

# **Re-Thinking the Commercial Workplace: How Are Companies and Employees Preparing for the Post-Pandemic World?**

## **Introduction**

Over the past 18 months, the UK and the rest of the world has had to adapt to a new way of living thanks to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The government restrictions put in place a work from home order to prevent the spread of the disease. This resulted in millions of workers across the country being forced to work from their own abodes. Throughout the majority of 2020, the work from home (otherwise abbreviated to 'WFH') practice continued into the beginning of 2021 until firms gradually started to move back into their offices as the vaccination programme took pace and lockdown restrictions lifted. Whilst the last year has presented companies with significant challenges in terms of operations and ensuring employee wellbeing during the pandemic, it has allowed them to understand how different ways of working have impacted or hindered productivity levels and which methods can be adopted for the future. Drawing on relevant articles and academic research, this essay will look to explore how the pandemic has presented the working world with a wake-up call and which workplace practices may be set to remain for the foreseeable future in the post-pandemic world.

## **Before the Pandemic**

Prior to Boris Johnson's announcement on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 declaring the first national lockdown, the typical office working week was set in stone. The usual 9 to 5, five days a week in places of work has its origins rooted by the formation of trade unions and has been a firm part of British culture since the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial boom<sup>1</sup>. Beginning in factories to ensure optimal work productivity, the eight-hour day gradually became engrained in all sectors of work yet became synonymously associated with the commercial office job. However, the practice wasn't ratified into law until the late 1990s under the New Labour Government and employees working hours were typically left to the discretion of their employer. The *Working Time Regulations* introduced in 1998 (later amended in 2002 and 2007) reflected aspects of the EU's *European Working Time Directive*, a ruling which

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<sup>1</sup> Preece, R., (2016). *Putting The 9-5 In The History Books*. Available at: [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/rich-preece/9to5-history\\_b\\_11522620.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/rich-preece/9to5-history_b_11522620.html) (Accessed: 15 July 2021).

essentially outlined new characteristics for the labour market to adopt to what we know today<sup>2</sup>. Key aspects of the legislation made it a legal obligation for employers to limit working hours to 48 hours per week, allowing employees to have four weeks paid leave throughout the year and entitling workers to an in-rest break if the working day is longer than six hours<sup>3</sup>. Daily habits such as commuting to work, collaborating with colleagues, attending meetings, after-work socials and commuting back home were all practices familiar to millions across the country as part of the conventional working-world. The pandemic essentially forced everything known to companies and their employees into adapting to an unprecedented new norm.

## WFH

With the government order to stay at home, WFH was formally adopted by non-essential businesses as a means of operation. This required office employees to set up their desks in the familiar surroundings of their homes and adapt to work in an online virtual environment. Some companies catered for the change by sending office provisions such as laptops, computer monitors and even desks to the homes of employees. Before the pandemic struck, WFH was a common component of the labour market. A report from the Office for National Statistics revealed that in the year before Covid-19 reached the United Kingdom (2019), 26.5% of the working population had done some work from home or mainly worked from home rather than in the office<sup>4</sup>. The rapid rise in IT and connectivity through the internet has facilitated the practice in recent times. Traditionally coined as 'telecommuting', WFH as a form was largely adopted by freelance workers and the self-employed as larger organisations required office space for employee collaboration. Conducted in 1998, long before WFH became a norm as we know it today, Gregor K. Stephens and Bernadette Szanja surveyed a group of American 'telecommuters' to gain an understanding of how the practice is viewed by those who take part in it. The findings from

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<sup>2</sup> Philip, B., Slater, G., Wheatley, D. (2015) 'New Labour and work-time regulation: a Marxian analysis of the UK economy', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 39(3), pp.712- 713.

<sup>3</sup> *Working Time Regulations 1998*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1998/1833/made> (Accessed: 22 August 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Haigney, V., Lawrence, B., Martin, J., Walton, A. (2021) *Homeworking hours, rewards and opportunities in the UK: 2011 to 2020*. London: Office for National Statistics. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/labourproductivity/articles/homeworkinghoursrewardsandopportunitiesintheuk2011to2020/2021-04-19#hours-worked-overtime-and-sickness> (Accessed: 22 August 2021).

their report identified several key advantages, the most popular being the ability to be flexible during the working day, defined in the survey as “the individual’s ability to work at his or her personal ‘peak’ times.”<sup>5</sup> Further results noted that the elimination of a commute, the physical conditions of the home environment and an overall improved family life were all seen as benefits from telecommuting<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, an equal number of disadvantages were identified from the research. According to workers, topping the list of home-working flaws was the isolation caused by having no physical interactions with colleagues whilst other downfalls included the fear of not being able to be promoted, being overworked and informal communication within respect companies<sup>7</sup>.

