

Remote Working in Ireland: A 2023 Benchmark

An NBI and Grow Remote Report



Rialtas
na hÉireann
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Introduction

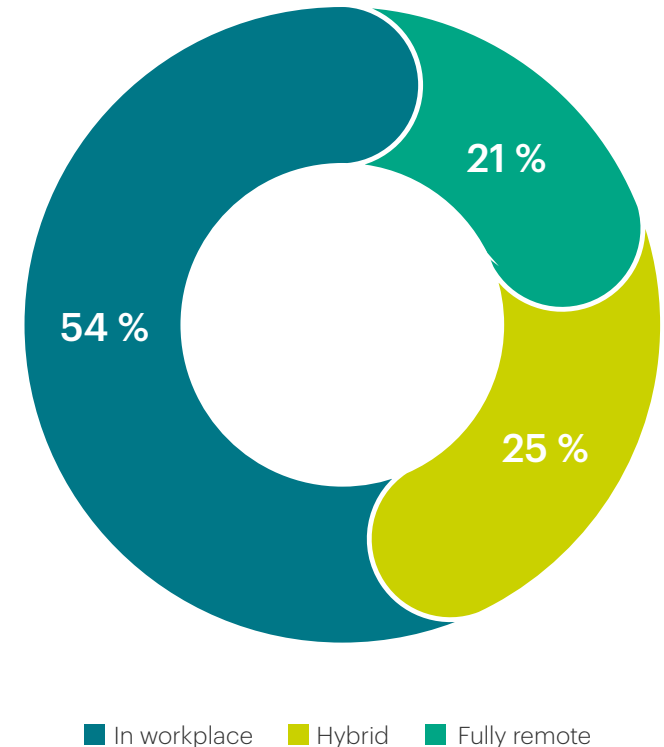
Remote working has evolved dramatically in recent years. Before the Covid-19 pandemic the option to work remotely was available for only a fraction of workers, mostly freelancers or those in a strong enough position to negotiate a one-off deal with their employer. During the pandemic, remote work became a critical response to an emergency, with thousands of workers working from home every day. Three years on and remote work is here to stay, with a majority of employees expressing a preference to work remotely at least some of the time, and employers showing a tremendous agility to adapt.

An interesting question at this point in our workplace revolution is whether everyone feels the same about where we are today. Remote working certainly has the potential to transform lives and help businesses enhance

productivity and introduce efficiencies, but there are also many challenges that need to be addressed, both for employees and their employers.

National Broadband Ireland (NBI) and Grow Remote have partnered up to analyse how attitudes towards remote working have evolved since the pandemic. The results revealed a relatively even split between those based in the office (54%) and those working remotely to varying extents (46%).

Naturally, there are still many challenges to be overcome in relation to remote working as we make this seismic shift from the traditional office-based model. But we are starting to see consensus on some clear benefits, including a more efficient use of commuting times and improved work/life balance.



“A job is not defined by the four walls of an office, it’s defined by the individual making it a success.”

Most prominently, the research revealed recurring themes regarding the impact of remote working on Ireland's workforce: job opportunities, diversity and inclusion, and what businesses should do next.

With our partners at Grow Remote, who are doing pioneering work to make location-agnostic job opportunities available and accessible to people across Ireland, this report reveals genuine feelings towards remote working and what employers can do to ensure all workers can thrive in this new world, regardless of where they work from.

At NBI, we're proudly delivering the National Broadband Plan, connecting over 569,000 premises across all 26 counties to bring future-proofed, reliable, high-speed broadband to over 1.1 million people. As one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects in the world, this will be transformational in so many ways, and the opportunities it will

create for people and businesses to embrace changes to their working practices will be realised.

In this inaugural Remote Working in Ireland Benchmark, we hope to shine a light on the considerations and practical steps that are still being worked through.



Peter Hendrick,
Chief Executive Officer at NBI



Methodology

The 'Remote Working in Ireland Benchmark' polled 1236 workers across the Republic of Ireland. The study also gained insight from 71 members of the Grow Remote network to compare results with workers who have sought remote working opportunities with support from the emerging social enterprise. The research was independently conducted by Core Research and builds on similar research conducted in 2021.

