

To be or
not to be...
**Remotely
creative?**

Exploring new models for collaborating
and innovating in the future of work



For many businesses, working practices and patterns look and feel very different to where they were before the pandemic. In some business sectors, it appears remote and hybrid working is here to stay, and in many instances has proven to be more productive... so far. While it's also extremely popular among employees who seek the opportunity to improve their work-life balance (and eliminate a long commute), some employers still have doubts that any efficiency gains will outweigh the potential for a longer-term degradation in quality of work and creativity.

New models of working pose a particular challenge for the creative industries, where working together in the same room is often seen as a key driver to creativity. Can you recreate that same energy and collaboration without physical interaction? Is the modern standard of hybrid or fully remote working even a possibility for creative workplaces? And how can creative leaders enable great work in a remote environment?

These are some of the questions we recently posed to an accomplished cross section of creative industry leaders: James Farrell, Head of Local Originals, Amazon Studios; Amy Hennig, President, Skydance New Media; Larry Jackson, former Global Creative Director, Apple Music; Rob Reilly, Global Chief Creative Officer, WPP; and Graham Taylor, Co-CEO, Fifth Season. They were able to share their valuable insights on the effects of - and approaches to - flexible working today.



32%

of professionals said they don't think they'll ever go back into the office full time In a recent Korn Ferry survey.

74%

say they have more energy and focus working from home instead of the office.

49%

of professionals say they would turn down a job offer if the company mandated that they go into the office full-time.

Myriad opportunities...

First, the silver linings. Our panel noted the many upsides offered by remote or hybrid working. One big pro has been the opening up of new talent pools beyond the traditional creative centers. Amy Hennig, for example, had been in the process of setting up Skydance New Media just as the pandemic hit, and quickly shifted her mindset away from location-based recruitment: “We realized—why be so limited in our thinking about how we can staff and recruit? The possibility of remote work actually became an opportunity, rather than an obstacle. It opened up the talent pool to a huge degree. We’ve been able to build Skydance New Media with a lot of flexibility, and with people all over the globe.” Today, her video games business is fully remote, with teams mainly clustered along the West Coast.

Removing geographical boundaries is also great news for diversity. WPP’s Rob Reilly, while working from home, has been able to connect with and mentor creative leaders from WPP’s businesses around the world, all via Zoom: “I believe that diverse creative leadership leads to the most disruptive ideas in the world, so reaching out like this is a business opportunity for us, and a growth opportunity for not only the work, but for our people too. It’s so easy to do this video thing now, you’re not having to fly anywhere. I actually think one-on-one connection has really gotten way deeper through video”.

Meanwhile, James Farrell at Amazon Studios was able to use his lockdown—time he would normally have spent travelling for work—in one-on-ones connecting with 150+ colleagues around the world, as opposed to only talking to people in his country or time zone.

The challenges of the pandemic (and the widespread social upheaval that followed it) have brought empathy to the fore, especially for leaders, according to Graham Taylor at Fifth Season: “You suddenly feel quite small. The pandemic was humbling. It’s pushing leaders to be honest with themselves and take responsibility for what they’ve messed up. We’re now much more intentional about the work we’re producing.”





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Larry Jackson

Amy makes the great point that remote working allows better democratization. If the ‘room’ is virtual, it’s no longer limited by size. “We can open up creative meetings or discussions to a wider number of teammates. So, my writers’ room might be six people, but since we’re meeting over Zoom anyway, we can invite the entire team in. Team members can participate, listen, or even just put the meeting on in the background while they work. People that wouldn’t normally be invited into that room now can be, which not only allows for a diversity of opinion but also opens up learning opportunities for the team.”

A clear benefit to working from home is that it’s popular with so many employees and is no barrier to efficiency. As Larry Jackson observed, during his time at Apple Music: ‘Everybody wants to work from home. We do so much efficiently, from where we are, that we’ve gotten really good at it. It’s been pretty remarkable to see what we’ve been able to do by working remotely.’”

For creative types, there’s no one-size-fits-all working solution. It’s been well-documented that creativity tends to peak for people in the early morning hours or just before bed, but it varies depending on the individual. The in-office dynamic has actually always been contrary to the natural flow of creativity, and flexible working is opening up new ways to get those creative juices flowing. Work flexibility can keep people engaged and inspired and could empower them to shape their days according to when and where they are most productive.



...but has the work suffered?

Despite the popularity and productivity of WFH, how has it impacted the quality of work? Graham has some interesting insights: “We’re definitely struggling to recapture the culture in the office. I think that creative processes are positively impacted by collisions between talented executives and creatives, with people interacting and bouncing ideas around. If you’re not in the office together, the mentorship and mobility of younger executives takes a hit. Right now, we’re all trying to learn a new sport.”

