PART 2

Read the text below and answer questions 14–26.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE WORKPLACE

A

For much of the twentieth century, the prevailing template for paid employment was inherited—at least in spirit—from the Industrial Revolution: work was organised around fixed hours, a centralised location, and managerial visibility, with a relatively sharp delineation between professional and domestic life. In labour sociology, this arrangement is often justified by coordination costs: bringing workers into proximity reduces the friction of supervision, standardises routines, and makes collective output more predictable. However, as advanced economies shifted toward a knowledge economy in which value is increasingly produced through analysis, design, and problem-solving rather than through repetitive manual procedures, the logic of strict time-and-place requirements weakened. This transition was evident well before the COVID-19 pandemic, yet the pandemic operated as an accelerant, forcing many organisations to treat location as a variable rather than a rule. The result has been less a simple "move home" story than a reconfiguration of how firms imagine productivity, accountability, and belonging.

B

Technological enablement is often described in terms of tools—video meetings, shared documents, messaging platforms—but the more consequential change has been architectural: a shift toward cloud-based collaborative ecosystems in which work products are continuously updated and accessible across devices, locations, and time zones. In such environments, synchronous communication (real-time meetings and calls) coexists uneasily with asynchronous communication (messages, shared workspaces, and recorded updates), creating new norms about responsiveness. While these ecosystems reduce the need for co-location, they can also cultivate an "always-on" culture in which workers experience persistent notifications, fragmented attention, and cognitive fragmentation—particularly when coordination is distributed across multiple channels. In theory, asynchronous practices should protect deep work by allowing tasks to be completed without constant interruption; in practice, organisations often reproduce the meeting-heavy habits of office life, generating a paradox in which digital flexibility is accompanied by intensified temporal pressure and a heightened expectation of immediate availability.

C

From a psychological perspective, flexible working arrangements generate an ambivalent trade-off between autonomy and isolation. Many employees experience greater control over scheduling, fewer commuting demands, and an improved capacity to integrate caregiving responsibilities—advantages that can translate into higher satisfaction and, in some contexts, stronger performance. Yet the same arrangements can reduce informal interaction: the “watercooler moments” and micro-conversations that transmit tacit knowledge, build weak ties, and create social friction that is, paradoxically, productive. When these low-stakes encounters disappear, some workers report a thinning of organisational support, weaker mentoring, and a diminished sense of collective identity. Moreover, the boundary between work and non-work can become porous, not only because devices travel home, but because communication becomes perpetual. In sociological terms, the workplace is no longer a site that one enters and exits; it is an ongoing network relationship that must be actively managed.

D

In response, many organisations have adopted hybrid work, typically presented as a compromise that preserves the benefits of remote autonomy while recovering the relational advantages of co-presence. However, hybrid systems can be harder to govern than fully remote ones because they create uneven information and unequal visibility. When some employees are co-located and others are not, meetings can become asymmetrical, informal decisions may occur in corridors rather than in shared digital spaces, and remote participants may experience reduced influence even when formally included. A well-documented risk is proximity bias: managers, often unintentionally, favour those they see physically, interpreting visibility as commitment and granting them more opportunities, feedback, or trust. This can produce a two-tier workforce in which advancement correlates with presence rather than performance. Consequently, hybrid success often depends on deliberate redesign—clear outcome-based evaluation, explicit documentation norms, and leadership practices that counteract bias by making work legible irrespective of location.

E

The workplace shift also has implications beyond firms, reshaping urban economics and spatial patterns of consumption. If commuting declines persist, the agglomeration effects that historically concentrated talent and spending in central business districts may weaken, at least for some sectors. Urban researchers describe a “Donut Effect” in which city centres experience relative hollowing—lower weekday footfall and reduced demand for office-adjacent services—while suburban and peripheral areas see renewed activity as workers reallocate time and spending closer to home. This rebalancing affects the service

economy: cafés, lunch venues, and transport operators in central districts may face contraction, while neighbourhood retail may expand. Real-estate markets respond accordingly, with potential downward pressure on commercial property in some locations and increased demand for flexible, mixed-use spaces elsewhere. Such dynamics illustrate a wider point: changes in work arrangements can trigger second-order effects that reach infrastructure funding, land-use planning, and even the social geography of cities.

F

Looking forward, the office is unlikely to disappear, but its social meaning is being renegotiated. Rather than functioning as a factory of tasks—an environment designed primarily to ensure attendance and throughput—it is increasingly repurposed as a cultural anchor that supports socialisation, identity formation, and complex collaboration. In this model, co-presence is reserved for activities that benefit disproportionately from shared attention: brainstorming, conflict resolution, onboarding, and the subtle trust-building that is difficult to manufacture through screens. At the same time, organisations are being pushed to articulate clearer principles about when synchronous interaction is genuinely necessary and when asynchronous workflows should dominate, thereby reducing cognitive fragmentation and protecting concentrated work. The emerging workplace, then, is not defined solely by location, but by governance: the capacity to design norms, technologies, and evaluation systems that keep work productive and humane in the long term.

Questions 14–18

Which paragraph contains the following information?

14 mention that workplace flexibility was already developing before the pandemic, which then caused the change to happen much faster.

15 an account of how online working systems may make employees feel they should respond immediately while making sustained concentration harder.

16 an explanation of why losing informal workplace encounters may weaken mentoring and the flow of tacit knowledge.

17 mention of a managerial bias that advantages employees who are physically visible in the workplace.

18 reference to a redistribution of economic activity away from city centres towards suburban and surrounding areas.

Questions 19–22

Look at the following statements and the list of workplace models below. Choose the correct letter, **A, B or C**.

A The Traditional Office Model

B The Fully Remote Model

C The Hybrid Model

19 It relies on physical proximity to standardise routines and ensure that collective output is predictable.

20 It allows work to continue across locations and time zones without depending on routine co-location.

21 It risks producing unequal influence in meetings when some participants share a room and others join digitally.

22 It typically requires explicit rules to prevent physical presence from being mistaken for higher commitment.

Questions 23–26

Complete the summary below. Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the text for each answer.

Effects of Flexible and Digital Working

Cloud-based working combines real-time **23** ..... communication with delayed **24** ..... communication, a mixture that can contribute to an “always-on” culture. Although flexibility may increase autonomy, the loss of informal “watercooler moments” can reduce the transfer of **25** ..... . Beyond companies, fewer commuters may lead to lower weekday **26** ..... in central districts and reduced demand for nearby services.

Answer Key

14. A
15. B
16. C
17. D
18. E

19. A

20. B

21. C

22. C

23. synchronous

24. asynchronous

25. tacit knowledge

26. footfall