Chapter 1

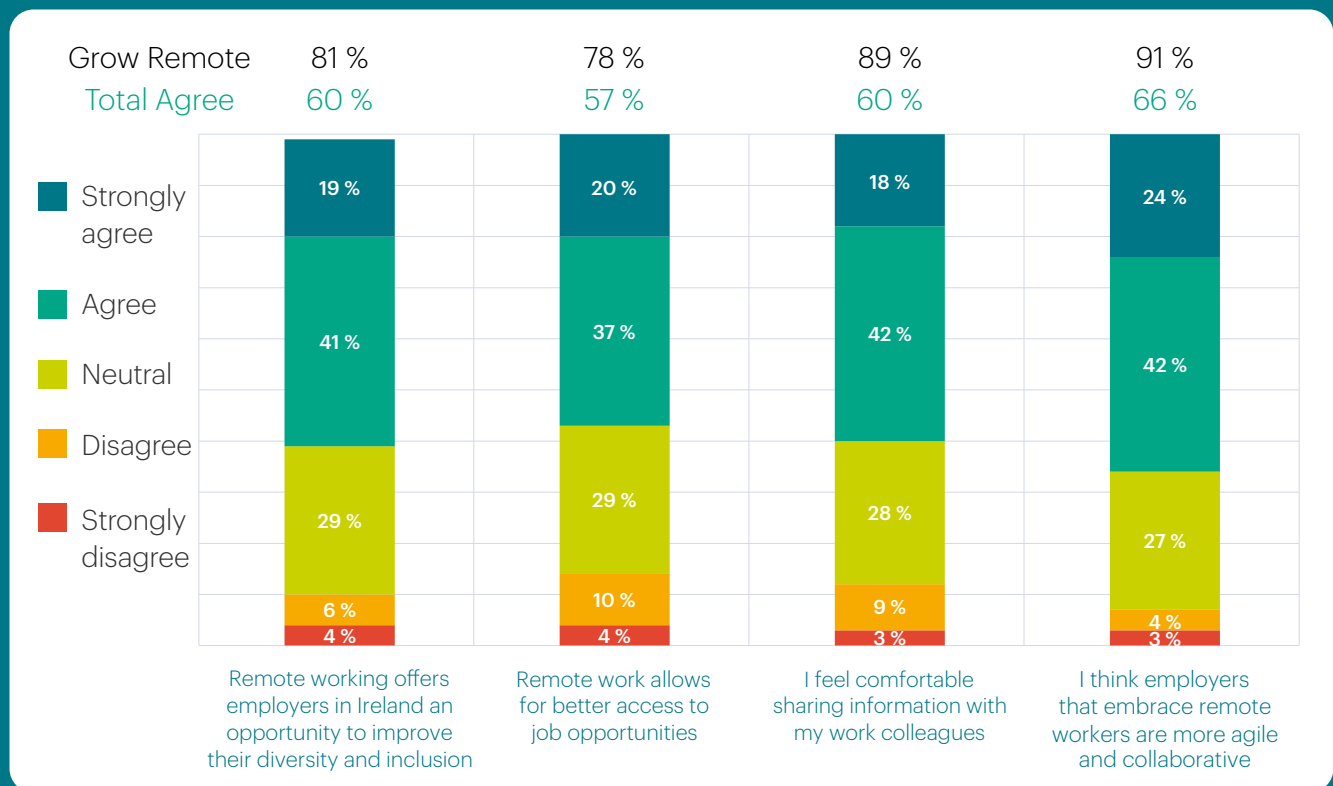
The Economic Impact

One of the biggest driving factors for remote and hybrid working is the economic impact, on individuals, businesses, and wider communities. Of course, in today's working world where we are so reliant on digital capabilities, high-speed and reliable connectivity is a critical component to make this possible. According to NBI research, 85% of individuals believe high-speed broadband can help the local economy and expand job opportunities.¹

Economic advantages come in different forms. According to EY's report on the 'Benefits of high-speed broadband',¹ the core benefits are as follows:

- **Balanced economic growth**
- **Bringing people into the workforce**
- **Improved economic resilience**
- **More foreign investment across Ireland**
- **Cost benefits of retiring the copper network**
- **Unlocking digital dividends**
- **Improving productivity**
- **Diversifying the rural economy**
- **Reducing pressure on cities**

In 2022, EY reassessed its original cost-benefit analysis commission by the State to determine whether the National Broadband Plan (NBP) would generate a positive return to Ireland. EY's 2022 results demonstrated substantial incremental benefits for the NBP over the 25-year appraisal period, with the total leaping up to €5.9bn compared to the 2019 estimate of €4.4bn.²



Crucially, this increase is predominantly driven by the shift to remote working in Ireland and the subsequent benefits to individuals living in the Intervention Area, who previously had to endure long commutes to their workplace.

