

Engage podcast: Hybrid Working

Guest presenters: Jenni Field, Kate Shaw, Martin Flegg and Sofia Cann

Transcript

Iain 0:11

Hello, and welcome to our latest CIPR engage podcast where we're looking at future ways of working. Now the pandemic has provided an opportunity to explore how we can work differently, in a post COVID world. It's a very different landscape for a lot of businesses, with many proposing to adopt a hybrid working model, as opposed to go back to the office full time. And in this episode, we'll explore the opportunities and benefits for PR and comms practitioners of implementing a flexible hybrid working approach. And we'll look at what to consider including the technology, ways of working patterns, that rhythm of the organisation, and how it all links together. And joining us, we've got Sofia Cann head of marketing and comms for Square Chapel Art Centre in Halifax, and the Old Court in Wigan, Martin Flegg, chair of Inside CIPR committee, Kate Shaw, who senior internal comms manager for Nationwide Building Society. And up first, our host, Jenni Field, Vice President of the CIPR, and Author.

Jenni 1:22

Hybrid working is a term that has been used a lot in recent months, and I'm really excited to have a bit of a conversation about whether it's a red herring, whether it's something that's here for the long term, or whether it's quite simply something that's absolute nonsense, and we don't need to worry about it at all. And I know that I'm joined here with other experts in communications to have the discussion. But following a recent post that I did on Influence magazine, I talked about the fact that I do think it is a complete red herring. Because I think that hybrid working, working flexibly has been something from a location perspective we've been doing for a really long time. What I don't think we're very good at is looking at work and home life as one and exploring the larger societal shift that I think needs to come from the post-pandemic or post-lockdown world. That for me is what hybrid working is truly about that true flexibility that's needed in the workplace. So, I'd love to get some opinions from my guests and co-hosts or co panellists, whatever you want to call each other today, and just going to take on what you think is, I guess, or how you would define hybrid working. And I'm going to come to Martin first.

Martin 2:36

Hi, everybody. Thanks, Jenni. What is hybrid working? Looking at? And that's a question and a half. I think it depends on the context, to be honest, because I think if you if you listen to some of the narrative, if you read some of the stuff that's being published, I think the words office and office work a loom large in the discourse at the moment. And you know, there are some jobs that just can't be done remotely, however much people that do them would like them to be done in that way. So I think the context is all I think we need to be mindful of, of

who we're talking about, when we're talking about hybrid working. Just so that we get the context, right. And the understanding of that situation, right.

Jenni 3:15

Fair, Sofia?

Sofia

Yeah, I agree. To some extent with that. I think we've got to be sensitive on who we're saying to because I know I've got caught up in that where I'm talking about, yeah, you know, working remotely or working hot desking, all that sort of stuff. And then you get a glimpse of someone you think, yeah you can't actually do that with your role. So, yeah, we've got to be mindful and sometimes I feel like I catch myself like, I think I know the meaning of it. And then it changes with conversations. So I've got to keep reminding myself because there's the whole hybrid and then flexible working and off-site working. So there's just lots of terms isn't there that you got to get used to and work out what it means.

Jenni 4:05

Yeah, nothing like us good comms people coming up with terms that you know, have different meanings to different people at all times. It's wonderful. Kate, what about you?

Kate

That's exactly what I was gonna say is, it's like another buzzword bingo, isn't it so we can take it off the list we've hit it already today? I think I have some of you, all of those. I think there is a massive thing about flexibility and choice. There are populations of people who have proved different ways of working for, you know, 2030 years, it's not new. What I think is new is I completely agree around people understanding the balance between work and home and all of the various different things that you have to confront in that and juggle and balance. And that's not just for parents, it's not just for carers, it's for different kinds of people for different kinds of reasons. So I don't think there's a clear definition of it and I think that is half the battle.

Jenni

I'm wondering also, as you're talking about that, that different workers not being able to work in kind of a hybrid world and that divide that was talked about quite a lot during lockdown in the UK around the fact that you had knowledge workers working at home. And then frontline workers still working on the front line in whatever capacity that might be whether it's working in a bank, doing bin collection, working in the NHS, and this kind of divide that was coming through organisations because of people misunderstanding or trying to do comparison, which is the thief of joy. But that feels like that might continue based on what you're just talking about there that this hybrid world that's applicable to some but not others is possibly going to cause huge divide inside organisations. Anyone wants to weigh in on that thought?

Kate 5:38

I'm happy to weigh in, because I you know, I work for an organisation that does have frontline workers. So we have branches on the high street. And we have people in our offices and at home, I think you're absolutely right, I think we are in a culture, which is what

the media is aiming to separate people is not doing anything to join the country together, it's aiming to create division, and divide and pit people against each other. So I think if we're not careful, that is only going to get worse through this and what I would like to see more of is how you encourage those frontline workers and hybrid workers to be part of the same organisation.