Whilst these conclusions of WFH/telecommuting vs working in the office were touched upon more than 20 years ago, they share similar characteristics to what employees have experienced over the past year during lockdowns. Elisabetta Risi and Riccardo Pronzato conducted an equivalent survey through online interviews this year in Italy to gain an understanding into how workers have perceived WFH during the pandemic. Other than the main advantage of being more flexible during the working day as discovered by Stephens and Szanja, the duo highlighted more shortcomings and frustrations detailed by interviewees. Thanks to the ease of digital connectivity through video-calling platforms such as Zoom, it was apparent employees’ surroundings at home became ingrained in their work lives and vice versa. Results showed participants in the study essential felt consumed by work, appropriately coined as “working objectives becoming the main concern of one’s existence.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it was brought to attention by some respondents that several inequalities had arisen during WFH concerning technological experiences. Issues identified under this constraint included workers adapting to new digital software without adequate training, relationship breakdowns due to the absence of physical interaction and internet connectivity problems<sup>9</sup>.

The overall satisfaction of employees working remotely can be difficult to ascertain. Risi and Pronzato argue from their findings that the enthusiasm for WFH deteriorated several

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<sup>5</sup> Stephens, G., Szajna, B. (1998) 'Perceptions and Expectations: Why People Choose a Telecommuting Workstyle', *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 3(1), pp. 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Stephens, G., Szajna, B. (1998), pp. 72

<sup>8</sup> Pronzato, R., Risi, E. (2021) 'Smart working is not so smart: Always-on lives and the dark side of platformisation', *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*, 15(1), pp. 113.

<sup>9</sup> Pronzato, R., Risi, E. (2021), pp. 115-117.

months into the practice<sup>10</sup>. In September 2020, before virus infections had reached its peak in the United Kingdom, YouGov conducted a nationwide survey to assess how people felt about WFH. Its results showed it could possibly be a practice to stay after the pandemic. Of those who had worked from home at some point during pandemic, 23% felt they would want to continue it permanently and a majority 68% would want to work from home some of the time in the future<sup>11</sup>. It also appeared those new to the WFH concept strongly wanted it to continue in some form; an overwhelming 91% of respondents who had never worked from home before wanted to be able to do so some of the time when the pandemic is over.

Implementing WFH on a permanent basis has not been adopted by companies as much as expected after lockdown restrictions were lifted in June 2021. In May 2021, 23.5% of UK businesses stated that they would use remote working moving forward, a 7% reduction in those who were implementing it at the time<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, a report conducted by the Federation of Small Businesses concluded that just 4% of small businesses across the country would allow their staff to work from home indefinitely<sup>13</sup>. However, a handful of larger firms have said they would look to make it a permanent fixture. NatWest, for example, opted to permit staff to work from home and only be in the office only two days a month<sup>14</sup>. If companies are set to adopt this form of work, managers will need to have a strong element of trust in employees. A theory raised by Monika Grzegorzczuk, Mario Marinello, Laura Nurski and Tom Schraepen is that a prominent flaw found in the model is the correlation of mistrust between senior company employees and junior employees<sup>15</sup>. Typically, younger and less-experienced workers were more likely to be in the office compared to experienced workers who were 'trusted' more to work remotely.

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<sup>10</sup> Pronzato, R., Risi, E. (2021), pp. 114.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, M. (2020) *Most workers want to work from home after Covid-19*. Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/economy/articles-reports/2020/09/22/most-workers-want-work-home-after-covid-19> (Accessed: 2 September 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Casey, A. (2021) *Businesses and individual attitudes towards the future of home working, UK: April to May 2021*. London: Office for National Statistics. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/article/businessandindividualattitudestowardsthefutureofhomeworkinguk/apriltomay2021#future-remote-working-practices> (Accessed: 23 September 2021)

<sup>13</sup> Makortoff, K., Partridge, J. (2021) *Office, hybrid or home? Businesses ponder future of work*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jun/18/office-hybrid-or-home-businesses-ponder-future-of-work> (Accessed: 22 September 2021).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Grzegorzczuk, M., Marinello, M., Nurski, L., Schraepen, T. (2021) 'Blending the physical and virtual: a hybrid model for the future of work', *Policy Contribution*, 14(21), pp. 8.

