

# The future of work: Remote work in the emerging new normal

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## Abstract

*What HRM structures and schedules are most likely to characterize the post-pandemic period? This paper, taking a multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of the future of work and hybridized workforces, straddles the fields of HRM, business economics, and organizational behavior. It seeks to provide insights into the evolving post-pandemic's new normal. The gains from the vaccination efforts in the US, in particular, are leading to shifts from the pandemic's dismissal as a short-term phenomenon, to one that is now manageable. This paper, hence, analyzes the emerging trends and patterns that will most likely influence and shape the use of the human resource in companies, especially within the United States of America. It highlights the various discovered types, intensities, modalities, related to a range of worker types and work conditions associated with hybridized HRM, and the expected patterns and changes in employer-employee relationships likely to be maintained or expanded, that, informed by the Gratton framework of time and place. The paper maintains that not all work types are suitable for remote work. Additionally, certain gender biases are retained in the pandemic induced HRM hybrid models, while some are even reinforced. New work-life balance issues have also entered into work structuring and scheduling arrangements, with implications for the education attainment of the young, especially if, for example, hybrid education delivery becomes more widespread. The paper concludes with suggested research recommendations prompted by the pandemic's activated sectoral labor supply challenges.*

## 1. Introduction

Whether it is called long-distance working, *working from home* (WFH) (see Sawhney, 2021), telecommuting, *working from anywhere* (WFA) or *working from office* (WFO) (see Gratton, 2021), telework, or remote work; depending on who is the speaker, some might regard it as an aberration (K@W, 2020), while others see it as a revolution (see Neeley, 2021). Throughout the several waves of the pandemic, acceptance and adoption of variations of hybrid models of in-person and remote work by companies have become the norm. A remote work survey in 2021 reported that 82% of American-based companies were planning to implement indefinite WFH models, while 77% wanted to make WFH permanent (Simform, 2021). In the context of the waning of the pandemic, which forms the backcloth to the emerging new normal, a V-shaped economic recovery is seemingly gaining steam in the US economy, with an expectation of a near annual 6% GDP growth rate, after the pandemic-induced economic decline. Since the Biden Administration's rescue plan, the labor market has generally been positive, with the unemployment rate tracking down to 6.0 percent (BLS, 2021). Related background information suggests an inflation rate higher than the Federal Reserve's 2% target, with expectations of an increase, but no runaway inflation in the short- to medium-term period.

In terms of methodology, this paper has been assembled from many secondary sources. However, the information gathered and presented, intends the provision of some insights regarding an improvement in the understanding of emerging trends in, the rationale for the variations in hybrid work models in place and declarations to formally adopt or to extend what is already in place. In addition, it seeks to address the likelihood of the retention of elements of the various HRM models, going into the future, in their entirety or in combination, as influenced by the control of the pandemic.

As such, this paper examines some of the concepts associated with the hybrid models created or intended by various firms. This is covered in the upcoming section. Following this is a very brief presentation of the nature, range and plans for the adoption of the hybrid HR utilization model in various industries and economic sectors mainly in the US. The review is not based on a company list that claims to

be exhaustive nor comprehensive. The next section discusses some of the upsides and downsides of existing hybrid models. The paper concludes with some research recommendations regarding the road ahead.

## 2. Conceptual Framework: Understanding Workforce Hybridity

The forced decentralized approach to the use of HR or the hybridity models of HR utilization, display a range of workforce members working remotely and at home, informed by employer needs and experience with the pandemic. Retention of some elements of existing models is generally assumed. The current levels and the degree of the intensity of adoption are not. Therefore, hybridization represents a mix of in-person and remote workers in a workforce, working synchronously or asynchronously, lying at some intersection of time and place (see Gratton, 2021). If effectively executed it is argued, a hybrid future will redound on both the workers and their employers, allowing for a more purposeful work-life, greater flexibility, improved agility, and enhanced productivity. Increasingly, for some companies, however, a more formal adoption is regarded as a given. For example, and for certain businesses, culturally speaking, work-at-home Fridays can become the norm, but at the same time ensuring that one day in the workweek is set aside where staff can all be present in person (if necessary) within a certain time window. In this regard, a number of firms have taken concrete steps to plan for the formal adoption of the hybrid HRM model with the controlled reopening of the US economy (K@W, 2021; Neeley, 2021).

