PROSPER
POST PANDEMIC EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME

PROSPER BUSINESS CASE

Successful Hybrid Work in European SMEs

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CONTENTS

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CONTENTS

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01 | AIM OF THIS BUSINESS CASE

Working remotely became a common working model for many companies as a legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic experienced from 2020. Within a very short time, many companies switched to remote office work. By means of online meetings, employees were kept up to date and the next work steps were clarified. This was an abrupt change that did not come about naturally, but due to external circumstances. Many managers did not have enough time to strategically guide this digitalisation process.

While the impetus for this rapid digitisation of the entire European workplace is rooted in the COVID-19 pandemic, a large part of the workforce, especially high-potentials, have now recognised the benefits of hybrid working. A return to a model of working exclusively from a business premises may not be a promising path for many companies. Large international corporations have been using flexible working models such as hybrid working for some time. For many small and medium-sized enterprises, however, the wave of digitalisation came rolling in like a tsunami. Therefore, the question for many European small and medium-sized enterprises is how they can use this digitalisation in the long term and in a targeted manner in order to achieve high employee satisfaction as well as good performance and competitiveness.

The aim of this business case, the first deliverable of the EU project "Post-Pandemic Empowerment Programme - PROSPER", is to give you, as the owner or manager of an SME, management tips and tools for successful, hybrid working. To this end, four central aspects are examined in more detail:

1. **Hybrid productivity**

2. **Hybrid inclusivity**

3. **Hybrid wellbeing**

4. **Hybrid sustainability**

The partners involved in the **PROSPER EU project** are themselves small and medium-sized enterprises that have successfully navigated the rapid digitalisation triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. With this business case, the project partners and their associated organisations share their proven strategies for the healthy productive implementation of hybrid work in SMEs.

This document thus contains a selection of solution-oriented practical recommendations and methods which should serve as an important basis for you as a manager to find the most suitable practices for your company and employees.

However, it should be noted that the digital work context of each company is different and one-size-fits-all solutions will not lead to success. Moreover, the recommendations provided in this booklet are not intended to be and indeed cannot be applied universally. Rather, those practices must be selected that are in line with the company's culture, management style and business processes and communication channels.

02

HYBRID WORKING: WHAT EXACTLY IS IT AND WHAT FORMATS ARE THERE?

Hybrid work is a flexible working model in which work is done not only on the company's premises but also from home or another location and can be arranged flexibly in terms of time. It is therefore a mixture of remote work and work on the company's premises. Employees can therefore work from any location (European Employment Services, 2021).

That alone sounds very simple, but in practice it poses many challenges for employers and employees alike. How much working time should and can be done remotely vs. in the company office? One criterion that determines the amount of work that can be done from home is the company's scope of activities. Office work can easily be done from home, but other activities, such as sales or production, cannot. But the company's philosophy and management style is also reflected in the extent and form of hybrid working. While some managers are open to the concept of hybrid work from the start, others see more dangers.

The implementation of these different forms of hybrid work is determined by each company and is an agreement between the employer and the employee. For example, precise specifications can be given as to how much working time must be held in the office or a free, flexible arrangement can be made. Last but not least, the extent of hybrid work also depends on the working conditions and the activities.

For employers, we can define the following forms of hybrid working:

Office First: The main place of work for employees is the premises of the company. The possibility to work remotely exists for special situations and exceptional cases.

Remote First: Work is generally done remotely rather than on the company's premises, but employees have the option of using the company office at any time.

Flexible Scheduling: staff members work either on the premises or remotely, depending on the situation and needs.

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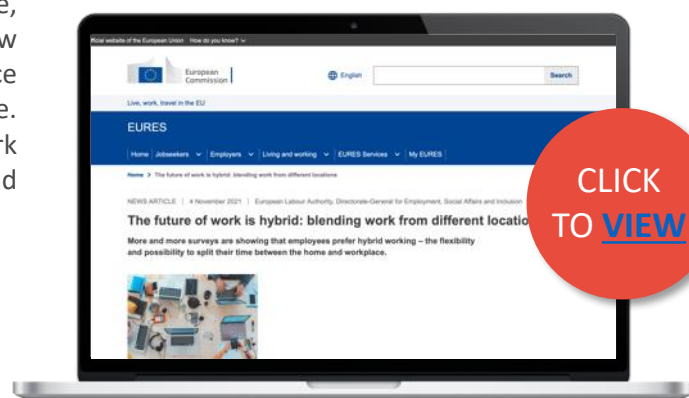
03

HYBRID WORKING IN PRACTICE

Hybrid working, at its most basic, seems straightforward when solely viewed from the spatial aspect: it offers employees the autonomy to choose their working location, be it from home or at the company premises. However, in practice, the hybrid working model becomes more intricate and presents a myriad of challenges for management to address:

Hybrid work invariably require purposeful modes of collaboration, and it's imperative that both employers and their teams are receptive to these changes. Familiarity and openness to digital technologies are vital for harnessing the full potential of hybrid working.

Furthermore, hybrid working places a heightened emphasis on personal accountability among employees. This paradigm shift necessitates trust to be at the forefront of managerial practices. With hybrid work models, the workplace culture undergoes a transformative shift.

Moreover, with increasing focus on sustainability in businesses, it's crucial to integrate intelligent systems in their digitalization journey now. Businesses should be cautious not to merely replicate their traditional in-office practices in a remote context, but rather, innovate and adapt for optimal efficiency and growth.

01

EMPLOYEE MANAGEMENT ADJUSTMENTS:

How does the shift to a hybrid working environment reshape the way employees are managed?

02

DEFINING AN INTEGRATIVE ENVIRONMENT:

What characterizes an effective and integrative hybrid working environment?

03

OPERATIONAL NEEDS:

What operational infrastructure and modifications are necessary for facilitating a hybrid workplace?

04

TECHNICAL AND LEGAL CONCERNS:

Beyond technology needs, what legal regulations and guidelines must businesses be aware of in a hybrid setting?

05

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

What are the cost implications, both immediate and long-term, associated with transitioning to and maintaining a hybrid work model?

04 HYBRID PRODUCTIVITY

Hybrid working digitises collaboration in the business. This sounds obvious, but on closer inspection it is not at all. The essence of hybrid productivity revolves around utilizing digital tools to work with intent, intelligence, and efficiency. When implemented correctly, this can supercharge a company's output, whether in terms of goods, services, or capital. For managers aiming to maximize the potential of hybrid productivity, it becomes paramount to delve into its four core components:

01

COMMUNICATION AND COOPERATION:

The way teams collaborate and communicate determines the efficiency of hybrid work. This encompasses both synchronous (like video calls) and asynchronous (like emails) modes of communication. Effective cooperation tools can enhance teamwork across different time zones or physical locations. There must be a clear picture of the existing communication channels in the company in addition to the realistic balance of workload and assigned worktime.

02

TASK MANAGEMENT AND BACKLOG ORGANIZATION:

Keeping track of ongoing tasks and backlogs - which refer to accumulated yet unfinished tasks or items - is vital. Efficient task management tools ensure that tasks are prioritized, delegated, and tracked efficiently, preventing any job from falling through the cracks.

03

MONITORING AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATION:

In a hybrid environment, traditional supervisory methods become less viable. Managers need robust digital platforms to monitor projects, track employee performance, and measure results. This can lead to more objective performance evaluations and better strategic decisions.

04

ADAPTING TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC SHIFTS:

As the world around us changes, so must our work processes. The hybrid work model used in businesses should be flexible enough to adjust to socio-economic transformations, be it new market trends, technological innovations, or evolving customer needs.

But how can SMEs best harness these principles? First and foremost, there needs to be an understanding of the company's current communication landscape and a realistic assessment of workload versus allocated work hours. It is on this foundation that the right digital technologies should be chosen.

