

SKILLS AND STRATEGIES FOR QUALITY HYBRID WORK IN CANADA



The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada, and is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.



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Executive Summary

For many employers in Canada, especially in the knowledge economy, figuring out how to navigate hybrid work was and remains critical not only to post-pandemic recovery but to the future of work. The COVID pandemic re-circuited worker expectations about where and how they work. So too did the housing and cost-of-living crises that followed. Employers can no longer treat hybrid work as a compromise or short-term measure.

Based on interviews with leaders of large businesses in the knowledge economy and human resource specialists with workforce development agencies, this report identifies concerns, trends, and best practices for hybrid work arrangements.

We found that approaches to hybrid work are no longer about surviving and reacting but about responsive workforce strategy in a changing economy. While hybrid work may initially have been ad hoc and experimental, employers, particularly in culture, finance, tech, and professional services, are now more proactive. They are learning from experience and engaging their employees to create supportive approaches to developing their existing workforce.

Employers continue to experiment and adjust, but the most successful approaches are informed by robust employee engagement, where the perspectives of equity-deserving employees are valued, and where diverse experience and expertise from employees at all levels is allowed to shape and reshape the workplace.

Flexible approaches to work also help to attract and retain talent. For example, being able to tap into a more diverse and more geographically spread out talent pool offers organizations a competitive edge. But employers are concerned about the impact of hybrid work on equity-deserving employees, workplace culture, productivity, and team collaboration. Greater dependence on remote technologies requires specialized attention to learning and engagement and creates new demands for social and emotional skills, not only across teams but at supervisory levels.

What is clear from our conversations with employers is that expectations and demands around hybrid work are rarely uniform, with some employees valuing different characteristics of their work than others. In hybrid workplaces, some employees may thrive in remote contexts, others in wholly in-person settings, while still others may prefer different combinations of both. For many employers, the process of bringing employees back into the workplace has proven even more complicated than sending them home.



Introduction

This project was conceived and launched in the spring of 2022 to understand what employers were saying and doing about hybrid work as they were emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. We wanted to know about the success of interventions that worked and understand better the lessons learned from the challenges that were encountered. In particular, we wanted to know what skills and strategies Canada's employers felt they needed to cultivate and adopt hybrid work environments.

There is broad consensus that hybrid work is not a temporary legacy of the pandemic: it is here to stay.¹ Today, one in ten workers in Canada have a hybrid work arrangement.² They tend to be concentrated in the knowledge economy, in sectors like finance, technology, or communications. Globally, it is estimated that by the end of 2023, 39% of knowledge workers will work in hybrid arrangements.³

Canada's employers recognize in hybrid work an opportunity to increase their competitiveness by reorganizing where and how work gets done to focus on results. But a majority continue to take a more cautious approach, instituting hybrid arrangements more incrementally in order to balance established habits and emerging expectations.

Those implementing hybrid work for the first time during the pandemic often did so *ad hoc*, with company schedules and team routines being adjusted as needs emerged, resulting in ongoing learning but also missteps—particularly in terms of their talent development strategy.

This approach did not inspire confidence among Canadian employees: a survey from October 2021 found that just one in five felt their employer was “well prepared” for the realities of hybrid work.⁴ In an increasingly mobile and hybrid economy, and particularly in a tight labour market, evidence suggests that being more well prepared to implement hybrid work would make an organization more competitive for talent.

Most employers offering hybrid work now have at least a year or two of experience in implementing different approaches and gathering direct insights on the benefits and drawbacks of hybrid work for their firms. Many have adapted employee training programs, or created new ones, to better support hybrid learning and skills development.

Employers have also learned lessons on factoring equity and inclusion into strategies for hybrid work and learning. Despite this, there remains a knowledge gap for Canadian employers in adopting practices that best enable high-quality, productive, and inclusive hybrid work within their firms.

As of fall 2023, employers in Canada continue adapting and experimenting with in-person and remote work strategies, but now have more perspective on the benefits and limitations of hybrid approaches.

Research Project Overview

Background

This project's findings contribute to an emerging evidence base guiding inclusive hybrid work arrangements. It complements prior research BHER has undertaken relating [to the impacts of COVID-19 on learning and employment, employer perspectives on skills and talent](#), and forthcoming research on employer perspectives on the barriers, needs, and enablers to hiring persons with disabilities.

