

Future office workplace and hybrid working after COVID-19

Lessons from MBE course Research Methods 2 – Case studies

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Introduction

Many companies are planning to shift to flexible workspaces and hybrid working after COVID-19. Positive experiences with remote work during the pandemic gave them new ideas about how to reduce the overall space they need and bring fewer workers into offices each day. However, they struggle what hybrid working should look like and what kind of facilities are required to support it. Hybrid working combines some remote work with work in an office.

In the **MBE Research Methods 2** course, students held online in-depth interviews with office workers about how COVID-19 measures, taken in the office environment, influenced their functioning and wellbeing, and how they coped with these changes. In October 2020, students held the first round of interviews with 26 office employees in three different organizations. In March 2021, a second round of interviews was done amongst 16 interviewees. Again these interviewees worked for three different organizations. Students analysed the interview data using Atlas TI. The research took an interpretive approach. Students learned to see the world through the eyes of their interviewees. Based on the interviews, lessons were learned about the future office workplace and hybrid working after COVID-19.

The research was performed in close collaboration with Jolanda Tichelaar of HeyDay facility management. Jolanda provided the interviewees and shared her knowledge on future workspaces in an online lecture. The students were guided by Jelle Koolwijk (Tu Delft, MBE) and Clarine van Oel (Tu Delft, MBE) in their case study research.

On this poster, the lessons learned for the Future office workplace and hybrid working after COVID-19 are presented.

Remote work depends on the mix of activities

The opportunity for remote work depends on the mix of activities an office worker has to perform, and depends on the interpersonal, physical and spatial context an occupation requires.

Some jobs require specific facilities, such as high performance computers, high speed internet or machinery, and must be done on a location that provides access to these facilities. Other jobs require collaborating with others, such as urban design meetings which people are not able to perform online (yet). Some jobs require specific workspace configurations, such as small cells where someone can make online calls or large meeting rooms that can accommodate both physical and online attendees. Finally, some jobs require colleagues to be near just to be able to talk about experiences and unwind after some hefty situation.

In contrast, there are also activities that can be done remotely. Many office workers say they are more effective when they have to process information, such as writing a report. Other activities that have a high potential for remote work are attending an online meeting or following a lecture.

Most office jobs are a mix of activities that can be done from home or must be done at the office. This explains why most of the interviewees expect to be working from home in the future, but not completely.

Remote work requires new practices and support

To capture the potential of remote working, requires organizations to adjust practices and their support to workers.

Working online means that office workers need to develop new workflows and use online tools that are new to them. Organizations need to support office workers in developing these new workflows and train them how to use new online tools that support remote working. Most organizations used basic online communication tools, such as Zoom and Teams, but were limited in more advanced tools that can be used for more specific group activities, such as brainstorming or creating workflows.

One of the main findings is that 'management by walking around' does not seem to support remote working workflows and highly dispersed teams. Organizations that already operated based on self-organizing teams showed less problems switching to online work than more traditionally managed teams. Some teams already used online tools and procedures, such as online daily stands, that supported self organization.

In some cases, individualized solutions are required. Not everyone has access to high speed internet and a space where they can create a home office. Other office workers felt lonely or preferred working in the office environment for personal reasons. Newcomers were having difficulties developing a wider network in the organizations and feared harm to their career.

Part of the interviewees were experiencing severe problems in separating work and life. Many were less active. Organizations should support workers in developing a healthy work/life balance.



"I think we once received a presentation from the health and safety doctor. So I switched all meetings that take an hour to 55 minutes so that they can just pee for 5 minutes or get a coffee before they go to their next meeting. So that they can take a breath."

Policy advisor, around 25, interviewed by Bernice, Lisa and Tessie, March 2021



"The creativity, trying new things, that's much more difficult now." [...] "I wanted to keep work and private separated. And that's more blurry now. That took me a few months to get used to. I don't like that much."

Genetics professional, around 50, interviewed by Carlos, Danica and Kristi, October 2020



"The team meets once a week online." [...]

"You get less of what is happening during the week." [...]
"You do not get inspired by people around you."

Intern at the department of knowledge and quality assurance, around 20, interviewed by David, Thijs and Suzanne, October 2020



"Now you sit there for eight-nine hours on a chair, it is just *click-on* *click-out* from meeting to meeting. Before, I sometimes had to cycle between meetings. Now that's not the case at all."

Urban designer, around 40, interviewed by Fieke, Betsy and Lisanne, October 2020

Hybrid work requires new office lay-out and facilities

When remote work and work in an office is combined, more online calls and meetings will take place at the office. Current day office lay-outs are often not suited for this kind of activities. Open-plan-offices, for instance, cannot be used for online calling, as it will disturb other office workers and have a negative influence on their productivity. Small cells are required for people to be able to make online calls.

In many occasions, meeting rooms are not equipped as hybrid meeting places were parts of the team are online and part of the team is in the room. This requires ICT facilities and maybe also adjustments to the sound insulation of office rooms to accommodate this kind of meetings.

How do these findings translate to educational practice?

Our faculty knows many different types of functions. Each function requires a different mix of interpersonal, physical and spatial context to be able to work remotely. Lets elaborate on the what this means for our educational staff.

Educational staff performs a variety of activities, such as lecturing, give a workshop, assist group work, give one-on-one feedback, reading, grading, and coordinating with other teachers. Some of these activities can be easily done at home. Processing information, such as grading, can be done from the home office and only requires a laptop, internet, desk and chair. However, other activities, such as giving online workshops require us to develop knowledge and advanced skills in various online tools, such as MIRO (platform for teamwork) and ZOOM (platform for communication). To work effectively, teachers would need fast internet and at least two screens. One screen is used to communicate with students and the other to follow what is happening on the virtual board where students are working together.

Because our faculty is involved in design, our staff and students work with spatial models, for instance of an inner city urban design. Spatial models are complex objects that are used to communicate across interdisciplinary boundaries. Currently, most of our staff is trained in discussing designs with the use of physical objects, such as mock-up models. These physical objects, however, will be useless to talk about the spatial design in a virtual world. Making the transition to online work, will require staff and students to develop skills in 3D and VR models, and online skills that allow us to have the same kind of interaction online.

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