

# How to Create a Hybrid Culture That Really Works

**Building Boundaries, Beating Burnout and Finding Balance** 







# **Executive Summary**

Whether you love it, loathe it, or simply tolerate it, remote working is here to stay. And while an emerging body of research continues to reveal the many positive benefits of this style of working, it does present its own unique challenges.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on the way we work, both in Australia and around the world—and now, many businesses and organisations are being forced to consider their core values, confront their weaknesses and commit to improving employee experience, both at home and in the workplace.

In this whitepaper, we explore increasing employee demand for remote working arrangements, shed light on the importance of maintaining work-life balance and take a deep dive into the acceleration of burnout culture.

We also unpack many of the challenges—both new and existing—that industry leaders face in creating and maintaining a thriving and connected workplace culture where face-to-face interaction has been reduced or removed altogether.

We hope that the information, guidance and practical advice in this paper prove useful for managers and leaders who are looking to improve employee wellbeing and experience—whether that's at home, in the office or in a hybrid working environment.

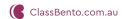


Did you know?

Remote working is expected to continue at least 50% of the time, post-pandemic.

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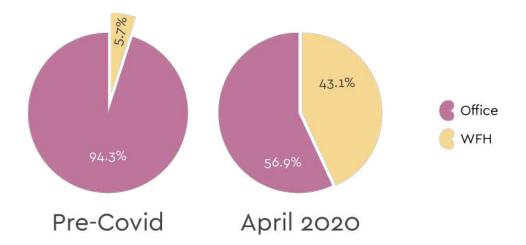
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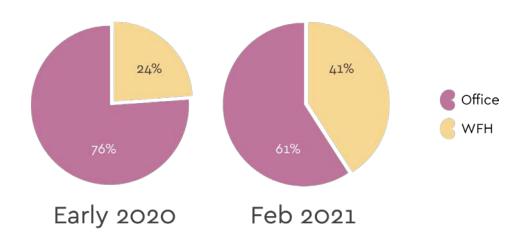
# WFH Is Here to Stay

Remote working: whether you're here for it or you're itching to get back to your stand-up desk and office banter, it's something we're going to see more of in the future. As the technological and social barriers that once prevented us from working at home are now removed, more and more employees are choosing to manage all—or part—of their workload from home. But what does working from home (WFH) actually look like, and how does it differ from country to country?

Recent statistics out of the UK revealed that while WFH was already on the rise prior to the COVID-19 lockdowns, it increased sharply from 5.7% pre-lockdown to 43.1% in April 2020.<sup>1</sup>



In early 2020, approximately 24% of Australian employees worked from home in some capacity.<sup>2</sup> In February 2021, that number grew to 41%.<sup>3</sup> And, while WFH was already an area of interest pre-pandemic, more and more businesses are now considering its role in improving staff retention, enhancing wellbeing and preventing burnout—a term that has become synonymous with the working culture of the 21st century.



### Understanding employee demand

The question isn't so much when we will return to the office, but how often? And, as we consider this "new normal", a potential hybrid of office-based work and home-based work seems largely inevitable. The data doesn't lie: the demand for a partial WFH arrangement has become increasingly necessary, with surveys continuing to show that a hybrid model of remote working reduces stress and increases worker wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> According to the Future of Work Survey undertaken by MIT Sloan Management Review, the 40 global executives who were surveyed believed that remote working would continue at least 50% of the time post-pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Notably, however, a number of the respondents also clearly identified that there are certain tasks that cannot be done as effectively in a virtual setting, thereby highlighting the need for a hybrid model. These tasks include:



Considering this, it's crucial that WFH arrangements are examined on an ongoing basis to ensure that employees who choose to work remotely, or under a hybrid model, can continue to operate in a way that makes space for these kinds of tasks in a safe, supportive and productive environment.





# Key Challenges to Look out For

### Managing work-life balance

Work-life balance is defined as "the individual perception that work and nonwork activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities."<sup>7</sup>

A 2018 review identified the outcomes of achieving and maintaining a work-life balance as:

- Job satisfaction and performance
- Family satisfaction
- Life satisfaction
- Improved mental health outcomes (including reduced psychological stress, emotional exhaustion and reduced prevalence of depression and anxiety)<sup>8</sup>

And while these outcomes certainly sound favourable, for many employees, work-life balance is more of an abstract concept than a tangible reality—even in knowledge-intensive industries that have been operating under a hybrid model for some time. But, as employee demand for remote working arrangements continues to grow, so too does the discussion surrounding the importance of work-life balance—and what was once a workplace perk has now become a necessity.

