UNIVERSITÉ
Concordia
UNIVERSITY

FUTURE CONCORDIA: WORK, WORKFORCE AND WORKPLACE

AUGUST 2022

Executive Summary

The Work, Workforce and Workplace working group met throughout the fall 2021 and winter 2022 semesters to undertake a reflection on the suitability of existing policies and practices governing the work of the staff complement of Concordia University. The working group was urged by the Steering Committee to be bold in making recommendations to guide the development of the University's strategic stance in its role as an employer of non-academic staff throughout the next three (3) to ten (10) years.

In doing so, it was encouraged to take note of the effect of the COVID19 interruption on the University's operations—and subsequent lessons learned—but to be wary of overreacting to the constraints of the moment in which it found itself doing this work. While the disruptions of the pandemic, to both the University community and the broader labour market, have undoubtedly caused profound impacts to the University's employment practices–it remains too early to determine which are lasting. The present document attempts to envision a moment after an evolving crisis from squarely within it.

The working group recommends the adoption of a flexible hybrid work model for non-academic staff employed by the University. In our opinion, a flexible hybrid work model is coherent with the University's workplace culture—in which collegial relationships amongst cohesive yet diverse operational units are paramount—and would best deliver on our colleagues' overwhelming request to have their employer's approach to their work be intentional.

The working group acknowledges that the adoption of a hybrid work model introduces—or, perhaps, sheds light on—an organizational load that itself requires management. For lack of a better term, by organizational load the working groups refers to a sphere of activity that enables or underpins the collective work of the University's staff, namely:

- Clerical, technical and manual support to ensure that the administrative systems, infrastructure and critical networks on which staff members rely to fulfill their functions remain functional and accessible (both remotely and in person);

- Care work to promote the health, retention and cohesion of individuals, teams and collegial networks within the University community–including conflict management, employee engagement and equity work; and,

- Management and leadership at the unit level, which facilitates individual contribution and enables collective accomplishment by coordinating teams and fostering collaboration amongst and between units.

The working group notes that the visibility, remuneration and recognition of this work is integral to ensuring the viability and vibrancy of the Concordia University community in the era of hybrid

work—and calls upon the institution to pay particular attention to the equitable distribution of this work along gender and socioeconomic lines.

As such, it mandates the University to implement a flexible hybrid model with great intentionality, paying special attention to the equity implications that have been laid bare by the COVID19 interruption, namely:

- The protection of the right to disconnect; and,
- Leadership proximity bias.

To do so, the working group sets out the following eight (8) elements it deems crucial to ensuring an equitable rollout and implementation of a flexible hybrid work model for the University's non-academic staff complement:

1. Scheduling conventions and automated tools to ensure better collegial coordination and protect employees' right to disconnect.

2. The judicious use of information technology infrastructure to ensure adaptability and alignment with a hybrid work model.

3. The reconfiguration of existing workspaces and thoughtful design of new workspaces to encourage flexibility and combat a scarcity mindset.

4. Dedicated training and support of unit leaders to ensure the management of hybrid teams informed by best practices and evolving needs.

5. Measures to ensure that all, including predominantly on-campus roles, benefit from increased flexibility—so that the burden of ensuring campus vitality may be shouldered collectively.

6. Streamlined and simplified hiring processes to ensure that the University's staff complement remains responsive to the community's needs and adaptive to shifts in the labour market.

7. A structured, two-way, performance assessment and development process to promote continual improvement—especially at the managerial-level—and monitor the success of a flexible hybrid work model.

8. The development of formal programs and the promotion of a culture of professional development, focused on career-related rather than job-related growth, to encourage upskilling and job mobility within the University's staff complement.

Mandate, Membership and Process

The working group was tasked with reflecting on the need and appetite of the University community for transformational change initiatives to ensure that its employment practices are aligned with emergent trends and values shaping the future of work. The working group concerned itself exclusively with non-academic staff but did consider the potential impacts of its recommendations on academic staff. All University sectors and non-academic employee groups were covered by the working group's mandate.

