Unlocking the hybrid working opportunity

Using technology to keep team members connected and engaged in a hybrid working environment

A report by glisser

September 2021
“I expect the pandemic has changed how we work at AT&T permanently forever.”

John Stankey, CEO of AT&T
Introduction: **Hybrid working is happening**

For the average desk-based worker, it’s hard to think of a more universally tumultuous period than the one from which the world is currently emerging.

The pandemic has impacted practically every facet of working life. But, more than that, it has fundamentally changed how most of us think about work.

Before the arrival of Covid-19, most knowledge workers constructed their working lives in terms of time spent in the office versus time spent working remotely – if indeed they were allowed to work remotely in the first place.

Fast-forward 18 months, and the distinction is altogether blurrier, giving rise to the concept of ‘hybrid working’ – a borderless way of working, empowered by technology, in which desk-based workers alternate between working environments according to need and preference.

The difference between the old world of remote working and the emerging hybrid reality of today is the flexibility it affords employees to make smarter choices about how their time is structured. Work from home days no longer need to be booked in advance or signed off with line managers. Employees no longer need to be subjected to endless office distractions when occupied with individual ‘focus work’. Meetings no longer require every person to be physically present.

In many ways, the concept of hybrid working rests upon a fundamental change in how desk-based workers are perceived. The pandemic has shown business leaders that they can trust employees to work effectively outside of the office; that in many cases, productivity is maintained or even enhanced by working remotely, particularly when employees no longer have to commute long distances daily. Thanks to this, hybrid working has also provided an unexpected opening for organisations seeking to improve their sustainability credentials. It is allowing these companies to dramatically reduce the need for business travel, one of the most significant contributors to the corporate carbon footprint.

What began as an enforced way of working – due to Covid restrictions, capacity limits and social distancing in offices, confusion over vaccine policies, employee apprehension, and much more besides – has become a desirable organisational norm for a growing contingent of businesses.

**Size is no barrier... and neither is industry sector**

According to McKinsey, nine out of ten global organisations will combine remote and on-site working in the post-Covid world. While the practical realities of day-to-day hybrid working are still a long way from being fully defined, it’s a working model currently desired by three-quarters of UK employees.

And what is perhaps most surprising about the shift towards hybrid working is that it is now being promoted by some of the world’s largest companies. When asked by CRN if remote working would continue in a post-Covid world, Michael Dell, founder of Dell Technologies, replied, “Yes, it’s absolutely here to stay.”

This is not simply a Silicon Valley phenomenon. According to Mark Purcell, CIO at FTSE-listed pest control giant Rentokil Initial, “We’re empowering our employees to build more flexibility into their workdays as we head into a hybrid workplace model in many parts of the company.”

Similarly, the following quote from David Sleath, CEO of logistics business Sergo, another FTSE-listed company, typifies the position of large multinationals regarding hybrid working, both in the UK and the US: “In order to support our ambition to be a more inclusive and diverse business, we have already announced a new agile working policy to give our staff the flexibility to choose where they work. In practice, I envisage most of our people working from the office around three days a week and remotely – whether at home or at our sites - for the remaining days.”

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1. NEBR: *Why working from home will stick*, July 2021
2. McKinsey: *What executives are saying about the future of hybrid work*, July 2021
3. YuLife survey, July 2021
4. CRN, March 2021
5. Google Workspace press release, March 2021
6. Evening Standard, March 2021
Introduction: **Hybrid working is happening**

**Hybrid working across FTSE and Fortune 100 companies**

To demonstrate just how far and wide the hybrid working movement has grown, we undertook desk research into some of the world’s biggest companies to determine their current position on returning to the office post-Covid and assess their enthusiasm for embracing hybrid working.

We examined public statements and website materials pertaining to US Fortune 100 companies and the top 50 companies in the FTSE 100 by market capitalisation (excluding any already included in the Fortune 100 list).

The results were stark. Of the 150 companies we examined, two thirds (66%) were on record advocating some form of hybrid working for their employees, compared to just 6% that had publicly stated their opposition for non-office-based working.