While it was once the responsibility of the individual to achieve and maintain this balance, it is now generally recognised that this responsibility rests on everyone in the workplace—including employees operating at management and organisational levels. Striving to achieve a balance for employees and managers alike not only leads to greater efficiency and productivity but also enhances creativity and job satisfaction. On the other hand, work-life imbalance leads to reduced job and life satisfaction, increased stress, impaired mental health and a greater likelihood of family conflict.9

### **Unique Living Situations**

For some, the phrase "work-life balance" may conjure up images of young, nuclear families looking for working arrangements that allow for school pick-ups, drop-offs and the occasional extra-curricular activity. And while flexible working arrangements have long been used as a means of navigating family life, leaders must remember that the modern workforce encompasses people from all contexts and environments. Many employees choose to work beyond their predicted age of retirement, some don't have children, others are single, and more and more people living with disability or chronic illness are entering the workforce. Needless to say, our domestic situations stretch far beyond the picket fence in the suburbs. From a socio-economic perspective, the cost of living in large cities is forcing many employees to live further and further away from the office or come up with shared living arrangements to ease costs. Understandably, all of these factors have a bearing on whether the opportunity to WFH would be welcomed by the individual.

While the pandemic may have levelled out the playing field, so to speak, as more workplaces move towards a hybrid model, an opportunity has arisen for management staff to acknowledge the needs of all workers, regardless of their domestic situation. Unsurprisingly, a 2017 report on flexibility in the workplace found that consistent access to flexible work for all employees reduced perceptions of unfair treatment and helped to boost morale.<sup>10</sup>





### Remote Productivity - boom or Bust?

When implementing flexible working arrangements, many employers ask themselves the same question: will productivity suffer? When attempting to answer this question, there is a clear lack of alignment between the anecdotal evidence and the findings of lockdown-related research. Understandably, practices relating to remote working vary dramatically from industry to industry, which makes it difficult to discern whether or not WFH is more productive and profitable than a conventional in-office setup. In short, far more industry-specific research is required before we get closer to a definitive answer.

In fact, research into the productivity of remote workers needs to be considered in a broader context for the data to be worth anything in the long term. For example, we're now aware that the productivity surge that was seen in remote workers during the lockdowns of 2020 was not an accurate representation of the whole picture. Instead, it was a form of "panic productivity" that has since been linked to the physiological response (i.e. adrenaline surge) caused by extremely stressful events and sudden changes to work and life. What's more, as many people were losing their jobs at the time, employees no doubt felt a greater need to prove their value, prompting them to work harder (and longer) than ever before. In the long term, however, this level of output is unsustainable and leads to fatigue, burn out and inability to meet the demands and expectations of the new normal.<sup>11</sup>

We tend to think of productivity as the only metric of success, but it's a deeply flawed one. Perhaps the question shouldn't be "are we more productive when we're remote working?" but instead "what is the human cost of our increased productivity when we work from home?". We're working longer hours, we're "always on" and we're missing out on simple moments of connection like tea breaks and impromptu chats with colleagues, all of which constitute necessary moments away from the workstation.

# Are we sacrificing our humanity for productivity?

### **Battling Workplace Burnout**

Let's face it: burnout has been an ongoing issue in the working world for some time. In fact, in 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) deemed burnout as 'an occupational workplace phenomenon' in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11).<sup>12</sup> Since then, things have only become more complicated.

