

# From **Cube** to **Cloud**<sup>TM</sup>

The Next Era of Work

*European Union/World  
Perspectives*



## INTRODUCTION

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### The Great Unplanned Experiment

Amidst the horror the world experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, an unplanned experiment unfolded before our eyes. Organisations across the globe were forced to immediately institute remote work protocols with no clear end date in sight. Companies had to improvise like never before. Leaders had to figure out how to manage virtually as the workforce tried to remain productive in the chaos and tragedy of a previously unknown plague. It was the greatest test of agility ever seen in the world of business.

Despite early delays in COVID-19 vaccination production and distribution across the European Union, EU businesses now look optimistically to the future with emphasis on workforce health, safety, and productivity.

Since the pandemic, three-quarters of firms globally (79% in the EU and 78% outside it) have changed their views of flexible work to be much more accepting and encompassing. Consequently, organisations in the EU seem well positioned to capitalize on a most important yet under-reported trend: increasing worker demand for choice and flexibility.





## From **Cube** to **Cloud™** : KEY FINDINGS

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- **Demanding a Return to the Office is a Mistake**  
Though CEOs may be eager to bring their workers back to the office, they are better served to ignore their personal viewpoints and instead rely on the sentiment of their employee base.
- **Flex work works**  
Globally, organizations report higher levels of productivity, engagement, culture health, and a stronger sense of connection to organizational purpose since the pandemic.
- **Innovation and performance are not contingent on working onsite**  
Justifications for returning employees to the office are not supported by the data and overlook the greater threat from not offering flex work: attrition of top talent.
- **The pandemic has redefined leadership**  
New ways of working require new leadership skills. Development should focus on those who are comfortable handling change and leading in a hybrid environment.
- **Offices will be reconfigured (not abandoned), and employee benefits will be expanded**  
High-performance organizations are more than 50% more likely to use a hoteling philosophy in the future, and/or use the office primarily as an innovation lab. Further, companies will make greater investments in holistic workforce well-being—this may include assistance with childcare and/or eldercare, paid family leave, and upskilling or reskilling.



## THE STUDY AND THIS BRIEF

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### About the Study

In the spring of 2021, human capital research firm the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) – in partnership with Top Employers Institute and iVentiv – launched a study to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic drove radical changes in the ways in which we work. With 1,452 respondents located in 55 countries and representing 37 different industries, the study examined strategies applied by high-performance organisations to enable collaboration, innovation, performance, and employee experience for workforces that suddenly transitioned From Cube to Cloud™.

### About this Brief

This brief highlights a few key findings based on a comparison of data from respondents representing EU-based organisations and those from organisations based outside the EU (hereafter, designated Rest of World). The data and findings in the brief do not reflect country-specific or region-specific (e.g., northern EU vs. southern EU) demographic or cultural nuances.

## Key Findings: EU Edition

The EU outpaces the rest of the world in flex work experience **pg. 5**

Emphasis on manager discretion and worker preference dictates need for support **pg. 6**

Flex work as a means to greater trust internally and externally **pg. 7**

Office space in the future has clear purpose **pg. 8**



*“The ambition levels of flexible work have been redefined and the area where flexible work is possible and acceptable has increased.”*

Respondent works for a Finland-based European financial services company



KEY FINDING #1:

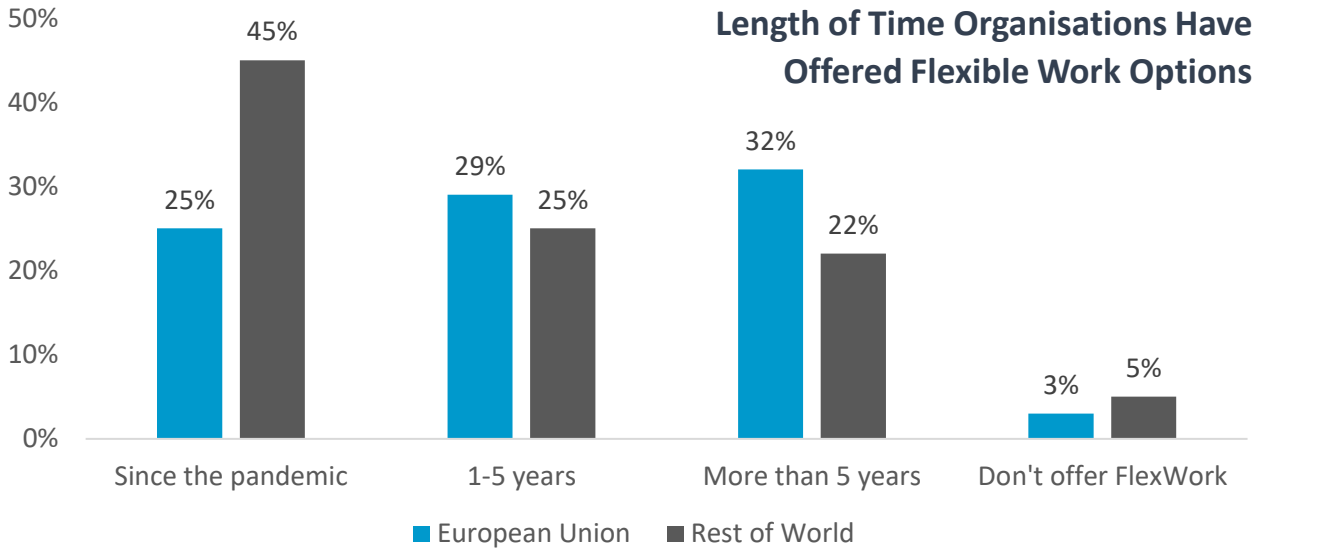
EUROPEAN UNION/WORLD

The EU Outpaces the Rest in Flex Work Experience

Nearly twice as many firms outside the EU did not offer flexible work options (flex work) pre-pandemic (45% Rest of World / 25% EU). Not surprisingly, more EU-based firms noted success with flex work over the past year (86% EU / 76% Rest of World).

Aspects of flex work most widely offered by EU companies are place of work (97%), scheduling (73% – i.e., hours of day, days of week), and number of hours worked (58% – e.g., flex time, part time, or reduced hours).

Several EU respondents noted that pre-pandemic flex work generally was tolerated and practised only as an exception, yet now is widely accepted as normal. With pandemic impacts still changing rapidly, and corporate sentiment on return-to-offices evolving just as quickly, how will your organisation know what (and where) to adjust, and how will those adjustments be perceived by your workers?



**KEY FINDING #2:** EUROPEAN UNION/WORLD

**Emphasis on Manager Discretion and Worker Preference Dictates Need for Support**

The positive impact on firms when they consider individual worker preference about where and when work is done cannot be over-stated. Companies outside the EU are 4X more likely to dictate those decisions via organisational policies, whereas EU firms (rightfully) are much more likely to defer those decisions to people managers and their workers (86% EU / 65% Rest of World).

EU firms should develop guidelines for managers on how to address new ways of working and provide extensive training and tools to help managers and employees arrive at the best work arrangements.

How will your organisation empower everyone to thrive and ensure a consistently good experience when working from home, in the office, or at a worksite?

How Decisions Will be Made about Who Works Onsite, Remote, or Hybrid



Respondent works for a Switzerland-based global security company



*“Offering more flexibility does not mean that people automatically spend a larger amount of working time remotely. Rather, people have more freedom to decide where and when they are most productive.”*

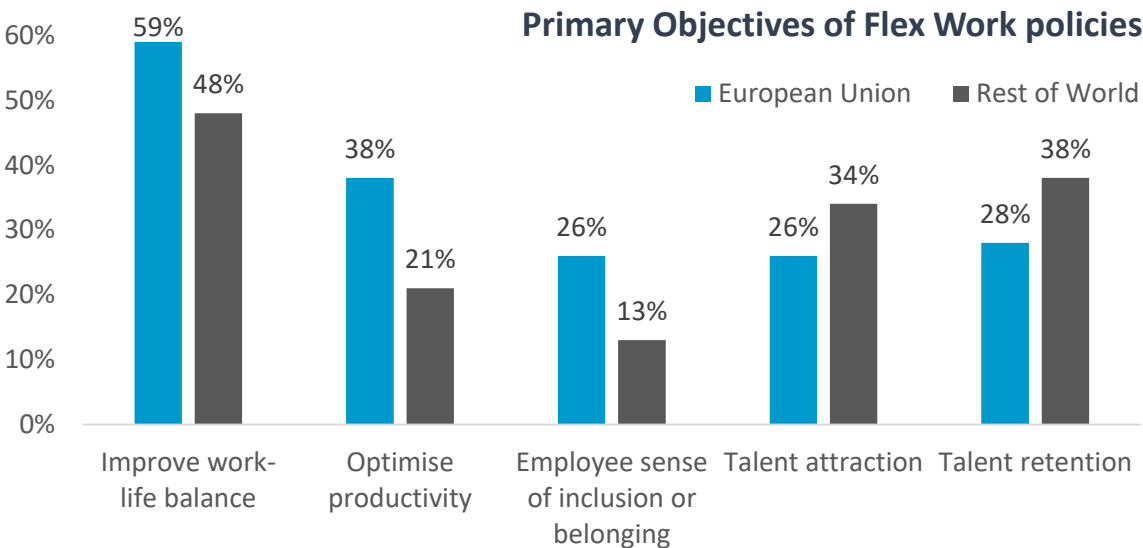
KEY FINDING #3:

EUROPEAN UNION/WORLD

Flex Work as a Means to Greater Trust

Two universal objectives of flex work are employee physical and mental well-being. Achieving work-life balance is an important component of both, cited by 59% of EU firms, as is one’s sense of inclusion (noted by 2X more EU firms). Notably, while Rest of World firms are more apt to leverage flex work for talent attraction and retention (of which workforce well-being and inclusion are leading indicators), EU firms are nearly 2X more likely to view flex work as a means to optimise productivity. In turn, that productivity focus implies trust in the workforce, which strongly impacts an organisation’s culture.

Other i4cp research suggests that decreased travel resulting from flex work can positively affect an organisation’s progress in areas of sustainability and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors – both of which are important to EU firms and their internal and external stakeholders.



*“Since the pandemic, we’ve introduced choice with responsibility. This allows associates to work from anywhere in their home location country. They can also choose how many days they work in the office, always given that individual or team performance is not impacted.”*





Respondent works for the France-based unit of a global software company

*“We now offer flex time (flexibility in working hours), flex office (authorization to work from anywhere in France) and (coming soon) will be flex workspace.”*

**KEY FINDING #4:** EUROPEAN UNION/WORLD

**Office space in the future has clear purpose**

Gone are the days of commuting to an office to answer calls or emails. In the coming 1 – 3 years, office space will be utilised with clear purpose, and many EU firms are leading with that vision. Whether to celebrate team milestones, build trust and camaraderie in project or work teams, ideate on new product concepts, or showcase capability to clients or prospective clients, office space will be intentionally utilised with specific objectives in mind.

In fact, i4cp found hoteling (reserving desks/offices/workspaces as needed) is a high-performance practice that companies should note. Top organisations say they are 58% more likely to use a hoteling philosophy in the future compared with low-performance companies, and 52% are more apt to say they will use offices primarily as innovation labs.

Likely Uses of Physical Facilities in the Coming 1 – 3 Years





## CONCLUSION

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### The EU is Poised to Capitalize on Flex Work: Embrace it!

Top organisations typically adapt to change well and describe themselves as agile. Research by i4cp into organisational agility discovered that companies in which change is viewed as a normal part of the business model — and even as an opportunity — typically prove to be high-performance organisations.

During the pandemic, those top companies exhibited greater ease in adjusting to disruptive conditions. In contrast, companies in which change is perceived to be overwhelming, or posing a destabilising threat, tend to be lower-performing organisations.

While the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most disruptive periods in our history, it makes clear that other unforeseen and unplanned events will disrupt the lives of individuals and the business environment in the future. Accordingly, organisations must ask what cultural changes are needed to better enable them to compete effectively in the years ahead. Savvy companies will learn from the pandemic and strive to create ever more agile cultures that are able to adapt quickly in the face of extraordinary circumstances.

## Recommendations:

- **Listen to your workforce.** Many companies are basing future work decisions on senior executive opinion rather than what the workforce is communicating it wants.
- **Make it clear that the company may change its position.** Acknowledge that the solutions created are for this point in time and are subject to adjustment in the future. Continue to gauge input from employees to inform future decisions, and keep the workforce updated.
- **Let managers manage.** Let managers and employees determine what is best to drive results. Managers will need support, and in some cases, training to help them navigate this new landscape.
- **Be innovative about innovation and your office space.** Innovation can happen without physical proximity. Now is the time to rethink how to best utilise existing real estate to optimise innovation and hybrid work.

## About

The Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) is a research and advisory firm that discovers next practices in human capital. Our member organisations rely on i4cp to ensure that their efforts will make the greatest impact on the business today and in the future. Through superior research, peer collaboration, tools, and data, we provide insights that help organisations better anticipate, adapt, and act in a constantly changing business environment.

## About

Top Employers Institute is the global authority on recognising excellence in people practices. Established 30 years ago, Top Employers Institute has certified 1 691 organisations in 120 countries/regions. These certified Top Employers positively impact the lives of 7 million employees globally.

## About

iVentiv delivers events for executives in HR, L&D, Procurement and Legal, who lead global support functions in multinational companies. Since 2008, iVentiv has delivered over 160 events across the globe, both virtually and in-person, with an average event score of 92%. Over half of the Forbes Global 2000 companies regularly join these sessions.



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