This report is written for employers interested in the opportunities and challenges presented by hybrid work. It may help to inform applied social research and organizational practices.

While most of our data comes from employers in the knowledge economy, in sectors like finance, technology, or communications, the perspectives provided here will likely be useful to a wider variety of organizations and leaders.

Methods

We began this project in spring 2022. Background research included a literature review of peer-reviewed and gray sources to extract and synthesize qualitative data and identify themes and gaps in knowledge.

We undertook an environmental scan of existing and promising strategies, pre- and post-COVID-19 onset, with a focus on hybrid strategies in Canadian and international contexts; and an analysis and synthesis of current discourse among skills and future of work stakeholder groups (private sector employers, skills and training practitioners, researchers, and knowledge economy employees).

We conducted key informant interviews with executive-level leaders from across Canada. Stakeholders in executive-level leadership roles were prioritized given the influential roles they play in adopting equitable, inclusive COVID-19 recovery workplace policies and practices, and in responding to challenges of employee demands, and talent attraction, retention, and development.

Interviews took place in two phases, in the fall of 2022 (prioritizing human resource specialists representing workforce innovation and skills development organizations) and the spring of 2023 (prioritizing private sector stakeholders). A total of 20 in-depth 60-minute interviews were conducted.

The project's research methodology, data plan, and research instruments were approved by the Research Ethics Board at Toronto Metropolitan University.

What is hybrid work?

Hybrid work is by definition a flexible work model that combines in-office and remote workers. Cisco defines hybrid work as “a people-first approach to managing the workforce.” It is meant to increase worker autonomy and job satisfaction. Ideally it also drives productivity “while addressing the major challenges of remote work, such as isolation and lack of community.”

Cisco describes multiple types of hybrid work models (e.g. flexible hybrid, fixed hybrid, office first, remote first), but the overall idea is that with hybrid work, “the workplace is no longer inside the four walls of the corporate office—it is an ecosystem of employees working from home, in coworking spaces, and the office. Team members can migrate between various locations depending on the work they need to get done.”⁵

Hybrid work requires organizations to redraw the map of how they work. It demands changes in how employees, supervisors, and leadership engage one another to deliver products and services to their clients and customers. Hybrid approaches favour what gets accomplished over where it gets done. Employers considering when and where a person ought to work have a distinct advantage in attracting and retaining an increasingly discerning, highly-skilled workforce.

Employee/Employer Preferences

As local restrictions on in-person work were relaxed or lifted towards the end of the third wave of the pandemic, employers began to consider how to make a return to the office happen. By summer 2022, employers were refining their approaches to in-person work, with growing numbers of businesses mandating that employees return to the office for at least a few days per week.⁶

The views of one private sector leader are typical of many we spoke with: “A lot of employees have gotten quite used to working at home and would like to stay there. But we cannot compromise how we manage our business.”⁷ While this expectation for a return-to-normal remains understandable, it is also not entirely practical for recruiting and retaining a post-pandemic workforce.

This workforce now includes two to three years of postsecondary graduates with little to no in-person work experience, alongside a cohort of junior talent who have spent more of their short careers working remotely than in-person. As one professional services leader confided, expectations have shifted:



There is this tension now between productivity and what we call ‘reconnection’ or connecting in person. Our younger workforce, particularly under thirty [years old], are saying they can not do it all. ... ‘Do you want me to be highly productive and efficient and working where I am most effective, at home? Or do you want me to come in and reconnect with you, for learning, or meeting with a client?’ They are saying [that] it is a challenge for them.

(Technical and Professional Services leader, January 2023)

The desire to return to pre-pandemic working conditions is not a universal one, neither for employees nor employers. Notions of in-person workplaces being the norm are also unlikely to be universal, at least in certain sectors or in certain regions where remote work pre-dates the start of the pandemic. Some leaders have long been advocating for the advantages of remote and hybrid work in their region based on pre-pandemic observations about the twenty-first-century global economy.

As one HR professional from a workforce development organization in Atlantic Canada pointed out:



“COVID-19 did such a service for us in terms of helping organizations to realize we cannot wait 10 years on this. ... [Hybrid work] is better for employees. It is better for organizations. And I do believe that ultimately it is going to all lead to more opportunity for everyone. So, as much as there are some downsides and pitfalls, I hope that what comes out of this is the real opportunity we have ahead of us.”

