

Research Bulletin 24/2 | Developments in Hybrid Working

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Summary

The number of job postings in Northern Ireland offering remote or hybrid working still remains significantly higher than before Covid-19. Even so, Northern Ireland has one of the lowest rates of hybrid working in the UK, possibly due to the structure of its economy and other factors, such as managerial practices.

Hybrid working impacts individuals, businesses, society and the wider economy in a number of ways. In line with the Department for the Economy's Economic Vision this article primarily looks at its impact on jobs, regional balance, productivity and decarbonisation.

Also explored, is the potential future of hybrid working, including the integration of advanced technologies like AI, changes in office design, and proposed new policies.

Background

Hybrid working is a form of flexible working where workers spend some of their time working remotely and some in the employer's workspace. Remote working can take place at home, in a shared workspace (outside the office), or in another location.ⁱ

The acceleration of remote working in Northern Ireland in Spring 2020 was driven by Covid-19 and associated restrictions. In June 2022, the guidance was relaxed, with the NI Executive noting that: "*The guidance 'work from home where possible' position isnot proportionate at this point.....Employers may still wish to consider how remote or flexible working could be used effectively to meet organisational need, for instance through adopting a hybrid working approach.*"ⁱⁱ

Since then, hybrid working arrangements have further bedded in across many organisations in Northern Ireland (i.e. over the last two years, or so).

It is still the case, however, that many work activities need to be undertaken at a particular geographic location (i.e., a farm, construction site, restaurant, manufacturing plant, etc.).

The service sector (including hairdressing and other close contact services) has low levels of home and hybrid working. The construction, manufacturing, transportation and storage, and accommodation & food sectors also have relatively low proportions of workers working from home, or partaking in hybrid working.ⁱⁱⁱ

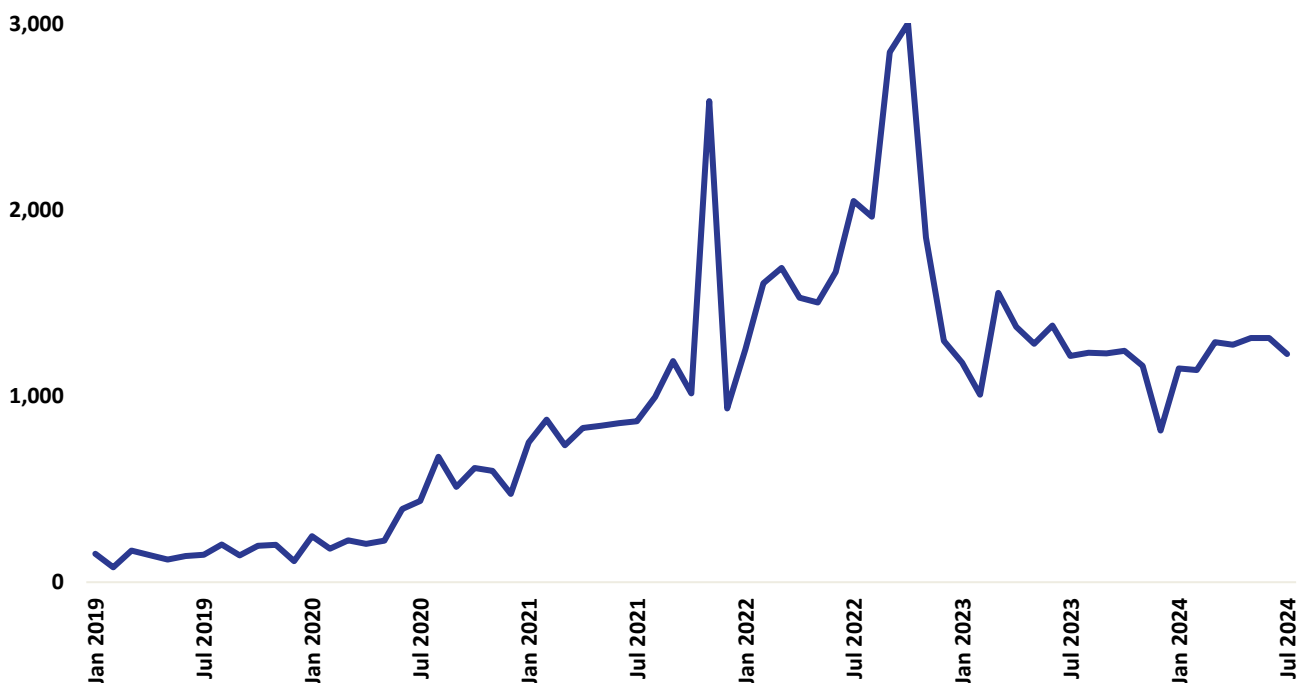
How has Hybrid Working Evolved in Northern Ireland

