

# Assessing the impact of hybrid work models on work quality

**PARTNERS**

Digital Nova Scotia

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## Executive Summary

The pandemic accelerated the move to remote work. Today, the question of continued remote work versus going back to the office, versus hybrid models of work is one of the key elements of quality of work for many.

Remote work arrangements offer employees several benefits, including increased flexibility, reduced commuting time, enhanced productivity, improved work-life balance, cost savings, better health, and well-being, and expanded job opportunities. However, these benefits can vary based on individual circumstances and job roles. Remote work can also pose challenges like potential isolation or difficulty separating work from personal life.

With the shift in how people want to work, organizations have to adapt to accommodate this new preference, or risk further challenges in recruitment and retention. The importance of the employee experience, as measured through perceived quality of work, is a critical aspect of organizational strategy.

This project sought to understand the factors that influence the degree of quality of work experienced by workers in Nova Scotia in traditional, hybrid and virtual work setups, and how employers in the province can enhance the work experience. The project showed that the remote workers surveyed tended to feel more positively about their quality of work relative to hybrid or in-office workers. Employers looking to improve attraction and retention of employees should consider strategies to better support remote work, including fostering a workplace culture that prioritizes trust, transparency, open communication and employee well-being.

### KEY INSIGHTS

Surveyed remote workers had a significantly higher perceived quality of work compared to in-office or hybrid workers.

The ability to bring your personal identity to your work had a large positive impact on the perceived quality of work across all working arrangements..

Mental health was named as a concern across all work arrangements, but most often by those working remotely.

## The Issue

The landscape of work has been completely reshaped by the pandemic. This unprecedented event forced many workers to transition to a hybrid or remote working environment. Now, three years after the pandemic started, many workers are still enjoying the benefits of working virtually, whether it be shared with in-office time or completely remote.



Remote work is a fundamental shift in our professional and personal lives. Workers value the flexibility, autonomy, and work-life balance that remote work offers. With more variations in working arrangements than ever before, employers are seeing the benefits and drawbacks of these different arrangements and are being called to make rapid changes to evolve work culture to attract and retain talent and support these new arrangements.

## What We Investigated

This project was designed to understand the differences in work quality depending on the nature of working arrangements for workers in Nova Scotia.

The research questions were:

1. What are the factors that influence the degree of quality of work experienced by workers in Nova Scotia in hybrid and virtual working arrangements?
2. How can employers in Nova Scotia support positive quality of work for employees by proactively shaping the hybrid and virtual working experience, and through which factors?

The project started with a literature review on quality of work that identified key issues for further investigation, particularly in light of changes in work approaches following the Covid-19 pandemic. The literature review guided question development for the employee perspective survey, which was circulated across a wide spectrum of employees working under different arrangements. The survey gathered data from 588 anonymous workers in Nova Scotia. The survey posed 50 questions, 48 likert scale questions and 2 open text questions. The programme aimed to train and certify 2,000 professionals annually. In terms of diversity and inclusion, the programme aimed to promote the participation of women who are vastly underrepresented in AI and technology sectors.

## What We're Learning

At the end of this project, partners had developed nine MOOCs on six different topics and more than 3,000 employees surveyed had a **significantly higher perceived quality of work compared to in-office or hybrid workers**. People working remotely rated their quality of work 12% higher than the average for all employees. Compared to those working completely onsite, remote workers enjoyed a quality of work 18% higher. 84% of remote workers indicated a positive team culture, 15% higher than the overall average. Employees in a hybrid arrangement rated their quality of work just 2% higher than the overall average, and 7% higher than onsite workers.

**Remote workers reported a higher sense of belonging than their hybrid and onsite counterparts.** Similar ratings were observed for feeling safe to be oneself and experiencing positive, supportive relationships. The remote workers surveyed were much more likely to recommend their workplace to their friends than onsite or hybrid workers.

**The relationship of people with their managers showed the greatest influence on the perceived quality of work relative to other factors included in the survey.** How employees connect and interact with their managers shaped their sense of engagement with their work and employer.

**A culture of thoughtful, informed decision-making and supportive management contribute to a high-quality work environment.** The way decisions are made and communicated greatly impacted how people see their contribution with their work and the future direction for their career, whether with the organization or elsewhere.

**The ability to bring your personal identity to your work has a large positive impact on the perceived quality of work.** The growing emergence of personalization of work, being able to be oneself, and appreciating the value of one's work to the customer or stakeholder and the organization matters to quality of work.

**Mental health was named as a concern across all work arrangements, but most often by those working remotely.** 65% of survey respondents reported a higher level of stress than in the past. Remote workers were more likely to feel that current stress is more harmful than in the past, and about a third report having more difficulty coping with stress. The increasing levels of stress people feel in the working environment and the growing impact on mental health means that employers, who may have seen mental health as a personal consideration in the past, are now being called to see the mental health of their employees as an organizational-level issue and key to any strategy to improve recruitment and retention.

## Why It Matters

Given widespread labour shortages across industries and sectors with no clear end in sight, employers have to enhance the quality of work to attract and retain employees.

By enabling remote work, employers open themselves up to a host of strategic benefits that provide a competitive edge in the modern job market. The adoption of remote work practices allows companies to tap into a worldwide talent pool, unbounded by geographical or commuting limitations. This expansion significantly enhances their ability to find the right skillsets and diversify their workforce, fostering innovative and effective teams. Furthermore, remote work arrangements often lead to enhanced employee retention. Offering the flexibility that accompanies remote work can greatly improve work-life balance and job satisfaction. Consequently, companies become more appealing to potential employees and are more likely to retain their current workforce, reducing costs associated with high employee turnover.

Regardless of the working arrangement, strategies to improve quality of work should include:

- Establishing a clear vision and purpose that is communicated effectively to all employees, helping them make sense of the future and understand organizational decisions;
- Involving employees in the decision-making processes in a collaborative way;
- Promoting psychological safety and belonging;
- Encouraging open communication;
- Monitoring and addressing stress and mental health;
- Providing growth opportunities through learning and development programs;
- Recognizing and rewarding excellent work.

Addressing the distinct needs and concerns of employees, based on their working arrangements, can potentially boost employee engagement, productivity, and organizational loyalty. Ultimately, ensuring that employees feel excited, purposeful, and valued in their daily work is key to maintaining a committed and satisfied workforce. Learning from this project can be used as a model for employers to shape a culture supporting quality of work in remote and hybrid environments. In doing so, remote work can boost productivity, reduce operational costs, broaden talent acquisition and retention, maintain

## What's Next

This project is part of our [Quality of Work](#) series, which explores different dimensions of quality work and how these dimensions interact with current challenges in the labour market, including skills and labour shortages across sectors. Part of a comprehensive strategy to improve the quality of work for individuals entails ensuring workers in vulnerable employment situations have access to similar rights and benefits as other workers. This includes protections, such as employment insurance, the right to disconnect and informed monitoring policies. The strategy should also provide access to upskilling and reskilling initiatives for individuals seeking to advance their careers or transition into different occupations or sectors.

FSC-partnered research initiatives address key gaps in policy and practice related to quality of work issues in the Canadian context. We are working with partners to generate insights across the projects.

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