While burnout is no doubt caused by a combination of factors, it can often be distilled down to a handful of major contributors:



Working over 50 hours per week



Unmanageable workload



Lack of support from management



Unclear communication



Unfair treatment in the workplace<sup>13</sup>

In the context of WFH, how has burnout changed? The answer is: it depends. Health outcomes for workers are heavily influenced by how effective workplace support is—and this encompasses a range of support types available to employees, including support from teammates, social connectivity outside the workplace, and work-to-family conflict.<sup>14</sup>

A review that looked at nine studies into the mental health implications of remote working took into account the following factors:

- 1. Organisational structure
- 2. Physical health and its impacts on mental health (i.e. less incidental exercise, sitting for long periods)
- 3. Psychosocial factors
- 4. Environment<sup>15</sup>

The outcomes of these studies revealed that remote working ultimately impacted people differently and was dependent upon factors such as domestic responsibilities (relationships, children, housework), organisational support—or lack thereof—and the quality of social life and connectedness. <sup>16</sup> From this research (which actually began in the 1970s), some key themes were determined. These include emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, demanding and heavy workloads leading to a sense of overload, as well as a loss of a sense of personal accomplishment. <sup>17</sup>

To further complicate matters, remote working has, in some ways, alleviated many of the factors that contribute to burnout, while in other ways, it has expedited the entire process.



A large survey conducted in 2020 by a team of researchers found that 85% of the 1,500 respondents felt that their general wellbeing had declined since the beginning of the pandemic, while 89% said their workplace wellbeing had declined. Of the 85% who said their general wellbeing had declined, 10% of those had experienced burnout. 18



Another survey conducted in 2020 by Mental Health America found that, of the 1,500 respondents who took part, only one in five felt that their human resources team offered productive solutions to preventing burnout—and three-quarters of respondents said they had experienced burnout at work.<sup>19</sup>

Occupational stress and burnout are not just issues for employees—they're an indicator of the overall health of the entire workplace. Burnout is associated with an increase in sick days and staff turnover, and also denotes a loss of productivity and a potential increase in payments for temporary employees or training for replacement hires.<sup>20</sup>

### Building better boundaries

Boundaries are a practical part of the burnout prevention toolkit, but they're also a vital part of sustainable work practices, regardless of whether you're WFH, onsite, or a hybrid of the two.

There's no denying that we've made some great strides as a society in understanding the importance of boundaries. And while we know that they're an effective means of preventing burnout and supporting mental wellbeing, upholding and enforcing them is another challenge altogether.

Around the world, researchers are showing great interest in the issue of workplace boundaries, and their work is revealing what many of us already suspected to be true: managing work-life boundaries reduces work-related conflicts. And of course, this not only benefits individual employees and their respective teams, but is also advantageous for management staff, and ultimately, entire organisations.

#### Upholding boundaries:

- Relieves stress
- Reduces the likelihood of burnout, addiction and other unhealthy coping mechanisms
- Improves overall mental and physical wellbeing<sup>21</sup>

An increasingly connected world means we're becoming increasingly boundaryless.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, it's important for management-level employees to value and modelstress-reducing behaviours in order to demonstrate what appropriate work boundaries should look like. This could include anything from managing their work hours and workload to taking time off. Similarly, for remote workers, it's essential to encourage the implementation of physical boundaries, such as a dedicated workspace.<sup>23</sup>

Implementing simple and mindful changes at a management level can help to 'hit refresh' on outdated mindsets around what's expected of workers (i.e. not leaving until after senior staff have left, not taking lunch breaks, putting in overtime at the expense of their health). Implementing these changes in a practical way might mean:

- Being more aware of employees who are likely to struggle to communicate their need for boundaries.
- Not scheduling meetings late in the afternoon when they're likely to run over.
- Conducting training sessions on how to set healthy workplace boundaries.
- Encouraging employees to disconnect (from technology) after hours.
- Creating an environment that allows for conversations about implementing boundaries without fear of judgment or professional repercussions.

Notably, many of these points require a workplace culture based on trust, mutual understanding and empathy—but that doesn't mean that implementing boundaries needs to be a burden. Here are a few simple behavioural changes that can assist in maintaining firm boundaries to benefit overall wellbeing:

- Physical boundaries—this could mean packing up your things for the day, turning your phone onto "do not disturb" mode, closing the door and physically walking away from the space, knowing you've left work and all that it entails for another day.
- Psychological boundaries—this could mean carving out time to relax, going for a walk outside on your lunch break, or cooking a meal with your partner in order to mentally detach from the working week.
- Emotional boundaries—this could mean separating your work-related feelings and emotions from your home life, thereby allowing you to focus more effectively on work tasks during the day while being more present with your friends or family after logging off.<sup>24</sup>





# Your burnout prevention toolkit

- Manage work hours in a realistic and sustainable way.
- Manage energy output by minimising interruptions, dedicating time to planning and delegating tasks across your team.
- Be proactive about taking time off.
- Take proper lunch breaks.
- Avoid putting in overtime at the expense of your health and wellbeing.
- Be proactive about challenging outdated mindsets.
- Pack up your things for the day.
- Turning your phone onto "do not disturb" mode after hours.
- Close the door and physically walk away from the space.
- Identify and separate work-related feelings and emotions from home-related feelings and emotions to allow for a clear distinction between the two.