However, the choice of digital tools should be strategic. Tools should be evaluated not in isolation but in conjunction with a company's unique operational processes, communication structures, and channels. It's pivotal to resist the allure of immediately adopting the latest digital innovations without thoughtful consideration. Overloading an organization with cutting-edge tools without clear purpose or alignment can be more of a hindrance than a help. The optimal strategy involves tailoring tool selection to the company's specific needs, ensuring that they complement and enhance existing workflows rather than disrupt them.

4.1. Advantages of Hybrid Productivity at a Glance

If digital tools are used in a targeted and step-by-step manner, the foundation is laid for hybrid productivity. This can result in the following advantages for companies:

- Hybrid productivity creates more time for the essentials. The tasks of the different professions can be done more effectively, more productively and more qualitatively.
- The transfer of knowledge within the company can run more smoothly and quickly.
- Interdepartmental and intradepartmental cooperation can be improved.
- Hybrid productivity can increase the output of goods, services and capital.
- Business processes can not only be automated but also simplified thanks to digital tools.
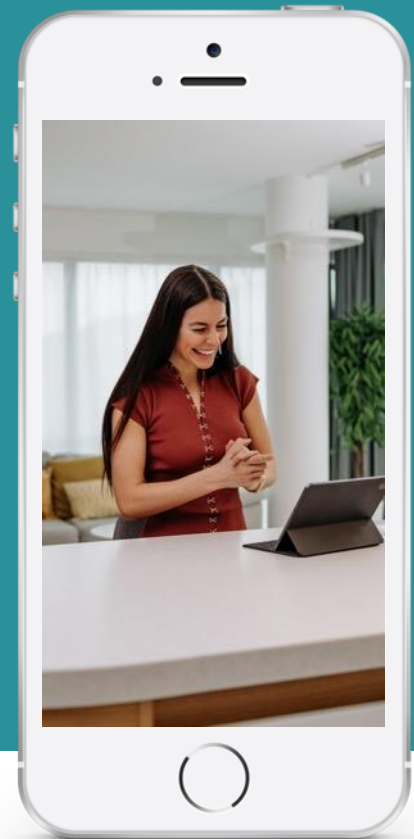
4.2. Challenges

When implementing digital tools and software, companies may face the following hybrid productivity challenges:

Cooperation
Due to a lack of IT skills or work overload, employees make little or no use of the digital tools provided, which has a negative impact on collaboration among team members.

Workflow
Optimising work processes is a very complex task that requires automated and clear structures. Only with the right technologies and the appropriate functions can the optimisation of business processes, communication channels and organisational structure be maximised.

IT security
Increased remote working goes hand in hand with concerns about IT security. Employers must not only ensure IT security in the office, but also invest more in IT and its security for remote workers.

Productivity Measurement
As hybrid working involves different working models, measuring productivity is a major challenge for managers. Proven systems cannot be used for remote working. After all, how is productivity monitored in the remote office? The number of mouse clicks? The frequency of email responses? Many software approaches as well as artificial intelligence systems still reach their limits at this point.

Technological Equipment
Not all employees have the necessary technical equipment at home to take full advantage of hybrid productivity. Even the internet can be a big challenge.

Concentrated Work
In the remote office, distractions are everywhere - from a full dishwasher to pets and errands. The more distractions there are in the work environment, the less focused you are at work. This has an impact on productivity.

4.3. Methods and Tips

Digital tools can never develop their full potential if the individual processes of the corporate presence culture are simply mapped digitally. Rather, a digitisation concept tailored to the company and its corporate culture is needed to fully exploit potential hybrid productivity. We show you which methods you can use to support hybrid productivity:

1. Virtual Office for Teams

Hybrid working requires an optimal virtual "office"/workspace in which employees can collaborate and network. A virtual workspace is used to simulate an office environment. In this way, everyone can work at home or at a favourite location, but still together with their colleagues. In this way, the "we" are feeling remains and the closeness to the team is maintained. Popular platforms for this are, for example: Walkabout workplace, Wurkr and Sococo.

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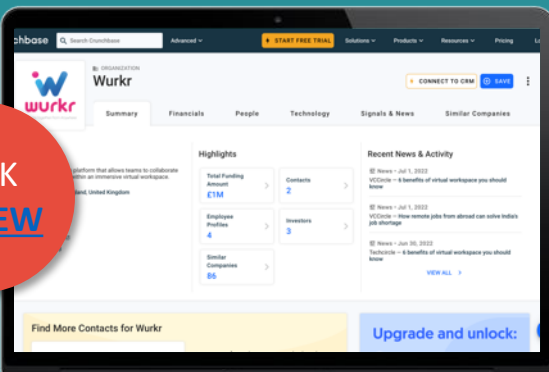
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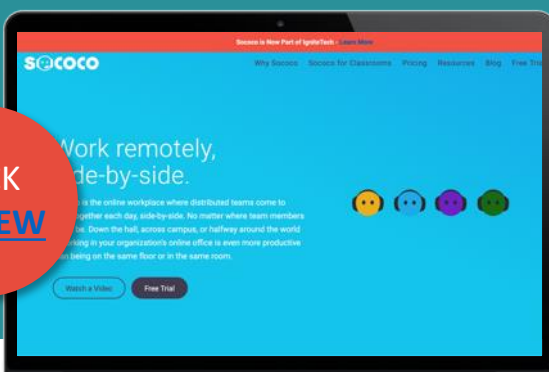
2. Ensuring a Learning Culture

Employers should on the one hand identify the digital learning gaps of employees and on the other hand be aware of changing market needs in order to be able to react quickly to these market changes by providing employees with the necessary training opportunities.

3. Quick Arrangements through Calendar Synchronisation

Being able to consult with team members again and again is an important premise of hybrid productivity. A very simple function, namely that of calendar synchronisation, enables team members to quickly recognise when they can consult briefly with whom, obtain brief information or even engage in quick brainstorming or exchange ideas. This makes possible what is also possible in the shared office: a quick and efficient exchange about professional matters, exactly when you need it.

4. Less is More

There are a lot of very good digital tools that facilitate work in different ways or simplify business processes. To enable hybrid productivity, it is important not to overdo the number of software and tools used in the company. Using a single suite of programmes can increase productivity, save time and achieve better results.

5. Recognise Changes

Nothing is as certain as change, especially in the field of information and communication technologies. Managers should constantly review workflows and processes and make changes as needed to stay up to date.

4.4. Lessons Learned

No company can avoid the topic of hybrid productivity as part of the digitalisation process. Whether in the office or working remotely, there are always things outside of professional tasks that require attention. Especially in the area of hybrid productivity, you can achieve focused work with tools:

- Digital and flexible working has become a critical factor in recruiting and retaining talented employees, as they increasingly prefer alternative working conditions.

- Hybrid productivity is not only influenced by remote workers, but also by organisational culture, organisational structure and other dimensions such as hybrid inclusivity and hybrid wellbeing.

- Although all employees are affected by digitalisation, they will not be equally open to the idea of hybrid working.

- Remote work can lead to even better results if employees are equipped with the necessary skills such as digital skills and technologies, proper internet connectivity, and safe software.

- In order to fully utilise the benefits of hybrid work and to identify and mitigate risks, framework conditions must be created that are respected and adhered to by all parties involved. Ideally, these framework conditions are developed in a process that takes into account the wishes of both sides, the employees and the managers, and provides for regular reviews.

