

Distributed Work: It's key to an effective workplace strategy

How does distributed work factor into an organization's real estate or workplace strategy within the context of increasingly collaborative work processes, an emphasis on positive workplace experiences, and new definitions of engagement and productivity? And how has this been impacted by COVID? It all starts by assessing what has worked since March 2020 and how that may be adapted into a long term distributed work program.

By Eric D. Johnson, Senior Workplace Advisor, Allsteel, HNI

IN THIS WHITEPAPER:

Distributed work is not a binary, one size fits all strategy; it includes a range of work options. HNI has established a reliable approach to defining and designing a distributed work strategy that will effectively support your organization's work processes, people, and culture.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN:

How to define and quantify distributed work for your organization

Three key questions to consider when developing and implementing a distributed work program

The people, technology, and place considerations associated with distributed work

Actions to avoid when implementing a distributed work program





PROOF POINT

According to a 2016 SHRM survey, 60% of US companies let employees work remotely or telecommute, up threefold from 1990.

So, what do we mean by 'distributed work'?

Distributed work¹ has been part of workplace strategy for years; simply put it is a program that supports employees working at locations outside the office. Many organizations have adopted it in one form or another; many more never considered it viable for their culture, business goals, or work processes. Or to put it another way, organization's leadership weren't comfortable with employees working 'where they couldn't be seen', so they didn't allow it to happen. At least not officially. Of course, COVID-19 changed all that.

When technology advances first enabled distributed work in the 1990s, many organizations seized the opportunity to send workers home, viewing this primarily as a way to reduce real estate costs. Today, we know that in order to be effective, a distributed work strategy must provide balanced support for effective work, an organization's culture and business goals, as well as making the workplace inherently more effective and efficient. COVID has not changed this.

While defining and implementing a distributed work program typically takes 8 - 12 month, COVID forced organizations to implement distributed work literally overnight. Today, many organizations realize that distributed work may be a viable long term option for at least a portion of their workforce - large tech companies like Facebook and Salesforce.com, who have traditionally worked under the premise that having their employees work 100% of the time in the office is integral to their innovation and success, are now planning for a major part of their workforce to be working outside the office full time.

So, where was everyone before COVID? And where did they go during COVID?

Well before COVID-19 appeared, occupancy and utilization studies completed over the years by multiple organizations and their workplace consultants have consistently found that knowledge workers are at their desk an average of 35-45% of the time². These findings clearly indicate that work is no longer happening primarily at in the office or at one's desk.

So, where was everyone? Technology gives users the ability to choose where they work – and often it's not at their desk. It's the huddle room, the scrum space, or the café. Or they choose to work outside the office - at a client site, a co-working space, or at home. Regardless of where they are getting their work done, their organization will need to 'formalize' what is currently taking place and ensure their employees have the right tools, resources, knowledge, and skills to be fully engaged and effective at their jobs regardless of the place they work.

This changed significantly in March 2020. The Workplace Evolutionaries' Work from Home Experience Survey found that since organizations began addressing the health concerns related to COVID, 88% of the US workforce was regularly working outside the office each week, and that 77% of the US workforce was working from home 5 days per week.

¹AKA Remote Work, Virtual Work, Work from Home, etc.

²With limited exceptions, like Call Centers.

PROOF POINT

A reliable rule of thumb is with an average utilization of 45%, a DSR of 1.5:1 can readily be implemented

DISTRIBUTED WORK; IT'S NOT "ONE SIZE FITS ALL"

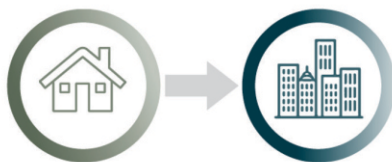
Distributed work takes place on a continuum; how an organization supports it is based on its business goals and desired culture. How individuals work this way depends on their work processes and activities - not every work process may be complete outside the office although many jobs may be completed effectively outside the office at least part time. Key 'points on the continuum include:

- Working in the office 100% of the time, with the freedom to use different work settings in the office based on the work to be done
- Working primarily at the office, but with a flexible schedule relative to starting and ending the day.
- Working primarily at the office with the flexibility to work 1 - 2 days outside the office
- Working consistently the same 2 - 3 days in the office and the balance of the week at locations outside the office
- Working at locations outside the office consistently 5 days a week, periodically coming to the office for special events.
- Working outside the office, likely at home, 100% of the time.

