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Emerging through Covid-19: Remote and Blended Working

July 2021

Remote and Blended Working



The arrival of Covid-19 has accelerated the move by many companies to remote, flexible and hybrid ways of working. This shift has provided many benefits for employers as well as employees.

At policy level, the government has launched a national remote working strategy Making Remote Work. This strategy includes an employee's right to request remote working, a mandate that 20% of public sector workforce will work remotely by 2021, investment in a network of remote working hubs across Ireland, and the national delivery of broadband. The strategy's objective is to ensure that remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace in a way that maximises economic, social and environmental benefits.

According to an ERSI report in May 2020 Who Can Work from Home in Ireland?, before the Covid-19 crisis, 14% of employees in Ireland worked from home in some formal capacity, either sometimes or usually. This figure is expected to significantly increase by the end of 2021.

Remote working brings many benefits to employers, employees, and society. As outlined in the remote working strategy, these include increasing participation in the labour market, attracting and retaining talent, enabling balanced regional development, alleviating accommodation pressures, improving work/life balance, improving child and family well-being, reducing the amount of time spent commuting, and reducing transport related carbon emissions and air pollution.

What do we mean by remote, flexible and hybrid working?

Remote working, also known as working from home, teleworking or mobile working, is a style of work that enables an employee to work outside of the employer's workspace, allowing them to essentially work from anywhere. Whilst a lot of employees have been forced into this working style during the Covid-19 pandemic, generally it is a work style that is put in place by an express agreement, permanent or temporary, between an employer and employee.

Hybrid working is a version of the above where employees will work part of their working week at a location remote from the employer's workplace. This can be at home or elsewhere, such as a remote hub.

Flexible working describes a set of working arrangements that could mean changes to the normal length of the working week, working day or location. For example, part-time working, job-sharing, and flexitime all fall under this category.

Ireland has an obligation under the 2019 Work/Life Balance Directive to implement the right to request flexible working by August 2022. This means that employers will need to prepare for flexible working requests from employees. You can prepare for this by assessing what will be suitable for your company and having a policy in place to inform employees about flexible working options. The appendix provides for a list of items to consider when setting up a flexible working policy.

Blended working models

Remote working is undoubtedly part of the future of work and so now may be a good time to design and develop a blended working model that will fit the culture, type of work and overall purpose of your company. Whatever option you choose, remote or hybrid working needs to work for both your business and your employees. As set out in the government's recent Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, some form of remote working will be a reality for many companies across Ireland beyond this pandemic.

The use of and access to remote working hubs and the acceleration of the National Broadband Plan will bring the remote working model to a new and more sustainable level. This will mean that remote working will feel very different to the experience of many during lockdown. This development will most likely lead to a rise in remote working models and see a greater number of workers relocating outside of the typical industry-centric hubs and becoming part of more rural locations.

Many employees are likely to favour increased flexible working options. This might mean combining working from the office with working from a remote location, varied working hours, and a focus on deliverables regardless of when or where work takes place. This may lead to workplaces extending to various locations and the office environment consisting of a mix of hot desk places and anchored workstations for those who prefer to make the office their workplace of choice.

This naturally will present a mixture of challenges and opportunities for companies as they establish and manage various workplace locations that provide effective and supportive work environments. Working options and preferences will vary depending on the business requirements and responsibilities of the roles. Businesses will need to ensure that facilities and training supports are in place to ensure a successful transition for everyone concerned.

