

Much has been written around the environmental benefits of going virtual, yet the jury is still out over whether this work model is a full-proof sustainability enabler.

“The body of research on the subject shows that it is too simple to assume that [teleworking is inevitably a more sustainable option](#). Unless workers and employers fully commit to the working-from-home model, many of the potential energy savings could be lost.” — Benjamin K Sovacool, Professor of Energy Policy at the Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex.

Remote work or office-based: Which is better for the environment?

The overall impact of remote work from an environmental standpoint boils down to behavioral practices. Socially constructed behaviors can either foster or alleviate the stress on the environment.

For example, office buildings consume much more energy compared to homes or apartments, but this does not dictate a lack of energy efficiency — office buildings are designed to consume and manage energy consumption more efficiently than residential buildings, such that long-term remote work might in fact lead to greater pollution and energy expenditure.

Here are the pros and cons of remote work for sustainability:

What can environmentally conscious corporations do in a remote-first world?

Several factors come into play when determining the true environmental impact of remote vs. in-office work: public transportation infrastructure, renewable’s participation in the energy mix, the overall status of the transmission and distribution grid, and the office and residential real estate’s energy efficiency, to name a few.

While we still lack data-backed reports that unmistakably establish remote work as a

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sustainability champion compared to in-office work, remote companies with sustainability top of mind can take several steps toward improving their environmental impact.

One workforce adjustment to make these steps feasible is to integrate a hybrid model, which combines remote and in office settings with enough flexibility to encourage environmentally conscious operations. By doing so, companies can:

1. Beware of seasonality. Through the [analysis of the carbon output of 200 UK-based workers across different locations](#), WSP, a UK consulting firm, found [remote work's environmental impact was higher in the winter](#). This stemmed from the need to heat several individual workers' residential buildings versus a single office building.

Based on this finding, employers should encourage their environmentally conscious employees to work in the office in the winter and to reduce the use of inefficient, energy-intensive residential heating.

During the summer, however, remote trumps in-office work in terms of energy consumption. Employers need to examine the measures they can implement to reduce energy consumption in under-utilized offices.

2. Look into residential, energy-efficient appliances. How homes or apartments are either heated or cooled can be improved with more energy-efficient appliances and approaches. Company leaders can design a strategy in partnership with specialists in energy efficiency. This will facilitate home improvements and behaviors that save energy and are more environmentally friendly, such as installing solar panels, using energy-efficient appliances, shutting computers down instead of choosing sleep mode, and even buying [Green Good Design-awarded](#) computers for remote workers.

3. Draft policies to motivate environmentally conscious employees. Workers have become more conscious of their energy use throughout the transition to hybrid work. Many professionals see remote work as an opportunity to take control of their energy consumption.

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However, not everyone has the know-how or access to resources that enable them to make a notable impact. Companies can implement policies to encourage these efforts, such as supporting the purchase and installment of Photovoltaic (PV) systems to offset their energy consumption at home.

Long term, hybrid companies are poised to require employees to align the energy efficiency of their physical office locations and their setup at home.

4. Look for valuable partnerships with energy companies. Home energy assessments have been shown to make homes up to [30 percent more efficient](#). A case in point is biotechnology company Biogen and financial giant Goldman Sachs, which partnered with alternative energy firm [Arcadia](#) to help employees switch their homes to wind or solar power. This cut their environmental footprint through a supportive scheme for remote workers.

Companies can partner with specialists like [ecolegIT](#) to combine CO2 compensation with technology, just as [Harmony Relocation Network](#) is doing to minimize the environmental impact of their work, and add eco elements to their teams around the world.

5. Go digital for the planet. Companies also have the option of leveraging technology for efficient and automated operations while keeping an eye on how much energy they use.

While combining the Internet of Things with sensors for cost-effective and efficient utility use – particularly with utilities like lighting, heating, air conditioning, and water supply – is an increasingly standard practice, employers still have a large gap to fill for their employees working at home. This area calls for clear guidance on sustainable digital practices when at home, especially during working hours.

Other [corporate policies observed worldwide to empower employees](#) in their energy consumption and environmental impact include:

- Inviting employees to take a personal pledge to reduce their own emissions while at home.

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- Further engaging employees with sustainability trainings and global green teams.
- Minimizing and offsetting all employee business travel emissions.
- Implementing incentive programs and gamifying the sustainability experience to further motivate employees and push them towards their goals.
- Appointing an internal leader or employee-led committee to serve as the face of sustainability within the organization.
- Providing employees with information on local and state-led energy programs and initiatives that they can use to make their homes more energy efficient.

The United Nations believes remote work can assist in reaching 14 of its [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#). As countries modify their regulatory frameworks, we can anticipate a wave of new and updated regulations looking to foster sustainable aspects of remote work.

Business leaders are taking action to ensure sustainability becomes an integral part of their operation models. Dhaval Gore, Head of Mayor's International Business Programme at [London & Partners](#), is engaging with businesses across London to start the conversation. His goal is to generate support and provide the knowledge and resources for London-based businesses to start thinking about embedding sustainability into their business practices and models. The position of large institutions and investors is becoming clearer in terms of the weight that the ESG factor has in how they invest in Europe's financial capital.

To ensure global compliance across a bevy of regulatory frameworks that are evolving to encompass the flexible work model on all fronts, companies can rely on the expertise of a global [Employers of Record](#). By doing so, businesses with global growth aspirations will have full visibility over the requirements inherent to setting up global remote teams, including markets that are leaning heavily on fostering sustainability across the different facets of working remotely.