PREPARE YOUR WORKPLACE FOR THE FUTURE: **HYBRID WORKING**

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Workplace Strategies
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MEASUREMEN

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A brief introduction into the Preparation of your Workplace

We tasted both the bitters and the sweets from remote work over the past year. The discussions about the future of work are the trending topics at dinner tables as well as the board tables. Some employees dream of going back fully to the office, while others dream to stay remote and work from anywhere. In turn, managers need to understand the needs of their employees and make decisions on how to handle facilities and (remote) work policies. The overall learnings are quite clear, most employees like remote work but they miss the informal coffee moments with colleagues at the water cooler, while collaboration through the webcam misses something essential in human contact. As a result, most employees desire to work a few days at the office and a few days remotely (source).

Brian Kropp, chief of research in the Gartner HR practice predicted that as many as four in 10 employees will work remotely at some point every week, post COVID-19 (source). But another survey showed stronger numbers, stating that 81% of UK employees didn't want to come back to the office for a 5-day workweek. In the US, 48% of workers would like a mix of working from home and coming into the office, with 41% saying they'd be willing to trade a higher salary for the ability to work remotely part of the time (source). Moreover, a trending Linkedin poll across 43 thousand Linkedin members showed that 36% of the responders would like to continue to work remotely full-time, and 32% preferred to work 3 or more days remotely.

Although a small fraction of the organizations (plan to) work without an office, also known as Working from anywhere (like Github), this is not feasible nor desirable for many organizations. Some processes are more efficient with physical interaction, and some employees work with physical systems they can't take home. Furthermore, the loss of company culture is a threat with full remote work. The onboarding of new employees is difficult, employees lose their connection with their company, and factors from private life are sometimes interfering with the company engagement of employees while working remotely. For example, breaks in the office usually involved chatting with colleagues, now everyone can't wait to stretch their legs and get away from their computer, leaving their colleagues on mute.

Towards Hybrid Working

According to businessinsider, Google and Amazon are just a few of the organizations that have announced they're rethinking the future of work: Travel giant Trivago, real estate firm Zillow, software firm VMware, and cloud-computing giant Salesforce have all said they're adopting some type of hybrid model of working going forward. While Microsoft was very clear in their report of 31.092 workers: "the data is clear: extreme flexibility and hybrid work will define the post-pandemic workplace". Together, it seems that most organizations are heading towards hybrid-working, meaning that employees will work partly in the office and partly remotely. But what will that look like? There are different issues that arise and strategies to take when it comes to facilitating the hybrid way of working that supports productivity and wellbeing. This whitepaper will discuss these issues and outline several strategies for an effective hybrid way of working.

"The data is clear: extreme flexibility and hybrid work will define the post-pandemic workplace"

Hybrid working, how?

Flexibility

The first issue that arises with hybrid working is flexibility. Flexibility becomes more and more of an important factor when it comes to working from the office and remote when it comes to flexibly scheduling work hours, and flexibility in the opening of the office. Managers and employees desire and need to be flexible to respond to changes in needs and changes in the market. With hybrid-working, parents would like to, flexibly, stay at home when their children are sick, or flexibly go to the office to have an (ad-hoc scheduled) meeting.

When we asked the question on Linkedin (see picture on the right), 68% of the 85 respondents stated that they want to come "flexibly to the office, whenever they want" over 16% who wanted to come on fixed days. Envoy, a workplace technology firm that surveyed 1000 US employees found that when it comes to getting back to the office, 39% would base their schedule around what they need to get done that day, and 37% would decide when to visit the office based on who else will be there that day - among office workers, that portion was higher, with 52% saying they would plan their schedules around their coworkers'.