So we are all aligned behind a common purpose, you will just do it in different ways. And you'll have different roles to play. And there will be elements of different kinds of ways of working of which location is just one part. And it's the part that people seem to be obsessed with. That will apply to everyone. So our frontline workers will be able to do different roles, though there could be an element of flexibility within their role, I could go and work in a branch and it might connect me even more to our members and our organisations. So I think it's about not creating those divides and looking for how you can make things work. And starting from a positive way of thinking, rather than focusing on the divide. If we can do more to join people together, that is always going to be a winner.

Jenni 6:52

And you talked then about kind of different locations and working in different locations bringing you closer to the front line. Is that something that you're looking at as an organisation that you could go and work in a branch rather than a central office location?

Kate

Yeah, absolutely. So looking at how we make the most of our branch network, which is spread across the country, on high streets, which are in trouble. So how can we help provide more to our local community is a big part of our ethos as an organisation. So it's not about staying at home, there could be opportunities all over the place, I think you have to balance that with not everyone's home environment is supportive to working in this way. And they will be just as many people who've struggled as there are who have found it fantastic. So if you can provide a different way of working and branches can be a fantastic opportunity for us. We are in the in the communities all over the UK. So yeah, we definitely want to look at how we can make the most of them.

Jenni 7:49

And if we think about that, that shift of the office location, the branches, all those things, there's been a lot of chat about hybrid, and also the demise of the office as a location and that people are saying the office is no longer needed. I have yet to see this in practice. I don't know anyone has said that office has completely closed shut down doesn't exist anymore. I don't know, anyone. And obviously, I don't know everyone but I'm wondering if you guys know anyone whose office has genuinely, totally completely closed and it's now a whole mishmash of work that's going to be home coffee shops and other stuff.

Sofia 8:30

I'm in a weird situation because I'm in the arts. So that just closed, the arts just went dark. So I suppose because when I catch myself talking about this subject and my opinion on it right now, I know in six months, 12 months, it probably change. But I'm seeing it as you know, I loved getting out, go into it, I was a bit of a geek, I would get up go to work, I would be the first one there. People thought I didn't have a life, I was a workaholic. And I never

thought I would change. I was proud of the fact that I was a workaholic. I wasn't ashamed of it. And when theatres went dark, and the arts, everybody either was on furlough, or if you were back, you were working remotely. And I panicked and thought, how can we do this? How can I do this? And for me, and I know colleagues in the same boat, it's probably been the best thing. So I spend that time that I would have travelled to work doing the workouts that I used to say, I don't have time to do this, you know, which then in turn makes me feel great. So I'm set up for the day. I do. I do need to put a little diary alert that says clock off, you know, you've got to switch off because, again, I don't have children. I don't have those distractions, which I know friends have said, you know, I have to clock off at school collection time and things like that. I don't so I work through and then at the end of the day, I go for a swim and I feel like this life where did it come from? I love it. So, but that is probably because we don't have the office space. Nobody's going into that building. Is that going to change in a few months time when theatres can open and you'll have the, the buzz of people around? And again, like what you were saying, Kate, there are opportunities that I, when when you were saying that, I thought, yeah, you know, I missed that being around people having those conversations, and then opportunities arise and programming ideas, marketing ideas. So, yeah, I don't know, I think down the line, I think that's what it's gonna be like, especially in my industry, we're just gonna keep going. It's great now and then, in a few months, like, I need to be around you to have the ideas and things like that. So let's get back in the office. But right now we have, we were not in an office, I can't remember the last time I was in an office over a year ago.

Martin 10:44

It's interesting that you say what's going to happen when the brakes come off. And in the UK, we're kind of standing on the cusp of this now, in this talk of in middle of June, that everything almost social distancing stops in, and then we're free again, free and we can touch people, we can have a hope, we can finally have a hug Jenny, can I let some base, you know, for centuries, people have worked in locations, and their work has been centred around locations, regardless of whether they actually needs to be there at all, work has been a physical place. And, you know, back into the 20th century, early 21st century that was kind of being swept away in some ways because of technology and the ability to work kind of anywhere, really. But old habits die hard, I think. And I just wonder how many people are going to go back to the old ways of doing things, either individually or collectively or as organisations, because that was there for so long. It's been taken away for about a year. But it's the temptation to go back to the old ways, just too great.

