

James (Jim) Berry

Managing the future of work in the post-pandemic landscape

Davide Ravasi: Welcome to Mind shift, a podcast from the UCL School of Management. I'm your host, Davide Ravasi. I'm the director of the school and I study change in organisations. I study why and how organisations change or do not change, and how culture, history, memory and identity affect these processes. Mind Shift aims to explore innovation in management, in conversation with members of the school's, diverse community of researchers.

We'll be peering through the lens of their research to get an insight into the rapidly shifting world of management and organisations.

Joining me today on this episode of the Mind Shift Podcast is James Berry. Everybody knows him as Jim. And Jim is an Assistant Professor here at the School of Management, and he's also the director of our UCL MBA. Jim has an incredible experience. He founded a software company, started a consultancy group, uh, he led R&D efforts in high tech. And he also, and I didn't know that, he wrote an anti-terrorism textbook. But this is probably something for another episode of this Mind Shift. And Jim brings this incredibly diverse experience to learn his research and on his teaching. And his work is really, really looks at, uh, questions around growth and innovation.

And he looks in particular at how new and creative ideas are, are generated, evaluated, selected, and, and, and eventually implemented. But this is not what we are going to talk about today, because today we are going to talk with Jim about hybrid working and, and how hybrid working has become incredibly popular as a, as a result of the, of the Covid pandemic.

And Jim, why don't we start by explaining, for those of us who may not know it yet, what hybrid working is?

Jim Berry: Wonderful. Yeah. Actually, the, the definition of hybrid work, uh, is, is a little bit fluid. People, people take some liberties with that. Uh, and call any kind of work that isn't just all in the office, hybrid.

Uh, but let's, let's get a little more specific with this. When we're talking about hybrid work, we're talking about a work situation where people

may be in the office some days. and somewhere else other days. So if we're talking hybrid work, we're comparing it against what regular work is. Um, and regular work being you left home, you went to an office where you were around your co-workers all day long, and then you left the office and you went home at the end of the day. Hybrid work is, is really a blending of work from home, and work from office. That's what we're gonna define as hybrid work. Is, is, two different work situations within the same job.

Davide Ravasi: Thank you. So, uh, this is something that was not common before the pandemic and I, I can see how, uh, the lockdowns that we had kind of forced companies to explore ways to, uh, uh, to to change the traditional work arrangements and to find ways for people to work, uh, outside the office, but perhaps this has also helped us discover some benefits of hybrid working, uh, because they're still popular to date.

Jim Berry: Yeah. I, I. I think there is, uh, this myth that Covid, the pandemic has really forced us into this, this hybrid work environment. Um, I think a number of companies actually did this a lot before, uh, the, the pandemic.

Uh, but the pandemic has definitely accelerated the change. Um, and what is kind of interesting that we're dealing with now is, as we come out of a situation where people are forced to work at home and offices are opening back up, you have people who are, uh, working from home at times, working from the office at times, and we're having to adjust to a new normal.

But I wouldn't say that it, we didn't have a lot of experience with it. Before Covid struck, you had companies such as IBM, a lot of consulting companies, where many of their people were working on the road and they had done away with the traditional office structure. Um, we had situations of hot-desking where people who could come in and work at different offices at different times, so they weren't tied to a specific office.

But I think what we've seen is, with the pandemic, so many other industries, so many people who used to work exclusively in the office environment, have had to transition and work from home. And now that we're coming out of this situation, uh, a lot of companies are trying to reimagine really what, what does work mean and, and how can we make it as efficient or more efficient?

Um, we all saw, saw bumps in efficiency, uh, at the very beginning of Covid when people started working from home, it, it was, it was a change. Uh, but more recently we have seen some tail of that effect, uh, where, where some of that efficiency has started to decrease. And I think that's an interesting component for us to talk about as, as we go through is, is where, where do we find those efficiencies?

And then also where might be, uh, some, some drops in that efficiency. Um, and, and how hybrid might be able to solve some of those issues.

Davide Ravasi: This is very interesting for me because I see happening at societal level, something I've seen happening at organisational level in my own research. Uh, um, being forced to, to do something that defies your conventional wisdom about the right way of doing things.

