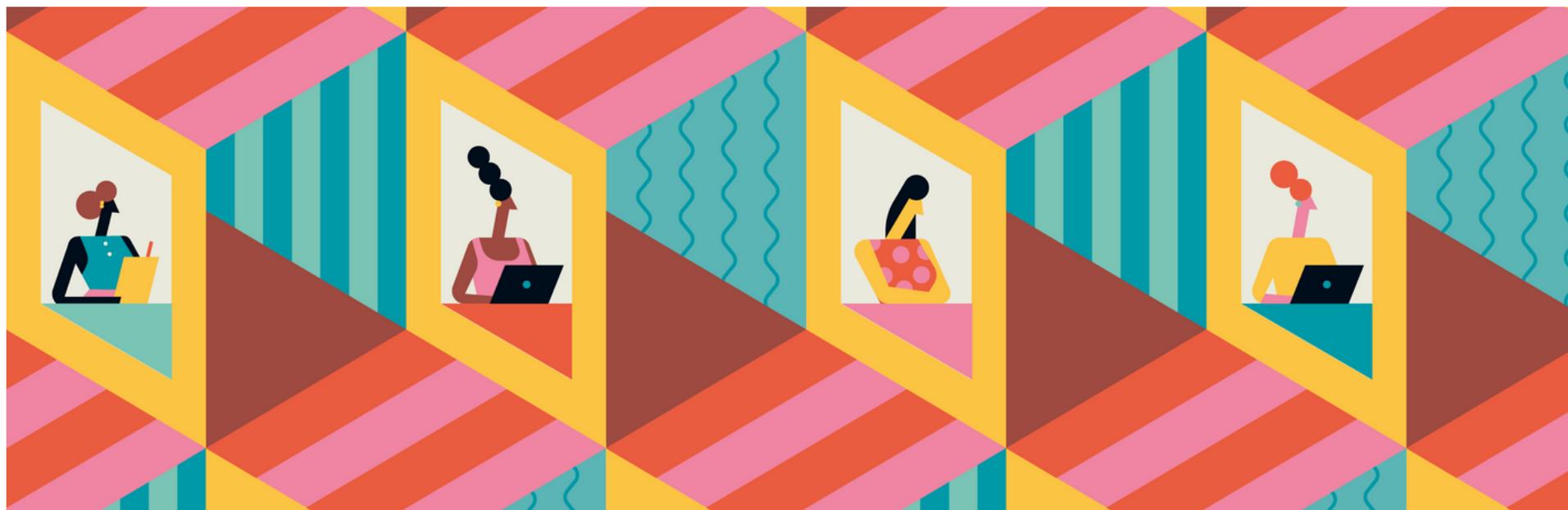


What's Hiding in Hybrid Work?

An Organisational Toolkit to Remedy the Risks for Women



Introduction

Since the catalyst of the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations and employees have embraced the opportunity of hybrid working. In research with The Female Lead we interviewed 80 women and men from public, private and voluntary sector organisations to explore how they experienced working in hybrid roles.

In our report, we identified that overall, both women and men are happy with hybrid working and experience many rewards including enhanced productivity, better health and wellbeing, reduced costs and commute time, more time with family and support with caring responsibilities. But we also identified four key risks for women in hybrid roles:

1. Invisible Workers
2. Shielded from Office Politics
3. Missing Meaningfulness
4. The Hybrid Career Ceiling

This toolkit has been designed to share the best practice we learnt about in our research interviews and identify ways in which the risks of hybrid work can be remedied.

How to use this toolkit

We caution that the requirements of hybrid work are specific to each organisational and team context. In our sample, we found sharp contrast between organisations that focused on creative work, sales, and technical work, for example. There is no one-size-fits-all, but we hope our recommendations will inspire organisations to consider how they can improve the experiences and mitigate the risks for women in hybrid work.

