Adobe Acrobat

Get everyone working together, anywhere.

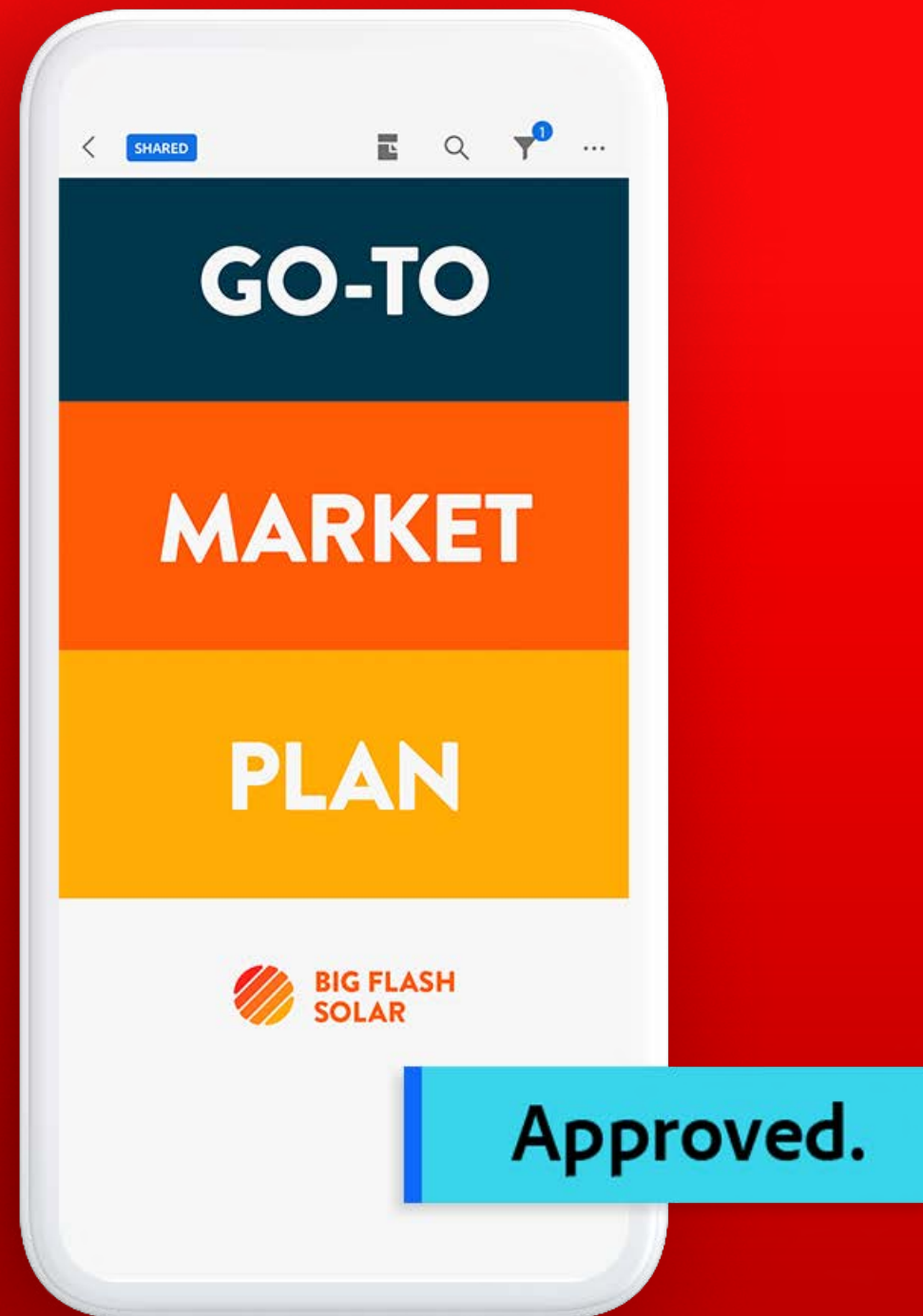It's time to focus on working well—whatever that looks like for you and your teams.

Over the past few years, there's been a paradigm shift in the way many businesses work. We've left the 9-to-5 behind, waved goodbye to daily commutes, and even let employees choose how and where they want to work. But is this reimagined workplace working as well as it could for you and your teams?

As a business leader, you want your teams to be efficient, productive, and high-performing, and you want your business to grow. Meanwhile, our new ways of working have left many teams dispersed—and busier than ever. Some are still using procedures and tools that were quickly improvised and adopted to allow remote working.

