

Office-based or Home-based: Are we remotely close to the new steady state? A working session

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ABSTRACT

Working sessions were conducted in both the 2023 PHUSE EU Connect (Birmingham, UK) and the 2024 PHUSE US Connect (Bethesda, MD). At the EU Connect, as part of the People Leadership & Management (PM) stream, we conducted a 60-minute, interactive workshop exploring the recent shift to remote and hybrid working models within Clinical Data Analytics in our industry. At the US Connect, we facilitated a 90-minute Interactive Discussion on the same topic. In both instances, the scope and agenda were identical, with the added element of comparing US findings to EU findings while in Bethesda.

Whether one identifies as a programmer, statistician, data manager, data scientist, or other role - they have seen their work impacted by remote working in the past 3-4 years. We want to share previous experience, define what the norm might be, and predict the future of remote working and the impact of it becoming embedded in our daily lives. In this paper, we provide a summary of the activities at the two PHUSE Connect conferences.

We believe that our findings can support both management and employees when applying an empathetic lens to policies related to working from home, working on site, and other hybrid approaches, noting that empathy works in both directions. Perhaps the findings will also help us understand the quantitative costs and qualitative impact of moving in one direction and not just the benefits.

INTRODUCTION

The one-hour session at the EU Connect was divided into three sections:

- Breakout sessions
- Breakout group readouts
- Wider group prioritization and discussion

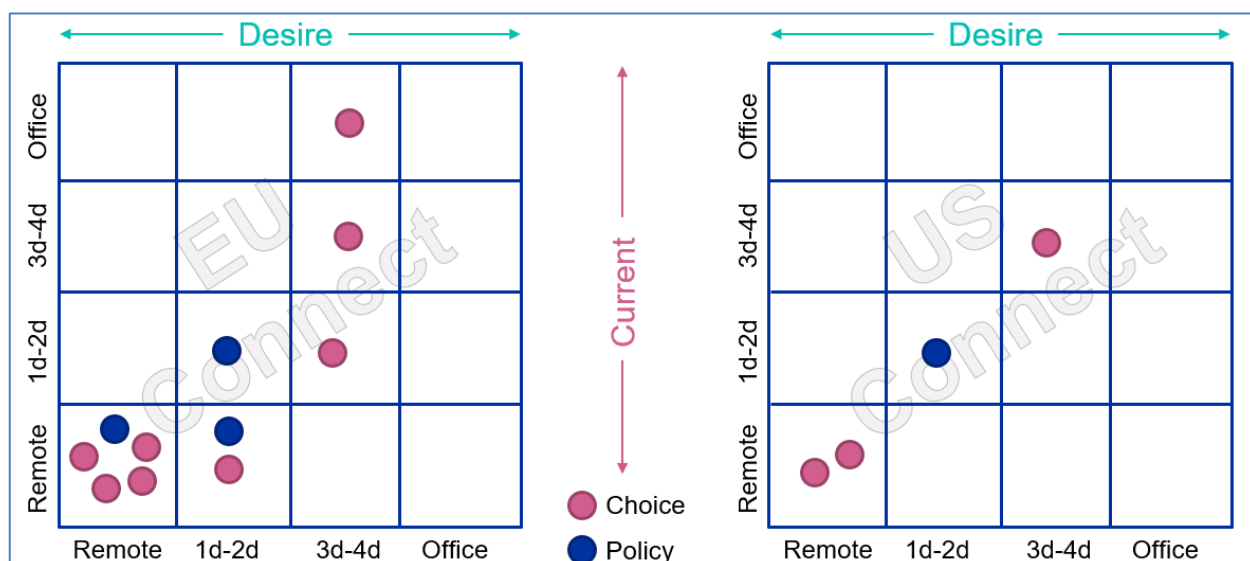
The first hour of the 90-minute Interactive Discussion in Bethesda was similar. We used the last 30 minutes to delve deeper into the topic and findings across both sessions.