According to the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC), less than 10% of Northern Ireland's labour force worked from home regularly before Covid-19.^{iv} This figure increased to 41% in April 2020 and gradually decreased to 30% in May 2021. A UUEPC study from August 2023 estimated the level of homeworking in Northern Ireland was 17%, the lowest rate of all 12 UK regions, but still higher than pre-March 2020.^v

There may be specific reasons why this may be the case. As noted above, some jobs are not well suited to remote or hybrid working. Northern Ireland's economy may have more of such jobs than the UK average. However, according to the UUEPC, the difference in current uptake of remote working between Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole is not completely down to sectoral structure, implying that other factors such as management practices influence the number of days that employees work remotely. The researchers observed that increased remote working in Northern Ireland also correlates with a higher salary and degree-level qualifications. It is less likely that lower-income thresholds will work under hybrid or fully remote patterns.^{vi}

Using data from Lightcast, we can see the prevalence of remote and hybrid working being referred to in monthly job postings in Northern Ireland increased notably since May 2020. The number of new jobs posted that offer remote or hybrid work spiked in late 2021 and again in autumn 2022, but while it has cooled somewhat since, there are still considerably more jobs offering remote and hybrid work than before Covid-19.^{vii}

Figure 1: Job Postings in Northern Ireland, Offering Remote / Hybrid Working ^{viii}



Source: Lightcast.

Notes: Data is from January 2019 to July 2024 and only counts new job postings for each month that include "remote" or "hybrid" in the job posting location. Lightcast is a labour market data analytics company.

Sectoral Analysis

Figure 2 below shows the number of unique job postings in the first half of 2024, by sector, that offer remote or hybrid work. The top 10 have been included.^{ix}

Figure 2: Job Postings in NI, Jan to Jun 2024, Top Sectors Offering Remote / Hybrid Working Arrangements



Source: Lightcast.

Notes: Data is from January 2024 to June 2024 and only counts new job postings for each month that include “remote” or “hybrid” in the job posting location. Lightcast is a labour market data analytics company.

Impact on Wider Economy

On 19 February 2024 Minister Murphy set out the Department for the Economy’s Economic Vision. This set a clear Mission with four key objectives: Good Jobs, regional balance, improved productivity and reducing carbon emissions / decarbonisation.^x

How labour is utilised in Northern Ireland, whether at home or in a designated workplace, has obvious relevance and impact on the above four objectives. Some of these impacts will be positive, while some may pose challenges.

Good Jobs

With Northern Ireland’s unemployment rate at record lows, employees face heightened competition for talent across a range of sectors. On 30 July 2024, Sync NI reported on a recent Job Report and Jobseeker Snapshot from NIJobs, stating: *“The survey reveals salary is the most important factor for people looking to change jobs, with 46 per cent naming it as their number one consideration, followed by flexible hours at 18 per cent and working format (hybrid/ remote) at 13 per cent. Key dealbreakers for NI jobseekers included a negative impression during an interview (27 per cent) and a negative impression during the hiring process (19 per cent), whilst a staggering 84 per cent of jobseekers would be quicker to apply for a job if it includes information about an employer’s policy on hybrid working.”*^{xi}

Research by the UUEPC published in 2022, found that women, in particular, indicated a stronger preference for hybrid working.^{xii} The Financial Times reported in September 2023 that analysis of Office for National Statistics microdata by the consultancy Public First revealed that professional women in the UK have become more likely to work full-time since Covid-19 in sectors where hybrid and remote working are now standard practice.^{xiii}

The Labour Relations Agency in Northern Ireland has noted that hybrid working may assist with skills retention in firms. Employees who might otherwise leave because of family location, new family or caring responsibilities, or disability, may stay if offered appropriate arrangements, including hybrid working.^{xiv}

The Work Foundation think-tank at Lancaster University, surveyed over 400 disabled workers across the UK, with over 80% agreeing that remote working would either be essential or very important when looking for a new job, and 66% ideally would want to work remotely 80% to 100% of the time.^{xv}

The shift to more remote working has sparked diverse opinions among employers, employees, and industry experts. These perspectives vary widely based on individual experiences, industry requirements, and organisational goals.