Kate 11:55

And that's where you need some concrete decisions around things like workplace and building. So you're right, Jenni, I've not seen any organisations that have just said, right, that's it, whenever we opening the doors again, lock them up, you know, most organisations are making small changes. So there are definitely places you've said it and including us where we are not reopening some of our buildings in Swindon, you are going to have to make those decisions in order to force the longer term behaviour change that you want to see. But you're you're right, Martin, you could see people drift, because it's the way it used to be or presenteeism starts coming back. And, you know, all my managers in that data think I should pop in just so I can be visible. And say, it might require some agitators, and some people who not make life difficult, but do what they can to prove these new ways I

say new, they're not new. These ways of working can actually sustain us in the long term. But also remembering that not everyone can work from home. And so we will always provide a desk for those who need it. It's one of the commitments that we've made as an organisation. So if you can think of people in unsafe home environments, or flat chairs, those people are particularly in some of the cities where you've got younger populations like London, etc, where you might be six people in a flat share for people around a kitchen table or you're on the end of the bed. That's not a nice way to work. So actually, in order they need a space to go to. So we've committed to doing that. And we were investing in our offices before this happened, we opened a new one last August, not a lot of people have been to it yet. So and that was around a future way of working that is coming true through all of the stuff that we're now seeing. So actually put puts us in a great place, and we're quite excited.

Martin 13:35

And that's a really important point, I think case is if you want change to happen, then you have to engineer the environment to make to make that to facilitate it so that it can happen. And if there aren't those firm decisions in organisations now about what the future looks like, and how people are going to work. And this is just isn't about, you know, point in place will you know, you can have 20 people in the office at any one time, there's policies, there's process, there's legal stuff, you know, all that stuff's gotta be put in place to actually make hybrid working really fly. And if people are kind of sat on the fence at the moment kind of thinking, well, let's just see what happens. What will happen is you'll go back to the old way of doing things, because that's what people were familiar with how presenteeism thing will come back and all those bad habits. And we're back where we were, you know, 18 months ago. So yeah, there's a really important point that decisions have to be made around the environment and creating the right environment so that people can work in that new way.

Jenni 14:30

I want to ask the question about the media because Kate, you said early on about the media, you know, being a bit divisive. And I I read a great book last year called the science of fear by Dan Gardner, which I've talked about a lot and it talks about media and fear in that as well. And then as Martin you were talking about how people will just go back and revert to type was then got me thinking about you know, do I want to be in someone's armpit on the train again, in terms of the fear, both the unpleasantness of being in an armpit, but also the closeness of being next to someone, I'm not sure that that's something we would go back to. So I'm just thinking about all those different things that are going on for people of the media messages that we're getting, you know, the fact that my home environment might not be the most conducive, or the safest for me to work in. So that needs to go into the office, and all of those things that are just bubbling around, but the fear piece, I think, is something that's going to take us quite a long time to overcome. I mean, I still remember, even last April, when we, we'd been in very severe lockdown in the UK, about four weeks, going to drop a present off to my brother-in-law, and other people arrived in the garden, and I was freaking out about the fact we were in a garden, there were two other people in a garden.

And it's been four weeks. And I think, God, it's been 15 months now. And that conditioning of fear, I think, is there and I wonder what role that's going to play in terms of the hybrid, working in the changes and helping people overcome that and whether organisations have a role to help overcome the fear. But without that feeling like you're forcing people into an office, I've got so many questions and thoughts based on what you've all said. So with all that rambling, I don't know if anyone's got any equal rambling thoughts, based on all of that.

Kate 16:19

Definitely. I think this is this is quite real for me, because we've literally had a conversation over the last couple of days around this, I think, if you as you go through the pandemic, our role as an organisation has been to keep people safe, and help people with their wellbeing and support and all of that stuff around it. So I don't think that goes away ever. So we're going to have to do that. Mental Health etc, is all a massive concern as we go forward, teams fatigue, blah, blah, blah. We know we know all of that. But in even in my own team, we had quite a personal conversation this week around a team away day in July and for this who live 100 miles away and to explore accommodating people who have kids. So actually, when they said London, I had an immediate reaction, which was to get massively emotional content, I just can't do it because I didn't like the tube before if I'm being perfectly honest, the idea of my face and an armpit is absolutely one I as a short person, it's very real. So I don't want to go back to that I'm quite claustrophobic and don't like crowds. So I'm a joy to be around. But I actually like it was I didn't know I felt like that until it hit me in that moment. And as a team, we went whoah, we've just made a massive assumption around getting together in that way and now we just need to go back around and check everyone's okay and actually I'll go with our drive probably to Central London rather than go on the train and on the tube. And I think multiply that on a massive scale for an organisation you will have people at completely different ends of the spectrum. So those who have been on the front line the whole way through and have been putting their lives on the line to go into public facing environments and look after people and then you've got people who have worked from home like myself, I've been in this box for 15 months went had my hair done the other day and that was quite overwhelming because of the noise and all of that sort of stuff. So if you then the idea of going into my old office which had 3000 people in it makes me nervous, although my step count would go up because blimey, I do miss the exercise. So actually if the multiple needs that people will have you aren't going to be able to please everybody but what can we do to look after the people who are unsure anxious and almost have that leadership steer that isn't you don't force people to do something that they're uncomfortable with, it's going to take time to come out of this situation. Working from home was almost overnight barring that you know, technical logistics etc. But actually going back will be really really hard. And we need to really help people through that and an organisation and and communicators etc, have a huge role to play in that.