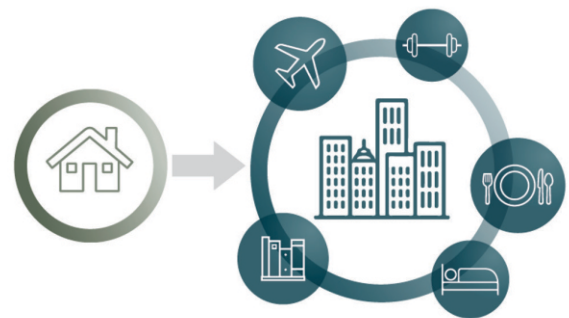
**FIGURE 1:
DISTRIBUTED WORK**

Distributed work is not a binary solution; an effective program will support different flexible options.

Distributed Work
IT IS NOT 'ONE SIZE FITS ALL'



Where We Were:
I have to go to the office



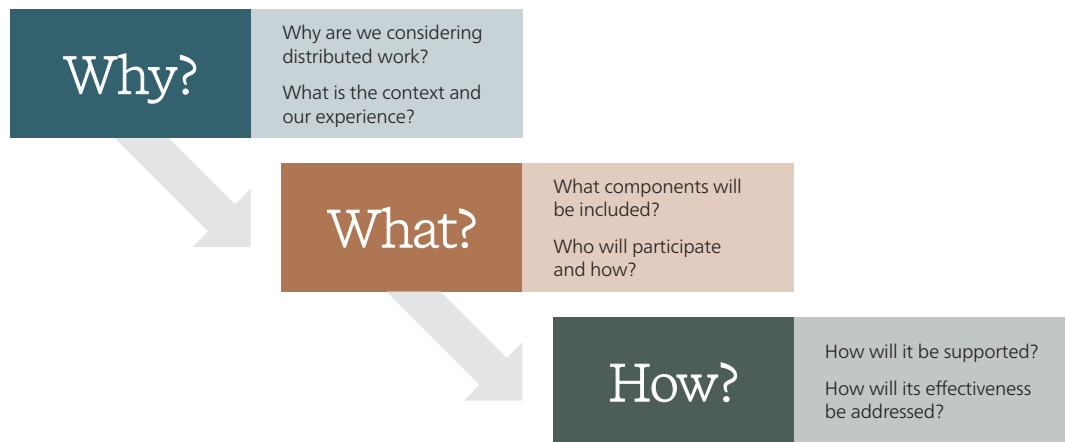
Where We Will Be:
I need/want to go to the office
I will go where I can do my best work

**FIGURE 2:
3 KEY QUESTIONS**

These questions need to be addressed when defining and implementing a distributed work program.

Three key questions

From our experience, organizations who are looking to implement a distributed work program, particularly in light of the experiences during the COVID 19 Pandemic, need to focus on and answer 3 key questions.



WHY:

Even before the pandemic, it was crucial for organizations to understand the context for including distributed work in their workplace strategy. Will distributed work support the organization's business goals and culture? Will individuals and teams be able to effectively complete their work and therefore their goals.

As organizations define workplace strategies to address COVID long term, these questions still need to be considered, even as their experience with distributed work since March 2020 made change the framework significantly. Now the questions include understanding what has and has not worked and whether continuing to support distributed work in some form supports the organization's business goals, culture and work processes. The Flexibility Assessment Tool at the end of this document outlines technologies that may be used to both understand what has and has not worked to date as well as the degree employees are working in a distributed way.