"68% of the 85 respondents stated that they want to come 'flexibly to the office, whenever they want'"

The flexibility that employees desire causes, most likely, huge problems when it comes to peaks in office occupancy. Across the 400.000 workstations we measured in the Netherlands Pre-COVID for example, we used to see a clear "flying bird" pattern with peak occupancy on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and lower occupancy on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday (see picture below). It is likely that this pattern is going to return more extremely because people now desire to stay at home on Wednesday and Friday. So we'll get highly stacked offices on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, and deserted offices on Wednesday and Friday. This will of course cause problems for facility managers who were desiring to cut down some office space.
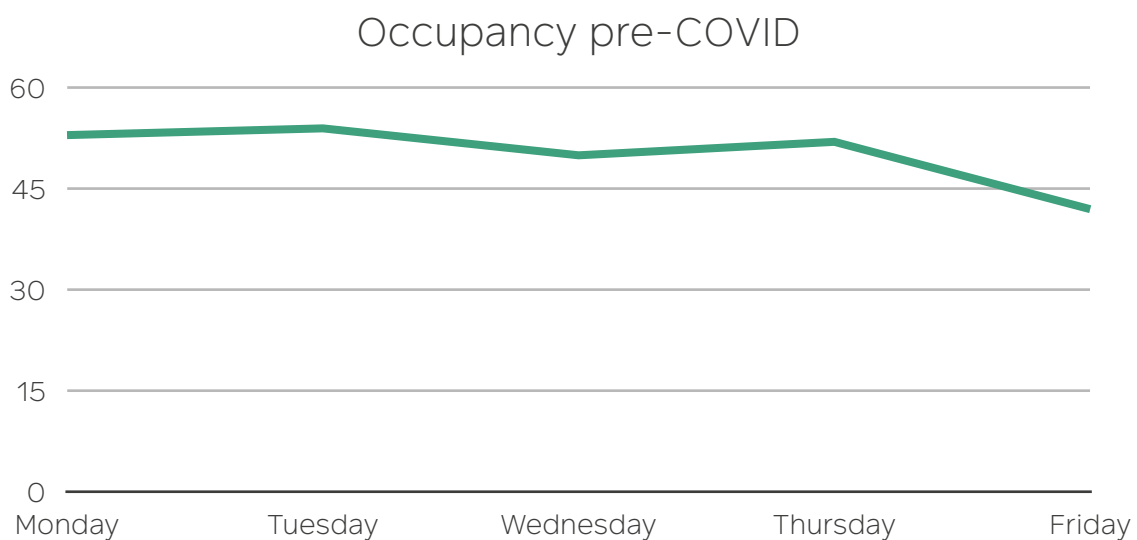
Occupancy pre-COVID

Figure 1. The "flying bird" occupancy patterns in percentages Pre-COVID.

