# Hybrid Working Podcast 6.mp3

**Glenn Baker**

Hello and welcome to the 6th Labour Relations Agency podcast in our series aiming to explore the world of work and challenging workplace culture. My name is Glenn Baker and I'm an Employment Relations Officer with the LRA, and I'm going to be your host for this episode.

Hybrid working exploded during the pandemic out of necessity to keep organisations running during those extended periods of lockdown. However, as time has passed and things have returned to normal, hybrid working has continued to be common despite the occasional headline from large companies like Goldman Sachs stating their entire workforce should be back in the office. We looked at the issue in our recent webinar “Hybrid working: Here to stay or past its use by date?” and I'm joined again by the panellists from that event to discuss things a little further.

Joining us in the room today, we have Ana Desmond, Ulster University economist and co-author of “Is Remote Working, Working?” - research into remote working patterns in Northern Ireland, published in August 2023. And joining us remotely, we've got Gary Cookson, leading HR practitioner and thinker and author of “HR for Hybrid Working” published in June 2022.

Hello folks and welcome to today's podcast. Just to get things started then, in the very recently published CIPD people profession 2023 report, the demand for hybrid working was ranked in the top three drivers of change for organisations in both the UK and in Ireland. As the post pandemic dust settles and hybrid working continues to evolve, should this be seen as a positive thing? I'll come to you first in this one, Ana, and then we'll hear from Gary in a moment or two.

**Ana Desmond**

Thank you for having me. It's been very mixed in terms of the research that we conducted during the pandemic. Employee experiences were definitely both positive and negative, but when we ran our most recent follow-up research earlier in the year, it was overwhelmingly positive. Employees really feeling the benefit of that reduced commute and having more time at home. When we look at the employer side of things, you know we're seeing positives there such as increased quality of work, people perhaps willing to work the time that was previously their commute, and employers generally are seeing productivity remain in and around the same as they were pre-pandemic as well, which is quite unexpected when people thought that it was going to really drop as a result.

**Glenn Baker**

Thank you. Alan, do you have anything to add there, Gary?

**Gary Cookson**

Yeah, I've been doing a lot of research on this similar topic about whether hybrid work is working, and there's lots of organisations that are trying to measure this and lots of organisations that are not trying to measure it, and some of the conversations I’ve had have been quite interesting because we never tried to measure how effective on-site working was, and yet all of a sudden, lots of people feel we have to measure how effective hybrid or remote working is. And one of the problems we've got there is we have nothing to benchmark it against, because we didn't measure how effective on-site working is, and we didn't set any measurements at the onset of remote and hybrid working, we might be too late to do it. But also, does it really matter? I think that hybrid work can work, if you want it to, but you've got to set your own measures on that. Some organisations I talked to measure it on productivity, some on performance, some on carbon footprint, some on employee engagement and others in different ways altogether, and like I said, around half don't measure it at all. So whether it's working, isn't really the question that I think needs answering. It's do you want it to work and if so, how? Because if you want it to, you can, you can make it work and that's what we explored in the webinar, and I guess we'll explore in this podcast too.

**Glenn Baker**

OK, and thanks Gary. Ana, in your recent research published by the University of Ulster earlier this year, you and your colleagues state that only around 17% of people in Northern Ireland have worked from home for at least part of the week, and this figure suggests that we trail behind the rest of the UK and Ireland by some way in this respect. Why do you think this is?

**Ana Desmond**

So, to set the scene. We currently have less than half the rate of people working from home compared to other parts of the UK and Ireland as well. Couple of reasons we can go into here, firstly in and around our sectoral composition. So, that might sound quite intense, but when we think about the types of jobs that we have here in Northern Ireland, we have a slightly lower concentration of those that we typically associate with higher levels of remote and hybrid working. So that can be your ICT sector, your financial services, but that doesn't explain the full gap as to why we have a lower rate there. So as part of our research in the policy centre, we've looked into other things such as levels of qualifications, people's incomes. But as Gary said there, a large part of this is whether people want this to work - so management practises are hugely influential regarding both the take up and the continuation of remote working within firms.

**Glenn Baker**

OK. Gary, just going back to the CIPD people professional report that I mentioned before. Ana mentioned there about the need for management to want to make it work, but the people professionals surveyed said a range of activities that become more difficult due to hybrid working, such as supporting mental health and building organisational culture and values, attracting, and retaining talent and managing performance. This is understandable in a changing environment, so what kinds of things can HR practitioners and people professionals faced with these challenges actually do?