Rob agrees: “At WPP we want to be the most creative company in the world, so we’ve got a bar to hit. To reach that ambition [when working remotely] will require us to find new routes to collaboration that match the upsides and are as fulfilling as in-person, in the office.”

But many creatives have found that the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic forced people to innovate and create radical new solutions. According to Larry: “Everyone realized when we went inside a lot was expected of us. During lockdown I had to dig deep and push myself and my team to do things that were really new and innovative, out of our comfort zone. I think it drove us to do provocative work that really pushed the boundaries. And that was hugely inspiring to our teams.”

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Rob Reilly

Helping out the next generation

Most of the panel agreed that mentoring junior employees has been more challenging, given the shift to remote and hybrid working. Amy told us: “We really want to bring on people that are at a more junior level. But it’s tough to figure out how to bring in someone that needs more guidance and mentorship and not risk them feeling isolated at home. They might be drowning, and we wouldn’t necessarily know it.”

Rob thinks companies and leaders now need to be much more intentional with mentoring: “It’s up to us to be more available to younger or diverse employees who want to learn from us. You’ve got to put the time in and find an hour or two a week to really mentor people. I’ve had a very positive experience doing that, which I probably wouldn’t have done otherwise.”

Graham is also an advocate of intentionality in mentorship: “We’ve tried getting people to mentor people that aren’t in their departments or in their lanes. Because we have fewer ‘collisions’ in the office, junior execs have less access to the variety of people across the organization. We’d like people to start thinking about mentorship a little differently. Ultimately, you can learn lessons in all sorts of different areas: executive skills, critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills. Mentors can also help you get visibility in the wider organization.”



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Amy Hennig



Physical interaction still matters

Obviously, the switch to remote working simply couldn't have happened without essential tools like video chat, messaging and email. But the software isn't perfect and connecting on screen causes its own challenges. Graham puts it well: "I think empathy takes a hit if you don't spend time with people in person. You don't pick up all the nonverbal cues on zoom. You have to work extra hard to find ways to connect into people."

James agrees: "Creative decisions require discussion and negotiation, so having people physically around a table talking things through has always enabled a nice collaborative approach. When everything is virtual, those discussions can become much more heated, because the body language and the nuance can get lost. Getting back to at least the hybrid model, where people know they're going to be able to see a person face-to-face again in a few days, can bring the temperatures down a bit. People tend to collaborate better."

James is clear that you won't be able to 100% replicate the depth of physical interaction, especially when it comes to pitching: "I was in Lagos for 10 days last year for work, meeting as many people as possible as we look to expand our business there. That experience of shaking hands is not comparable to virtual meetings. If you want to win something, if you want to sign somebody up or deepen a relationship, you need to go and see them. And not just once, but multiple times. When you're up against a competitor who is trying to just connect with them on video chat, there is no substitute for bonds forged in person."





The hybrid balancing act

Even with people meeting occasionally in the office there are obstacles. Rob explains: “The challenge comes when half the people are in the office and half the people are not. For example, if I’m in the office here in New York, meeting with eight other C-suite people in London, there’s often meetings where I’m just looking at a wide conference room. If we can’t create a joyful, nurturing and meaningful experience for the people that are not in the office, I don’t think we’re going to be able to reach our ambition.”

Graham mentioned the importance of making the workplace a fun, dynamic and enjoyable place to be: “Build it and they will come”. That means evolving office culture so people feel FOMO when they’re not there and setting the expectation that if you want to move up, you need to show up.

Amy mentioned another potential risk of hybrid working: “Although we’re still mainly remote, as we start to move into more of a hybrid work situation the risk is that you start to introduce a ‘center / periphery hierarchy’. The people that come into the office, even if it’s just a few days a week, inevitably have a stronger in-person work relationship, which can create a sort of privilege center, even if they don’t mean it to. We really have to be vigorous in our efforts to not let that happen.”

