

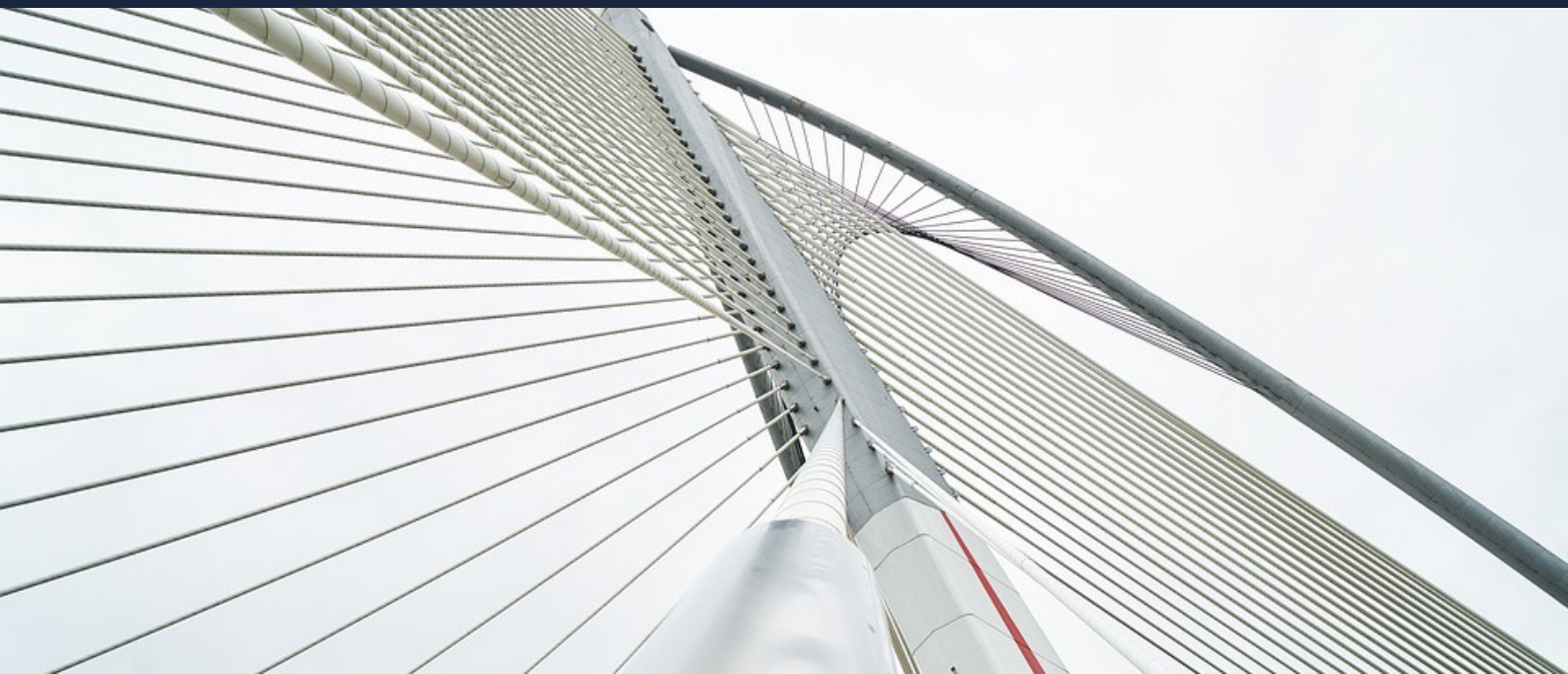
BEYOND THE OFFICE ROTA

Hybrid Work Is an Operating Model Transformation — Not a Policy Decision

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Strategic Implications of Distributed Work

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“The organisations that treat hybrid as a scheduling problem will spend the next three years solving the wrong equation.”

1. The Wrong Conversation

As organisations emerge from the most sustained period of remote work in modern history, the dominant question in boardrooms and leadership meetings has become depressingly narrow: how many days a week should people be in the office? Two days? Three? Should it be mandated or left to team discretion? Should Fridays be protected?

This is the wrong conversation. Not because office attendance is irrelevant — it is not — but because framing hybrid work as a scheduling question obscures the far more consequential transformation that is actually underway. What the last eighteen months revealed is not merely that people can work from home. It revealed that the operating assumptions underpinning how most organisations collaborate, make decisions, and govern delivery were already fragile — and that the shift to distributed work has made their weaknesses impossible to ignore.

The organisations that treat hybrid as a policy decision will produce a policy. The organisations that treat it as an operating model transformation will produce something far more valuable: a way of working that is genuinely designed for how their people, processes, and governance actually need to function.

