Hybrid Working: Answering the Big Questions

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed almost every aspect of the world, and the world of work is no exception to that. One of the most notable changes in the way that we work has been the trend towards hybrid working: a system of work that aims to combine the benefits of working from an office with those of working from home. Hybrid working largely came about because most people were suddenly forced to work from home practically overnight as countries compelled their citizens to stay at home to curb the spread of the virus.

Once people were working from home (many of whom had never done so in the past) they realised that it came with some great benefits, but also some drawbacks. These are often the opposite for office and home working: the office is great for collaboration and poor for focused work, while working at home is great for solo work but can cause issues with collaboration. Many companies have been surprised to find that they have actually performed at least the same or even better with everyone working remotely and have now turned their attention to unifying these experiences to leverage the benefits of both.

Amalgamating these two approaches has proven difficult however. It is often hard to gauge what level of hybrid working is right for the organisation or if it is right at all. If you are confident of that, it is often unclear how that will affect the office space provided for staff or how you might need to change how you operate to support employees. And then the big question: how can you know if it is actually working well? This series will guide readers through how to answer the big questions of hybrid working to fully attain the opportunities of a hybrid workforce.

What is the correct balance of hybrid working?

Companies, departments, teams and individuals all have variable levels of time they want to spend in the office. For some people this may depend on when they want to see colleagues or go the gym after work and for others it may be a case of being able to focus better at home. The correct balance could even be fluid, following trends in business cycles or just personal lives. Some companies have tried to mitigate this by mandating that everyone come into the office 5 days per week; others have decided that being entirely remote works for them. Most have fallen somewhere in the middle, but it can be difficult to settle on an expected cadence of office versus home working that keeps employees happy and keeps communication flowing.

UnWork has been surveying all over the world and we have found that the majority of people would like to be in the office for 2-3 days per week. This is generally stable between companies, departments and age groups:
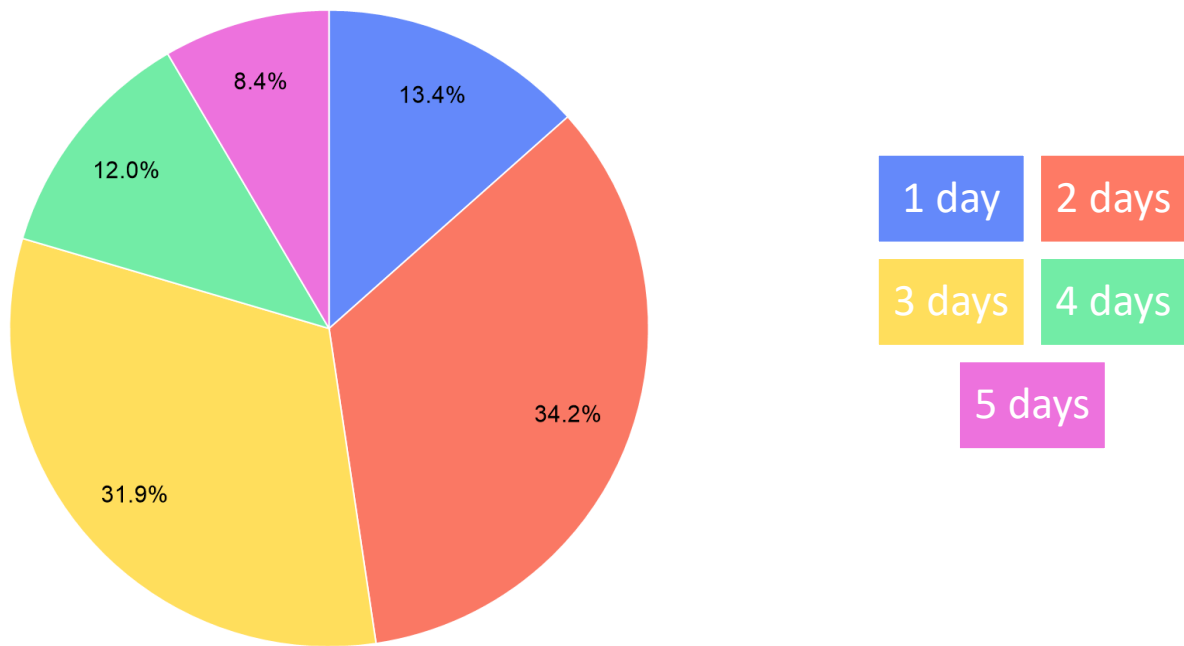
Figure 1: Typical values for employees asked how many days they would like to spend in the office in the future.