WHAT:

A distributed work program will have different components which need to be identified and integrated, including:

- Who will participate in the program, and how will their participation be defined.
- Will employees have access to alternate space outside the office - co-working, flex space - be included.
- How will employees be assisted financially in setting up their home office.
- Will unassigned seating/desk sharing be used in the office to support distributed workers when they do come to work in the office.

HOW:

Once the program components are defined, the specific operational processes, technologies, polices and training required to support the program need to be defined, including:

- Operational processes: cleaning and safety protocols, home office set up and management, program management, occupancy and utilization assessments, communication and feedback mechanisms
- Technologies: collaboration and knowledge sharing, managing desk sharing and access to multiple work location options, workspace location and wayfinding, integration with safety and cleaning protocols, occupancy and utilization
- Policies and training: managing virtual teams, managing virtual meetings, communication skills, technology use and application, making remote work effective, time management, schedule protocols

PROOF POINT

Flex jobs have increased in the US 157% between 2005 and 2019 (GWA, 2019)

FAILURE MODE: ONE TYPE OF DISTRIBUTED WORKS FOR EVERYONE

Even though nearly everyone worked outside the office during the COVID pandemic doesn't mean that everyone can or wants to work that way in the long term. Establishing a strategy that mandates a certain level of distributed work, such as a mandatory three days per week working from home, can be both disruptive to the individual and have a negative impact on employee engagement and productivity. A strategy built with a clear understanding of different work processes and work styles and that gives employees more choice in when and how they get their work done will be more effective, continue to support engagement, build trust between employees and their managers, and contribute to a positive workplace experience.





PROOF POINT

70% of managers say distributed work is the same or better for team performance, on average (WE WFH Experience Survey 2020)

FAILURE MODE: IF IT WORKED BEFORE COVID, IT WILL WORK NOW

Often, managers are not provided training on how to effectively manage people – they are simply promoted because they were a good individual contributor. As a result, they manage their teams as best they can, often based on how they were managed, which equated physical presence with productivity; it's the old unwritten rule 'if you are not at your desk you are not working.' More organizations were beginning to realize that approach is no longer valid or fully effective; COVID accelerated that realization significantly.

Some organizations will 'snap back' to where they were before the pandemic started, bringing all employees back to the office. Most organizations recognize distributed work is not going away. And that doesn't mean 'everyone works remotely 100% of the time' It will work in different ways for each organization based on work processes, culture and business goals. And while most managers adapted to the 'overnight' radical changes during COVID, they may still need additional training and assistance to ensure they are managing their teams effectively in the long term.

PROOF POINT

Only 12% of employees want to work remotely 5 days per week, 56% want the option to work from home at least 1 day per week. (Gensler, 2020 Work from Home Survey)

FAILURE MODE: SEND EVERYONE HOME

While technology gives everyone the ability to work in multiple locations or at different times, not every person or work process will be effective in a distributed work model. Some individuals are more productive when they have the structure of going to the office each day. It's not that they are bad employees, it's just that activities outside work – children, TV, chores – can be too distracting. Likewise, work processes that require continuous collaboration, or access to unique tools and technology that are only available in the office won't be as effective in a distributed or remote setting.



Research shows that **communication and trust** are key elements to effectively managing a virtual team. Specific communication skills training for both managers and their teams will improve the management, social cohesion, and effectiveness of the team.

Training in virtual management typically has two components:

1. **Remote collaboration tools:** Training to use virtual technologies and tools, like Go-To-Meeting , Zoom or Skype for collaboration, Google.docs, Microsoft Teams or RealTimeBoard for document sharing.
2. **Remote communication skills:** Training is required to establish best practices and protocols for communication (including how often to check-in with the office) and managing virtual meetings. Applying these skills will ensure a virtual team and their manager will continue to be effective in their jobs.²

Building an effective, flexible distributed work strategy

A distributed work strategy is one component of a broader workplace strategy. And like the broader strategy, there is not a one-size-fits-all distributed work strategy. This has been the case since distributed work became a viable option in the early 2000's; it is the case now as organizations address challenges associated with COVID. And it will be the case looking forward. As such, it is essential that your program be designed to support your organization's work processes, business goals, and culture, and not compromise the performance of individuals or teams by making it harder to establish rapport, build trust, and freely exchange information³.

