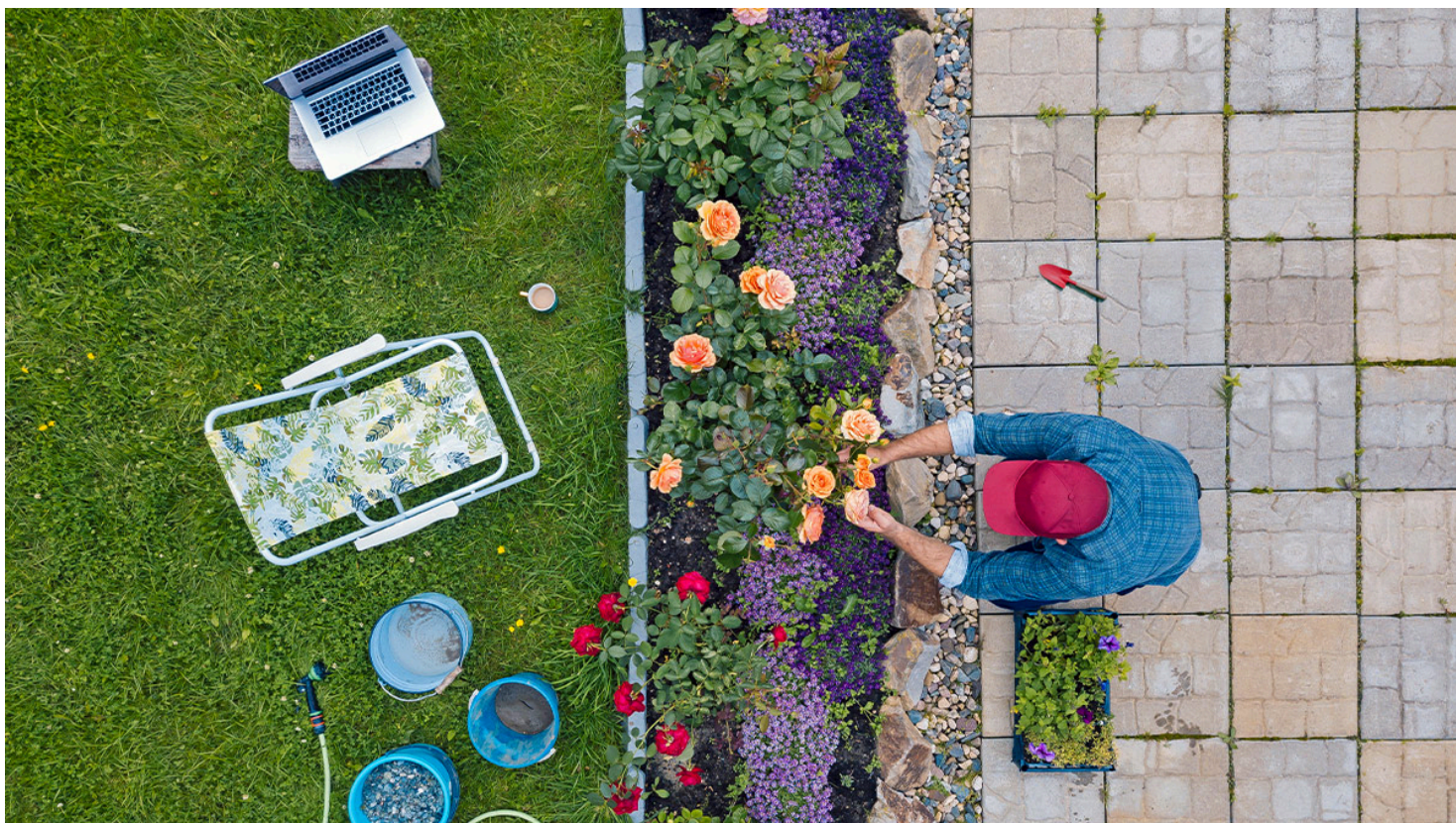


Virtual Teams

Balancing Autonomy and Structure for Remote Employees

by Holger Reisinger, Paul Sephton, and Dane Fetterer

May 13, 2022



Summary. Employees want full autonomy to choose where and when they work. Data from the new Jabra Hybrid Ways of Working 2022 Global Report finds that this increased autonomy contributes positively to an employee’s work experience, boosting factors such as motivation, productivity, trust, and mental well-being. However, one major concern that leaders have expressed is the inability to make important decisions about the future space and technology needs of the organization if they don’t know where or when employees will be working. Luckily, Jabra’s data also finds that employees long to restore some sense of stability to their lives after two very uncertain years. The authors provide a roadmap for leaders to support increased employee autonomy while still tending to the more tangible needs of the organization. [close](#)

As major companies like Google and Apple have begun mandating a return of all employees to the office for a certain number of days per week, the debate about flexibility and autonomy continues to develop. More organizations are taking a firm stance on where they feel their employees should work, once again casting the spotlight on the question of how much say employees should have in determining their own work arrangement — whether they should be able to decide where and when they work, or whether their organization should make that decision for them.

Even since before the post-pandemic return-to-office discussion, there had been many diverging opinions about the best approach for leaders to take. This has resulted in headlines ranging from “Let Employees Choose Where, When, and How to Work” to “Don’t Let Employees Pick Their WFH Days.” In this wide-ranging

debate, advocates for leadership control over employee work arrangements are often seen as insensitive to the needs of employees. Similarly, advocates for full employee control over their work arrangements are perceived as blind to the needs of the organization. However, in many cases, both of these arguments miss the mark. If executed correctly, allowing employees to choose where and when they work can both boost the employee experience and give leaders the structure and predictability they need to make key strategic decisions for the organization.

Here, we present a roadmap showcasing how leaders can use office spaces and technology to empower employees to create structure in their work arrangements, even when they have full autonomy to choose where and when they work.

Employees want to choose where and when they work