Sofia 19:05

I agree. I went through something similar where so I suffered with OCD and I thought being couped up in a home was going to just be the end of me. And the worry for me was I mean there's a meeting put in for not it's for an hour, and it's not for a few months, but that's all I'm thinking about now and I didn't realise I thought yeah an hour it'll be fine. People I know, you know, some new people that sort of stuff. And that's all I think about at the

moment about you know, getting there is it all COVID safe is it all the things that I suppose when you have OCD you think about this stuff anyway, like sanitizer, it's been a bit of heaven for me really, I'm making light of it, but it's how I feel. I feel normal because everybody's using sanitizer, everybody's got wet wipes and it's like I blend in now this is fantastic. So let's go of going back to normal, which was you know, you just go around shaking hands and things like that It fills me with dread. I want everyone to sanitise. I went to the gym. And it was my happy place. Because, you know, you think back, nobody used to clean the equipment before and after use. And now that's what you do. And it's like, why would you not doing it before? Somebody else's sweat. So for me, it's that sort of thing that I'm thinking about. But on the other side, as well, in the workplace is where you do pick up on other people's anxiety and you know, check in Are you alright, and you can't do that by zoom. And so that's alarming, you know, where, how are we looking after each other? Like, we once did in the office, I think, you know?

Martin 20:48

I've discovered things about myself in this pandemic that I probably otherwise wouldn't have done, I always felt I was an introverted loner, who didn't need other people, you know, it didn't care if I didn't see anybody ever. It's not true. You know, and, you know, if I was invited to case meeting in London, I'd be off there like a shot. I'd be absolutely there. But I just, I think, you know, maybe my level of confidence is higher now. Because in there, you know, I'm obviously significantly older than you. And I have both my jabs. And that's, that makes me feel much more confident, you know, let me start this pandemic, you know, going to the supermarket was a terrifying experience, literally, you know, just you don't want to be in and out there in like 10 minutes, if you could be. Now I'm kind of a, you know, swanning around the aisles, you know, how the different pastors and all that sort of thing, because, you know, I've had my jabs, that I've got the confidence now. And I think that, you know, the point I'm making is, is that everybody's, as we said, is at different points in their journey of going back to the normal. And there's all sorts of different influence on how it influences and how people feel about that case, absolutely. Right in the in the in the workplace environment. And from the communications point of view and a leadership point of view, we've got to be sensitive to that. Getting people over the threshold back into back into this new way of working is going to possibly be the biggest challenge. Actually, out of all of this. The actual hybrid working bit that comes work later on is actually possibly easier. We're actually getting people over threshold into that new world is that is that is a tricky a bit. And it won't happen as quickly as it did at the beginning of the pandemic, where we were all booted out boxes overnight, and it was tough to make the best of it. So used to take months, years.

Jenni 22:36

And I wonder in that journey of that month series, and I think I think you're spot on in terms of, you know, that immediacy with which we were at home, versus what's going to happen now in terms of that, that time that it will take. But I also wonder whether there's a realisation of how long that's going to take, I kind of feel as we've been talking that everyone thinks, wait, well, we're going to hybrid working now. So as of next week, you're in category one, and category two, and category three, and how everyone's going to be marvellous, I'm not sure we've identified the fact that this is, you know, a much bigger change. And as we're talking, I'm interested in how we talk about culture change in a pre-

COVID world, as communicators, we will talk about culture change for organisations and how that's probably a three, five-year transformation. I'm not sure we're looking at hybrid working, because we've created a buzzword around it, I'm not sure we're looking at that, as culture change, which is essentially what it is, it's a significant shift in the culture of the organisation that is probably going to take three to five years, and it's not going to happen overnight. But I'm just not sure we're giving ourselves leadership, comms functions, everything, that time maybe to work through that shift. Because of the individual nature of how everyone's feeling, which you've all talked about.

Martin 23:55

How long does it take to change a culture? You know, it's not, we've all sat in meetings as communicators and some bright sparks says we need to change the culture. As if it's something that's gonna happen like that by next week.

Kate 24:07

Just make a video.

Jenni 24:08

Yeah, that make it an animation video. And then you're really nailed it.

Martin 24:13

Or have a couple of posters, you know, that will change the culture around here around the place, you know, it's, it's not under something, there's something here about, you know, as we've said earlier about planning an intention. You don't change a culture by accident, you change it by design, and there's so many different elements to that, but, you know, we need to be thinking about, it's alright, having new processes, new rules, it's all those things are important, but actually, if the culture doesn't support hybrid working, and, you know, we've all worked for managers in the past, perhaps where there's been a bit been a degree of, you know, having to be in line of sight and they've, they've had a lack of confidence about you know, about their ability maybe in terms of in terms of managing people who they can't see all the time.