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All loads of things, and of course I can recommend two good books on the on the subject, but that's not why I'm here. It it's not difficult. It's different. Glenn, I think. That's the way I would describe it. Remote working is a very different experience than on-site working is, and you have to put lots more conscious intentional effort into the things you do, because it's too easy to leave things to chance and they drift away. And in the CIPD report they highlight things like well-being, culture, talent and performance, and those are things you've mentioned. I take each one of those in turn and just give you something to think about. Well-being is clearly affected by remote and hybrid working, often in a good way, sometimes in a bad way, because work invades the space in which your life exists and gets in the way of that sometimes, and sometimes there are unforeseen consequences. But everybody who does any element of remote and hybrid working does it in an environment that is unique to them. Nobody else in their workplace has that same environment or has the same demands on their time or the same family around them, or the same stakeholders in their life. That means that well-being has shifted from being something that is an HR LED initiative of, let's provide everybody with free fruit or free massages or yoga classes - well-being for the many - to being something is very, very individualised hyper-personalised well-being, It means something different to everybody else and we've got to focus on the individual. You can make the same point about talent attraction, talent management. We live in a seller’s market now in terms of labour, people have got so used to working when, where, and how they want to, that they are reluctant to go back to more collective experience and collective contracts. They want us to appeal to them as an individual and personalise the employee experience. With culture and values, when you leave those things to chance and you let individuals work in the way they want to, culture can and often will deteriorate. It's much like if you leave your grass and your back garden alone and you don't mow it, then weeds grow in it and it grows out of control. And if you don't put the effort into managing it and keeping it tidy, then it does look quite untidy and deteriorates. Organisational culture is the same and remote working has loads of benefits but can detract from organisation culture if you don't really think about it, if you don't put the effort into managing it and maintaining it. And we're all guilty of that sometimes and performance management takes on a different spin as well, because performance needs looking at through a different lens. It needs, again personalised into the type of work being done where we're not so much managing the performance because you can get data about performance in lots of different ways asynchronously, run reports on systems. We're managing the human being, and the human being manages the performance, and that's a real challenge for lots of managers and for lots of employees. So it's understandable that there are challenges and the CIPD cite these, but they're not ones that we can't get around. We can if we want to, we can if we think about it the right way.

**Glenn Baker**

I think what comes across from what you said there Gary is really the need to change the way that we think about these things and change the way that we approach them.

**Gary Cookson**

Correct. And it requires people professionals to have a real OD (Organisational Development) mindset there, because you mentioned change a few times in what you said. We need to navigate our organisations through that landscape of change and all the emotional reactions to it. We need to think about structure, culture, team relationships, leadership development, communication, workflows - that's an OD (Organisational Development) skill set that lots of people professionals don't have.

**Glenn Baker**

Yeah. Thanks for that Gary. Just going back to you then, Ana. You mentioned “earning the commute” in our recent webinar on hybrid working where employers need to take steps to ensure that office or on-site time is actually worthwhile. What do employees want out of their on-site time? And what can employers do to actually make this time work for their employees?

**Ana Desmond**

I'm going to flip this a little bit and start with what employees maybe don't want, and I think that's coming into the office and perhaps sitting on a Teams call with either other people in the office or other people that are at home. And maybe that's all they do during that day is go from call to call and they're not really making, you know they could have done that from home, and they don't feel the commutes worthwhile. So then how do we flip that around and make that worthwhile? And that's where line managers, HR professionals, really come into this. So, what we think is key here is coordination, and not just of people, being in the office on the same day as your colleagues, really key, and we'll come back to some of the reasons behind that, but also coordinating your tasks. So making sure that the tasks that you're doing whilst in the office are the ones most suited to being in the office. So that can be collaborating with colleagues, that can be fostering your corporate culture, that can be encouraging creativity and innovation between your colleagues. And those are things that companies are reporting that are actually suffering, as a result of remote and hybrid working. But these are the things, as you were saying there Gary, that maybe just require a little bit more effort, but they can be really well done, when they are coordinated in a really effective way.

**Glenn Baker**

OK, and thank you, Ana. Gary, one of the biggest issues that we hear about hybrid working is that it doesn't always suit certain roles or types of jobs, which often means that it might be seen as unfair to offer hybrid working to some people and not the others in an organisation. Is there anything that employers can do to get around this, and maybe once again move away from that kind of thinking?

