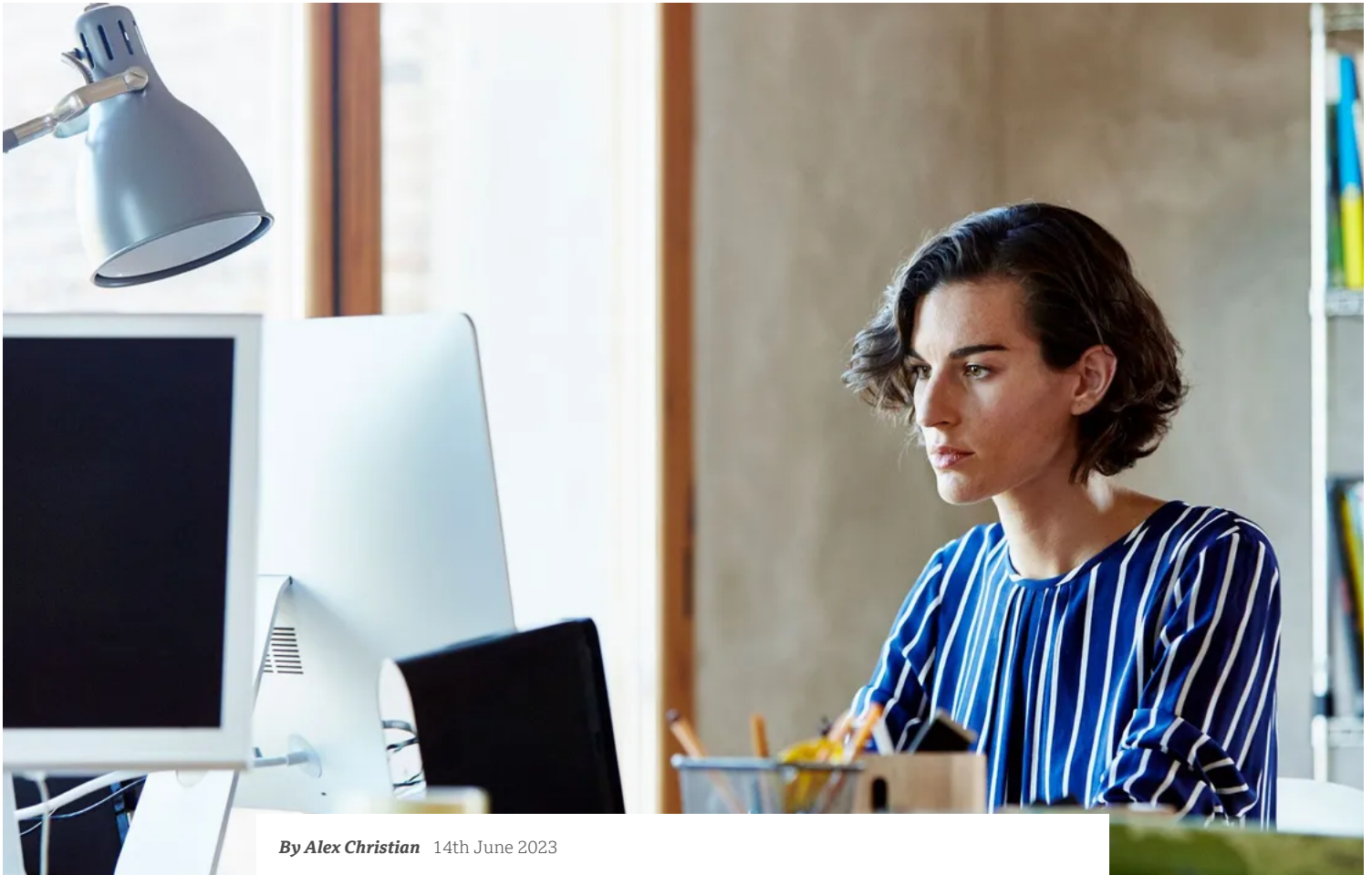




FEATURES

Why hybrid return-to-office mandates aren't as flexible as they seem



By **Alex Christian** 14th June 2023

Touted as dynamic and agile, a fixed pattern of in-person and remote working can actually deprive workers of the autonomy they need to thrive.

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s they continue to navigate return-to-office plans, many companies are settling on hybrid set-ups: a workweek split between the office and the home, featuring a few fixed days of in-person working, generally with a standard 9-to-5 schedule.

Largely, these arrangements are touted as fluid and agile, a compromise offering workers much of the control and autonomy they expect following the pandemic. But the very nature of strict in-office dates and hours, implemented top-down by bosses, may not actually provide workers as much flexibility as advertised.

“Often, it’s giving employees a hybrid schedule of where they should do their jobs, without any flexibility,” says Tim Oldman, founder and CEO of employee-experience research firm Leesman, based in London. “It’s shoehorning them into fixed patterns that may not best support their work.”