But finding the correct balance of hybrid working is not as simple as just asking people how often they would like to come in. How people would like to work does not necessarily fully reflect the needs of the business or how those people might work best. This information needs to be combined with other data to fully explore which factors are most important to the work that employees do and how much time they spend on different tasks:
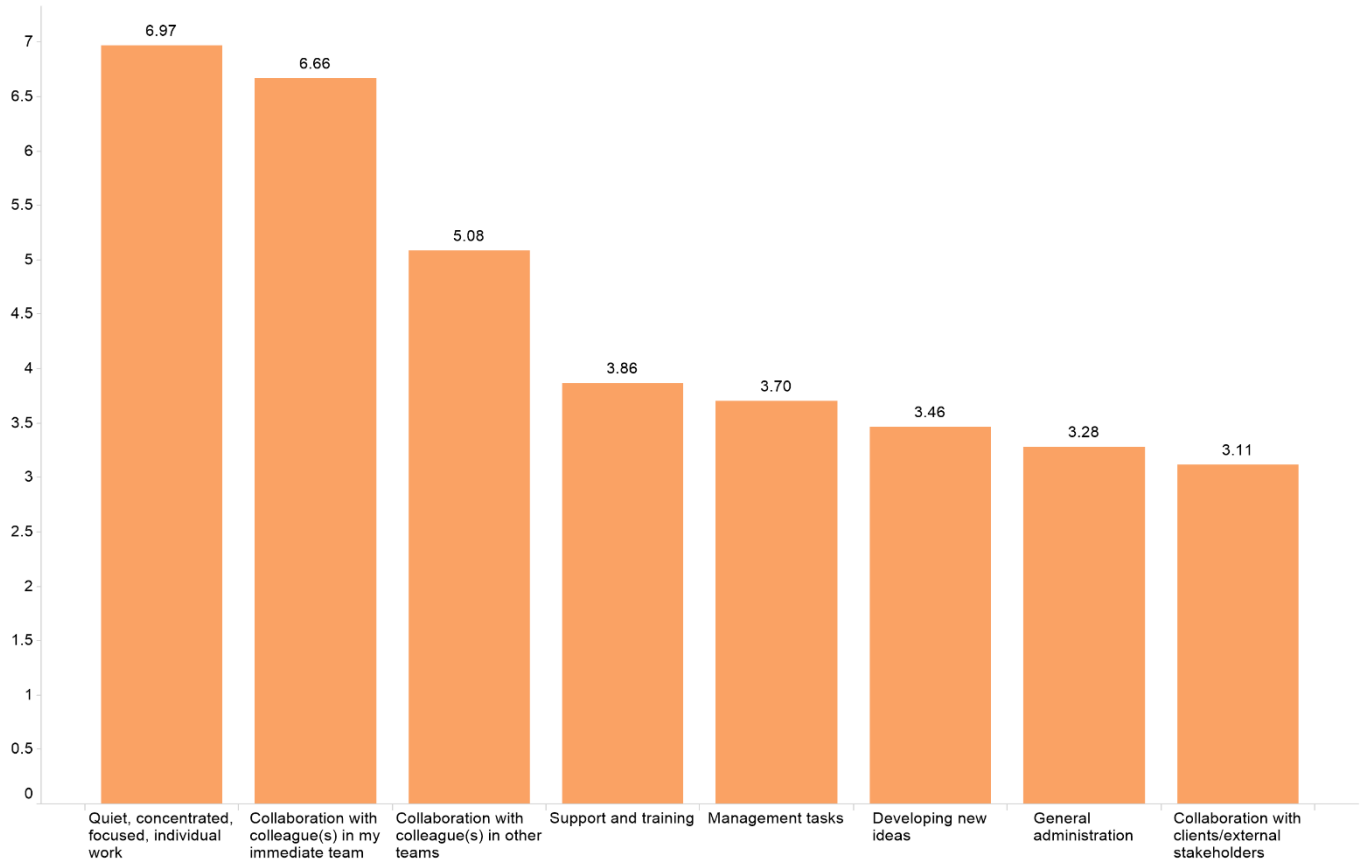
Figure 2: Typical values when employees are asked to rank the most important types of work for their roles.
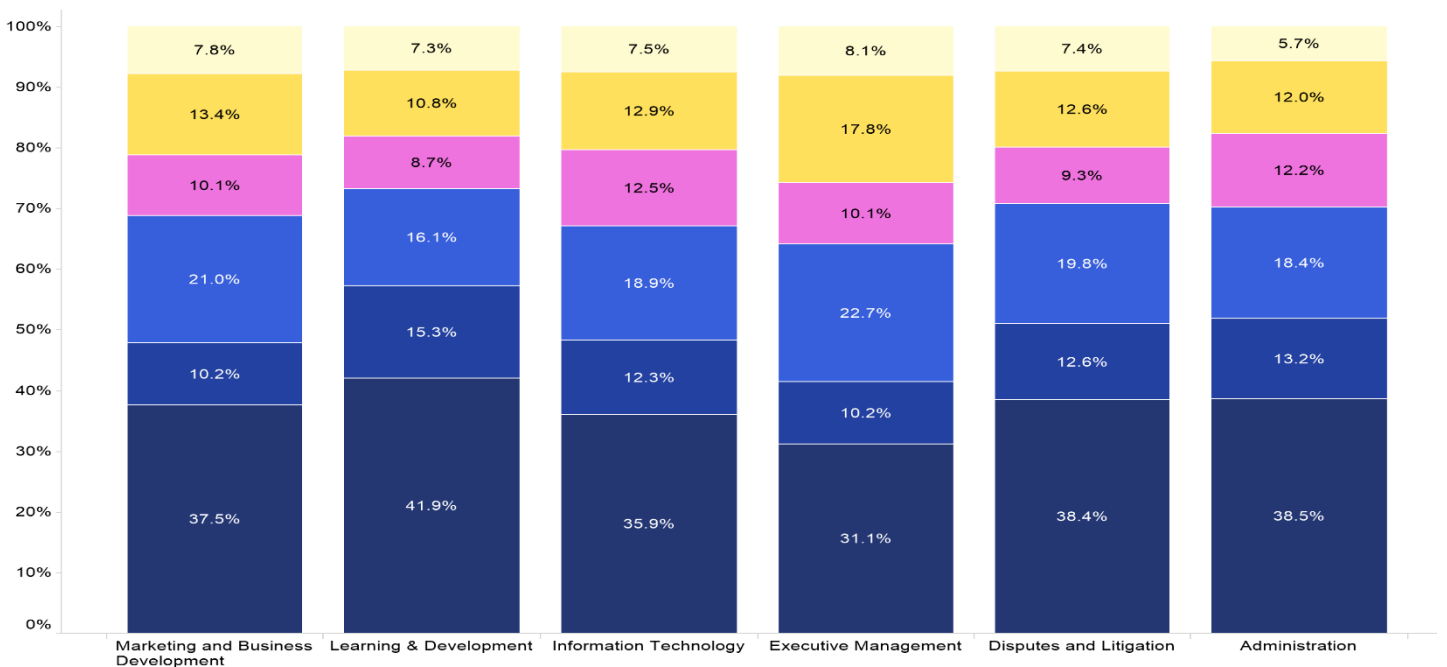

