GLOBAL ERGONOMICS MONTH WEBINAR SERIES

Supporting remote office work, pivoting back to the workplace during a pandemic, and the future of virtual workspaces

Transitioning Out of the Pandemic: Expected Work Environment Challenges and Opportunities in a Hybrid Work Era

Maral Babapour
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Maral Babapour, Ph.D.
Institute of Stress Medicine

VÄSTRA GÖTALANDSREGIONEN
HÄLSAN OCH STRESSMEDICIN

- M.Sc. Industrial Design Engineering
- Human Factors specialisation
- Ph.D. Human-Technology-Design
- Chalmers University of Technology 2010-2019
- Institute of Stress Medicine 2019-present

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Background

- An ongoing project on Activity-based Working (Flexible/Free seating/Clean-desk)

- **Case:** a public service organisation in West Sweden with ca. 3000 employees that relocated to 3 different office buildings (relocation: 2018-2019)

- **Purpose:** evaluate consequences of reloaction on employees' work environment, percieved health and self-reported producitvity

- Interactive research design to inform (further-)development based on surveys, focus-group discussions, logs and observations (baseline + 6 months post-rel.)

Mapping worker expectations

New research questions

- What are employees' preferred ways of working post-pandemic?

- What are the expected needs and work environment challenges for returning to the post-pandemic office?

Method

- Mini-survey (ca. 1500 respondents, 50% response rate)

- Scenario-mapping workshops with focus groups (9 sessions with a total of 61 participants)

Context

- Administration of public services: health-care, transport, regional development, cultural development and tourism

- Limited remote working prior to COVID-19

- Implemented MS Teams in October 2020

- Restrictions from November 2020 in Sweden

Up to 1 day
9%

2-3 days
22%

4-5 days
69%
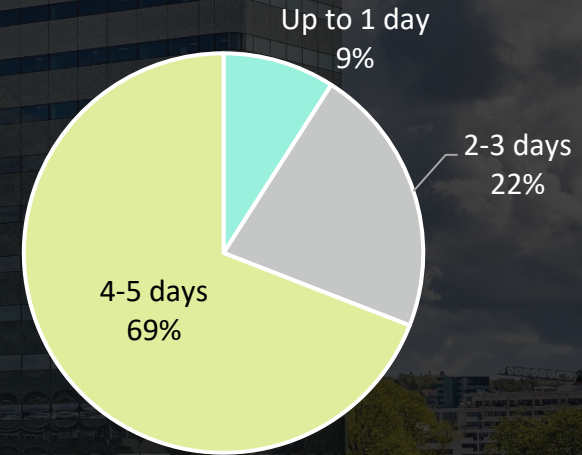
Days at office before the restrictions (1473 respondents)

Workshop setup

- Different perspectives

- Benefits / drawbacks of remote work

- Simulating a fictious work week after the restrictions

- Risks, opportunities, expected challenges, & new needs with respect to office work after the pandemic

Remote work before COVID-19

From a vision to reality

- Work-life balance

- Increased engagement and job satisfaction

- Increased autonomy

- Decreased sick leave; risks for sick-presence

- Unchanged – increased performance

- Initial social and proffessional isolation

- To create and keep boundary-setting strategies

Charalampous et al. (2019)

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Polarised work conditions (20-21)

Work-life balance

- Fewer distractions
- Less misspent time
- Increased control/autonomy
- Improved individual and group performance

Unfavourable work conditions

- Increased work hours
- Cognitive overload
- Poor ergonomics of home offices
- Household limitations
- Blurred work-life boundaries
- Social and professional isolation

Remote work during COVID-19

- About 50% report increased performance and fewer work hours (Ipsen et al 2020)

- Less positive appraisals among respondents with interdependent roles (Baert et al 2020)

- No difference in physical activity but more sleep time (Hallman et al 2021)

- More postural and heart rate variability (Widar et al 2021)

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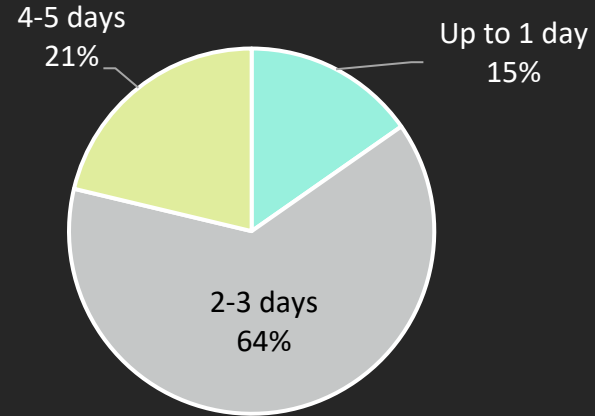
Distansarbete, på ISM:s hemsida