The new Jabra Hybrid Ways of Working 2022 Global Report shows that employees with full autonomy to choose where and when they work unanimously report a better work experience than those with limited or low autonomy. Below, you can see how we've defined these various groups:

- **High autonomy:** “I have full autonomy to choose where and when I work, with the ability to come into the office if I want.

- **Limited autonomy:** “I’m required to work remotely full time and can choose to work anywhere but the office”;
“There is a minimum number of days required in the office, but I can choose which days to come in.”
- **Low autonomy:** “I’m required to work in-office full time”;
“I work from home and the office, but the days are chosen for me (e.g., required in office on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and from home on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays).”

In the study, we define work experience as an aggregate of eight different metrics: sense of belonging, motivation, productivity, trust in team, trust in leaders, impact, work-life balance, and mental well-being. When asked how their work arrangements impact various aspects of their work experience, high-autonomy employees report the highest levels of belonging, motivation, productivity, trust in team, trust in leaders, work-life balance, and mental well-being. In some cases, these scores are more than 20% higher than their low autonomy counterparts. Interestingly, the sense of impact that employees felt they had in their organization barely varied across any of these groups. In the future, leaders and managers will need to find alternative ways to boost employee sense of impact, such as through increased reward and recognition.

In today's battle for talent, employee experience has become a key focus for many leaders. Empowering employees to choose where and when they work can be one of the biggest drivers of a better experience at work.

Flexible location choice will continue to grow as a priority

The shifts of the past two years have given employees good reason to reprioritize their lives to focus more on their health and well-being. So much so, in fact, that our research last year found that the majority of employees had come to value flexibility more than salary and other benefits. This flexibility has given them the opportunity to find newer, better ways of doing their jobs from anywhere and on their own terms.

Employees believe that these new, better ways of working are here to stay. In fact, our latest data shows that 64% of Gen Z and 63% of Millennials consider their office to be their laptop, headset, and wherever they can get a strong internet connection, compared to only 48% of Gen X and 43% of Baby Boomers. It's clear that the future of work — a future made up primarily of these younger generations — will prioritize having the freedom to work from anywhere.