Figure 3: Typical proportions of work time spent on different activities across teams.

With this information, we can not only understand how much time people want to spend in the office, but also look at that through the lens of what kinds of activities are most important to their work and differences between departments. Filtering the data in this way lets organisations make a more informed and objective choice about how many days in the office is likely to be suitable for their workforce.

While surveys form an important strand of the data required for working out the correct balance of home working, there are further data sources to explore. Typically, data sources like surveys that rely on self-report are open to a range of biases as they are predicated upon human's ability to remember, estimate and judge facts about their experience. We can complement this through using data that is observational in nature, bypassing these potential biases.

Viva Insights from Microsoft provide a way to do this: through passive collection of collaboration data from Teams and Outlook, this platform can provide organisations with a huge range of data about the workforce and working habits. With our network mapping techniques, we can not only map out the collaborative network of the organisation but start to identify which segments of the network are the most important; these are typically those that need to be easiest to access and therefore may have more of a need to be in the office more often.
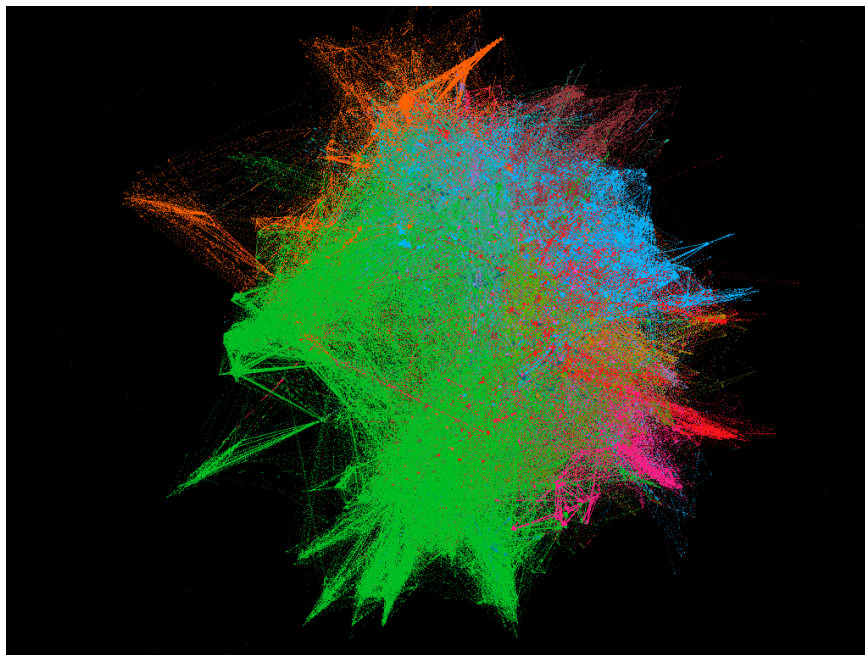