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Rob Reilly



Trust-based leadership

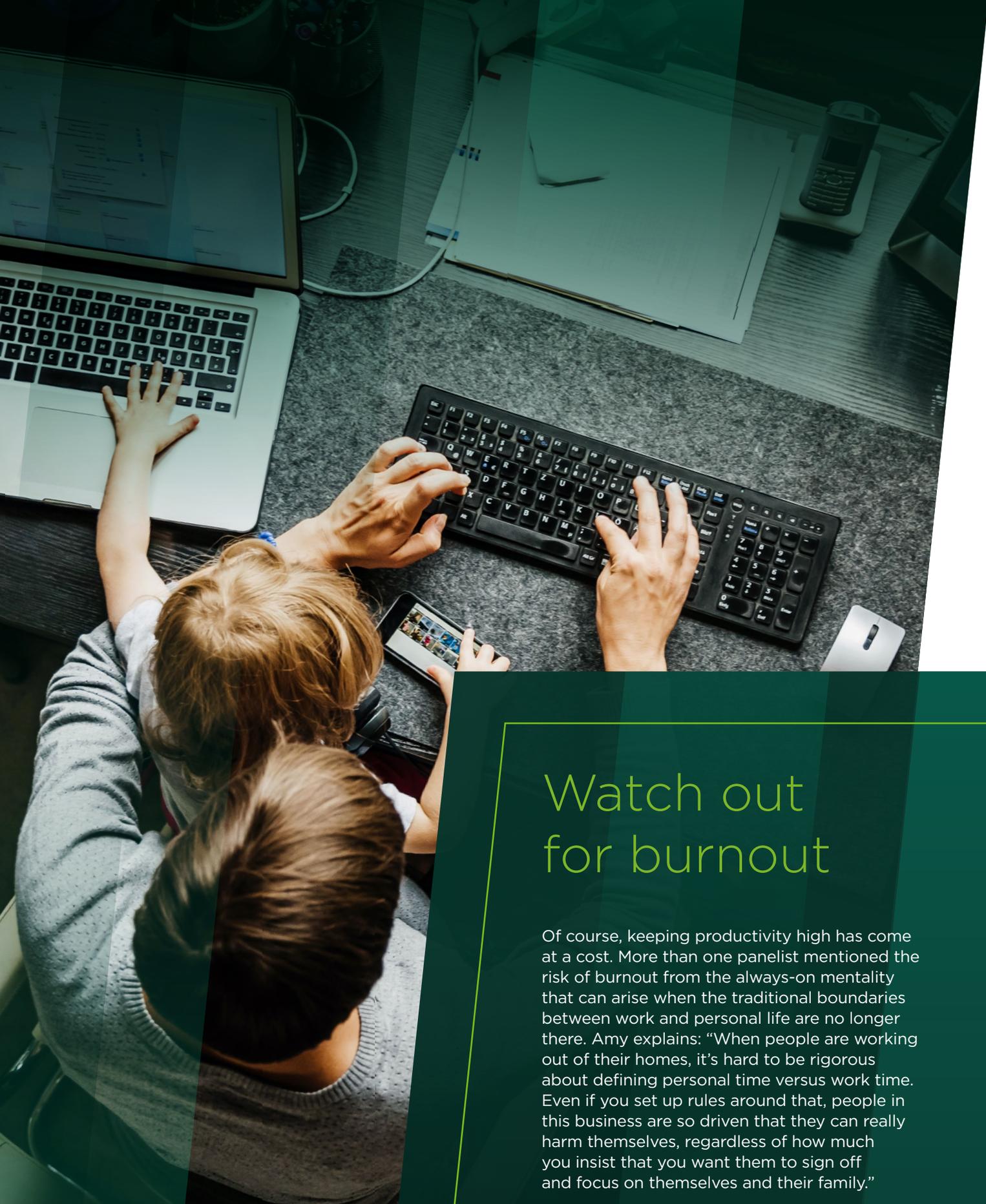
We were curious about the leadership processes and qualities our panel was finding effective in the remote-working context. For Amy, it's all about trust: "We've hired a lot of industry veterans who had a proven track record of being able to work autonomously and were independent thinkers. This aligned with our cultural goal of giving talented, experienced people clear objectives, and then trusting them to problem solve and get to solutions together. I don't believe in white-knuckle creative control. Instead, our messaging to the team is, 'we'll have regular check-ins and make sure you have the resources that you need, but we trust you to work autonomously.' Our people have found this incredibly liberating, creatively. In this sense, remote work reinforces the importance of trust."

Leading a remote team without micromanaging your talent means you'll need robust processes and guardrails to ensure no one gets left behind. And you'll need to make sure your technology is up to the task of making remote collaboration as seamless as possible.



“ Our people have found this incredibly liberating, creatively. In this sense, remote work reinforces the importance of trust.”

Amy Hennig



Watch out for burnout

Of course, keeping productivity high has come at a cost. More than one panelist mentioned the risk of burnout from the always-on mentality that can arise when the traditional boundaries between work and personal life are no longer there. Amy explains: “When people are working out of their homes, it’s hard to be rigorous about defining personal time versus work time. Even if you set up rules around that, people in this business are so driven that they can really harm themselves, regardless of how much you insist that you want them to sign off and focus on themselves and their family.”