To even the occupancy, managers would rather even the spread of employees across the week. There are several options to deal with this, for example, one could make a ratio for employees of fixed days to come to the office with their team, and flexible days, whenever they feel like it. In a 2/1 ratio, an employee could have, for example, Monday and Wednesday as two fixed office days with their team, and one of the other days, whenever they feel like it. Having that flexibility around the team days can be important for communication between employees across teams, knowing who and what is going on outside your team bubble can boost company engagement and culture.
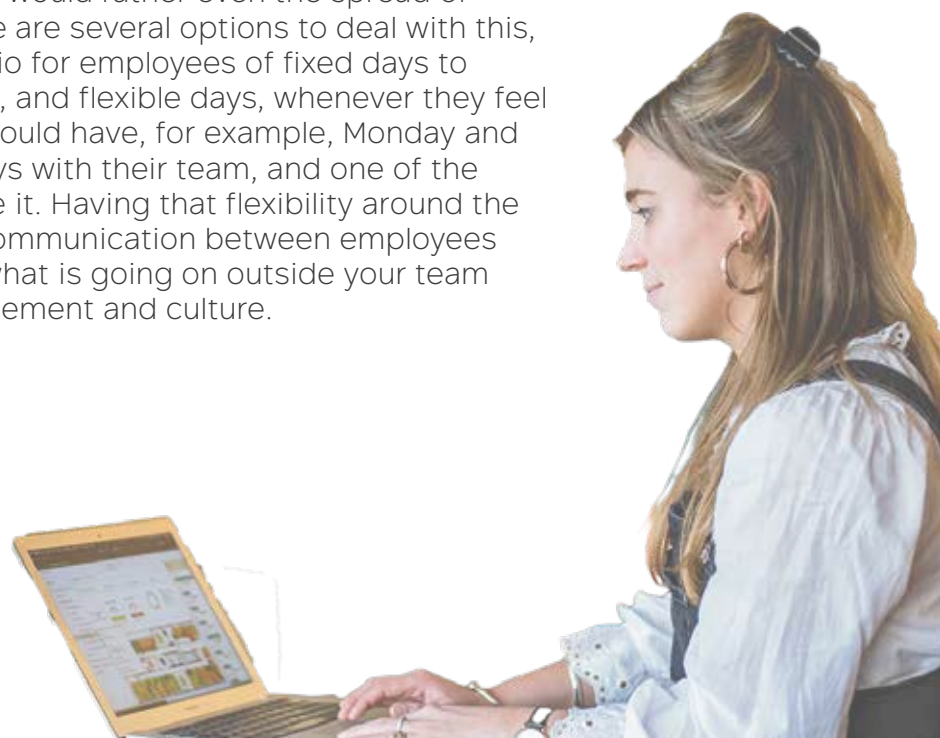
Dynamic Occupancy

Between employees, there will be different desires when it comes to the office/remote ratio. As mentioned, we currently see different needs in the number of days people want to come back to the office. These needs are based on our current situation and don't account for how it will actually be in the future. People might enjoy or hate being back in the office so it is likely that the needs will fluctuate as well over the coming months. There will also be a self-reinforcing feedback loop here, the more people like working at the office, the more days they will like to work at the office, possibly leading to high peaks and low lows. Furthermore, certain periods or projects might actually require more office attendance and seasonal changes might also affect the needs of coming to the office. Together, this will lead to a (highly) dynamic picture of office occupancy in the future. Facilitating a hybrid workforce thus requires understanding the dynamic occupancy of the office and being sure that the office doesn't get overwhelmed at the peak moments.

There are several ways to deal with managing occupancy. With a fixed office, one could measure occupancy using sensors or walkarounds and predict occupancy. This data can be used to take preventative measures or to be fed back to the employees, providing awareness of the coming peaks and/or giving slots for reservations. Together, this should lead to efficient occupancy of the office. Nevertheless, several issues might occur with reservations like people reserving but not showing up, or reservation wars e.g. popular days and popular rooms. But one could also move towards adaptive offices with a flexible number of workspaces to compensate for the dynamic need for workspaces. One could for example have a core office with a fixed number of workspaces, and have an adaptive region of flexibly available workspaces. With flexibly available workspaces one could think of shared office spaces that one could rent when needed such as WeWork, or cafés and restaurants. This flexible region can compensate for the high peaks in dynamics. The third range of office spaces can then be regarded as the home offices of employees. Much of the work is possible from their homes, while even some employees could/want to host physical meetings at their home (office). Together, having workspaces adaptively available can dynamically occupy all the employees. The exact proportion of each type of workspace depends on many organization-specific factors such as company culture, the availability of flexible workspaces, and employee needs.
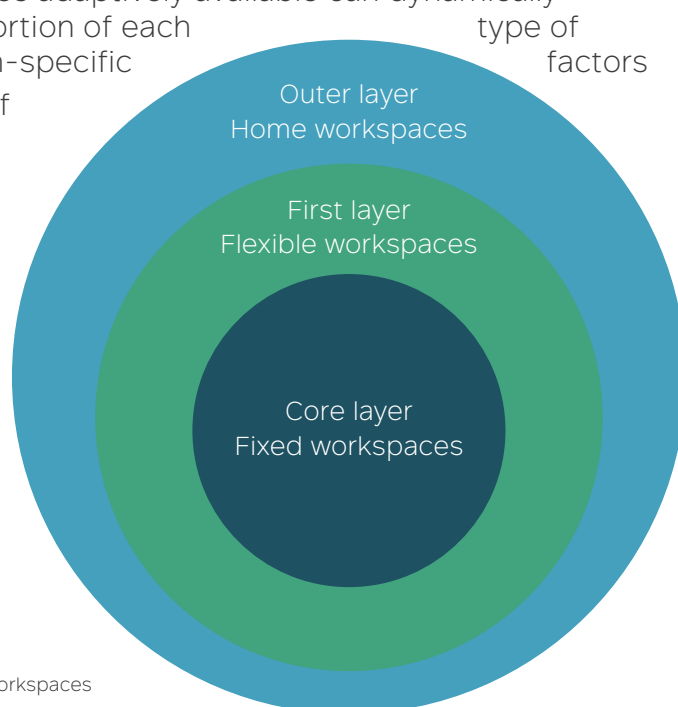
Figure 2. A visualization of adaptive workspaces