Before you decide on the most appropriate working model for your business, you should consider the following elements:

- ✓ The effect that working from home or another location may have on the productivity and wellness of your employees and the team generally
- ✓ The impact that this new way of engaging may have on troubleshooting and collaboration in general
- ✓ How innovation and creativity can be harnessed and ideas shared to capture the dynamic contribution needed from teams
- ✓ How different working models increase or decrease access to talent
- ✓ How working practices and models can be tailored to each team's requirements – companies that develop a flexible strategy that can be adapted to various needs are likely to be more successful in attracting and retaining talent in a remote and blended world

Remote office set-up and space

When setting your employees up for success in a remote or hybrid set-up, it's important to remember that remote work attracts all the same rights and responsibilities as office-based work in terms of working time, pay and benefits and health and safety. In preparation for this new aspect of work, a [Remote Working Checklist for Employers](#) has been developed by government. The following are considered both mandatory and good work policy:



Working time and rest breaks

One characteristic of remote working, and a reason why so many employees opt for it, is increased flexibility towards working hours. Remote employees are still governed by the [Organisation of Working Time Act 1997](#) and employers are required to record employees' work time and details of any leave granted to them. Employers should be clear on what is considered the normal working time for a remote worker, which may vary depending on the individual or job role, and to establish an appropriate method to monitor working hours, breaks and rest periods for this category of worker. It is important for employers to ensure that employees are taking the appropriate breaks and to remind them if they are not. Managers should pay particular attention to any signs of overwork.



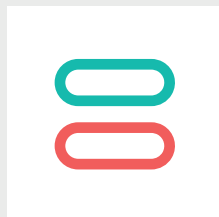
Right to disconnect

Following on from the working time requirements, a [Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Right to Disconnect](#) was released in April 2021. This code outlines best practice in ensuring employees can switch off and disconnect outside of normal working hours. With lines between home life and working life blurring within a remote working set-up, employers should carefully assess how they can ensure employees are able to disconnect from work. A good remote working policy will cover how this will be managed.



Pay and benefits

An employee's pay and benefits are not altered by virtue of remote working. Employees are entitled to the same pay and benefits as they would if based at an office. Employers should be clear on what, if any, contribution is provided to employees toward household expenses such as internet, lighting, and heat.



Employment equality

Employers should ensure that the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 are being adhered to regardless of whether their employees are working remotely or not. Employers should also be aware of the Equality Acts when adopting remote working or relevant training within their organisation. For instance, an employee working remotely must have equal access to career development, training, and promotion opportunities as those working on-site.



Managing health and safety

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, employers have a responsibility to provide a safe place of work, and this extends to any remote working environments. An employee's workplace is anywhere their work is performed and this includes their home, hub, or office.

Review your general health and safety risk assessment for your organisation to make sure you factor in any potential risks that come with working environments outside of the workplace, such as those posed by using work equipment at home. The Health and Safety Authority provides good guidance on conducting a risk assessment. In addition, BeSmart is a free online tool to guide you through a risk assessment process.

An ergonomic risk assessment is important in the remote set-up. Employers should instruct employees in the correct assessment and set-up of their equipment. Requesting photos of the remote working workspace will give the employer a strong idea of potential risks.

There is a mutual responsibility to ensure health and safety at work and as such, employees have a duty to make their manager aware of any concerns, issues or questions relating to health and safety matters, so necessary action can be taken if needed. Accidents related to home working should be reported in accordance with a company's accident reporting procedure.

Remind employees about any well-being schemes or employee assistance programmes (EAP) in place; there is good information for employees at HSE's Healthy Ireland website.



Data protection

Inform employees about best practice for managing data and maintaining appropriate confidentiality to ensure that personal, company, client, and any sensitive data is kept confidential and secure for remote working. Have the appropriate technical measures in place to protect this data.

Any potential data breaches must be reported to the employer as soon as possible.

The Data Protection Commissioner has produced guidance on the protection of data under a remote working arrangement.



Tools and technology

Technology is the foundation of successful flexible working. With the right equipment, applications, and communications tools you can enable your employees to stay connected and work flexibly wherever they may be. Along with the right IT equipment, employees will need home connectivity and access to the company network and any company-required software.



IT security

Any business can become vulnerable to viruses and malicious attacks. When operating on a remote basis, we rely more heavily on the awareness of everyone to protect their own devices.

