

Simplicity to complexity

There was a time when we thought that homo sapiens was singular, immutable: us. We then began to understand that humans had a longer lineage, stretching back to the early hominins (including *Ardipithecus Ramidus*, after which my company is named), and the later australopithecines. But there was still only one human, right?

No. In fact there have been at least nine species of homo. Not singular; not immutable. Each time we find another species, the picture becomes more complex, more variable, more dynamic. The same is essentially true as we assess the evolving nature of work. One time, there was one way: singular and immutable. Now there is variety and dynamism.

Once we recognise this simple fact, we can move on from one-dimensional labels and plan for the complexity of work: we can distinguish work and place; we can recognise the diversity of work processes and patterns, and we can move beyond the notion that the future is entirely novel and is, in fact, a progression from the past.

Company man to digital nomad

For much of the twentieth century, large, departmentalised and hierarchical businesses, undertaking largely clerical, process-based work, dominated the office economy. The headquarters of large manufacturers, banks and insurance companies, advertising and media businesses, lawyers and accountants and so on all concentrated into large buildings. Layer upon layer of management evolved, and companies sub-divided, amoeba-like, into complex departmental structures.

Anthony Sampson captured the essence of the phenomenon in his book *Company Man: the Rise and Fall of Corporate Life*.¹ The corporate organisations, with their massive structures, rigid hierarchies and life-time employment, created the professional manager. This was the 'corporate' office, with 'company man' – the symbol of armies of similarly-dressed workers, undertaking largely repetitive, processed-based work in highly divisionalised, layered companies.

Workplaces and workstyles remained pretty constant for a long period from the 1950s through to the 1990s. But the personal computer, lap top, smart and email changed everything, radically and fundamentally. Company man became as abruptly extinct as one of the ancient humans. The simplicity and sameness yielded to a far more complex tapestry of work processes and workstyles.

This was first recognised by design practice DEGW, who categorised different activities and the work settings needed to support them.² They identified four generic settings – den, club, hive and cell – to express both the physical and behavioural characteristics of different kinds of work (Figure 1).

FLEXIBLE, FIXED, ACTIVITY, HYBRID: THE WORKPLACE MINESTRONE

This categorisation provided a useful tool for gaining a rapid understanding of how an organisation's work processes translate into types of activity-based settings. But the problem from a contemporary perspective is that the model had no time dimension.

As the twenty-first century dawned, organisations were coming to be managed less as huge corporate machines and more as systems or networks in which work was increasingly about short-term assignments, communication, mobility and connectivity. In such organisations, knowledge is the currency of exchange, and traditional approaches to command-and-control structures break down.

Figure 1 Workstyles and activity settings

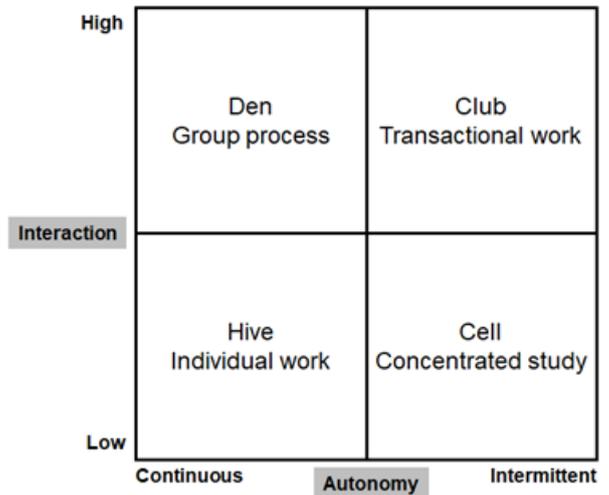


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Which brings us to Covid-19 and the lively debate about the dominant workstyles that will result.

Towards agile working

There has been much discussion recently about what the term 'hybrid work' actually means. The term gained common currency well beyond the arcane world of Workplace as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. Mainstream media adopted the easy-on-the-eye term, and it has now become the term to describe What exactly?

The media need iconic handles to use as a form of shorthand in their printed and broadcast pieces; and superficially, most people know that the term hybrid means: a work combo of office and home (or nearby). But the fact is that it introduces a major problem because there is an implication that we are moving from one 'old workstyle' to another 'new workstyle'. No variation, no nuance, no diversity, no complexity.

