



Work After Lockdown: No Going Back

What we have learned working from home through the COVID-19 pandemic

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About **Work After Lockdown**

Work After Lockdown is a major research project funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research & Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19. Our research examines how enforced working from home in the UK has changed how people want to work in the future and how organisations have responded.

An innovative research partnership

Work After Lockdown is delivered by a partnership of academic and applied researchers from the university, commercial, and social sectors specialising in human resource management, and organisational behaviour. The project is led by the Department of Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management at Southampton Business School (University of Southampton), in collaboration with the Institute for Employment Studies and work design and organisational culture specialists, Half the Sky.

Work After Lockdown has brought academics and applied researchers together to investigate how enforced working from home under successive COVID-19 lockdowns has impacted how UK employees will work in the future.

About this report

The project has completed three waves of research, relating to distinct phases of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions introduced in the UK and, which enforced working from home for formerly office-based employees.

This report presents insights from the waves of data collection and summarises the learnings and implications for employers and policy makers. The authors of this report are grateful for the support and participation of a wide range of individuals and organisations in sharing their experience of living and working through the pandemic.

The themes explored in this report relate to leading organisational change; employee health and well-being; managing performance and productivity in remote teams; learning and development; promoting inclusion through new working practices; and preferences for flexible and hybrid working.



23rd March 2020 PM announces UK wide lockdown

2020-2021



England

10 May

People who cannot work from home should return to the workplace

1 June

Phased re-opening of schools

23 June

"UK national hibernation" coming to an end, easing of social distancing and other restrictions

22 September

Return to working from home

5 November

2nd LOCKDOWN

Christmas

4 days meet up only

6 January 2021

3rd LOCKDOWN

22 Feb 2021

Expected roadmap out of lockdown

8 March

Planned return of schools



Scotland

1 April

Guidance issued to non-healthcare public services to reduce virus spread and support social distancing

20 April

Guidance published on home learning

29 May

Phase 1 of routemap out of lockdown begins

19 June

Phase 2 begins

10 July

Phase 3 begins

19 July

Revised fair work statement collaborative approach needed

11 August

Pupils return to schools

10 September

Extension of localised restrictions

Christmas Day

Meet up only

5 Jan 2021

Mainland LOCKDOWN in place 'til mid-Feb



Wales

8 May

Lockdown extended for further three weeks

10 May

Stay at home slogan kept in Wales, Scotland and NI

29 June

Schools to reopen but only for one third of pupils at any one time

13 Sept

1 in 3 should still work from home even after restrictions lifted

23 Oct-9 Nov

'Firebreak' to reduce cases and people told to stay at home

Christmas Day

Meet up only

28 Dec

LOCKDOWN begins

7 Jan 2021

Schools remain closed

15 March

Schools to reopen for pupils over 8. Stay local replaces stay at home



2021-2022



England

29 March

Legal obligation to stay working from home removed but guidance to carry on WfH if you can

19 July

PM announces no need to carry on WfH employees can return to offices

September

PM unveils winter plan for COVID-19 if NHS is under sustained pressure this includes the return of face masks and return to work from home if necessary

January 2022

UK government is no longer asking people to work from home



Scotland

2 July

Scottish gov publishes COVID-19 office guidance

“In line with good practice, employers should work with their employees to consider hybrid and flexible working models to avoid a wholesale return to offices at this time”

September

Government urges businesses to allow staff to WfH until mid-January 2022



Wales

16 April

Anyone who cannot work from home entitled to free lateral flow tests

18 June

Lifting of restrictions postponed due to warning of third COVID-19 wave

7 August

Social distancing laws lifted in workplaces

December

Fear over Omicron and Welsh gov announces fines on employers and employees if people are not WfH without good reason

27 December

Employees to be fined £60 and employers £1000 for any rule breaches

28 January 2022

People should still WfH wherever possible but this is guidance not law



The analysis draws on three sources of data collected between July 2020 and December 2021:

- Analysis of the national dataset Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey (University of Essex, ISER, 2021¹);
- 2,221 survey responses to our online worker well-being and work preferences survey among employees working from home in jobs that were more office-based prior to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- 72 in-depth interviews with 46 leaders, managers, and colleagues without management responsibilities in four case study organisations selected to cover a range of geographical working experiences across the UK, as well as different organisational forms. Verbatim anonymised quotes are used throughout the report.

Focus sectors

The transition to working from home in March 2020 affected a third of UK employees and two industry sectors stood out for the scale of the pandemic-driven shift to mass working from home: Professional, Scientific and Technical (PST) and Public Administration and Defence (PAD)². Together these two industry sectors represent 1 in 7 of all UK jobs.

These two sectors are interesting because PST has a much higher percentage of white-collar, desk-based occupations relative to the rest of the UK economy, and PAD has a high proportion of key worker roles in the workforce for whom exclusive working from home is not an option.

Our case study organisations are two local authorities operating in England and Wales, and two global law firms with offices in Scotland and across the UK. In focusing on these sectors and organisational forms, our findings have wide application to all jobs that were formerly office-based, and to organisations managing workforces made up of differing proportions of office-based and non office-based workers.

Work After Lockdown traced transitions to and from enforced working from home under successive COVID-19 lockdowns in these four organisations.

1 University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2021). Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020–2021. [data collection]. 11th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8644, DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-8644-11

2 University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2020). Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020. [data collection]. 6th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8644, <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8644-6>



Tracing change through time

Work After Lockdown adopts a longitudinal approach, tracing the experiences and outcomes of pandemic-driven working from home for employees and organisations through time. The great benefit of longitudinal research such as this is the ability to ask questions of the same people multiple times which builds up a picture of personal and organisational change and continuity. We are able to examine how much has changed and how much has stayed the same.