Your own culture, if you will, uh, then somehow puts you in a position to discover that certain assumptions you had were incorrect. And actually, you know what, we can have people working remotely and they are perhaps going to work even more than we thought before. Uh, and, and what I see is perhaps some broader cultural changes taking place regarding the appropriateness of, um, of hybrid work.

Earlier you mentioned IBM and high tech companies and how this is becoming more and more normal in a broader range of industries. But what are the benefits that these companies discovered?

Jim Berry: Well, I think one of the benefits and, and let's segment this off, so let's look at some of the benefits of remote work, uh, because hybrid, hybrid is a, mix of remote work and work in the office. So let's look at some of the benefits of remote work.

If I'm a company and I'm looking at remote work, what I've just done is I've said my employees don't have to live in one location. What that does is that opens up my pool of, of talent that I can draw from, from people who might be within an hour's commute of, of my office location to a global talent pool.

If the best person lives halfway across the world, I can include them in my company now because that's fine. They don't have to physically come to the office. So some of the benefits of remote work for a company situation is, is the fact that, that you have access to a, a global

talent pool. And I think this is where, where tech companies had had been at the forefront of this even before the pandemic.

The other, uh, benefit is workers, if they don't have an hour commute each way, have two extra hours in each day that they can devote to, not just to work, but maybe to home life, maybe to, uh, their family, maybe to organising their lives at home so that when they are actually doing work, they can concentrate on what they're doing with the office and, uh, have some of those other responsibilities already taken care of.

So I think this is where we've seen that efficiency jump. It wasn't just losing the commute, it was the fact that losing the commute for many people allowed them to do more things in their day. Whether that was focused on work or whether that was focused on personal life, it freed up mental capacity for being more productive at work.

Davide Ravasi: And I think that, uh, perhaps the counterintuitive thing that happened is that, perhaps, unfortunately, or sadly, people put more time into work rather than if, if they only could. Of course some of us had, uh, kids to take care of where, where, uh, didn't have that option. But, but the impression I have is that a lot of people out there ended up working more than they should and that they used to.

Jim Berry: Yeah the data supports that. The data does support that. One of the things and, not just I, but, a number of different researchers and even government agencies are, are looking into this is, uh, the health aspects of working from home. And this has been a trend for years. We, we've kind of moved to a digital culture where, where things are on 24/7, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

And, uh, many jobs, expected management personnel, but, but even lower-level personnel to be available to answer questions at any time. And when you have gotten to a situation now where people might be working from home, the barrier of I have left the office, uh, is, is kind of missing at that point. And, and so we are in a situation where people, many people have worked more.

But also I do think that we've got a larger issue of, of dealing with what is the segmentation of work and home life and, and how do you keep those from bleeding into one another? Uh, I know personally, one of the things that I've done is I only open up email for an hour a day. So to me,

Davide Ravasi: That's why you reply so late today.

Jim Berry: Yes! That is exactly the reason. But what I found is that this allows me to segment my, my life and be really productive in the things that I'm doing. Um, it may, may make me a little less responsive on one other aspect, um, it's, it's a tool that's allowed me to clarify the distinctions between work and, and home.

Davide Ravasi: But I agree and, and I think that it is also one of the recommendations that you hear is to find daily rituals that allow you to separate more clearly your personal life from your work life. Go take a walk, do something like, have some daily routines that, uh, that help you segment time better.

I'm very bad at that. But, uh, I'm just giving advice, but I'm not very good at implementing it.

So, it seems that there's a lot of benefits from, from the perspective of the companies, some implications that are not necessarily desirable from the point of view of, of us individuals, employees. Uh, but is it all so it's all positive for companies because I suspect that as less and less people spend less and less time together in the same place something may be lost somewhere.

Jim Berry: Yeah. As somebody who studies creativity and innovation within organisations, this has been a, a real sore point on this. I study things like water cooler creativity. So creativity that occurs outside of the formal job, uh, operation. So, when you're in the office and you're having a side conversation with somebody who's in a different function than you are, somebody that you might not be sitting in a meeting with, uh, but you find, wow, there's an overlap here, there's a way that we can, we can do something new, uh, between our two units that could increase the value for, for all.

Um, and it's that, uh, serendipitous, uh, opportunities for interaction that has been lost with, with Covid. The other thing, uh, with the move to work from home, that happened very quickly for many companies. And so, we were in the office one day and the next week we were all working from home, but we were working with the same people that we were working with in the office.