THE PERSPECTIVES OF MANAGERS OF EUROPEAN SMES

- *Hybrid work arrangements must be understood as a continuous process, without an end phase, therefore they need to be revised regularly.*
(MOMENTUM, Ireland)

- *Hybrid working, compared with working in the corporate office, is a very different kind of work. With proper planning and structuring, hybrid work can offer significant benefits, such as a better work-life balance, lower environmental impact and a larger talent pool for companies, as recruitment does not necessarily have to take place in a specific geographical location.*
(DIE BERATER, Austria)

- *Hybrid working relies on good organisation, understanding and mutual trust.*
(EUEI, Denmark)

- *New, common and objective indicators must be introduced to monitor hybrid productivity. New sharing and storage procedures need to be introduced with special attention to security.*

- *Employees should not feel pressured to be too digital if they are more productive doing other tasks. As a manager, it is important to recognise that each employee has a different speed to complete tasks digitally.*
(CATRO, Bulgaria)

- **Cybersecurity is gaining central importance in the hybrid work model. IT security is to be understood as a basic prerequisite for a successful digital transformation.**
(Smart Revolution, Italy)

- *The extent of hybrid productivity is not only dependent on remote workers, but also on organisational culture and structure, as well as other dimensions such as hybrid inclusivity and hybrid wellbeing.*
(BUPNET, Germany)

- *To ensure hybrid productivity, managers and also employees should focus on communication.*
(Eurotraining, Greece)

05

HYBRID
INCLUSIVITY

As businesses adopt and evolve their hybrid working models, it's vital for management to instil a sense of belonging among employees. With the rapid pace of digitization, there's a risk that employees may feel sidelined, viewing themselves more as mere cogs in a digital machine rather than valuable contributors to the company's mission. If not addressed proactively, such feelings can spiral into a sense of social isolation, leading to reduced morale, detachment from team dynamics, and potentially, departures from the company. Hybrid inclusivity, therefore, becomes a central tenet of modern work culture. It emphasizes that all team members, irrespective of their roles, hierarchies, or professional responsibilities, have equal and unhindered access to the company's digital infrastructure. Moreover, it's not just about access, but also ensuring that employees possess the skills and confidence to effectively utilize these digital tools.

True inclusivity in the hybrid model champions the idea that digitization is not an exclusive domain, reserved for specific roles or tiers within the company. Instead, it's a collective endeavour, engaging every employee. This holistic approach not only ensures operational efficiency but also fosters a collaborative, inclusive, and cohesive work environment where every member feels valued and integral to the company's success. Key approaches to making the transition smoother:

01

TRAINING FOR ALL:

Offer training sessions for everyone, ensuring that no one struggles with the new tools. This isn't just about how to use them, but also why they're beneficial.

02

OPEN COMMUNICATION:

Encourage feedback. Understanding employee concerns helps in making necessary adjustments. Regular check-ins can also help in identifying anyone feeling disconnected.

03

EQUAL ACCESS:

Ensure every employee, irrespective of their position or role, has access to the necessary digital tools. This creates a level playing field and promotes inclusivity.

04

TEAM BUILDING:

Hybrid work can sometimes dilute the team spirit. Organizing virtual team-building events or regular catch-ups can help maintain camaraderie In companies, hybrid working is accompanied by major and yet often underestimated challenges on a social level.

5.1. Advantages of Hybrid Inclusivity at a Glance

It goes without saying that the technical component of implementing digital processes or tools in the company already presents enough challenges for managers. But if employees are seen as equals within the company in the sense of a hybrid inclusivity, this brings many advantages for the company in the long run:

- Strengthening employees' mental wellbeing.
- Increasing employees' motivation.
- Strengthening the sense of unity.
- Promoting better cooperation.
- Improving the internal information flow.
- Promoting the cultivation of social contacts within the company.
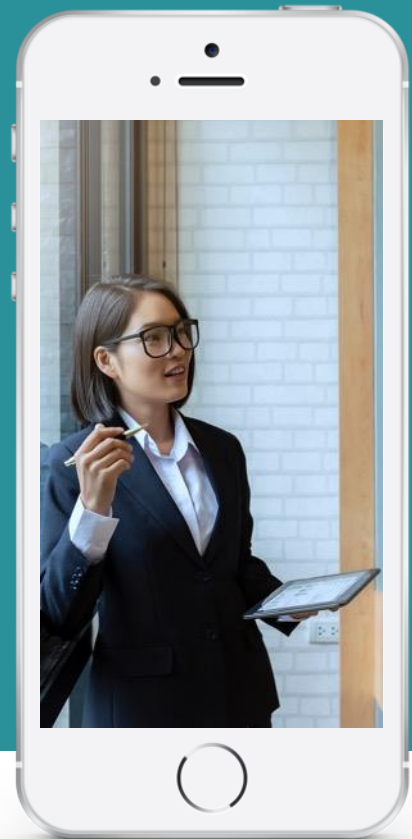
5.2. Challenges

Challenges at the social level are usually very complex. One reason for this is because they are very individual and cannot be solved with an overall concept. For managers, the following challenges in particular arise in the area of hybrid inclusivity:

Unfair Assessment of Performance

Research shows that remote workers are about 5% more productive (Harvard Business, January 2021). However, studies show that 64% of managers believe that on-site employees perform better than remote workers. This even leads to employees working on premises being given a higher pay rise or promoted more quickly than remote employees (Gartner, April 2021). This unequal treatment of employees in hybrid work is a major source of risk and can lead to exclusion.

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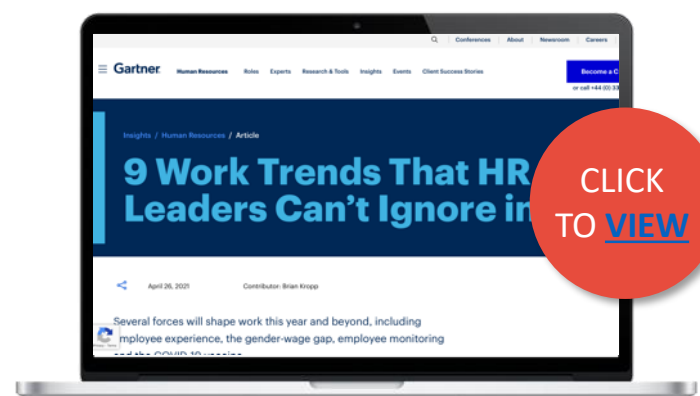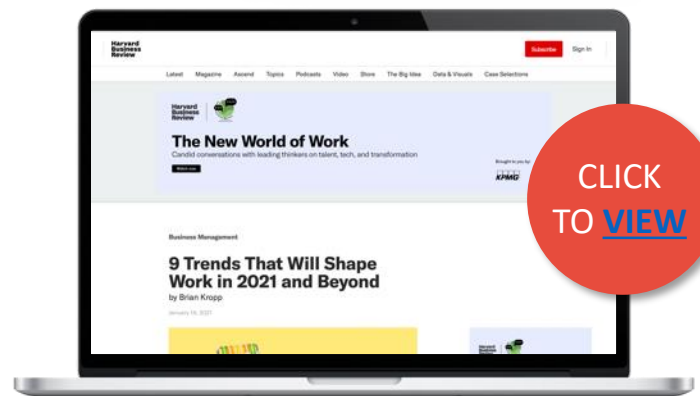
Digital Skills Gap

Not all employees have the same digital skills. In order to be able to use digital tools effectively, it is crucial to equip employees with the necessary skills. Only in this way they can master their daily work with digital tools in a self-determined manner.

Trust Instead of Control

Hybrid work environments require a high degree of trust from managers, which is considered a key competence of hybrid work environments. However, trust is an important aspect not only from the perspective of the manager, but also from that of the employees, as trust in the manager promotes job satisfaction (Jäckel 2020). If managers do not have genuine trust in their employees, they should rethink human resource management, starting from a more "careful" recruitment process.

5.3. Methods and Tips

But how can hybrid inclusivity be implemented in practice? We will show you some elements that you too can implement in your company:

1.