Gratton (2021) contends that conceptually, hybrid workforces as suggested earlier, can be designed in terms of *place* and *time*. The associated four-quadrant analytical framework places time on one axis, and place on the other. Here, place refers to the workforce being *place-constrained*, meaning, working in-person from the office (WFO, work-from-office workers, or WFOs) (see Choudhury et al., 2019). At the polar opposite end, the HR is *place-unconstrained* (WFA, work-from-anywhere workers, or WFAs) or teleworking. Regarding time, employees are more *time-constrained*, that is having to work with others, at the same time. Workers, too, can be *time unconstrained*. These are the ATWs (anytime workers). They could be working asynchronously at different times (working with others, but even in different time zones), or whenever they please, such as those in gigging work relationships (domestically or internationally), passing on semifinished work to others for completion in other time zones. For those who can work as part-time independent contractors, in particular, remote work offers the opportunity for international gigging. This especially allows for employers pre-pandemically and post-pandemically, to choose from a wider pool of talented workers from anywhere around the world (see Best, 2017).

Figure 1 below, adapted from the Gratton (2021) time and place framework, from O'Hara (2014), and from Sawhney (2021) takes a more focused labor utilization or employment perspective, to specifically isolate various worker types and characteristics, based on the working and contractual relationships between employers and employees, by firms forced to follow a more or less formal hybrid HRM employment strategy. It reclassifies workers as work-from-office workers, or WFO workers (WFOs), and work-from-anywhere workers, WFA workers (WFAs), with finer distinctions being made according to the times those workers are either expected or required to be at their jobs. Quadrant #1 in the figure, therefore, shows the traditional and largely pre-pandemic (9-to-5) FTWs (fixed-time workers), made up of regular workers who "report" to work (sometimes by logging in), as members of in-person teams, part-time, and gigging C-suite workers. It is noteworthy that gigging has moved into the C-suite, as some companies have been employing temporary and part-time workers at the C-suite level, sometimes showing up for three out of five days per workweek, even before the onset of the pandemic. This pattern is very likely to persist in the post-pandemic period, even as WFA workers (see Best 2017; Kalita, 2021).

Quadrant #2, following Gratton's constrained time but unconstrained place classification, points to working conditions for today's hybrid workers who complete 9-to-5 worktime schedules as fixed-time workers (FTWs), but working from anywhere, (sometimes referred to as WFH and WFA workers). These could be regular employees, part-time workers, and virtual teams on the regular payroll of companies. Quadrant #3 in the figure identifies the hybrid worker types that are unconstrained by time, but are constrained by place, as would be in the Gratton (2021) framework. Such workers are constrained to work at the office (WFO), but theoretically can work there at any time (anytime workers, or AWs). Worker types that belong in this group can include regular workers (employees with normal psychological contracts), in-person teams, part-time workers and gig workers. Finally, workers in Quadrant #4 would include

those workers who may be forced, or have elected to work anytime (anytime workers, or AWs) and from anywhere WFAs (work from anywhere) as found in the Gratton's unconstrained time and unconstrained place framework. In this group, one would expect to find virtual teams (domestic and international), some part-time and contract workers, independent contractors, and gig workers (domestic and especially international) such as Uber drivers.