(HR professional, February 2023)

A financial services leader was similarly enthusiastic about opportunities for blending in-person and remote work, telling us: “Hybrid enables us to do better on [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion].” To practically affect change, they added, “that really does take a manager who has that awareness, builds that trust, belonging, leads with empathy, *et cetera*.”⁸

Based on who we spoke with, though, the jury is still out on the relationship between hybrid work and its impact on work culture, equity-deserving groups, and productivity. Some employers suggest productivity is in fact higher among hybrid teams,⁹ while others argued that any perceived increases come at the expense of extra hours worked by employees and the potential erosion of workplace culture.¹⁰

What is critical is that approaches to hybrid work make supports available to ensure employees are included and engaged.¹¹



Findings

Key Finding 1

The most successful approaches to hybrid work are informed by robust employee engagement.

We heard from employers that employees are demanding flexible work arrangements more than ever before, voicing preferences on how they work, when they work, and where they work. An executive with a major technology firm told us: “I think people initially looked at it as a perk or benefit to be able to work remotely or in a hybrid environment but now it is what employees expect. It is no longer just a perk... employees want that choice and flexibility.”¹²

Evidence suggests that employers who support employee decision-making regarding their own work conditions are more likely to retain talent and may even be able to attract people from a broader and more diversely skilled and experienced talent pool.¹³ For large, global companies managing teams internationally, familiarity and comfort with virtual and hybrid work arrangements enables them to better leverage internal talent across locations and time zones. One for-profit leader told us:



The fact is if we rely on in-person workers, our pool of talent in any one location is capped out at about 3,000 to 4,000 people. If we eliminate that [by implementing hybrid work], we allow ourselves to tap into our global workforce of 30,000 people. All of a sudden somebody in Hong Kong can work on a project in Toronto. ... Now we have a 24-hour-a-day work cycle, which is pretty exciting and powerful. That is a really nice side benefit that we do not often think of. I can have a team that is running around the clock, but I am not burning them out.

(Finance and Insurance leader, February 2022)

Some employers we spoke with recognized the need to develop practices and procedures collaboratively, democratically, and through participatory discussion with their teams. For some, this included co-authoring a “team charter,” a document to help clarify expectations and responsibilities around working remotely or coming into the office. One employer in the financial services sector described participating in an exercise called “Team Norms” where they, alongside other managers, attended a training session to help them discuss team activities, work locations, approaches to communication, and expectation setting.

Offering opportunities to make choices and express opinions over working conditions can be valuable for a wide variety of workers. For younger, entry-level employees who may have limited in-person professional experience, employer flexibility and openness to coming up with different kinds of engagement together could help determine priorities for face-to-face training that also work best for their teams and supervisors. Practical incentives may also help: for example, casual dress codes or stipends for costs associated with in-person work can help reduce barriers to in-person engagement and encourage important, informal networking and professional development opportunities.

Engaging employees in discussions around what they want hybrid work to look like, and what supports and resources would help them go into the office more frequently, can help ensure inclusive and people-centric workplaces. While this resembles “negotiating boundaries,” as one workforce development leader put it, effective engagement provides firms with opportunities to tap into the collective wisdom of employees and create “buy-in” for decisions around hybrid work.

Striking the right balance between flexible and strict approaches to hybrid work continues to be a challenge for employers in the knowledge economy. We heard that being overly rigid, such as by mandating minimum in-person working days or hours, may cause employees to look elsewhere for more flexible opportunities.

Key Finding 2

Employers are concerned about hybrid work's impact on workplace culture.

The employers we spoke with are concerned about the impact of hybrid work on workplace culture. Stakeholders across tech, finance, cultural, and information sectors mentioned feeling that the loss of daily in-person interaction was hampering their ability to foster a strong sense of shared culture, and that this was having a particularly concerning effect on new and younger workers. Survey data from 2021 named culture as the biggest concern for CEOs considering approaches to virtual and hybrid work.¹⁴

Employers we spoke with felt that hybrid work meant a reduction of time spent face-to-face, in person with colleagues. These losses, they felt, would invariably impact collaboration, creativity, and teamwork. Some referred to the value of hallway or “water-cooler” conversations, discussing the perceived importance of informal networking for establishing professional relationships and strengthening workplace culture. But replicating these experiences in virtual or hybrid environments or ensuring that opportunities to build social capital and grow culture are happening online remains an ongoing challenge.¹⁵

Some employers have successfully navigated these difficulties through new practices, such as mentorship relationships that pair remote workers with senior staff to create a ‘virtual water cooler’ experience.¹⁶ Others have found value in hosting regularly scheduled, online check-in meetings in various formats, with different combinations of staff and supervisors, and with groups of various sizes. These may include one-on-ones with management and colleagues, group check-ins with project teams or working committees, or resource group meetings established with the specific goal of strengthening one or more organizational policies.