It's time to revisit processes and tools to ensure they're really bringing employees together and enabling their full potential. Optimizing your business processes to encompass flexible working can be an opportunity to make changes that will allow your businesses (and teams) to truly thrive. We have the capacity to work anywhere, anytime, with anyone—and if we all choose to take full advantage of this chance, we can get everyone on the same page and together reap the future rewards.

Get everyone working together, anywhere.

It's time to focus on working well—whatever that looks like for you and your teams.

1 Isn't flexible working the dream for many?

It can be—but we need to make sure we're getting it right.

50%

of all enterprise workers, as well as leaders of small- to medium-sized businesses (SMBs), say they're now working longer hours than they'd like, with the average working week length creeping up to 45 hours.[1]

Plus, the ability to work from anywhere can put us under pressure to be "always on."

49%

of all enterprise workers, and 3 out of every 5 SMB leaders, feel the need to be reachable around the clock—especially if they're part of Gen Z.[2]

And it can be hard for employees to take up the possibilities of flexible working times.

55%

feel obligated to work office hours, even when they know they won't be as productive.[3]

In the rush to establish new ways of working, there may have been too much emphasis on working within outdated structures and not enough on what we need to maintain a healthy work-life balance. So, while we're definitely getting things done at work, we're not necessarily working *well.*

2 What does working well look like?

This is the first challenge: Working well looks different for everyone. Speak to one employee and they'll tell you they like a 7am start—at home, no noise, no music. They need peace and quiet to focus.

Another may say they need their headphones in, music on, and an hour with their laptop on the couch.

Some find evenings their most productive time, while others know that a midday walk with the dog leaves them fresh for the next video call.

From nonstandard hours to working from home and getting things done on the go—different people find different things helpful for different reasons. They could have caregiving commitments, be looking for a better work-life balance, or simply live further from the office than most.

This all makes it impossible to create one perfect "working well" formula that will work for every team or for every person. The key is to take a human-centric approach. You should look for ways to address each individual's needs, instead of trying to create a single one-size-fits-all solution.

We have the opportunity to overhaul the structures and attitudes inherited from the very different working environments of the past. With some planning and commitment, we can create human-centric working structures that allow everyone to work well, bring employees together, and help your business to work better as a whole.

3 Why do some businesses ignore working well?

Encouraging employees to work well seems to have eluded many businesses so far, and the biggest problem may be that their leadership team thinks it's already happening.
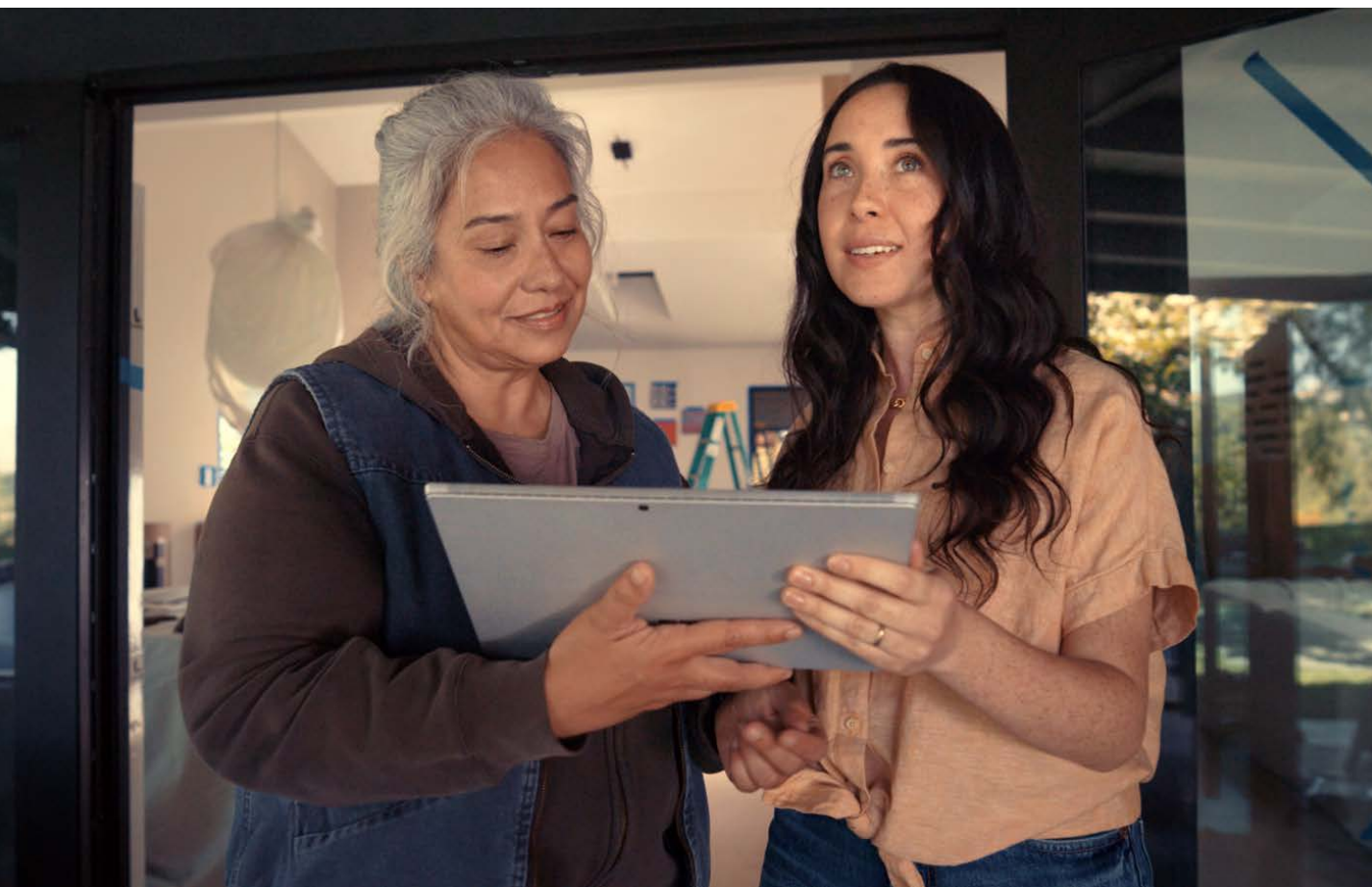
75% of executive leaders believe they're operating within a culture of flexibility and take employee perspectives into consideration, but only