Professor Nick Bloom, from Stanford University, USA, alongside Ruobing Han & James Liang, published a paper in June 2024 that found working from home improves retention without damaging performance. The authors: *"...ran a six-month randomized control trial investigating the effects of hybrid working from home on 1,612 employees in a Chinese technology company in 2021–2022... found that hybrid working improved job satisfaction and reduced quit rates by one-third. The reduction in quit rates was significant for non-managers, female employees and those with long commutes. Null equivalence tests showed that hybrid working did not affect performance grades over the next two years of reviews."*^{xvi}

Remote and hybrid working can give workers more flexibility and autonomy which can facilitate job satisfaction. A paper published in 2023 by Rhys Davies and Professor Alan Felstead of Cardiff University suggests that *"...the spread of remote working to a wider range of occupations has prompted improvements to some elements of job quality. Remote working allows workers more autonomy over their working time, both in terms of when to start and stop work as well as the ability to take time off."*^{xvii}

Many employees appreciate the flexibility that remote working offers, allowing them to better balance their personal and professional lives. The elimination of daily commutes may provide more time for family, hobbies, and rest, leading to improved overall well-being.^{xviii}

Both employees and employers can benefit financially from remote work. Employees save on commuting costs, work attire, and meals, while employers can reduce expenses related to office space, utilities, and maintenance.

However, savings for employees can be offset somewhat by spending more on electricity and heating, etc, at home. Employers may face computer hardware and software costs, to enable remote working amongst their staff.

Offering hybrid or fully remote working can give employers access to a broader talent pool and can lead to more diverse and innovative teams. Remote work may allow companies to hire the best talent regardless of geographic location. From the worker perspective, it can mean that more job offers are able to be practically considered, even if based many miles from home.

As noted above, hybrid working involves both time spent at the workplace and time spent working remotely. A good balance between both, may achieve the 'best of both worlds' as there has been a number of drawbacks cited in relation to an overreliance on remote work.

Remote working can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness due to the lack of in-person social interactions with colleagues. This isolation can affect mental health, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and burnout.

There is a perception that new employees in firms, in particular younger workers, may be disadvantaged by remote working, with induction, mentoring, shadowing, and training opportunities potentially taking a hit.^{xix}

In February 2024, Camilla Cavendish noted in the Financial Times that: *"Sadly, those who are the most in favour of remote work are youngsters. Yet they are also the most likely to be overlooked — and miss out on promotion — if they are not physically present. It's hard enough to make your voice heard in a hybrid meeting if you're on the screen and others are in the room; and juniors can find this especially difficult. It's harder to find a mentor if you're not in the building. And after an online session has ended, the others in the office are likely to be continuing the conversation."*^{xx}

Remote working can lead to a blurring of work-life boundaries. Without a clear divide between work and personal life, some remote workers struggle to disconnect from their jobs, leading to longer working hours and increased risk of burnout. The lack of a physical separation between home and workspaces can exacerbate this issue.

The widespread use of smartphones and other digital devices means that always being 'on call' has become a reality in some jobs, as continuous remote access can create pressure for individuals to be constantly accessible. In relation to this, the Department for the Economy has included a Call for Information on the 'Right to Disconnect' within its ['Good Jobs' Employment Rights Bill Consultation](#), and would welcome information on employer and worker experiences. The consultation opened on 1 July 2024. The closing date is 30 September 2024 at 17:00.^{xxi}

Remote work relies heavily on technology, which can be a double-edged sword. Technical issues, inadequate home office setups, and varying levels of digital literacy can create barriers to effective remote working.

Some employees fear that working remotely could impact their career advancement opportunities. Being physically absent from the office might limit their visibility and access to informal networking opportunities, which is important for career growth.

Overall, there are many positive outcomes for employees, with hybrid working. However, it may be advisable to ensure a good mix between remote working and being present in a workplace, to avoid the issues highlighted above materialising.

Regional Balance

Working from home has impacted on city centre footfall, although this has recovered to some extent more recently. This decreased footfall has had a knock-on economic impact on city centre trade, especially in retail and in hospitality.