Virtual Teambuilding Breaks

Online coffee or lunch breaks can be an entertaining change in the daily routine of remote work. They serve the exchange among employees and support the feeling of togetherness. For example, as a manager you can organise virtual pizza breaks where all employees have pizza or other food delivered to the place of work at the same time. Virtual office parties are also possible, or providing employees with care packages containing special products that match the company.

2.

Buddy System

In the buddy system, managers bring two people together to promote informal and very open communication between them. A buddy system is essential in hybrid work models in the context of onboarding new employees. Experienced employees serve as support for new workers to settle into the company and its values and social fabric. Buddies are usually colleagues from the same team or in similar functions. However, this does not always have to be the case and can be determined by the managers.

3. Peer Group Support

Hybrid work is often very isolated. There is no need to meet in the hallway or the coffee kitchen, but with a little creativity it can also be done online. By means of online peer group meetings, an informal exchange basis among employees should be made possible and promoted. These informal get-togethers are an important driver of hybrid belonging.

4. Teambuilding Activities

If people rarely get together in the office due to hybrid working, this simply has to happen in a different place and setting in order to promote a good working atmosphere and networking. Perfectly suited for this are teambuilding activities, the added value of which has already been recognised by many companies. Teambuilding activities usually also aim to promote different competences, such as creative problem solving.

5. Online Jour-Fixe

Hybrid work needs joint exchange to clarify the next steps, divide up tasks or generate ideas. Just like in face-to-face culture, jour fixes are ideal for this. A series of presentations and/or performances, discussions or similar events that happen on a fixed day every month. The regularity of these jour fixes is extremely important in the case of a hybrid work organisation. Make sure that the jour fixe is always held on the same day and at the same time. This gives employees security and structure.

These meetings also create the opportunity to promote open communication among each other. This can be a fixed point in the agenda and also concern the exchange of private information such as experiences at the weekend.

6. Adaptation of the Office Space

Leaving the premises as they are, but at the same time switching to hybrid working is possible, but in many ways it does not make sense. Hybrid working should promote better communication and networking between employees. To achieve this, parts of the company premises must or can be adapted. Create a spatial solution in the company where creative ideas can be exchanged, experiences and knowledge shared, questions asked and meetings of all kinds between employees made possible.

5.4. Lessons Learned

Hybrid inclusivity is a very important factor in implementing hybrid work successfully in the long term:

- Used professionally and responsibly, digital tools and technologies can promote hybrid belonging in the company. The prerequisite for this is always to develop a comprehensive strategy for the use of digital tools and to focus not only on technical and financial aspects, but also to include the social component. Digitisation processes must be supported by the employees in order to be implemented successfully.

- Digital tools have become an indispensable part of the recruitment process and human resource management, enabling more people to be reached. They also offer numerous opportunities for onboarding activities. At the same time, these tools can

also be a hindrance if employees do not have the necessary technical expertise or digital skills to use them.

- It is crucial to ensure that leadership behaviours and processes in hybrid teams do not exclude anyone. The 'we' feeling must never be lost sight of. Clear and open communication is very important, because you cannot "not communicate".

- All employees and managers, regardless of their position, hierarchy, or responsibility in the company, are affected by the digitalisation process and its challenges in particular because not everyone has the same access to the same services and not everyone has the same level of digital proficiency. The only differences are the extent and the areas of work concerned.

THE PERSPECTIVES OF MANAGERS OF EUROPEAN SMES

- *Striking a balance between hybrid work and hybrid belonging can make a company a highly attractive place to work. However, it requires managers at all levels to listen to and coach employees*
  (Catro Bulgaria)

- *An inclusive culture is increasingly an important competitive advantage for companies when it comes to recruiting and retaining talents.*
  (Smart Revolution, IT)

- *Results of scientific studies show that trust is an essential foundation for digital leadership and collaboration. But trust isn't just emotional—it's scientific. For digital collaboration, trust and clear communication are game-changers*
  (EUEI, DK)

- *Changes within a company must take place in dialogue with the employees and include the organisational culture.*
  (DIE BERATER, AT)

MOMENTUM, IE

Balance in hybrid work isn't just about logistics, it's about belonging. Inclusivity isn't a buzzword; it's our edge in the talent game

06

HYBRID WELLBEING

Promoting the physical and mental wellbeing of their own employees is a focus for many managers and HR specialists. If most of the work is done at the computer and is hybrid work, hybrid wellbeing inevitably becomes the focus of managers' responsibility as well as HR and leadership staff. The reasons for this are many and varied.

Taking work into one's own four walls automatically leads to a certain mixing of private and professional life. Where people live, they also work. This has advantages, but also some disadvantages. Remote work has the advantages of time flexibility and focused performance. These advantages contribute significantly to increasing the productivity of employees. However, the continuous and intense increase in productivity in a digital environment can have serious effects on wellbeing. This effect is further intensified by the fact that people working in hybrid environments feel they have to do more than if they were working exclusively on the premises (Harvard Business, January 2021). The background is simple: no one can see what hybrid employees are doing and when. As a result, employees feel the internal pressure to be more productive. However, this higher productivity is at the expense of the employees' wellbeing. Often, restlessness increases, the stress level rises and employees feel burnt out.

In addition, hybrid working leads to spending even more working time in front of the computer, as meetings are also held online. The result is greater strain on the eyes, which can lead to the so-called "office eye syndrome". Since hybrid working eliminates the natural movement from one office to another or to a meeting room, there is a risk of greater strain on the musculoskeletal system. Hybrid working can therefore also have a far-reaching influence on the physical condition of employees.

Hybrid wellbeing therefore describes the impact of information and communication technologies and digital services on the mental, physical, social and emotional health of workers. Promoting hybrid wellbeing is an essential part of the responsibility of managers and leaders. It also leads to broader interactions with issues of belonging and productivity.

6.1. Advantages of Hybrid Wellbeing at a Glance

Integrating hybrid wellbeing strategies into the business environment has multifaceted advantages:

1. Promoting Physical and Mental Health:

Hybrid work models often mean more flexibility. Employees can adjust their environment to suit ergonomic needs, take breaks to stretch or walk, and even integrate fitness into their routine, all of which contribute to physical wellbeing. The flexibility also extends to mental breaks. The hybrid model can alleviate the stress of long commutes and rigid schedules, allowing employees to curate workspaces that foster mental calmness and focus.

## 2. Promoting Motivation and Awareness:

Employees often feel more valued when given the trust and autonomy inherent in hybrid work models. This trust can boost motivation, as workers feel empowered to manage their tasks in ways that suit their personal rhythms. With the flexibility to balance work and personal life better, employees often become more aware of their wellbeing needs and can act proactively, ensuring they remain at their peak both mentally and physically.

3. Strengthening the Sense of Unity:

With the right tools and strategies, a hybrid model can foster a strong sense of community. Regular virtual team meetings, collaborative projects, and digital team-building exercises can bridge the physical distance, cultivating a united front and ensuring no team member feels isolated.

4. Promoting a Good Working Atmosphere:

When teams are supported in their wellbeing and given flexibility, it often results in happier, more content employees. This positive mood radiates, creating a vibrant, collaborative, and supportive atmosphere, whether team members are working remotely or in the office.
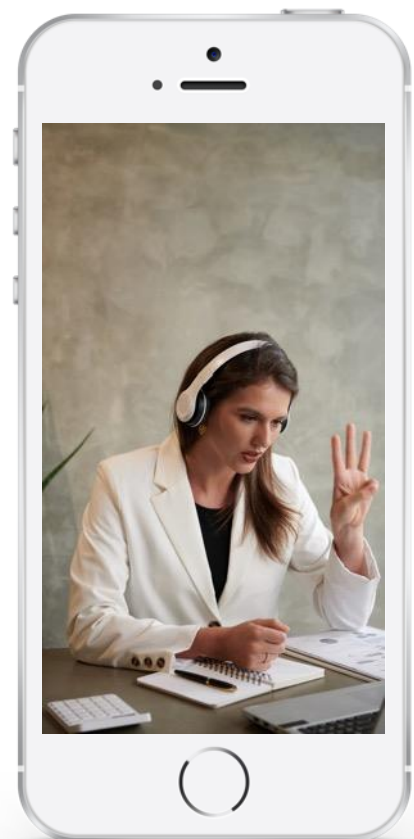
6.2. Challenges

And on the flipside, of course, promoting hybrid wellbeing poses the following challenges to SME leaders in particular:

Expanded Management

COVID-19 has brought the private and health aspects of employees into the centre of managers' tasks. If managers take on this task and integrate it into their area of responsibility, it can positively influence the physical and mental wellbeing of employees and lead to an increase in performance (Baker, 2020). However, this presents managers with a change in leadership style.

