

Home Working? The Present and Future of How and Where We Work in the Context of COVID-19. Cardiff Business School COVID-19 and Work WP 2020, Cardiff University

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The COVID-19 pandemic has a profound impact on where (and how) people work. The study provides a quick snapshot of its impact on managerial and white-collar workers. This group were chosen for several reasons, first, this group are not generally directly customer-facing and so are likely to be the last group of employees who go back, physically, to work. When it is safe for them to do so, trends in flexible work are likely to be exacerbated with large companies, for example, questioning why they need to invest in such costly office space and employees wondering why they spent so long commuting on a regular basis. It is perhaps not hyperbole to suggest that issues on the future of such work (or at least where it is located) is open to question (although equally we should not over extrapolate). This in turn is not an easy question to answer, there are implications for organisations and employees alike, which this report will, tentatively, address. Second, managerial, and white-collar employees more generally, have been studied, internationally by the report authors for twenty years (1) and we went back (quickly) to some of these organisations--or at least the UK ones--for this research (see, for example, Hassard et al 2009; Hassard and Morris, 2018; 2020).

As we have already stated, the research is by its nature tentative. It is based on interviews with thirty-five managers and white-collar employees of seven large UK organisations. These organisations do, however, have a degree of sectoral spread covering high and lower tech, manufacturing and services and the private and public sectors. The report authors also have a great deal of knowledge of these organisations and their employees from fifteen years plus of research and, as a consequence, have built up a degree of rapport with some of these managers. We have three headline findings which are perhaps unsurprising but are worth restating. Further, in the longer term the issue of where work takes place, how it is organised and the organisational and employee consequences are perhaps the more interesting (if tentative) findings. However, the three short-term consequences of mandatory home working are:

First, that the negative impacts of homeworking have been vastly different for workers and particularly for those with responsibilities for school-aged children, in other words it has been much worse for these employees (particularly women, but also men).

Second, for many of the managers and white collar workers these new work patterns liberating I terms of their work-life balance,

particularly the lack of travel and commuting (although there were also a number of negative features)

Third, that for those who are already used to a degree of working from home have found it (much) easier to adapt.

The Study

As indicated already, we went back to large organisations who we had previously interviewed at in a previous large study which, amongst other issues, was interested in where people were working and found that digital technologies had transformed the location of work, from the office primarily to home, coffee shops etc and had made working time more flexible to a certain degree which offered managers the opportunity to balance work and other obligations but also, in a context of extreme working pressures, made work all encompassing, with work and email (and other means of digital communications). The changes between the two studies in the early noughties and ten or so years later were profound; in terms of the types of technologies used (US managers in the early 2000s introduced us to the Blackberry), the pervasiveness of these trends with managers regularly working in the evenings and weekends and the expectations of both organisations and their managers (this was the 'new normal'.

So when the pandemic struck and people were sent home and in a short period of time were expected to work from home, this struck us as something very interesting to study, namely the impact of the new home working imperative and whether this would presage new ways of working longer term. In answering the second question we wanted to balance predictions which were claiming radical changes to where work was going to take place and how it was going to be organised and the acceleration of what were pre-existing patterns at certain organisations, pre the crisis. Our findings are not 'scientific' as such, this is a very quick piece of research with a relatively small sample, but it does offer to some pointers as to the impact of home working during the crisis (positive and negative) and to the future of work. We emailed our request to ten organisations and seven responded and we then sent out approximately one hundred short questionnaires to managers and white-collar workers with a request that we follow this up with either a personnel interview or a remote one, typically via Zoom. The questionnaire was deliberately short in order not to overburden the managers and to encourage them to respond. Our sample was not in an academic sense 'scientific' but did offer a snapshot of the economy with a brewery, technical consultancy, insurance company, utility, telecommunications corporation, management consultancy and a public sector organisation. The questions asked were: Are you male, female? Do you have caring responsibilities, e.g. children (what age and how many; parents or other)?

If working remotely, do you anticipate that this will come to an end shortly or continue for the foreseeable future?

What have been the advantages and disadvantages of the working arrangements under COVID, for example, on your work-life balance?

Finally, do you anticipate that this pandemic will have a fundamental restructuring on the nature and location of work more generally?

Results.

The sample was split two thirds male and one female with the brewery and the technical consultancy being all male which is typical of the wider managerial workforce of these companies. Interestingly when we interviewed at the consultancy company (in 2017) it had set increasing the female proportion of its workforce as one of its key strategic goals. This had proved partially successful with a number of recent female graduates joining the company but was considerably hampered by recruiting graduates from subjects which are dominated by males (such as engineering and computer science) and by the working patterns at the organisation requiring employees to be on-site at their customers for several days per week (one of our interviewees had, for example, spent several months in 2019 working at an automotive firm located in continental Europe which involved travelling every Sunday and currently travelled to work London (from Wales) for several days a week (he had three children aged 11, 9 and 9). This business model of consultants on-site had become an expectancy of customers ten years ago but the interviewee questioned whether or not this would change post-crisis, making employment more appealing to females. While this is a positive trend, a downside to this was that with this customer facing requirement was dropped then work would be relocated offshore to Poland and India. This was a realistic prospect with the relocation of work to India a key KPI for individual managers and his group of ninety employees being asked to shed twenty jobs.