Less time spent in-person can also impact an organization’s learning culture—particularly for those at entry-level or in junior positions, but also for all employees onboarding with a new team or in a new organization. Learning by shadowing while at work helps employees grasp “the bigger picture,” or how different roles and teams fit together. Without adequate accommodation for hybrid approaches, limited opportunities to observe or participate in informal learning could negatively impact opportunities for career advancement and employees’ ability to work effectively within and across teams.¹⁷

Key Finding 3

Hybrid work can both alleviate and exacerbate challenges for equity-deserving employees.

Employee equity emerged as a top concern among interviewees. Leaders recognize the reality that women remain more responsible for family obligations¹⁸ than their male co-workers, making their return to the office more complex and “face time” with superiors more consequential.¹⁹ Deaf and disabled employees may experience additional impacts, particularly if they face difficulties commuting as a result of mobility impairment, or lose access to digital technologies with a shift to more unmediated professional environments.²⁰ Neurodivergent employees may also experience additional impacts, such as struggling to adjust to noisier office environments.²¹

For some, then, hybrid work is a necessity. Without the flexibility or choice that hybrid work can provide, the ability of employees to work would become limited or even impossible. Of course, hybrid work is not a universal cure for inaccessibility or inequity, but it may support equity, diversity, and inclusion. It may also support the right to accessible employment.

One interviewee felt that hybrid work created opportunities to engage equity-deserving communities in ways that were not obvious prior to working virtually. They described efforts to create career path programs for Indigenous professionals who might not wish to leave their communities, but could be engaged in remote work through a concerted digital technology strategy as part of a hybrid team: “Hybrid work enables us to think more outside the box in terms of how we move the dial with Indigenous communities.”²²

While hybrid work can help some employers achieve a good work-life balance within teams or across the firm, it can also exacerbate challenges to achieving workplace equity and diversity objectives for others. The main concern for equity-deserving employee groups is that workers who are better positioned to go into the office or thrive within in-person settings will disproportionately benefit. They may be recognized more quickly and more likely to be promoted than their counterparts working from home due to a “presenteeism bias” or “facetime bias.”²³ Managers may need guidance and training to ensure inclusive approaches to hybrid work environments are meaningfully offered, while teams may need to adopt and enforce formal policies that ensure biases are effectively addressed if and before they become apparent.

Samuel and Robertson suggest that employers give careful consideration to who spends time working at the office versus at home, and how that relates to career mobility and team productivity.²⁴ Poor or episodic engagement with staff over hybrid work conditions is not only consequential for equity-deserving and equity-denied employees, but erodes trust across an entire organization.²⁵

There are also practical considerations to be made, then, in terms of individual and team management as well as with the use of digital technology and collaboration tools in support of diverse and equity-deserving employees. Leaders we spoke with described efforts to ensure that software and resources were accessible to employees with disabilities, for example, by offering real-time captioning during meetings.

Key Finding 4

Hybrid work renews demands for social and emotional skills for all employees.

The same skills that were needed most for work before the pandemic remain the same in hybrid work arrangements: *digital skills and social and emotional skills*.²⁶ What the shift towards hybrid work has confirmed, though, is that these skills are required by all, regardless of their team, level, experience, geographic location, or industry.

In other words, it is not enough in hybrid work to focus training efforts only on junior staff: supervisors and managers also need support. Each must be responsible for developing the competencies needed to communicate effectively, empathetically, and individually with team members, colleagues, and organizational leadership, and to do so efficiently through the digital tools that enable teams to work across multiple hybrid workplaces.

As one professional and technical services leader summarized: “How do we go about, for leaders, equipping them to manage remotely...how do you engage with your people? How do you communicate with [them], how do you manage performance, productivity, and create some sense of team when everyone is remote?”²⁷

Virtual and hybrid work arrangements create new and different demands for the behavioural and interpersonal skills that were once needed to manage in-person only work places. In our interviews, we asked what skills employers thought were best suited for hybrid work arrangements, and how they vary by position. Table 1 below summarizes our findings.