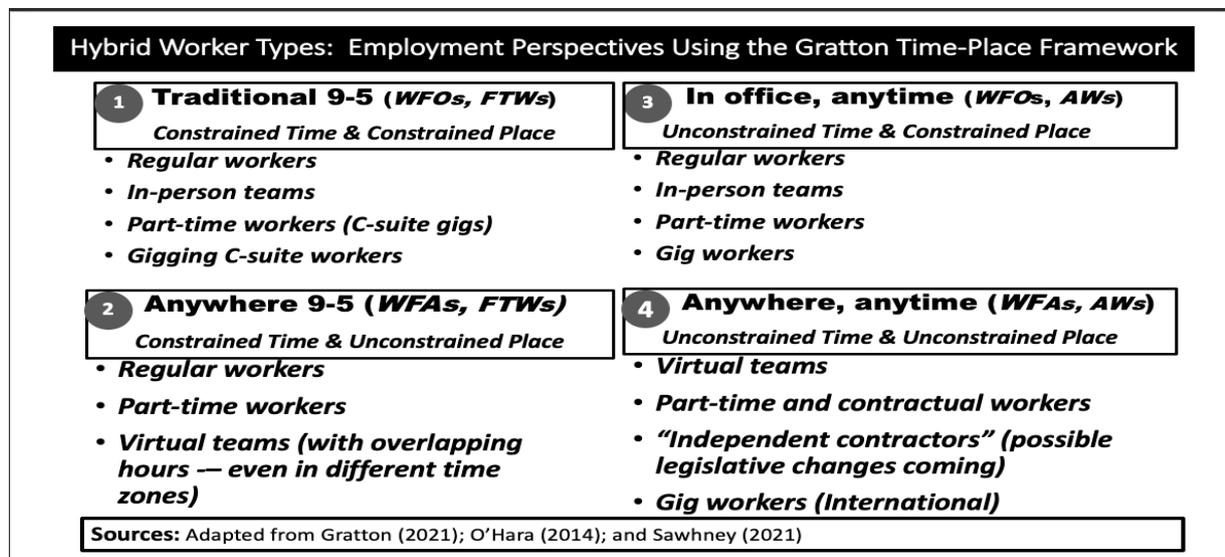


Figure 1: Sources: Adapted from Gratton (2021); O’Hara (2014); and Sawhney (2021)

In addition to the perspectives with respect to time and place, two other key factors operating in hybrid environments are: a) *hybridity positioning*, and b) *hybridity competence*. Mortensen & Haas (2021) maintain that key sources of power and influence, emerging from access to resources and different levels of visibility, depend on hybrid positioning. The authors also contend that with respect to *hybridity competence*, operating effectively in a hybrid environment becomes a source of power, as it is a skill in and of itself. Additionally, those with the ability to work in such a workforce, may well outperform those recognized as having “advantaged positions,” if in the low visibility parts of the workforce, they show others that they are trustworthy.

### 3. Some Factors Shaping the New Normal

A number of factors and developments for economic, technological, and for political and security reasons are expected to influence greatly, future hybrid work patterns domestically and around the world. Among them are cost savings on office space, the search for productivity increases, the need for agility and flexibility, and the sourcing of talent regarding skill shortages.

Savings Regarding Real Estate Expenditures. In keeping with the company policy change to retaining a significant number of WFH-type workers, a number of firms have been studying their use of real estate in terms of office space in a post-pandemic world. In this regard, Gartner (2021) in a recent survey, anticipates that some companies will be engaging in shared seating.

Table 1 below, without claims to being either exhaustive or comprehensive, attempts to capture some company initiatives, associated industries and/or the related economic sectors around the world. It shows those companies that are in the process of formal workforce hybridization, their plans, or those with intentions to retain some form of hybridization, with some notion of permanence. Nevertheless, the rate and type of adoption of formal hybridization of HRM will depend, in part, on the degree of national control of the spread, and success with population immunity.

