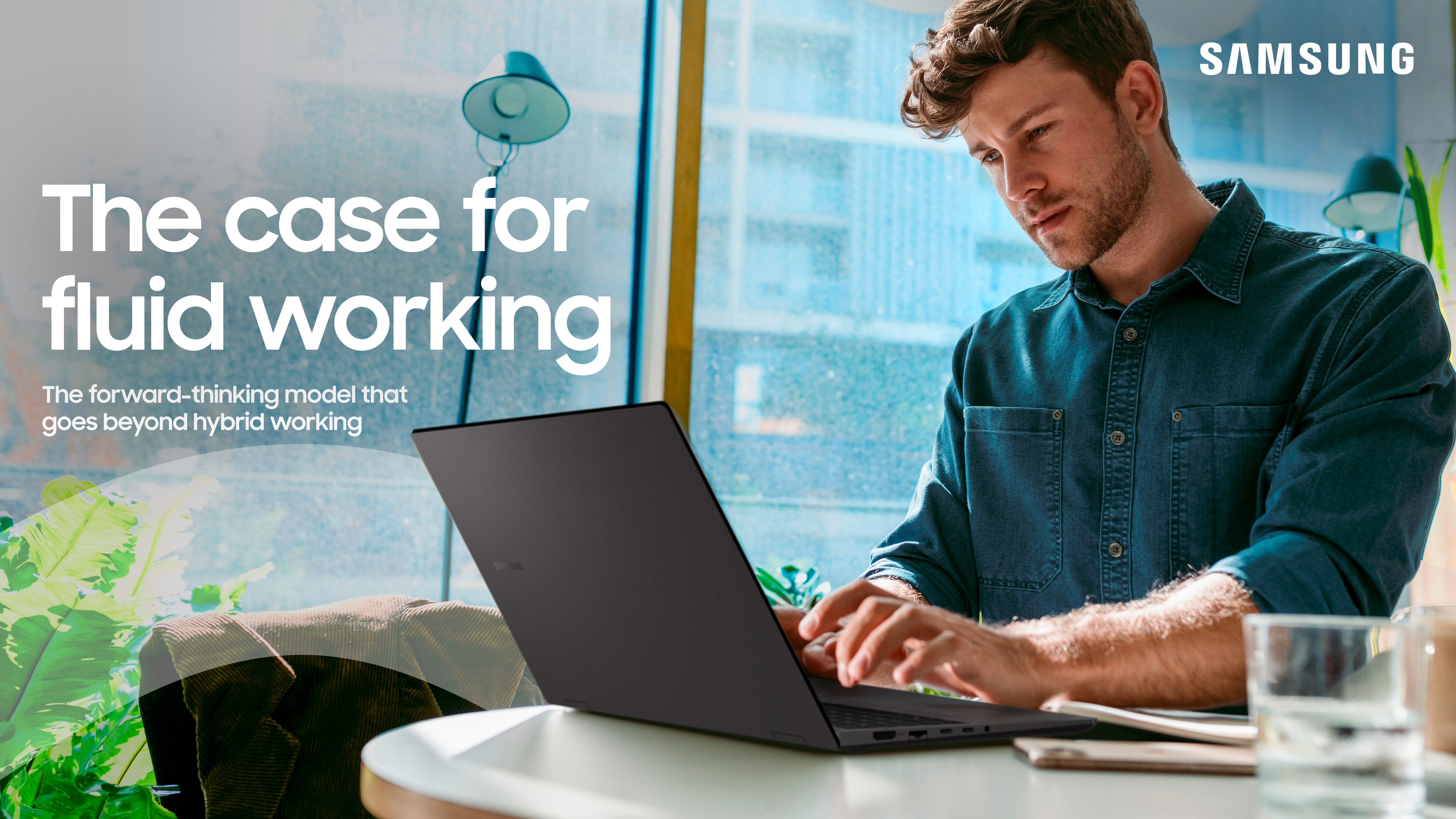


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The case for fluid working

The forward-thinking model that goes beyond hybrid working



The world of work is in flux, I think.

The term 'hybrid working' is confused and conjures companies' missteps. To retain the best talent, Joe Walsh, Director of B2B at Samsung UK, says we need a new way to think about the world of work.

This claim is well supported by the data. For one point of context, if we look at the United Kingdom, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) published a report in May meant to answer this question: is hybrid working here to stay?

According to the ONS report, before the coronavirus pandemic, only 1 in 8 people reported working from home (12%) at least once during the week prior to the survey. Now the number of people permanently working from home is 1 in 7 (14%). If we look at businesses' policies on homeworking, the proportion of organisations that plan to include working from home

as a permanent fixture increased from 16% in autumn of 2020 to 23% in Spring 2022.