Martin 25:00

You know, that's culture, how do you move those managers out of that, that culture of surveillance and presenteeism into something that is much, much, much looser and freer, and more facilitative? It's, it's, that doesn't happen overnight. And it's not just training. It's actually, it's actually a mindset.

Jenni

Yeah. I mean, it's... it's a significant shift. And we talked earlier about things being quite deliberate to create that. And I'm, I'm still furiously highlighting "The Fearless Organisation" by Amy Edmondson. And she talks in there, giving examples of organisations where there are real examples of how you can put things deliberately in place to create psychologically safe environments. And it's a really great book in that regard because of the practical stuff that you can take from it. I'm just not sure I've heard many conversations about what is going to change about how we work as a result of "hybrid working", which I'm now putting in air quotes for people listening.

Jenni 26:02

Because I haven't... I don't know about you, I've heard mainly conversations about the categories that people are going to be put in. And, you know, the technology being in place, which I've talked about, you know that technology has to catch up with that flexibility. But I haven't heard very much around that processes and the ways of working that are going to shift as a result. I don't know, you know, whether you guys have seen that in your organizations or if you've heard stuff and I just haven't seen it, which is obviously possible.

Kate

I mean, we've got some... some elements of looking at that. I think, I think you're right, it's... it's very much – I was going to say the easy stuff...it's not easy - but it's talking about buildings, and it's talking about Teams, and Zoom, and all of that sort of stuff, which is just part of it. The biggest thing that's come through from our organisation when we researched with all our employees was “What is the purpose of our workplace?” actually, so social contact was number one. But number two was coming together to solve a problem. And actually, that is one of the things we will see in the ways of working and some of the tools and techniques that we will give people to help them do that. So we all know that whiteboarding and brainstorming and stuff is harder, so a virtual medium, but actually, what if you are looking at the purpose of your meeting or your whatever it might be, and looking at the goal you need to achieve, then you kind of go through “What we need to achieve that?” And oh, actually, we need to be together, we need to be face to face and we need to work it through. No one leaves the room until the problem solved. I think we can all remember those days of being marched into rooms and... “Solve the problem now”. But hopefully, it's done with a bit more flexibility in mind and kind of having learned so much about people and their lives. And you know they've got a school run or you know they care for their mum etc. because you've seen them in the background. Actually, it just brings us to life more as people and actually that should help us get better solutions. Because we're working better with each other and understanding each other. We... we've got a large focus on ways of working as an organisation very much focused on our member needs. And not not focusing on what our team needs or what a manager needs but what our members need from us as an organisation because we are member owned, not shareholder owned. And that provides a different kind of lens because you are working for... like Bob, the one who visits the branch in Swindon all the time. And so by keeping that in your perspective and focusing on the member needs, it helps you look end to end to the member journey and work out what is the right way to do something. I am hoping that we can see more people joining us from all over the... all over the country. So we're already seeing much more appetite for coming and working with our organisation. Because of our public commitments that we've made, that then helps us represent the communities that we serve in a much better way - be much more diverse, much more inclusive organisation, leading to different ways of working and tackling different problems and tackling different challenges. So different voices in the room, I think will just add so much power to what we're doing. But yeah, you're right, the kind of difficult stuff we haven't touched yet. We're not seeing much on that I think it's going to be a real challenge.

Jenni 29:08

We'll just avoid that for a bit longer!

Martin 29:11

Or when you think about the legal implications, you know, for example, you know, where legally your contract of employment says that your place of work is an office. Is your place of work now going to be your home, legally? Because outside that has all sorts of ramifications, things like expenses and being able to claim money for travelling to different places and that sort of thing. It also brings into into place, you know, sort of insurance and that sort of thing, which, you know, employers are going to have to bear the cost of that sort of thing as well. So this is always really crunchy stuff that organisations are going to have to work through. The stuff that we've been talking about is really the soft stuff, you know – “What's the office for?”, “How do we make things inclusive?”, you know that's sort of the soft HR stuff in some ways. But actually, there's a whole bunch of hard stuff that nobody's going near at the moment. And I'm not seeing a lot of a lot of solutions being suggested as to how those things would work in the future.

