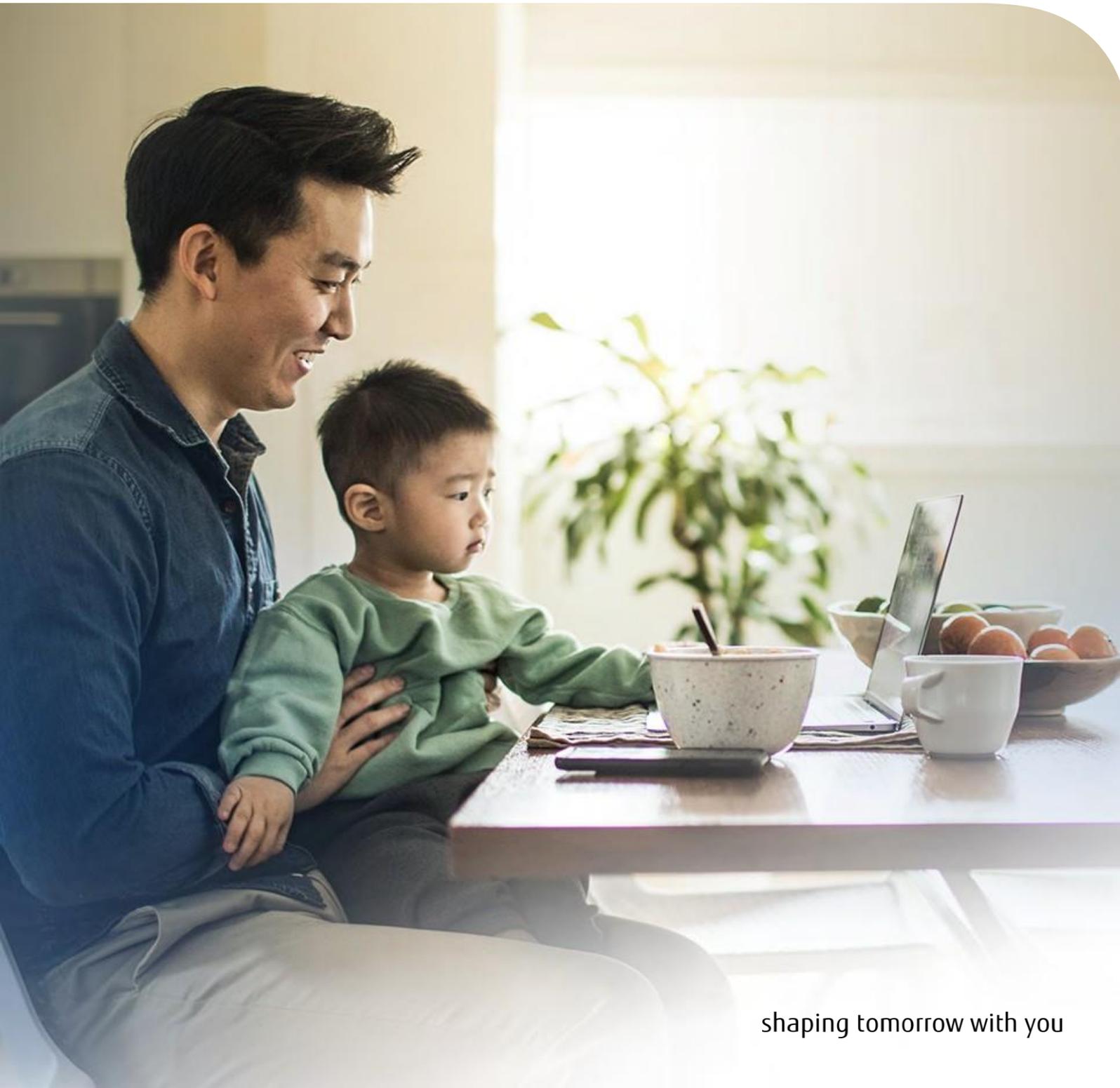


The next 9 to 5: How to make flexible working work



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Even before COVID-19, 9 to 5 was on its way out. In 2019, 75% of global business leaders already considered flexible working to be the new normal. This was driven by workforce globalization and technologies that allow us to do our jobs anytime, anywhere; the need to attract and retain top talent has been another factor that has pushed many organizations into offering more flexible working options.

COVID-19 has accelerated this transition. Lockdown restrictions around the world meant that those who could, had to work from home, and this forced them to balance their professional lives with childcare and other personal commitments. The 9 to 5 became an inconvenience and even an impossibility for many, so a new model emerged.

What does that model look like? What opportunities and challenges does it bring? And how can employers implement it successfully in 2021 and beyond?