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The very idea of flexible, borderless hybrid working dictates that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach. Across these global giants, the day-to-day reality of hybrid working is going to look very different. It may even be the case that some business leaders are paying lip service to hybrid working while secretly setting their sights on re-establishing old norms at the earliest opportunity.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that some form of hybrid working is already happening amongst a sizeable majority of blue chip companies, with many of these businesses looking to permanently embrace this working model for some or all of their desk-based workers. The question is: how are they getting on?

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7 Fortune 100: The top 100 companies in the US, and a subset of the Fortune 500, a list of the 500 largest US public and privately held companies published by Fortune magazine.

8 FTSE 100: The 100 companies listed on the London Stock Exchange with the highest market capitalisation.
“A hybrid model is more complicated than a fully remote one. At scale, using it will be an unprecedented event in which all kinds of norms that have been accepted practice for decades will be put to the test. Leaders are a long way from knowing how it will work.”

McKinsey
Businesses are struggling to move from concept to hybrid working reality

Commenting on his plans for office reopening, Mark Read, chief executive of advertising company WPP, recently explained that: “We will never go back to working in the way we did before and our people will work more flexibly, in our offices, with our clients and from home.”

It’s the perfect articulation of the hybrid working ideal, a vision repeated by many other CEOs on both sides of the Atlantic. But for the vast majority of organisations, realising this vision on a practical, operational and logistical level is proving to be quite a challenge.

The problem is that even when organisations are seemingly clear about what they expect of their knowledge workers, the practicalities of their chosen approach can still be extremely difficult to nail down. For example, when a business mandates that its hybrid workforces spend three days in the office and two days remote working per week, it immediately throws up problematic questions. Which teams come in on which days? Does everyone have to stick to the same days each week?

On the one hand, attempting to systematise hybrid working runs the risk of undermining its purpose and the advantages it brings. On the other, failing to establish clear hybrid working processes risks ushering in confusion and chaos, with team members never in the right place at the right time.

Creating an employee-centric strategy

There’s also the significant issue of balancing management’s priorities with the wants and needs of the wider workforce. As McKinsey notes, “Employers are ready to get back to significant in-person presence. Employees aren’t. The disconnect is deeper than most employers believe, and a spike in attrition and disengagement may be imminent.”

An organisation might attempt to transition to hybrid working. However, if those at the top still give precedence to the people who show up in person, the upshot could be the creation of a two-tier workforce or, if the company has scaled back their real estate, an all-out turf war for office desks.

Writing for Harvard Business Review, leadership consultant Sue Bingham explains that, “Employers must get serious about adapting to employees’ needs by soliciting their input along the way.” This point is crucial – hybrid working will only be embraced if it enriches employees’ lives. The majority of desk-based professionals have spent the past 18 months proving that they can work effectively from their homes. They don’t need a compelling reason to continue working in this manner; they need a compelling reason why they should divide their time between their home and the office.

Working without a blueprint

Bingham goes on to claim that, “Time will tell which businesses will succeed with their hybrid structures and which won’t, and because we as a society tend to look toward successful companies to emulate their processes, market and business trends will force continued attention to the success of a given approach.”

Right now, the issue facing the two-thirds of FTSE-listed and Fortune 100 companies in favour of hybrid working is the lack of a clear blueprint or defined structure. As McKinsey points out, “The question of how many days in the office per week are best is the most obvious one to answer, but it isn’t the only question, and it may not even be the right one to answer first.”
“CIOs must rethink concepts like communication, training and development and knowledge exchange with digital workplace tools in mind as an integral component of how work is done.”

Gartner: Four Ways for CIOs to Implement Hybrid Working in 2021
Technology is key to unlocking the hybrid opportunity

In essence, the challenge facing organisations looking to implement hybrid working is one of tangibility – how to make hybrid working work in practice.

And while defining the days in or out of the office doesn’t appear to solve this tangibility challenge, determining the right technology to underpin hybrid working looks like a much more fruitful first step for businesses to take.

This is because, like remote working before it, hybrid working cannot possibly work without the right technology in place.