> "Barco, an office software company, showed that already 1 in 4 meetings is a 'Hybrid meeting'"

Hybrid Meetings

As mentioned earlier, employees have the need to collaborate and talk to their colleagues when returning to the office. This might require more space available for meetings and to connect with each other. Our own Habital research data using real-time experience sampling (with 4,661 samples) showed that on average, employees spend about one day of the week (15% of their time) on collaboration work (see graph 2 on the next page). However, the number of meetings differs largely between organizations. Unless a very strict meeting rhythm is obtained it is unlikely that all these meetings will be scheduled on that one day, and that all the employees needed for those meetings are at the office. Barco, an office software company, showed that already 1 in 4 meetings is a "Hybrid meeting" a meeting where a part of the attendees join physically and the others join remotely. Having effective hybrid meetings depends on the type of meeting but also on the facilities in place. Barco showed for example that "conflict resolution" is the meeting that employees think requires physical presence the most (49%), while "regular team meetings'' is the most popular activity to be held remotely. Having policies in place for the type of meeting, physical spaces, and allowing hybrid attendance could prevent future issues concerning these topics. Moreover, proper conference rooms with good IT facilities might also be welcome to host hybrid meetings effectively.
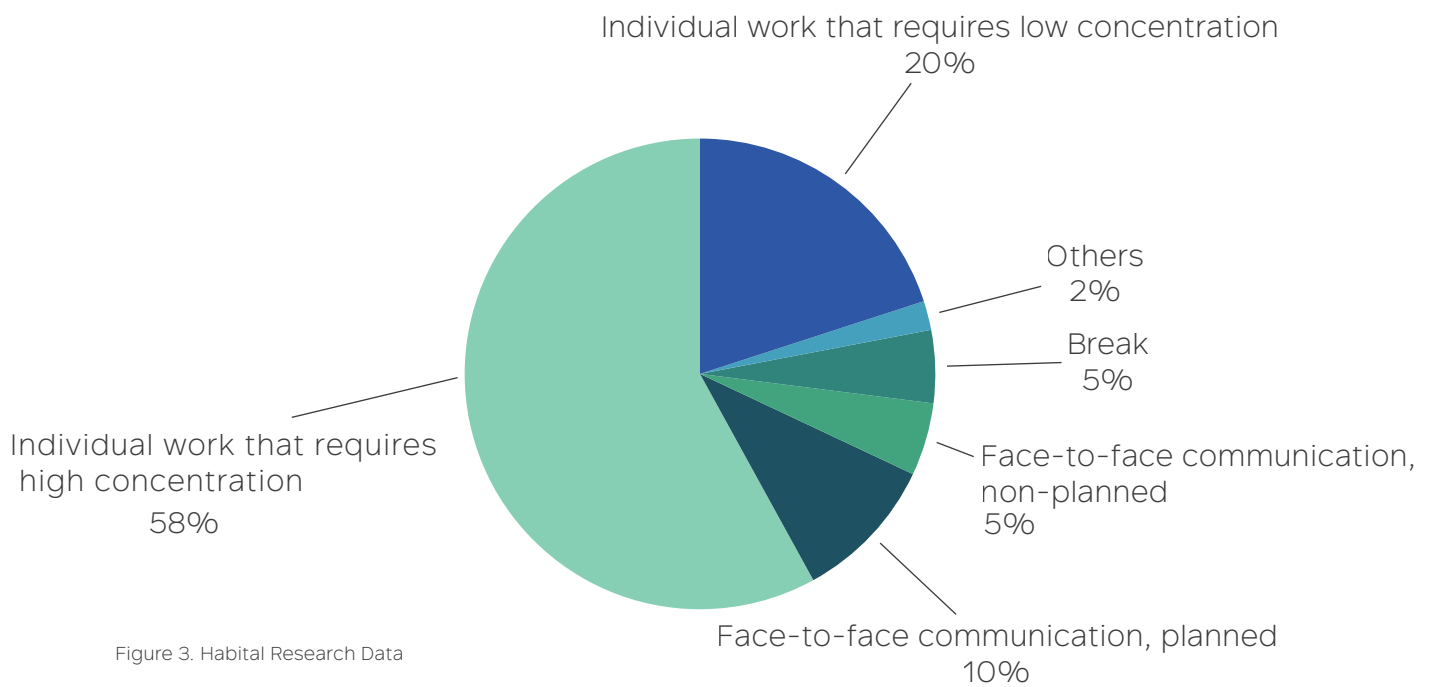
Figure 3. Habital Research Data