¹NBI research of 298 people in 38 towns, World Telecoms Day, 2022.

²EY, National Broadband Plan, Benefits of high-speed broadband



“The National Broadband Plan is all about closing the digital divide by bringing future-proofed, high-speed broadband to every home, farm and business so that all parts of the country can reap the economic and social benefits, and no one is left behind.”

- Peter Hendrick, CEO of NBI

Richer job opportunities

Long-term remote working was a new experience for an overwhelming number of the workforce, with 79% of respondents confirming their remote working arrangements were introduced within the past five years. Now that we’ve gone through our adjustment years following Covid-19, it’s become clear to many that remote working has genuine benefits to their career, in addition to a positive impact on work-life balance.

Over half of workers (57%) in Ireland say that remote and hybrid working facilitates better job opportunities, and 31% feel it has already had a positive impact on their career advancement. When Grow Remote members – who could be seen as early adopters of remote working - were asked the same question, an overwhelming 78% say they saw better access to job opportunities due to remote working, providing a strong endorsement from those who have already made the switch.

Having flexibility around where you work is invaluable to certain groups of individuals,

perhaps those who have additional demands at home or those with financial challenges. One respondent commented on the “great opportunities for working parents/people with caring responsibilities.” Subsequently, the views of employers who facilitate and embrace remote working are seen as being more agile and collaborative by 66% of workers.

But it’s important to address both sides of the coin. Nearly one in four (23%) respondents still feel that remote working could have a negative impact on their career, mostly because they feel there are fewer chances to meet senior people in the office, which was cited by 77% of workers.

Exposure to influential figures within a company is a crucial part of career progression, so this is where organisations must address the internal culture around different workplace practices so that every individual has the same opportunities, regardless of whether they work remotely or from the office.

Chapter 2

Diversity and Inclusion

Promoting equal opportunities for everyone is top of the agenda in national workplace practices, and there has been momentous movement towards championing diversity and inclusion (D&I) in business.

Almost three in five workers (57%) say that diversity and inclusion in the workplace is 'very important' to them, with the highest responses being amongst females (61%) and 25-34-year-olds (67%). Promisingly, 39% of workers say D&I in their workplace has improved as a direct result of remote working.

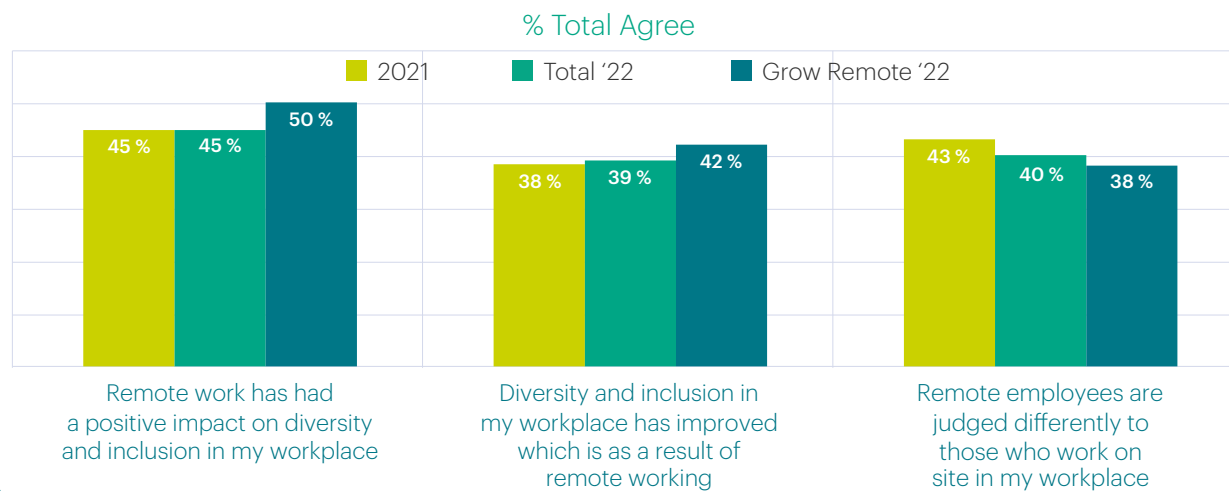
Again, offering flexible working allows individuals to shape their working schedules around other important engagements and responsibilities.

Significantly, 60% of workers feel remote working offers employers in Ireland an opportunity to improve their diversity and inclusion. When asked what comes to mind when they think of remote work and the opportunities it brings to employees, one respondent commented: "Flexibility and the acknowledgement that not

everyone performs optimally 9-5, Monday to Friday."