Without access to conferencing technology, all meetings would have been cancelled during the Covid lockdowns. Without messaging and collaboration tools, group projects – from software development to financial services – would have been nigh on impossible to continue through the pandemic.

With hybrid working, two further technology challenges are added to the mix – unification and engagement. Firstly, the technology has to unify the working experience for all employees, irrespective of where they’re working. For example, if a spontaneous brainstorming session has been organised in the office, are the remote-based team members still able to join in and participate?

Secondly, the technology has to engage everyone who isn’t there in person – and keep them engaged. One key takeaway from the mass remote working of the past 18 months is just how difficult it is to sustain people's attention indefinitely through a computer screen, and non-office based workers are always a click away from the exit.

No more stop-gap solutions

When considering the requirements for effective hybrid working through this lens, it's evident that many of the technology tools businesses have relied on throughout the pandemic fall short of what's needed. In truth, some of these tools did not deliver effective remote working solutions in the first place – they were simply the first available option at a time of crisis.

Video conferencing is an excellent example of this – basic technologies such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams demonstrated their usefulness in connecting small groups of 2-4 people in informal settings, but their limitations were exposed when used within a formal meeting context, for virtual events, or situations requiring team-wide participation and engagement. As Jamie Dimon, the outspoken CEO of JPMorgan Chase – and one of the most vocal advocates for returning to the office – has explained, “Most [of our] professionals learn their job through an apprenticeship model, which is almost impossible to replicate in the Zoom world.”

Dimon’s concern is that, as a result of these technological limitations, long-term hybrid working might undermine the character and culture of his business. But what if there was a better technology solution available to large organisations?
“We see a hybrid future of work... This has unlocked tremendous productivity and flexibility in the Unilever team.”

- Alan Jope, CEO of Unilever
Making every hybrid meeting an event worth showing up for

In fact, a number of large organisations are finding that the solution to this problem of engagement lies in an unlikely source – their meetings and event technology platform.

Such technology platforms aim to replicate the core components of an in-person event in the digital domain. From virtual lobbies to auditoriums and breakout rooms, helpdesks and sponsors’ stands to downloadable press packs and marketing collateral, the idea is to give online attendees the same sort of experience that they would expect when attending a physical event.

Just a few years ago, event technology barely existed as a category – let alone a category now worth almost $100bn\(^{13}\). However, at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of company events were hastily ported over to the online world as businesses attempted to prevent the wheels from falling off their customer, partner, employee and investor engagement activities. It was a mass migration to virtual that quickly propelled the event technology industry from relative obscurity to mainstream adoption.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the growth in event technology adoption is its apparent versatility. Once businesses have an event technology platform in place, they’re suddenly finding all manner of additional uses for it, above and beyond their keystone corporate events – from hosting daily team catch-ups to running learning and development programmes. In this use case, the event technology platform serves as a kind of all-purpose virtual venue, with large organisations extending their number of user licenses well beyond the events planning team to enable other departments to enjoy the benefits. It even has the added benefit of allowing organisations to cut down on environmentally-unfriendly business travel by hosting more of their internal and external events and meetings either fully or partially online.

**From hybrid events to hybrid working**

Most event technology providers have been preparing for the post-Covid reopening of society by adapting their platforms to support ‘hybrid events’. This means providing the option for both in-person or online attendance at the same event, ideal for a world in which people spend less time in the office and are less willing or able to travel far for work purposes.

The most versatile technologies can actually unify the event experience for in-person and online attendees – so that everyone gets the same experience and the same benefits from the event, irrespective of how they’re choosing to attend. And it is precisely because of this capability that event technology is now emerging as a surprise frontrunner in the race to solve the technology challenges of hybrid working.

With the right technology, businesses can operate hybrid meeting spaces that are available across the entire organisation on an ongoing basis. Some platforms even allow for total customisation, meaning that the hybrid spaces reflect the branding and general look and feel of an organisation’s physical real estate. It’s a far cry from the unbranded, limited functionality of basic video conferencing, and a breakthrough moment as far as hybrid working is concerned.