The increase in remote and hybrid working has affected traffic congestion in Northern Ireland, especially during peak hours and may have a positive environmental impact. Related to this, other impacts of increased remote and hybrid working can include less demand for day-time parking, as well as the usage of public transport. In 2020-21 for example, Translink in Northern Ireland faced a substantial funding shortfall due to reduced passenger numbers.^{xxii}

Since 2018-19, only one of Belfast's train stations has seen an increase in passenger numbers. Yorkgate station had a 26% increase in passenger numbers between 2018-19 and 2022-23, largely due to the opening of the Ulster University Campus in the city centre. The decline in passenger numbers at every other station in the city during those years may have been indicative of workers commuting less to offices in Belfast.^{xxiii}

There may be 'winners and losers' from any economic activity that has been displaced by remote and hybrid working. In terms of the local residential housing market, some areas outside of the cities saw increased demand, partly due to relocation preferences enabled by increased remote working.^{xxiv} As some employees no longer need to commute to urban centres daily, a few may have chosen to relocate to more affordable and spacious homes in suburban or rural areas.

Some businesses and government departments have taken the decision to reduce their physical footprint by selling off some of their estate, with the NI Civil Service planning to cut their office estate by around 40% over the next four years.^{xxv} In March 2024, it was reported that Hughes Insurance recently adopted a hybrid model of working, and this meant their current commercial property footprint was no longer being utilised to its capacity. The company noted that: *"As a result Strangford House in Newtownards has been put up for sale. The executive team at Hughes Insurance are exploring alternative, more accessible commercial premises that better meet the needs of the business."*^{xxvi}

The demand and supply of co-working spaces has increased locally in recent times. Coworking is an arrangement in which workers for different companies share an office space. It allows cost savings and convenience through the use of common infrastructures, such as equipment, utilities and receptionist services, and in some cases refreshments and parcel acceptance services.^{xxvii}

According to the Coworking Cafe, *"Fuelled by the headway of remote and hybrid work models, co-working spaces have emerged as a compelling alternative not just to the home office for freelancers, but also to traditional office spaces as businesses strive to optimise costs and maintain flexibility."*^{xxviii} At the time of writing (August 2024), the Coworking Café website listed over 50 such co-working spaces across Northern Ireland, from a range of providers.^{xxix}

In April 2024, the Irish News reported that IWG, the world's largest provider of hybrid working office space was intending to open a new state-of-the-art flexible workspace in Newry.^{xxx} Meanwhile, BBC News NI noted in June 2024

that “Glandore serviced office space has taken over seven floors of Arthur House in Belfast city centre and is expanding in response to increased demand for flexible working.”^{xxxix} Glandore is one of Ireland’s leading workspace providers.^{xxxix}

Productivity

In the first quarter of 2023, UUEPC conducted consultations with 45 employers. Findings showed that employers felt productivity remained the same as in 2019 or improved slightly. While participants agreed that staff had increased their working hours, an increase in efficiency or higher output was not evident, indicating that there may be productivity losses. However, 44% reported an increase in the quality of work produced by employees. Employers emphasised how well management teams adapted to remote working environments, but noted that managers struggled in some aspects, this may be expected because staff in Northern Ireland typically receive less management training than those in similar positions in the UK.^{xxxix}

Effective collaboration can be harder to achieve remotely. The lack of spontaneous conversations and face-to-face meetings can hinder communication and teamwork, potentially impacting project outcomes and innovation.

While home working may be more suited to completing ‘tasks’, it may impact on creativity. When researchers at Columbia University, USA, assessed almost 1,500 people put into pairs, over either a video call, or in-person, and asked them to come up with new product ideas, they found that face-to-face pairs produced more creative ideas compared to the virtual pairs. The authors suggest that video calls focus communication on a screen, narrowing people’s focus and hindering the ‘broad, expansive process of idea generation’.^{xxxix}

Northern Ireland was the first region in Europe to achieve 100% broadband coverage.^{xxxix} Strong, reliable internet connectivity is crucial for successful remote working, which can necessitate wider investment in telecommunication infrastructure. In response to the increased demand for better high speed internet connectivity across Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy launched Project Stratum in November 2020, a £197 million project aimed at delivering gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to more than 81,000 primarily rural premises, in partnership with Fibrus Networks.^{xxxix} Impressively, 92.1% of customers in Belfast achieved ultrafast broadband speeds (>30Mbps) in 2023 (up from 88.2% in 2022), with only Cardiff, Crawley and Luton ranking higher amongst UK towns and cities, according to the Centre for Cities Outlook 2024.^{xxxix}

Decarbonisation

According to recent research published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in September 2023, people who work remotely all the time produce less than half the greenhouse gas emissions of office workers. The study found employees in the USA who worked from home all the time were predicted to reduce their emissions by 54%, compared with workers in an office. However, one day of remote work a week reduced emissions by just 2%, because energy savings from not being in the office were offset by factors such as an increase in non-commuting

travel when working from home. Working remotely two or four days a week reduced an individual's emissions by up to 29% compared with on-site workers.^{xxxviii}