However, there are still those who feel remote working comes with its hinderances. Our research reveals that 40% of workers agree that remote employees are judged differently to those on site. Whether this is on the basis of laziness or simply being 'less committed', it is the employer's responsibility to promote an inclusive culture and eradicate any negative outlooks on any particular working practice. Everyone's situation is different and the modern workplace must facilitate each individual.

As remote/ hybrid working becomes more embedded, slightly fewer feel remote workers are judged differently, but should perception around D&I be improving?



"Remote work has the power to transform Ireland by unlocking quality jobs from urban areas and making them accessible to everyone, regardless of location."
 - Joanne Mangan, Employers Lead at Grow Remote

Chapter 3 Employers Drive Momentum

One standout observation from the research is that employers play a crucial role in supporting and facilitating flexible working opportunities, and all eyes are on them to see what they'll do next.

Interestingly, smaller businesses (firms with 1-49 staff members) had already started adopting remote working pre-pandemic, with 50% of workers suggesting they were fully remote or hybrid prior to Covid-19 restrictions. The value found in flexible working had already been recognised, while the pandemic exposed the wider population to the benefits on offer.

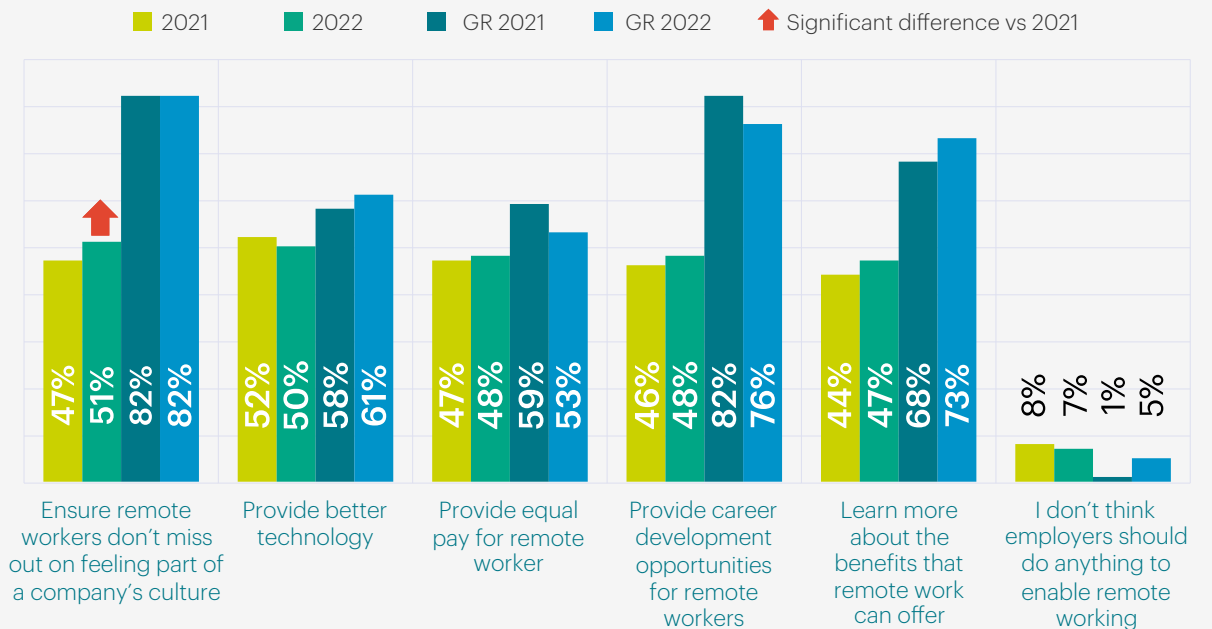
In terms of what employers can do next, the biggest demand from workers is providing better technology to enable remote working. Productivity was – and still is – front and centre of business priorities pre, during and post-pandemic. The workforce has demonstrated that they can operate effectively from almost any location, but they need to be given the right tools to do so.

Furthermore, one of the biggest fears of remote workers is feeling isolated from company culture and missing out on career opportunities by not being physically present. Employers are responsible for reassuring employees that their successes and value will be recognised and celebrated regardless of where they work. After all, a business is no longer defined by the four walls of an office.



