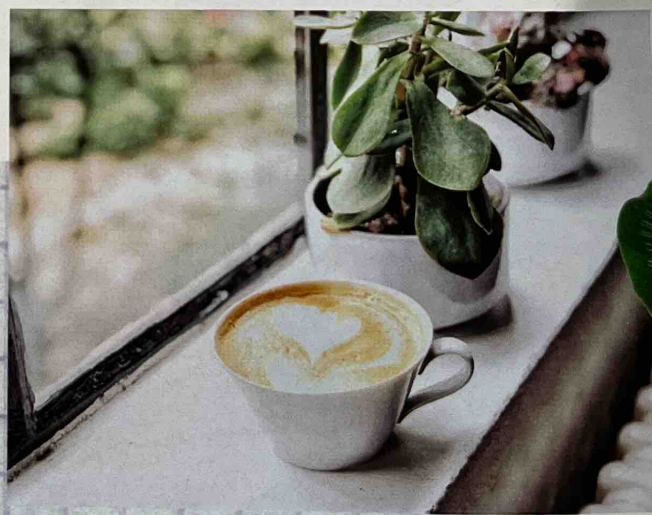
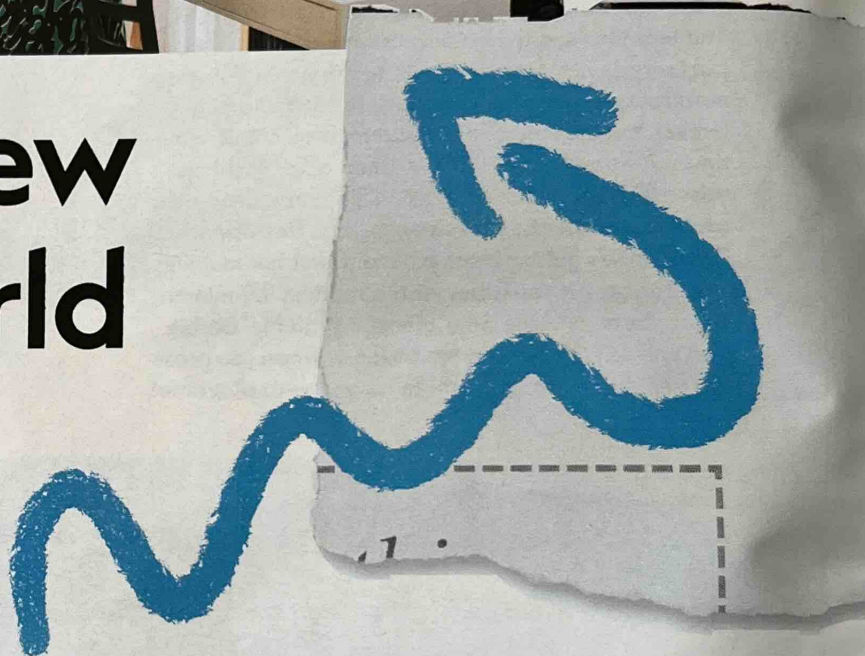


A whole new (work) world

From MIA commutes to virtual team meetings, our working lives have undergone a seismic shift in the last year – not all of them bad. Here's how to increase those WFH wellbeing wins

Words: Alex Davies

A year ago, if someone had told you Zoom would become a vocab staple, commutes a novelty and WFH (working from home) the norm, you might have suggested a refund on their crystal ball. But, when it comes to pandemic-driven changes, it's hard to underestimate the huge shift in our work lives, in particular – especially for anyone office-based. While it has definitely taken its toll, it's also rocket-fuelled the conversation about the wellbeing benefits of flexible working when we return to the office – whether that's tweaking our start/finish time to accommodate childcare or other commitments; reducing our hours; or working from home more. There's clearly a case for less rigid thinking when it comes to the way we work. 'Before [the pandemic], many people were told they weren't allowed to work from home or that it was a privilege,' says Cate Sevilla, author of *How To Work Without Losing Your Mind* (Penguin). 'With more flexibility, I think everyone would be so much happier.' So, whether you're still hustling remotely, are back in the office (watch this space), or doing a combo – tap into the wellbeing wins of this new era. Let's get to work...





DON'T FEEL
TIED TO
YOUR DESK'



**Wellbeing In Interiors (RIBA Publishing); grigoriou.co.uk

FLEX APPEAL: MAKE IT PERSONAL

OK, so Margaret from Accounts saw your pants drying in the Zoom background (just us?), but being surrounded by our own stuff is actually an *upside*. Personalising our work area may help us to feel less emotionally exhausted, according to a study in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. And your kids' drawings, notepads with uplifting sayings and a personalised organiser (such as a bespoke Boots Annual Planner, from £15.49/1,549 points[†]) can be especially comforting in a low-privacy space.

Keep it up: When you're back in the workplace, you can still personalise your own area. Think small boosters, such as a few travel snaps or crystals. If you're still WFH a lot more, curate a space that supports your wellbeing. 'Set up by a window if possible, as exposure to natural light helps to keep our internal body clocks in sync,' says Elina Grigoriou, an interior designer and author** who offers home workspace virtual consultations. The Lumie Vitamin L SAD And Energy Light **ONLINE ONLY** £90/9,000 points, may boost mood and focus if you don't have access to much natural light. And, adds Elina, 'Don't feel tied to your desk. For creative work, I'll go to a soft seat where I can tone down stimulation.'

