

Hybrid working: here today; gone tomorrow?

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Introduction

The events of the past three years have changed working lives forever.

Add to these events the advances and accessibility of technology for individuals, and we see a shift away from the necessity for everyone to work together in an office type environment, to a need to work together in individual silos – our homes, reception areas of hotels, and service stations on motorways, the countryside and even in exotic locations around the world (as some advertisements would suggest).

This silo approach doesn't suit everyone, nor does it suit certain types of work – manufacturing, for example, where working in a factory type environment cannot easily translate into working in silos. Interestingly, Harris Tweed workers work in silos, and they manufacture some fantastic products, but in the main, silo working isn't for those making or building something.

Silo working doesn't suit everyone who has been obliged to adopt this practice. Extraverts like being around other people, and obtain much of their energy from interaction. Being isolated at home, albeit working, can become very uncomfortable for those who don't like the isolation, and who crave contact with others.

This is true, also, for those who decided during the past three years, that living in cities is passe and living in the country is the next 'big thing' to do. The migration to the countryside has done wonders for house prices in the country, but not much joy for those living in cities with flats to sell. Nor has it done much good for those servicing people working in offices; as they aren't there anymore; they are all in the countryside, in their silos.

Now however, those who crave company, are beginning to return to cities, raising the question – is hybrid working here today and gone tomorrow?

On top of this there seems to be some leaders of businesses and other organisations who have exposed their complete lack of trust in their workforces. They have placed enormous pressure on their followers to return to the empty spaces that are office buildings, so an eye can be kept on them and ensure they are, in fact, working. Being in a place equals working. Not being in a place equals not working. An interesting perspective on working lives.

In a country whose productivity levels have remained static for over 20 years, the increased productivity levels of people working in silos might have been regarded as a solution to improving productivity.

Of course, people aren't actually working in silos. They are communicating using technology. They keep in touch over social media as well as the established technological meeting systems, that are improving all the time.

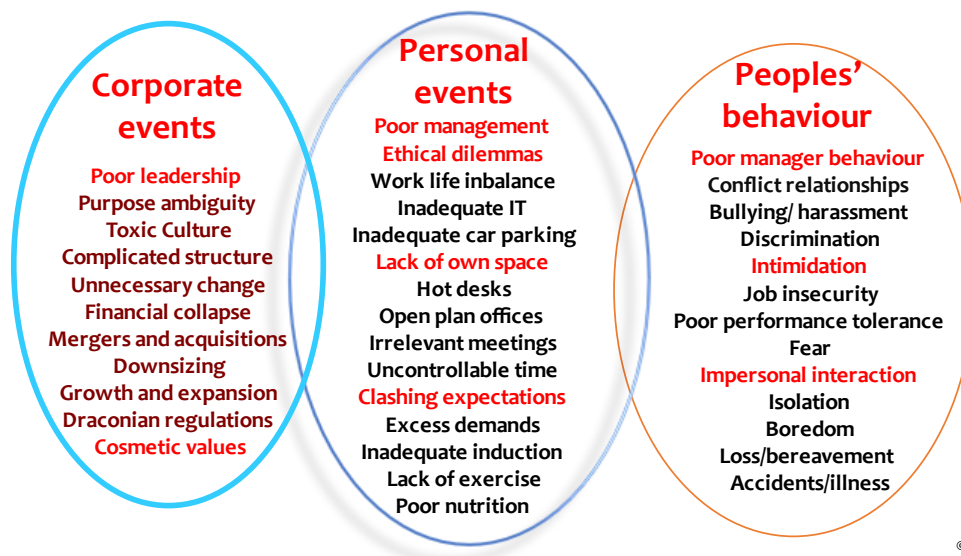
But does this mode of communication meet the needs that people have for each to thrive, perform at their peak and enjoy their working lives?

Things that might go wrong.

MAS is in the prevention business, preventing people in the workplace from experiencing the adverse events that may lead them to experience stress. We are interested in this because stress leads to under performance as a consequence of the person not being able to effectively concentrate.

Physical interference is relatively easy to negotiate away. It is remarkable that so much physical interference is tolerated by so many people, when negotiating with those who do physically interfere can result in improved performance and productivity.

However, as MAS are psychologists, we are interested in the psychological interferences in the workplace that effectively reduce or hijack concentration.



In the image above are common events in any workplace. Most people have experienced more than one and report the impact they have on their performance and their feelings about their work and workplace, which tend to be universally negative. We know the excess costs to organisations of these events and others is huge – up to 5 times the combined costs of sickness absence and staff turnover attributable to stress.

In a situation where individuals are working at home, which of the events are likely to happen?

Home working doesn't prevent many of these events from occurring. It may accentuate some, for example, isolation and irrelevant meetings.

Unless the underlying leadership and cultural influences go a long way to eliminate the opportunity for the events, above, from occurring in the workplace, the prospect is that they will continue to happen when individuals are working in their silos, at home or elsewhere.

Increased productivity from home working might be from those individuals already working in a positive working environment in the workplace. In their own silos, increased opportunity to concentrate may be the reason for improved productivity.

We are, also, interested in how the workplace supports and develops individual psychological wellbeing, resilience and performance, all aspects of Psychological Responsibility¹



In the image above are elements that help each of us build our psychological wellbeing, resilience and performance.

Working in silos may enhance some of these elements, for example, empowerment, self-efficacy, control and pleasure being amongst them.

Others, however, may be more difficult to sustain and develop, for example, self-esteem, attachment, motivation, meaning and success. These are elements that require the reactions from others in ways that have impact. Remote recognition loses whatever impact is possible without the opportunity of physical meeting and reinforcement.

Gone tomorrow

Many organisations are pursuing hybrid working, where individuals spend some time in their silo, and others in the office.

¹ See Derek Moowbray's Guide to Psychological Responsibility@Work MAS Publishing 2019 obtainable from www.mas.org.uk

Hybrid working requires considerable effort to make it work effectively².

There are several reasons why people need to come together physically.

There is a need for social interaction. Roughly half the workforce will have a preference for being extravert, and will have a driven need to meet people, socialise and obtain energy from their interaction.

The other half of the workforce need to interact with others physically, in order to prevent isolation from happening without the individual being aware of its significance. Loneliness creeps up on people and has a devastating impact.

Interacting physically is needed for us all to pick up on the signs and signals that happen in interaction that provide greater understanding, and enable more accurate interpretation of the other person, how they are feeling and how they are responding to events.

Team working is another focus for drawing individuals together physically. Teams are the groups that come up with feasible ideas, as well as being groups that ensure some projects are completed effectively. Whilst it is common practice in multi-national companies to have members of teams split between countries, with limited time access to each other let's say between USA and China, these teams also need to meet physically from time to time to benefit from the nuances that happen when physical interaction happens.

Conclusion

Clearly we shall see how long hybrid working continues to be a preferred form of working.

It is concluded, however, that as long as hybrid working is properly arranged, so that individuals get the best of both worlds (silo working and office working), then it is likely that hybrid working will be here today and here tomorrow.

If, on the other hand, hybrid working doesn't prevent adverse events from occurring, nor enhance the psychological wellbeing of individuals, performance will not improve, and will deteriorate over time, rendering hybrid working as an inefficient and ineffective way of working on a routine basis.

² See Derek Mowbray's 'Together Apart' 2020 obtainable from www.mas.org.uk