Professor Steven Sorrell, an energy and climate policy specialist at the University of Sussex notes however, that remote working could have "unintended consequences" which might offset any reduction in carbon emissions. If you only commute a couple of days a week, you may choose to live further from your workplace. And if you work at home during the day, you may choose to take additional trips – perhaps to pick up some shopping or simply to get out of the house. Analysis by the University of Sussex found that total weekly travel was greater in households where at least one member was remote working, suggesting that the presence of remote workers in a home encourages greater travel by their flatmates and family members.^{xxxix}

Home energy use, which would typically include heating and electricity, may increase during remote and hybrid working. Use of paper for printing may decrease however, as may plastic usage.^{xl}

Hybrid Working in Other Economies

It is fair to say that outside of Northern Ireland, hybrid working has also become more commonplace and has seen new developments, both in terms of government policy, but also implementation across businesses and other employers.

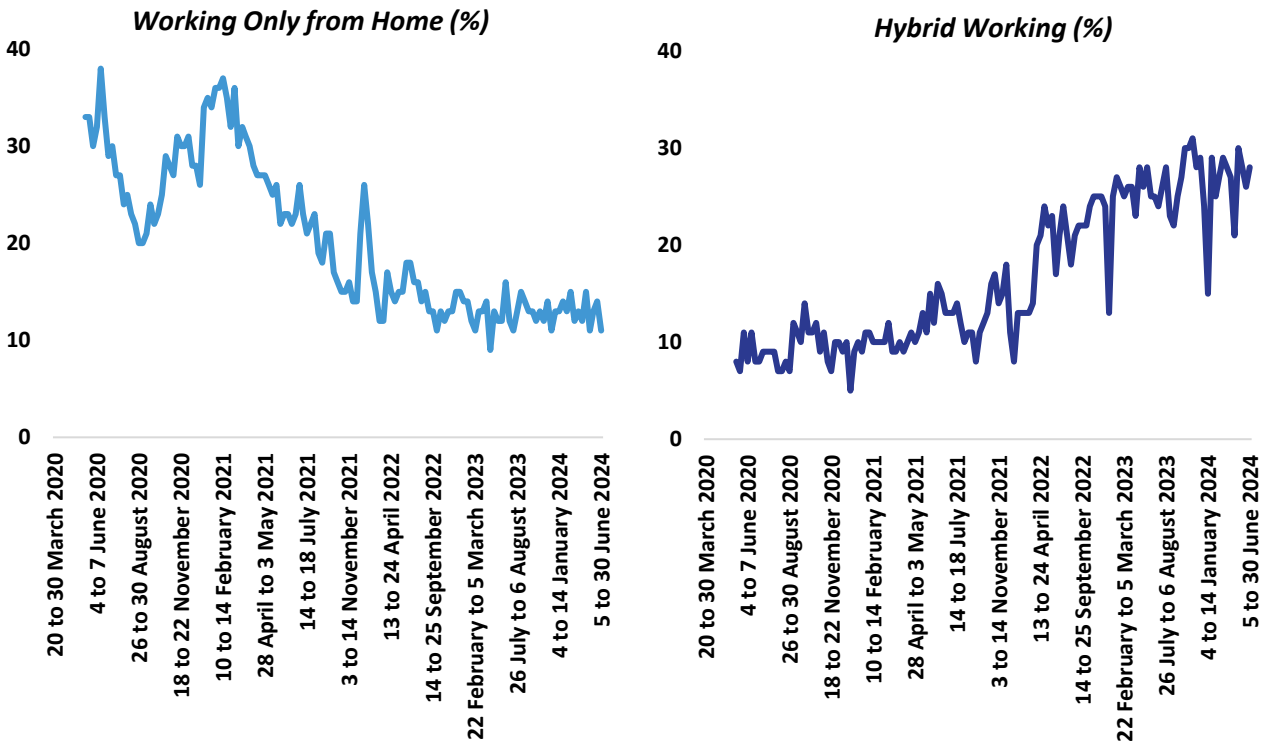
Great Britain

The Flexible Working (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which came into force on 6 April 2024, extended to England, Scotland and Wales and updated the Flexible Working Regulations 2014 by removing the requirement for an employee to be continuously employed for at least 26 weeks to make a flexible working application. This could include: part-time working, home working, hybrid working, flexi-time, job sharing, compressed hours, annualised hours, term-time working and team-based rostering.^{xli}

As illustrated below, figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Opinions and Lifestyle Survey show that Great Britain had elevated rates of those only working at home in Spring / Summer 2020 and then again in late 2020 / early 2021, peaking at more than 35% of working adults. This coincided with the heightened Covid-19 restrictions at the time. After gradually falling thereafter, the rates of home working roughly settled at between 10% and 15% and remained steady over the last two years.