Table 1: Some Companies in Transition to Formal Adoption of Hybridization		
<i>Company</i>	<i>Sector/Industry</i>	<i>Action/Activity/Outlook /Plans</i>
Google	Media	Advancing moves to bring back workers to the office
Facebook, Spotify, Microsoft, Salesforce, Twitter, and Slack	Social Media	Rolled out plans for a long-term remote workforce by the end just 2021 Thiefels (2021).
CDLP (Stokholm)	Fashion	Restructuring to locate 50% remote workers around the world
J P Morgan Chase	Banking	Considering a permanently remote workforce
UBS (Switzerland)	Wealth Management	One-third of employees to work remotely permanently
PSA Group (Europe)	Car (Auto)	Non-production staff to shift to remote work (agility strategy)
Box	Internet	15% of workforce post-pandemically on full-time basis
Coinbase	Finance	Anticipates 20-60% and more over time remote workers, with restrictions lifted
Nielson	Media	Staff complement of 3000 will work mostly from home
Nationwide Insurance	Insurance	To transition to remote workers at 16 of its 20 locations
Tata Consultancy Services (India)	Services	Anticipates 75% of its workforce to be working remotely by 2025
Sources: Neeley (2021), Thiefels (2021) and Clayton (2021)		

The Working from Home (WFH) Option. For O'Hara (2014) this includes the benefits of: a) flexibility, b) autonomy, and c) the comfort of working in one's own surroundings, among other things. However, there are upsides and downsides associated with extended periods using the WFH option. Sawhney (2021) maintains that some of the by-products of such work environments include monotony, social isolation and burnout. Granted the new hybrid forms with multi-located parts of a company's workforce, post-pandemic hybrid HRM is expected to undergo several changes. However, research shows that a work setting suitable for remote work has to be fairly independent, and at the same time, employees need to have the knowledge base to do their work well. In such situations, both the employers and employees stand to benefit from the job relationships (Choudhury et al., 2019; Mortensen & Haas, 2021).

Work Performance and Productivity Improvements. The change to greater work flexibility has had a positive impact on productivity, depending on the business type. Neeley (2021) for example, states that J P Morgan Chase experienced a three-fold increase in worker productivity from its traders working from home. Moss (2018) states that for working parents with children, job flexibility, where workers can choose the place and set their own working hours, (combined, WFA, and AWs situations in Quadrant #4 in Figure 1 above) have been found not only to increase gratitude, but also to improve job satisfaction, coupled with stress reduction. Here too, employees are able to experience cost savings with respect to commutes and childcare (Carucci, 2021). There is also the expectation of increased worker retention and motivation. The WFA (working from anywhere) remote work variant, too, has the potential to extend the careers of valued employees, encouraging them to remain with companies. By so doing, these older employees can pass on their organizational memory to younger workers, as the former move on to more favorable climatic areas in keeping with their health demands (Choudhury et al., 2019). Therefore, intergenerational mentoring remains a potentially positive holdover in the post-pandemic future.

#### 4. Remote Work in the New Normal: Some Potential Downsides

Work-Life Separation and Work-Life Balance. Given today's labor market conditions, at what levels might office workers, in particular, be willing to return to work in a post-pandemic world? In this regard, some studies have concluded that teleworking loses its appeal in winter. In addition, for workers with a preference for strict segmentation of work and life, work-life balance remains an important issue. This has special implications for the scheduling and structure of remote work. Perhaps as segments, 55% of persons in a recent study felt an inability to balance their work and home lives. For some workers, too, there is a preference for a return to work for three days per week. Others want the option of being at

home, at least one day during the workweek. However, pre-pandemic workplace gender and equity issues are likely to persist. Women, more than men, appear to have a preference to work from home. Yet, if managers continue to give preferences to those who they see, then women will correspondently pay a career price (see *The Economist*, 2021).

Teleworking can cut both ways. It must therefore be recognized, that one of the downsides of teleworking or working from home can also be productivity. Some workers in the current climate face an uphill battle to stay focused on tasks at hand, in addition to remaining highly motivated when home becomes the office or the workspace. For managers then, the challenge is to keep workers motivated and to monitor them from a distance. With WFH workers, the lack of co-worker proximity too, means that employees lose the benefits of the creative conversational exchanges that occur (say) at the water cooler, or along corridors, forfeiting potential serendipities. Even with the best streaming and conferencing media tools available on the market today, reportedly, it requires more assertive behavior on the part of some workers for them to remain mindful that some audience members are indeed part of the workforce. Therefore, those who work as teleworkers are very likely to suffer in the absence of facetime with others working under similar conditions with managers, reinforcing some of the negative influences on their promotion and their careers (see Morgan, 2021). For some, too, a sense of never being at the workplace can also translate into one of forever being at the workplace (Neeley, 2021; Tugan, 2020).