SURVEY

In parallel to the interactive session, a survey was provided through the abstract to solicit perceptions on the benefits of various working arrangements: working from home and working on-site – from both an employee perspective and employer perspective. Results of the survey at the time of the session were shared with attendees. Results were similar among respondents during the 2023 EU Connect and the 2024 US Connect.

 Survey - Benefits			
Employee – Work-from-home		Employer – Work-from-home	
No commute	Working across time zones	Wider geographic pool of candidates	Staff retention
Flexibility	Environmentally friendly	Giving employees flexibility	Creates trust
No office distractions	More productive	Less office space (cost?)	Happier employees
Focus time		More work done – less commuting	
Work-life integration			
Closer to family			
Employee – On-site		Employer – On-site	
Easier to learn company culture	Informal/Ad hoc connections	Monitor employees	Informal mentoring/coaching
Sense of community	No distractions from home	Collaborative working	Sense of community
Being around colleagues	Office equipment	F2F interaction	Structured workdays
F2F interaction	Work-home separation	Ensure good employee relations	Team building
Free coffee/food	Social engagement	Accountability	Culture building

The survey also indicated that, among the small number of respondents, many had current working arrangement that was aligned with their preferred arrangement and choice provided by their employer. Again, results were similar among respondents during the 2023 EU Connect and the 2024 US Connect.



BREAKOUTS

In each session (EU and US), we divided the attendees into a few smaller groups and asked them to reflect on their current working situation as working from home, working on-site, or hybrid. We asked them to discuss within their groups what has (or has not) worked well for them in recent years. They were encouraged to consider perspectives as both a direct report and a manager. As an outcome of the breakout session, groups were tasked with identifying their **Top 5 issues** (negative or positive).

READOUTS

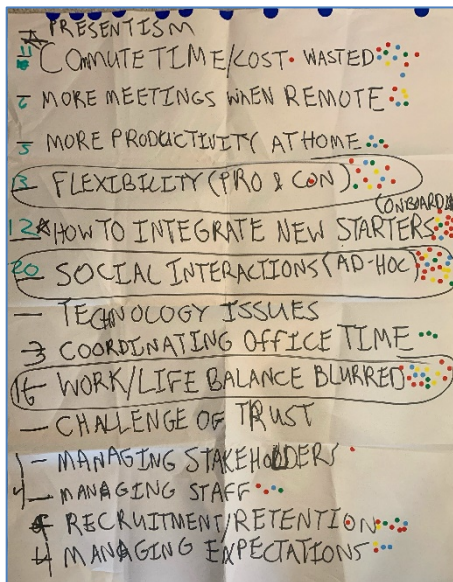
The next segment of the session asked each group to report their **Top 5 issues** back to the wider group. After some amazing transcription work by Chris (EU) and Caroline (US), the efforts of attendees resulted in 15 unique issues across the breakout groups in the EU and 13 unique issues in the US. These included topics such as commuting time, impact on meetings (more when remote), impact on flexibility, social interactions, and technology issues.

EU Connect	US Connect
Presentism	Constant availability – no separation home/workplace
Commute time/cost wasted	No commute saves time
More meetings when remote	Flexibility
More productivity at home	Loss of F2F opportunities w/management and opp. for advancement
Flexibility (pro & con)	Less expensive for companies to support wfh
How to integrate new starters (onboarding)	Loss of fashion sense
Social interactions (ad-hoc)	More distractions
Technology issues	Lack of oversight of new starters / mentoring / coaching
Coordinating office time	Lack of clarity of policy from country to country
Work/life balance blurred	Earlier / later meeting hours
Challenge of trust	Less encouragement and sense of community
Managing stakeholders	No office closures or sick days
Managing staff	Moonlighting
Recruitment/retention	
Managing expectations	

