

Africa's small towns boom as hybrid working is increasingly in demand

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Africa is in the midst of unprecedented changes to the workplace that will affect enterprises and workers across the continent for decades.



Though remote work has been a defining characteristic of the Covid era, most enterprises continue to have a notable in-person component of their operations and plan for their workplaces to be primarily in-person or hybrid.

In a recent study, when enterprises were asked about the future model of their workplace, just four percent said that they planned to remain partly or wholly remote. In the coming years, many enterprises plan to use a hybrid workplace model, with some work taking place remotely and other work being done at the business location or a close to home co-working space.

This finding has been echoed in other global studies, such as the Boston Consulting Group, which called the hybrid work "the new remote work". Enterprises may spend some time fine-tuning exactly how their remote work model looks by reviewing the relative effectiveness of remote and co-working arrangements.

One of the most critical drivers of the future workplace model that enterprises adopt will be the sector in which they operate. Hybrid work is likely to be the dominant workplace model across a range of higher-skilled services sectors, from professional services to financial and insurance activities to administrative and support services. However, it will be far less common in other sectors, most notably hotels and restaurants – where nearly nine in 10 enterprises plan to return to a predominately or wholly in-person business model.

Transportation, manufacturing and construction – all enterprises with a significant in-person component – are also less likely to plan a permanent move to hybrid work. While hybrid workplaces are set to increase across Africa, enterprises in some countries seem likelier to do so than others. The survey suggests that Nigeria leads the way, with some 56 percent of

enterprises planning a hybrid work model. Mozambique may also see a significant share of hybrid workplaces, with 49 percent of enterprises planning to use this model and another 11 percent planning a fully remote workplace.

Uganda said that human connection was a fundamental part of their work. "Our business is about interaction," said one manager, "meeting face to face, creating relationships. It's something we can't take away from our products." Others wanted to see the return of a particular part of doing business, which they felt was more effective in person.



Research in South Africa found that physical presence at the workplace was significant. The impact of Covid-19 on African enterprises has been immense, especially for companies not traditionally designed to operate digitally flawlessly. Others wanted to restart particular parts of the business process, such as training, mentorship or orientation.

The shift in workplace models means significant changes for many enterprises. Research in South Africa found that many employers are transitioning to remote or hybrid work plans to reduce the amount of office space they rent. There are notable trends in how office space is being used, for example, the planned increase in hot desking. This is where workers book office space in advance for a set period while at the office instead of having a permanent desk.

There is much to be gained from the serendipitous interactions in the corridor and other things you can't recreate online. It is sometimes more productive to deal with issues instantly and in person.

With long commutes increasingly a thing of the past and hybrid working now standard for up to 40% of all workers, the research suggests there has also been a surge in the workforce of commuter towns as hybrid working allows people to work closer to home. Local economies set for boost as hybrid workers could rise by up to 175% in local towns.

Technology empowers white-collar workers to do their jobs productively no matter where they are, and as a result, there has been a shift to more localised work. In the hybrid model, companies benefit from greater productivity, with Professor Bloom of Stanford's research showing that productivity gains amount to 3-4% while employees enjoy a better work-life balance. IWG research revealed that half of employees would quit if forced to commute long distances on a daily basis.

Locations with historically larger white-collar commuter populations and fewer local white-collar jobs are set to benefit the most, as workers recognise that they are able to work closer to home and from local workspaces without the long commute – ultimately further increasing local spending in Suburbs, dormitory towns and rural communities.

Demand for co-working spaces to rise

Hybrid working allows employees to choose where and how they work, which workers highly value. Previous research by IWG found that 72% of hybrid workers said they would only consider new jobs and roles that allowed them to base themselves at workspaces closer to home for part of the week.

Mark Dixon, CEO and founder of IWG commented, "The hybrid migration is one of the most important forces at play in the world today as workers increasingly embrace the opportunity to work locally, bringing significant opportunities to the economies of local communities as well as creating a better work-life balance for employees."

Hybrid working is radically reshaping the geography of work. This latest research highlights that it has a profound and lasting impact on the make-up of communities and the geography of towns and cities.

Suburbs, dormitory towns and rural communities everywhere are being revitalised, and this trend will continue to accelerate over the coming years.

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