2. What the Pandemic Actually Exposed

The rapid shift to remote work in early 2020 was, in most organisations, an emergency response rather than a considered strategy. Teams moved online, meetings moved to video, and — to many leaders' surprise — work continued. Productivity, by most measures, held or even improved. This was widely interpreted as vindication: remote work works.

But this interpretation misses something important. What sustained performance during the crisis was not the superiority of remote work as a model. It was the residual capital of relationships, context, and institutional knowledge built up during years of co-located

work. People knew who to call. They understood the unwritten rules. They could interpret ambiguous communications because they knew the sender. This capital is finite, and in many organisations it is now visibly depleting.

The pattern I have observed is consistent: teams that were well-established before the pandemic have largely maintained their effectiveness. Teams that have formed since — or that have experienced significant turnover — are struggling in ways that are difficult to diagnose from a distance. Onboarding is slower. Tacit knowledge transfer has stalled. The informal networks that used to form around coffee machines and corridor conversations have not been replaced by anything equally effective.

This is not an argument for returning to the office. It is an argument for recognising that the current model — which in most organisations is neither fully remote nor thoughtfully hybrid but rather an improvised middle ground — is not sustainable without deliberate redesign.

3. The Operating Model Gap

An operating model describes how an organisation actually delivers value: how decisions are made, how work flows between teams, how governance operates, how information moves. Most organisations' operating models were designed — often implicitly rather than explicitly — for a world in which people were physically co-located for the majority of their working time.

The shift to hybrid work does not merely change where people sit. It changes the fundamental mechanics of how the operating model functions:

- Decision-making becomes asynchronous. When teams are distributed across locations and time zones, the assumption that decisions are made in meetings — and that the right people will be in the room — breaks down. Organisations that have not redesigned their decision-making processes for asynchronous operation find that decisions either stall (waiting for the next time everyone is together) or are made informally by whoever happens to be available.
- Governance loses its informal channels. In a co-located environment, a significant proportion of governance happens informally: a quick conversation after a meeting, a walk to someone's desk to check a number, a corridor exchange that surfaces a risk. These interactions are invisible in most governance frameworks but essential to their functioning. In a hybrid model, they do not happen unless they are deliberately designed.
- Collaboration defaults to the lowest common denominator. Without explicit design, hybrid collaboration gravitates toward the tools and patterns that require the least coordination: email, shared documents, and video calls that replicate in-person meetings without any of their advantages. The result is a model that combines the isolation of remote work with the rigidity of office-based schedules.
- Culture becomes something you build rather than something that happens. In a co-located environment, culture is partly emergent — it forms through daily interactions, shared experiences, and observed behaviour. In a hybrid environment, the emergent pathways are weaker. Culture either becomes something leaders

actively invest in and design for, or it fragments into team-level subcultures with no coherent whole.

4. What Redesign Actually Looks Like

Treating hybrid work as an operating model transformation means asking a fundamentally different set of questions than "how many days in the office?" It means asking:

- What decisions need to be made synchronously, and what can be asynchronous? This is not a blanket policy — it requires examining the actual decision-making patterns of each function and designing appropriate mechanisms for each.
- How does governance operate when the informal channels are weaker? This means making explicit what was previously implicit: documenting decision rights, creating visible escalation paths, and designing check-in mechanisms that do not depend on physical proximity.
- What does effective collaboration look like for each type of work? Deep individual work, creative ideation, structured decision-making, and relationship-building each have different requirements for location, synchronicity, and tools. A blanket "three days in the office" policy treats them all identically.
- How do we build and maintain organisational knowledge when informal transfer is reduced? This is perhaps the most consequential question, and the one most organisations are currently neglecting. The answer is not more documentation — it is a deliberate redesign of how knowledge moves through the organisation.

5. The Leadership Challenge

The reason most organisations are having the wrong conversation about hybrid work is not a lack of intelligence. It is a lack of courage. Treating hybrid as a scheduling question is easier than treating it as an operating model transformation. A policy can be written in a week. An operating model redesign takes months, requires uncomfortable honesty about what is not working, and demands that leaders engage with the mechanics of how their organisation actually functions — a level of operational detail that many senior leaders prefer to delegate.

The organisations that will thrive in a hybrid world are not those with the most sophisticated office-booking systems. They are those whose leaders had the courage to ask what needed to change about how the organisation works — and then actually changed it.

This is a leadership challenge, not an HR challenge. It cannot be solved by facilities management, employee surveys, or technology platforms. It requires leaders who are willing to examine their own operating model with the same rigour they would apply to a market strategy or a product portfolio — and who recognise that the way their organisation worked before the pandemic was not optimal, merely familiar.

The window for this work is now. The improvised model that has carried most organisations through the last eighteen months is showing its strain. The choices leaders make in the next six to twelve months about how their organisations operate will shape not just where people work, but how effectively they work, for years to come. Reducing that choice to a number of days per week would be a failure of ambition that most organisations cannot afford.