Burnout. Albeit, not peculiar to, or essentially tied to remote work *per se*, another downside associated with teleworking, is burnout. With or without a pandemic, burnout is a potential threat to work-life. For some occupations, the pandemic has increased the incidence of burnout. To compensate for some of the disadvantages of working remotely, some workers may engage in overcommitment resulting in burnout. If the incidence of burnout remains at, or goes beyond current levels going into the future, this must be addressed very seriously. Whereas research points to burnout as being a problem tilted towards the organization, more than being an employee's problem, it behooves all employees to engage in preventative steps to avoid it. Besides, recovery requires teasing out and addressing its components. Therefore, in the interest of recovery, researchers have identified three symptoms that may appear singly or in combination. Viewed as resources, the first is *exhaustion*, which is a reduction in mental or physical resources. A second can be *cynical detachment* which is described as a reduction in social connectedness. The third is a *reduced sense of efficacy* or an erosion of value for oneself. In the WFH environment, to recover from burnout, employees need to assess which of the resources have fallen sharply and return each to acceptable levels (Heng & Schabran, 2021; Neeley, 2021; Sawhney, 2021; Tugan, 2020). It follows therefore, that burnout will remain an expected characteristic of the workforce's new normal.

Teams and Teamwork. Deployment of a more formalized hybrid HRM model also affects teams and teamwork. One drawback relates to the allocation of responsibility for positive organizational outcomes. Current remote work arrangements if maintained, would see the persistence of the tendency to give greater credit for a collective output to those who are more visible by virtue of being there in the office. Hybrid settings, it is maintained, are also linked to power differentials created within teams (Mortensen & Haas, 2021).

Nevertheless, companies have always operated with teams, especially in the execution of high technology projects. Witness the participation of several companies, on a global scale, in the assembly of new models of aircraft, for example. It is of import to note too, that the disruption caused by the pandemic to the global medical supply chain has forced a re-examination of lean production strategy, bringing some elements of production back to workers in the US, with implications for employment, and labor cost. The skills gap, nevertheless, persists. The workforce conditions imposed on companies by the pandemic in many parts of the world have resulted in networks of individuals operating as virtual teams. Teams, however, have their own peculiar set of challenges. Whereas telework does have its positive effects, one of its drawbacks with respect to its use with teams going forward, can be its impact on trust and psychological safety. Persistence with workforces lacking in-person interaction can rob some employees of the confidence, that they can let their voices be heard without fear of humiliation and punishment with respect to work content especially (see Edmondson & Mortensen, 2021).

Taxation and Living Expenses. In the US, taxation levels differ from state to state. Work from anywhere or WFA as company policy, does permit employees to work from different counties or states as

a matter of choice, as individuals or as team members. The pandemic however, forced the decision on some workers to have their workplaces in different states of the US, while sheltering from less seriously COVID-19-affected cities in other states (see Choudhury et al., 2019). For some workers, the taxation implications regarding residence may have to be taken on board. Double residency may mean “double taxation” of a single income.

Using geographically dispersed teams as a strategy to get closer to their markets, Sun Micro Systems reportedly saved half a billion dollars, utilizing a voluntary virtual work program (Neeley, 2021). Even for those facing the hardships of the pandemic, remote work in some cases, could have translated to a lower cost of living, with the exception of price increases regarding certain products. Some employees, if they were forced to live in certain low-cost areas closer to parents, they could have realized a *real* salary increase, and at no financial cost to their employers (see Choudhury et al., 2019).