The next 9 to 5: What it is, and what it is not

The best way to define the next 9 to 5 is by saying what it is not – and that is a one-size-fits-all approach. Organizations that adopt this new model offer employees a high degree of flexibility around when and where they work. Some employees might choose the familiar structure of 9 to 5; others might chop up their days, allocating blocks of time to work, interspersed with blocks of time for their personal life. The possibilities are as diverse as employees' individual circumstances.

"Power has shifted as a result," says Carla Hall, head of workforce and workspace services at Fujitsu. Employees now have control of their own working schedules, and the ability to choose how and when they work. "Properly implemented, flexible work makes people accountable," says Silvia Zanella, head of HR communications at a big four consultancy firm, future of work expert and author. "It makes them feel that they are the protagonists of their daily adventure, and they feel more engaged as a result."



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Why it matters to businesses

The shift to a fully flexible working model forced by COVID-19 was so sudden that many organizations – and many employees – were not prepared for it. As a result, there are now several challenges to be overcome to ensure this model works for all.

The struggle to separate their personal lives from their work commitments and switch off at the end of the day is leading to more stress and anxiety among some employees. So while work-life balance may seem like one of the biggest benefits of flexible working, it can also be one of the greatest challenges.

"A good work-life balance is a consequence of the proper implementation of flexible work," says Zanella. "We really need to better understand how we want our work to come into our life and how we want our life to come into our work. This will be a long journey, and we have barely started it."

To make the journey easier, leaders need to show that they trust their employees to get work done in a way and time that suits them. However, trust between employees and organizations is being tested, presenting another key challenge to be tackled.

"Trust must be two-way," says Hall. "Employees need to be able to trust that they are not expected to be 'always on'. At the same time, the employer should trust that employees are being productive at home, rather than doing something else."

Fostering a relationship based on trust would also help organizations tackle another major challenge that has been exacerbated due to flexible working: cyber security. As employees access their work emails, check instant messages or download files from the cloud at different times of the day and from different locations, organizations have become more vulnerable to cyber attacks. In fact, there has been an exponential rise in cybercrime during the pandemic – up 400%, compared with previous months.

Organizations need to be able to trust their employees to take the necessary steps to work in a safe way online that protects both employees' and organizations' data. This is critical as inappropriate use of IT resources is the most frequent cause of business data breaches.

How to make flexible working work

To overcome these challenges and make the new model work for all employees, organizations have to take three steps. They should provide training in essential skills, demonstrate strong leadership and adopt the right digital technologies.

Digital and soft skills must take priority

Digital skilling-up is an urgent priority. Employees who understand why, how and when to use the necessary tools and platforms will communicate better, experience less frustration and work safely online. And if leaders lack the necessary digital skills, they can feel overwhelmed about which technologies to implement across different teams and how to manage a workforce that is working remotely and more flexibly.

There is also increasing demand for soft skills, including empathy and communication – especially among the leadership team and managers. “You need to be very bold to be a good leader nowadays,” says Zanella. “But you also need to be more vulnerable, more empathetic and more caring.” Leaders who possess these skills will be able to foster trust and build stronger relationships with employees.





Leaders must model healthy and flexible working

As employees struggle to separate their work commitments from their personal life, leaders need to set a good example from the start. "Employees need to see leaders modeling a flexible work mentality and showing that people can and should set their own boundaries," says Hall.

Training will help, and so can the right technologies. "Wellbeing training is a priority for us," adds Hall. "We are training leaders to support wellbeing in the workplace by encouraging teams to take breaks and making sure that no one is isolated. We are also using analytics to monitor wellbeing and give people reminders to take a break."

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Old and new technologies must meet new employee needs

The technologies employees are using to connect and collaborate online are not all new. But in a remote workplace, they become the main way in which employees form connections and the company builds its culture. This is new. "That is why the platforms we are using have to be able to create the same experience at home that we had in the workplace," says Hall.

Collaboration platforms such as [Monday.com](https://www.monday.com) and [Yammer](https://www.yammer.com) can help to create a sense of community and provide real-time visibility, which helps leaders to manage workflow. There is also demand for more innovative solutions such as virtual workspaces, which use virtual reality to help employees collaborate side by side online. [Spatial.io](https://www.spatial.io), for instance, allows employees to create their own avatars and "sit" next to colleagues in a virtual office. However, while such platforms provide many benefits, they may also present a cyber security threat. So organizations will need to invest in applications that are built with security in mind, with features such as multi-factor authentication and usage-behavior analytics.

The benefits of this new flexible model are significant, but neither employees nor their leaders should get carried away: there are also drawbacks that could have a significant impact on personal lives and careers. To prepare for the next 9 to 5 and minimize those downsides, organizations will have to invest in new skills and the right technologies. If they do this successfully, they will foster mutual trust between the business and the workforce, raise productivity, and attract and retain top talent.



Join us for a Virtual Co-Creation Workshop to explore how Fujitsu can help you drive your digital transformation.

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