Although the recommendations we make are targeted at supporting women in hybrid work, they are designed to improve inclusion in hybrid roles more broadly. As such, we refer to employees and hybrid workers, not just women in our recommendations below.

We thank the participating organisations and individuals who took the time to share their experiences with us and enabled us to develop this toolkit. We would also like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for funding this project.

Why Going Back to the Office Won't Work

We found that simply requiring employees to be back in the office full time is unlikely to help the risks identified from our research.

Hybrid working is embedded

Organisations have adapted rapidly to the world of hybrid working. Many workplaces have reduced or removed office space; some have closed offices to amalgamate them into larger but more distant hubs. Organisations have also made legal changes to hybrid workers' contracts, outlining their flexibility to differentiate their perks from office-based colleagues. These legal and structural changes to the workforce make calls for UK employees to return to the office unlikely to succeed.

Empty offices

Empty offices were a common theme in our interviews. In some teams, empty offices became a vicious cycle and a culture difficult to reverse once embedded.

“It's very tricky to find a reason to go into the office when nobody else is there” (F)

Hot desking

Hot desking was viewed as problematic for returning to the office. Some found the physical and technical set up of different desks challenging. Booking systems also created barriers for team cohesion meaning that the goal of attending the office for social interaction was often lost.

“With hot desking, people can just sit anywhere... it's difficult to see who's in and who's not in”(M)

Attracting and retaining employees

Ultimately, we found that participants all wanted the flexibility of hybrid roles.

“Hybrid work is what people expect and want now” (F)

Being supportive of hybrid working is crucial if organisations want to attract and retain talent.



Summary of Recommendations

Risk 1: Invisible workers

Women double down on tasks and engage in (virtual) presenteeism to counter stereotypes of hybrid workers. Working behind a digital wall risks women's work going unnoticed and unrecognised.

- Reframe and communicate what 'productivity' is
- Managers to champion employees upwards and sideways
- Showcase employees without relying on managers
- Support employees to separate work from home

Risk 2: Shielded from office politics

Women are unaware and/or left out of political interactions between peers and managers. Being shielded from politics risks women feeling left out of the loop and lacking the networks they need to leverage for career support.

- Reframe 'politics' to encourage inclusive interaction
- Create transparent communities
- Incentivise (not mandate) the office

Risk 3: Missing meaningfulness

Women felt hybrid work is less joyful and miss the camaraderie they had with colleagues. Along with increased isolation and video fatigue many struggled to find meaning and purpose from their work.

- Invest in purposeful team bonding
- Encourage camaraderie via transparent social groups
- Create a vibrant office environment

Risk 4: The hybrid career ceiling

A combination of a lack of visibility, less access to office politics, finding less meaning from work, fewer opportunities to learn vicariously in the office and the structure of senior roles means women are at risk of experiencing slower career progression.

- Onboard employees in-person
- Provide regular shadowing opportunities
- Design flexibility into all roles
- Provide multifaceted sponsorship

