

Is the future of work hybrid?



As the pandemic starts to wear off after more than two years of intense sanitary restrictions, lockdowns and health protocols, and countries start to alleviate their policies, open their borders and even ban social distancing and masks, organisations have started to follow suit with return-to-work policies...

But the response came with mixed feelings. For many employees, going back to office brings a sense of normalcy and jogs memories of work life before the pandemic, where the workplace was undeniably the only place assigned for work.

Though, let us bear in mind one thing: we have not and are not returning to the same workplace we left. Expectations for a mass migration back to the office need to be reset because reality is otherwise. Around the world, workers and employers are clashing over return to office plans, while some are threatening to quit if forced to be physically present at the office. In March 2022, Robert Half, a global recruiting firm released a survey that revealed 50% of US workers would rather resign than be forced back to the office full-time. And some actually went forth with those kinds of bold decisions. Apple Inc. for instance deployed a return to office policy which had all employees sulk and threaten to quit.

More recently, Elon Musk, founder of Tesla and SpaceX, demanded that Tesla workers return to office or leave the company: "Anyone who wishes to do remote work must be in the office for a minimum (and I mean *minimum*) of 40 hours per week or depart Tesla. This is less than we ask of factory workers," Musk wrote, adding that the office must be the employee's primary workplace where the other workers they regularly interact with are based — "not a remote branch office unrelated to the job duties."

So, it is clear from these examples that requests to return to office are gradually coming in from organisations. However, met with resistance and reluctance, a new mode of working has emerged. In a large part, in this post-pandemic era, employees with the ability to work remotely are mostly anticipating a hybrid office environment going forward – one that allows to spend part of their week working remotely and part in the office.

Indeed, after two years of people working remotely, the hybrid model—understandably—seems like a practical way to ease into commuting and working in an office setting.

As an international management consulting company, we wanted to know how companies and individuals in Mauritius and abroad are viewing remote and hybrid work. Consequently, we conducted a survey, designed to gain insights both from senior executives of companies and individuals regarding current and future work models and challenges posed.

A total of 26 companies from 188 contacted participated in the study representing various industries with companies from the Financial Services industry representing 34% of the sample followed by conglomerates (15%) and Retail and Distribution (12%), while 108 individuals from a reach of 213 individuals provided their input to the survey. Those who participated were predominantly millennials (68%) with forty-seven percent (47%) of respondents holding professional / specialist roles.

There was an almost equal split between male and female participants (51% and 49% respectively), among whom eighty-two percent (82%) of individual participants had a partner employed on a full-time basis with 39% having children of schooling age.

Figure 1
Generational Category

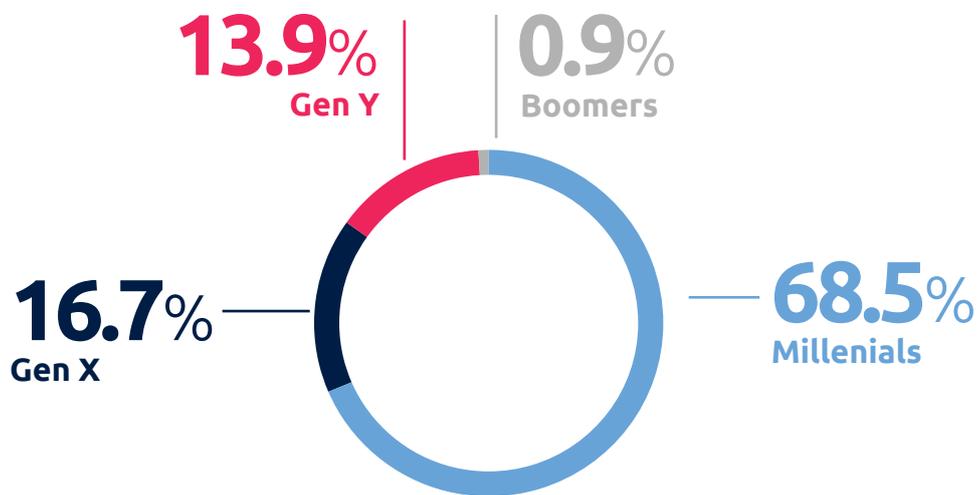
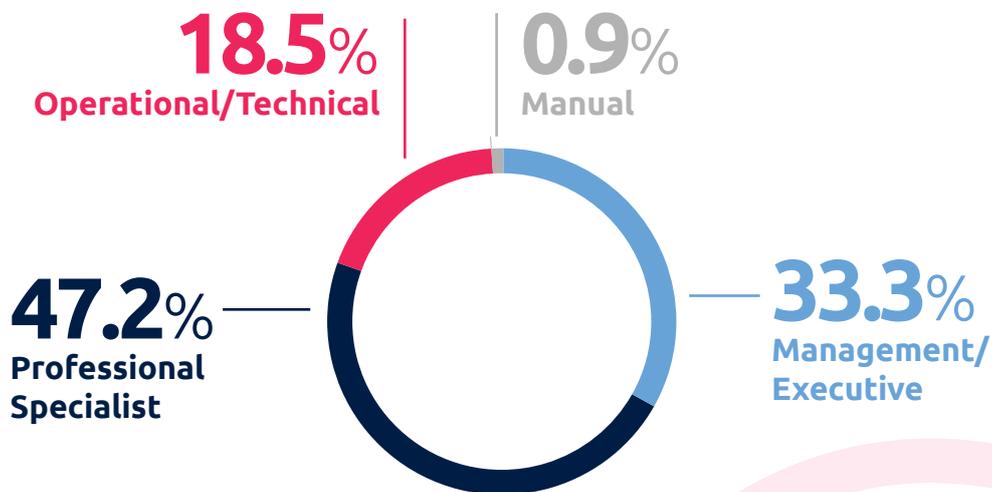


