

## Major Builders Plan to Keep Hybrid Work Model for Office Employees

Written by: Zachary Phillips, Editor, Construction Dive

An electrician can't install wiring from home. A carpenter can't measure twice and cut once over Zoom. Structures aren't built with tradesmen who only come in to work a few times a week.

It's no surprise that in-person construction continued through the pandemic. Nevertheless, the pandemic did provide a wake-up call, or at least an opportunity, for contractors to think differently about their offices, project planning, and time management. That new mindset is likely to continue in the post-pandemic world, as many U.S. builders have already adapted different schedules, new technology and hiring practices in line with a hybrid work model.

In a hybrid model, employees split time between both in-office work and remote work. There are two primary models.

First, companies set up and hire around hubs where employees come to the office several days a week. Second, in a remote-first method, employees work remotely but have hubs, or work cafes, where they can choose to go in. Construction, like most other companies, leans more into the first category.

### Necessity drives change

When the pandemic sent workers home, industries quickly adapted to collaborate digitally.

A pilot program from U.K. contractors discovered flexible work



schedules increased employee wellbeing, while decreasing overtime hours, without negatively impacting project schedules or budgets. Construction tech company OpenSpace surveyed its customers in late 2021. It found, prior to the pandemic, 52% of its customers said their field teams had never worked remotely but now, 92% said they will allow occasional or frequent remote work.

“COVID underpinned so much for us at Skanska,” said Lena Ulvi, senior vice president and head of U.S. human resources for the Sweden-based contractor. “It quickly became apparent that construction was deemed an essential industry, and that safety, digitalization, and flexibility were at [the] top of mind for everyone.”

Ulvi said Skanska rolled out a flexible working program in 2018 and continues to use it where it makes sense. Other builders, such as McCarthy, based in St. Louis, have done the same.

“All teams at McCarthy continue to use a mix of in-person and digital methods to implement project-specific plans and strategically manage any potential delays due to a spike in COVID-19 cases or supply chain issues,” said Shaun Sleeth, president of McCarthy’s Northern Pacific region.

Balfour Beatty was finalizing a hybrid work program in the states before the pandemic, according to Eric Stenman, the U.K.-based contractor’s U.S. president.

“While many of our employees recognized some benefits of working remote, almost everyone reported missing the face-to-face interactions and impromptu hallway chats,” Stenman said. “So, before our teammates returned to the office, we rolled the program to ensure it would work ... Resoundingly, our teammates were pleased the program provides the flexibility they desire with the in-person touchpoints that is important to our culture.”

Stenman said Balfour Beatty is shooting for a hybrid policy that includes three days of work a week at the office, though he recognized the concept is not one size fits all. Some employees thrive more on in-person collaboration than others.

Sometimes, it’s as simple as defining work as “portable,” – such as estimators who can work from their computer – or “nonportable” – such as site work – ahead of time, Sleeth said.

“As a result, our employees have a clear idea of when they may work from home and when they must show up to the office or jobsite,” he said.

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## Eye-opening technology

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Beyond the universal tools, like Zoom, construction companies have relied on technology during the pandemic. McCarthy has wielded Mural, a collaboration tool that syncs information between stakeholders to communicate about the daily work happening on site.

From remote documentation to QR codes for gaining access to jobsites, contractors tested multiple use cases in the pandemic. One of the things that seems to have stuck is the hybrid model – which has also allowed contractors to hire and train offsite workers from different localities than where they are based.

“The pandemic has been the real-life case study that with the right technology, culture and committed employees, companies – even general contracting companies – can offer hybrid work programs without sacrifice to the bottom line,” Stenman said. “And in the end, have much happier employees.”


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## Empathy, flexibility

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It’s not always just about the work. Going remote highlighted personal challenges like childcare, which affect work scheduling. So often, empathy and flexibility about working remotely can create simple solutions to those common conflicts, Sleeth said.

Stenman echoed that sentiment.

“We encourage this balance and trust our project managers to look out for the best interest of their teams as much as we trust them to deliver our projects,” he said. “Just because you are [a] field supervisor doesn’t mean you should have to sacrifice being your kid’s soccer coach or attending your neighborhood’s meeting.” 



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### About the Author

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Zachary Phillips joined Construction Dive in September 2019 and is now an editor. Prior to that, he worked as an editorial intern for the Baltimore Business Journal and the Hill.com. He is a graduate of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, where he covered several beats across numerous school publications, including the Diamondback, Testudo Times, and Capital News Service.

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