Digital Overload

Remote work leads to employees working more and longer. Coupled with the feeling and internal pressure of having to work more, this lengthening of the working day can lead to digital overload in the long term.

Scepticism

While many employees will accept offers to promote hybrid wellbeing and related physical and mental health, some employees will also be sceptical about the offers or believe that they do not need them. The challenge for managers is to identify which employees need the services (such as wellbeing days, employee engagement assistance programs, etc) and to figure out how to convince them.

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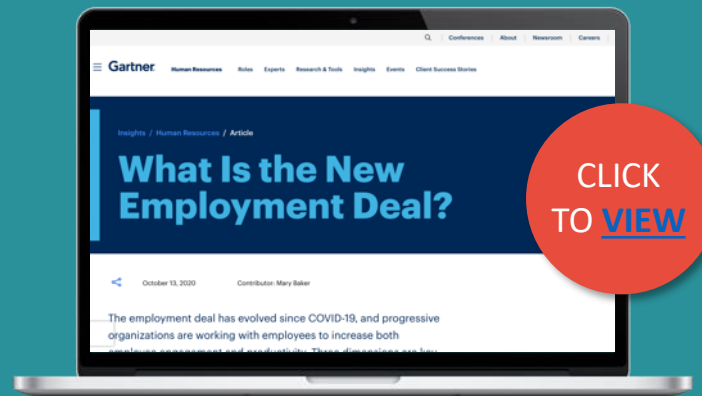
6.3. Tactics to Nurture Wellbeing in a Hybrid Work Landscape

There are hardly any jobs left that do not rely on technology. On the contrary, numerous professions are even carried out entirely online. This draws managers into the responsibility to implement measures of hybrid wellbeing in the workplace. Here are some examples:

1. Counselling Services

Managers should offer holistic support to employees on several levels: direct professional counselling services to support employees' mental health, as well as free services for employees' daily contacts, to promote a sense of belonging. This could include family members. The advantage of this is that partners, friends or relatives can have a close relationship with the staff member and provide emotional support. Examples of this are welcome gifts for the family of new employees, organising an open day to which all family members of employees are invited, or other events aimed at connecting family and work.

2. Offline Breaks

In addition to the lunch break, employees who work in hybrid mode should take regular breaks of 5 to 10 minutes. These short breaks from working online should not be used to do work offline. These breaks should be exclusively for relaxation.

3. Hybrid Wellbeing as Part of the Corporate Culture

What is experienced at the highest level in companies is perceived by all employees. Create a corporate culture based on trust, support for others and, above all, self-care.

4. Creative Quiz

Hybrid wellbeing is very individual: different employees will need support in different areas of hybrid wellbeing. Through creative quizzes that included questions on social and psychological issues, managers can gain a little insight into aspects of employees' mental health and, if necessary, address issues with coordinated measures.

5. Workplace Health Promotion

In most European countries, workplace health promotion is a voluntary additional benefit provided by employers. However, due to the progressive digitalisation of the working world, this element must be very central in order to be able to achieve hybrid wellbeing of the employees. When developing a concept for workplace health promotion, it is important to refer to digitalisation. This includes not only the higher stress level and the risk of burnout, but also the physical component of increased strain. The measures for workplace health promotion can include new working time models, proper sitting posture at the workplace, ergonomics at the workplace or also relaxation techniques.

6.4. Lessons Learned

Hybrid wellbeing is unavoidable for SMEs and can be promoted with individual strategies as well as digital tools. Key findings of the hybrid wellbeing field include:

- In order to achieve hybrid wellbeing in the company and among employees, it is important to ensure that the remote workplace does not feel secluded and separate from the company premises.

- Digitalisation has fundamentally changed the classic workplace in a very short time. This has been accompanied not only by improvements, but also by health crises, which can be both physical and physical in nature. Hybrid wellbeing measures can mitigate these health risks.

- Hybrid wellbeing requires the correct use of information and communication technologies. As digitalisation will not decline in the coming years, but will continue to advance, employees will need to work with technology throughout their professional lives. This fact alone makes managers responsible for promoting hybrid wellbeing through policies and best practices.

THE PERSPECTIVES OF MANAGERS OF EUROPEAN SMES

Hybrid wellbeing challenges us all to learn and apply new skills. Employees need to become aware of taking care of their own health and safety. This thinking needs to be supported by management.
(Catro Bulgaria)

Hybrid wellbeing requires a new organisation of work, new skills and ways of thinking for people. Employees must recognise and understand more on their own that work cannot "damage" their mental and physical wealth.
(Smart Revolution, IT)

Our digital workspaces are, above all, human spaces. While technology propels us forward, it's our collective human spirit that binds us. Together, we navigate, correct, and grow from every challenge.
(Momentum, IE)

Prioritizing hybrid wellbeing isn't about slowing down—it's about smart and sustainable productivity (EUEI, DE).

07

HYBRID SUSTAINABILITY

Due to rapid digitalisation, sustainability has become much more than simply a social and ecological issue. And that is a good thing, because only sustainability strategies that include the entire value chain lead to a promising and competitive economy. This includes energy-efficient data centres as well as greener supply chains.

But what is hybrid sustainability, and isn't it somehow a contradiction in terms?

It is true that technologies are responsible for releasing substances that are harmful to the climate and environment. However, this can be prevented through hybrid sustainability:

This includes reducing and offsetting CO2 emissions, saving excessive resources, and avoiding technological and digital waste within the company.

Luca Ferraro goes further in the understanding of sustainability in hybrid in that it not only refers to environmental impact but also about gender equality, equal working opportunities and inclusivity, in line with UN Sustainable Development Goal guidelines. Furthermore, hybrid sustainability provides a tool to discuss, reflect and evaluate individual, corporate, and societal needs and problems. The concept of hybrid sustainability underlines the need to critically question what companies contribute to society.

Hybrid sustainability refers to practices that use digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) in a way that prevents or reduces the negative environmental impacts associated with ICTs.

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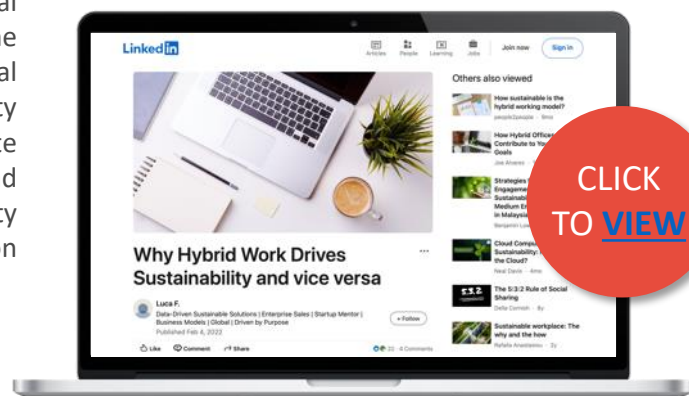
But where can companies start with hybrid sustainability? Two central areas have emerged for this:

01

GREEN IT:

Green IT aims to reduce the impact of ICT on the environment. Green IT is not only concerned with production and disposal, but above all with the way resources are used.