57% of employees believe current organizational cultures enable and embrace flexibility, and just

47% believe executives consider their views.

At the same time,

72% of executives believe their workplaces embrace a range of employee needs and preferences, but only

59% of employees feel the same.[4]

4 What could working well look like for your business?

Spotify is a great example of setting up a human-centric working model. All of its 6,500+ employees can work wherever they want. This could be their homes, the office, a café—or all of the above. They can move to another city or country, and even if there isn't a Spotify office there, the business will fund a co-working space. There's just one rule: "The exact mix of home and office mode is made jointly by each employee and their manager." That emphasis on joint decision-making clearly focuses on the needs of both the employee and the business. As a result, the company has seen its overall attrition rate drop by 15% in 2022 (compared to 2019)—and its average time to hire decreased by 12.5% (from 48 days to 42).[5]

As well as being flexible about location, you can be flexible about working hours. It's possible to extend your working day and let everyone choose their working hours within it. There's no set start time or finish time. As long as previously agreed and clearly stated core hours are covered, everyone has the flexibility to work when it suits them and when they believe they perform best. Agreed core hours (such as 10am–1pm) allow people to avoid traffic and cut down on commuting time.[6] Many hospitals, as well as industrial and transportation organizations, use an extended workday. The potential advantages for employees include more days (and more consecutive days) off, fewer consecutive working days, and more rest days to recover from fatigue. These can add to improved morale, more job satisfaction, and less absenteeism.[7]

Equally, Iceland saw beneficial outcomes from a four-year pilot that ended in 2019. It was the first country to conduct such a large-scale test, and 2,500 people had their workweeks reduced from 40 hours to approximately 35. Researchers found a reduction in stress and burnout and an improvement in work-life balance. As a result, change was adopted across the country with nearly 90% of the working population now having reduced hours. Similar studies have commenced across Europe and the rest of the world, with Spain expected to include 6,000 participants —the largest number yet.[8]

These examples suggest that making flexible work functional will require a fundamental shift in some company cultures—along with some informed and future-proof decisions about tech. This demands real commitment, from the top of the business down.

5 Who wins when we focus on working well?

We all do. If you allow your teams to work in the ways that suit them and your business best, not only are they happier, but you lay the groundwork for them to flourish and bring their best selves to work. This often means that their work is better too.

43%
(almost one in two) of employees surveyed across EMEA, the US, and APAC believe that greater flexibility in working hours has helped them increase both their productivity and efficiency.[9]

Employees get more done when they're given more choice over where, when, and how much they work.

2x
the return on sales

(or ROS, a financial ratio of operating income to sales showing how efficiently a company generates profits from revenue) was reported by businesses scoring in the top 25% for employee experience compared to those in the bottom quarter, according to research from IBM.[10] This could be at least partly due to improved customer experience from better employee engagement.

# 6 What about businesses who don't see the appeal of working well?

Apart from missing out on possible productivity and efficiency gains, they may also struggle to attract the best talent to create and maintain a diverse workforce—or even hold onto who they've got right now.

35%

of enterprise employees across seven key European countries—rising to as many as 50% of Gen Z workers —plan to switch jobs in the next year.