\(^{13}\) Grand View Research, July 2021
Making every hybrid meeting an event worth showing up for

Every day is an event

One of the reasons why event technology is proving so attractive as a solution for hybrid working is the mindset behind it. Events build brands, reinforce culture, educate and create affinity. They represent a unique way to engage an audience. Great events are eagerly anticipated and savoured for a long time afterwards. The most powerful event content can genuinely change the lives of attendees – empowering people to do better, go further and achieve more.

This mindset can also be applied to everyday hybrid working as an antidote to some of the current remote working practices that continue to disappoint employee and organisational expectations. For example, much has been made of the concept of Zoom Fatigue, the feeling of exhaustion caused by spending long periods on video conferencing. But the reality for millions of employees is far worse because they’re being asked to use technology designed purely to connect people, not to engage them.

Practically all businesses have struggled to deliver a positive, consistent attendee experience using the current crop of remote working tools, whether due to technology and connectivity issues, problems with meeting/session formats, or difficulties encouraging participation, averting desk-based distractions and preventing exhaustion and zoning-out.

In contrast, using powerful event technology, every meeting, team gathering, brainstorm, or customer presentation becomes an ‘event’ in its own right.

It’s a far more audience-centric approach to everyday hybrid working, prioritising employee engagement and the need to involve and excite attendees, whatever the nature of the ‘event’, driving participation and delivering value for those in the room AND those at their desks.

The sustainability gain

Analysts who have spent time calculating the carbon footprints of in-person versus virtual events, have found consistently that online events have a smaller footprint, even when conservatively over-estimating the carbon emissions from digital communication technology.

For example, the CO2e emissions are around 160g per hour for video conferencing and 36g per hour for streaming videos. That means that over a three-day event, a participant’s emissions move from a potential 2.52 tonnes (the equivalent of a flight from Asia to the UK) to 4.8kg CO2e, which is a 99.8% emissions reduction.

This research focused predominantly on ‘big ticket’ events and conferences attended by thousands of people from around the world. In addition to this, however, many companies have, for many years, routinely flown their employees from country to country for far smaller events, training sessions, or even routine meetings.

This culture of prioritising face-to-face interaction at all costs has had devastating environmental consequences, and it has taken the pandemic to put the brakes on the practice and allow organisations to rethink their priorities.

Now, with a hybrid approach, companies can host a compelling in-person event or meeting for local attendees, while allowing those who can’t – or prefer not to – travel, to attend online. It’s a more logical way to meet employees’ preferences and balance the need for in-person experiences with the costs and sustainability concerns of too much travel.
“We have an opportunity to combine the best of how we operated pre-Covid, with everything we’ve learned over the last year.”

Alison Rose, Chief Executive of NatWest
Prioritising engagement, wherever people are located

By far and away the most significant challenge when running a virtual or hybrid event is the issue of audience engagement, and the same will be true when it comes to hybrid working.

Business leaders know this already because they’ve experienced challenges engaging their team members while working 100% remotely through the pandemic – in the all-hands meeting that has suddenly felt flat and low-energy; in the virtual end-of-year party that has petered out after an hour rather than building to a heady climax.

As Alison Rose, chief executive of the UK bank NatWest, commented at the launch of her company’s ‘ways of working’ framework, “I would say that we’ve busted the myth that jobs need to be done in a certain way… [We now have] an opportunity to combine the best of how we operated pre-Covid, with everything we’ve learned over the last year.”

For all of the advantages of affording staff more flexibility with their work, an engaging working environment is essential for maintaining the cultural fabric of an organisation. During the pandemic, many businesses were forced to make do with whatever technology was closest to hand and forgo the cultivation of an engaging working environment in favour of keeping the ship afloat – the core business of getting things done. Employees understood this trade-off; indeed, most were happy that they still had jobs.

However, while 100% remote working meant everyone was in the same boat, hybrid working brings the fear of missing out into sharp focus. Not everyone can be in the physical working environment at the same time. Hence, the shift towards permanent hybrid working runs the risk of breeding disengagement and dissatisfaction if the practical reality is that employees feel left out, isolated and marginalised whenever they’re outside of the physical office.

