



University of  
Central Lancashire  
UCLan

Re-imagining  
Good Work:

# Remote & Hybrid Working Principles for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

Understand  
Flexibility

Support  
Development  
& Training

Prioritise  
Health &  
Wellbeing

**Remote &  
Hybrid  
Working  
Principles**

Be Aware  
of Digital  
Presenteeism

Understand  
Employee  
Voice

Foster  
Relationships

# Foreword

## Why these principles are important for SMEs in the North of England

This document outlines six practical principles to support remote and hybrid working. Hybrid working refers to a blended approach of 'at' the site of the workplace and offsite, eg working from home. Remote working typically refers to working offsite which, during the pandemic, has been largely at home.

Small and medium sized enterprise (SMEs) who operate in the northern regions were facing huge financial and productivity challenges long before the pandemic occurred, therefore these principles have been developed to support productivity and the health and wellbeing of employees. With over half of employees in the North West, North East and Yorkshire and Humber region working in typically office-based environments and now being asked to work from home or engage in hybrid working, there is a significant lack of good home working practices for four million northern remote workers. The same is true for hybrid forms of working.

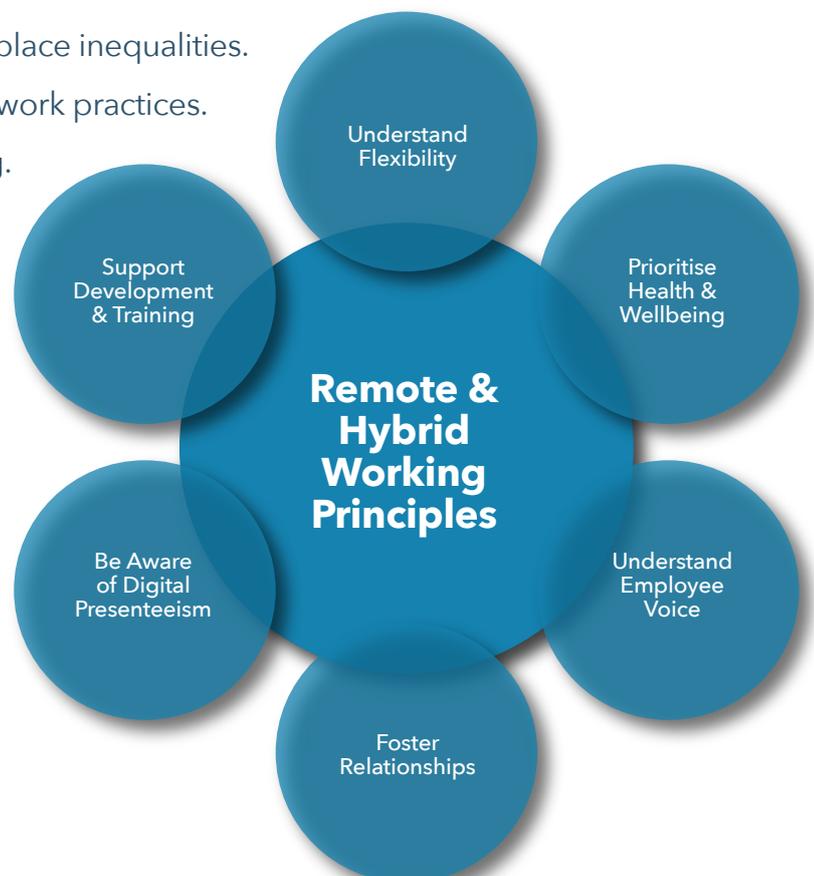
These principles are underpinned with rigorous research, which examined the impact of the pandemic on SMEs, as part of the 'Phoenix Project'. This project was carried out by the Centre for SME Development (Professor Sue Smith), the Institute for Research into Organisations, Work and Employment (Dr Adrian Wright and Dr Gemma Wibberley) and the Research Centre for Business, Management and Enterprise (Professor Phil Whyman and Dr Alina Petrescu), at the University of Central Lancashire. We engaged with representatives from organisations such as ACAS, CIPD, Trade Unions, Lancashire Local Enterprise Partnership, the Federation of Small Businesses, Lancashire Chamber of Commerce, NP11 Growth Hubs, alongside colleagues from our partner Universities (see page 10) while designing these principles. The principles are presented individually but they overlap and interact with each other and are designed to be common sense. To get the best from this guide, think through what each principle means for you and your business and what is in your gift to be able to do. We hope you find these principles informative and useful.