Risk 1: Invisible Workers

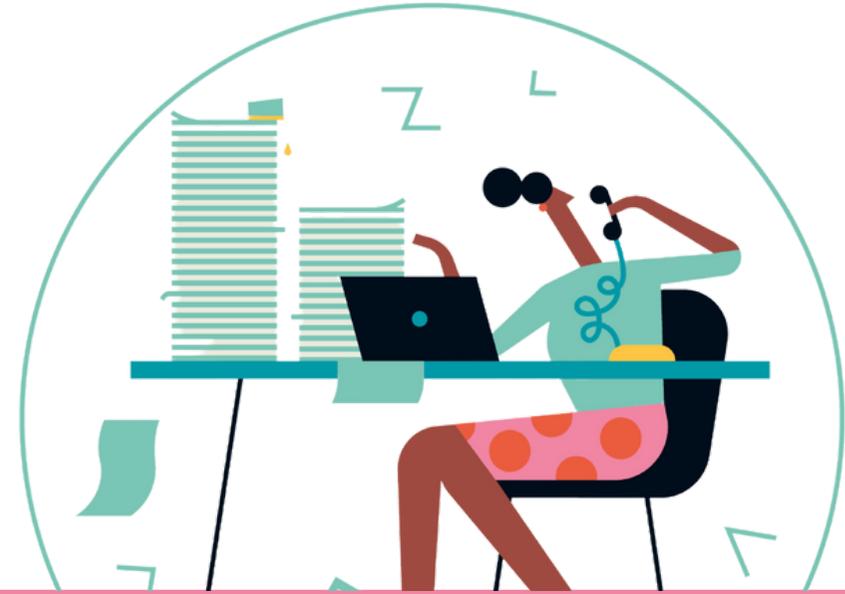
The risk

Women double down on tasks and engage in (virtual) presenteeism to counter stereotypes of hybrid workers. Working behind a digital wall risks women's work going unnoticed and unrecognised.

Recommendations for organisations

Reframe and communicate 'productivity'

- Organisations need to consider reframing productivity from transactional outputs (e.g., tasks completed, hours worked) that encourage a 'head down' approach to a more holistic 'head up' model that fosters team cohesion and innovation (e.g., connections made, ideas generated, peer feedback)
- A surprising number of our participants did not know how their work was assessed, monitored, or rewarded leading to virtual presenteeism. Organisations need to be transparent about what 'productivity' is and how it is rewarded in different roles.



Making reward transparent at CPI

The Centre for Process Innovation (CPI) ran all-staff webinars hosted by the senior leadership team to enhance transparency in remuneration.

“I was quite impressed with that actually because normally businesses are a bit cloak and dagger about stuff like that” (F)

The webinars were used to explain reward including how salaries are calculated, how employees are allocated to different salary bands, and how bonuses were distributed.

Managers to champion upwards and sideways

- Communication channels in hybrid work can be ‘top-down’. It is important managers are mindful of championing and ‘talking up’ employees to provide them with visibility and connections to senior leaders.
- Siloed teams in hybrid working mean managers need to also champion their staff sideways so that employees are given opportunity to raise their profiles across the organisation.



Showcase employees

Hybrid workers need to know their efforts are acknowledged. Organisations need to consider:

- Offering visibility beyond the team or work unit
- Not being reliant on line managers to spot and showcase work

Showcasing employees' work at all-staff forums or opportunities to present to senior management can empower employees and enhance their visibility

Support employees to separate work from home

Striving to demonstrate diligence in hybrid work can pressure employees to be ‘always on’. To mitigate this organisations can:

- Set ‘core hours’ of operation
- Encourage use of delay functions when sending emails at evenings or weekends
- Senior leaders to role model ‘switching off’
- Avoid making work requests on platforms that may be sent to employees’ personal devices (e.g. Whatsapp)
- Provide adjustments (e.g. headsets, screen filters) to limit employees' family exposure to work content.

