

FOREWORD BY

STEWART BUTTERFIELD

CO-FOUNDER AND CEO OF **SLACK**

HOW THE FUTURE WORKS

LEADING **FLEXIBLE TEAMS** TO DO
THE **BEST WORK** OF THEIR LIVES



BRIAN ELLIOTT

SHEELA SUBRAMANIAN

HELEN KUPP

WILEY

Praise for *How the Future Works: The 7 Steps to Getting There*

We have arrived at a moment where we can backslide into the status quo or transform society for generations to come. *How the Future Works* makes the latter possible -- providing us with a blueprint to deeply consider the future of work. It is a must-read for today's leaders.

**Indra Nooyi, former CEO, PepsiCo and author of
*My Life in Full***

We know flexibility is the future of work—the big question is how it's going to work. This book combines the latest data with actionable advice on giving people more freedom without settling for less excellence.”

**Adam Grant, #1 New York Times bestselling author of
Think Again and host of the TED
podcast *WorkLife***

How the Future Works uncovers the key principles for building a culture that connects, supports and inspires every employee in this new all-digital, work-from-anywhere world. It's an essential guidebook for transforming the way people work and unlocking their potential.

Marc Benioff, Chair and Co-CEO, Salesforce

I pay attention to the Future Forum. And if you're interested in folks who take in gobs of data, listen, ask useful questions, and make helpful judgements on how we might work now, you might too.

**Priya Parker, author of *The Art of Gathering:
How We Meet and Why It Matters***

CEOs confront few topics as complex, urgent, and strategically important as the future of work in a post-pandemic, increasingly digitized world. Brian, Sheela, and Helen highlight pitfalls, provide insight and practical advice to help guide leaders through these choices, and put us on a path to improve work for the benefit of our people and our organizations.

Rich Lesser, Global Chair, Boston Consulting Group

The disruption to work ushered in the era for flexible work forcefully. This insightful book provides a framework with examples for successfully implementing flexible, diverse, and inclusive cultures.

**Tsedal Neeley, Professor, Harvard Business School and
author of *Remote Work Revolution* and co-author of
The Digital Mindset.**

At a time when the fundamental nature of how and where we work is changing, organizations of all sizes need guidance on navigating what has become a brave new world of work. *How the Future Works* artfully weaves together research, principles and storytelling to help leaders unlock the power of flexible work.

Arvind Krishna, Chairman and CEO of IBM

How the Future Works is as valuable as it is much needed for today's executive. The book is excellently conceived, organized and written. Plus, with the checklist at each chapter's end and the tool kit at the book's closing, it's very easy to turn this into an action plan. Bravo!

Alan Murray, CEO, FORTUNE

How the Future Works is an incredible resource for business leaders as we navigate seismic changes in today's workplace. The founders of the Future Forum are helping to answer some of the bigger questions we're facing as we reimagine work and create new ways of working that can better serve both employees and employers.

**Tracy Layney, Senior Vice President and
Chief Human Resources Officer, Levi Strauss & Co.**

How the Future Works builds a very strong business case to reset how we think about flexibility, resulting in a better, more sustainable work model for both employees and organizations. It provides practical guidance and resources to think through where, when, and how work gets done – and most importantly, why flexibility makes strategic sense. An excellent read for leaders who are re-imagining the future of work post-pandemic, amidst a very competitive talent marketplace.

**Helena Gottschling, Chief Human Resource Officer,
Royal Bank of Canada**

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THE **BEST WORK** OF THEIR LIVES

**BRIAN ELLIOTT
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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Stewart Butterfield</i>	
Introduction: The 9-To-5 Just Doesn't Work for Us Anymore (And Maybe Never Did)	1
Why Flexible Work Works	11
How the Future Works: The 7 Steps to Getting There	
Step 1: Stand for Something: Agree on Purpose and Principles	29
Step 2: Level the Playing Field: Create Guardrails for Behavior	47
Step 3: Commit to How You'll Work: Develop Team-Level Agreements	67
Step 4: Experiment, Experiment, Experiment: Normalize a Culture of Learning	87
Step 5: Create a Culture of Connection from Anywhere: Reimagine Your Headquarters	105
Step 6: Train Your Leaders to Make It Work: "Soft" Skills Matter More than Ever	127

Step 7: Focus on the Outcomes: Avoid the Doom Loop and Embrace the Boom Loop	147
<i>Conclusion: Making a Difference</i>	165
<i>Resources: Your Future of Work Toolkit</i>	169
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	203
<i>Cast of Experts</i>	209
<i>About the Authors</i>	211
<i>Notes</i>	213
<i>Index</i>	223

Foreword

In March of 2021, about a year into the pandemic, Slack’s executive team was dialed into our regular weekly staff meeting. We were 45 minutes into what was becoming a very frustrating conversation about office reopenings, remote work policies, time zone guidelines for hiring plans, regional compensation adjustments, and a host of other topics that are by now quite familiar to company leaders in nearly every industry.

We were talking past each other, seemingly disagreeing about the most basic aspects of the future we imagined, until our Chief People Officer, Nadia Rawlinson, stopped the conversation: “Hold on: when you ask ‘what’s going to be different?’ are you talking about different from February 2020? Or different from today? It matters because the answers take you in opposite directions.”

She was right. Human brains love shortcuts, and it is much easier to imagine the future as just like the past, except for one small difference. For every “we’ll go into the office two days each week,” there’s an implicit assumption: “. . . but otherwise things will be more or less the same as February 2020.” But that assumption is wrong, not least of all because it presupposes every employee lives within commuting distance of an office. The world has already moved on.

When you think about the future of work as evolving from our present “normal,” things look quite a bit better. Starting from the baseline of the surprisingly impressive performance we’ve seen with nearly every office worker working from home, we get two new, big advantages. The first, as the pandemic subsides and we learn to better negotiate the ongoing risks and trade-offs, will be a fuller return of the amenities of regular life. More

travel, more togetherness, and less risk to our physical health will mean better mental health and happier lives for all.

The second advantage will be the return of in-person communication and collaboration as one of the tools available for us to get work done. This will help in forming relationships, building trust, and approaching certain kinds of creative work. Even after the pent-up demand for seeing colleagues in person subsides, regular time spent together face-to-face will play a key role in the experience of most knowledge workers, including most of those who otherwise prefer to work remotely 100% of the time.

Nadia's question shifted the conversation into the kind of engaged debate that was more characteristic of our normal discussions. In subsequent conversations with dozens of customers, along with fellow software CEOs and industry observers, I've noticed increasing receptivity to an optimistic and open-minded approach to the future of work.

The pandemic highlighted the fact that most organizations had already switched from a mode of operation where digital technologies supplemented in-person communication, to a world where in-person supplements the digital. Now we just need to get our mindsets caught up to that Digital-First reality.

The opportunity we have today is enormous. No adage has proven itself more true in my career than "never waste a crisis," and no crisis has been bigger than this. This is a chance to reimagine how work gets done, to break bad old habits, and make work better for people and companies.

Like the scientists say, you can't unscramble an egg. We need to start thinking about the future we want, given where we are today. We need to avoid falling back to assumptions about a familiar remembered past that is not coming back. My hope is that more leaders will think about this time—and the unforeseeable set of circumstances—as an invitation to get creative, to experiment, to invent, and to take advantage of what will surely be the biggest single opportunity we'll have in our lifetimes to make fundamental changes to how we work. And helping leaders navigate the way forward was one of the reasons I was excited to help launch Future Forum, a consortium backed by Slack.

We all know that work can be more fulfilling, less stressful, more pleasant, and more productive. The purpose of this book is to help you make that happen.

— *Stewart Butterfield, co-founder
and CEO of Slack*

Introduction: The 9-To-5 Just Doesn't Work for Us Anymore (And Maybe Never Did)

When Slack, the enterprise messaging platform, was founded, co-founder and CEO Stewart Butterfield lived in Vancouver, and the company's other founders were located in New York and San Francisco. Together they built a product that enables distributed work among distributed teams, but even still the company's primary headquarters was established in San Francisco. Because, of course it was. "If you want to do inter-bank finance, you have to go to London. If you want to start a giant media company, you have to be in New York. If you want to do movie production, you have to be in Los Angeles," Butterfield told an interviewer way back in 2018.¹ If you want to start a tech company, you have to be in the San Francisco Bay Area, or so the thinking went at the time, at Slack and so many other companies. Indeed, it wasn't long before Butterfield moved to San Francisco himself, so he could be closer to the heart of both the company and the entire tech world.

Despite the fact that the Slack product was designed to allow people to work collaboratively in a virtual forum, at the end of 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the vast majority of the company's engineering staff—79%—were located in the San Francisco Bay area, with only 2% working remotely. The organization wasn't against flexible work per se. There were those high-performers who, once they'd applied, were granted permission to work that way, and occasionally they would hire someone from outside the area. But, as co-founder and Chief Technology Officer Cal Henderson admits, "I was definitely skeptical of it." At the time it was important to company leaders that they have a cohesive group of people located in the same place and coming into the office on a set schedule so they could collaborate and do innovative work.

But that way of thinking caused some challenges. It made hiring more difficult. With rare exceptions, people had to live near Slack offices or be willing to move, despite the high cost of local real estate. When employees wanted to move away, typically for family reasons or to pursue a better quality of life in less expensive locales, the company often lost talented people. "We tried to accommodate really exceptional people when there was no other alternative, but we also let some exceptional people go," Butterfield recalls.

That's essentially where the company was at when the pandemic hit, offices closed basically overnight, and everyone was forced into a kind of grand experiment. Just like we have seen with company after company, in industry after industry, the nature of work changed.

In the beginning, the focus of Slack's leaders was simply on productivity, on how people could continue to achieve pre-set goals in these altered circumstances. They paid close attention to the metrics as things unfolded, and to everyone's surprise, they quickly found that overall, output, quality, and reliability remained strong. "It was surprising how well we continued to operate," Henderson says. Even still, there were some significant variations across teams depending on their circumstances. Parents with young kids, those dealing with health challenges in the family, or those with poor work setups and internet connections struggled more, for obvious reasons. But as the company got better at identifying where problems existed and what those problems were, they were able to provide help—giving people support, space, even equipment—and the outlook continued to improve.

In the beginning, most companies—most people, in fact—thought the shift would be temporary, but as lockdowns were extended, most workers began settling into a rhythm—and not just at Slack, but at numerous companies we worked with during the period. They also made some discoveries about the conventional wisdom that had previously dictated so much of how we worked—and, oftentimes, that “wisdom” just didn’t hold up. Because so much of how people were used to working was based on the idea of being present together in space and time, there was an assumption that these things were necessary for collaboration and innovation. Many had relied on whiteboards for brainstorming sessions, for example, but when forced to find another way, solutions—often simple ones—presented themselves. Team members at Slack began brainstorming in an online document where everyone, in their own time, could offer ideas and opinions, and then the group would get together for short discussions once everyone had weighed in. It worked better than expected, as did numerous adjustments to fundamental work habits and processes, like meetings, team building, measurements, and more (all of which we’ll talk about in this book).

During that unprecedented time, companies were looking closely at the impact of what was happening, measuring not just productivity, but employee sentiment and engagement to see if business would simply fall off a cliff. But the opposite happened: these new, more flexible work practices were shown to actually *increase productivity*. According to an analysis by Goldman Sachs Group, productivity—defined as the measure of goods or services produced per hour by workers—rose 3.1% during the first year of the crisis.²

Within a few months, leaders at Slack had already begun talking about permanently applying some of the changes that had taken place and lessons that had been learned. “It was just very compelling evidence,” Butterfield explains. “It was an accident of history that we got pushed into this, but there’s been a benefit to forcing this change because there otherwise would have been no way to convince anyone that it would work. I can’t imagine how we ever would have come to believe this empirical fact that we could work so well with everyone working flexibly unless it actually happened.”

The evidence was convincing enough that Slack’s leaders decided to change course. “At some point it felt like we had been operating this way for long enough that we could be confident we would continue to be able to operate this way in the future,” Henderson says. In 2020, Slack announced their intention to move forward, not try to go back to how

things had once been, by introducing their new flexible work strategy. They opened up hiring within the US and allowed people to keep their jobs if they moved. They began developing tools and methods for people to connect and collaborate from wherever they were and whenever worked best for them and their team. Once they started down this path, it would be hard to go back, but Butterfield's confidence showed in his own choices: He realized he, too, could move away from the Bay Area he had once gravitated to and go somewhere else, which he did when he moved to Colorado. "I realized I can just go," he says, "and it's not really going to make any difference to my ability to lead or do my work."

It's been more than a transition for the company, it's been a transformation that's had a wide-ranging impact, one that we'll continue to talk about through the course of this book. But just in terms of the distribution of talent, by the end of 2021, only 36% of Slack's engineering team was located in San Francisco and the number of team members working remotely on a permanent basis grew from just 2% pre-pandemic to nearly 50%.

One of the main reasons Slack decided to make the fundamental shift to a more flexible way of working is the impact it has on recruiting and retaining employees—the battle for talent—which is one of the biggest challenges that employers of knowledge workers face today. A 2021 joint survey of CEOs by *Fortune* and Deloitte found that 73% said that a *labor shortage* was their biggest external concern, and 57% said that *attracting and recruiting talent* is among their biggest challenges; followed by 51% who said *retaining it* is highest on their list.³

As you will see over the course of this book, flexible work offers a real opportunity, not just to attract and retain talent, but to transform the way people work and unlock their potential. One of the reasons that's possible is because so much of the way we had been working pre-pandemic was rooted in old norms and organizational models whose evolution largely stalled out decades ago even as technologies continued to change and workforces became more diverse. It just took a crisis to open our eyes to it and force us to do something about it. As Butterfield put it, "This is no time for retreat to the comfort of well-worn habits. We can't respond reflexively. This moment demands a thoughtful and intentional response and will reward creativity in attempts to build a better workplace and world." And that's far more attainable than some leaders may realize.

Flexible work “has opened up to question every aspect of the work experience; it all needs to be unpacked. The corporate office was the yardstick. It was facetime, it was your calendar, but even before COVID, that wasn’t sustainable. We need to think about the employee experience. This is an opportunity to get the most out of your people as a company.”

— Atif Rafiq, *President, Commercial and Growth, MGM Resorts International*⁴

Why the 9-to-5 Mentality Needs to Go

The old adage that “time is money” goes way back. It’s typically credited to Benjamin Franklin, and it describes the long held belief that more time spent working equals more success. And that may have been true at one time, for some anyway. In the agricultural era, more time in the fields meant more crops getting planted or harvested (of course, that only worked for the owner of those crops or those being paid by the hour or bushel to work the fields, rather than slave labor or indentured servants). Even still, much agricultural work was unlikely to continue after sundown and it’s often seasonal, unlike what took root during the Industrial Revolution when a large part of the labor force moved from field to factory to work on a set daily schedule.

As journalist Celeste Headlee, author of *Do Nothing: How to Break Away from Overworking, Overdoing, and Underliving*, put it: “Before the industrial age, time was measured in days or seasons. However, when workers began punching in and out of work, our understanding of time changed, as did our enjoyment of our time off.” If people got time off at all, that is. Shifts in factories and mills could sometimes last for ten, twelve, even fourteen hours a day, leaving little time to do much else but eat, sleep, and get ready for another day of work (a notion that may not seem all that unfamiliar to many working today).

Labor movements grew in power in reaction to strenuous conditions, but it was more than just workers who saw the need for change. In the 1920s, automobile titan Henry Ford found business reasons to impose

limits on working hours. As someone who kept a close eye on efficiency, he noticed that when employees worked too many hours, they made mistakes and productivity suffered. As a result, he imposed restrictions: eight-hour days, five days a week. He wasn't the first to do this, but he deserves credit for bringing attention to the concept. "We know from our experience in changing from six to five days and back again that we can get at least as great production in five days as we can in six," he said. "Just as the eight-hour day opened our way to prosperity, so the five-day week will open our way to a still greater prosperity."⁵ Still, it wasn't until the next decade, in 1938, that President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act limiting working hours for all workers.⁶

It was during that Industrial Era that the concept of work became so tied to measures of time and output, to the point where they were seemingly inseparable. Management practices followed suit, with leaders relying on things like punch cards and monitoring practices to make sure workers were putting in their time and churning out product.

Many of these ideas persisted even as work changed considerably. In the mid-twentieth century, many workers moved again, this time from the factory to the office, but, like the field or factory, there was still a central location where work had to get done—that's where the files and equipment (typewriters, switchboards, fax machines) that enabled work were located, as well as the people you needed to collaborate with to get your work done.

Even today, most of us still think of the workday as some variation of 9-to-5 and the workweek as Monday through Friday. Bosses often expect to see their employees in the office at a certain hour and take note of when they leave (pre-pandemic, at least). This has largely remained true even though, thanks to a slew of new technological tools, the kind of knowledge work that drives much of today's economy doesn't need to be done from anywhere in particular, or during any particular hours. Many of us no longer have to show up in the field where the crops are in order to do our work, or in the factory to assemble widgets, or in an office to connect with colleagues and clients. In fact, the idea that we would wait until we get into the office at 9:00 a.m., or have a hard stop when we leave at night, went away quite some time ago for most of us (if we ever experienced it at all), when our laptops and smartphones started allowing us to carry work home with us in our bags or pockets. 9-to-5 is a concept that just doesn't resonate with most knowledge workers today.

It seems that so much of how we work has changed over the past few decades, and yet so much hasn't. Concepts like presenteeism, clock-watching, and employee monitoring are all still widely practiced in companies across industries, and rarely have we stopped to wonder whether these old habits and expectations still make sense. (Spoiler alert: they don't, as you'll see throughout this book.) Then along came COVID-19, which shut down offices across the globe, and suddenly we couldn't avoid it any longer: We had to take a closer look at the way we work and ask whether it was possible to do things differently—and maybe even in a better way.

As anthropologist, James Suzman, wrote in his exploration of how the concept of “work” has evolved throughout the ages: “By recognizing that many of the core assumptions that underwrite our economic institutions are an artifact of the agricultural revolution, amplified by our migration into cities, frees us to imagine a whole range of new, more sustainable possible futures for ourselves, and rise to the challenge of harnessing our restless energy, purposefulness, and creativity to shaping our destiny.”⁷

In other words, if the way we work is rooted in old norms, what's stopping us from changing, and from doing things in a new and better way?

“I see the 40-hour office workweek—an artifact of factory work—finally becoming a thing of the past. Employees will escape grueling commutes and gain more control over their day.”

— *Drew Houston, co-founder and
CEO of Dropbox*⁸

What Is Future Forum, Anyway?

Future Forum was born because we saw this huge opportunity to redesign work—something that hasn't happened since the Industrial era. We want to help leaders understand that opportunity—which is about far more than just designating some work-from-home days—and all it can do for their businesses.

Future Forum grew out of the fact that Slack has always had a strong research team dedicated to understanding how people work and what can help them perform even better, because the answers to those questions are

fundamental to the products the company makes. It has been clear from that research that many workplace practices, structures, and measurements of success haven't kept pace with the massive change we have seen in the last decades in the kind of work people do in the knowledge economy, and how they get it done. Though much of the research once focused on making Slack products work better, there had long been rumblings, led by Butterfield, about starting a "Center for the Future of Work" in order to look more broadly at how "work" as an idea was changing—and more importantly, how it needed to change even further.

But the idea never really took hold, that is until 2020 when so much of the world shut down, businesses had to close their doors, and Slack, like practically everyone else, was forced to do things differently. We suddenly found ourselves in conversations with companies around the globe about how to continue to work under massive new constraints. In the beginning, the nature of those discussions were highly practical: How are you handling this? Are your people able to work like this? What's getting in their way? How are you supporting them? What's working? What are you saying to Wall Street about what's happening?

After a few months, however, things began to settle and executives moved from a crisis mentality to a more philosophical one. We started having conversations with leaders in all kinds of business, and not just tech companies, about how surprisingly well certain things were going, how productivity seemed to be holding steady, if not improving, and how certain people even seemed to be happier and more engaged than ever before, while others were struggling under tremendous challenges. Admittedly, it came as a surprise to many leaders that just because people were largely on their own, working outside the office and, to a great extent, on their own schedules and terms, didn't make them worse employees. With this new realization, gradually the conversations moved from "How do we make this work?" to something else: "Does this work so well that we should be rethinking the way we work, not just for now, but for the long term?"

Out of that context, Future Forum was born, a consortium focused on redesigning work for all types of people. We guide executives to build workplaces that are flexible, inclusive, connected, and ultimately more effective for the world we're living in today. We conduct original research and engage thousands of executives from a wide variety of industries in order to learn from one another, experiment with new concepts, and ultimately push our thinking about what the future can hold.

The upsides of flexible work have been a welcome surprise, of course, but it hasn't all been a rosy picture—and our research has looked at that, too. It quickly became clear that we have created an inequitable system where benefits are not distributed evenly across the board. There was massive unemployment in some sectors, for example, especially where it wasn't possible to shift to different ways of working. And for those working from home, caregiving responsibilities paired with school closures often made work more difficult, if not impossible. These inequities have disproportionately affected women, especially women of color, but flexible work has provided an upside for many historically disadvantaged groups as well. Women and people of color are among the groups who say they want flexibility the most, for reasons we will discuss in later chapters. In fact, now that so many have experienced what flexible work can do for them, the vast majority of knowledge workers say they want more of it. Our research shows that flexibility is the most important driver of job satisfaction behind compensation.

One of the core goals of Future Forum is to understand what people need, to do their best work, and find ways that leaders can meet them where they are so organizations *and* people can find greater success together.

“To me, flexible work is the future. If there’s one silver lining of the pandemic, it’s that this time away from the office has allowed us all to reevaluate our priorities.”

— Ben Chestnut, co-founder and
CEO, Mailchimp⁹

Seven Steps to the Future of Work

The need for this book arose out of the work that Future Forum has been doing since its founding. It draws on the experiences of a wide variety of companies—including IBM, the Royal Bank of Canada, Levi Strauss & Co., Atlassian, Dell, Genentech, Salesforce, Boston Consulting Group, and of course, Slack—as well as experts in the field to not just redesign the future of work, but provide a blueprint to get there. Because, without a doubt, the old way wasn't working as well as it could.

While flexibility is not a panacea for all workplace issues, it is a major step in the right direction, if done right. Of course, doing it right can be tricky when companies have been working in a specific way for decades and don't know how to make the shift—because if you want to be successful, it's not a simple retrofit process, where you take old ways of working and move them into a virtual forum. This book aims to help you redesign how you work by taking you through seven key steps, filled with case studies and hands-on advice, to make it happen. After all, there is a real battle for talent going on, and flexibility is what people want. As you will see in the next chapter, it's also what companies in a fast-changing marketplace are going to need if they want to stay competitive.

Why Flexible Work Works

“The workplace will now be wherever work happens, and the workweek will be whenever work happens best for each person.”¹ That was how Dropbox CEO, Drew Houston, described the company’s flexible work strategy, announced in October 2020, which was a clear break from how they’d worked in the past. Dropbox had largely been an office-centric culture, and they’d invested a lot in creating what Chief People Officer, Melanie Collins, describes as “the most delightful work environment we possibly could.” Their office spaces, which are located around the globe from San Francisco to Sydney, Australia, included things like state-of-the-art gyms and world-renowned cafeterias featuring their own signature roasted coffee blend. Office space was such a big part of their culture that pre-pandemic only three percent of its people didn’t work out of one. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and those offices had to close, the vast majority of Dropbox employees were displaced.

Much like what happened at Slack, as the pandemic forced them to pivot, Dropbox leaders were surprised to find that productivity and performance didn’t really miss a beat. That caused them to rethink what they’d been doing and accelerated their conversation around the merits and possibilities of flexible work. The pandemic forced more flexibility on companies, of course, but the question for Dropbox quickly became: How could it work over the long-term? What would a flexible work strategy look like if it were dictated, not by circumstances, but by design?

The answer wasn't obvious. Dropbox began by forming a team, co-led by Collins and Alastair Simpson, their Vice President of Design, with representatives from different parts of the company—design, tech, HR—to really study the issue. They took their time and kept an open mind as they looked internally at how their people were responding, as well as externally to benchmark dozens of companies. “We considered everything on the spectrum from full-time to no-time at the office,” Collins explains.

Among the models they rejected was the typical hybrid one—where some people work remotely and others continue to come to the office as usual. This is, perhaps, the model most people think of first, but Dropbox decided it wasn't right for them—the main reason being, as Collins explained, because it “creates two very different employee experiences that could result in issues with inclusion, or disparities with respect to performance or career trajectory depending on whether you are in the office or remote.”

Instead the team came up with a strategy that makes flexible work the primary experience for all employees. But when the concept was proposed to their leadership team, it was far from an immediate win. There were questions and pushback. Houston, in particular, wanted more detail. It sounded good in theory, but he wanted to be able to picture what a “day in the life” would look like for employees.

As we mentioned earlier, Houston now describes the workplace as being “wherever work happens,” and the workweek as “whenever work happens.” So, how do you balance those notions with the very real need for team members to connect and collaborate with one another? Instead of the traditional 9-to-5 expectations, the team asked what people really needed to collaborate effectively with one another while balancing individual needs for focus time. The flexible work proposal included the concept of “core collaboration hours”—four-hour windows of time each day when employees would be accessible to one another to do these very things, leaving the rest of their schedule open to get individual, focused work done when it suited them (see Figure 1). That concept raised concerns, like: “How will I be able to meet with people in different timezones?” and “How will I condense eight hours of meetings into just four?”

The team had to come up with answers. Core collaboration hours needed to be aligned to time zones, for example: a window of 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on the West Coast synched with noon to 4:00 p.m. on the East

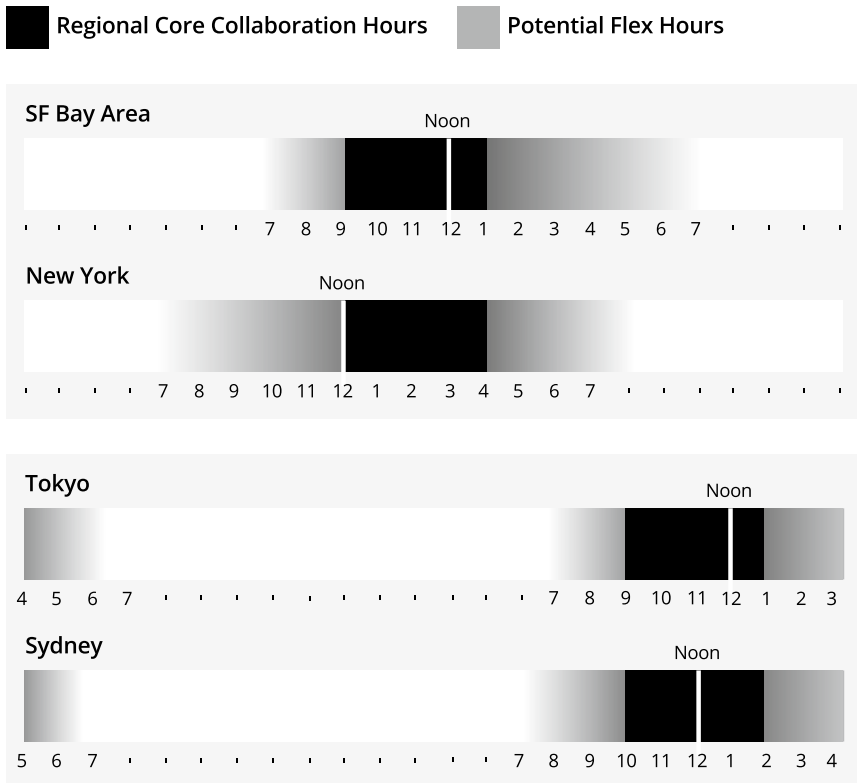


Figure 1 Dropbox's core collaboration hours

Dropbox set “core collaboration hours,” or four-hour windows for synchronous collaboration, aligned to time zones versus anchoring to physical locations. The example above highlights collaboration hours for their Americas-based and Asia-Pacific-based teams.

Source: Dropbox

Coast, which meant that everyone could collaborate during a reasonable timeframe but still allowed flexibility in the schedule so people could have lunch with a family member or pick up a kid from soccer practice.

As they sorted through these kinds of issues, it became clear that to be successful, the company needed more than just a policy statement; they needed to create what Collins describes as a “deliberate shift in culture.” This meant everything from changing ideas about what should actually merit a meeting (more on this tricky subject later on) to how to offer perks that weren’t focused on in-office cafes and gyms.

To introduce the concept and market the change required to support it, Dropbox provided everyone with a dedicated toolkit, an open and evolving guide with practical exercises and advice to help teams focus on the behavior shifts needed to be successful. Topics range from task prioritization to team leadership, and the toolkit focuses heavily on embracing asynchronous work since that's a concept that's been difficult for people to wrap their heads around. Vice President of Design, Alastair Simpson, says, "The two behavior shifts we're focused on the most are getting rid of unnecessary meetings and embracing asynchronous work. We believe implementing these two things makes the biggest difference for our employees based on our research to date." Even as they focused on flexibility, Dropbox knew that in-person interaction was still important, so they adopted plans for their Dropbox Studios—collaborative spaces that employees can use for in-person meetings, team events, learning experiences, or whatever else meets their needs.

Some of the advantages of the new strategy quickly became clear. As we mentioned in the last chapter, flexibility is increasingly something that employees value and look for. It was no different at Dropbox. Based on internal surveys, they found that 88% of their people preferred increased flexibility and 84% stated that they were *as productive* or *more productive* while working flexibly.

But the benefits went well beyond that. Leaders wanted to ensure their new flexible work model was helping them meet their key goals and financial objectives—and early results were more than promising. After implementing the new approach, they saw the following:

- Three times the number of applicants
- 15% faster time to hire
- 16% increase in diverse candidates

That's just one example of how flexible work can work. And not just for tech companies like Dropbox either, as you will see in the coming chapters. Flexible work has huge potential for new companies and long-standing ones, centralized organizations and ones that are globally dispersed, for all sizes and most industries. When done right it has clear benefits for both people and the companies they work for.

What We Mean by Flexible Work

Hybrid, remote, virtual, distributed . . . these are all terms you will hear associated with the concept of flexible work, and they all describe work models that differ from the traditional setup that has been the default way in which so many people have worked for decades. For the purposes of this book, we lump them all together under the umbrella heading of “flexible work” (but with an important caveat that we’ll get to in a moment).

That’s because “flexible work” has a somewhat flexible definition. It encompasses a wide range of options that can be tailored to meet the needs of your company, or even the needs of different teams within your company. And yet far too often people define it far too narrowly. They think only of those employees who sometimes or always work from home (WFH) even though that’s just one, rather narrow definition (and, as you will come to learn, typically not the most beneficial one). Flexible work, in our view, is more of a mindset than a specific set of rules or policies. It’s about freeing oneself from the outdated notion that work = office and the workweek = 9-to-5. Instead we can push the boundaries of how we think about the ways in which we can work together and offer people more freedom and autonomy to get things done in ways that suit them better. We can choose to focus on which model is going to drive the best outcomes for our business, rather than on where and when that work takes place. This requires some flexible thinking.

For example, the reason why WFH is generally not the most beneficial version of flexible work is because the *when* is actually more important than the *where*. You see, most of the time when people talk about flexibility, they talk about location—and, in fact, most of the common terms we just mentioned, like *remote* and *distributed*, largely suggest this kind of flexibility. But **schedule flexibility** is actually far more important. A Future Forum survey of more than 10,000 knowledge workers across six countries found that 76% want flexibility in *where* they work. That’s a significant number, one worth paying attention to, but, perhaps surprisingly, it’s not even the kind of flexibility that workers want most. A whopping ninety-three percent of workers said they want flexibility in *when* they work (see Figure 2).²