# Challenges of Remote/Hybrid Working

Many employees and businesses have extolled the benefits of working from home. However, this research highlights the breadth of challenges frequently associated with remote working and hybrid ways of working. Examples include:

- Increased feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Negative impact on social relations at work.
- Increased workloads.
- Blurring boundaries between the workplace and the home.
- Increased focus on task orientated and transactional work.
- The reinforcement of existing workplace inequalities.
- A detrimental impact on equitable work practices.
- Challenges to health and wellbeing.
- Digital presenteeism and being 'always on'.
- A lack of training and development.
- Exacerbating unresolved conflict between team members.
- Zoom/Teams fatigue.

These examples have shown to have a negative impact on productivity, which has led to the development of this set of principles to support SMEs in remote and hybrid working.





# Flexibility

## Understand Flexibility

Consider needs of employees and the organisation to achieve secure, sustainable and productive work which enables flexibility (such as hours, place and ways of working).

## The Context

Long hours, damaging work patterns and an uneven impact on carers are all known impacts of working at home. Staff are the greatest asset of organisations and growth will be high on the agenda when the pandemic is over. Inclusive practices and a diverse workforce can lead to higher turnover and better performance so involve workers in decision making.

## Practical Solutions

- Have regular conversations about boundaries between contactable and non-contactable hours.
- Provide a way to have open discussions about home/work boundary issues.
- Put individual needs at the heart of return to the workplace discussions.
- Talk to employees about needs and situation of the business.
- Demonstrate a clear plan that is sustainable for employees and employers in the short, medium and long-term.
- Don't assume the needs of employees/employers are the same or static.
- When considering workplace restructuring think of alternative options such as job-sharing or part-time work rather than redundancies.
- Talk through different options of remote working (working from home, offsite, co-working spaces etc) and hybrid working and what is expected by you, the business and the employees.
- Undertake regular reviews of flexible arrangements to ensure they are fit for purpose for all.



# Skills Development and Training

## Support Skills Development and Training

Ensure employees can meet the changing needs of the business, while focusing on development and progression for the whole workforce. Make skills and development opportunities equitable and fair.

### The Context

To meet productivity challenges and skills gaps it is important employees are developed. In order to meet these new working practices, training and development should not privilege those

physically present. Skills development and training can 'level up' the organisation by ensuring everyone is supported to develop new skills.

## Practical Solutions

- Check on new training needs for employees.
- Reassess new training needs for the business.
- Show commitment to long-term training and development and invest in your most important assets (your people).
- Work with your team to facilitate informal, peer and social learning; and check that they are taking place.
- Keep a focus on development and progression for all employees in the organisations regardless of where they are physically located.
- Ensure ways in which new employees can have a sense of belonging, perhaps through buddying up with colleagues they can informally learn from or have a mentor.
- Create action plans so all employees have access and support in development and learning.



# Employee Voice

## Understand Employee Voice

Embed communication strategies where worries, tensions and conflict can be discussed to improve workplace relationships. Create an inclusive work environment to ensure minority voices are heard.

## The Context

A lack of voice and trust, or alienation can result in longer term consequences such as higher staff turnover and challenges to organisational commitment.

## Practical Solutions

- Avoid a two-tier workforce, between those working on and off site, by providing everyone opportunities to have their voices heard.
- Focus on internal communication strategies that can replicate face-to-face communication for all employees.
- Provide a structure for minority voices and employees that are silent to be heard by offering a variety of communication channels.
- Introduce temperature checks (eg pulse surveys) so employees have confidence to speak about their experiences of remote/hybrid working.
- Engage employees in discussions about the return to the physical workplace.
- Discuss fairness at work concerns with employees.
- Explore potential for unresolved conflict between team members. For example, regarding remote/hybrid work arrangements or communication.
- Create worker forums to understand employee voice – clear communication lines create an inclusive work environment where worries and tensions can be heard.