Individual Work

Although the office seems to become rather a space for meetings, several, if not all employees will likely want to spend some of their time on individual work at the office. Some employees might think it's more productive, fun, improves their work-life separation, or that it just fills their day at the office in between their meetings. As shown in the graph above, on average still a large proportion of work is individual high concentration work (58%), so when people work 3 days at the office, they will spend a large amount of time on this type of individual work. There should still be spaces at the office that support high concentration work effectively. Nevertheless, it is good to mention that the exact proportions of activities vary strongly between organizations, thus the exact proportions should be determined for each personal organization.

Radical New Models

Until now, we discussed rather easy approaches to hybrid working: a few days a week at the office, a few days remote. But one could also imagine ways of hybrid working that could radically change the way of working. For example, instead of thinking on a weekly basis, one could approach it on a monthly or quarterly basis. One could organize a few weeks of remote working, and then one week (or a few days) of on-sight interaction. These days of physical presence could then be organized as a conference/summer camp kind of event with many brainstorming sessions, teambuilding activities, and outlining the work schedule for the following weeks, until the next get-together. The costs of organizing such events can be compensated by the complete loss of office space, while most employees would be excited to attend these conferences since they are about meeting their colleagues and also having fun together. Furthermore, employees from different teams will have more frequent interactions on such events, which are generally neglected in many organizations, especially remote working.

Conclusion

Many organizations have concluded that hybrid-working will be the future of work. People will spend more time working remotely. The flexibility in their needs and the availability of office space should match to support work effectively. As we could expect more dynamic fluctuations in occupancy needs, it could be smart to handle the availability of space more adaptively. Activities will also take place in a rather hybrid form which will need policies and adjustments to physical spaces to be held effectively. But to act flexibly and adopt the hybrid way of working, one needs to understand what your employees need, what they do, and how the workspaces are occupied and used. Therefore, the use of data is recommended to support quick and conscious decision-making in a more flexible and adaptive future.

Key points:

✓ Hybrid working is here to stay, employees need it, organizations need it

✓ More flexibility and high dynamics in occupancy are expected which need an adaptive approach to handling occupancy

✓ Although the office might become a space mostly for communication, activities will also get a more hybrid nature, that should be supported effectively

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