Sofia

That's everything that we're looking at at the moment. So because we're two sites across different boroughs, who only recently merged, so there was always going to be an element of people working across sites, how is that going to work, we're not sat in, we wouldn't have been sat in the same building all the time, like we were before. And so for us, it feels like definitely, for me, it feels like it was the right time all of this happened, because we would have been looking at this down the line when we did have our audiences back, but we've got this window of opportunity now, where audiences aren't back yet...they probably won't be for, I know some art places are opening in the summer, some won't be until September – that's us - which means we've got this fantastic opportunity now to look at all of this. And we have started, like you said, with the, the softer stuff, the easier things like the building. So you know, we had this huge office, quite well kitted out, and everybody had their, you know, because it's your space, you end up with all your knickknacks, don't you with all you know, pictures and postcards and all sorts and all of that's gone, there's, it's, I'm quite excited about this, we're gonna have a bank of standing desks. But you can, you will still have the stools that you know, you can sit on. So you've got that option. But just so you know that you're gonna be working on... I've worked at the standing desk. And it is lovely, because I just feel like I work smarter you moving around getting your steps in that sort of thing. So we're looking at things like that. We're also looking at lots of systems that I've never used before, which I love. So I use something called you probably know it monday.com. And there's similar ones out there where all the team import, we put our actions and things like that all the deadlines, when we need things off each other with little action buttons. I don't know if that's because of my OCD. I love it. And I'm obsessed with it. And I just thought, you know, how did I not learn about this stuff? So in lockdown and working remotely, I've learned about so many different systems and processes. And and at first I thought this never gonna work, you know, we need to be face to face. And this still is an element of... I know I miss out on things where you overhear a conversation. And you think I've been looking for that answer. And you know, you just answered it, or you need a quick fire “What's happening here?”, “Who's done that?” So you do miss out on that. So I think you know, there will be a bit of wasted time. But, I will then say things like Zoom meetings and things like that. I feel like you just get to the point, especially if you're cheap like me, and you're using the free version, you don't have time to go on for...you know, I

remember meetings that you were sat in for like two hours and you think “Did anybody take any notes?”, “Did anybody do anything?” You think “What a waste of time.” So with those meetings, I just feel like we're to the point we get the answers. You do the “How are you?” But that was the bit that was the worry for me. You can say how are you and someone will say absolutely fine, and then they'll probably come off, then they've been tears or stressed and you don't know that. I think that's the really worrying part for me. And the rest of it I'm really loving, and I can't wait to see what happens. And I hope we don't go fully back. I don't know, that's just me thinking I'm going to miss out on my swims and my HIIT workouts.

Jenni 33:29

But it's funny, isn't it? Because I think we have got that sort of, you know, that extra journey now - there's always I think every kind of three, three to six months, mainly three, it feels that we have to relook at our routines again, whether it's because we've got into a mundane rhythm, we need some change up. I know for me, my husband has gone back to the office. And it's so weird, him not being here and us now, you know, I'm not having to do lunch, the both of us just do my lunch. And you know, and just we were kind of so as one and now we're we're not at all and he's at work. I have this real like, I can't like just keep him up to date with what's happening in my day. Become that annoying wife, that's now just texting him for no reason at all. But it's that, you know, for us, we've got one car so it's that shift again now of “Okay, well how do we how do we work now you're at the office? I'm not - you need the car,” and all those logistical things that kind of come into play to shift. And it's all just so individual, isn't it? So when we look at organisations that are doing these categorising of people and, and things like that, you know, how can that work? And I've said a few times that I just think it's an oxymoron of terms. You can't talk about having flexible working and then create really rigid processes around it, because they are completely juxtaposed as concepts, but I equally think you have to have, you know, parameters, and we've talked a bit about those things. And Jim Egan, who I co-moderate a clubhouse room with talks about freedom within a framework, which I love. And I know is also from a book called “The trust factor” which I've just finished, but this whole freedom within a framework is kind of where I'm edging to as that solution. And a friend of mine has been told that for her, her boss has basically said, “We want you in the office more than you're at home.” And that's kind of it. Like there's not anything around, “You have to be in five days a week,” there's not anything about what days, you can discuss that with your team. And she's decided she's going to go in, I think Mondays Tuesdays Thursdays, because she likes a Monday because it kicks her off for the week and, you know, it's that sort of switch up, change my weekend. No one wants to be in an office on a Friday hasn't done for years. But I just quite liked the freedom that allowed you to have with just that simplicity. And I know that might sound too simple – they're a small business - but surely, that's got to be better to have that freedom and a framework rather than these rigid policies of categories and stuff like that.

Kate 35:56

This is music to my ears.

Sofia

No, I love that as well. But I'm finding it really difficult because I've gone from an organisation where I had to put in a five page proposal of why how it would work for me to

work five days over four, which everybody I knew in any organisation was doing that. And I thought, yeah, I'll do that, you know, Friday's off. And I worked over anyway, I was always owed time back. So it's like, well, why don't I do this, and I had to put in a proposal. And I finally got that, whereas now we're going to this new way of working and, and I have been told by my line manager, as long as the work gets done, I don't mind where you are, or, or how you doing it. And so for me, that's quite difficult when I've worked by rules and regulations and things because I feel like when I get to my laptop, and I plug myself in and everything, and especially at the moment when you know, I'm it's the month of fasting, and I am keeping my fast. So I'm not having coffee breaks or lunch breaks. And so I'm sat at my laptop, and I do not move. And she will call and say you know "How you get on?" I'm sat there and say "Yeah, fine." And she's like, "Are you sat at your laptop again?" I said, "Well, yeah." And she's like, "Go for a walk, go for a run!" I'm like, "Really?" I don't know, I don't know, if it's an over policing of your self do fall into those... which camp are you in and you kind of go Yeah, I'll put the washing on a watch bit of Telly, and then I'll do my work, or do you go, I'm going to sit here in case someone calls me and I'm here. And it's hard to get your head around.