Earlier in the paper, we discussed the 3 key questions an organization needs to consider when developing a distributed work program -Why, What and How. The details of the answer to 'How' are best defined by considering the People, Technology and Place factors of the work place. Not surprisingly, these are the same factors that need to be considered when defining a broader workplace strategy.

**FIGURE 3:
LONG-TERM STRATEGY**
*3 factors to consider when
designing and implementing
a long term distributed work
program*



³ Jan Johnson and Karen Plum. 'The Challenge of Virtual Teams',



A distributed work program designed while considering these three factors together will more effectively support an organization's business goals, people and work processes; a strong, sustainable and positive User Experience is built with an integrated focus on People - wellness, group norms and protocols - Place - ergonomics, home office set up - and Technology - wayfinding, user focused knowledge and collaboration tools. The Distributed Work Program Checklist at the end of this paper lists specific items to consider.

As a former colleague so aptly put "Mobility breeds mobility." This is more true today than before COVID. Since March 2020, organizations have had to focus on distributed work - aka, mobility - in a very specific way - all in to support safety and health while also enabling effective work. Looking forward to 2021 and beyond, organizations will expand their experiences and understanding of distributed work and inevitably expand the adaptability and breadth of their program. Over time, distributed work will simply be the 'way we work at this company.'

The Takeaways

Understand flexibility in your organization

Assess the current utilization and occupancy in your facilities and how distributed work can support achieving your organization's business goals.

It is not just a real estate play

While there may be real estate saving associated with a distributed work program, that alone will not ensure the program's success, particularly in light of organizational and work process changes driven by COVID. The program must support the workers' effectiveness, align with the organization's culture, and enable future organizational, work process and technology changes.

Distributed work is not all-or-nothing

It does not mean everyone will be working remotely. Define distributed work so that it aligns with your organization's culture and supports your people and their work processes.

Technology will drive more flexibility

Improving seamless and intuitive knowledge sharing, presence, and collaboration tools will create worker experiences that are as effective as face-to-face interactions, which in turn will expand the work activities that may be completed anywhere, anytime.

Distributed work does not always diminish community

Distributed work relies on flexibility and choice, both of which support improved engagement. Creating a positive workplace experience will also drive engagement and make the office the choice place to be - which in turn will support community.



Insights to Action

Flexibility Assessment Tool

This table identifies the different processes for collecting data about workplace utilization, occupancy and work flows. This data can be used to determine existing patterns and levels of user flexibility.

TOOL	DATA COLLECTED	APPLICATION
Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which spaces are occupied • How long spaces are occupied • How many users are occupying a space • What activities users are engaged in • What tools/technology are being used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facility utilization • Determining number and types of spaces used and required based on occupancy • Quantifying technology use • Identifying work activities
Security Badge Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total # of arrivals during a set period of time • % of users assigned to a facility who enter during a set period of time • Categories of users, i.e., employees, visitors, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facility utilization • Total number of seats required • Occupant profiles
Wi-Fi Enabled Sensors (typically located in furniture or doorways)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which seats are being used – individual or group • Duration of use • Utilization by seat, room, etc. during a set period of time • Environmental factors - temperature, noise, humidity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facility utilization • Number, size and type of workspaces required • Available workspace locations based on user preferences • Wayfinding to open workspaces • Monitor safety protocols - cleaning, social distancing
Wi-Fi Enabled Devices - laptops, cell phones, tablets, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facility occupancy • User locations and mobility patterns • Work space occupancy and use data • HVAC lighting demands/levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facility utilization • Number, size, and location of different space types required • Work group locations based on internal flexibility and collaboration patterns • Available workspace locations based on user preferences • Wayfinding to open workspaces • Building system demand and adjustments based on trends and real-time data



Distributed Work Program Checklist

The purpose of the following checklist is to help organizations evaluate their readiness to define and implement a distributed work program. We suggest that you don't use this checklist in a linear way, but instead jump across categories to ensure that you have a balanced approach to data collection and measurement, analysis, and creation of your mobility program.

