

TIME TO RE-ONBOARD & HYBRID WORK

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With the massification of the "Covid-19" vaccination in Portugal, with 83,5% of the population fully vaccinated, the last quarter of 2021 promises to be a resume to work. But this time, everything points to a return to work stressed by what we used to call "Future of Work".

The Future is already among us, and it has a name: Hybrid Work. A powerful combination of remote and in-person work.

This is the big new trend in Western economies: the United States, Canada, Australia, Brazil and Europe are investing heavily in hybrid work models that combine work at the premises (vertical or horizontal) with the remote work that characterized the pandemic.

Remote work and telework, as we already know, has tremendous advantages for all stakeholders and for the community:

- For companies, it reduces costs with installations and generates a greater capacity to recruit employees geographically distant, besides allowing the stability of the operation in confinement phases;
- For workers, it guarantees them greater freedom of action, better work-life balance, the ability to work for companies located in different geographies, and the reduction of costs and time associated with commuting;
- For the community, it is a huge factor in reducing commuting, a tool for reducing CO2 emissions; a tremendous opportunity for development of previously forgotten and abandoned rural areas; and an important factor in containing new pandemic outbreaks that may continue to occur, due to the Delta variant or others that may come.

But exclusive remote work also has obvious disadvantages: it heightens social isolation; makes career progress more difficult; separates workers from their representatives and union structures; and reduces group work, the exchange of ideas, and the resulting creativity. Exclusive remote work alienates people and human contact.

Because of this, the hybrid model, in professions that do not require constant physical presence, can enhance the advantages of remote work, and minimize its disadvantages. It ensures employee turnover and less crowding workplaces, allowing employees to benefit from two complementary realities: in-person work and remote work.

However, for it to work well, there are some precautions to take:

- **Planning:** companies and their HR departments must plan intelligently and clearly the distribution of hybrid work among their employees; in some cases, for example, employees work 2 days a week in face-to-face work and 3 days in remote work; in others, it may be the other way around; or we may have entire weeks of in-person work and others of remote work;
- **Communication:** planning must be properly communicated to employees in advance, so that they can plan their lives and know what to expect; the worst that can happen in an organization is lack of communication and the use of "Chinese walls" about the model to be adopted; uncertainty and lack of communication about how the future will be generates anxiety, unnecessary "noise" and lower productivity;

- **Involvement:** employees must be involved in the solution; not necessarily by consulting or issuing prior opinions, but at least through good explanation of the rules adopted and constant and effective communication mechanisms;
- **Adaptation:** hybrid work plans should not be definitive; they should be flexible, follow the evolution of the pandemic and the adaptation to this new way of working; they can (and should) be changed and recalibrated, to the extent that this is justified; and workers should be aware of the temporary nature of the plans to be adopted.

We know that the Future of Work is not going backwards and will involve hybrid work, digital nomadism, work on digital platforms, lots of digitization, and the use of algorithms. It will bring new opportunities, but also new risks and challenges that must be guarded against.

The solution is not in trying to prohibit or decree a return to the past; the solution is in regulating these new trends, in the name of the Decent Work Agenda. The Future of Work in Portugal must be cultivated and regulated so that it can bring new opportunities, decent and better paid jobs, with more freedom and less precariousness.

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