Leaders are concerned about letting employees choose location

Despite the major motivation, productivity, trust, and well-being benefits of increasing employee autonomy, many business leaders may find relinquishing all location decision-making power to employees to be a disconcerting thought; after all, it's leaders who need to make important decisions about what to do with the organization's physical infrastructure. CBRE, a global leader in commercial real estate, released a report in 2021 indicating that "corporate real estate professionals are being tasked with developing more agile strategies in the face of portfolios that are bound by contractual obligations, depreciation schedules, and cultural norms."

This same sentiment is leaving many business leaders asking themselves important questions about the future of their organizations in a hybrid working world. Should we sell off some of our real estate? What do we do with our desk arrangements or meeting rooms? How do I service our technology needs if I cannot predict how many employees will be working in the office? If leaders are to make informed decisions on these crucial questions impacting workplace investments and overhead costs, they need to have a predictable and stable overview of how their employees plan to work. They need to understand how buildings, spaces, and technology will be used.

Employees seek habits, structure, and predictability

We're creatures of habit. In much of what we do, we strive for balance and structure, not least between work and life. It's this predictability that offers us more certainty and allows us to get the most out of our lives. And just because employees can choose where and when they work doesn't mean that they'll override these inherent human tendencies. They'll still try to create structures and habits in the day-to-day that allow them to optimize their time.

Take one example from the workplace. In our research, 69% of high-autonomy employees said that if they didn't have a permanent, regular desk or office at work, they'd still try to sit and work in the same spot every day anyway. This number is the same for low-autonomy employees and only 2% lower for those with limited freedom to choose where they work. Predictability triumphs regardless of the amount of autonomy you're able to exercise at work. Similarly, knowing what your workday will look like can be a great motivator for coming into the office, and employees will be more likely to do so if they know what to expect.

We found that as the amount of time a given employee spends in meetings goes up, so too does their preference for their home workspace over their in-office workspace. With 80% of all meetings now fully virtual or hybrid, in-office meeting spaces aren't being utilized to the extent that they were prior to the

pandemic. And with the work-from-home shift of the pandemic, 42% of employees have reconfigured their home workspaces for a virtual working world (a number that rises to 68% for those spending more than half their time in meetings). As such, many are better equipped for today's virtual workstyles at home. The reliability and predictability of their home collaboration experience offers more certainty about the trajectory of their day than the prospect of coming into an office that isn't optimized for a virtual style of work.

Here, leaders are in a bit of a Catch-22. On the one hand, many are hesitant to reconfigure offices without mandating that employees use them. On the other hand, they can't expect employees to want to go back into the office when their home setup is better for virtual work and collaboration. If office spaces are brought up to speed with the capabilities of many employees' remote locations, the predictability of their office use habits will be easier to map out.

Three steps to leading a high-autonomy hybrid organization

With the right strategy, leaders can leverage the trust and well-being benefits of increasing employee location choice — both of which contribute positively to productivity — while still being able to make business-critical decisions about what to do with the organization's physical infrastructure.

Step #1: Create spaces that actually meet the demands of a virtual-first working world.

Our data shows that employees recognize the value of having access to multiple places to work, both in terms of maximizing productivity and feeling a sense of belonging in the organization. The top two reasons for wanting to come into the office are focus and collaboration — two tasks that are often seen as diametrically opposed to one another. But the current state of offices leaves employees with a subpar environment to effectively complete these types of tasks.

For example, a recent Bloomberg piece reported that “one of [one employee’s] main annoyances is the echo when she’s seated next to a colleague on the same call as her.” “Sometimes,” writes the author, “she can’t even understand what’s happening in the meeting because of it.” Because workspaces aren’t purposefully thought out, employees are forced to blend the physical and virtual worlds in a way that reduces the value of both.