Figure 2
Job Type



The impact on productivity

The whole question of remote work boils down to how far productivity is enabled in such circumstances and environment and the responses are quite surprising.

Companies surveyed shared that they have registered a positive impact about overall productivity at 71% from their employees while they were remote working, with team work and collaboration accounting for 71% or an employee engagement level reaching 69%. If productivity doesn't seem to be that much impacted,

employers have mixed opinions about the impact of remote work on company culture, 50% of whom believe there is no impact and the other 50% spread among the fact that it could have eroded the company culture.

From an individual perspective, the results point right along the same lines in terms of productivity. 72% of 108 individuals who participated agreed or strongly agreed that they were more productive when working remotely and only 12% felt that their managers were not supportive of them working from home.

Figure 3
Impact on overall company productivity

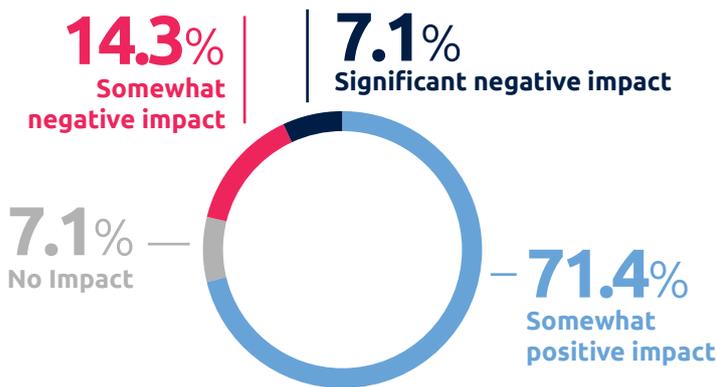


Figure 4
Impact on teamwork and collaboration

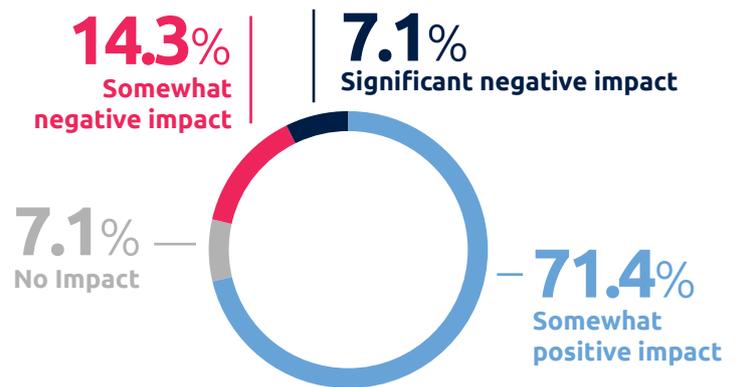
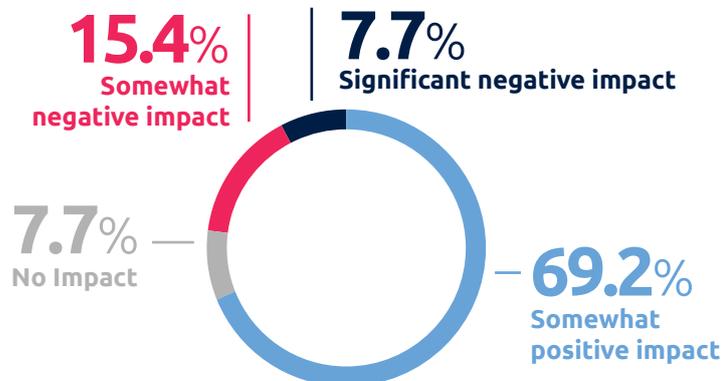