Those struggling with time and productivity pressures are front and center. And around half of all enterprise workers say they'd also switch for access to better tools that make them more effective.[11]

18%

of workers surveyed by Microsoft stated they had changed jobs during 2020–2021, citing personal well-being or mental health and work-life balance as two of their top five rationales.

46% say they're looking for a positive work culture, while 42% said they wanted mental health and well-being benefits.[12] With the World Health Organization also reporting a 25% increase in anxiety and depression globally,[13] it's little surprise that we might see employees become more interested in getting support in this area.
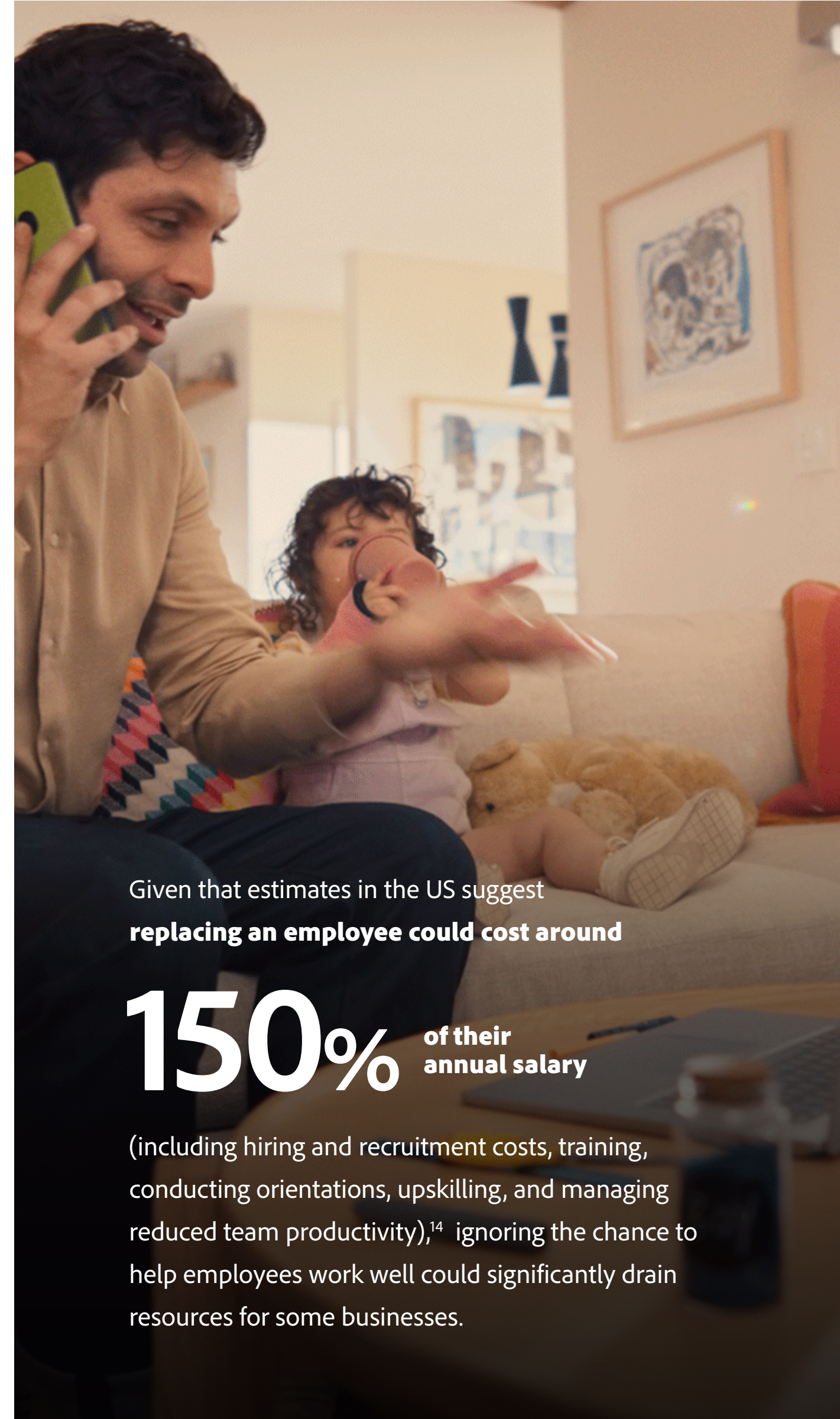
Given that estimates in the US suggest **replacing an employee could cost around**

150% of their annual salary

(including hiring and recruitment costs, training, conducting orientations, upskilling, and managing reduced team productivity),[14] ignoring the chance to help employees work well could significantly drain resources for some businesses.