## Hybrid Working

A fresh form of work which has emerged from the pandemic has been the hybrid working model which effectively combines going into the office for a few days per week and WFH for the remainder. It is no surprise that this has taken off, with most office-based companies turning to the format to promote a gradual return for employees into their places of work after months of absence. The practice permits workers to experience the autonomy of working from home whilst also benefitting from the social, in-person collaboration in the office, allowing optimal flexibility. Hybrid working itself hadn't been fully applied before the pandemic, as Lynda Gratton argues. She argues that some elements of the model, such as flexible hours of work and location were more common ventures rather than companies permitting full freedom for employees<sup>16</sup>. Several aspects for company managers having to deal with the hybrid model are also identified by Gratton, including Jobs/tasks, employee preferences, projects/workflows, and inclusion/fairness<sup>17</sup>. In a similar stance, Grzegorzczuk, Marinello, Nurski and Schraepen refer to a 'BBBB' structure for hybrid working. This structure consists of 'bricks' (re-evaluating office space), 'bytes' (the digital tools issued to employees when working remotely), 'behaviour' (ensuring company values are still active in both environments) and 'blueprint' (flexibly allocating work tasks)<sup>18</sup>. These components are essential for the model to work and must be considered by companies before enforcing the practice.

Businesses adopting hybrid working are growing by the day due to employee satisfaction. A YouGov survey found that only a fifth of UK businesses would make their employees come into the office for a typical five-day working week after the pandemic is over as they look to implement the hybrid model for the foreseeable future<sup>19</sup>. It is also widely believed the model will gradually begin to revolutionise how companies seek to attract employees and benefit themselves at the same time. A piece of research by recruitment firm, Robert Half, recognised five key trends which have emerged from the new style of work; talent pools will become bigger due to recruiting outside of their office base, salaries will become more

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<sup>16</sup> Gratton, L. (2021) 'How to Do Hybrid Right', *Harvard Business Review*, May/June. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2021/05/how-to-do-hybrid-right> (Accessed: 22 September 2021).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Grzegorzczuk, M., Marinello, M., Nurski, L., Schraepen, T. (2021), pp. 12-15.

<sup>19</sup> Nolsoe, E. (2021) *One in four businesses intend to allow all workers to work from home at least some of time*. Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/economy/articles-reports/2021/07/29/one-four-businesses-intend-allow-all-workers-work-> (Accessed: 23 September 2021)

competitive as a result, company investment will be channelled more towards technology, employee candidates will look to show off 'hybrid skills' and adapting to remote onboarding and offboarding<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, we may see the model being catered for those who are required to be at home more often<sup>21</sup>. Employees who have extra responsibilities such as acting as carers for family members will be able to do so with the flexibility of going into work on some days and being at home for the rest of the work.

### A Permanent Return to the Office?

In what would have seemed like an unattainable feat at the beginning of 2021, a permanent return to the office has been opted by some businesses. Up until 19<sup>th</sup> July, all non-essential workers were advised by the government to "work from home where possible", yet there was no immediate rush for them to get back into their offices. For the majority of 2020 and parts of 2021, the commercial real estate property market was plunged into uncertain territory as the demand for office space dramatically fell due to businesses operating remotely. A report from real estate company, Savills, found that London office space leased by business tenants in August 2020 had decreased to 200,000 sq ft, a way down from its average of 900,000 sq ft for the month<sup>22</sup>. With predicted vacancies in office buildings set to soar during the pandemic, it was widely believed the need for offices would become irrelevant, even prompting action from governing authorities. In April 2021, the City of London corporation announced that empty offices would be converted into more than 1,500 new homes by 2030 within the Square Mile area (which is known for its high-rise skyscrapers) to specifically accommodate for flexible working<sup>23</sup>. It is quite possible we will begin see similar planning trends being implemented soon, particularly in larger financial hubs. In a similar stance due to the popularity in online retail during the pandemic, the

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Half (2021) *UK businesses believe hybrid working is here to stay following 190% spike in remote job postings since start of pandemic*. Available at: <https://www.roberthalf.co.uk/uk-business-believe-hybrid-working-here-stay-following-190-spike-remote-job-postings-start-pandemic#main-content> (Accessed: 23 September 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Beck, V. et al. (2021) 'Working Lives', in Parker, M. (ed.) *Life After Covid-19: The Other Side of Crisis*. Bristol: University Press, pp. 59.