Figure 5
Impact of remote work on employee engagement

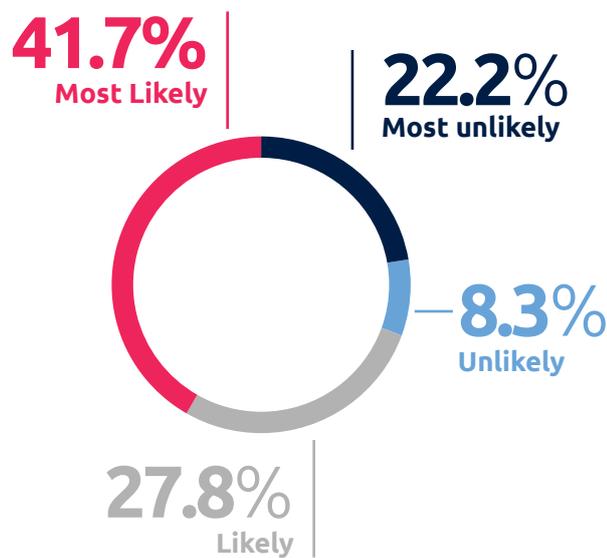


The survey further indicated a preference of employees to see an increase in the number of days they are able to work remotely.

Almost 7 out of every 10 individual respondents also indicated that they would

consider quitting their current job for the same level of compensation but were afforded the flexibility to work remotely, a trend that very likely matches international counterparts.

Figure 6
Likelihood to quit for same compensation but ability to work remotely



It remains to be seen whether such intentions materialize into reality but the results from this sample group reinforce the observed trend that there is potentially a shift in the workforce's expectations, and more so, a clear indication that remote work is sought after and poised to stay. Ultimately though, how this new hybrid era unfolds will depend on the types of hybrid experiences employers create and how managers adapt.

It is undeniable that senior and line management sponsorship and support are critical success factors in driving the change and organisational initiatives such as hybrid work. And our study pointed out that, of those organisations that had not yet

established a formal Remote Work policy, a third of them are considering doing so in the next 12 months. Quite an interesting perspective, indicating the shift in working models is being considered.

The respondents reported that the primary aim and expected benefit of implementing such a policy is to provide greater flexibility to their employees (50%).

Figure 7
Considering implementing remote work policy

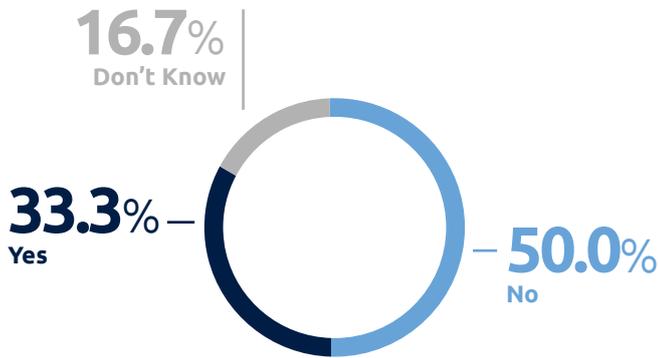
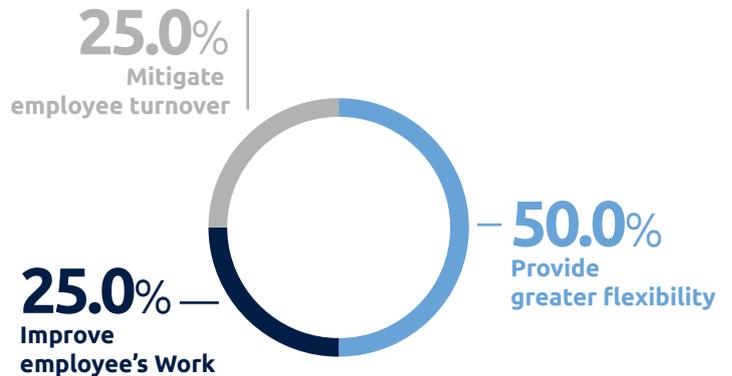


Figure 8
Expected benefit of future policy implementation



How hybrid can the workplace be actually?

As the pandemic gradually shrinks in the lives of the population at large, and restrictions removed, the workplace is slowly filling in with employees. As effective as remote work may have been as this survey showed, where twenty-three percent (23%) of respondents are currently working from home on a permanent basis whilst 16% reported being on-site every day, there is a clear intention to leverage on a hybrid mode.

Interestingly, 56% of the respondents currently working remotely on a permanent basis indicated that they would favour to spend at least some time in the office – with a schedule of 3-4 days working from home being the preferred option. This schedule may have evolved in the meantime with the removal of restrictions but the quest for a hybrid model is still very much present and appeals enough to employees to long for these facilities.