PILOT THE STRATEGY

Validate utilization and occupancy data, technology, training

People

- Work Process assessment (flexibility, collaboration, focus, unique requirements)
- Remote Work Policy
- Training
 - Remote Communication Skills: staying connected
 - Remote teaming
 - Managing remote meetings
 - Managing remote teams
- Technology
 - Ergonomics: home office set up
- Group norms and protocols
- Communication and Change Management Plans
- Metrics
 - Engagement
 - Retention
 - Productivity/effectiveness
 - Team Goals

HOME OFFICE SET UP

Very few organizations compensate their remote employee for high speed Internet.

Technology

- Mobile platform (i.e., laptop, tablet) for impacted personnel
- Seamless and secure remote network access
- Seamless access to all typical in-office tools and technology while remote (i.e., printing)
- Remote communication and collaboration tools
 - Instant messaging
 - Individual video
 - Web meetings
 - Document sharing/coordination
 - Conferencing
 - Presence
- Mobile voice
 - "Follow me" technology, unified communication
- Work process technology assessment: identify unique technology requirements that may limit flexibility
- Metrics, including technology adoption

Distributed Work Program Checklist continued

STOWAGE VS. STORAGE

Mobile employees need a place to 'stow' their backpack, shoes, laptop for the day as opposed to storing files and work materials over time.

Place

- Individual workspace standards that support mobility
 - Storage: limited within individual workspaces; shared in open areas
 - Personal storage for short term use
 - Acoustically enclosed spaces for privacy and focus
 - Easily accessible data, power, and voice
- Solo, team and community spaces to support different work activities and provide user choice and flexibility
 - Individual workspaces
 - Formal Meeting spaces
 - Informal meeting spaces
 - Open work areas
 - Quiet zones
 - Enclosed work areas
 - Clear and consistent wayfinding
- Reservation technology (as required)
 - Individual workspaces
 - Collaborative workspaces
 - Mobile platforms to facilitate use
 - Business rules
- Home office set up and provisioning
 - Ergonomics assessment and review
 - Set up options and support
- Protocols
 - Communication response
 - Working together
 - Workspace access and use
- Services and support
 - Services Standards and/or SLA (Service Level Agreement)
 - Staffing
- Metrics
 - Workspace utilization
 - Work process and effectiveness support



Workplace Advisory at HNI

The Workplace Advisory team listens. We apply research and our extensive workplace experience to assist organizations in the development and implementation of situationally appropriate workplace strategies. Strategies that align with organizational culture and business goals, support the ability to work effectively, utilize real estate assets as efficiently as possible, and adapt to changing business and work practice requirements.

Eric D. Johnson is a key member of the Workplace Advisory team at Allsteel, HNI. He effectively integrates the breadth of workplace considerations – design, talent, operations and technology – to creatively and optimally support changing work practices and an increasingly diverse workforce. Eric’s career has included corporate facilities, interior design, strategic workplace consulting, and workplace and mobility program design, implementation and management. He has also taught graduate level workplace change and strategy; and is a certified interior designer, and a member of CoreNet Global and the Global Chair elect for the IFMA Workplace Evolutionaries.

Looking for
more?

Here's our
recommended
reading list.

- Stringer, L. et al., Distributed Work Revisited; Research Report #37, IFMA, 2015.
- Meister, J. and Mulcahy, K., The Future Workplace Experience. McGraw Hill, 2017
- AWA and CeBMA, 6 Factors that impact Knowledge Worker productivity, 2017.
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