02

GREEN-THROUGH-IT:

What characterizes an effective and integrative hybrid working environment?

03

ALIGNMENT WITH UN SDGS IN A HYBRID WORLD:

Advocates for hybrid strategies that ensure universally accessible opportunities. This would integrate offline and online initiatives, ensuring hybrid sustainability aligns with the broader objectives of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

04

HYBRID GENDER EQUALITY:

Promote equal representation in both physical and digital workspaces. Emphasize equal pay, growth opportunities, and representation across decision-making levels in a hybrid setting and proactively prevent inadvertent gender biases in digital tools used in hybrid workplaces.

05

EQUAL HYBRID WORKING OPPORTUNITIES:

Support the democratization of the hybrid workspace. Ensure roles and responsibilities in both physical and digital realms are available to a diverse range of talents, unhindered by geographical or societal boundaries.

06

HYBRID INCLUSIVITY:

Nurture the creation of a hybrid environment that's receptive to the diverse needs of all users. Advocate for hybrid platforms designed with accessibility features to cater to individuals with disabilities. Ensure everyone, irrespective of their background, has equal access to digital tools and physical opportunities.

7.1. Challenges

The challenges in the area of hybrid sustainability for SMEs lie in particular in the following aspects:

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The energy needed for a single internet search or email is small, approximately 4.1 billion people, or 53.6% of the global population, now use the internet. Those scraps of energy, and the associated greenhouse gases emitted with each online activity, can add up. The carbon footprint of our gadgets, the internet and the systems supporting them account for about 3.7% of global greenhouse emissions, according to some estimates. It is similar to the amount produced by the airline industry globally, according to Mike Hazas, a researcher at Lancaster University. And these emissions are predicted to double by 2025. Why your internet habits are not as clean as you think - BBC Future

CLICK TO **VIEW**

Increase in Electricity and Gas Prices

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and high inflation in 2022, gas and electricity prices have risen to unmanageable levels for many companies. If workers or employers have to pay all the costs for gas and electricity caused by remote working, this creates another big challenge for both sides.

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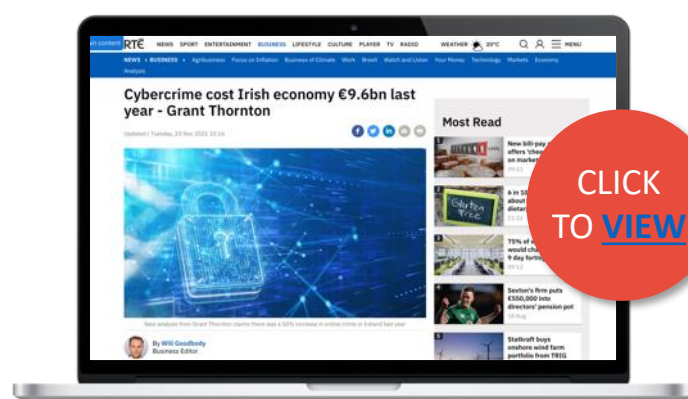
Data Security

In the wake of the global pandemic, the move to remote working increased the number of cyber-attacks aimed at remote and hybrid environments. Cybercrime cost Irish economy €9.6bn in 2020 with a 50% increase in online crime in Ireland in 2020 - Grant Thornton. It is essential for companies to take measures to protect themselves, their people and their customers from data leakages. This in turn necessitates the use of more technologies and digital tools to protect digital data. The increase in technologies thus also comes at the expense of sustainability.

7.2 Advantages of Hybrid Sustainability at a Glance

Hybrid sustainability can:

* save energy costs
* reduce downtime
* reduce emissions
* optimise processes, technology and plant performance
* lead to a competitive advantage.
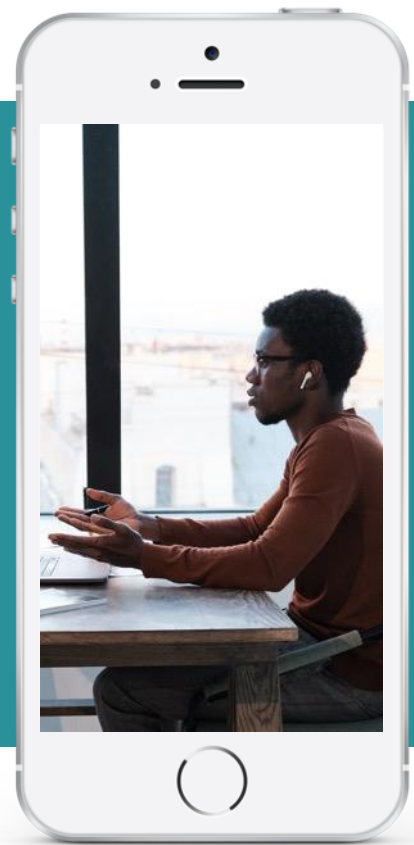
7.3. Measures and Tips

A truly sustainable design of digitalisation in companies is still rare, not least because technology is developing so rapidly and digital sustainability strategies require ongoing adaptation. Thinking about sustainability and digitalisation together is therefore still new for many executives, which is why we are providing you with some tools that will serve as thought-provoking ideas for your own practices:

1. Carbon Offset

Directors and managers must consider the environment as part of their responsibility and implement an internal system that calculates the carbon footprint of all company practices. In return, CO_2 emissions can be offset through different environmental projects.

2. Green Hardware

Environmental protection begins for a company with the purchase of hardware. This is an area that is very often ignored, but is very simple to implement. The focus is on resource-saving production, durability, low energy consumption and environmentally friendly disposal. Seals of quality for green IT, such as the Blue Angel, and others outlined in this interesting article - Five Seals for Sustainable IT, help in the selection of environmentally friendly hardware. When it comes to disposing of existing hardware, proper disposal is key. Individual parts can be recycled and reused.

3. Efficient Data Management

In addition to sustainable hardware and software, data management also plays an important role in hybrid sustainability. Manufacturing companies in particular can avoid overproduction through proper data management.

4. Cloud Hosting

Working in a more resource-efficient way is also made possible by cloud hosting. Instead of a company-owned server, the data is stored in a cloud in a resource-saving way. This reduces the hardware requirements of companies.

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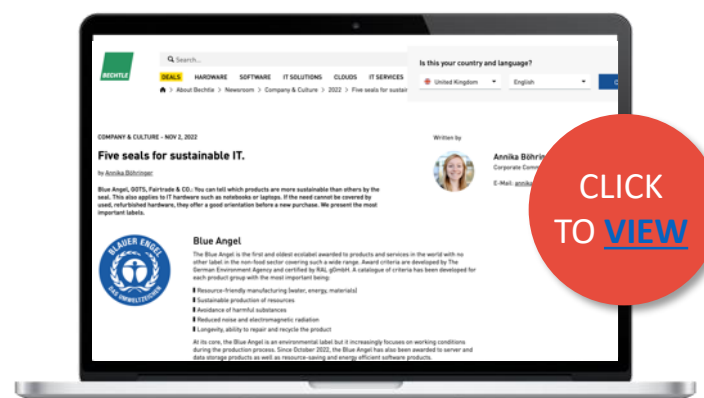
5. Paperless Processes

Getting rid of the printers in the office sounds impossible? There are in fact numerous options for green IT software that make paperless offices possible. If you convert your company to paperless processes, this will also lead to a reduction in bureaucracy and documentation. Moreover, there is no need to buy paper or toner. The use of digital signatures is a cornerstone of a truly paperless process is the adoption of digital signatures. These eliminate the need for physical documents to be printed, signed, and scanned. Digital signatures provide secure and legally binding methods to authenticate documents, agreements, and approvals. Not only do they reduce paper consumption, but they also speed up transaction times and improve document traceability.