Figure 4: Organisational network map. Colours represent departments and the more links between nodes (dots) the more time they spend collaborating.
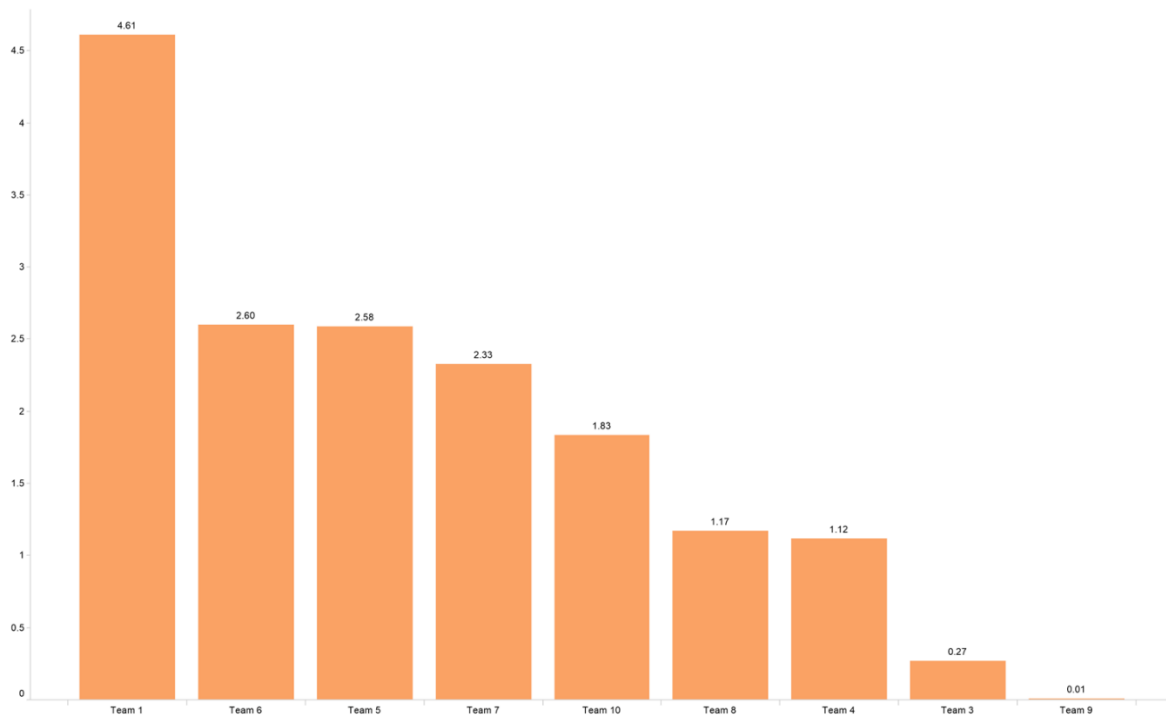
Figure 5: Eigenvector centrality scores across different teams. The higher the score the more "influential" the department and therefore the higher need to be in the office.

All of this data together can be used to answer the big question of what balance of hybrid working is right, and crucially, what balance is right for different segments of the organisation. No two people work in exactly the same way and neither do any two teams. Unpicking the nuance and understanding the differences between teams will ensure that everyone gets closer to a balance that is right for them, their work and the company. So, the answer to the question: "What is the correct balance of hybrid working?" is that it is variable in a number of different dimensions and understanding your organisation, what they want, what they need and how they work is how you find a balance of hybrid working that works for you.

The next entry in this series will examine the question: "What does it mean for our office space?". This entry will explore how hybrid working changes what we need from offices and how best to respond to the trends to futureproof the office.