But how much should we work at the office? Do we need it at all? And is hybrid working—a term that implies a neat, 1-1 split—even the right way to conceptualise this change?

We are still vacillating around these issues, years since we experienced a big shift in culture and all the opportunities and perils that entails.

And yet amongst the noise, we've begun coming up with some useful viewpoints.



A workspace is a headspace

Many of us are returning to work in some form, but opinions on what this form should take remain hotly divided, not least because of the impact on wellbeing and mental health.

In a BBC article from January 2022, the author describes employees who “have never been so tired.” And, in one global survey, when asked about the biggest working-from-home challenge they face, a majority of respondents said they faced no challenges. But, when there was a challenge, the most-cited obstacle was difficulty unplugging, or separating work from home.

Yet, according to the ONS report on hybrid working, more than 2/3 (78%) of respondents say that working from home part of the time has improved their mental health.

Some of these splits fall along generational lines. Younger people, for example, are more likely to want to work in an office for its proximity

to the city, for its mentoring and skills development, and for its social components.

This generational divide comes to life in the data, too. According to the ONS, “the youngest and oldest workers were least likely to hybrid work... [and] workers aged 30 to 49 years were the most likely to report hybrid working between 27 April and 8 May 2022, with 29% reporting doing so.”

But there’s a limit on how useful it is to make generalities on this topic. That’s the point, I think, that a lot of us have been missing. Everyone is different and every job is different and so there’s no reason to have a one-size-fits all policy in an age when personalisation is possible.



For this reason, I don't particularly like the term 'hybrid working.' It's too binary for the modern world. It's not just working from home versus working from the office. With the right tools, you really can work from anywhere.

And whilst it might seem like an obvious conclusion, according to at least one global survey, that is the biggest benefit for employees of working from home—the flexibility to spend your time how you want to.

And so: **it's about flexibility, a kind of fluidity. A style that accommodates that being at work is now a state of mind.**

So, when I say that a workspace is a headspace, I mean that being at work is a state of mind. For example, for those in the information sector: if you are good at what you do, and you have the right tech behind you, there are increasingly more jobs you can accomplish from a beach in Bali as well as in a tall stalk of steel and glass in London. You can tweak a slide deck when you're waiting in your parked car for school pick up, or when you're in between sets at the gym.

To satisfy everyone, employers need to facilitate this fluid approach.

More profitable companies prefer a fluid model

According to a survey conducted by Accenture, 63% of high-growth companies employ some blend of working from home and working at the office. In contrast, a greater proportion of companies with little to no growth (69%) have decided blending WFH and face-to-face (F2F) won't work for their industry.

83% of the time, workers prefer a blend of WFH and F2F.



Fluid working explained

The term fluid working means individuals working anywhere, anyhow, anytime. The ethos of fluid working is one of focusing on productivity and the benefits of being able to spend more time with your family, not having to commute, that sort of intention.

That we can do these things—reduce our carbon footprint from commuting and also spend more time with our children and attending to hobbies—and still remain highly productive is perhaps not really surprising. Whether or not we all articulated that we could be working remotely, at least a lot of the time, I think that we all knew it, deep down.

In a way, it was overdue, and that explains why we adapted to this shift so swiftly. Digital technology enables us to lead more balanced lives in a profound way. It is about more than just working from home. We now have the tools for fluid work in motion—to make work the way we want, and to blend our personal and professional lives into a mixture that brings out the best of both.

A highly individualised approach is the foundation for fluid working. Each person needs a bespoke arrangement—and so you need flexible technology that all works together well. But scaling that across a whole organisation could prove to be difficult.

Technology is the answer to allowing employees to decide where, when, and how they work—whilst also being easily managed through a common set of controls and tools.

It is at least as big a change in daily life since the advent of factory work in the Industrial Revolution. And this time at least, it feels like more equitable progress, benefiting all workers. But while change can happen fast, progress tends to come in fits and starts.

Businesses are now untethered from the constraints of old 'industrial' ways of working, those inspired by a factory model, with clanging bells and punch cards and the first steel-frame buildings erected to house huge productive machines.

We've got an opportunity now for employees to be more fulfilled and achieve the right balance of work and life. But many companies are missing the mark by thinking that the answer is strictly hybrid working—a binary choice of office or home.