# Foster Relationships

## Foster Relationships between co-workers

Be creative to enhance the dialogue across the organisation in an inclusive way and enhance trust and commitment.

### The Context

Social relationships and 'connectedness' at work are extremely important. Isolation and loneliness are a serious impact of the pandemic.

## Practical Solutions

- Offer ways and time for employees to connect to each other, encourage employee led conversations.
- Create meetings to reintroduce staff to each other when returning to work.
- Communicate the right to not participate in social events and interactions.
- Focus on new employees and developing social relationships.
- Ensure both remote and on-site workers can interact together.
- Foster the relationships between co-workers in work hours.
- Be creative to enhance the informal dialogue across the organisation.
- Encourage informal worker forums should employees wish to discuss common issues that they all might be facing and share resources.
- Encourage interactive activities that fit with the ethos of the company and are built from the ground up.
- Hold team meetings simultaneously face-to-face and virtually to ensure everyone has access regardless of location.



# Digital Presenteeism

## Be Aware of Digital Presenteeism

Set clear guidance demonstrating around what being 'at work' means and set boundaries around work-life balance and encourage the right to 'switch off'. Trust your workforce to make the decisions that are best for their wellbeing.

## The Context

Communication technologies can intensify the work of employees. Presenteeism impacts productivity and damages the wellbeing of the workforce. We should not assume that 'being' at work is always the best thing for our employees and businesses.

## Practical Solutions

- Encourage the right to switch off from communication channels and emails. Set clear guidance demonstrating that being 'at work' can be not online.
- Talk to employees about the impact of their work hours.
- Suggest the time typically used for commute could be used for health and wellbeing. i.e. time for exercise.
- Create natural breaks in-between meetings. For example, by finishing meetings at 10 to the hour.
- Consider the differential impacts surveillance and monitoring techniques can have on employees.
- Ensure fair and equitable workloads and responsibilities across teams.
- Ask yourself and your teams if working less can achieve more.
- Encourage conversations about managing customer demands in a timely manner.
- Encourage time away from the desk, even in work hours.
- Consider the impact of current work patterns and cultures.



# Physical and Mental Health and Wellbeing

## Support Physical and Mental Health and Wellbeing

You and your employees are your greatest asset. Support yourself and them to support your/their mental and physical health and wellbeing.

### The Context

There is a moral and legal duty to show care for the work force. Without people, goods and services cannot be delivered. The impact of the pandemic on mental and physical health are well known, so policies, practices and cultures need to support health and wellbeing. Therefore, check in on workers, listen to concerns, and act.

## Practical Solutions

- Train Managers in health and wellbeing issues. Raise awareness and make resources available for Managers to signpost staff to access help.
- Support Managers in how to have difficult conversations, particularly around mental health as they may be fearful of making mistakes.
- Make every contact count (MECC) - discussing wellbeing and health should be a normal part of Management conversations with staff.
- Consider health and wellbeing when managing the return to the physical workplace, consider individual concerns and create a safe working environment.
  - Create options for staff to talk about their workplace return anonymously or indirectly.
- Signpost employees to relevant support (eg Public Health England, Mind).
  - Use Wellness action plans for staff working from home, implement these for all staff as a preventative tool for wellbeing and mental health, built in from induction onwards for new staff.
  - Use Workplace adjustment passports to record adjustments and changes to work patterns to ensure co-ordination of line management.
- Start with basic policies around sickness and absence, performance management. Ensure a link between policy, procedure and practice. Review existing policies/ create new to ensure they support staff (eg Mental Health/ Domestic Abuse/Workplace Conflict).
- Promote new and existing policies widely, make them easily accessible and integrated with other workplace policies.

# Collaborative Partnership

These principles stem from a collaborative partnership between the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), Leeds Beckett University, Northumbria University, Sheffield Hallam University, Teesside University, University of Bradford and York St John University. The research is focused on the impact of Covid on SMEs and looking to the future of re-imagining work.

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