So we already had existing relationships. We knew who to go to, to get answers to this question or that question. As we get further away from those relationships that we built when we were working together in person, that's where I think some of the efficiency has started to drop off.

Because those relationships that we had lived off of, for the first few months of Covid, maybe even the first year of Covid, those relationships, if we haven't put the effort into maintain them, have broken down. And so, some of the intrinsic knowledge, the, the tacit knowledge that you had of who to go to to get answers to these questions. Who could actually do this versus just sit in a meeting about it, um, gets lost. And so, the efficiency is gonna naturally decline because that's kind of the grease between the gears is, is that knowledge.

And as that knowledge degrades, we lose that capability of, of not just being operating in Zoom meetings or in official, uh, this is the time when we chat, uh, but those offline discussions get lost. And that's, that's where a lot of our initial jump in efficiency came from is we had that to rely on. So, the extra knowledge that you gain from a side discussion over a sandwich or a coffee, uh, is, is something that that's very hard to replicate in the online environment.

And these kind of things are, I think where companies are now trying to push their employees to come back to the office so that we can build back some of that, uh, non, it is work related, but it's not work focused interactions that, that help you, um, build a more holistic view of what the organisation is, from a culture standpoint, but also from a creativity standpoint.

What are we trying to accomplish? What are we trying to do and, and who else is trying to do similar things that I can then work with. Uh, in, in moving these things forward. And so I think this is where a lot of companies now are, are moving towards this hybrid work environment because they're saying the work from home has some great efficiencies, but there might be some, some deficits that, that are being caused and, and how do we rebalance the situation to capture the efficiencies of work from home, but also shore up some of those deficits that have, have started to occur.

Davide Ravasi: And I suspect that, uh, even though I'm not sure there's any data about it yet, that the way you identify with an organisation, the feeling of belonging that you have for an organisation, is kind of weaker

if you've never set foot in the offices. If your, uh, all your interaction with your organisation, with your colleagues is mediated by, uh, by a screen.

Jim Berry: We, we do have some data on these kind of things. It's a little anecdotal, um, but data, even before, before Covid about why people leave companies or why people stay at companies, oftentimes are the relationships that they develop with their coworkers, with their superiors.

And if we extrapolate from that, if you aren't building those deep level of relationships, then your connection to your organisation is obviously gonna suffer. Um, and so, so finding ways to, to build that can be really helpful for organisations and, and companies that aren't able to do that are going to obviously have a, weaker culture. And, and, when you have a weaker culture, the permeability between working with you and working with somebody else, being a contractor who, who is just there to do a job and tick a box versus somebody who might actually look outside their job parameters and say, there's something else over here I think we could do, or something we could fix, or, or, who am I gonna give my innovation to?

Really gets a little bit lost in that situation when you don't have a cultural connection to the organisation.

Davide Ravasi: And going back to what you mentioned earlier, I think that one of the challenges that companies will be facing is how to recreate that informal interaction. So, this is something that I'm experiencing myself in a managerial position. Scheduling informal interaction makes it formal.

Jim Berry: Yeah. When, when you schedule a informal interaction, you're right, it does change it, particularly when it's a boss scheduling it with, with a lower level employee. It always has that loaded characteristic of, what does this mean? Um, I do think this is something that as organisations we are, we are going to struggle with, and I think there are some, some better approaches and, and answers to this.

Um, but it, it is something that a lot of companies are struggling with of, how do I encourage these pieces without making it a requirement. But I wanna make it a requirement because I want everybody to participate in them. Um, and so I think that's something that, that we have to deal with.

Um, I think things such as regular offsite meetings, regular social gatherings, um, there was actually data from a, a company that was, uh, asked people if they wanted to come back to the office and 70% of the employees said yes. And then they dug a little deeper and said, okay, so how often would you come to the office?

And the, the numbers were dramatically lower. It wasn't, I want to come to the office every day. It's, I miss my, miss my co-workers, I missed the interactions. Um, but am I willing to travel an hour each way in order to do so? Hmm. Once you add that into the equation, that changed completely. But maybe there are opportunities for a monthly offsite that, that's done outside of the office where maybe there's an hour of office interaction. And then there are two or three hours of, of non-office interaction. Uh, team building activities where people can interact across groups, uh, lunches, dinners, social components. I think there are some considerations of, of infringing upon people's personal time and space.