# Cultivating Culture and the Importance of Play

### **Creating a Culture of Connection**

Remote working has dramatically changed the landscape or medium in which a workplace culture can thrive. If the office was the "medium" before, we must now improvise and find new ways for team culture to flourish. This includes creative methods of communication that take everyone's communication styles into account, along with new ways of supporting each other and alternative opportunities for innovation, brainstorming and creating genuine connections.

So, what does fostering team culture look like in a remote work setting, especially when the informal chats and get-togethers that once sparked connection are starting to fizzle out? One possible solution to this very modern conundrum could lie in taking a more flexible approach to communication and collaboration. This might mean committing to regular online catch-ups that take everyone's schedules into account, while also encouraging and facilitating spontaneous chats and collaboration time. These daily practices are necessary in order to support entire teams and prevent individual members from slipping through the cracks. In addition, weekly teambuilding activities—such as a virtual happy hour or trivia nights—can be supplemented with regular outings and in-person team activities (where possible) that aim to get employees out of the house, out of their comfort zones and out of the 9-to-5 headspace.

Notably, the leadership skills required to effectively nurture team culture in a hybrid or remote working environment differ significantly from those that are required in traditional working environments, mostly because they require a greater degree of sensitivity to, and awareness of, the needs of everyone in the team.

Understandably, a lack of opportunity for team bonding and collaboration can result in disengagement, thereby leading to a steep decline in motivation and innovation, which in turn, may leave team members feeling isolated and primed for burnout.

While one-on-one interactions and independent work tasks can be done virtually, where possible, team-building activities should still take place in person to promote a genuine emotional connection between colleagues.<sup>25</sup>

### All Work, No Play?

In this new working environment, leaders must think creatively in order to foster a culture of innovation in their teams—and this may come down to the implementation of one simple action: play. So, what's the link between building brilliant teams and the seemingly childish concept of play? In the same way that it provides an escape for children, adult play is all about engagement, pleasure and mindfulness. It has little to do with outcomes and everything to do with experiencing the present moment in all its fullness. What many teams really need in order to thrive and connect is the ability (and the permission) to simply "be"—to be normal people, to be social, to be playful, and to be creative for creativity's sake. While this may not sound like the best investment of the company dollar, in the words of Ken Robinson, author of Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative...

"You can't just give someone a creativity injection. You have to create an environment for curiosity and a way to encourage people and get the best out of them."<sup>26</sup>

Robinson refers to creativity as "applied imagination"—imagination, play, learning and pushing against the perceived safety of our comfort zones are all things that brave parents would encourage their children to do. And it's exactly what we need to encourage in our teams.



### **Boosting Employee Playfulness**

If a team member lacks the opportunity to regularly engage in playful activities, this might result in a sense of frustration, moodiness, or rigidity. And, while encouraging employees to take regular holidays certainly helps, to fully experience the therapeutic benefits of play, periods of creativity and connection must be a regular occurrence. When it comes to helping employees build better boundaries, boost productivity and prevent burnout, encouraging playfulness is a must. A 2013 study conducted by researchers at the University of Illinois found that playful young adults reported lower levels of perceived stress when compared with participants belonging to the "Low Playfulness" group.<sup>27</sup> Notably, the "High Playfulness" group also displayed more adaptive behaviours when dealing with stressful situations. While this study was conducted using university students, many of the stressors experienced in tertiary education are similar to those that exist in the workplace. As such, it might be said that while playful employees experience the same stressors as others, they also perceive, experience and cope with these stressors more effectively.



### Craft Together, Stay Together

Whether it's pottery, painting or candle-making, spending time getting crafty boasts significant social and psychological benefits. Encourage your team to swap screentime for a hands-on activity and help them disconnect from the demands of their daily to-do list.