**Gary Cookson**

OK, I'm going to start with a controversial statement that a lot of the listeners won't necessarily agree with, but I don't think there are any jobs that cannot be hybrid, and I'll explain that in a bit more detail. There aren't, there really aren't any jobs that can't be hybrid, but what we do have are tasks that cannot be hybrid and where you have issues is that you have a job that is comprised entirely of such tasks. And that's a problem because that does lead to all the situations that you described in that question to me. But that's a conscious choice, somebody designed that job, somebody wrote that job description, somebody made a choice to put a lot of tasks that cannot be done hybrid into the same job. And because they made a conscious choice to do that, they can make a conscious choice to undo that, and redo that in a different way. So, my advice is to stop thinking of it in terms of jobs and think of things in terms of tasks and Ana just mentioned that, about which tasks are better done on-site and which are better done remotely. That's a good start point for what I'm thinking about. I think this is a real good opportunity to redesign work itself and to really focus on how do we get more productive, how do we get more efficient, and how we get more from what we've got in terms of resources. Think of each task, ask questions about each task. So, can we change where, when, how, it's done? Can we change who does it? Can we change what does it? Open up the possibility of artificial intelligence doing some tasks? Can we outsource it? Can we move it from one job to another, or to a different team from another? Can we automate it? Can we stop doing it? There's loads more questions, but asking those types of questions about the tasks might enable you to unfreeze a task, geographically, time-wise - so that it's got more flexibility. The entire job might not change, but the tasks can, and it’s these little bits around the edges that enable you to make more of hybrid working by focusing on productivity and efficiency. In the same vein, you'll be able to make more of alternative working weeks, potentially reducing the working weeks, and you might be able to bring in artificial intelligence in a planned and structured way that works for all, but it's about focusing on the tasks and not the jobs.

**Glenn Baker**

Thanks, Gary - there's plenty of food for thought there, about how we might want to change the way that we approach job design with tasks in mind in order to maybe give more people that opportunity to work hybridly.

OK, then folks, as we approach the end of this short podcast, could I just ask each of you for one final point or take away about hybrid working that you'd like our listeners to consider when they're thinking about the subject? I'll come to you for that one first, Gary.

**Gary Cookson**

OK, I think organisations are at a tipping point with hybrid working. They can go one way, or the other. You can either leave it all to chance and there are some attractions in that, in terms of autonomy and flexibility, and it sounds very nice to leave it all to chance and let people figure out for themselves, but it could be a bit too chaotic. The other way you can go is being very structured, very rigid, and mandating an approach to hybrid working, but I don't think that's going to work either, although that's quite an easy option. So, my advice, my parting thoughts here, is to find the middle ground here. Work out why mandating isn't the approach. Work out why leaving it to chance is not the approach and work out what that leaves for you. If you don't want to go to either of the extremes, what's left? And think about the questions you need to answer, the decisions you need to make as an organisation, because hybrid working can work, but only if you want it to. And if you want it to, start making a go of that, ask the right questions, make the right decisions. So that's my advice.

**Glenn Baker**

Thank you there, Gary, and could I just come back over to you then, Anna, for your final thoughts?

**Ana Desmond**

So, I suppose mine ties in quite nicely with Gary, which I suppose is a lovely way to round this up. And so, it's been all over the news, people can't avoid it, we've seen these return to the office mandates by some of these big multinational companies, and I suppose my point comes off the back of that. If you're sitting in that position, and it's probably not the people listening to this podcast being proactive about their hybrid approaches, but it's maybe for those who aren't that are thinking about mandating their employees back into the office perhaps five days a week. I want those employers, and those line managers, and those HR professionals, to ask “why are you doing this”? What are the reasons why, and what's not working and what can you address? And I'm actually going to round up from a quote that I really love. I actually read it from a research organisation called Gallup, so I'm not claiming it as my own, but I thought it was really fantastic. And it's that leaders need to ask, is this “a location problem or a management problem? No location can fix poor management, and the office alone has no magic way to create great organisational culture”, which I think sums up so nicely, a lot of the challenges that people are facing today, but also, is making people look back at themselves and their organisations and their practises to say, OK, what are we maybe doing well, but why isn't this working and how can we do it better?

**Glenn Baker**

Fantastic Ana, and what a great quote that is. OK, well, unfortunately, folks, we're going to have to wrap things up there, but I'd like to thank you both for your contributions, and your time today. But just before we go Ana, if people want to learn more about your work and research, how can they go about it?

**Ana Desmond**

So, we have an Economic Policy Centre within the Ulster University. We have a website that you can access - ulster.ac.uk, and we're also on Twitter quite actively @UlsterUniEPC.

**Glenn Baker**

Great stuff, and how can people keep up to date with what you're up to, Gary?

**Gary Cookson**

Mostly through social media, you can connect with me on LinkedIn. You can find me, I'm Gary Cookson, or you can find me on Twitter/X, and also on Threads at Gary\_Cookson**.**

**Glenn Baker**

Thank you, Gary. And I'd just like to remind our listeners that the recording of our recent webinar event “Hybrid Working: Here to stay or past its use by date?” is available on our website at [www.lra.org.uk](http://www.lra.org.uk).

And finally, I'd just like to thank Anna Desmond and Gary Cookson for their contributions today and for joining me on the podcast. And if you'd like to hear more of our podcasts, you can get them on our website, or on Spotify.