It should be noted that an employer cannot require employees to install programmes or applications on devices owned by employees, or to use these devices for remote services. Companies must provide appropriate equipment if employees are expected to access company software.



Employee commitments

Remote working is a two-way trusted relationship. For it to be successful, employees must also play an active role in its success. As leaders, you should be clear about your employees' obligations so that they know what they need to achieve. These include:

- Having an internet connection that is adequate for their job
- Having the ability to access and use all relevant systems and tools
- Staying in touch with managers and colleagues
- Managing their schedules to ensure that there is some overlap with those of their team members, as is necessary for all to complete their roles effectively, including those who may be in other time zones
- Maintaining the required standard of performance
- Complying with the standards, behaviours and policies laid down in the contract of employment and employee handbook
- Abiding by the health and safety requirements and working in a safe manner



Building a remote working culture

Whether we are communicating to our teams remotely or via face to face, communication is more than just words. It is also our tone, our presence, our voice, our accent, our mood, our intent and, of course, our body language.

- Mix your communication mediums – use phone and video, agree your non-negotiables such as when cameras should be on or off
- Review your team practices around trust, ownership and accountability
- Make an extra effort to create and provide shared context – at company, project and task level
- Use smaller teams and one-to-ones to connect with each other on a regular basis
- Allow some time at the start of each meeting or call for a non-work-related chat
- New employees need daily contact; ideally assign a buddy who will maintain very frequent contact and support

Global workforce and jurisdictional considerations

With globalisation, freedom of movement and emerging businesses delivering cross-border provision of services, the possibility of employing a global workforce has gained more significance than ever before. These new opportunities bring new administrative obligations and responsibilities for employers. As tax and reporting obligations of posted workers or employed persons from abroad differ for each country, the proper setup of non-resident employment requires thorough strategic planning covering both local employment law and local tax requirements.

Location and employment rights

The employment rights that govern the terms and conditions of employment will be those of the country where the individual is physically working. Different countries have different thresholds for when employment rights are accrued, and employers will need to be fully briefed on the requirements of specific locations.

Entitlement to leave, statutory benefits and the employment remedies all need to be applicable to the right location. An employment contract covering all aspects of the employment relationship is an essential document to have in place and must be signed by both parties. In addition, customised policies and procedures that set out how the relationship will be managed must also be in place.

Right to work

Ensure your employee has the correct work authorisation documentation in the jurisdiction in which they intend to be employed.