Telework and Education. Although not all of the damage may be attributed to remote teaching, however, its use in combination with other factors have been associated with negative outcomes for some students in the American school system. At least one large school district reported an increase, way above the norm, in the number of F grades usually awarded. In this regard, it might be said, that remote teaching as a work category, has been found not to be a perfect substitute for in-person delivery. The State of Connecticut witnessed, for example, “F” grades being returned at four times the normal rate (Parish, 2021). Yet, hybrid (in-person and streaming) delivery of education may---in the short term---be one of the characteristics of the new work norm in education.

## 5. Discussion

As suggested above, there exists a lingering mismatch in terms of the demand for labor and availability of certain skills that existed in certain sectors of the US economy even before the pandemic. This bottleneck will continue to exert pressure on the cost of labor. Certain companies have already adopted a policy of involvement with certain schools to train would-be employees to close the skills gap. The new normal may also witness employee departures for entirely new job types. Such action might just be coming from those who consider themselves to be working too hard under current conditions such as, those being paid less than a living wage. Witness McDonald’s recent wage increase response to its labor supply shortage. Current hybrid models, too, apparently remain very unfavorable to women with respect to careers (see The Economist, 2021). Yet, any near-term mitigation of some of the inherent biases against working mothers seems to depend on national vaccination efforts, addressing hesitancy, and the reopening of schools and restaurants, as they all appear to have some impact on the willingness of women to return to work in-person, as part of the workforce. On the other hand, some aspects of the short-term labor market shortages for some categories of workers may be a function of the absence of fair-market wages in some sectors, and not a COVID-19-induced fear of the in-person workplace as such.

## 6. Conclusion

Gains made in the vaccination efforts in the US, in particular, are leading some actors to shift their view of the pandemic as a short-term phenomenon, to one that is now manageable. The future of work, therefore, calls for increasing adaptation on the part of both managers and their employees, as HRM becomes more formally and strategically decentralized. Workers are expected to continue to work from the office (the WFOs) or from anywhere (WFAs), from the office (the 9-to-5s from the office, the WFOs), from home (the WFHs) and at any time (as ATWs) and from anywhere (the WFAs).

Generally speaking, blue-collar workers may not have too much choice regarding being either WFH or WFA employees, while white collar workers may continue to move into the gigging WFA economy. Some might engage in such part-time and remote work activity, just because it offers a source of supplementary income. Vaccination success and the termination of the unemployment insurance element of the stimulus package should mitigate some labor supply bottlenecks. Therefore, policies must be put into place to discourage vaccine hesitancy in the short term, on the part of those reluctant to return to their pre-pandemic in-person workplaces, because of safety and conditions of work issues. Recognition, too, must be given to some of the forces at play working against those who are less visible, or who will have chosen the WFH option. This may be overcome with trust. Research efforts, therefore, need to discover the extent to which the quality of work-life has changed, since the need for greater recognition of non-work

issues like family and parenting entered into the picture, with respect to structuring and scheduling in today's hybrid workforce models. It follows then, that those companies that have not addressed most of the remote work issues, however, will face increasingly, labor market forces and calls regarding agility, skill scarcity, flexibility, and then the new needs of psychological safety regarding WFH and WFA workers, in particular. Companies too, will have to revisit and modify dynamically, their HRM policies. Future research regarding remote work will also have to address the challenges of the new work-life balance issues. These would involve families, elderly parents and school-age children, where some schools may have adopted short-term, or even long-term, hybrid teaching modalities. Research is also needed regarding the movement of different worker types along the time and place options selected, with respect to specific occupations and industries. Then, there is too, the need to study the ramifications of the wage price adjustments on the cost of labor, as led by Amazon and McDonald's on the broader demand for labor. Last, but not least, is the need to study the role of the increasing incorporation of AI into decision making, man-machine work teams in the production of goods and services regarding supply chain operations and the impact of the above on HRM, in an increasingly technology-driven and competitive global marketplace.

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