7 Challenges on the road to flexible working.

When you look at the potential rewards of focusing on working well, it seems almost too good to be true. But it's not without its challenges—it isn't as simple as handing out laptops. You may need to make some fundamental changes to maximize the potential business gains and ensure that everyone feels the benefits. Here are some things to think about.

It's got to come from the top...

There's often resistance to full flexibility from management and leadership. They may focus on the resources needed to get started, as they aren't the main beneficiaries of the immediate advantages. They may question whether working "anywhere, anytime" would really suit the business. And there may be trust issues—how do you know your workers are hard at work if you can't see them? Microsoft has found that one-to-one conversations between managers and employees can help to create trust by allowing shared understanding. 97% of Microsoft employees who discussed how they work best with their manager say their manager supports their desired work style.[15] Other objections include resentment of the overheads involved in maintaining offices if they aren't used all the time—but rent and facility costs are usually a small fraction of payroll. If office use can boost productivity by 10%, it effectively pays for itself.[16]

...and it has to filter all the way down.

For flexible choices to be fully embraced, employees need to feel empowered to use them. They must trust that they won't be censured for working in a way that suits them. You'll need to actively encourage them, with reassurance that the old "out of sight, out of mind" mindset is gone for good.

It's got to work for you too.

As a leader, you need to know you can manage remote and dispersed teams effectively, without technological or procedural barriers. Make sure that the need to see people's faces at work is over—this presenteeism can tempt remote teams to signal that they're always available. And make sure that your tech is doing the heavy lifting of keeping everyone connected, rather than you doing it manually. Always remember that any new structures must help everyone to work well. Including you.

There are some simple techniques that could help you feel comfortable managing hybrid teams too. Try workshopping team agreements on the behaviors that help everyone stay at their best during hybrid working and ensuring regular check-ins to find out how those agreements are working for all. Stay in regular conversation with your team members, both to make sure you're aware of any changes in circumstances and to help them all take individual and collective accountability for working as a whole.

Hitting deliverables.

A common concern that may need to be addressed with leadership is around delivering work. It's worth bearing in mind that although 54% of leaders fear productivity has been negatively affected, 80% of employees say they're just as productive, or even more so, since moving to remote or hybrid working.[17]

You need the right tools at hand.

You'll need to ensure teams can work well together and collaborate from mixed environments without affecting output. Effective flexible and remote working rests on having the right technology available, while avoiding the trap of piling up too many tools that are hard to integrate and slow down your team's work. Your business will need access to tech expertise that can guide you through the decisions you'll need to make, whether in-house or external.

For instance, all-in-one integrated tools can streamline workflows without adding to the number of systems your employees must learn and move between. They can reduce human error and improve collaboration too.