<sup>22</sup> Chick, S. (2020) *Office demand in a post-pandemic world*. Available at: <https://www.savills.com/impacts/market-trends/how-are-the-office-markets-faring-in-10-key-cities-around-the-world.html> (Accessed: 24 September 2021)

<sup>23</sup> BBC News (2021) *City of London to convert offices into homes in post-Covid ramp*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-56888615> (Accessed: 27 September 2021).

government made it easier for developers to convert empty buildings in declining highstreets into residential properties.

Regardless of the WFH trend, there is no doubt that the office will be required for companies in one way or another to accommodate employees' needs, particularly those who prefer the workplace environment. To do so, offices and their amenities will need to be transformed to meet new wellbeing demands which have arisen during the pandemic, such as ensuring a Covid-safe setting, an essential process which had started in the lead up to the office return. However, the office 'revolution' had already been conceptualised long before the pandemic. In 2015, Rob Harris noted that the design of office spaces had dramatically changed in the past 30 years from a setting which contained simple desk and meeting spaces into separate areas with informal meeting spaces, collaboration areas, social areas and ultimately limiting the size of total desk space<sup>24</sup>. These features will become the norm in future office designs as companies look to re-kindle the in-person cooperation between workers whilst maintaining a degree of flexibility. Oluremi Ayoko and Neal Ashkany offer support for this notion, arguing that open-plan offices as opposed to private desks will be a future office trend. However, they also identify several flaws such as noise distractions and conflicts which may impact productivity<sup>25</sup>. Furthermore, many office landlords will additionally be looking to make their properties as energy efficient as possible under a global incentive to push for a greener future. Organisations such as BREEAM (Building Research Establishment's Environmental Assessment Method) and IWBI (International WELL Building Institute) act as accreditors for a building's environmental impact and offices will be equipped to ensure a target is met in making a working area as comfortable as possible<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, attracting the best talent will also be a priority and the office will be a stand-out representation of a business to do so. Harris notes several key elements which companies should focus on in their offices to entice potential employees: space should express company values, adaptable designs, workspaces which provide collaboration for creativity,

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<sup>24</sup> Harris, R. (2015) 'The changing nature of the workplace and the future of office space', *Journal of Property Investment & Finance*, 33(5), pp. 432.

<sup>25</sup> Ashkanasy, N., Ayoko, O. (2020) 'The physical environment of office work: Future open plan offices', *Australian Journal of Management*, 45(3), pp. 496.

<sup>26</sup> Chegut, A., Eichholtz, P., Kok, N. (2014) 'Supply, Demand and the Value of Green Buildings', *Urban Studies*, 51(1), pp. 23.

shared spaces, amenities/services and creating memorable experiences through social events<sup>27</sup>.

A crucial part of any office-based business is to decide and negotiate the terms of the premises lease with their landlord. Conventionally, lease contracts have lasted between 5 and 25 years with the idea that a company will renew or move out to find another workspace, yet the past year and a half has forced companies to re-think this. The face of office occupation has also changed in recent times by becoming increasingly adaptable to meet the requirements of tenants, a factor which has taken hold during the pandemic. Serviced offices and managed spaces are workspaces in which everything is provided for the tenant such as kitchen amenities and cleaning services, which will often be shared with other occupiers. Whilst this type of office lease remains popular with larger companies looking to make a place more of their own, a sharp trend that was taking motion before the pandemic was that of co-working spaces which are run by third-party operators, rather than the office landlord. Seen as the most flexible alternative to regular leasing, co-working permits companies with smaller teams to effectively hire individual desks and meeting rooms in an office for as little or long as they want in the same space as other companies. This prevents them committing to a lengthy lease whilst having the freedom to use an office when they want as well as being able to easily create relationships with other tenants<sup>28</sup>. Harris also highlights that shared; multi-use buildings would become a common occurrence regardless of the pandemic<sup>29</sup>. This would see buildings containing a mixture of office and retail space, further highlighting the flexible trend predicted for the future.

### Provisions for Workers

Regardless of whether companies wish to adopt WFH, the hybrid model or return to the office permanently, they will need to establish provisions and protocols to fulfill the wellbeing needs of employees. The pandemic has made society more aware of the importance of checking in on mental health and businesses should make this a priority for employees moving into the post-Covid world as found in a research survey conducted

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<sup>27</sup> Harris, R. (2015), pp. 433.

<sup>28</sup> Richardson, L. (2021) 'Coordinating office space: Digital technologies and the platformization of work', *Society and Space*, 39(2), pp. 353.