For some workers, this reality isn't simply inconvenient or disappointing. Less flexibility disproportionately affects some employees more than others – particularly, caregivers and workers with disabilities. “Fixed hybrid policies often don't address the return-to-office challenges faced by employees with different experiences of the workplace,” says Oldman.

Flexibility: A non-negotiable?

Although hybrid schedules vary, the most common ones strike a balance between three office and two remote days a week or vice versa. Often, these in-office days are fixed instead of selected ad-hoc, with the aim to consistently get teams together, or enable scheduled collaboration or in-person meetings. In theory, this compromise is a fair deal to both the employers who want their workers back in seats, and their employees, as they can hold on to some remote work and subsequent flexibility.

Workers continue to prize their autonomy. In a May 2023 survey of 2,105 US workers by market-research firm The Harris Poll, 69% of current or former remote workers say the independence that comes with remote work is more important than the professional benefits of in-person work. They also report that the flexibility of remote working means they're more able to speak freely (74%) and are happier with their own work (72%).



Rigid hours, even when the days are flexible, can be difficult for carers, disabled or neurodiverse workers who may prefer the flexibility of work from home (Credit: Getty Images)

Indeed, a fixed hybrid schedule benefits many workers. The Harris Poll data showed 45% said they preferred a set schedule. “There will always be a subset of people that prefer certainty and knowing where they'll be every day,” says Matthew Davis, an associate professor at Leeds University Business School, UK.

For this section of the workforce, a fixed hybrid pattern confers both flexibility and structure; it enables them to work from home and craft their remote days, while still enjoying the benefits of in-person working, such as socialising and collaboration.

However, inherently, these mandates are actually very rigid, with strict requirements around which days to be present, and the working hours on those days. “People tend to respond very well to feeling they've had choice and control over their life in general,” says Davis. “For most people, a fixed schedule is their least preferred option of hybrid working. Generally, the less control people have, the less good their outcomes.”

Importantly, rigid office hours hit certain workers particularly hard, say experts. “Those who prefer to work more flexibly may have caregiving responsibilities for their family – and that's disproportionately women,” says Brent Cassell, vice president, advisory in the HR practice of consulting firm Gartner, based in Virginia, US.

Alongside parents and carers, disabled or **neurodiverse workers** may also prefer the flexibility of working from home. “Those with physical or cognitive impairments are less likely to be willing to commute into the workplace when everything is set up for them at

home,” says Oldman. And this may be a large swath of workers: “In our research, between 15% to 18% of workers self-select as having an impairment that impacts them at work.”

Experts are concerned that mandating hybrid schedules deprives sections of the workforce the flexibility and autonomy that enable them to thrive. “There’s much talk of diversity, equity and inclusion: understanding employee diversity, recognising talent and providing solutions for those employees,” says Oldman. “A fixed hybrid schedule risks us going backwards in terms of awareness and addressing certain workers’ distinct needs.”

Where it leaves workers

Workers stuck with inflexible hybrid-working patterns have an obvious option: they can find a job that’s more accommodating. “Employees that spend more time in the office than they want are more likely to look for another role,” says Davis. “It’s like if your salary isn’t good – you look elsewhere for an employer that can match your expectations.”

But as more companies settle on a fixed hybrid model in a tightening job market, not every worker will be able to find a role that guarantees the flexibility they seek. “Even companies that were more relaxed, and had a free hybrid model in which workers chose where, when and how they worked, now have more structure in place,” says Davis. “There’s a tension between individual choices and the ability for a team to coordinate and get work done together.”

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Nevertheless, Davis believes many bosses understand that mandated office days don’t suit everyone – a seemingly rigid hybrid structure may have room for flexibility.

“Companies are still testing and learning their hybrid-working models,” he says.

“Although structure has been added so that important, in-person days are worthwhile, many employers will still likely allow for individual freedom and exemptions – a fixed hybrid set-up may actually be more flexible in reality.”

In these nascent set-ups, Oldman says bosses and workers can negotiate a more balanced version of hybrid, blending the best of collective in-person working with individual flexibility. The onus, though, rests on the employer. “Any employer has to make a decision for the general interest of the majority for the purpose of the organisation – and most workers will accept that some rules are needed. But employers can do more in understanding the true spectrum of inclusivity – and providing flexible and agile solutions for employees within a framework that suits both parties.”

Davis says these workers can also reorganise their jobs with their line managers, carving out greater autonomy through different start times or **choice of office desk**. “There can be conversations around choosing to work in a quieter part of the workplace, flexible hours or how their work is done. It at least gives an employee choice, allowing them to redesign their job for greater flexibility.”

Many workers, however, may never get the full flexibility they enjoyed working from home as they practise fixed hybrid mandates. The reality is, unless they can find a role that offers the autonomy they want, they’ll have to meet their boss somewhere in the middle.

“Spaces designed for living are often better at supporting knowledge workers in the modern world than those designed for working,” says Oldman. “The implication is nearly everyone loses with fixed, mandated hybrid schedules. Really, employers should be nearly as flexible as the employee.”