The tools to engage from anywhere

One of the reasons why event technology is the key to unlocking hybrid working within large organisations is its ability to solve this engagement challenge. The very best event technology platforms offer a suite of tools to help hosts and organisers create a more immersive experience. For example, they can allow presenters to build engagement – from tests and quizzes to polls, games and social integration – directly into presentations.

Meeting hosts can also upload their content into the platform more seamlessly and organically, rather than having to resort to awkward screen-sharing. The upshot is that every attendee experiences the content in its intended format, irrespective of how they’re attending, and everyone has the same ability to get involved.

While these tools were built with large scale company events in mind, it’s easy to picture how they can be used within a day-to-day hybrid working context to enliven a meeting, run a brainstorm, or ensure that everyone feels able to contribute.
Prioritising engagement, wherever people are located

Equal value for all attendees

The caveat here is that, to truly enable hybrid working, attendance for these meetings has to be widely available to every relevant team member and cannot be predicated on certain people being in the office on a given day.

One of the goals of hybrid working is to allow business leaders to make decisions more quickly, without having to wait for certain key employees to be physically present in the workplace. In the case of company meetings, online attendees have to be perceived and treated equally to those in the room (with technology that makes this possible), otherwise leaders will start defaulting to old habits, delaying meetings until the right people are physically in the room, or asking people to abandon their hybrid working schedules.

Monitoring the effectiveness of hybrid working

The other aspect of event technology that could come in handy when seeking to engage hybrid workers is data analysis and insight. These platforms have been designed to track attendees throughout their event journey, assessing their sentiment and interaction levels and generating real-time insights into event effectiveness, engagement and overall performance.

Within a hybrid working context, such insights could provide much-needed data on how different day-to-day events and meetings are performing and where tweaks may be necessary to ensure everyone enjoys the same consistent, high-quality hybrid work experience.

It’s also worth acknowledging that not every team interaction needs to be formally hosted on an event tech platform in order for hybrid working to be effective. Basic video conferencing tools still suffice for basic person-to-person interactions. Popular collaboration technologies like Slack and Teams offer valuable real-time problem-solving and interaction capabilities that millions of employees benefit from each day.

There’s a need for businesses to take time to define the appropriate use cases for each technology involved in hybrid working. It’s no different to the meeting room systems in physical offices. Two team colleagues looking to quickly sit down together probably won’t book the board room for their catch-up. By first establishing what type of technology is appropriate for each formal or informal company meeting and event, it’ll be far easier to monitor how the technologies are actually performing.
“Events and meetings that are hosted via technology providers invariably carry data governance concerns, many of which have been overlooked in the rush to digitise during the past year.”

Vanessa Lovatt, Chief Evangelist at Glisser
Protecting privacy and intellectual property in the hybrid working world

When evaluating new technology, one of the primary focal points for every multinational business is its security/privacy credentials. These organisations may require thousands of employees to use the technology on a daily basis; they often operate in heavily regulated industries; and they simply cannot afford to make compromises when it comes to their data and intellectual property.

The sheer volume of high-profile breaches reported over the past five years has skyrocketed data security to the top of the corporate agenda. However, one area that’s not always given the same level of attention is how the data is being accessed and used by the technology providers themselves.

In the case of event technology platforms, this is an essential consideration. There’s been much talk amongst those in the exhibitions and events industry about the attendee data captured by these platforms and what happens to it. For example, event technology provider Swapcard recently admitted that it does not delete any attendee data unless the individual requests it, and it automatically co-owns all content shared via its platform. From the provider’s perspective, this is quite an attractive model for any AI-driven platform. The more data the provider receives, the better its event-recommendation algorithms become. From a corporate perspective, however, this approach won’t wash for organisation-wide day-to-day usage.

No right-minded organisation would have agreed to this type of policy for a wholly-owned corporate event back in the days when events were in-person only. There is no good reason why they should agree now, particularly not if they’re looking to host dozens or even hundreds of events, meetings and gatherings via their event technology platform.

And yet, a worrying number of event technology providers operate similar policies, leaving notable holes in their T&Cs that allow them the opportunity to market to all platform ‘attendees’ (and even share their data with other event organisers), not to mention hoovering up all content shared within each event, irrespective of whether the speaker/organiser has deemed it confidential.