But if you do them during the workday, uh, that you might be able to, uh, put that in place as a structured activity.

Davide Ravasi: I think we are in a way, in uncharted territory here. Uh, we used to operate under certain conventions and we all accepted the idea that we would wake up in the morning and go to work, go to the office.

And bosses were reluctant to, to give people the possibility to work from home because you never know what's gonna happen once they are at home and they're not at the office. And we had a lot of, uh, routines and, and forms of interactions that were based on these assumptions that the proper way to work, is to go to the office every day.

And now with. Uh, after a pandemic, after the lockdowns, after having experienced remote working, hybrid working for a prolonged time, uh, we, we have started challenging these assumptions. You know what, actually, I don't think I wanna go back to the way it used to be. And it kind of works even if in it's working a different way. But we don't know quite yet how to make it work.

Office work has been around for centuries maybe, so we have norms and rules and rituals and conventions about how to make office work, work. And with hybrid work, perhaps we're just at the beginning.

Jim Berry: I, I absolutely think we are at the beginning. And, and one thing, uh, you bring up a really interesting point about it being office work.

Uh, a number of times you, you might read an article and it's, you know, all work is changing. You know what, uh, the, the plumber who has to replace a pipe still has to come to my house. They can't phone it in. Um, the person who's working in a retail shop can't work from home because their job requires their presence.

So, we are really only talking about a segment of, of work that is white collar knowledge work is capable of doing this hybrid component, and even some of that needs to be done in an office setting. Uh, we are, we're at a university, and when our students are on campus, we have, we, we might need to have, uh, physical presence with them.

Um, and so, so there are times when, when being in a location is, is necessary. But you're right, I think a lot of the assumptions we had about having to show up at nine o'clock and, and, you know, working through the afternoon and into the evening and then going home and, and then that's being off work. I think those assumptions have to be challenged and, and for companies, they need to really rethink about what is the job that's being done and, and what is the value that that job is delivering to, to the workplace.

And, and are there other ways that we can, when we can deliver this, um, I think the job market was already looking at, and a lot of, uh, luminaries were looking at, what would be the impact of AI on some of these jobs. And they were really being concerned that AI might drive a lot of people out of the workforce because their jobs would be replaced by bots.

Um, and so that was something that was being thought of for the last five, 10 years, and then all of a sudden we have this pandemic and everybody's now working from home. And, and those two shifts in, in work styles are, are, kind of happening hand in hand now.

And so, um, I think companies really need to evaluate, what are the jobs that are being done? How is it best to be delivered? Does it need to be done by a person? Does it need to be done by a single person? Um, uh, this, this offers up a lot of opportunities for things such as job sharing,

part-time work, bringing in, uh, working mothers who will only want to work three hours a day.

Well, great, you know, you put three of those together and, and you've got a full-time employee, but now they have additional flexibility. And I think that's something that's really been kind of forced on companies is that that flexibility and it's exciting to see where it's gonna go.

Davide Ravasi: As we said earlier, uncharted territory in a way. But this, this means that there's a lot of opportunities to experiment and explore new ways of working. Um, from your perspective, from your vantage point, have you seen any company, any organisations that are doing anything particularly interesting? That can show us possible ways in which hybrid working will evolve in the future.

Jim Berry: Yeah. Uh, a number of companies have tried to put in, in place, uh, hybrid policies where, where people will work from the office two days a week. Um, and companies that are doing these things really well are, are doing them in consultation with their employees. What are the best ways of doing this?

I think, as you mentioned, those assumptions. Assuming that everybody works best, nine to five is an assumption that has probably been challenged by this. Because when we think of, of hybrid work and, and what does work mean, we, we sometimes get stuck on the place of work and, and not just the time of work.

So, when you think of flexibility of work, there is, where does the work happen, but also, when does it happen, should come into this. So, so this is another variable that companies are dealing with, is you know, we want to be supporting our clients 24/7. How can we arrange that support that might be in the middle of the night where our company offices are. Having disparate offices might make more sense.

