

# How businesses can drive diversity and productivity with hybrid working

A hybrid working model plays a crucial role in attracting a diverse workforce, which includes three specific groups: working parents, individuals with varying health needs, and those affected by the increasing cost of living near their office.



Image: Supplied

By incorporating hybrid working into their workplace strategy, organisations can enhance work-life balance, increase engagement and productivity, and create a workforce that is diverse and equitable, ultimately driving innovation and growth.

## Cost of physical space

As more workers return to the office, real estate has become a top priority for the C-Suite initiating a re-evaluation of the business' entire workplace strategy. CEOs and CFOs are weighing the costs of physical office spaces against the advantages of having employees gather in one location. Extensive research shows that a high-quality workplace leads to employees wanting to spend more time at an office. Thus, having the right kind of space in the right location is crucial for attracting and retaining talent.

The effectiveness of the hybrid work model is being recognised by both employers and employees. While employers desire to have their teams back in the office, employees also value the flexibility of remote work. The traditional nine-to-five office schedule is no longer the norm, as many workers now prefer a hybrid arrangement that allows them to work remotely for part of the week. This shift has shown evidence of contributing to improved organisational performance, including higher employee engagement and lower turnover rates.

However, there are still business leaders who remain sceptical about the effectiveness of hybrid working. Some insist on requiring employees to be physically present in the office on a full-time basis. The ongoing debate centres around balancing employee quality of life with corporate productivity. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that hybrid working can play a vital role in fostering workplace Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) – something that should not be overlooked when harnessing the power and potential of a diverse workforce.

For those of us who firmly believe in the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I), attracting a diverse pool of talent is of utmost importance. This is where the hybrid work model truly shines. It goes beyond mere personal preferences or performance; when implemented effectively, the hybrid work model allows us to tap into talent within specific target groups. Here are three prime examples:



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## Women with primary caregiving responsibilities

Attracting and retaining women who have family commitments has always been a significant hurdle. The Covid-19 crisis only exacerbated this challenge. In 2020, millions of women exited the workforce due to the difficulties posed by school and childcare closures.

Many women express a strong desire for flexible work arrangements to better manage the delicate balance between caring for their children and commuting to work. This challenge becomes even more complex for those with additional caregiving responsibilities, such as aging parents or family members with disabilities.

The hybrid model caters to the unique lifestyle needs of working women. It levels the playing field by addressing and resolving challenges that would otherwise negatively impact their careers and overall quality of life.

## Individuals with physical or mental health conditions

For numerous individuals with disabilities, commuting can be a significant barrier. Remote work can provide them with the opportunity to seamlessly integrate into the organisation and contribute more effectively, especially for those whose homes have been modified to meet their specific needs. While it doesn't eliminate the need to address ongoing challenges with public transportation and workplace design, it can certainly assist those who face these difficulties on a daily basis.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that disabilities are not solely physical. More and more people are being diagnosed with some form of anxiety disorder. Many of these individuals find it challenging to come into the office five days a week, especially when their commute is long, complex, or involves crowded public transport.

“We believe that workplace design must recognise the importance of accommodating neurodiversity by providing easy access to private or quieter spaces as needed,” says Joanne Bushell, MD of IWG Plc. However, there are still many spaces that present challenges for individuals with heightened sensitivities.

“A hybrid work arrangement, especially one that incorporates a flexible physical workspace, allows individuals to actively participate, be productive, and experience a sense of belonging within their work environment, regardless of any obstacles they may encounter,” adds Bushell.



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## Individuals experiencing financial constraints in finding suitable housing

Even prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, there was a noticeable rise in the duration of commuting, as an increasing number of individuals labelled as "super commuters" started traveling more than 90 minutes each way due to the high cost of living in their vicinity of employment.

Many workers find themselves being effectively excluded from job opportunities simply because they cannot afford to reside within a reasonable commuting distance from their workplace. This situation turns the location of one's home into an implicit requirement for employment, thereby creating obstacles in the hiring process for individuals belonging to various demographic categories, particularly marginalised communities and minority groups.

A hybrid work model once again offers the advantages of both worlds: the accessibility of technology and tools that enable working from home on specific days of the week, combined with less frequent (and therefore more manageable) commutes to the office for collaboration or team meetings.

## All inclusive

While there has been a marked variation in the strength of feeling towards hybrid working among different demographic groups, McKinsey research found that there was one thing all employees agreed on, regardless of ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation: hybrid working should be underpinned by a set of inclusion practices.

Specifically, it identified work-life support, team building and mutual respect as being central to a successful hybrid working policy. Being sensitive to the demands of employees' personal lives, providing opportunities to strengthen trust and collaboration between colleagues and “showing genuine concern for the well-being of all employees” are key to going hybrid – and not only will your employees thank you for it, but your diversity and inclusion strategy will, too.

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