Kate

We we've got a concept called accountable freedom within our organisation, which is exactly the freedom within a frame so you know what you are accountable for, and you have the freedom to deliver it in the way that you see fit for the best outcome. So that that has existed for a couple of years now, it's definitely about empowerment, and encouraging people to make their own choices. And so when we went into our piece of research around the future of work, we definitely looked at flexibility and choices, our working hypothesis and just wanted to back that up with the data from our people. I think when we then come through that and made our commitment around, we're telling people, they can work anywhere, as long as they're led by the work. So that that's our kind of number one commitment. Because we think people... you're right Jenni, that bit around, you have to be in the office two days a week is suddenly not very flexible, doesn't give you a lot of choice. And so we know it will require more management. So our buildings will have a finite capacity. So you are going to have to have systems to book a desk or whatever it might be. But it doesn't necessarily mean you have to be in an office. So I might decide to go for a walk with a colleague, because they live around the corner from me, we're not going to drive 45 miles to Swindon to do that, actually, they live around the corner, it might be less binary than that. So it's not about home versus the office, it might be around Well, my computer technology is not working today. So I've got to get in the car and drive to a branch to connect to the LAN cable, or it might be I've got builders in so I need to go in for a couple of days just to get away from the noise or it might be to escape from the children I might go in because the homes to loud whatever it might be. It's about respect for each other's choices. So that's the other big thing around division. And, you know, creating divides between people. If someone wants to be in an office five days a week, fine. Someone wants to be at home five days a week, fine, as long as the work is getting done. And as long as people are delivering the right outcomes for members, then they should have the power to be able to choose that. It is probably quite clear that those people that you're worried about not delivering, were probably not delivering when they were in the office. You know, it's quite a basic statement. But they were probably on their phone playing on Facebook in the office. So the fact that you can't see them doesn't mean the behaviour is any different.

You've got to find ways to performance manage and talk to people and all of that sort of good stuff that comes with it. But the freedom and flexibility and choice is absolutely key and quite exciting and causes quite a reaction. So I don't think anyone expected the media coverage we saw off the back of our "Work Anywhere" announcement. I think we were on the Today programme through to Radio 1 through to the Six O'Clock news. We we're absolutely delighted. And we knew we had to be a bit bolder than maybe nationwide has been in the past, so that was quite exciting for us.

Martin 38:39

But it's you know you're at you're also describing your own circumstances. And this is why what I said at the beginning that this, this show is really important about about context. It's about context and the permission that you're given to be able to do those things. And, you know, early on, early on in the pandemics, and that really interested me was the rise in the use of surveillance software. In some organisations, there was an exponential, particularly the United States, there was an exponential rise in the use of employee surveillance software. Those sorts of organisations are not going to give you the sort of permission and choice and the freedom that you've just described. So, you know, hybrid working will not be equal for everybody – it will very much depend on where you work. I mean, there's quite a few things on social media at the moment about some common...If employers don't offer hybrid working in the way that people wanted, they will actually move jobs, they will leave and they will go work somewhere else. I think that's probably true.

Kate

Yep. And I think there is for the other extreme as well. So if you consider graduates who may be wanting in-office presence, you may be seeing reports of graduate saying, Well, I'm going to work for an employer that will allow us to be in the office and encourage us to be in the office or make us be in the office. Because I think that is a gap. And one that needs to be thought through by all organisations is how you onboard early career people, whether that's grads or non grads, but that emerging talent where they've never worked in an office. And I mean, I'm a big believer in that they've probably spent the last year learning different skills. But it is up to an organisation to help them learn networking, and relationships and all of that sort of stuff. It's about finding new ways to do things not just going Well the old way was the way we did it before. So let's get back to that. I think if you graduates would have located to where the head offices of an organisation whether that's London or Swindon, wherever it might be, actually, that might have meant moving away from their friends moving away from their family, if they'd had an option to do that differently, they might have done. And so it's, I think, if we can collectively look at new ways of doing things for different kinds of career groups or different kind of employees, then I think we can give people more choice and more options. And that's what this all comes back to.

Jenni

And I've got one, one sort of final question, just thinking about the the audience of the podcast being, you know, predominantly CIPR members and working in PR and communications, where your time is not always your own. And you have to be on call on a on a, you know, regularly outside of hours. Now, for internal communicators, sometimes that's less so I've managed a crisis line in a 24/7 business that doesn't make any difference. You're still on call, I've had to answer phones from the Evening Standard when I've been an

on-call press officer on a Friday night in a bar. So there's something about the work that we do that I think makes it incredibly difficult to not be kind of on call or feel like you're on call. So how do we get that balance? People working in PR and comms have this, this hybrid space where there are boundaries, and I will get on a soapbox about boundaries, but I won't. But I think in our industry, it's particularly challenging. I just wonder your thoughts on that.