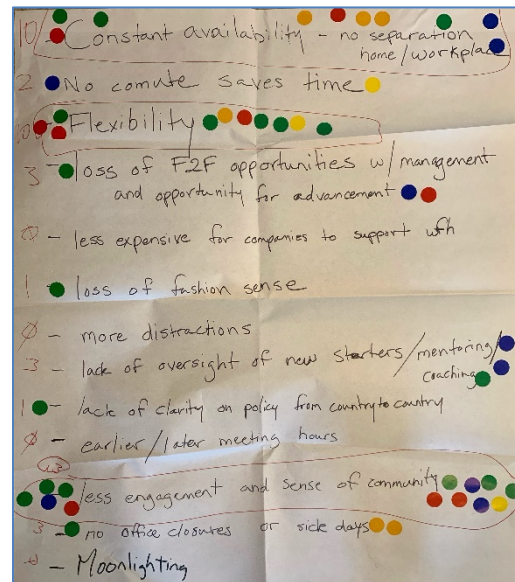
PRIORITIZATION AND DISCUSSION

The last segment engineered a dot-voting session where each attendee was given 3 'dots' to place next to the items in the list of issues that they thought were *most important* to consider with respect to working from home or working on-site. The result was a list of 3 issues as top vote-getters.

EU Connect



US Connect



There are two main takeaways from the exercise:

1. Both EU and US Connect sessions landed on essentially the same Top 3 issues
2. Discussions yielded different results as the list moved beyond the Top 3

The top issue selected in both the EU Connect and the US Connect related to **having a sense of community**. In Birmingham, there were 20 votes for "Social interactions (ad-hoc)" and in Bethesda, there were 13 votes for "Less encouragement and sense of community". Ordered by votes, the full results are:

EU Connect

US Connect

Social interactions (ad-hoc)	20	Less encouragement and sense of community	13
Work/life balance blurred	16	Constant availability – no separation home/workplace	10
Flexibility (pro & con)	13	Flexibility	10
How to integrate new starters (onboarding)	12	Lack of oversight of new starters / mentoring / coaching	3
Commute time/cost wasted	11	No office closures or sick days	3
Recruitment/retention	9	Loss of F2F opportunities w/management and opp. for advancement	3
More meetings when remote	6	No commute saves time	2
More productivity at home	5	Lack of clarity of policy from country to country	1
Managing staff	4	Loss of fashion sense	1
Managing expectations	4	Less expensive for companies to support wfh	0
Coordinating office time	3	More distractions	0
Managing stakeholders	1	Earlier / later meeting hours	0
Challenge of trust	0	Moonlighting	0
Presentism	0		
Technology issues	0		

Rounding out the Top 3 are issues related to **work-life balance** and **flexibility**. As we review the remaining issues, **new starters** and **commute time** were raised in both sessions. However, there were differences as we get deeper into the lists. In the EU, topics talked about managing stakeholders, managing expectations, and logistics of coordinating office time. In the US, the group highlighted global differences in policies, the reduction in 'office closures', and a loss of fashion sense. Office closures refers to on-site employees that are still expected to work-from-home when the site happens to physically be closed, for example due to inclement weather. Perhaps these

differences are indicative of a real US vs EU difference. Further investigation is warranted to understand more deeply.

There is one more take-away here: Bigger dots work better!

CONCLUSION

Given the top three issues resulting from both sessions, those that design policies related to working on-site vs remotely should seek to minimize these risks with their decisions. Construct real mechanisms to maintain a sense of community, not just in the office or for those remote, but also across the two groups. Support employees to make the necessary choices which create a healthy separation of work and personal lives – and in a balanced way. Empower and trust your employees with flexibility so that they may contribute to organizational objectives without having to choose between the company and family. And, consider the impact of such policies on remote, on-site, and hybrid workers, alike. By evaluating such policy proposals through these lenses, we may actually achieve the next steady-state of hybrid working.

It was a thrill to facilitate these sessions in both Birmingham and Bethesda. We would like to extend our thanks and gratitude to the attendees, at both the 2023 EU Connect and the 2024 US Connect, for their engagement and trust in the process. Thank you, as well, to the EU Connect **People Leadership & Management** stream chairs for 2023 [Annelies van Zeveren, Irina Sargsyan, and Kath Wright] and our Interactive Discussion chair [Kirsty Lauderdale] for trusting us to deliver these sessions and (hopefully) providing value back to the PHUSE community on this topic.

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