The working group paid special attention to the University's future staff complement, that is, individuals and demographics not yet or only recently employed by the University. It also noted the University's responsibilities as an anchor institution and its special duty towards future generations of employees given its educational mission.

Membership	Role	Sector
Natalie Camirand	Manager, Organizational Development	Human Resources
Meredith Evans	Manager, Undergraduate Admissions	Enrolment Services
Charmian Harvey	Executive Director	University Communications Services
Mai-Gee Hum	Director, Career Management Services and Corporate Partnerships	John Molson School of Business
Donald Lafrance	Director, School of Graduate Studies	Vice-President, Research and Graduate Studies
Timothy Ni	Manager, Student and Alumni Ecosystem	Instructional and Information Technology Services
Jane Somerville	Managing Director	District 3 Innovation
Darlene Walsh	Chair	Department of Marketing

Co-leads: Téo L. Blackburn, Director, Concordia International
              Linda Campione, Director, Future Concordia and Return to Campus

Resources: France Bigras, Chief Information Officer
              Carolina Willsher, Associate Vice-President, Human Resources

Process

The working group identified and interviewed a host of resourceful colleagues from throughout the University's leadership and staff ranks. It sought employee feedback from the broader community through a series of open consultative sessions. The working group was also informed by the concurrent work of Ernst & Young consultants mandated by University leadership to assess its readiness for the future of work—as well as by both published research and feedback from industry-specific interest groups and market-wide research consultants.

CONCORDIA.CA

Recommendations

Work model

The working group understands a flexible hybrid work model to be one in which, both;

- the majority—or a significant portion—of employees fulfill their duties by working partly on-site and partly remotely; and,

- the distribution of on-site versus remote work is dictated by operational and/or sectoral realities rather than by pro rata or fixed benchmarks.

Within a university setting, we understand this to mandate flexibility at the unit-level so that managers and employees can determine the appropriate mix of in-person and remote work for teams and/or individuals based on their unit's mission, staff complement, strategic objectives, and the ebbs and flows of the academic cycle. The alternative being the need to meet fixed ratios of in-person and remote work set at the sectoral or institutional level, such as a requirement for all employees to spend fifty percent (50%) of their working hours on-site.

In a flexible hybrid higher education employment model, a unit leader within Enrolment Services might mandate a higher ratio of in-person work for the entire unit at key moments within the academic cycle, i.e., at the beginning of the fall and winter semesters, throughout exam periods, during registration periods or when grades are released. Whereas a unit leader within the Office of Research might require increased in-person work during peak funding application seasons, in preparation of faculty orientation sessions or in advance of financial reporting deadlines. In all cases, a unit leader may request a higher ratio of in-person work at moments within the lifecycle of the unit where increased collaboration, cooperation or creativity is required, i.e., when new colleagues are onboarded, during strategic planning or training phases, to affect a reorganization or in anticipation of the departure of a colleague.

Our recommendation of a flexible hybrid work model rests on three (3) pillars:

1. The inevitability of remote or blended work in a post-pandemic labour market;
2. Feedback from existing employees about those employment conditions they do and do not wish to face moving forward; and,
3. Our reflections on the institutional culture and capacity for change of Concordia University.

Upon reflection and review of (both industry-specific and market-wide) future of work literature, we believe that the University must offer some form of hybrid work in order to remain competitive to current and future employees. Without a work model that fosters intentionality in the distribution of in-person and remote work, the University risks losing its status as an employer of choice within the Montreal and higher education communities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that external candidates in ongoing recruitment processes

CONCORDIA.CA

are already deterred by the lack of a reliable hybrid work promise by the University. Worse still, sectors within the University itself are experiencing retention issues as internal candidates perceive others to be more thoughtful in their approach to hybrid work. The future of work at Concordia University inevitably features remote work.