8 How to get started.

Working well will look different for every business, but human-centric principles are a great starting point. A human-centered organization is one that puts the needs of its employees, customers, and community first and aligns its activities around them. Focusing on better experiences creates an environment that improves morale, productivity, and relationships.
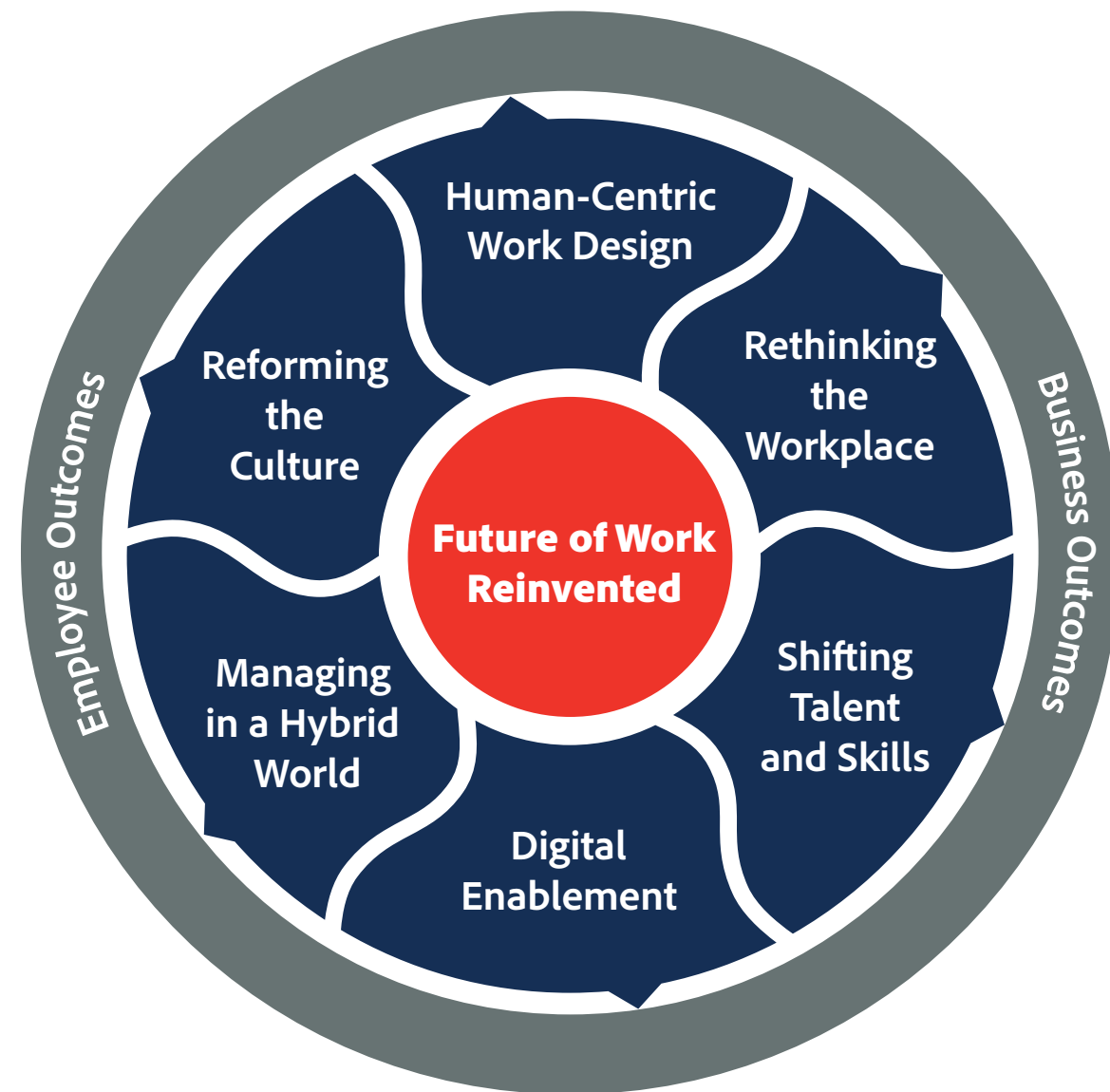
IBM has led the way in developing the principles and practices behind human-centered organizations. From its experience coaching and tracking many businesses through the process, IBM has identified four related but distinct practices required to succeed. These are needed in equal measure to balance each other out and allow effective action.[18]

	Focus on external outcomes	Focus on internal capability
Team-level practices	**Deliver outcomes** Deliver outcomes using human-centered design.	**Guide teams** Ensure that a team is effectively practicing to sustainably deliver great human outcomes.
Organization-level practices	**Invest in opportunities** Deploy and direct human-centered teams to deliver human outcomes aligned with organizational goals.	**Transform conditions** Foster sustainable organizational conditions for human-centered design to scale.

Source: "Building a Human-Centered Organization," IBM.

And Gartner's *Future of Work* research puts human-centric work design firmly within its models for how workplaces will look in the future.

Future of Work Reinvented

Human-Centric Work Design
Rethinking the Workplace
Shifting Talent and Skills
Digital Enablement
Managing in a Hybrid World
Reforming the Culture

Employee Outcomes
Business Outcomes

Human-centric working principles.

To take a human-centric approach, you need to understand your people's pain points and come up with individualized solutions to address them.

You'll need:

- **Empathy:** to immerse yourself in your teams' needs and desires and help build ways of working that work for them

- **Creativity:** to find the best ways to solve new problems —a lot of this involves identifying the right tools and tech for the job

- **The ability to integrate business and individual needs:** involve your teams in the process of designing new work structures that can support their success, particularly when it comes to enabling collaboration and communication

Once you've got on board with these principles, there are some key approaches that can help everyone work together smarter and faster, even when they're apart.

Create the right organizational policies and guidelines.

Agree upon and define what the new structures and principles mean to your business, then make sure that you let everyone know—along with key elements like work locations and hours. This should include determining which guidelines and standards apply company-wide and where separate functions or divisions should create their own policies or approaches.

Empower your managers.

Make it clear how much autonomy managers have when making decisions for their teams. Give them guidelines and training to facilitate team discussions and build team structures that work for their own people.

Assess performance by outcome.

When you focus on outcomes rather than tying achievement (and remuneration) to how those outcomes are achieved, it means more flexibility all around. For this to work, you'll need to create and nurture a culture where employees can move quickly, make decisions, and learn from their mistakes.

Choose the right tech and tools.