'Bright Ideas' at CPI

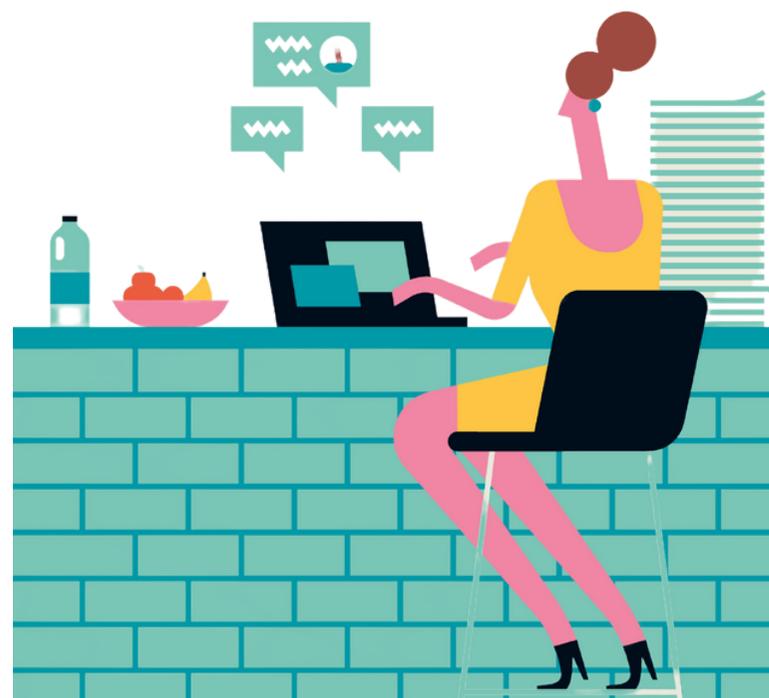
'Bright Ideas' is an initiative by the Centre for Process Innovation (CPI) to encourage employees to submit ideas that will improve the organisation.

Employees can make suggestions via an app and each idea is reviewed by a team of 'Bright Ideas' champions. 'Bright Ideas' benefits both CPI and its employees. CPI benefits from the diverse range of knowledge and experiences shared by its staff; employees gain voice and visibility.

"I think Bright Ideas is a really good initiative, it makes the business more efficient and effective by actioning ideas that people come up with, but also for making people themselves feel heard" (F)

Crucially, 'Bright Ideas' means hybrid workers are not reliant on managers to spot or present their suggestions. This allows hybrid workers more control over their profile in the wider organisation and improves their networks with senior leaders.

"Around 80% of the organisation will never see, hear, or know anything about you. So, Bright Ideas is a good way to show yourself and secure potential progression" (F)



Risk 2: Shielded from Office Politics

The risk

Women are unaware and/or left out of political interactions between peers and managers. Being shielded from politics risks women feeling left out of the loop and lacking the networks they need to leverage for career support.

Recommendations for organisations

Reframe politics to encourage inclusive interaction

Many women found politics a distraction or distasteful, or were unaware it persisted in a hybrid world. But politics is important, so organisations need to communicate the value of informal interactions and promote inclusive political cultures[1]:

- Embed political skills training into staff development
- Add pre- and post- buffer times into meetings to allow time for informal sharing of organisational knowledge and ‘hand-on-the-door-handle’ questions
- Encourage informal, unstructured online meetings within the working day[2]

Coffee roulette to foster connection

To encourage employees to forge connections beyond their teams and reporting lines both Patrizia SE and the Centre of Process Innovation use ‘coffee roulette’.

Employees who sign up are randomly allocated one or two other people across the organisation to have a coffee with.

“That’s been a really good way of meeting people you wouldn’t generally get to meet” (M)

Create transparent communities

We found siloing of teams reduces informal knowledge sharing in hybrid work, leaving people to turn to informal chat groups, which exclude others, to get ‘the intel’.

We found organisations that created communities of practice were able to connect people across different teams. As transparent and open communities, they provide inclusive informal knowledge sharing, help people network, and raise employees’ profiles.

Building communities at Ecus

Environmental consultancy, Ecus has developed communities of practice called Technical Working Groups. These groups comprise people from across the organisation with an interest in a specialism or ecological discipline, such as bats, newts or biodiversity.

“People on the bat technical working group dial in from all over the place and they chat bats once a month” (F)

Sessions are facilitated via Teams and are run once a month. Technical Working Groups operate cross-regionally and are championed by a senior member of the organisation.