Table 1: Stakeholder perspectives on skills for hybrid work, by employee level

Skills for junior and entry-level employees	Self-management Proactive communication Teamwork Time-management Critical thinking (particularly about when to come into the office) Accountability
Skills for managers	Empathy Active listening Communication (emphasis on presentation and facilitation abilities) Accountability
Skills for leaders	Trust (towards employees) Accountability Strategic thinking (intentional approaches to hybrid work)

Many of the skills our stakeholders identified are familiar—such as communication or time management—but there are clear distinctions based on an employee’s level and role. Managers, for example, need empathy and active listening skills. Often they are required to understand why an employee elects not to come in person more frequently, or to recognize the signs, made more subtle through remote technologies, that indicate that an employee may be struggling with their mental health and in need of support. Active listening helps them to proactively avoid confusion and reactively resolve conflicts within their teams regarding work processes, goals, and results.²⁸

Accountability at all levels is considered an important skill for hybrid work, where employees are required to take responsibility for their work and own up to their mistakes. Related to accountability is trust, a social and emotional skill that is particularly critical for managers and supervisors to cultivate. In hybrid work arrangements where in-person engagement is limited or direct supervision is not possible, managers and leaders must demonstrate their trust that employees are making good decisions about their work and schedules.²⁹

As Charles Feltman argues, trust is a two-way street: it is as much about trusting as it is about modeling one's own trustworthiness.³⁰ Accordingly, the skill is a critical one for leadership, not only for cultivating a trusting work environment but also for repairing broken trust and effectively combating workplace cynicism—both critical but underappreciated elements of effective DEI initiatives.³¹

Key Finding 5

Hybrid work requires new types of employee skills training and development.

Employers that recognize and even anticipate opportunities in hybrid work are identifying effective strategies for team training and individual learning and development in hybrid workplaces.

In some instances it is as simple as providing resources or tools that help employees consider when in-person work ought to be prioritized. “There is something needed to help people make those decisions,” one leader from the professional services sector told us. “We developed ... a rubric of, ‘are you doing these types of things? These are the things you can do at home. These are the things you should do in the office.’”³²

The pandemic-related transition to virtual work also required that employees quickly adapt to new tools and software and be comfortable with enabling technology.³³ Early in the pandemic, researchers identified the need for organizations to invest in training their workers at all levels to ensure they had in-demand skills suited to rapidly changing conditions.³⁴

As part of that transition, employers and employees have become increasingly familiar with online learning as an important method for training and skills development. “Before, people would think it is a crappy way to learn,” one stakeholder told us. “They do not think that anymore. They have adapted to learning virtually and being able to do that. So, they are quite comfortable with it, and it allows us to be more focused on it.”³⁵

Over the past two years, businesses we spoke with have made significant investments in third-party education and training platforms, including learning management systems, to support self-directed learning and professional development. Through these platforms, employers have curated learning programs that they found to best support employee development.

Some have chosen systems that allow employees to pick and choose learning pathways according to their own goals and interests. Certain businesses have also developed their own virtual courses and programs customized to their skills and talent needs. Some have leveraged in-house talent and expertise, while others have partnered with post-secondary institutions to create targeted training programs.³⁶

Greater familiarity and comfort with virtual learning, including self-regulated and self-directed learning, has allowed organizations to better leverage training amongst internal talent. “Historically you had people flying all over the world to a central location for about a week and it would cost a pretty penny to put on this big show for emerging leaders. Now, many more people can participate on an annual basis.”³⁷

Employers, though, still have questions: what is the proper proportion of remote learning to on-the-job training? What are the limits of remote approaches to learning and development, whether synchronous (occurring in real-time) or asynchronous (self-directed, occurring at times convenient for the learner)? How does that ratio vary among employee levels and across sectors, particularly in roles requiring employees to demonstrate specific, applied technical skills?

Apprenticeship training, for example, is often built around peer-to-peer training, with strong emphasis on in-person mentorship. The use of emerging technology, like AR and VR (augmented reality and virtual reality), holds promise as a strategy to support mentorship where physical presence is not possible.³⁸

Despite increased comfort and familiarity with virtual learning, in-person training is likely to continue to play an important role in employee training and development programs.

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