Feeling part of the company's culture is becoming more important. However, there is still a belief among half of employees that employers should provide better technology to enable remote working

Q. What do you think employers can do enable remote working?



Continued

Top tips for businesses:

- **Adopt a remote-first approach:** Ensure all employees have equal access to information and opportunity regardless of where they work. Remote-first does not mean remote employees have priority, it simply means the organisation builds policies and processes to ensure equitable access to all employees, remote, hybrid or office-based.
- **Define a clear remote working policy:** Try to avoid making decisions on remote work on an individual or one-off basis, rather have a clearly defined policy to ensure a sense of fairness across the organisation.
- **Access a wider pool of talent:** Make roles location agnostic where possible to attract a wider pool of talent outside of commuting distance to the office.
- **Bring people together with purpose:** Remote working does not mean that people never meet in person. Facilitate in-person get-togethers such as company retreats, team meetings and local events but ensure there is a strong purpose to these gatherings.
- **Focus on outputs, not presenteeism:** In a remote working environment it's not about how many hours people spend at the desks, it's about the output of their work. Set clear goals and KPIs and ensure employees have everything they need to be successful.
- **Train managers and employees:** Remote working is still a relatively new way of working for everyone so it's important to invest in upskilling and educating managers and employees on how to lead remote teams and thrive in a remote working environment.



“Ireland has a best-in-class remote working ecosystem, with a highly skilled, remote-ready workforce. Remote working has the potential to transform the lives of people in Ireland by providing equal access to opportunities to everyone, regardless of where they live”
- Tracy Keogh, Co-founder of Grow Remote

Chapter 4

Empowering Employees

From our research, it's clear that the workforce is divided on their preference of working model. But the one overarching demand is flexibility – the chance to weigh in on the discussions around working practices to ensure their voices are heard. Fundamentally, it's about facilitating workplace productivity, wherever that may be.

According to the third annual National Remote Working Survey (released in 2022 by the Western Development Commission and NUI Galway), 95% of employees believe remote working has made life easier, and almost a third would change jobs if remote working preferences are not facilitated – even if that means taking a pay cut.

The biggest benefit of remote working recognised by employees is lower commuting times and general enhanced efficiency, closely followed by an improved work-life balance. Given the advantages on offer, it's unsurprising that 47% of survey respondents said remote working was a key factor in their decision to change employer.³

³ The 'third annual National Remote Working Survey' relates to this <https://westerndevelopment.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Remote-Working-Survey-Report-2022-1.pdf>

“Over the course of the last two years, businesses have had to respond in many ways to make sure that culturally they are embracing new ways of working; technically they are secure and have the software and systems to be digital first; and are changing mindsets to unleash opportunities to improve productivity in the workforce”

- Peter Hendrick, CEO of NBI



As part of the National Broadband Plan, over 300 Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) have been established in public locations to deliver free public access to high-speed connectivity. The selected locations include community halls, libraries, sports facilities, enterprise hubs and tourist locations. Some BCPs will support remote working, others will facilitate study and digital skills training, and many will act as community access hubs with indoors and outdoors WiFi.

The BCP initiative means employees are not beholden to travelling into cities for work or finding sufficient connectivity. They also facilitate flexible working models in the interim. Remote working does not always refer to 'home' working. BCPs give employees a greater selection of choice in terms of working location, as a network of connected hubs.

Conclusion

The potential around remote and hybrid working in Ireland is momentous. There are proven benefits on an economical and social level, across both work and personal life for businesses and their workforces.

In order to continue on a path of progression, organisations must recognise that there is no one size fits all when it comes to working models. Some individuals want more facetime in the office, some prefer the comfort of their homes. Neither is better than the other – it is simply down to personal preference. And as long as the job is done well, does location really matter?

Remote working allows for an equitable spread of economic value across the country, not just within urban bases. There is a decentralisation of opportunity. Large enterprises can move to rural parts of Ireland and still deliver the same output as they would achieve being based in a major city. Equally, employees are no longer tied to certain locations for work. We all know that property prices and rental fees in cities can be extortionate, so many would benefit from being able to move further away, without limiting their employment opportunities.

The wider National Broadband Plan, including the BCP programme, are enabling the long-term establishment of remote working, so it's now on businesses to champion their workforce and promote location agnostic roles to meet expectations.

Our workplace revolution continues, and no outcome is set in stone. Working models must be frequently assessed to ensure the demands of individuals are being met, alongside the needs for the wider business. It's a work in progress, and everyone's voice should be heard.

For more information about NBI and the National Broadband Plan visit nbi.ie, where you can access Eircode specific updates on the rollout.

Find out more about Grow Remote at growremote.ie