Like many other aspects of hybrid working, companies must understand the trade-offs involved, and data privacy is no exception.

Demonstrating a security-conscious culture

Returning to the thorny issue of security, one of the challenges with any emerging technology is that platforms can spring to prominence without any significant exposure to external scrutiny.

That’s not to say that providers are failing to consider the need to secure their technology; rather, that security is not always the top priority from the outset. Indeed, the prevailing technology culture of the past decade – ‘move fast and break things’ – has not always been conducive to thorough and rigorous security analysis.

As soon as a new technology becomes widely adopted, cybercriminals and hackers start to pay attention. Hence why the plethora of Zoom security issues we know about today only began to surface during the pandemic as the platform rose to prominence, despite it being almost eight years since Zoom first hit the market.

This is a serious concern for any organisation considering adopting event technology as the lynchpin of its hybrid working strategy. Many of the leading providers have only been in existence for a couple of years; their platforms are still in their infancy and yet have snowballed from just a handful of users to millions of customers since the onset of Covid-19.

So before they roll out third-party event technology, every business needs to check that the chosen provider is ISO27001 certified – or equivalent. This type of security framework goes beyond the bare minimum technical requirements to consider the entire culture of the provider: how they handle and store data, how they consider security within day-to-day processes, what sort of employee education and training they provide.

Given that day-to-day users are likely to be customers, employees, key partners and stakeholders, it’s in every organisation’s interests to get their head around these emerging security and privacy issues and determine a better strategy for keeping their intellectual property and attendee data safe and secure.
“We have made the decision to embrace a hybrid working model and offer much more flexibility to our staff in the future. This reflects our belief that, very simply, people who like what they do, do it better.”

Milena Mondini de Focatiis, Group CEO at Admiral Group
Making the right hybrid working choices

Hybrid working is not simply a post-Covid pipedream. It's financial services provider Citi deciding that, “Colleagues will work in the office at least three days per week and from home up to two days per week. This is not just a scheduling exercise.” It's global insurer AXA launching a global hybrid working strategy because, “Some 90% of colleagues have said they wish to increase the amount they work remotely in future.”

Hybrid working is a firm commitment from some of the world’s biggest businesses to do things differently. Two-thirds of the FTSE and Fortune firms we researched have voiced their support for hybrid working since the start of 2020. Employees will be looking to them to deliver on their promises and turn visions and frameworks into functional, productive, engaging day-to-day hybrid working environments.

Choosing the right technology to support hybrid working is every bit as important as defining the hybrid working policy itself. It really is the key to unlocking the hybrid opportunity. Conversely, without the right tools in place, hybrid working cannot hope to succeed. Events technology may have emerged as a leading candidate to support organisation-wide hybrid working, but not every event technology platform is well-suited to the task. Business leaders must evaluate their options carefully and prioritise the technologies that afford them the most flexibility and control. They cannot afford to have their hybrid working strategy curtailed by the limitations of the technology they have chosen.

As the pandemic starts to recede, this is the moment for organisations to take decisive action around hybrid working. The right technology platforms can play a crucial role in unlocking hybrid working within large organisations and keeping employees engaged... wherever they’re located.

About Glisser

Glisser is an award-winning tech platform powering unique company event experiences, anywhere. Clients include KPMG, Informa, Pfizer, Facebook and Uber.

Glisser’s SaaS technology platform enables companies to power unique and engaging event experiences for customers, partners, investors and employees, face-to-face, online, and in-between, with livestreaming video content, audience engagement features to improve the delegate experience, and powerful event analytics, all the while maintaining topflight security protocols.

Its best-in-class virtual, in-person and hybrid event tools gives event planners the power to wow and make every event a memorable one.

And while ambition counts, size doesn’t. Glisser believes that every company should be able to deliver its dream event, whether it’s a highly focused interactive training session or communicating to 150,000 attendees spread across the globe.

15 The future of work at Citi, March 2021
16 AXA deploys its smart working strategy worldwide, January 2021