For both individual focus and group collaboration tasks, employees must be able to access spaces that reduce these types of disturbances and maximize the utility of virtual tools. One way to do this is by considering the acoustic and visual privacy offered by any given space. Our data shows that employees prefer spaces with acoustic privacy (61%) over visual privacy (39%). In other words, they’d rather work in spaces where they can’t hear or be heard by those outside of the space than spaces where they can’t

see or be seen by those outside. And this makes sense, as acoustic privacy lends itself well to increased concentration as well as to virtual collaboration environments where audio quality oftentimes poses quite an issue for many.

The death of in-office collaboration is being driven in part by a superior remote experience with technology that is better suited to the environment in which it's being used. Creating office spaces that allow employees to access virtual environments more easily will make their lives easier, consequently allowing them to create predictable work habits and space usage patterns.

Step #2: Supplement the diminished sense of belonging in the office space with an increased sense of belonging in the virtual space.

For a long time, many employees had a personal desk or office at their place of work. And oftentimes, these spaces were points of great pride for employees, spaces where they would keep their favorite coffee cup and proudly display photos of their children. With the rise of hot-desking — a necessary decision for many companies transitioning to a hybrid model — we know that personalized spaces are rapidly disappearing in many offices. Similarly, employees are resistant to the idea of not having a place they can call their own: four in 10 say they would feel less loyalty and commitment to their company if they didn't have a regular, permanent workspace in the office. And why wouldn't they feel

that way? For many employees, that sense of belonging and ownership they had over a personal space was taken away and they were given nothing with which to replace it.

With our presence in the organization being primarily perceived virtually, that very same sense of belonging that employees once felt in the office space must be replaced with a sense of belonging in the virtual space. This is especially true for organizations proceeding with hot-desking arrangements. The personal artefact that was taken away from them — the desk or office — must be replaced with their own personal technology that offers them a sense of ownership and belonging in the new virtual world of work.

This then raises the question of which technologies best enable that increased sense of belonging and inclusion. Our data found that users of professional audio devices reported feeling more included in virtual meetings than those using either consumer audio devices or the microphones and speakers built into their laptops. In fact, users of professional headsets were 11% less likely to feel left out of the conversation in virtual meetings than consumer device or built-in audio users. Similarly, professional headset users were 14% less likely to report not being able to hear what's being said in the meeting than built-in users and 12% less likely than consumer device users. If employees are to feel a sense

of belonging in these professional virtual environments, they need the professional tools and technologies built exactly with those environments in mind.

Step #3: Let employees find the balance that matches their life's new rhythm.

Now that the architectural and technological backdrop is all in place, leaders can focus on building a flourishing high-autonomy work culture. With this setup, employees have all the elements they need to build work habits that work for them. Over time, a picture of the organization's average workplace occupancy rates will begin to emerge. Consequently, leaders can then use this information to identify that balance and make well-informed, strategic decisions about the company's future real estate and technology needs.

When leaders give employees the freedom to choose where and when they work, it signals that they trust them to do the job they were hired to do. The data shows that that trust is then paid back to leaders and teams at a very high rate, building a tight-knit culture of inclusivity and belonging. With the right spaces and technology in place, employers enable employees to create structure in the way they work, thereby improving the employee experience. And by following these steps, a high-autonomy approach to work will create happier, healthier, and higher-performing employees who will be able to find a balance that benefits both themselves and the wider organization.

HR

Holger Reisinger is SVP of Large Enterprise Solutions at Jabra.

PS

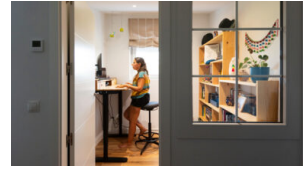
Paul Sephton is Head of Brand Communications at Jabra.

DF

Dane Fetterer is a Staff Researcher & Writer at Jabra.

Recommended For You

Fighting Loneliness on Remote Teams



It Might Be Time to Spill Your Corporate Secrets



PODCAST Toxic Workplaces



Surveilling Employees Erodes Trust - and Puts Managers in a Bind