The rates of hybrid working were stable around the 10% level during much of 2020 in Great Britain, but started to rise in 2021, and continued steadily increasing until flattening somewhat in 2023 and the first half of 2024. A survey for 5 to 30 June 2024 found that 28% of working adults hybrid worked.^{xlii}

Figure 3: Trends in Working Arrangements in Great Britain^{xliii}



Source: The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey from the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Notes: Comparable estimates regarding location of work are not available for the periods 20 to 30 March 2020 to 7 to 17 May 2020. First graph shows percentage of working adults that have worked from home. Second graph shows percentage of working adults that have both travelled to work and worked from home in the past seven days. ONS detail numerous caveats relating to data collection and changes to survey questions and policy over time.

Like in Northern Ireland, remote and hybrid working has impacted the housing market in Great Britain. However, more recently it seems that the rural housing market has cooled, as employers have begun to request a return to the office. The Financial Times reported in April 2024 of some people who had relocated from London to rural England now struggling to sell their property in an attempt to move back to the city.^{xliiv}

In their Action Plan to Address Depopulation, published in February 2024, the Scottish Government committed to flexible hybrid working for their workforce, enabling staff to work from a range of locations and thereby facilitating the workforce to be much more geographically spread across the country.^{xliv} Furthermore, it has been reported that Scottish Civil Servants are eligible to work from abroad for up to one month per year, a policy that has been in place since April 2023.^{xlvi}

In 2022 the Welsh Government published a remote working strategy for Wales. This outlined their approach to achieving 30% of the Welsh workforce working at or near to home, setting out the economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits of remote working and plans to embed remote working for the long-term in the Welsh workplace.^{xlvii}

Ireland

In the Republic of Ireland, the right to request remote working was signed into law in April 2023, with the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023.^{xlviii} On 7 March 2024, the Government brought the rights into operation and published a code of practice drawn up by the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). Employers and employees are obliged to have regard to the code when considering applications for remote working. Figures released by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment show that up to 30 July 2024, 18 people had made complaints to the WRC about remote or flexible working.^{xlix}

In 2001, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment published Ireland's National Remote Work Strategy. The Strategy's objective was to ensure that remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace in a way that maximises economic, social, and environmental benefits.^l

A report by UUEPC published in October 2023, titled 'Remote Working on the Island of Ireland – A cross-border comparison' looked at trends in remote working in Northern Ireland and used data from a range of sources to extend comparisons across the island of Ireland. UUEPC's analysis showed that *"...despite a return to the office, the uptake of remote working in Ireland remains high at 34%. Northern Ireland in comparison has the lowest uptake (at 17%) of remote working across all regions of Ireland, with post-pandemic remote working uptake currently sitting lower than Ireland's pre-pandemic levels of remote working (20%)."*^{li}

The report highlights that the types of jobs offering remote and hybrid working are similar on both sides of the border, with software development being the highest sector offering some level of remote work, and the likes of customer service, human resources, and accounting in the top 15 for both economies.^{lii}

The authors also looked at cross-border commuting. Travel time may play a bigger factor for cross-border commuters from Northern Ireland who would typically travel further than Southern cross-border commuters. UUEPC suggest that by reducing once lengthy commuting times, remote / hybrid working has made cross-border commuting more practical and viable for employees especially if they only have to do it 1-3 times a week. The economists predict that these factors coupled with the benefit of higher wages and wider opportunities in Ireland has the potential to increase cross-border working across a range of occupations.^{liii}

Those individuals who work cross-border and undertake remote / hybrid work need to be aware of various rules that apply across the two jurisdictions. According to a paper by the Centre for Cross Border Studies and Border People, published in May 2023: *"A growing number of cross-border workers blend time in the office with time spent working at home. Trends of commuting to the office once or twice a week appear to be very common. In terms of tax, social insurance and access to healthcare (as a worker) this can create complex situations for both employer and employee which might require professional, expert guidance."*^{liv} They note that the tax implications of cross-border employment is one of the top enquiries presented to the Border People project.^{lv} A situation where tax is paid on two payrolls, in two jurisdictions, can be referred to as 'double taxation'.^{lvi}