In our conversations with current employees, we discerned a certain level of frustration about the way in which the return to campus had—in its focus on capacity and its use of the student-facing criterion—by default ushered in a rigid hybrid model. We heard from colleagues, for example, who felt a great deal of frustration about having been called back to campus to spend the day alone or, worse, on videocalls with colleagues. However, without fail, existing employees acknowledged the importance of regular in-person work, especially for teamwork and creative collaboration. Overwhelmingly, colleagues recognized the benefits of in-person work for new employees. Overall, our sense is that employees were not in disagreement with their leaders about the benefits of on-site work, but rather insisted that the distribution of this work be thoughtful and deliberate.

Finally, a note on institutional culture and the aptness of change. Although we sense that the institution has surprised itself by its capacity to change in response to the COVID19 interruption, we question the wisdom of a profound shift towards remote work. We suspect that, within the staff complement at least, culture is operational at Concordia University. By this we mean that a great deal of the University's operational capacity stems from a network of collegial relationships between staff members. We suspect that, more so than for other institutions or employers, relationships between colleagues from disparate units drive problem solving and productivity (in the absence of formal cooperation structures). It is hard to imagine perpetuating and sustaining these relational networks remotely, especially in the long term (i.e., as the staff complement replenishes itself through attrition).

In elaborating working arrangements for their units, therefore, we urge leaders to reflect deeply on the rationale behind their choices—that is—on what precisely they are trying to accomplish and encourage. Each manager should consider the kinds of roles and tasks, their key drivers, and the (collective and individual) place and time needs of their colleagues to optimize the benefits and minimize the downsides of both on-site and remote work. A flexible hybrid work model is the best mechanism for doing so within our community.

Success factors

The working group has identified the following eight (8) elements it deems crucial to the successful adoption of a flexible hybrid work model for non-academic staff.

1. **Time and energy management: scheduling conventions and automated tools to ensure better collegial coordination and protect employees' right to disconnect.**

   The working group acknowledges the potential downsides of hybrid work for the health and well-being of staff. While the increased flexibility of remote work has been a boon for some, notably, workers with disabilities, it has come at a cost for the work life balance of others. The working group notes that these adverse effects—particularly for women and members of historically marginalized communities—were well documented throughout the pandemic.

   Although the working group recognizes the substantial efforts made by higher education institutions to draft right to disconnect policies, it finds these to be insufficient since they place the burden on individuals to advocate for themselves—and thus create an additional strain (i.e., decision fatigue, split focus, need for discipline) on employees. As such, the working group urges the University to investigate the use of tools to automate disconnection, such as:

   - Delayed delivery of email, at the server level, to allow for staggered scheduling;
   - Scheduling settings within calendar applications that establish meeting start times and durations, universal breaks, and dedicated teambuilding or training periods; and,
   - Automated tools that facilitate hybrid and remote work scheduling within and amongst teams—notably—to facilitate the scheduling of meetings.

   As an added benefit, the use of such tools would relieve the increased burden of coordination and scheduling imposed by hybrid work, which is disproportionally borne by support and junior staff. To this end, the University should mandate that all employees keep their online calendars up to date with their availabilities for both in-person and remote meetings.

2. **IT: The judicious use of information technology infrastructure to ensure adaptability and alignment with a hybrid work model.**

   The working group notes colleagues' frustration with the inadequacy of the University informational technology infrastructure for remote and hybrid work. We note the need to align technological tools with the flexible hybrid work model by adapting the University's inventory for mobility. Notably, by:

   - Ceasing the acquisition of desktop computers and moving towards the full adoption of laptops with universal docking stations (and multiple screens);
   - Harmonising cell phone policies with cloud-based telephony;

- Creating and making available hybrid conference rooms by online reservation to the entire community (or, at the very least, within sectors); and,
- Equipping teams with low-cost gadgetry (ex., teleconferencing owls, mini-projectors, portable 360* cameras) to facilitate virtual meetings in mixed-use spaces.

The working group urges the University to pay particular attention to inclusion in its information technology planning. For example, hybrid teams require the ability to have impromptu blended meetings allowing the full participation of both in-person and virtual attendees. Managers asked to think about work distribution intentionally may find their best efforts stymied by the lack of appropriate videoconferencing technology. We note the great advances made in both hardware and software designed for hybrid teams and urge the University to be expedient in its adoption of adaptive technologies.

