



HRMT CONFERENCE

Employee Engagement and Hybrid Working

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Employee Engagement: Learning Through the Pandemic and Hybrid Working

An exploration of the ONS's approach to employee engagement since the start of the pandemic, and what we have learned as we look to the future.

Our reaction to the pandemic in terms of engagement, wellbeing and hybrid working.

Key elements of our approach and how this has evolved since 2020.

What we are measuring around engagement, our evidence for what's working well and what remains uncertain.

Future plans and challenges: what next for employee engagement in a hybrid organisation?



Initial reaction to the pandemic

- Switch to total homeworking, with a small number of 'critical worker' exceptions
- Total flexibility around working hours
- Additional special leave allowances
- Absolute focus on wellbeing and connection
- Rapid deployment of IT equipment and furniture
- Multi-functional crisis management group established with a strong focus on wellbeing, communication and engagement
- Dashboard established - early realisation that sickness absence was actually falling, and feedback on our engagement was positive

Evolution of our approach

- The UK was in and out of lockdown a number of times, however **we maintained our focus on wellbeing and communications throughout these cycles.**
- We have offices in three of the four nations of the UK, and at times the rules were not aligned. Generally we have defaulted to the most cautious approach.
- The Operations Group structure was critical to our ability to respond and engage with colleagues on how we were managing the situation.
- As we moved past the peak we planned our longer-term approach using **a principles-based rather than rules-based policy**, which we call our Flexible Working Framework.
- These principles aim to **balance business need and individual preference to allow people to work in a flexible way in relation to both hours and location.** There are a range of different approaches across UK Civil Service departments – some are more rules-based than ONS.

Measuring engagement

■ Annual People Survey

- Measures headline Engagement Index plus 9 themes.
- Standard instrument across the UK Civil Service, first introduced in 2009.
- Largely consistent time series questions, with some additional blocks chosen by departments.

	2019	2020	2021
Engagement Index	63%	71%	70%
PERMA	73%	74%	74%
Stress Index*	28%	25%	25%

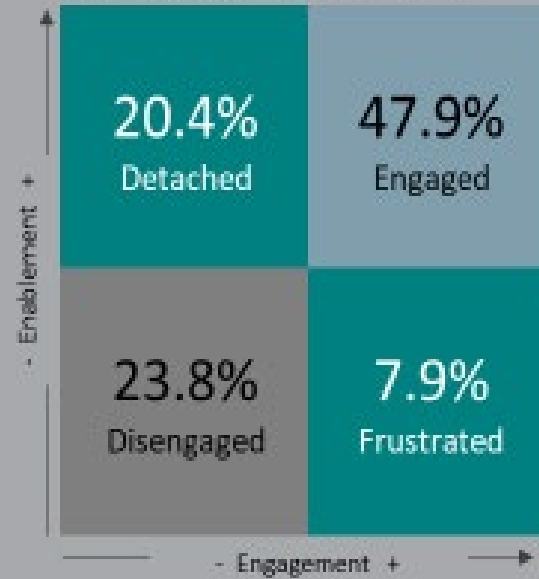
* Lower scores are positive

■ Employee Voice

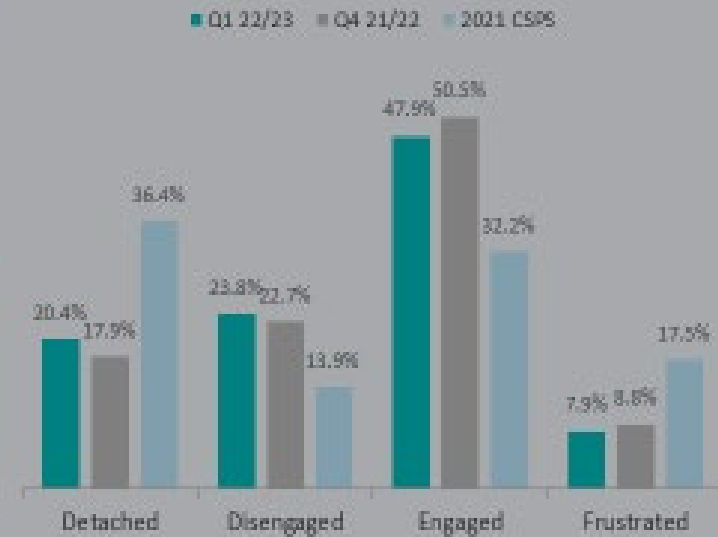
- Quarterly Pulse Surveys
- Monthly intranet polls
- Listening groups



Figure 1: Engagement vs. Enablement
Quadrant Pulse Survey Q1 2022-23



Engagement vs. Enablement variance between
Pulse Surveys and People Surveys



Employee Voice

- We run pulse surveys in each quarter, apart from the People Survey quarter. Average response rate is c.33%.
- Pulse surveys combine core engagement questions for time series data with theme-specific questions that deep-dive into a single area.
- Surveys are combined with other data sources to produce reports and recommendations.

Frequency of engagement

For over a year we ran monthly intranet polls, each with a single question, publishing a response and using them to shape our actions. This proved unsustainable in the long run, with falling response rates, but provided us with valuable insights.

For example:

In April 2021, we reran a poll from June 2020 to understand how our people wanted to work in the future. A total of 2909 people took part (approx. 57% response rate), making it the most voted on poll to date. The results were:

- In the field/an IPS site, as required by my role: 3% (5%)
- In the office full-time: 2% (3%)
- In the office the most of the time: 6% (12%)
- In the office and working from home an even amount: 27% (33%)
- Working from home most of the time: 43% (35%)
- Working from home full-time: 18% (10%)
- Other: 2% (1%)

N.B. Figure in brackets shows the percentage score from the June 2020 poll.

Other engagement channels and tools



Trade Union consultation



Diversity Networks and Steering Groups for Inclusion, and Health & Wellbeing



Regular 'Your Call' events led by our Permanent Secretaries, using managed live streaming and Slido



Blogs, news and events from a combination of HR, Communications and colleagues across the organisation



What have we learned?

- High engagement can be maintained in times of crisis and change. Our sense of organisational purpose and our commitment to communicating were key contributors to this.
- Our initial response may have created a permanently raised level of expectation around wellbeing and flexibility. Increasing turnover and falling vacancy fill rates suggest we may no longer stand out from other employers.
- A principles-based approach to hybrid working has, so far, revealed a clear preference for working at home which has increased over time.
- Average office attendance as a percentage of FTE has slowly increased while remaining lower than expected... BUT – we are more productive than ever.
- Evidence of change fatigue? Persistently low survey scores on Managing Change; difficulty in replicating the agility we showed in 2020; engagement scores dip in our crucial middle management grades.

Looking to the future

- We intend to maintain our principles-based approach to hybrid working, but aim to rebalance how it works in practice. Evolving from rules to principles is a cultural challenge.
- We need to discover what will engage more people, more often to come into our offices. We have invested in high-quality office environments geared toward collaboration and flexibility.
- The drivers for engagement, attraction and retention are well aligned with good corporate citizenship and public service values.
- Hybrid working has greatly expanded our effective recruitment catchment areas, and we are also expanding our estate footprint to access new employment markets for key skills. However this has to be balanced with maintaining connection.
- We must continue to innovate and improve on inclusion, engagement, culture and wellbeing; focus on these elements is now a fundamental part of employee expectations.
- Overuse of tools and channels can lead to diminishing returns. Good engagement strategy must be matched with adaptability.