



# Work After Lockdown

## Bulletin 1

### Working-from-Home: Transitions and Tensions Webinar Thursday 10 December 2020

This was the first event in a series to share the emerging findings of the eighteen-month research project titled Work After Lockdown, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The project examines how the Covid-19 accidental experiment around working from home is changing the way the UK will work after lockdown. The webinar featured members of the Work After Lockdown research team and Professor Sir Cary Cooper responding to the findings. A webinar recording can be accessed here: [www.workafterlockdown.uk](http://www.workafterlockdown.uk)



### Context: working from home in lockdown

In July 2020 28% of the UK's employed population were working from home all of the time, according to our analysis of the Understanding Society COVID-19 national dataset. This is a huge shift from the 5% who the Office for National Statistics (ONS) report were mainly working from home before the COVID-19 crisis. In our two sectors of study, professional services and public administration, the rate of change was much higher, and those working exclusively from home account for around 50% of the workers in the two sectors. In focusing on these sectors, our findings have wider application to all jobs that were formerly office-based.

### Emerging findings

Workers have proved they are highly adaptable even in these unusual times:

- Seven in ten (73%) workers surveyed wanted to carry on working from home in some form. This desire is mirrored in the national data from Understanding Society: Covid-19 Study, where we find that around 90% of workers want at least some working from home once things get back to 'normal'.
- Nine out of ten (88.5%) employees felt that they had got more work done or as much done as in the office.
- Six out of ten (64%) workers rated the ability to work flexibly as the best feature of working from home.
- Eight out of ten workers (82%) miss the informal contact with their colleagues that the pressure of working from home has squeezed. It's this social deficit that workers feel is the worst aspect of working from home.
- But maintaining this high productivity during the pandemic takes its toll, with responses on mental health ranking at 47 out of 100, which is low as measured by the WHO5 global standard.
- Two of the key determinants of better mental health are satisfaction with your work/life balance and frequent contact with your manager. Those with line management responsibility reported lower levels of work/life balance. But the line manager plays a pivotal role. They carry the invisible load of keeping everything running, *'it's just diary saturated ... the word to use is relentless.'* An employee we interviewed said of their manager *'my manager has been extremely supportive, and I think that makes all the difference, we have very open one-to-ones and I say how I'm feeling about things. I feel really lucky.'*

### Three key themes explored by the expert panel

#### Pivotal role of Line Manager

Only 45% of line managers had received guidance on managing remotely. Yet they are vital to motivate and inspire teams and check on the well-being of co-workers. How well you adapt and adjust to a new way of working should not be down to luck. Discussion focused on codifying the qualities and competencies needed in managing a remote or hybrid workforce, as well as the support that organisations could provide around flexible job design and productivity tools. An audit of managers could pave the way for identifying those with strong people skills and those who could benefit from training, and those whose skillset is more oriented towards a technical career pathway

#### Sustaining productivity

The high levels of self-reported productivity during the early phases of the pandemic are heartening, given productivity's 'flatlining' in the UK since the Great Recession of 2008, but the question remains on how they can be sustained. Productivity is closely linked to wellbeing and plenty of contact with your line manager. We are entering a period of greater labour market uncertainty, with a worse recession than 2008, and a new relationship with the EU.

#### Wellbeing

Given the circumstances, the low levels of mental health uncovered by the research are not surprising. Pre pandemic, reported levels of stress, anxiety and depression were at 57%. By 5 May 2020, they had risen to 63% (ONS Wellbeing survey) As the job market becomes less certain, the expectation is that mental health rates will worsen.

Commenting on the research, principal investigator **Dr Jane Parry**, Director of the Centre for Research on Work and Organisations at Southampton Business School, University of Southampton said: *‘These early findings show that people made impressive adaptations in being forced to work from home with little warning. But they also show that line managers carry the burden of making the experiment work, without any let-up in their previous workload, and in large part without any training around job design. Employers need to put in place greater support for line managers as they are the glue that holds organisations together’.*

**Dr Zoe Young**, of Half the Sky said, *‘this form of flexible working has become the norm for millions of workers and our findings echo the national picture. But flexible working should mean more than just a change of location. Employers need to think carefully what a role entails and what suits the employee too. Being busy all the time is not the answer.’*

**Professor Stephen Bevan** of IES reflected, *‘these early findings suggest there is no fear about productivity dropping by being at home. But employers should take note of the low mental health scores which indicate that it is not good for employees’ wellbeing. They miss the informal contact with co-workers that being in the office brings.’*

#### What's next

Our research continues and we will be able to trace the changes as they happen and see how the key issues that we have highlighted unfold over time. Sign up at [www.workafterlockdown.uk](http://www.workafterlockdown.uk) to receive our newsletter and information on events and publications.

Work After Lockdown is an innovative research partnership of: