

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY FOR HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENTS

A guide for further education and skills leaders and managers

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INTRODUCTION

In this guide we build on the advice in [Psychological safety in FE settings: a guide for leaders and managers](#). The shift to hybrid working has resulted in many advantages - reduced commuting time, a more flexible working day and staff feeling more in control of their lives. Staff across many sectors have identified that certain tasks are much easier when they work from home, including reading complex documents and other focused work requiring high levels of concentration. Advances in technology have also allowed staff to work at a time that fits around their other commitments. According to [ONS data from 2022](#), more than three-quarters (78%) of those working from home in some capacity reported an improved work-life balance.

However, [The impact on remote and hybrid working on workers and organisations report](#) by UK Parliament found that remote and hybrid working has both positive and negative impacts on work-life balance. The research highlighted challenges, including the blurring of work-life boundaries, pressure to remain constantly available online, and an increase in working beyond contracted hours, all of which can lead to increased stress for workers. This guide also explores these challenges in more detail in the context of FE and skills settings and provides suggestions for leaders and managers to better support themselves and their colleagues in hybrid working environments.



HYBRID WORKING: WHAT ISSUES MIGHT FE AND SKILLS STAFF FACE?

- **Missing informal chats:** Remote staff can miss spontaneous conversations at work, which may help them form closer bonds. A [loneliness at work report](#) found there is no evidence that remote working increases workplace loneliness but remote staff did report more desire to socialise with colleagues.
- **Sedentary lifestyle:** The absence of a structured office environment may lead to some hybrid staff sitting for extended periods without regular movement, leading to potential mental and physical health issues.

- **Less time outside:** Spending long hours indoors without leaving the house can diminish exposure to natural light and fresh air. This isolation can negatively impact mood and mental wellbeing, as many people benefit from time spent outdoors, especially in nature.
- **Blurred lines between work and home:** With no physical separation between the office and home, it can be challenging for staff to switch off from work. This can lead to extended working hours, difficulty in maintaining a healthy work-life balance and ultimately burnout.
- **Collegiate relationships:** Hybrid work can create barriers to team bonding and cohesion if not managed with care. Building trust and understanding may take longer, potentially impacting collaboration and team morale. Read our [Building collegiate relationships in FE settings guide](#).
- **Technology fatigue:** Reliance on virtual communication tools can lead to fatigue and burnout. Constant video calls and messaging can feel overwhelming, leading to frustration and overwhelm.
- **Limited access to resources:** Remote staff might not have the same access to resources as those in the office, including technology, office supplies, and support from IT. This may impact productivity and increase frustration.
- **Promotions and development:** Hybrid staff may feel overlooked for promotions or career development opportunities due to reduced visibility. This may lead to feeling undervalued or unappreciated.
- **Home distractions:** Working from home can introduce distractions (family members, neighbours, pets, household chores) making it difficult to maintain focus in some situations.
- **Adapting to changing work environments:** Switching between home and office environments requires constant adjustment. Staff may struggle to adapt their work habits to different settings. Some staff may struggle more than others including neurodiverse and disabled staff members.
- **Cost of living crisis:** Many FE and skills staff will have been impacted by the cost of living crisis and increase in fuel costs. This financial pressure may increase stress; additionally staff may refrain from putting heating at home resulting in them working in a cold or uncomfortable environment.

We all need a tribe

"For millions of years, human beings have been part of one tribe or another. A group needs only two things to be a tribe: a shared interest and a way to communicate." — [Seth Godin, Tribes: we need you to lead us](#).

Most of us belong to several different tribes. Our family is one example but mostly tribes are the people we are in touch with regularly and where we have a common interest. We might be part of a tribe of football supporters, community groups, a political party or an online support group. We share a common language and this gives us a sense of belonging.

And it is important to remember that different people need different styles of tribes. Some people are perfectly content with one or two meaningful connections. While other people prefer several relationships or people in their tribe.

Given we spend so much of our time at work, there can be a number of benefits to being part of a work tribe including feeling more connected, reduced loneliness and better wellbeing overall. The government report [Employers and loneliness](#) found that those who are employed are less likely to report feeling lonely often/always (5%) compared to those who are unemployed (15%) or economically inactive (8%).

But simply being employed is not enough. Having a sense of belonging at work is important. And feeling connected to others can help improve your mental health. Brene Brown, an American academic has developed a theory about [how to cultivate meaningful connection](#) and provided new approaches for

leaders to consider:

- **Grounded confidence:** This involves removing our shell and showing vulnerability. It's about being emotionally honest and not putting on an act. It's also about being part of a culture where staff grow and learn together.
- **The courage to walk alongside:** This means focusing on others, being empathetic and avoiding judgement.
- **Practising story stewardship:** This involves telling and listening to stories. Being curious and recognising the impact of different life experiences. It's about recognising what each staff member has to offer, regardless of where they are located.

Brown says leaders need to forge more meaningful connections with their teams and listen to them. We see stories in the media of leaders who say, "I don't believe in working from home, so I don't encourage staff to do it" or "I like to have meetings first thing in the morning when everyone is fresh." Managers may not have the same views and experiences as the people they lead.

She encourages workplaces to develop a culture where people can expose their vulnerabilities without fear or judgement to reduce stigma and promotes a more supportive environment that recognises the many different ways in which people work.

WHAT IS A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT?

In the 1990s, Amy Edmondson, a Harvard Business School professor, defined psychological safety as work environments where people feel comfortable sharing ideas, asking questions, and admitting mistakes without fear of punishment or ridicule. [In her book *The Fearless organisation*](#), she shares the research that led to four guiding principles:

- Encourage teams to bond through day-to-day tasks
- Normalise opportunities to learn from mistakes
- Ensure that all people feel seen
- Seek input with humility and openness.

Psychological safety creates an environment to help team members feel more engaged, motivated and ultimately more connected. It helps them to speak up without fear of retribution. This can lead to better decision-making, as people voice their opinions and concerns, which often leads to a more diverse range of perspectives. It also fosters a culture of continuous learning and improvement, as members feel comfortable about sharing worries or concerns. To learn more read [Psychological safety in FE settings: a guide for leaders and managers](#).



GETTING STARTED: CULTIVATING CONNECTION AND SUPPORTING STAFF WELLBEING IN HYBRID ENVIRONMENTS

A good place to start when trying to cultivate connection and support staff wellbeing in hybrid settings is to answer these questions. You may already be addressing some of these areas, or there may be aspects you haven't yet considered or that could use more attention:

Do you regularly check in with hybrid and remote staff?

A simple way to gauge how staff are coping with hybrid or remote working is by asking them directly. Would they prefer 1-2-1s on their office day, or would they prefer virtual check-ins? How often would they like to check in? Regular touchpoints help keep communication open and address any issues early.

Do the team understand each other's working styles?

Consider bringing the team together (virtually or in-person) and asking them to share their preferences for working styles, as these can be trickier to understand in remote environments. For example, do they prefer focused, uninterrupted work time or collaborative sessions? What are their shared values? Find an activity at the end of this guide.

How do staff feel about their workload?

How is work planned and allocated in your organisation? Is staff wellbeing factored in when new projects are undertaken? Do you have enough staff to meet demand, or are people being spread too thin? If staff don't have breathing space in their calendars, they won't be able to connect with others during the day or take meaningful breaks.

Do staff work beyond their contracted hours?

If workloads are heavy, staff may feel pressured to work beyond their contracted hours, which can negatively impact their wellbeing. Are they missing dinner plans with friends, spending less time with family, or feeling reduced energy to socialise or enjoy personal activities during the weekend? This can lead to isolation and loneliness.

How are staff supported with stress?

Home workers statistically experience more stress. Stress is a risk factor for loneliness. How are staff being supported with stress? Take a look at this advice on how to create a [stress risk assessment](#). A useful tool to share with your team, or to complete yourself is the [circle of control, influence and concern](#).

1. Have you established ground rules for hybrid working?

It's important to have clear expectations in place for hybrid work. How will chatbox functions be used? What are the expectations for virtual meetings (e.g. cameras on, participation)? Are work calls ad hoc, or will staff be given notice? What are the core hours when staff are expected to be 'logged on'? DH Associates has a hybrid working policy, which includes expectations of working in a virtual environment and offers flexible working hours to help staff balance work and personal life.

2. How are meetings conducted?

Are meetings designed to be inclusive of both remote and in-person staff? Are staff ever excluded? Are meetings structured in a way that accommodates the needs of hybrid teams? If a meeting must be in-person is this communicated with all members of the team in advance? Remember to schedule time during virtual meetings for catch-ups; you consider an [ice breaker](#) ahead of longer meetings to strengthen bonds.

3. Do staff have access to mental health support?

For example, do you have an [employee assistance programme \(EAP\)](#) that provides a free, confidential helpline for staff to access when needed? Harrow College offers Plumm, an all-in-one mental health platform accessible via a mobile app.

4. Are staff encouraged to support their physical health?

Do you encourage movement breaks to counteract the sedentary nature of working from home? Shrewsbury Colleges Group offers staff a gym membership. South Eastern Regional College collaborated with the Public Health Agency and Northern Ireland Chest Heart & Stroke to offer a Work Well Live Well survey, where staff receive personalised feedback on their health, stress levels and work environment.

5. How do you utilise technology?

Are you using the right technology for the job? Is it up-to-date? Does it foster collaboration between hybrid staff? When was the technology being used by staff in your setting last reviewed? Basingstoke College of Technology has been recognised for its innovative use of GeminiAI to plan day-to-day activities, saving nearly six hours per week, leaving more time for meaningful connections. Shared calendrs with space blocked out for focus time can also be beneficial.

6. Do you encourage technology boundaries?

It's important to establish healthy boundaries around technology use. Do you encourage staff to disconnect from work emails and messages outside of office hours, and promote taking regular screen breaks to avoid digital fatigue? Take a look at [Developing a technology strategy to support staff wellbeing](#) for further tips.

7. Do staff have easy access to the equipment or tools they need to perform their roles efficiently?

Including appropriate furniture, software, hardware and IT support. Lack of necessary tools can lead to frustration, hinder productivity make staff feel disconnected from the team and lead to feelings of loneliness, as they may perceive the organisation as not investing in

their success.

8. Do you role-model healthy behaviour?

FE and skills leaders set the tone for the team. Are you modelling healthy workplace habits? Whether it's taking breaks, disconnecting after hours, or prioritising your own wellbeing. When staff see leaders prioritising work-life balance, they're more likely to do the same. Read [Role-modelling wellbeing as a busy leader](#) for practical advice.

9. Is your organisation fostering opportunities for connection outside of work? As well as fostering connections between colleagues, it's worth bearing in mind that FE and skills settings act as great connectors into the community. Can you identify staff most at risk of loneliness and share relevant networks? Take a look at our [loneliness and isolation in FE settings guide](#) For example, [Men's Sheds](#) targets mens' connection, while other groups focus on bringing women together, like [London Lonely Girls Club](#). Some settings offer a volunteering day each year to allow staff to get involved in a charity or community group of their choice.

10. Have you considered Professional Supervision? Don't forget about your own need for connection! If you are an FE college leader, [consider signing up for Professional Supervision](#) with Education Support at no cost to you. Professional supervision provides a much-needed outlet for sharing experiences and reducing feelings of isolation at senior management levels. Hear from two FE college leaders, [Helen](#) and [Rosie](#) who took part in professional supervision.

IMPROVE TEAM CULTURE BY UNDERSTANDING YOUR WORKING STYLES

In a hybrid environment, often we may have to work even harder at understanding each other's working styles. For example, do you prefer focused, uninterrupted work time or collaborative sessions? Is your team aware of how to get the best from you at work? Our working styles are often driven by our 'drivers', which are not visible.

Therefore, understanding your teams' drivers (and them understanding yours!) can be a helpful exercise way to build better communication and connection.

[Kahler's Five Drivers](#) offers an insight into how we interact with other people. The five drivers are now widely used in education, psychotherapy and management, allowing us to analyse our behaviour when we are working in groups, our style of management and leadership. It is especially useful at showing how we appear to other people. Our body language, tone of voice and gestures reveal our inner workings. Sometimes we may see ourselves differently to the outside world.

By studying the five drivers we get an insight into our own and our team members' motivations and behaviour. Why not share this [questionnaire](#) with your team to get an idea of your individual drivers? Once you have identified your driver, you will find you are more aware of its influence on your day-to-day life. You may also find you react more tolerantly to other people in your team because you have a new insight into their drivers.

FE and skills leaders can get insights on how to get the best from team members by downloading this [further insights table](#) which shows the qualities of each driver.

Working styles: 10-minute exercise for hybrid teams

1. You get the best from me when...
2. You get the worst from me when...
3. My most productive hours are...
4. My preferred communication method is... (I.e. direct, clear, concise, explaining the 'why' to help give me context).
5. The work environment I thrive in is... (quiet, collaborative, flexible in location)
6. I feel most engaged when... (I have autonomy, when I can collaborate with others).

This exercise is especially valuable for hybrid teams, where sometimes it can take longer to get to know each other. It is a good idea to repeat this activity when a new member joins the team.

Reaching out for support

Education Support is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff, including those working in the FE and skills sector. You don't need to be in crisis to talk with qualified counsellors about anything you are experiencing. You can call their free and confidential helpline 24/7 on 08000 562 561.

Sources

- [Psychological safety in FE settings: a guide for leaders and managers, ETF](#)
- [Mental health tips for hybrid working, Mind](#)
- [How to build a supportive hybrid work environment, Red Cross](#)
- [Role-modelling wellbeing as a busy leader, Education Support](#)
- [A guide to loneliness for teachers and education staff, Education Support](#)
- [Loneliness at work report, British Red Cross](#)
- [Developing a technology strategy to support staff wellbeing, Education Support](#)

Thank you



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