(i) Many respondents expected to be working from home for an extended period, at least to September/October (the interviews were in June) and some expecting it to last until the end of 2020. Even at the brewery (and surprising to the author), managers were estimating that they were going to be working at home for an extended period;

(ii) an advantage cited by all was the lack of a commute and/or travelling and its impact on their work-life balance. Some of the responses were touching, particularly for males with young children but across the sample, with respondents citing less stress as a consequence. This was pronounced with commuting in London and other larger cities but also related to travelling normally associated with work, such as at the technical consultancy but again across organisations;

(iii) interestingly, the telecoms company had temporarily rolled back its previous 'work-from-home' policy with employees being required to attend work for several days a week and being made redundant if they did not live close to their workplaces (the company was already going through a major restructuring exercise with compulsory redundancies introduced for the first time). Some felt that this challenged the necessity for being at work, a telecoms interview reported travelling to London every fortnight to meet important superiors while an

interviewee at the telecoms consultancy expressed the view that people went work to 'be seen' and to network;

(iv) unsurprisingly, parents (of both genders) cited significant problems with childcare and home schooling, with many citing this as 'extremely challenging', managing work by collectively working round the clock and at weekends and 'a lack of any division between work and parenting'. There was some evidence of females facing considerable pressures. Two managers were single parents, while in other couples females had taken a previous 'hit' to their career prospects in order to have families and were bearing greater responsibilities for child care as they earned less, worked part-time etc which is confirmed by other studies of the gender impact of the crisis (Adams-Prassl et al, 2020; Alon et al, 2020; Andrew et al, 2020; IPSOS Mori/Fawcett Society, 2020; summers, 2020).

(v) while this finding is perhaps not novel, other findings were more fundamental and had long term implications for home working, although for firms and employees which were more used to more flexible found adaptation easier. Employees found that work/non-work divides were extremely blurred, found it difficult to 'turn off' from work and had a belated appreciation of the sociability of office work. Others found the situation very isolating; work monotonous and extremely challenging with a lack of downtime and being continually 'on-call', stimulation overload, communications problematic and 'Zoom' very demanding physically. A telecoms company manager, for example, reported nine, half-an-hour meetings that day which was typical. Elsewhere, a female manager observed:

'Workload has increased significantly due to the nature of my work. In addition there is now far less down time in the work day – I'm constantly on calls (either scheduled meetings or people calling as soon as my Skype light goes green). Stimulus overload; I'm simultaneously getting bombarded with emails, Yammer Messages, Teams Messages, Skype Instant Messages, phone calls on Skype and phone calls on Teams (we have 2 separate telephony systems so I'll be on a call on one and getting called on the other). No 'thinking time' or 'doing time' as diary constantly booked up with calls. Regularly sat at my desk for 4+ hours without moving at all. Conference call fatigue – discomfort of wearing a headset all day, jumping from one call to the next on a range of topics feels more tiring than a normal day in the office. Trying to home school two children and work is extremely challenging – children have a schedule from school which runs from 9am to 3:30 with set tasks needing to be done at set times. Frequently trying to juggle work calls and field questions and help the children with their school work (and just provide quality general supervision) does cause significant additional pressure'.

Thus far we have reported on the findings, some of which are less or more surprising. The million-dollar question is, however, what implications does this have for the way work is organised and where it is located in the future, post-COVID (hopefully). Opinions differed. Some were sceptical. A male manager from the insurance company had very poor experience of the new working arrangements associated with home working and COVID:

'From my perspective not many benefits. I walked to work before and had a routine. I had had a period in my life before doing excessive hours in the office and then again at home in evenings and weekends. This way of working is intrusive. The office is always with me. WhatsApp's go outside

core hours. The personal laptop is now combined with work so has to be hidden away as it's a reminder that the office is now my home. Management is now by email, is not thought out, requires immediate action and is chaotically delivered at all times of day and night. Plans to action your day are routinely disrupted by the volume of out of hours emails, many of which are simply white noise. There is no structure and the ability to drill technical ability into employees is finished by remote interaction which does not even begin to replace MBWA. Employees feel very alone and under empowered.'

OK, there are massive benefits in flexible working and we have been exploring this for a couple of years. The ability to work from home god life balance of for work which can be better attacked from home is undeniable. The clamour about this being the "new normal" is fatuous. I understand that for many this temporary working is exciting and fun, but work in my area is based on shared learning and experiences. No-one was ever going to get on a plane again after 9/11. Look what happened there. Economic reality and the basic need for human interaction mean that we will still need all our offices and our employees to attend on some basis of regularity'.

By contrast, others were more hopeful of change. Some argued that developments that they had argued for for years had suddenly materialised, while others noted individual and societal benefits, for example, work-life balance ones and wider environmental benefits. However, the interviews pointed to considerable downsides for employees and organisational inefficiencies (a number noted that a quick face -to-face meeting often cleared up confusions which were lost in the new normal). Most predicted a more flexible hybrid model of home and office working, although the 'loss' of organisational control and associated difficulties should not be underestimated (2).

1. The authors have researched the impact of organisational change upon managerial work dating back to the 1990s and funded by a variety of organisations including the ESRC (twice), Alliance Foundation, Santander Foundation, NHS and Cardiff Business School. The two primary pieces of funding, however, were. An **ESRC** funded study of *Management and New Organisational Forms: Middle Managers in the UK, USA and Japan, 2001-03* and **Alliance Foundation** funded study of *Managerial Work: International Comparisons, 2016-20*.

2. Our thanks to the managers for their time and cooperation, 'garden' interviewing is also an academic novelty

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