Whether organisations lean in to maintain remote working fully or part-time, the success of its sustainability only lies in the implementation of critical factors and overarching guiding principles that we cannot underestimate.

Remote work cannot work for everyone!

Let's face it...the ability to work remotely is intrinsically linked to the type of industry. For instance, the finance and insurance sectors are well suited to accommodate remote work, as much as all service-oriented industries which leverage heavily on technology and can therefore operate on a remote basis. Industries that have the least potential to integrate remote work into their future are ones that rely on physical care, labor, or the operation of machinery, like a construction worker or a dialysis nurse, and tasks that rely on collaboration and have a greater impact on success when done in person, like teachers or trainers. Overall, however, the sectors that have the most potential for remote work are concentrated within white-collar jobs.

As an international consulting company, where most of our assignments are delivered and launched on-site in our clients' premises abroad, we have had to rethink our ways of working, adapt to the technological possibilities as much as its glitches, review and even reinvent our management style, our communication practices all the same while securing a highly-demanding task and

ensuring quality and excellence at work.

At its core, remote work is a question of nimbleness and whether it will be an enduring benefit remains to be seen but based on the sampled group of individuals we surveyed, it could be one of the determining factors candidates consider when evaluating their next offer of employment.

Remote work is about a new lifestyle

The term has been buzzing ever since the pandemic shook the world, but every part of every person's and organisation's life has been impacted. Lifestyles have shifted or new lifestyles emerged, just as new behaviours and habits.

Let's focus on the work part. An ideal remote work policy or ecosystem would involve a complete redesign of the working infrastructure and facilities at disposal. It would mean less office space or reduced office space, leveraging on a hot desking space management system, open spaces or just cubicles for specific meetings or gatherings. Less money on physical infrastructure would hence leave space for more investment in technology for instance.

Digital investment is instrumental in the success of remote work. This would require organisations to invest in digital solutions that allow staff to work and collaborate efficiently. Nothing brings productivity to a screeching halt faster than slow networks, insufficient software, or heavy administrative protocols.

When the hardware and software are handled, the "heartware" needs to be rewired as well. People are managed and connect differently when they are at a distance than when they are on premise. It accounts for a complete and different

management style or styles and people themselves bond differently to share their thoughts and preferences, frustrations or opinions, whether they are more involved or less participative.

There are so many spheres to be onboarded or handled that remote work uncovers that its understanding goes beyond work scenarios only. It leans in to a new lifestyle really where everyone be it an individual or an organization is more mindful of the environment, his health or the health of its employees. A remote arrangement would require more diligence for instance from a health perspective, like eating habits, pauses or more importantly exercise to keep the body moving, just as less commute would create less stress or even reduced expenses due to less corporate clothes shopping.

Be mindful of alignment

One out of two companies that had an established Remote Work policy reported that the policy had no impact on their company's culture. This could be interpreted in two ways i.e., either those companies had an existing culture that was conducive for employees and leaders to thrive in this new work context or that the organisations' cultures had either never assessed the true impact of remote work on their organizational culture.

It can be very uncanny to think that a full remote work arrangement may have little impact on productivity though or especially culture which is why organisations need to be very mindful of how they align their strategies for such a system.

Unfortunately, in our experience, more often than not, organisations miss out on reaping the full benefits of their change initiative due

to a misalignment between the change enablers i.e., strategy, people, process and technology. For instance, offering the opportunity to work remotely could potentially require an organisation to revisit its sourcing strategy and its learning and development programme, adopt technologies that enable asynchronous collaboration and/or embed a continuous performance management approach and process to drive accountability and personal development.

Strategy first!

A hybrid model cannot be put in place just for the sake of it. A clear strategy needs to be defined because it sure comes with its challenges as well. Lack of workplace innovation, insufficient oversight and cultural shifts have been identified by specialists as barriers to successful hybrid work, not to mention sustaining company culture—all traditionally highly associated with in-person work, even though some organisations and individuals have pointed out that it had barely an impact on same.

From what this survey has pointed and based on our own analysis and experience within the organization, what is instrumental in the successful implementation of remote work boils down to the right balance among these factors:

- 1** A change of mindset from both employees and employers.
- 2** A rethinking or an adaptive leadership style.
- 3** A revamped infrastructure and physical workplace onboarding the right type of technology for collaborative participation.
- 4** A conducive environment for enhanced productivity while promoting culture.

All in all, for hybrid work to actually work, all dots need to be connected towards an overarching purpose that must result in increased productivity, well-being of employees and happier customers. One thing for sure, two years down the line, we can no more be into 'band-aid' solutions as we were in a pandemic era. Putting in place a new model of working will require the right actions.