Our view

The pressure to adopt flexible working models is here to stay. Creative organizations need to accept that, embrace it, and build a culture to support it. As we've heard from our panel, creative work can get done effectively – sometimes even more effectively – remotely. But while productivity is good, we've heard that culture, team dynamics and depth of relationships can suffer. Unfortunately, there's no one-size-fits-all solution.

Perhaps it's all about balance—toggling between the synchrony of being together and the asynchrony of being apart. But that doesn't happen by luck, hope, or chance. It's deliberate. As our firm's psychologists tell us, there are things that leaders can do to achieve higher or lower levels of synchrony in teams. When synchrony is strategically managed, it can help support empathy, collaboration, learning, and engagement.

Smart creative organizations must be deliberate and adaptable and build a culture to support the models they define for themselves, proactively experimenting with new ways of working until they find solutions that work for them and their people. This means building a world of clear expectations, frequent check-ins, continuous feedback, and set deadlines. Leaders that have the emotional intelligence to connect with people on different channels will be essential.



The creative leadership skills you need for the remote workplace



Understand and empathize with why employees might prefer to work from home.



Embrace the opportunities offered by remote working, rise to the challenge and drive innovation.



Set clear expectations and then trust employees to find solutions and get the work done.



Be intentional about mentoring (via zoom if necessary) and make it a company-wide policy to drive inclusivity for junior employees wherever they are.

Finding your place on the flexible-work spectrum

There's no one-size-fits-all for the future of work – especially within the creative industries. We expect organizations to forge ahead under a range of models, ranging from companies that encourage a full return to the office, to others which embrace remote work at scale, to everything in between. Each model has its pluses and minuses. To get the most out of any model, leaders will have to take several factors into consideration.





Fully in-person

Benefits



Energy and creative magic generated by physical collaboration.



Protect unique company culture.



Mentor, support and develop junior colleagues.

Challenges



Unpopular with some employees and potential employees.



Limits talent pool (and diversity) to geographical area.

Getting it right



Make the workplace an exciting and valuable place to be and build a strong office culture.



Provide clear policies and incentives, such as subsidized travel and in-office perks.



Meetings don't always have to be in the office - consider finding new and inspiring gathering places.



Hybrid (optional or fixed)

Benefits



Best of both worlds - if you get it right.

Challenges



People working at home feeling excluded.



Limits talent pool.



Could still end up with an empty office unless attendance is mandated.



Tech issues can hamper comfortable interaction.

Getting it right



Ensure gatherings are intentional, meaningful experiences designed to build trust, connection and do important collaborative work.



Leverage collaborative tools and technology and tighten up your processes.



Consider shifting from synchronous to asynchronous work, where work doesn't happen in meetings but independently on shared documents.



Be deliberate about mentoring, and consider more structured employee development and training programs.



Fully remote

Benefits



Access to a global, diverse talent pool.



Inspires innovation and new ways of thinking to overcome challenges.



Employees free to become “digital nomads” enabling access to cultural enrichment opportunities that can expand one’s thinking and inclusivity.



Better work / life balance.



Not limited by room capacity.

Challenges



Losing a sense of corporate culture and connectivity to colleagues.



Mentorship and supporting junior employees



Burnout / always-on mentality.



Time zones can limit hours of interaction.



Collaboration and communication are harder over video.

Getting it right



Be intentional with check-ins and Zoom mentoring.



Be clear with objectives, deliverables and transparency.



Mitigate against people disappearing in the system.