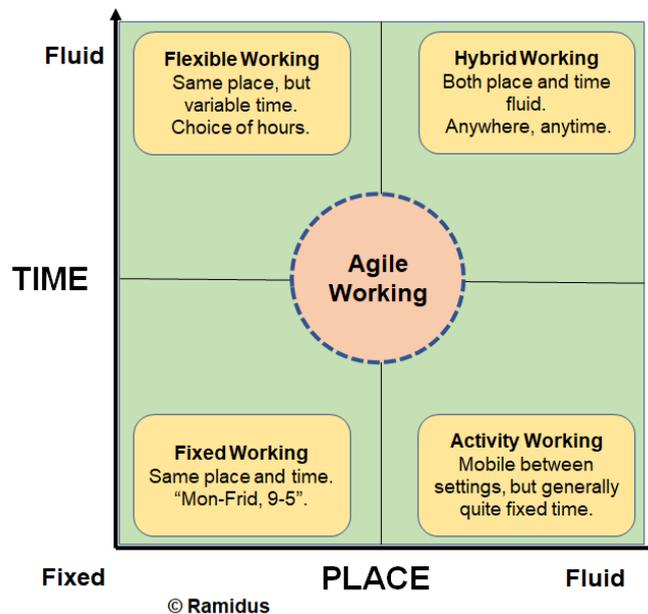
But the fact is that there is complexity. We are not moving from one dominant model to another. There is context, there is continuity, there is evolution. We are adding to the richness of the work experience, not replacing one with another.

Figure 2 seeks to address this complexity and to bring some definition to the different terminologies being used. The figure offers a model based on both time and place; it offers a continuum of choice in both from fixed to fluid, rather than a binary choice; and it allows for 'traditional', or fixed office work (because no matter what some of the more evangelical commentators say, there will remain a role for this type of work and worker).



FLEXIBLE, FIXED, ACTIVITY, HYBRID: THE WORKPLACE MINESTRONE

Figure 2 Agile working: time and place; fixed to fluid



The model suggests that ‘hybrid’ is simply one style of work that is added to ‘fixed’, ‘flexible’, and ‘activity’ working; and all are captured under the generic heading of ‘agile’, including fixed as one of four extremes.

The key aspect to the model is any organisation or workplace might accommodate all four workstyles. Equally, there might be just one workstyle. But the fact is that there is choice – dependent upon corporate and individual priorities.

Fixed working is self-evidently the previously almost universal approach in which everyone turned up at the office at more or less the same time, and left at more or less the same time, five days a week, for roughly eight hours per day. There are some people and functions for whom this remains either a necessity or a preference.

Flexible working is a term that gained most widespread usage in the public sector. It rarely questioned the issue of location, which was assumed to be ‘the place of work’ as defined in the employment contract. The ‘flexible’ aspect referred to time, and was granted to part-timers, job sharers, those with caring responsibilities and so on. Today, it simply means the ‘when’ rather than the ‘where’.

Activity was ‘the flavour of the day’ in the run up to Covid. As the computer left the building and mobile technology became ubiquitous, so workplaces became ‘activity-based’ with a tapestry of settings to accommodate different work modes – concentration, collaboration, socialising, and so on. Even so, the office remained the anchor for most activities, with an element of ‘third place’ working.



Hybrid working, of course, is the label attached to the now widely anticipated practice of blending working in the office with working from home (or nearby). Both time and place are fluid. In this sense, we do not have hybrid workplaces or flexible time, just hybrid work. Hybrid work forms a bridge between flexible time and fluid place. Some people might adopt a blend of flexible and hybrid; others a blend of activity and hybrid.

Why does any of this matter?

Because however the media choose to describe workstyles, the Workplace community needs to be clear on what it is talking about and advising on: terms require definition. This paper suggests that both time and place range from fixed to fluid, and that hybrid working forms a bridge between fluid time and fluid place. The palette of workstyles are referred to generically under the widely-used heading of agile working, which ties directly into corporate agility.

And it is critical to recognise that the future is colour, not monochrome: diversity in workstyles and workplaces will be critical. Hybrid is not a single solution. Once we accept this, then two separate (but related) discussions need to be had.

- **People** HR functions will need to evolve rapidly from largely 'hire and fire' functions to workstyle management functions, with far more creative approaches to managing different demographics, training leaders, enhancing mentoring and training, managing cultural cohesion, and ensuring the health and wellbeing of all staff.
- **Place** As workstyles evolve, so 'demand management' becomes an increasingly important function. Corporate real estate professionals, owners and providers must ensure that workplaces attract people and provide an enhanced experience: fewer surveyors and more concierges. Similarly, we do not need a new design agenda; we need a new place management agenda.

Dr Rob Harris
Principal, Ramidus Consulting Limited
<https://www.ramidus.co.uk>

¹ Sampson A (1995) *Company Man: the Rise and Fall of Corporate Life* HarperCollins, London

² DEGW (1998) *Design for Change: the Architecture of DEGW* Watermark Publications, Haslemere p98