"Our team loved [the ClassBento paint and sip class]. They haven't stopped raving about how much fun they had." - Helen Kensett, Belle Property

"We did this [calligraphy] class for team building and [the teacher] Vanessa was mindful of taking into account the different ways each person in the class might need to approach the steps. The team had a great time and were eagerly showing off their creations after the class." - **Ebony Wilson, Google** 



### Ready, Steady, Bake

If there's one thing that every team member shares, it's the need to eat! If you're struggling to find team-building activities that have global appeal, cooking classes are a great place to start. Learning to cook is an essential life skill—and empowering your team to do so is a tangible way to support their wellbeing. Unsurprisingly, the economic cost of poor overall health (which is caused by factors like obesity, poor diet and poor lifestyle choices) has an enormous impact on the business sector.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, when team members possess the knowledge necessary to cook healthy and wholesome meals, they're more likely to experience improvements in their overall wellbeing. And of course, better overall wellbeing can also translate into increases in energy, performance, productivity, output and general job satisfaction. What's more, the sensory nature of cooking classes makes them an effective way for team members to step back, unwind and focus on the experience at hand.

From making the booking to enjoying the [watercolour] online class, everything was so enjoyable. We had packages that needed to go out to people and it was taken care of by ClassBento. I will 100% be looking at using their service again." - Daniel Bloom, Canva



### Two Green Thumbs Up

A growing body of research shows that spending time in green spaces or natural environments can help to reduce stress and improve overall wellbeing, especially for

urban dwellers.<sup>29</sup> And while heading out for a team hike might not be possible, soaking up the health-boosting benefits of plants certainly is. Floristry workshops, terrariummaking classes and even the Japanese art of kokedama (which loosely translates to "moss ball") are all effective team-bonding activities that incorporate the stress-busting benefits of greenery. What's more, studies show that indoor plants help to reduce feelings of stress and negativity, while also reducing indoor air pollution.<sup>30</sup> Whether your team is working from home, the office or a combination of the two, you can't beat the health-boosting benefits of plants.

"Our company (employees in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide) signed up to do a [ClassBento] terrarium-making class during lockdown and it was a very enjoyable experience! We were all very excited to get hands-on making terrariums for the first time. It was also a great opportunity to get the team together during trying times. The class was a delight and lifted our spirits." - **Desi Day, Certane** 



### Let's Get Physical

Tight hips and tense shoulders? Government guidelines recommend between two-and-a-half to five hours of moderate activity per week for adults<sup>31</sup> – and this is an important recommendation to keep in mind when attempting to improve wellbeing in the workplace. While more rigorous forms of exercise may not be practical within work hours, setting up a step challenge or similar goal-based program is an effective way to encourage incidental exercise and undo the (physical) damage of desk jobs. It also fosters engagement and gives team members a common lifestyle goal to work towards.

Given that they are far easier to incorporate into the working week, gentle mindfulness activities like yoga, meditation and tai chi may also have their place. While more research is needed, a 2010 study published in the Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health found that one 60-minute yoga class per week enhanced emotional wellbeing and resilience of staff in a university context.<sup>32</sup>



### **Final Thoughts**

Although the discussion around remote working and work-life balance began in the 1970s, there's no denying that we've reached a defining moment when it comes to employee experience. Since the beginning of 2020, businesses and workplaces around the world have shifted to embrace full-time remote working, while experimenting in real-time to find out what works and what doesn't.

An overwhelming amount of industry leaders believe that remote working will continue at least 50% of the time post-pandemic<sup>33</sup>, and if this is the case, it's necessary for companies to focus on preventing burnout, improving work-life balance, encouraging healthy boundaries, and of course, fostering a thriving team culture in a virtual setting. For many leaders, this will require innovation, creativity, and long term vision, especially if sustainable and lasting change is to be achieved.

While the world is still an uncertain and ever-evolving place, this certainly isn't the first time we've had to change the way we work. As we look back throughout history, we've seen the best and worst of the industrial revolution, witnessed women entering the workforce en masse during WWII, and even watched as the global financial crisis unfolded around us. Across the span of human history, we've adapted, evolved and pivoted—and we will no doubt continue to do so as we address the challenges of 2022 and beyond.







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