Other Economies

Data from Eptura in August 2023 showed a significant increase in desk bookings across various sectors, with a 56% rise in the USA and a 46% rise in the UK since autumn 2022. Banking, finance, media, and entertainment sectors have seen notable upticks in office attendance. Companies like Meta and Amazon are tracking office attendance rigorously and enforcing compliance through disciplinary measures. For example, Meta's 'In-Person Time Policy'^{lvii} tracks card swipes, and Amazon's CEO has stated that non-compliance with office attendance rules could result in termination. With a cooling job market and rising cost of living, employers now have more leverage to enforce these mandates. This has led to a stronger emphasis on in-person work, which some business leaders believe is crucial for productivity and organisational culture.

According to JLL data^{lviii}, office attendance among European clients has reached 74% of pre-pandemic levels, the highest since Covid-19. This indicates a significant shift towards office-based work, with companies making confident statements about the importance of in-person collaboration for their business success.

The Future for Hybrid Working

As we look forward, the future of remote and hybrid working is poised to continue to evolve, influenced by technological advancements, shifting employee preferences, and organisational strategies. In this section we look at how this may possibly change in the next few years, while being mindful that predictions can be wrong.

Technological Integration

The foundation of remote work lies in technology. Over the next decade, we can expect significant advancements in tools and platforms that facilitate seamless remote collaboration. Innovations in virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) will likely create more immersive and interactive remote work environments. These technologies can simulate in-person interactions, making remote meetings, training sessions, and collaborative projects more effective and engaging.

Additionally, artificial intelligence (AI) will play a crucial role in enhancing remote work. For example, Dr. Gleb Tsipursky noted in Forbes Magazine in May 2023, that AI can be used to make video conferences more efficient by providing features like real-time transcription, translation, and captioning. Furthermore, AI-driven tools can streamline tasks such as project management, meetings, customer service, and data analysis. Dr. Gleb Tsipursky notes that: *“By analyzing patterns in employee behavior and performance, AI can identify areas for improvement and provide tailored recommendations for optimization. This enables remote workers to manage their time effectively and prioritize tasks in a way that maximizes productivity and minimizes burnout.”*^{lix}

There is an ever-growing focus on the Digital Employee Experience (DEX), which refers to the quality of employees' interactions with technology in their work environment, including at home.^{lx}

Hybrid Work Models

Structured hybrid work is defined by Flex Index as setting specific expectations on when employees work from an office. This can vary from minimum percentage of time, minimum number of days per week, specific days per week, or a combination of minimum and specific days in the office. This differs from a fully flexible hybrid work approach.^{lxi}

Challenges still remain with respect to effective employee monitoring in a hybrid work environment. According to the HR Director publication, some companies have ramped up their use of employee monitoring software. These tools are designed to track various metrics such as keystrokes, mouse movements, and active hours to gauge employee activity. In July 2024, the HR Director reported that *“Wells Fargo, the third biggest bank in the US, has announced the termination of several employees for using “mouse jigglers” to simulate activity on their workstations while working from home....The bank discovered the use of the devices during an investigation into allegations of fake work.”* The publication does note however that: *“True productivity and engagement go beyond just being present or appearing online; they involve how effectively and meaningfully employees are contributing to their work. Simply “monitoring” if an employee is online gives no meaningful insight into how successful they are at work.”*^{lxii}

In March 2024, Jeanne Meister stated in Forbes Magazine that companies need to build a culture of trusting their employees to work from anywhere, and measure outcomes, not just face-to-face contact: *“Trust is crucial for healthy organizations, especially in hybrid working environments. Leaders must prioritize people practices that communicate trust regardless of where work gets done. This means team leaders must have the autonomy to figure out a rhythm of working that works best for their team members and judge employees by the outcomes they deliver and not whether they work in an office.”*^{lxiii}

As noted above, remote working can lead to a blurring of work-life boundaries. In August 2024, BBC News reported that the UK Government is exploring models in various other countries, where workers have the ‘right to switch off’ or ‘right to disconnect’.^{lxiv} As aforementioned, the Department for the Economy has commenced a Call for Information on this issue. In Ireland, the WRC’s Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Right to Disconnect (2021) refers to an employee’s right to be able to disengage from work and refrain from engaging in work-related electronic communications, such as emails, telephone calls or other messages, outside normal working hours.^{lxv} In Belgium, companies with at least 20 employees must have agreements in place on the right to disconnect.^{lxvi}

Redesigning Workspaces

The traditional office has undergone significant changes. Offices have, or will, transform into collaboration hubs rather than places for daily individual tasks. These redesigned workspaces will focus on facilitating teamwork, creativity, and social interaction.