6. Optimised Server Room

It is not only the server itself that consumes energy; cooling and lighting are other important resource-wasting factors that you can address in your company. You can do this, for example, by using rooms for the servers that have little or no sunlight. Windows can be equipped with reflective foils and insulated.

7. Employees as Part of Hybrid Sustainability Strategies

No matter which hybrid sustainability strategy you pursue in your company, make sure to involve employees so that they can develop an awareness of green IT. Some practices of hybrid sustainability, such as purchasing sustainable hardware, may not affect the work of employees at first glance, but others, such as paperless processes, change the daily work of employees enormously. If the topic of hybrid sustainability is exemplified by managers with conviction and as a matter of course, acceptance among employees is quicker and easier.

7.4. Lessons Learned

Hybrid sustainability is an ongoing process that must be understood as part of the corporate culture.

- Hybrid sustainability leads to being able to fully exploit the potential of digital technologies.

- With *green IT and green-through-IT* measures, companies can not only contribute to hybrid sustainability, but also reduce costs and expenses within the company.

- Measures of hybrid sustainability are not only a necessity but lead to a competitive advantage.

- Sustainability goes hand in hand with hybrid productivity, hybrid wellbeing and hybrid belonging; all aspects support each other.

THE PERSPECTIVES OF MANAGERS OF EUROPEAN SMES

- *Remote working can contribute significantly to environmental sustainability as it reduces public commuting, especially in the case of those employees who do not use sustainable transport.*
  (Die Berater, AT)

- *Both employees and employers should be aware of the negative environmental impact of digital disruption and be prepared to take a proactive stance to effect change.*
  (Catro Bulgaria)

- *Sustainability goes hand in hand with hybrid productivity, hybrid wellbeing and hybrid belonging. All of these elements support each other like puzzle pieces.*
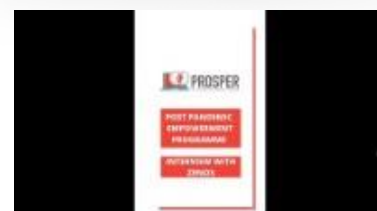 *(Eurotraining, EL)*

- *Hybrid sustainability depends on changing our work behaviour and habits - at all levels and in all types of activities.*
  (EUEI, DK)

- *The impact of hybrid work has become an important part of measuring corporate footprint.*
  (SMART REVOLUTION, IT)

CLICK ON PLAY TO LEARN FROM AN SME INTERVIEW

PROSPER

POST PANDEMIC EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME

INTERVIEW WITH ZENOS

08 BEST PRACTICES

For flexible or hybrid work arrangements to be successful, open lines of communication must be established. This standard of professional excellence includes the following features:

01

MAKE USE OF ELECTRONIC MEANS OF COMMUNICATION:

Video conferencing, instant messaging, and project management platforms are just a few examples of the digital communication tools that any employee at any SME should use to facilitate real-time communication and cooperation among team members. A manager of a certification body for individuals also highlighted that the use of such tools facilitates communication, decision-making, and problem-solving across geographical boundaries.

02

OUTLINE THE NORMS AND REQUIREMENTS FOR DIALOGUE:

Set specific goals for accessibility, response times, and preferred channels of contact (at the executive level, with the IT manager). A software engineer at a technology company said that this practice helps to ensure that team members know when and how to communicate, which in turn reduces the possibility of misunderstandings and delays. Guidelines for effective cooperation should include preferred means of communication that are adapted to the needs of individual activities and contexts.

03

INITIATE TEAM MEETINGS AND CHECK-INS ON A REGULAR BASIS:

As part of a dynamic team in a highly competitive and constantly changing industry, it is essential to set up regular team meetings, one-on-one catch-ups, or daily stand-ups to check in on everyone's work, discuss any issues that have arisen, and keep everyone on the same page. It has been suggested (senior management level, technology manager) that regular check-ins might foster a sense of connection, accountability, and collaboration among remote workers.

04

PROMOTE TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION:

Honest and transparent exchanges of information encourage a setting where team members feel safe providing updates, asking questions, and making comments. The head of human resources of a Bulgarian bank claims that doing so increases employees' trust in one another and their willingness to work together.

By combining the information gleaned from employee interviews with management interviews, this integrated best practice emphasises the value of effective communication tools, clarifies communication expectations, supports regular check-ins, and fosters transparency and open communication. Activities like this help remote and hybrid teams work together, remain in touch, and achieve their goals in a productive way.

Reference: Employees & managers interviews.

It is important to promote work-life balance and support employee wellbeing since working remotely or in a hybrid setting can make the boundary between work and personal life more porous. To help their remote or hybrid workforce avoid burnout, increase job satisfaction, and general wellbeing, small and medium-sized organisations may promote a healthy work-life balance.

Restrictions should be implemented as managers should make it clear to their employees to separate their work and private life. This includes determining regular work hours, creating a dedicated working space, and establishing habits that help separate work from personal time. It's also important to remind employees to take time away from work while they're not on the clock.

By giving the staff the conditions, they need in order to stay safe and healthy, including access to programs and tools, this goal can be achieved. Some ways to achieve it include making available a variety of mental health resources, hosting online wellness programs or events, and encouraging folks to practise self-care. By reminding employees to take regular breaks, get some exercise, and behave responsibly, managers help improve their health and productivity.

Allow workers to set their own schedules within certain parameters so that they may better balance their professional and personal responsibilities. Workers benefit from this leeway since they may tailor their approach to the specifics of their situation. Work-life harmony and contentment in the workplace are both boosted as a consequence.

Post pandemic empowerment programme

The arrangements made by SMEs to prioritise employee assistance and training are crucial to the success of their remote and hybrid job opportunities.

A thorough training program for remote employees should include several skills, including the ability to communicate effectively, manage time, use collaborative technologies, and strike a solid work-life balance. By adapting the programs to the needs of managers and employees, skills may be strengthened and awareness of the difficulties of remote work can be increased.

It is also crucial to provide solid technical assistance for remote workers so that issues may be resolved speedily. Supervisors should welcome queries from workers. IT support hotlines, troubleshooting instructions, and fully stocked toolkits are all examples of what may fall under this heading.

Employees at small and medium-sized businesses may be more successful in their remote responsibilities if their employers provide them with the tools they need to do their jobs well.

References:

Junior Project manager: In the interview, the employee mentioned the need for training programs for both managers and employees to navigate remote work effectively.

Project Manager in European Projects and Digital Content Developer: The employee expressed the need for training and guidance for employers and employees to adopt a remote/flexible working model.

SMEs ought to value employee health and happiness to create a positive remote or hybrid work environment. They should think about the following possibilities:

Making strategies and implementing initiatives to boost employee wellbeing. Things that might fall within this category include facilitating access to mental health services, developing virtual wellness initiatives, and advocating for self-care practices. Breaks, exercise, and positive workplace practices should be encouraged to improve workers' health and morale and boost productivity.

Defining clear expectations for working hours, encouraging employees to disengage from work after working hours, and promoting a healthy environment at home by proposing ergonomic changes are all steps toward establishing a healthy work-life integration. Insisting that workers set clear limits between their work and private lives, institute rituals that help them keep their work and personal lives distinct, and assign certain areas of the office to specific types of work.

SMEs that value employee wellness and work-life balance may be better able to foster the conditions necessary for remote and hybrid workers to feel supported, productive, and happy in their jobs.

References:

E-learning content developer: The employee highlighted the importance of work-life balance and wellbeing in remote work, mentioning the need for policies supporting employee wellbeing.

E-learning platform administration and technical support & Project coordinator in European projects: The employees emphasised the challenges of work-life integration and the need for initiatives promoting wellbeing and managing stress.