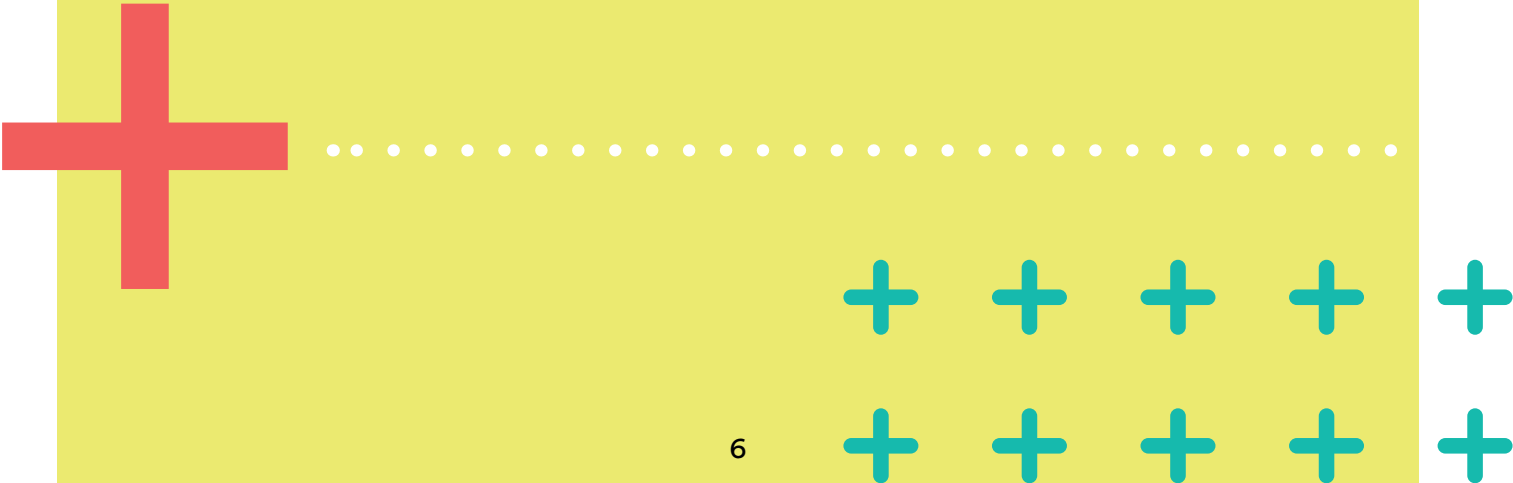
Tax Implications

A person is usually tax resident for a jurisdiction if they fall under the following rules:

- Has a permanent home in the country
- Is present in the country for a period (or more periods) exceeding a total of 183 days, during any 12 consecutive months, ending in the current calendar year

However, it is important to check the requirements in each jurisdiction as the rules may vary significantly.

There can be tax implications for both the employee and employer when an employee is either posted abroad or generally working from another jurisdiction.



Managing remote teams

Regardless of where employees are physically located, it is important for them to feel connected, motivated, and productive. It is possible to have a very successful working relationship with remote teams if some basic rules are adhered to:

- ✓ Observe and listen to the needs of employees
- ✓ Have regular communication to keep your people engaged
- ✓ Remind your employees of your company culture and what is expected of them

According to a recent [Gartner HR survey](#), 41% of remote workers say they don't feel connected to colleagues when working remotely. These findings highlight that merely providing remote working is not enough. There are a number of other aspects that need to be developed and planned in order to ensure that remote working delivers sustainable and effective benefits for all, including the creation of an inclusive work environment for individuals to thrive.

Management activities

Managers play a fundamental role in their team's success as they have a significant influence on team engagement and productivity. Let your managers know how they can best support their teams:

- ✓ **Provide an opportunity for regular check ins** – have weekly one-to-ones if possible, and team check-ins daily or bi-weekly
- ✓ **Continue to provide motivation and feedback** – provide an opportunity for varied and interesting work, recognise and reward employee effort and offer opportunities for development
- ✓ **Set clear goals** – these should be short term (weekly, monthly) and long term (quarterly, annually)
- ✓ **Measure employee deliverables** – be clear about how the performance of employees will be measured
- ✓ **Prioritise contact with those who need it** – if you cannot fit in one-to-ones with everyone on your team, focus on team members who need more support during different times. For example, new employees or someone starting a new project may need more contact whereas a more experienced employee may need less
- ✓ **Monitor workloads** – remember that excessive workload can cause additional stress to employees and impact on their health and well-being

Setting clear expectations





- ✓ When do you expect individuals to be available during the working day? Do you have core working hours where all employees are expected to be accessible? Can you implement certain focus times where an employee does not need to be contacted?
- ✓ What tools do you expect the person to be logged into during core working hours, for example, Microsoft Teams or Slack?

Summary

Whilst many businesses have been operating some form of flexible working for the past 12-18 months, this has been largely unplanned and temporary. For businesses transitioning back into their workplaces, employees are likely to begin to request more permanent or longer-term adjustments to their ways of working. This now offers an opportunity for your business to put in place a well-thought-through flexible working strategy with supporting policies and procedures. This will provide clarity to employees on your company's policies and expectations in a remote or hybrid arrangement.

The right set-up in this area will vary depending on the type of business and industry in which you operate. However, regardless of your sector or industry, it is important to involve employees along the way and adjust practices as needed for a longer-term solution. Upskilling managers in areas such as communication, goal setting and performance management will aid the success of a flexible working strategy.