As noted above, co-working spaces are becoming more common. The Belfast Telegraph, in August 2024, quoted the local commercial property practice CBRE NI: *“Whilst the serviced office sector accounts for a relatively small portion of*

the total office stock in Belfast, this sector is continuing to grow as companies look to build in flexibility and reduce day-one capital costs by not having to invest in a fit-out.”^{lxvii}

Security

Cybersecurity will also be a critical concern. With employees accessing company resources from various locations, organisations must implement robust security measures to protect sensitive information. This includes using secure communication channels, regular cybersecurity training, and advanced threat detection systems.

Overlooking someone’s electronic device is termed shoulder surfing. Lucy Finlay, director at ThinkCyber, told ITPro the rise of hybrid working has increased the amount of exposure business devices have in public spaces, making a spike in social engineering attacks like shoulder surfing an inevitability.^{lxviii}

Talent Acquisition and Retention

The future of remote work will significantly impact talent acquisition and retention strategies. Companies will be less constrained by geographical boundaries, enabling them to tap into a global talent pool. This shift will increase competition for skilled workers, prompting organisations to offer attractive remote work options to attract top talent.

Remote work will also influence employee retention. Workers increasingly prioritise flexibility and work-life balance, and companies that offer robust remote work policies will have a competitive edge in retaining their workforce. Employers will need to focus on building strong virtual cultures, providing opportunities for remote employees to engage and connect with their teams.

Challenges and Solutions

Along with its benefits, remote work presents challenges that organisations must address. Issues such as employee isolation, communication barriers, and maintaining productivity require innovative solutions. Companies will need to invest in mental health support, virtual team-building activities, and comprehensive training programs to ensure remote workers remain engaged and productive.

The Department for the Economy is currently consulting on proposals for the [‘Good Jobs’ Employment Rights Bill](#) which includes proposals for changes to the flexible working regulations (pages 97 to 105), with the intention to introduce new primary and subordinate legislation which will amend the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 and the Flexible Working Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015. The objective of the new legislation will be to enhance current rights and entitlements to flexible working for employees by:

- removing the current 26-week qualifying period before a flexible working request can be made (which may include a request for hybrid or remote working), thereby making this a right available to both new and existing employees;

- allowing an employee to make two statutory requests in any 12-month period (the current entitlement being one such request); and
- removing the requirement that the employee must explain as part of the statutory request what effect the change would have on the employer and how that might be dealt with.

The consultation opened on 1 July 2024. The closing date is 30 September 2024 at 17:00.^{lxix}

Conclusion

The evolution of hybrid working in Northern Ireland represents a significant shift for many, in how work is structured and experienced. While the adoption of hybrid working has brought benefits, it also presents challenges that must be carefully managed.

The future of hybrid working will likely be shaped by technological advancements, policies, evolving employee expectations, and broader economic trends. It will be essential for employers, employees and policymakers to remain adaptable, fostering work environments that balance flexibility with the need for in-person collaboration and community engagement.

Hybrid working policies and practices will play a critical role in shaping the future of work in Northern Ireland, with implications for jobs, regional balance, productivity, and decarbonisation. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented by hybrid working, Northern Ireland can position itself to achieve its broader economic and social objectives in the years to come.

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- [i Hybrid working: Guidance for people professionals | CIPD](#)
 - [ii Update to working from home guidance | The Executive Office \(executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
 - [iii Research Bulletin 22/2 - The Future of Remote and Hybrid Working in Northern Ireland \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
 - [iv Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland: Full Report \(ulster.ac.uk\)](#)
 - [v Is Remote Working, Working in Northern Ireland? Trend is Still Lagging Far Behind Rest of UK - Ulster University](#)
 - [vi Is Remote Working, Working in Northern Ireland? Trend is Still Lagging Far Behind Rest of UK - Ulster University](#)
 - [vii Lightcast - A Global Leader in Labour Market Analytics](#)
 - [viii Lightcast - A Global Leader in Labour Market Analytics](#)
 - [ix Lightcast - A Global Leader in Labour Market Analytics](#)
 - [x Statement from Minister Murphy - economic vision | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
 - [xi Sync NI - Job vacancies in Northern Ireland increase as competition for talent heightens
New survey reveals dealbreakers for NI jobseekers - NIJobs Recruiter News](#)
 - [xii Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland: Executive Summary \(ulster.ac.uk\)](#)
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