Foto: gettyimages

Group scenarios

1. Mainly at the office

2. Mainly remote work

3. Hybrid work

4-5 days
21%

Up to 1 day
15%

2-3 days
64%

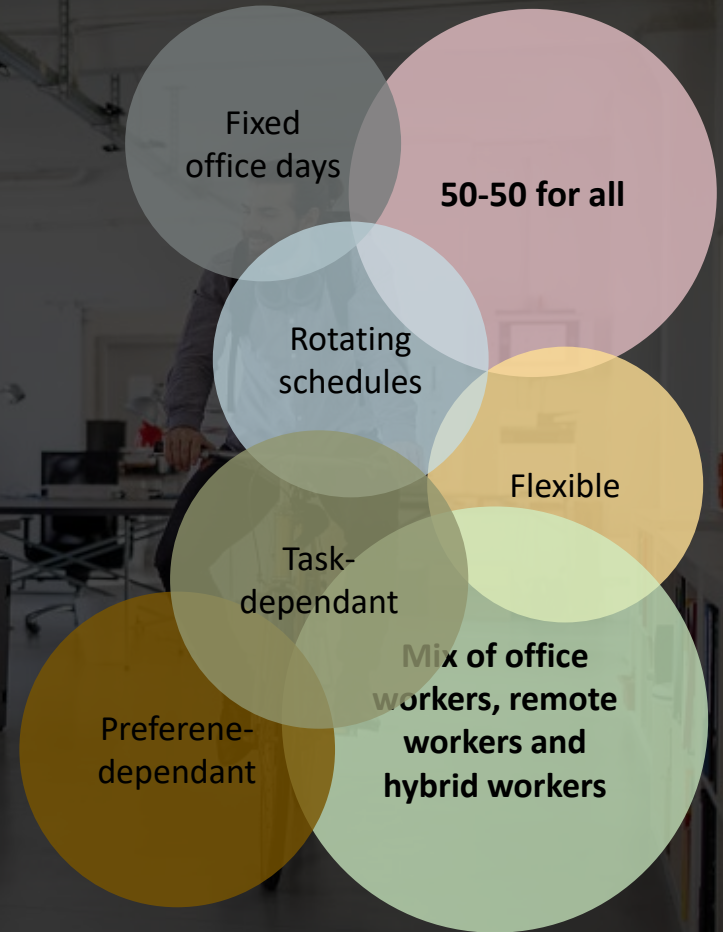Days at office after the
restrictions (1473 respondents)

What is the hybridity in hybrid work?

Hybrid collaborations
A combination of synchronized, asynchronized, co-located and distributed interactions over a longer period of time

Hybrid meetings
Synchronized interactions between co-located and distributed participants

Fixed office days

50-50 for all

Rotating schedules

Flexible

Task-dependant

Mix of office workers, remote workers and hybrid workers

Preferene-dependant

Hybrid work
Individual perspective

Customisation of work arrangement

Keeping the increased autonomy

Work-life balance

Variation / services

"There is no such thing as normal. Before, everyone just went to the office. Now, it will be different among us."

"We have now tested and appreciate more self-leadership. To get to plan and have flexibility gives the satisfaction of being able to influence your own work situation"

"No commuting time gives me more quality time for my family and children."

"I get a lot of energy from working out at lunch time, and as a result I can do a better job."

Hybrid work
Communication & interactions

Combining different types of meetings

- **Spontaneous interactions**

- **Structured online meetings**

- **Creative / developing meetings on-site**

- **Team-building activities**

- **Working outdoors**

50

"To stand by the coffee machine and discuss trivial things."

"Our meetings are more structured and efficient now. But there is a ticking stress in them. You want to get to the point as fast as possible."

"where you need deeper discussions so that you can take a leap together."

"I think we will use the offices for things we can't do at home, like thinking and creating together."

"Our major need is now to care for our community, and create situations for play and fun, so that we don't only focus on our excel files."

Hybrid work
Communication & interactions

Increased asynchronized communication

Refraining from asking for help

Coordination / synchronising

Inclusivity in hybrid meetings

Frictions, ambiguities and disagreements

50

"It creates stress to be available all the time, always answering e-mails and receiving notifications."

"Should I call someone and disturb them with my minor questions now? No. I don't do it. You don't feel confident in your decision-making when you can't ask your questions."

"have to plan much more than before."

"I prefer that everyone attends meetings on equal terms; when some are remote, everyone should connect on their devices to see each other equally and have access to the same tools."

Hybrid work
Team interactions

Team efficiency

Team cohesion vs. "Us and them" mentality

Information silos

Organisational belonging

50

"My team works in different buildings, it is just easier to work remotely."

"There may be a fear of missing out, when people go back to the office. What will everyone talk about? And what info will be exchanged? You don't have the FOMO when everyone works from home."

"We have tried to keep in touch with digital coffee breaks, but it is only with our own group."

"You can forget that you are a part of something larger. Sometimes, you almost forget your purpose and function."