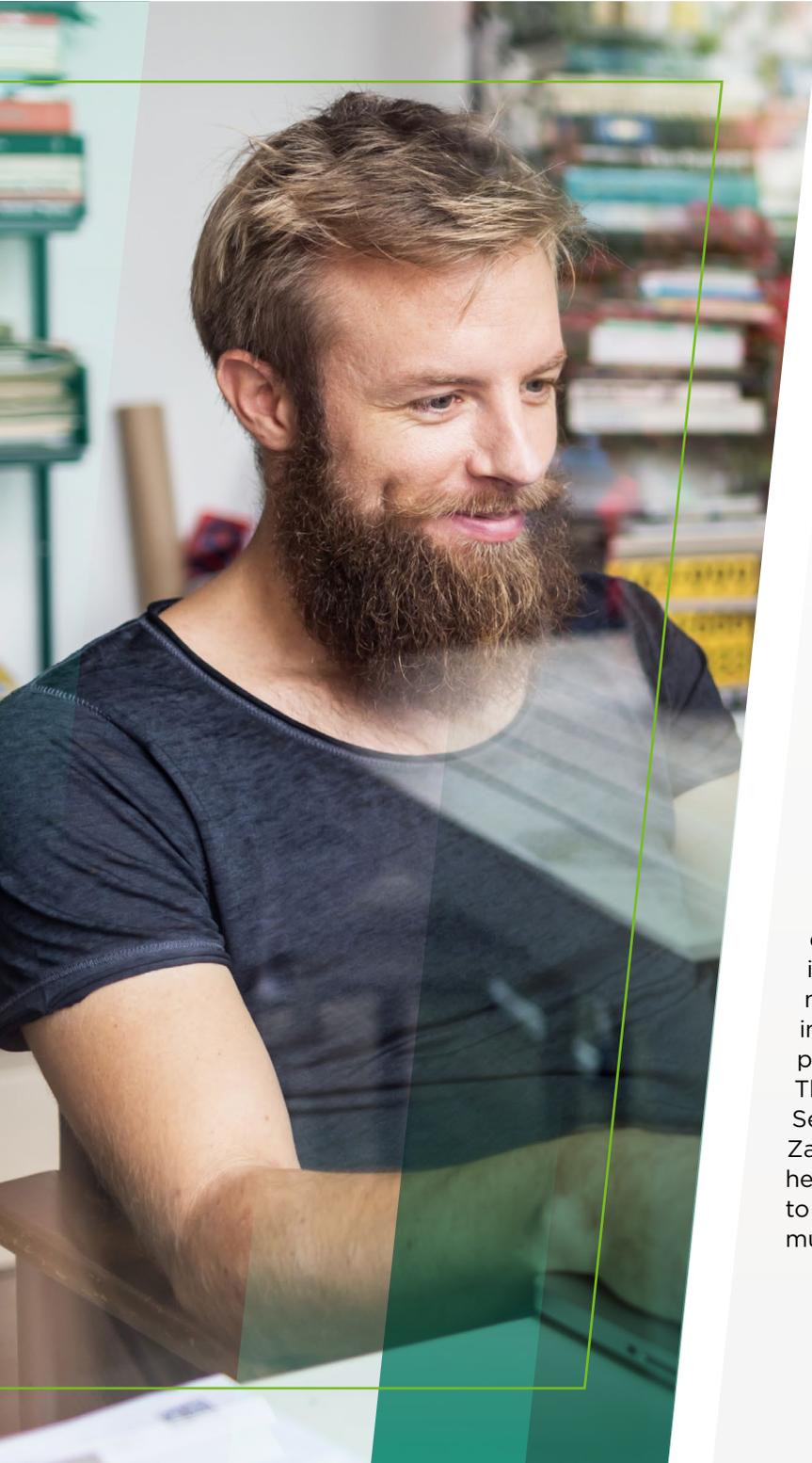


Still expect and plan regular face-to-face meet ups like team off-sites and social events.



Leverage technology to implement virtual employee development and training programs.

What's happening on the ground?



So far, there have been multiple approaches to work that have emerged in the post-pandemic era. Of the big names, Microsoft Corp. is choosing to go hybrid, although schedules having more than half the time spent away from the office will need managerial approval. Salesforce Inc.'s Slack is going digital-first and wants employees to spend a maximum of three days a week in the office.

Meanwhile, Airbnb has fully embraced remote working—unsurprising for a travel company—and is allowing its 6,000 employees to live and work anywhere in the world. Following the policy announcement by their CEO Brian Chesky, who believes that ‘the office as we know it is over’, Airbnb’s careers and jobs page saw a huge influx of visitors. Speaking in the Washington Post, he said: Ultimately, I don’t believe that CEOs can dictate how people work. The market will. The employees will. Flexibility will be the most important benefit after compensation.”

On the other end of the spectrum, Tesla’s CEO Elon Musk has taken a hardline stance against remote working, declaring it ‘no longer acceptable’ in a highly publicized leaked internal memo. Tesla employees must now be in the office for ‘a minimum’ of 40 hours per week or expect to lose their jobs. That’s great news for Amazon Web Services technical recruiting leader Zafar Choudhury, who has tweeted he’d be happy to bring them over to AWS, where remote working is much more acceptable.

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Korn Ferry is a global organisational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organisation structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers. Our 11,000 experts in more than 50 countries deliver on five core areas: Organisation Strategy, Assessment and Succession, Talent Acquisition, Leadership Development, and Total Rewards.