Integration is key—having too many separate tools makes it hard to use any of them effectively. Start from a single platform for workflows across the business, and choose additional online tools that can be used from any device and easily integrated into your other apps.
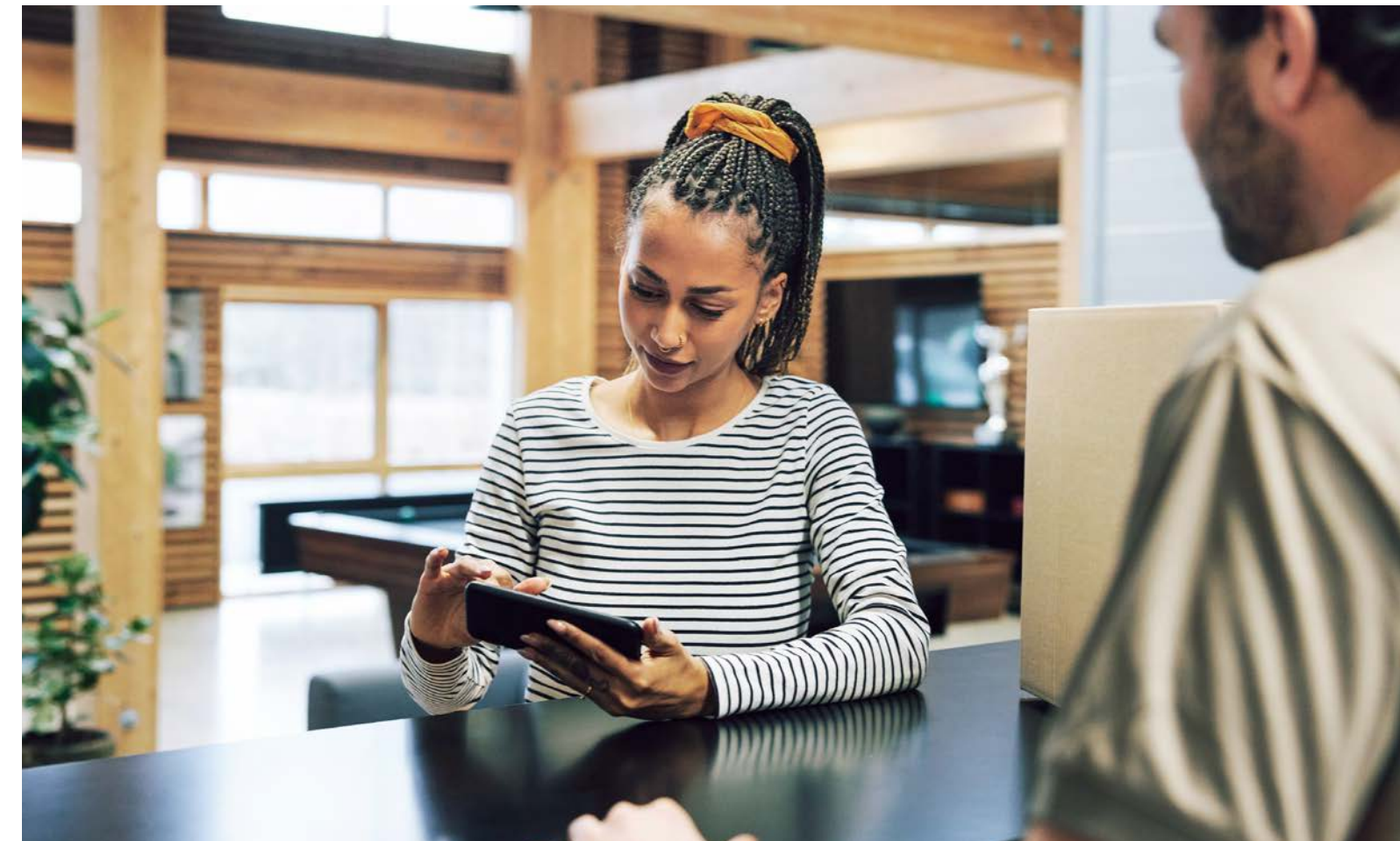
The best productivity and collaboration tools remove friction, increase efficiency, and let employees do their jobs better—in the office, at home, or on the go.

Connected ecosystems.

Effective tools won't add more to your technology stack, but instead they let your people do more within the tools they already use. This not only reduces learning curves and friction for your people but also allows your IT team to maximize the investments they've already made in tech.

Intelligence.

Automating mundane, paper-based tasks allows your people to focus their energy on projects that require a personal touch—which not only improves morale but boosts productivity. And automating repetitive tasks lets you onboard people faster, speed up contract turnaround times, and automatically collect e-signatures and route documents.

Work-anywhere functionality.