Hybrid work
Leadership perspective

Manager-employee distance

Fulfilling work environment responsibility

50

"You have the responsibility to follow-up as a manager. Before, I went around at the office and had oversight on how things were going. Now, I need more control and have to be more clear about my responsibilities and purposes as a managers. It is mutual. They also expect me to follow up and have a need to be seen. The communication will have to be more flawless now, as we rely more on e-mails and phone conversations."

Hybrid work
Leadership perspective

Manager-employee distance

Fulfilling work environment responsibility

Conflicts and ambiguities

Resource allocation

Limited organisational support

50

"It is up to the managers to interpret the guidelines and recommendations. I think there will be a lot of comparisons about how flexible one is allowed to be."

"Why should we pay rent for using the whole facility, if we go there 1-2 times a week for meetings?"

Hybrid work
Physical / digital work environment

Better workstation ergonomics on-site

Distractions and crowding on-site

Insufficient spaces for online meetings

Meeting rooms not fit for hybrid meetings

Cognitive demands of online meetings

Worries for infection risks

Misspent time / behavioural changes

"Most of us will really need better ergonomic equipment at home."

"we had a lot of digital meetings before, and it was quite difficult to have them in open spaces, partly due to confidentiality and partly due to the many distractions. It used to be a challenge to find a phone booth or a room."

"We should learn a lesson about spread of diseases, even for a flu. It will be quite annoying to have to disinfect your keyboard several times a day."

# Post-pandemic remote work policy

- Starting point is their activity-based offices

- Tasks determine whether remote work is appropriate

- Decision is to be made on a group level

- Agreement between line managers & employees

- No additional equipment is provided to support remote work

- The decision should contribute to a sustainable work-life and reduced energy consumption

A sought-after but stigmatised benefit | An imposed norm | A (partially) removed benefit

Preferences for return to offices is influenced by:

– Tasks/role in group, interdependencies;

– The functionality and user experience with the office configuration;

– Social climate, geographical distribution;

– Individual (digital competence, seniority, capabilities);

– Household (commuting distance, home office, family situation).

Group-level issues are:

– (Continued) polarised work conditions;

– Frictions/conflicts between managers and employees;

– Increased demands on staff managers;

– Challenges with resource allocation, configuration, leasing, etc.
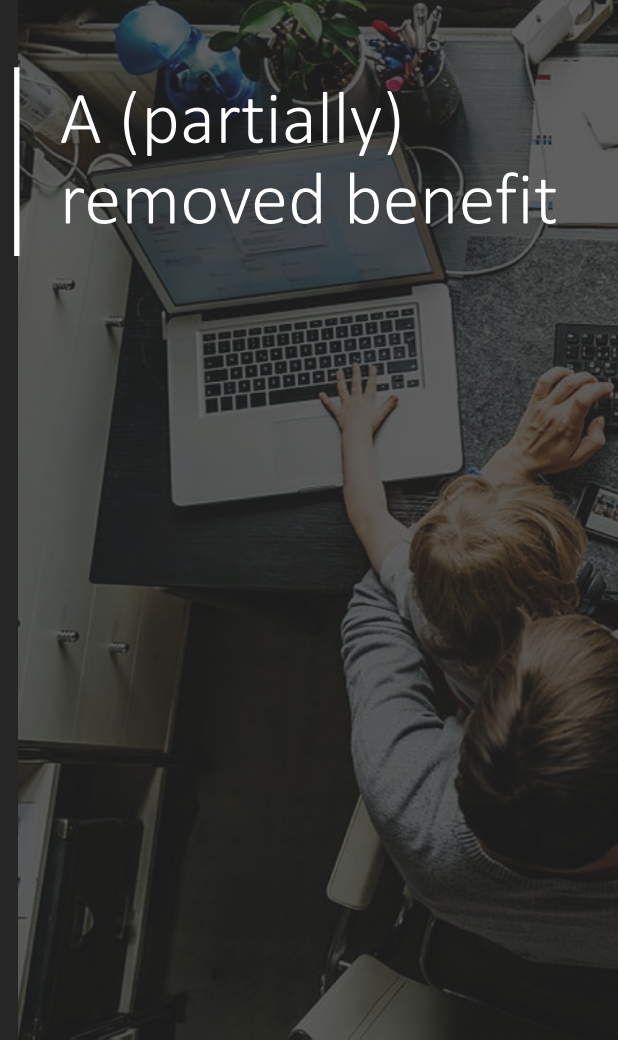
Knowledge gaps & future work

- Expected versus actual work environmental challenges

- Does the extent of remote work matter?

- Long-term gains and losses in terms of physical/cognitive workload, individual and group performance, health outcomes and resource efficiency

- Development of decision support for groups/managers

- Development and diffusion of solutions (physical/architectural/digital/virtual) for hybrid work

TACK!

Maral Babapour, Ph.D.
maral.babapour.chafi@vgregion.se
Institute of Stress Medicine

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