<sup>29</sup> Harris, R. (2015), pp. 431.



during the peak of the pandemic by Microsoft Surface UK. Most workers (63%) felt they are not pressured by their company to return to the office and have been able to live a life not dictated by commutes and working hours; 56% feel their happiness has been increased since working from home<sup>30</sup>. The impact of the pandemic has also been felt, and companies will need to cater for this; more than a third of employees feel mental health training would be the most important aspect when learning WFH skills<sup>31</sup>. However, the balance of remote working and going into the office is certainly needed as 65% feel socialising and in-person collaboration being missed the most<sup>32</sup>. As a trend, younger people in work were more likely to suffer from mental health issues than anyone else, namely down to the lack of social interactions. This further emphasises the need for companies to remain flexible in allowing employees to use office spaces when they want<sup>33</sup>. Findings from Stephen Almond and Andrew Healey in 2003 showed that mental health problems such as anxiety and depression accounted for a continuing tendency in the highest number of lost working days due to office absences<sup>34</sup>.

Whilst specific legislation concerning a work-life balance in the United Kingdom doesn't currently exist, it is active in several European countries such as France and Spain<sup>35</sup>. Companies themselves are responsible for their employees' wellbeing in coordination with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), a government agency which encourages and regulates safe work practices. Beck *et al.* proposes that a new set of legislation should be introduced to specifically address working hour lengths and schedules for employees which would result in more productivity whilst ensuring greater wellbeing<sup>36</sup>. This would also help to combat any conflicting personal commitments for employees such as childcare. There have been recent reports in countries such as New Zealand and Iceland where companies have begun to trial four-day working weeks which have been met with overwhelmingly positive feedback from employees. Although this may not be an immediate practice in the UK, it may be a common schedule for the future.

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<sup>30</sup> Microsoft Surface UK (2020) *Work Smarter to Live Better*. Available at: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/business/work-smarter-to-live-better/> (Accessed: 29 September 2021).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Jia, R. et al. (2020) *Mental health in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic: cross-sectional analyses from a community cohort study*. London: BMJ.

<sup>34</sup> Almond, S., Healey A. (2003) 'Mental health and absence from work: new evidence from the UK Quarterly Labour Force Survey', *Work, Employment & Society*, 17(4), pp. 738.

<sup>35</sup> Grzegorzczak, M., Marinello, M., Nurski, L., Schraepen, T. (2021), pp. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Beck, V. et al. (2020), pp. 58-59.

Companies will look to implement wellbeing mechanisms for employees moving forward. Provisions may include mental health awareness days, free access to counsellors/therapists, regular company social events and time-out periods in offices, for example. Another alternative is for the structure of HR teams to change so there are members who specifically deal with the wellbeing of employees. A study by Deloitte in 2017 concluded just 22% of UK company managers had received a form of mental health training in the workplace<sup>37</sup>. A further point for companies to make note of is how their employees are commuting to work if they choose to go into the office as the pandemic may have made workers more reluctant to use public transport. Whilst this would often be the most convenient and efficient way to get to work, companies will need to be patient when it comes to the commuting process and respect to the choice of employees. Some companies may want to offer cycle to work schemes in the future to address this issue, with the government set to re-vamp national transport infrastructure in a post-Covid transformation<sup>38</sup>.

### Concluding Thoughts

When the world was hit with Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, it was impossible to predict how society would respond to the implications. Businesses have completely transformed how they operate, resulting in office workers having to adapt to a totally new style of work. It is quite possible that the pandemic has been the revolution needed for the labour market; prioritising the wellbeing and needs of employees before work. In the post-pandemic world, we will see companies become increasingly flexible in the way they function, essentially placing the power of the workplace into the hands of employees, gifting them the autonomy work in the style which suits them. It was announced in September 2021 that the government is considering making the hybrid model the default model for work, launching a Flexible Working Taskforce in the progress to oversee the transition<sup>39</sup>. With this process in motion, its highly likely the hybrid model will be the conventional way of work. Successful

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<sup>37</sup> Hampson, E., Soneji, U. (2017) *At a tipping point? Workplace mental health and wellbeing*. London: The Creative Studio at Deloitte.

<sup>38</sup> Newbery, D. (2020) *Transport policy for post-Covid UK*. Cambridge: Energy Policy Research Group.

<sup>39</sup> Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (2021) *Making flexible working the default*. London: Information Policy Team.

working experiments during the pandemic have allowed companies to prepare for the shift, as well as preparing employees for the new normal.

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