Browser-based tools allow your teams to move beyond traditional applications by offering the same functionality and capabilities online. They ensure that every user accesses the right version of the tool whilst offering more consistency, greater accessibility, and less friction. They can allow your people to work and collaborate together from head office to home office—and everywhere in between—on the go, on a huge range of devices.
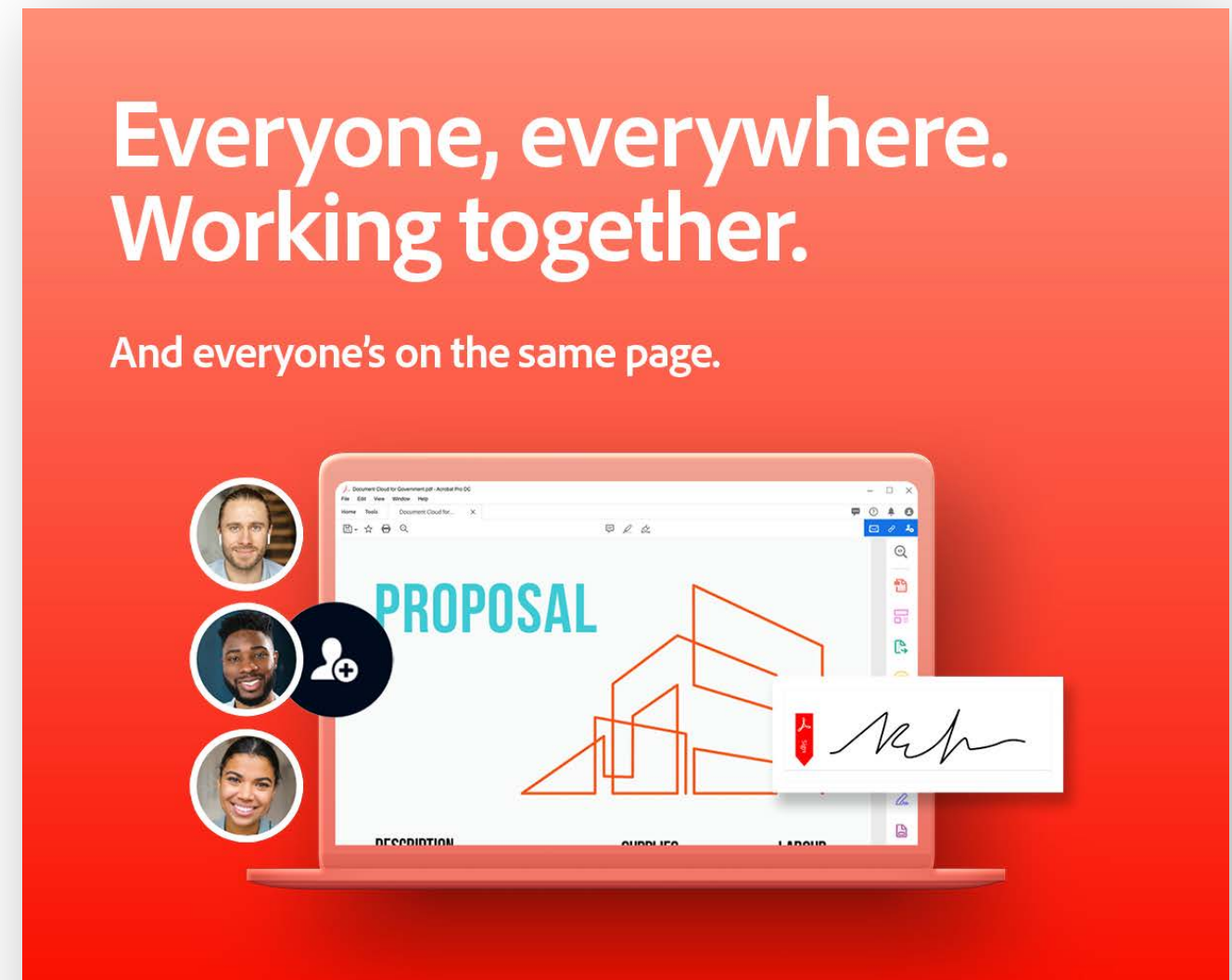
The right tools and tech help make low-effort tasks more efficient, giving that time back to your people. You just need to give them the freedom to decide how to spend it.

9 And they all worked happily ever after...

Once you've found the approach to flexibility that works for your business, ensured understanding and established consensus at all the right levels, and identified the processes and tools you'll need to work well together, you're ready to reap the benefits.

You should find yourself with engaged and empowered workers, a connected, secure work environment that can be accessed from anywhere, and a blend of people and tech that allows key tasks to be automated and streamlined for friction-free working.

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With new ways of working leaving many workers dispersed and busier than ever, how can we ensure we continue to work well?

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