Sofia

Well, Jenni's last podcast, one of your last podcasts for me did it with the boundaries, because like I said, at the start, I was a workaholic, I think I thrived on that, you know, I'm gonna be on call and it felt great. And there's a shelf life for it as well. And you're right, it does the, you know, I could be out with friends and they'd go, you know, who's calling you and you'd go Oh, it's the press, you know, and I just got to deal with this and then you think, Really, like I'm not doing brain surgery or anything like that. So for me during lockdown. And I remember listening to that, because I thought I need to put some boundaries in how I'm going to do it. And I heard your podcast. And I said, right I'm going to do it. Because I was I was doing an example that you'd said in there, which was when you're out of office on you're out of office is on. So leave it and I thought if I can't master this during lockdown, I never will. And I did. So if my out of office is on I come away from it, the app is off my phone, I don't look at it. And honestly, I can say that I've learned so much through lockdown personally and with work. And I hope this lasts for longer. And it's not gonna be six months. And we go back into it because I don't check my work emails out of hours. They know that if they if they need me, it has to be an emergency. And then I know I must take it. But I don't I don't get that anymore. I don't have to check things like that, because and that rule still stands from from my boss, which is if the works getting done, you go and have a life and it's like, what am I allowed? So yeah, the boundaries, putting those in place and sticking to them.

Martin 43.29

I think some people some people that I know that work in PR and comms have actually never ever left an office, you know, they've worked through in an office all the way through through lockdown. You know, they've been there because because leadership, senior stakeholders have required them to be there, require them to be physically present. So they're, you know, immediately to hand if needed crisis, or no crisis, but it's, you know, what does that what does that say about, about, you know, those complying with that, because there's that feeling that we need to do that, that, that we can't be somewhere remote and do the same sort of job. But it's also it's also about educating your stakeholders I think about, you know, how you don't need me in your line of sight physically, for us to be able to get stuff done, you know, even if it is an emergency, so in some ways, we're at fault ourselves because of the way that we we behave and we we act and everything, but actually, it's about the demands that are placed on us by others and actually educating them that now lots of lots of people who have solved crises in this in recent months in a remote fashion, you know, why can't we. So by educating stakeholders well I think

Kate 44.45

I think if there was ever a year to prove the value of what we do, it's been the last year and if I think back to March last year, we did a two day test to see if everyone can work from home and never went back. And we did, we did switch immediately we were going to do an A-team and a B-team in our communications function, and we were going to have half in half out and we would swap over to give people a break... that lasted one day. And then the team A who were in the office, we were just like, No, we'll just, we'll all be at home. And there is there's probably a mix here in terms of boundaries for me, because one is you need the processes, and you need the stuff that supports your people to be able to do it. So you need rotas you need, if you've got an on-call person, they know what's expected of them that week, and they are rightly compensated as a result. And you also need self-discipline. So I am rubbish at this. And if any of my colleagues are listening, there'll be laughing. Because I will check what I don't do is I don't reply. So I will look at my phone out of hours. And I might do a little bit of work, why don't email my team or try really hard not to. And I try really hard not to reply because all that encourages is people know you're always on. So actually it is a bit of self-discipline, it needs a bit of confidence to do it. Because you are sitting there go, we've got this email over there from someone and you kind of pick and choose so if you get an email from the CEO, chances are you're probably gonna reply. But I think if we've learned anything over the last year is a) the importance of wellbeing, and mental and physical. All of this all of the good stuff that comes with that. You can't be always on it. Most comms people I know, would work all day. Then watch the Coronavirus briefings at 5pm in the UK. And that would then mean hours of work in the evening ready to tell the organisation what it meant for them at seven o'clock the following morning. We had a massive team helping us do that. And so you stand up the people around you in a crisis you make it work well. If wellbeing as a focus, you will do it in the right way. And boundaries, I think are really hard in a comms function because of that always-on. But you if you are clear as a team with what you're trying to achieve, and you've got the processes and the support there. We are lucky we've got a fantastic leadership team who are really supportive of this and family comes first. We saw that when when some of our team had children at home because of homeschooling. We've had to learn to work in a different way. We've proved we can do it. We've got to stick to our guns now.

Jenni 47:07

Oh, definitely. I think it's been a lovely conversation. Thank you so much for joining me to talk about such a topical topic of hybrid working and I think we've covered so many elements of it around you know, the fear, the media, the individual aspects, all of it so just thank you very much. Really I think it's been great and I hope it's you know interesting and sparks inspiration for the people listening as well so, thank you.