FLEX APPEAL: TAKE IN THE SCENERY

These times have shown that, for those of us who work with a laptop, we can work from anywhere – whether it's a coffee shop or even an island paradise. Barbados has launched a visa to entice remote workers (*grabs passport*), while professionals in India are reportedly setting up their laptops by mountains and beaches. 'A change of scenery does wonders for our mental wellbeing,' says consultant counselling psychologist Dr Ritika Birah.

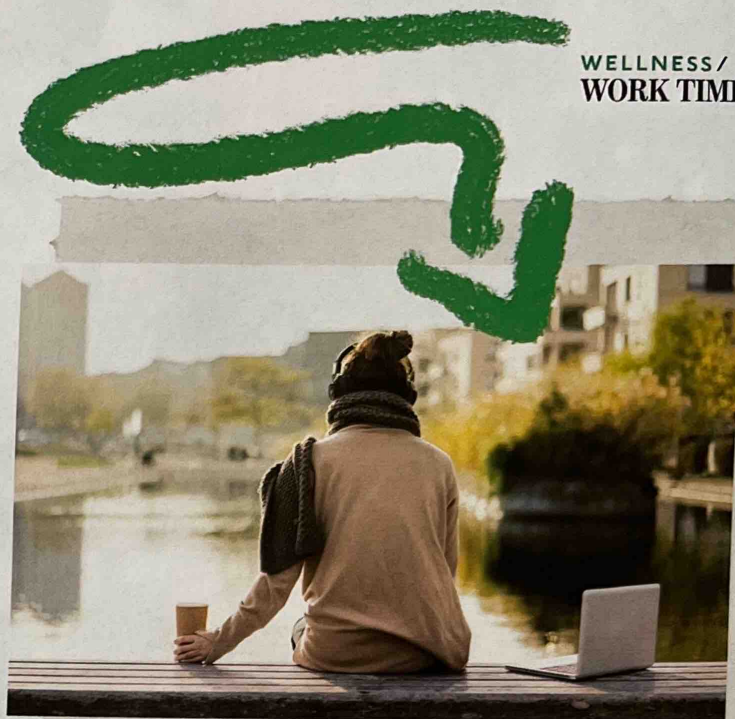
Keep it up: Barbados might not be on the menu for us all (sob) but, when it's safe to do so, investigate co-working spaces, libraries and cafés that offer hot-desking. Or take your laptop into the garden, park or another area of your workplace (if you're there) for a few hours. 'Tune into your senses to find the right space,' advises Dr Birah. For example, will that coffee shop's music let you concentrate? (FYI: slow and quiet tunes get the science thumbs-up.) And if you set up in a green space, ditch your shoes. 'Connect to the earth and feel the grass between your toes for a new sensation,' suggests Dr Birah. →

[†]Visit bootsphoto.com.



FLEX APPEAL: ROUTINE BENEFITS

Many of us no longer have commutes, or have reduced them. 'Which is great, as that hectic hustle can put us in a negative headspace, because we feel like we have no choice but to just get through it,' says Dr Birah. And the new world of 'commuting' from, say, our kitchen table to the dining room *should* also give us more time for ourselves. 'With no commute, people can take time to invest in routine self-care,' explains Dr Birah. 'They get up and maybe go for a run, make a juice or tea – something that boosts their mental health rather than draining it.'



Keep it up: The one benefit of a commute is boundaries to the start and finish of our working days. So if WFH becomes your norm, continue with activities that trigger the switch between personal and professional time – whether it's a shower, meditation (the Smiling Mind app is a great freebie) or a workout. Even try a fake commute – go for a walk first thing, perhaps with a podcast. A brisk morning stride can improve our daily decision-making, according to an Australian study. If you *are* commuting, personalise the journey. 'Whether you read, listen to music or watch a TV show, it's your window, so do what you want,' says Dr Birah.

FLEX APPEAL: WORK HOURS TO SUIT

It's not a luxury everyone has of course, but flexible working recognises that 9 to 5 isn't the only way to make a living. We all work best at different times (60% of us are early birds, 24% prefer afternoons and 7% the evenings*, according to a Rovva poll), plus the freedom to choose our hours makes personal commitments way easier. In fact, a fifth of us find flexible work hours a win for our mental health, while a third agree they actually boost productivity.

Keep it up: Clearly communicate your hours to your team and stick to them. When your work time doesn't coincide with your colleagues', the isolation struggle can be real. Seek out those 'water cooler' moments, whether it's a call with your work spouse or arranging regular virtual team drinks. 'When we're physically separate, we don't have to be emotionally and socially separate,' says Dr Birah. Reach out if you're struggling, whether it's to your manager, family or a support organisation, such as Shout 85258 (giveusashout.org) – a free, confidential text service.

FLEX YOUR HUSTLE MUSCLES

Want a more flexible work sitch? Cate Sevilla shares how to ask for what you need...

1 Put together supporting reasons as to why you need this – and why/how it will make you more productive/effective at work. For example, perhaps starting earlier would give you more time to do admin before the daily meetings begin. Prepare answers for any concerns your manager may have. I also firmly believe in being honest if, say, working from home would greatly improve your mental wellbeing, which has

a positive impact on your efficiency, focus and job satisfaction.

2 Speak to your manager: an email is easy to scan and ignore. It's harder for anyone to dismiss you or what you're asking for in a call or face-to-face meeting.

3 Know your worth: if they say 'no', you're entitled to ask why. Get to the heart of the issue. If it's a blanket 'no', is this a place where you want to work? Ask for what you need and don't apologise for it.

*9% of the UK workforce had no preference toward the time of day they work.