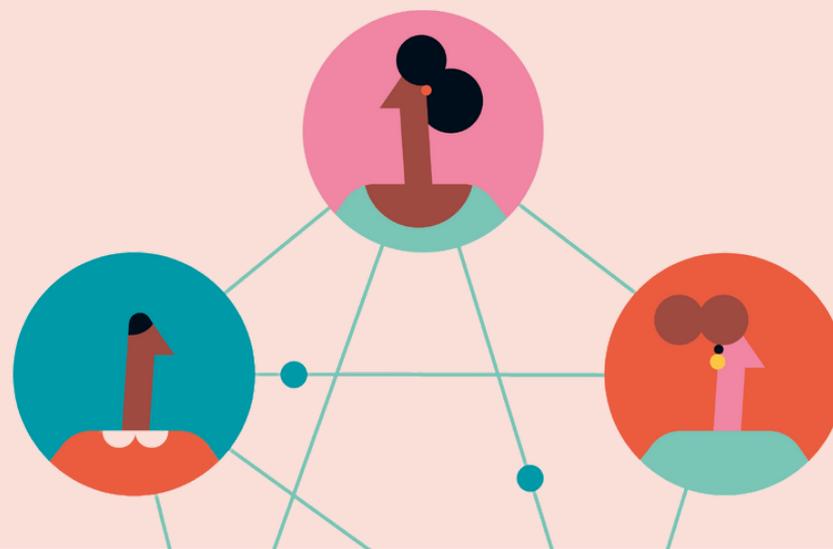
One of the purposes for the networks is to ensure people within the industry help each other stay informed of changes to law and regulations due to Brexit, for example.

“There was a real need, because there's so much changing in our industry at the moment” (F)

Every participant that we interviewed from Ecus discussed their enthusiasm for the communities of practice they were involved with. Employees felt the groups allowed them to build networks and signal their interest and ambition to develop their careers.

“It’s an opportunity to find out what are the new developments in this area and who do I speak to about getting more experience” (F)

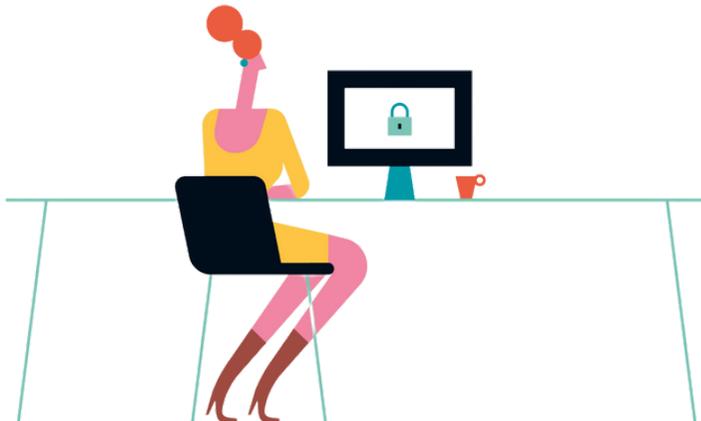
“There is a networking opportunity there to get to know people across the country” (M)



Incentivise the office

Social interaction in the office can help break down boundaries and enhance team cohesion and networking, if done right. But we found teams rarely coordinated their office days and employees were also unsupportive of attempts to mandate them into the office.

There were several ways organisations we spoke to incentivise their employees to visit the office environment including free food, all-staff forums, guest speakers, paid expenses, celebrations of cultural events, improving office environments (e.g. meeting spaces, decor).



Incentivising the office at OVO Energy

OVO Energy are encouraging, but not mandating their staff to attend the office. While emphasising choice in hybrid working, leaders recognise the importance of bringing people together.

“No one’s forcing you into the office, but it is a great thing to connect with people in person” (M)

One of OVO’s most popular policies has been free lunches on Thursdays.

“I’ll drive in and work at the office because they do free lunches on a Thursday. I think Thursdays are now the busiest day in the office” (F)

OVO have moved to a hub-structure, closing smaller offices, shifting focus to larger hubs where employees travel to network and develop team knowledge.

Improved office spaces, team events and expenses for many to travel for work show the many tools OVO have leveraged to improve office-based interaction.