3. **Space: The reconfiguration of existing workspaces and thoughtful design of new workspaces to encourage flexibility and combat a scarcity mindset.**

Throughout its deliberations, the working group benefited from rich exchanges with other Future Concordia working groups and collaborated on overlapping issues—notably—the place and space implications of work models under consideration.

We wholeheartedly support the recommendations of the space working group and wish to lend our support thereto, especially, as they pertain to the judicious use of space to promote collaboration and encourage spontaneous exchanges. We share their desire to see the University prioritize the creation of accessible mixed-use spaces to foster flexible ways of working and–crucially—urge the University to take advantage of this opportunity to combat the scarcity mindset that drives a culture of territoriality over campus space.

4. **Management training: Dedicated training and support of unit leaders to ensure the management of hybrid teams informed by best practices and evolving needs.**

We note that the adoption of a flexible hybrid work model places an increased burden on middle management, who shoulder the responsibility of cultivating the kinds of workplace practices hybrid workers require to perform. Flexible hybrid work models impose a good deal of both tangible (i.e., scheduling, coordination, space and technology management, reporting) and intangible (i.e., fostering inclusion, bolstering employee engagement, creating channels for informal communication, information sharing) work on unit leaders.

The working group sees in the adoption of a flexible hybrid work model a great opportunity to combat an endemic feature of higher education institutions: the lack of formal leadership development. It recommends the development of formal and mandatory training, support and coaching for hybrid team managers, with a particular emphasis on technological and soft

skills, and encourages the development of lateral communities of practice to develop a set of institutional best practices.

The working group notes the relevance of its comments below on job profile creation, performance assessment and professional development for this recommendation.

5. **Equity: Measures to ensure that all, including predominantly on-campus roles, benefit from increased flexibility—so that the burden of ensuring campus vitality may be shouldered collectively.**

   The working group notes the need to ensure a vital and vibrant campus in the era of hybrid work. It also recognizes the need to ensure the continuity of services to the University's various clienteles. To this end, the working group urges the University to consider the potential windfalls of more flexibility for all employees—including those tasked with predominantly on-campus work.

   For example, staggered scheduling with split coverage between on-site and remote colleagues can ensure extended service hours and more choice for users of the University's services. Blended service delivery models allowed by flexible work arrangements have the potential to increase the University's responsiveness to both long and short-term shifts in the nature and volume of the demand for services.

   The working group also urges the University to reflect on the benefits of collaboration and collegiality for all job classes, without making assumptions about whose presence is required and whose is optional. Leaders are urged to keep in mind whose work is rendered more and less visible by a hybrid workforce, and to cultivate an awareness of the potential impacts of their presence and attention on the advancement of individuals and teams.

6. **Better hiring: Streamlined and simplified hiring processes to ensure that the University's staff complement remains responsive to the community's needs and adaptive to shifts in the labour market.**

   The working group has identified the University's cumbersome hiring process as a major barrier to agility and adaptiveness to labour market trends. Managers expressed frustration at their (in)ability to attract and retain quality candidates—and to keep them engaged throughout lengthy recruitment processes. Unit leaders further expressed deep frustration at the lack of deferral to their subject matter expertise by the University's highly centralised human resource department.

   Recognizing the constraints imposed by the collective bargaining environment, the working committee urges the University and its employee groups to work together on the following managerial requests:

- The removal of multiple approvals, forms, and memos required to staff new and vacant roles;
- Greater departmental autonomy to approve temporary (i.e., parental, sick) leave replacements and to staff short, fixed-term, roles;
- Greater flexibility in the organization of roles and teams into units, in order to accommodate inter-unit collaboration and the judicious deployment of human resources for greater cooperation;
- An embedded HR specialist for each unit or sector, familiar with its mission and attuned to the particularities of the labour trends and practices its faces, who can counsel unit leaders throughout the employment lifecycle and advise the relevant collective bargaining teams on its evolving needs;
- Increased flexibility for employees to try new roles and take on stretch assignments, both within and outside of their unit; and,
- An investigation of the possibility of hiring fully remote workers from outside of the City of Montreal and the Province of Quebec.