Plan what can work for your organisation

-  Who are the primary stakeholders who need to be involved in setting up a flexible working strategy within your company – these may include team managers, IT, HR and health & safety representatives?
-  How does the proposed flexible working strategy reflect the mission, vision and culture of your company?
-  How does the proposed flexible working strategy fit in with your company's business objectives? Do you need to consider future business challenges such as an expansion or reduction in workforce?
-  What are the cost impacts of implementing a flexible working strategy in your business?



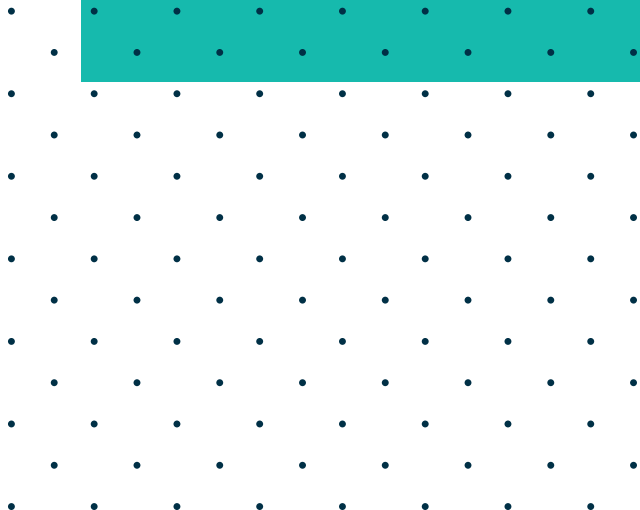
Implement the approach

- ✓ If possible, trial the proposed flexible working strategy in one area of your business before it is fully implemented and make changes where needed
- ✓ Adjust appropriate policies to incorporate the flexible working approach: hiring, onboarding, training, performance management, meetings management and health & safety
- ✓ Communicate the flexible working strategy to the wider company
- ✓ Train or upskill managers in communication, feedback, goal setting and performance management



Review and monitor the success of the strategy

- ✓ Analyse available data such as performance reviews, business KPIs and absenteeism rates. Review whether performance targets have still been met or improved. Monitor absenteeism rates – have they increased or decreased?
- ✓ Survey employee engagement levels - have levels improved or disimproved?
- ✓ Survey manager feedback. How have managers found the transition to remote or hybrid working. Has their team's performance changed?
- ✓ Review associated costs to your business. Have they increased or decreased?



Appendix

Items to consider when setting up a flexible working policy

- ✓ What types of flexible working can your company support – for example, remote working, job sharing, flexitime, compressed hours?
- ✓ What factors will your company need to consider when reviewing a flexible working request? For example:
 - Ability to meet customer demand
 - Ability to organise or redistribute work among existing staff
 - Ability or availability to recruit additional staff
 - Impact on quality
 - Impact on performance
 - Availability of work during periods the employee proposes to work
 - Cost factors
- ✓ What eligibility criteria does your company want to put in place – for example, length of service, job category?
- ✓ Who in the organisation will make the final decision?
- ✓ How do your employees apply for flexible working – do you provide an application form?
- ✓ When will employees receive a reply to their request – 2 weeks/1 month/6 weeks?
- ✓ How often can an employee apply for flexible working?
- ✓ What is your appeals process?



About Enterprise Ireland

Enterprise Ireland is the government organisation responsible for the development and growth of Irish enterprises in world markets. We work in partnership with Irish enterprises to help them start, grow, innovate and win export sales in global markets. In this way, we support sustainable economic growth, regional development and secure employment.

About Voltege

Voltege Management Ltd is a leading Irish HR and Management Consultancy. Voltege's ethos is to effectively partner with and deliver support and advice to clients to meet the needs of their business. Voltege supports scaling start-ups, entrepreneurs, SMEs and undertakes larger organisation design and complex projects with major corporates.

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