“OVO is creating an office environment that supports and facilitates the way people work now”. (M)

Risk 3: Missing Meaningfulness

The risk

Women felt hybrid work is less joyful and miss the camaraderie they had with colleagues. Along with increased isolation and video fatigue many struggled to find meaning and purpose from their work.

Recommendations for organisations

Invest in purposeful team bonding

We found that employees need more opportunities to have fun and strengthen relationships with their colleagues:

“It would be great if we had more fixed dates within the organisation for a coffee chat, or a barbecue, or after work drinks, so people can really plan to go to the office” (F)

The most successful team bonding efforts took employees outside of their working environment and were linked to activities that held purpose and meaning for employees.

Purposeful team bonding at Patrizia SE

The global investment and asset management company in the real estate sector, Patrizia SE, established an international foundation, which is committed to improving the education of children and young people. Employees of Patrizia SE are encouraged to engage in the foundation’s work by participating in exercise challenges and volunteering.



“They do lots of things to help team building: cycle challenges, mountain challenges . They’ll say “come and help us raise money for a children’s school in Africa” and it won’t be holiday, they will be working days. I think it’s really good” (F)

These challenges support education in areas such as South Africa, Nepal and Kenya and provide employees with meaningful activities that align themselves with the organisation’s purpose.

Encourage camaraderie with online groups

We found employees who engaged in online social groups with their colleagues had more enjoyment from their work. Organisations can therefore provide non-work-based groups for employees to interact.

Organisations need to be mindful to ensure such groups are transparent, open to all and operate respectfully.

Examples we came across in our interviews were:

- Digital book clubs
- Food groups to share recipes and their results
- Film and TV review groups (careful of spoilers!)
- Fitness groups
- Volunteering groups

Create a vibrant office environment

Although hot desking is a functional requirement with smaller spaces, offices for hybrid workers have become rather soulless.

Organisations should look to improve physical spaces to encourage social interaction. Examples we found in our interviews included increasing social seating areas and improving kitchens and informal meeting spaces to be more welcoming.

Organisations should also review their hot desking software. We found booking systems that allowed employees to find colleagues and book desks in advance were most valued.

Online social groups at Equation

The domestic abuse charity, Equation, uses messaging groups to build friendship and trust between employees. Employees discuss popular tv shows, chat and support each other.



In the summer of 2022, the organisation created a group to discuss the reality TV show, Love Island:

“It was my manager who set it up. She said, “We can talk all things Love Island and anyone is welcome to join” (F)

Making group participation transparent allows employees to join at their own discretion but not be excluded. Equation also take steps to ensure the groups remain social:

“We have a bit of a rule that it’s not for work stuff, just general social chatting” (F)

Dog friendly offices at Ecus

Dog friendly offices were a workplace rarity. But a combination of employees not rushing back to the office and the increase of dog owners since the COVID-19 pandemic, explains why dogs in the office are becoming a growing work perk.

Employees from environmental consultancy, Ecus, explained that having dogs in the office made hybrid working more enjoyable.

“I don’t have a dog myself but it’s really nice having dogs wandering around the office. I am very much a doggy person” (F)

Hybrid working not only allows employees to walk their dogs at home during their lunch break, but a dog friendly office makes it easier for dog owners to come in.

Checking all employees are comfortable and having outside spaces is vital if organisations wish to become dog friendly:



“I take the dog out for walks during lunchtime at home... but our office is also right by the Severn Estuary, so it is its own nature reserve, you’ve got a salt marsh there and lots of nice space to walk dogs” (M)

Every participant we interviewed from Ecus discussed their love for dogs and that having them in the office creates a happier work environment.

“Having dogs in the office is good for the office atmosphere, and animals in general are great to have around people” (M)

Risk 4: The Hybrid Career Ceiling

The risk

A combination of a lack of visibility, less access to office politics, finding less meaning from work, fewer opportunities to learn vicariously in the office and the structure of senior roles means women are at risk of experiencing slower career progression.