If you look at the numbers, there's no question that the difference between hybrid working, or "office/home", and fluid working, or "work anywhere" is a real emergent phenomenon. In the UK, for example, the number of hybrid workers grew this year, from 13% in early February to 24% in May 2022, according to the Office of National Statistics. But, in my estimation, the number of fluid workers is actually much higher—as, according to the ONS data, 38% of working adults reported having worked from home at some point over the past seven days.

Some of us want to come into work one day a week, while others prefer working from home just once weekly. To flow in the right direction, and to render the transformation of work complete, companies need to allow—and facilitate—all styles.

That's fluid working.

A man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and dark jeans, is sitting in a large, plush orange armchair. He is looking at a laptop on his lap. The room has a wooden ceiling and large windows in the background, letting in bright light. The overall atmosphere is relaxed and modern.

**38% of UK employees
report working
fluidly—having worked
from home at least once
in the previous week.**

When 'fluid working', what should an office be?

Jennifer Magnolfi Astill, one of the world's top researchers on the evolution of workspaces, had a conversation with the Harvard Business Review, where she said that the pandemic accelerated a "natural evolution." The office, as it exists today, is something other than a 'place of work'.

How useful the office is for each job and for each individual will depend on the person and the role they are undertaking. However, the traditional 'office' is usually a place with common utility or usefulness. It's a place to frame our actions and orient us in a mindset. It's a place to collaborate, to talk about something complicated face-to-face. It's a social place and for many of us that's energising. But it also needs to allow for video calls, and that means that many of the current 'open office' plans have been an unmitigated disaster.

And then there's working from home. When you're working from home, your tech kit is your office in essence. And that puts new pressure on IT departments to help form company culture remotely, and to enhance productivity without relying on face-to-face interaction.

The procurement decisions IT makes will—albeit sometimes inadvertently—have a large impact on the culture of a company. We can't leave the folks in the IT department making an estimation—with a finger to the air—about which way the company culture is headed. Because a hybrid—or indeed a fluid—working style will have different technical requirements than pure play remote or in the office.

In a world with an ambiguous future, the IT department will end up making a plan by default and equipping the employees with their best guess of what's required—instead of what's actually needed.

But what makes fluid working in an ambiguous era possible is technology. And it's not just having a single device that works well, but an entire ecosystem that sing together in harmony. It needs to be easy to switch from your phone to your laptop and back again. To throw something up on the monitor in the office or share your screen remotely. When employees are working remotely, care needs to be taken to make sure the quality of the meeting is at least nearly as good as for those in person, and that's only possible with technology that does the job.

And of course, then there are concerns about information security, about fortifying protection for all of the devices outside the building, another dimension of the external office we are all constructing.



A fluid working model includes a digital spine

Companies today need a digital spine, that's the big take away from me.

Only those organisations that see technology as fundamental support—as the backbone—will be able to flourish in a fluid world of work.

It is true to say that the phone and computer you use for work have never been more important. These are now not just how we produce and create but also how we communicate everything when we are away from the office (or speaking to someone who is). But we should not ask our IT departments to bear the brunt of creating a remote working culture; the IT

department has never been more important, and it needs to extend into every sense of how the company operates. We need to empower them with the right tools and expertise to make that happen.

So, while fluid working might be a kind of radical flexibility in principle, helping IT to help employees bring the office home (and beyond) is fluid working in practice.

To help, here's my 4 ways to go with the flow:

4 considerations for fluid working

1.

Empower your team with a digital spine. Your team needs the right technology for video calls, collaboration tools, and for reliability and style, too.

2.

Don't leave the IT dept to determine culture and ways of working by itself. This is a holistic process that requires everyone's input in an open discussion.

3.

The office is a mindset. We no longer commute to physical workplaces. We instead enter a state of mind, let's call it 'work mode.'

4.

There's no one-size-fits-all option. Truth doesn't happen along binary lines and neither should our remote working policy. We don't need to limit ourselves to hybrid working.

Author: Joe Walsh



Bio:

As the director of B2B at Samsung UK & Ireland, Joe Walsh is one of the leading figures in the UK's enterprise technology market.

Joe joined Samsung in 2018, following spells at Stanley Black & Decker, EE and Carphone Warehouse. On joining Samsung, Joe stated that his impact would be reflected by B2B team innovating the next mobile economy with its partners.

With a good understanding and keen researcher into technologies such as 5G, Blockchain, Machine Learning, AI, AR/VR, Connectivity, IoT and Security, Joe is an advocate of the age of information. Joe is educated in economics, majoring in strategy, commercial, innovation and Go-To-Market, making him a passionate practical dreamer of digital innovations that solve problems for the evolution of a digital world.

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