

How the flexible workforce is driving a new era of sustainability

Hybrid working is helping to create the foundation of a more sustainable future, and employers need to grasp the opportunities that arise.

Issued by [GO Content Lab](#) 28 Feb 2023



Flexible working has come hand in hand with a new era of sustainability. There are numerous ecological benefits to sharing spaces and having fewer empty desks, but the pioneering mindset that flexible workers possess means that eco-friendly offices, technology and behaviours are becoming more than a nice perk; they are becoming an expectation.

Environmental and social responsibility is significant to [Gen Z](#), with 55% saying employers should take it seriously and almost half (48%) refusing to join a business that doesn't have clear environmental and social goals.

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Room to grow

The hybrid model enables businesses to grow naturally over time. It's more sustainable both environmentally and economically. Many of our members have started small with just a few desks before gradually taking over entire swathes and when they need – or on a hire-by-hire basis.

The environmental benefits of companies switching to the hybrid model are considerable too. Buildings currently account for 40% of societal energy use, and a single unused desk creates a tonne of CO2 each year (the equivalent of driving a car 6,000 miles). Post-Covid-19, many workers choose to stay away from HQs on certain days, opting for home-working or a local flex-space instead. By downsizing their central HQ and using flex-space according to demand, companies can reduce their carbon footprint and give their employees a place to go that is thriving and full of life every day of the week.

Flexible freelancers

Globally, the flexible freelancer community is growing steadily. Allwork [reported](#) that by 2027, freelancers would make up more than 50% of the total workforce in many major economies. We are also still amid the 'Great Resignation', a term coined in 2021 when more people than ever started leaving their permanent, traditional, salaried jobs globally.

As hybrid working is adopted, more businesses are turning towards environmentally efficient shared workspaces. The On-demand flex-space membership rose 92% year-on-year in South Africa in 2022 as the appetite for hybrid working soared and more workers split their time between working close to home and in the office.

But the behavioural habits of the freelancer are also being picked up more widely by the permanently employed community.

Additionally, IWG has opened almost all its new centres in non-city centre environments during the past two years. Demand for suburban locations has increased exponentially worldwide, with another positive environmental knock-on effect...

Cutting down the commute

The '[hub-and-spoke](#)' model allows workers the flexibility to attend face-to-face meetings at a company HQ but also to base themselves at a flexible workspace closer to home when working solo. It is a critical driver in sustainable employment for one main reason – it reduces the commute. As IWG CEO [Mark Dixon](#) says: "Companies of all sizes see addressing the need to get their people to commute to work as the greatest contribution they can make to reducing their carbon footprint. They understand that by bringing work into the home and the heart of communities, they will immediately and significantly reduce the weight of traffic on roads and in cities across the world."



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Tech choices

Adopting hybrid working across the globe has also accelerated sustainable technology innovation. Online meeting technology, ranging from the metaverse to large plug-and-go screens that can raise remote participants into life-sized faces at the table, all help alleviate the need for travel. And as the gaze shifts more meaningfully towards sustainable working, more ecologically thoughtful hardware is also being created.

Tech company [Acer](#) has just launched a new light, hybrid-friendly laptop that they say is up to 50% more efficient than comparable modern devices. They have also started using post-consumer recycled plastic for their chassis and keyboard.

Similarly, the newest HP PCs contain [90% recycled magnesium](#) in their enclosure case, while all outer packing for the devices is 100% sustainably sourced. As environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles become increasingly important in every business's strategy, more innovations like these will be needed. And while innovations like the world's first PC made with [recycled coffee grounds](#) are perhaps more in the business of marketing than real sustainability, green innovations driven by new ways of working are re-shaping the landscape.

Green offices

Employees love working in a nice office, but more than that, they love working sustainably because it reflects the values and care of the employers who choose to inhabit them. Environmentally conscious employers are often human conscious too.

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