Recommendations for organisations

In-person onboarding

We found many organisations had switched to online inductions for new staff as a result of COVID. But in-person onboarding helps new starters interact with colleagues, understand the office culture and learn vicariously, improving their career opportunities.

“If we have a junior coming in to start, I’d say to the team, “Right, let’s have a day in the office together”. I can go through everything and anything they need to know. Yes, you can be onboarded remotely, but when you’re junior you need that face-to-face mentoring and guiding hand” (F)

Based on our research we recommend:

- Asking new starters to attend the office for the first few weeks of new appointment
- Encourage team members to attend the office more when new starters join the organisation
- Encourage staff to keep cameras on when meeting new members of the team.

Regular shadowing opportunities

Not being in the office means fewer opportunities to learn the skills and behaviours for different roles.

Organisations should provide shadowing opportunities online or in-person, for new starters to understand office culture and learn new skills.

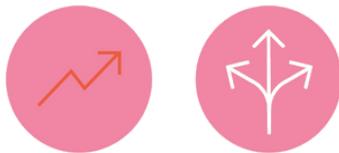
Shadowing programs are also important for experienced staff in hybrid work so that they can learn the behaviours and skills required for future career moves.

Design flexibility into all roles

We found all employees valued flexibility, but younger employees had higher expectations when it came to deciding how much to work and when.

Without flexibility in senior roles, employees who structure their lives around the availability of hybrid work may face a barrier to their progression. The interviewees recommended:

- All roles, including senior positions, should be designed so working from home, job sharing, and part time work are also feasible.
- Senior managers should role model flexibility by being open about their work schedules.
- Be open to women and men negotiating work arrangements that are beneficial to organisations and individuals' careers.



Profile: Ilda Rodriguez

Ilda, a Children and Young People Project Worker at domestic abuse charity, Equation, outlined how flexibility was a priority in her career. Since leaving university she has chosen to work part time, 28 hours over four days.

Ilda focuses on work life balance over financial reward and enjoys working for an organisation that support her career and personal goals:

“Obviously, I work and make enough that I can support myself, but when I finished University at 21 years old, I didn’t want to go into a full 38-hour work week in the office, with a 9 to 5 lifestyle. I wanted to ease myself into a job and then figure out what I want to do”

“Equation is very much a part-time, flexible hours supporter. They say, “Here’s your job, here’s your tasks” and they’re good as long as you do your tasks and you’re on top of things. This allows me to have a good personal life, rather than working and doing my personal life around my job”

Ilda demonstrates the shift in a new generation of employees who value flexibility and personal growth.

Provide multifaceted sponsorship

While we found organisations provided opportunities for mentoring and membership of diversity support and belonging networks, few offered sponsorship.

We suggest that sponsorship is vital in a hybrid world where employees struggle to gain visibility, learn organisational knowledge and navigate the on- and offline workplace environment.

Organisations should look to work with employees to ensure they have sponsors who provides the following support^[3]:

- Advise and coach
- Sharing of political knowledge
- Connection to powerful networks
- Opportunities for development
- Advocate for the protégé to decision makers

These roles can be provided by one person, or many. Ensuring sponsors are not the person's line manager also expands their networks and visibility in the organisation.

Notes

[1] See Wyatt, M., and Doldor, E. (2022) Office Politics don't have to be Toxic, Harvard Business Review, available from <https://hbr.org/2022/05/office-politics-dont-have-to-be-toxic>

[2] We found 'online socials' held after work hours had waned in popularity since the COVID-19 pandemic as they contributed to video fatigue and work life conflict

[3] Ibarra, H (2019). A lack of sponsorship is keeping women from advancing into leadership. Harvard Business Review. Available from <https://hbr.org/2019/08/a-lack-of-sponsorship-is-keeping-women-from-advancing-into-leadership>

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We are keen to hear from organisations who implement our recommendations or want to know more about our research.

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