We make a special note of the great limitations of current job profiles for hybrid team management. By conceiving of roles exclusively as a list of tasks, current profiles fail to capture the non-task related duties owed by employees to the institution and to their colleagues. In addition to the above, we urge the University to reconceive its role descriptions to comprehensively capture employee duties, such as the responsibility to contribute to a vibrant campus environment and the obligation to support new and existing colleagues during demanding periods. The working group hopes that such a rethinking will promote the hire and promotion of individuals with the requisite skills and character to contribute to a vibrant, collaborative and creative staff complement.

7. **Performance: A structured, two-way, performance assessment and development process to promote continual improvement—especially at the managerial-level—and monitor the success of a flexible hybrid work model.**

The working group acknowledges that increased flexibility mandates new forms of accountability for managing and engaging staff. It also notes that best practices in hybrid team management are emergent market wide. The University must therefore take great strides in developing its own set of best practices in response to the particular realities it faces as, both, an institution of higher learning and an established employer within the local community.

In order to do so, we deem it crucial for the University to foster a culture of accountability that empowers employees to take ownership of their work and ensures that the adoption of a flexible hybrid model serves as an opportunity for continuous improvement and institutional growth.

To do so, the working group recommends the introduction of a formal performance assessment cycle—embedded within the calendar and with dedicated support—that would provide a structure for goal setting, coaching and learning development. The working group notes the important work done by colleagues within the department of human resources on competency-based models of performance assessment. It suspects that—given the increased emphasis on upskilling and soft skills for hybrid workplaces—a competency-based performance assessment program is most suitable for the University community.

The committee insists that, in order to be effective, the University's formal performance assessment process must:

- Provide for bottom-up (i.e., employee to supervisor) and peer-to-peer feedback;
- Have tangible effects on career advancement and remuneration; and,
- Assess competency, including soft skills, in support of the University's nine (9) strategic directions.

Finally, it notes the viability of competency-based formal performance assessment programs within higher education employers and points the University towards the following peer institutions for reference: the University of Toronto; the University of Calgary; and, the University of British Columbia.

8. **Professional development: The development of formal programs and the promotion of a culture of professional development, focused on career-related rather than job-related growth, to encourage upskilling and job mobility within the University's staff complement.**

In both its review of labour market trends, and in its consultations with current employees, the working group was struck by the appetite of workers for learning and development. The working group urges the University to leverage its lifelong learning expertise and next-generation university framework to provide its staff complement with a more formalized approach to professional development. We encourage the University to develop a host of training and development initiatives for staff that promote the following five (5) goals:

1. Provide employees with a customized and interest-driven career development plan, with growth milestones both within and outside of the institution;
2. Incentivize managers to support employees in seeking career-related—as opposed to job-related—growth opportunities, relieving the financial burden of professional development on employees' current unit by providing dedicated funds and time from a centralized pool;
3. Leverage digital tools and instructional technology, including virtual reality and artificial intelligence;

4. Focus on retention and employee attraction when designing professional development offerings, in part, by allowing employee interests to drive development; and,

5. Encourage both formal and informal peer-learning amongst colleagues.

[END]

Appendix I: Foundational Resources

Ernst & Young

The Future of Work, the Workplace, and the Workforce Key Trends Report November 2021
Concordia Future of Work Staff Consultation Report (February 2022)
Future of Work Design Session (February 2022)

EAB (formerly, Education Advisory Board)

Various Research, Reports & Webinar
Presentation (February 2022)

Internal Concordia Research

OCCG HR Return to Campus Survey Results Executive Summary (October 2020)
Lessons learned: Return to campus

Work, Workforce and Workplace – Working Group

Concordia: Feedback and observations from the March 2022 consultations with staff
Internal Consultations (Birks, Human Resources, Environmental Health & Safety, Facilities)

CONCORDIA.CA