So, what I've seen from a number of different companies are those that are setting up remote office locations, instead of having maybe one large central office, they're having multiple small offices. And so, putting those offices where uh, employees are living and maybe being able to spread those geographically allows for a company to really be more globally reactive.

Davide Ravasi: Then there are perhaps the scariest developments, this remote surveillance systems that, that keep track of whether you are actually at the computer, for how long and what you do and track. I'm a little uncomfortable I must say when I think about these things being imposed on, on, uh, well fortunately not on us yet, but on many workers out there.

Jim Berry: Yeah and you can see the, the TikTok videos of, of workers who found ways around them, the mouse movers and, and different systems to, to avoid the, uh, the surveillance piece.

Davide Ravasi: Resistance is this?

Jim Berry: Oh yeah. Resistance. Absolutely. I, I think we can go back to some fundamental concepts of, of building trust between, uh, companies and their employees.

And if you wanna build a surveillance state like that, you will end up probably getting a lot of malicious compliance. And, and this I think goes back to, to re-imagining what is the job that's being done and, uh, do we want to go back to the, to the day of presenteeism. Where you show up at the office at nine and if you're one minute late, you're, you're in trouble and, and you, you leave at five I is, is that the kind of system we're doing? Or do we want people who are actually very productive at their jobs and may be able to do the job extremely well, extremely efficiently in less time than we anticipate.

Um, and, and is that, is that a bad thing? Um, my suggestion is no. Um, we would rather reward an employee who is doing the job efficiently and effectively and, and maybe only needs to spend five hours doing it. But, you know, how do we incorporate that into our compensation models, into our work loading models? Uh, that's where it gets a little, a little complex.

Um, I would hope more companies are moving towards a situation where they're paying for performance versus being present.

Davide Ravasi: This is interesting though because it seems to, to close the circle, no? We started by saying that, uh, hybrid working may be challenging our cultures, undermining identification and belongingness, making it more difficult to build trust.

And now we're coming to the conclusion that the only way to make hybrid-work, work, is to find ways to strengthen the culture, reinforce identification, instil work ethics, and build trust.

Jim Berry: Yeah, I, I think that's true, but I, I, I think where that might be a little bit different is, I think we were talking about work from home with those, those negatives. And hybrid is, is kind of an answer of bringing people together so that you can build that trust.

Um, there is some data that when people interact purely online, um, specifically in, in tech space forums, that kind of communication leads to misunderstandings and oftentimes some, some non-civil communication, as we're seeing in a number of our social media platforms, uh, as in society as a whole.

Uh, but there are studies on this in organisations within email communications, between peers. Uh, they might say something more aggressively in an email than they would face-to-face.

So building a time when people can get together and, and build relationships and build that face-to-face component, you'd be less likely to, to have some of those rougher conversations on email, uh, if you actually knew the person you were having that conversation with, and you knew you were gonna face them next Tuesday when you got to the office.

So, uh, I think the hybrid work environment is, is an effort of companies to create a situation where, employees get the benefit of flexibility, get some of the benefit of the efficiencies of working from home and not having to travel. Uh, but also gain some of those benefits of building relationships back within the organisation.

And I think this is, this is where actually a number of leaders that I've talked to, you know, how do we do this? If we bring people in for two days a week? Do I bring in my accounting team on Monday and Wednesday and my finance team on Tuesday and Thursday? If, if you do that, then you're actually reinforcing the silos that, that you're hoping to break down.

So, so figuring out a hybrid work schedule is something that, that needs to be done with conscious approach. Yeah, you're right. The trust component is, is so important in, in building a, a value to the organisation

and how we do that. I think hybrid is what the solution we're trying to put in place is.

Davide Ravasi: Thank you, Jim.

I think this was very interesting and, and, and perhaps we can, we can do this again a year or two from now and see how the landscape has, uh, has evolved.

Jim Berry: We can see what the answers are a year from now, um, and see how well this podcast, uh, dates over time.

Davide Ravasi: So thank you Jim, and thank you all for joining us today.

I hope you enjoyed this.

Jim Berry: Thank you, David.

Davide Ravasi: You've been listening to Mind Shift, a podcast from the UCL School of Management.

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We'll be back soon with another conversation about innovation management and organisations, with more fascinating researchers from the UCL School of Management.

Until next time, thank you for listening to the Mind Shift podcast and bye for now.