



## New Work/Health in A Hybrid World of Work

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### **The Future of Work/Promoting Health and Creativity**

Hybrid work presents employers with special challenges. How can occupational safety and health be ensured with staff working at multiple locations? How do you nudge staff to also enjoy being in the office?

Hybrid work is here to stay. People appreciate the benefits of home-based work so much so they hardly come to the office anymore. But many employers want their staff back in the office more often. "It will never be the same again as before the pandemic," says Dr. Stefan Rief of Fraunhofer IAO. "Not having to commute already saves people a lot of time. Part of this time is used to work longer hours; but many also use it for leisure and social activities," adds Dr. Michael Barth, occupational physician at B·A·D GmbH. "People no longer want to give this up."

### **Working Spaces to be Curated**

On the flip side, many employees are fed up with video conferencing and teleworking. They long for F2F contacts with colleagues. "Workplaces must be attractive enough to make people invest the time they save commuting in returning to their offices," says Barth and adds: "Fringe benefits such as canteens and childcare could be helpful there."

Transparency is also key – because some people are afraid of not meeting anybody at the office. Since people attract people, we should make visible who is on site when. "Knowing that certain colleagues will be there mean I'll also come," says Rief. "Just as visible as who is there, should be what is going on there. What you basically need, is a type of Center Manager to 'curate' the office space. Offices are developing into operator real estate that somebody has to consciously take care of. You need some 'background noise' to make people get together."



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## **In the Past “Air, Light, Noise” – Today “Kitchen Chairs, Kids, Calories”**

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But, of course, it is also important to keep the co-workers fit who predominantly work in their home-based offices. While in the past air, lighting and noise were an issue in the office, today’s problems are associated with kitchen chairs, kids, and calories. “We note in increase in back pain especially lumbar and neck pain. The range of motion is often smaller at home and drawing the line between the demands of work and home life is not always easy. We observe that plenty of video-conferencing and pure screen work – meaning your eyes always work at close range – contribute amongst other things to a new phenomenon: Zoom Fatigue. And the density of information adds to the perceived stress,” says Barth. “Office furnishings in the home often leave a lot to be desired even though working conditions should be the same in both places, according to the Ordinance on Workplaces,” observes David Wiechmann, Chairman of DNB e.V. “Most companies are well equipped, but this does not necessarily mean their employees’ home-based offices are, too. Kitchen tables are a case in point. Only few people have the luxury of working in separate studies.” During the autumn and winter months lighting proves a major problem. “So far, only very few have invested in high-quality lighting,” says a concerned Rief. “When employees work from home 2-3 days a week, employers have to take this seriously and support them. After all, these are my co-workers who ideally will return to my office and who I want to forge loyal ties with my company.



## **Sensor-Based Coaching and Strengthening Employees’ Own Responsibility**

Counselling and coaching at home-based offices can be done through digital channels and video conferencing tools. Guidance and briefings can also be provided this way. There are even mobile, sensor-based analyses of movement patterns at the (home-based) workplace as a response to the growing cases of back pain; lasting several weeks they result in behavioral recommendations and tutorials. “But most important is to strengthen employees’ own responsibility and competence – regarding both ergonomics



and mental stress. Coaching should be extended to include self-management. But an ergonomic workplace is and will be the be-all and end-all,” stresses Wiechmann.

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### **Individualization also Important in New Work**

In future, however, categorization by tasks or areas of activities will not be enough. Because people are individuals. “In the hybrid new world, more importance will be placed on employees’ characters. Are they introvert, extrovert, do they look for closeness to people, do they look for more information? Some people would love to return to the office but are worried about not meeting anybody there. Maybe I can win some people back from this group? Managers must learn to lead more individually,” says Rief.

### **Workation Promotes Creativity**

In the meantime, another way of working is also becoming increasingly popular. People take a workation (work & vacation) – meaning they take a vacation, also in other countries, for a long weekend, working remotely from there. This is subject to a company agreement, but once signed, nothing stands in the way of such an arrangement anymore. “More than half the employees would like to do a workation and this figure is even as high as 68% among those under 35,” says Rief. Here, too, it is important to agree on F2F meeting times, he feels. This way people could meet with people from other companies and hopefully return with new inspirations. They could be introduced to an App or business model that only exists in another country. This alone would be a benefit. “On the way, you collect plenty of new information and impressions. This definitely boosts creativity,” agrees Wiechmann.



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### **Digitalization and Immersive Meeting Structures**

Another game changer in the world of work is Artificial Intelligence (AI). It provides enormous relief and can support documentation processes, for



example. AI frees employees from routine tasks giving them more time to solve the real problems.

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Great potential also comes care of another innovation. “I caution against believing we have already fully understood the hybrid world of work. It does give us plenty of freedom, but we’ve only been working this way for two years. What people miss is the chance to ‘watch over colleagues’ shoulders’, that informal exchange. We cannot simulate that well yet digitally. At the institute we want to create an immersive meeting infrastructure with the aim of also working with, and next to, each other virtually. In an immersive world I could walk up to my colleagues during a meeting. This creates a feeling of proximity. Or via the Metaverse I could be sitting by the lakeside in Norway rather than in a gray office. I can solve this spacially or digitally, best would be both,” Rief demands.



KASTEN / BOX

### **What Awaits us at the Trade Show**

The trade show will demonstrate what is feasible in real life and digitally, and what New Work can look like in Halls 4 and 5. B·A·D will be represented with experts from all areas of expertise. They will convey how healthcare is introduced into home-based offices by means of AI-based health coach KICO or the VR OfficeTrainer, special VR goggles that support ergonomic office design. Interested visitors are invited to try out both tools at the B·A·D-exhibition stand.

Das Deutsche Netzwerk Büro e.V. is dedicated to the topic Health in a Hybrid World of Work – and to health promotion at the home-based office, in particular. Practical scenarios are used to demonstrate how both physical and mental hazards can be prevented and/or which organizational measures can be undertaken.

24 - 27 OCTOBER 2023  
DÜSSELDORF, GERMANY



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**Bildunterschriften /Captions New Work**

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