09

HYBRID WORKING: TREND, NECESSITY OR FUTURE?

For many companies, today's working world is fundamentally different from the way it was before the COVID-19 pandemic. Many jobs can and will be performed exclusively online and thus also independent of location. Online is considered the new form of presence in the working world. It is therefore not just a trend that will pass, but a new working model that is also desired and demanded by many employees, especially those with high potential.

It is beneficial for managers to note that digitalisation and hybrid working have very positive influences on **PRODUCTIVITY**. With the right digital tools, working time becomes more efficient and there is more time for the essentials. The challenge here lies above all in selecting the right tools. It is important not only to focus on the many great functions and advantages of the individual tools, but also to always consider the corporate culture, the communication channels, and the business processes.

Digitisation in companies also has a large social component, which shows itself in the form of **HYBRID INCLUSIVITY**. Not all employees find it equally easy to use digital tools. Even if employees want to use the advantages of remote work, managers must ensure that they also have the necessary digital skills. Otherwise, there is a danger that in the case of hybrid work, individual employees will become very withdrawn and thus gradually become socially isolated. You can counteract this phenomenon through the targeted use of appropriate digital tools. In this area, holding informal team activities online on a regular basis has also proven successful. This can take place, for example, in the form of regular virtual pizza meetings. Although events or social interactions of this kind may seem new and sometimes alienating at first, experienced remote workers are convinced that virtual events help to reduce the feeling of isolation and promote a sense of belonging.

The effects of hybrid working and the associated shift to digital tools also have a major impact on the physical and mental health of employees. In addition to a higher risk of burnout, there are also risks of increased physical strain. An additional danger lies in the fact that these stresses are not recognised by managers, or are recognised too late. This is especially the case if employees work mainly remotely and no sufficient or suitable arrangements for digital exchange have been established. **HYBRID WELLBEING** measures can prevent precisely these and other dangers.

In the future, companies will be held much more accountable in terms of sustainability aspects. The implemented digital systems should not only lead to an operational benefit, but also to an ecological one. Companies of the future are therefore thinking about sustainability right at the beginning of the digitisation process and the implementation of hybrid work. For a working world with **HYBRID SUSTAINABILITY**, managers can make an important contribution with numerous measures. With green hardware, paperless business processes and cloud hosting as examples of possible measures, SMEs can take important steps to reduce their carbon footprint.

The success of healthy hybrid work is thus fundamentally dependent on the use of the right technologies and collaboration solutions that suit the company. The work culture is designed to be very flexible and agile.
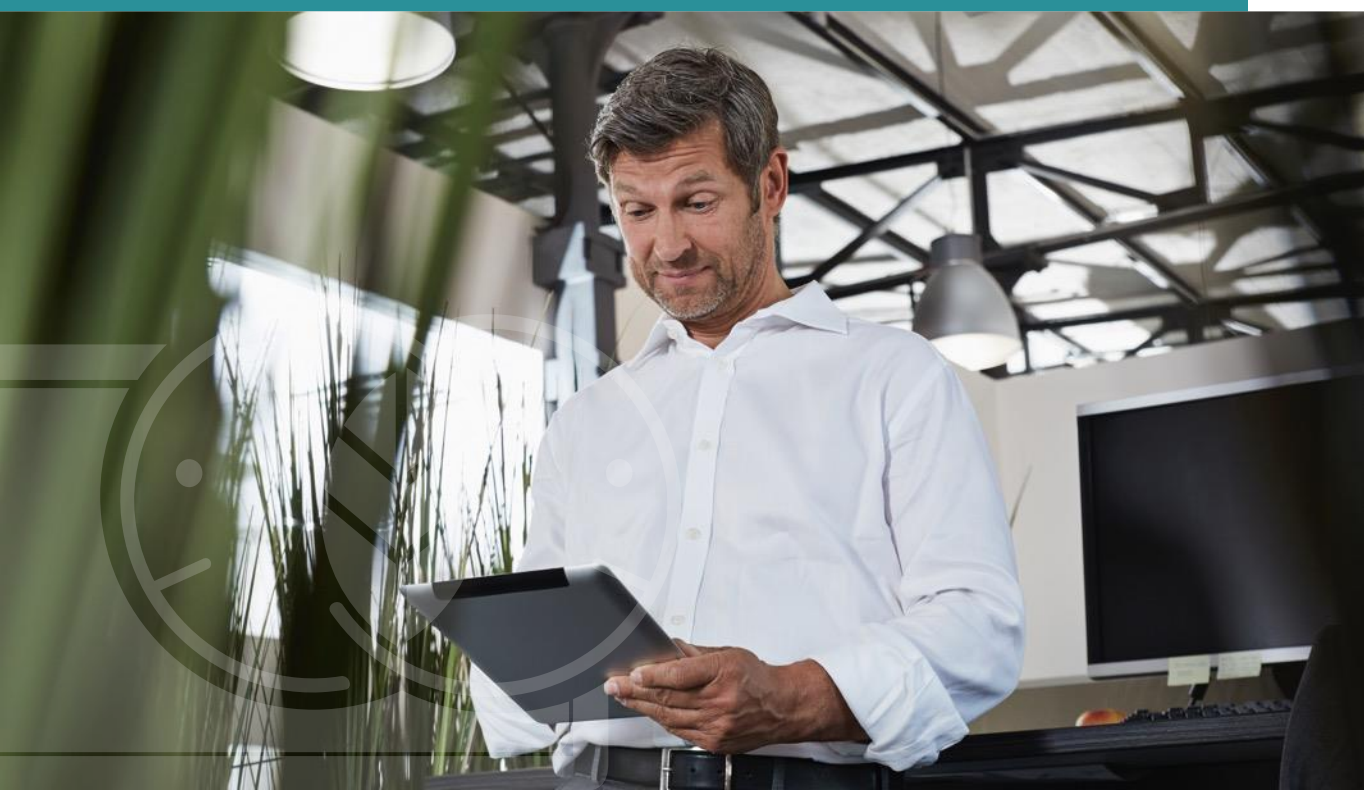
10 PROJECT OVERVIEW

The pandemic has caused a paradigm shift in management because of the dramatic increase in work-from-home practices. Yet the shift to hybrid work raises challenges for both managers and the staff. On one hand, today's managers also need interpersonal and relationship-building skills to carry out traditional management activities through digital interfaces. On the other hand, unconstrained digital work can have negative consequences for employees' mental and physical health, leading to digital burnout and low productivity. Where training offers and educational resources on remote leadership exist, they are primarily addressed to multinational corporations. As SMEs make up 99% of companies and employ 66% of Europeans, PROSPER has been carefully designed to meet the needs of European SME managers and is aligned with partners' expertise, all of whom are vocational training providers to the small and medium-sized business sector.

The overall objective of the Post-Pandemic Empowerment Programme (PROSPER) is to design, develop and implement a new training approach that empowers SME managers to reimagine their role as remote managers and ensure remote employees balance digital productivity with wellbeing and inclusion.

With PROSPER we are supporting SMES and Educators by

- **Developing** new training for SME managers / HR staff/team leaders to update their leadership skills for remote/hybrid settings;

- **Ensuring** that the specific training needs of SMEs are met and the wider developments of digitalization, inclusion and wellbeing are included;

- **Contributing** to adapting Vocational Education and Training (VET) to labour market needs due to the ongoing digital transformation fuelled by the Covid19 pandemic.

These objectives are achieved through three offers:

- **Business Case:** offering solutions and answers to new hybrid work questions and is tailor-made for the specific needs of small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs).

- **Online Training:** providing managers, HR, and leadership staff with a compact online training with 4 main modules on productivity, inclusivity, wellbeing, and sustainability in hybrid work.

- **Empowerment Program:** supporting managers, HR, and leadership staff in their organisational change mission and offering face-to-face workshops.

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