Our first report: *Working from Home under COVID-19 lockdown: Transitions and Tensions* examined the period of rapid change to mass working from home under the first national lockdowns of March–June 2020. This period was characterised by upheaval and uncertainty to which the majority of employers and employees responded with compliance and remarkable adaptability.

In the latter part of 2020 it was becoming clear that pandemic-driven working from home would continue for much longer than anyone could have imagined. Our *Work After Lockdown* research walked alongside employers and employees as they adapted to the changing pandemic context through 2020 and 2021. The second wave of our data collection in May–July 2021 was timed to capture the preparation and anticipation of a return to offices. It was at that point ‘hybrid working’ became a commonly used description of both employers’ strategies for transition and individual employees’ preferred working patterns.

The third wave of data collection in November and December 2021 considered employers’ and employees’ reflections of the pandemic experience and their expectations about their future working arrangements. Findings from all three waves are brought together in this final report.

Work After Lockdown traced transitions to and from enforced working from home under successive COVID-19 lockdowns in four organisations. Two professional services firms in the legal sector and two local authorities participated as case study organisations.

Definitions

Hybrid working is about *where* work happens. A hybrid working pattern refers to a blend of home-based and office-based working, which may be fixed or fluid in terms of the proportion of time spent in either location in a typical week.

Flexible working extends to more variations of hours, schedule and location of work. A flexible working pattern, practice or arrangement refers to any adaptation to the standard hours, schedule and location of work.



Lessons from Lockdowns

Hybrid working is the new workforce expectation. The evidence of our research is that there has been a permanent mindset shift around how work can be organised, and that, “the grand experiment that nobody wanted has worked.”

Attention should now be on maximising the opportunity to embed the more successful working practices that have emerged over the past two years into the next phase of change in global labour markets.

The message from our research is that while many of us will welcome the opportunity to return to the communality of offices, there can be no going back to expectations for universal office presence.

The default has shifted in employees’ preferences for hybrid working. Our analysis shows that a close alignment between employees’ work preferences and the flexibility options that their employer offers is a key driver of recruitment, retention and performance.

Navigating the post-pandemic transition to permanent hybrid working requires finding a balance between the employers’ need for control (over outputs) and the employees’ desire to choose how, when and where they work (to balance productivity with their broader commitments).

Working from home through lockdowns and the first forays into hybrid working called upon managers to refine a new set of skills that included supporting well-being, initiating conversations around working preferences, managing virtual connections, ensuring effective induction for new starters, delivering on-the-job learning, and developing outcome-based performance measurements. To do these well takes dedicated time and resources.

Humanised and personalised workforce relations have developed over the lockdowns alongside a growing awareness of teammates’ different circumstances.

New working practices have evolved over this period which can enhance the workplaces of the future and include: the death of paperwork; digital collaboration and team-working; enhanced time management; and more flexible working hours.

The digital skills development leap that has been achieved over the past two years positions organisations well to continue to innovate services, and to enhance virtual communications among teams.



Leadership has been tested in many ways through the pandemic. Those individuals at the top of organisations adept at inclusive leadership have been most successful – creating safety and stability, listening to, involving and motivating their people. Nuanced, deliberate, and personal communication by senior leaders has been essential to creating a climate of trust.

The evidence of our research highlights both the demands on organisations and their employees to ensure continuity through a period of disruption, and the resources that have proved essential for individual and organisational performance. We have identified seven areas to pay close attention to as we enter the post-pandemic period:

- **Technology:** continued investment in digital infrastructure enables hybrid working. At the most practical level, when people work in two places they will need to have easy access to IT resources from both locations.
- **Inclusion:** there must be parity of opportunity for people who may be mostly or entirely home based with those more regularly working in an office. Employers should review the equality, diversity and inclusion impacts of hybrid strategies and remedy potential exclusionary practices. A very practical activity is to take steps to ensure every meeting is an inclusive hybrid meeting, with video dial-in opportunity, led by a chair that need not be in the office, and ensuring contribution from all.
- **Democratic decision-making:** throughout lockdowns and occasional returns to offices, teams have benefited from high involvement in designing their own ways of working that take account of individual working pattern preferences and organisational needs. In transitioning to hybrid models, teams should be involved in designing ways of working and curating office spaces to suit their needs.
- **Job Analysis:** corporate transition to hybrid working is greatly assisted by clearer understanding of the time and place constraints on tasks that require people to be on-site at particular times. Pre-pandemic, this type of job analysis was not routine, and only ever undertaken in response to an individual's request for a flexible working arrangement. Post-pandemic, employers should analyse and cluster jobs into particular work styles based on their time and location requirements and make this information available to all recruitment candidates and existing employees. Transparency and clarity about what a hybrid arrangement looks like in every role is essential to trust, inclusion, and smooth transition.
- **Line management:** Well-being should be first and foremost in managers' concerns and conversation as individuals prepare for post-pandemic hybrid working. Empathetic listening is an important skill, and key to engagement.
- **Communication and messaging:** Frequent and personal communication by leaders was an essential aid in guiding their organisations through lockdown. This was informed by checking-in regularly with employees and using quick 'pulse' surveys. These methods of insight and communication should continue though this next period of change.
- **HRM practices:** Induction and on-boarding of new starters has been a weak spot during the pandemic, and needs more deliberate facilitation by managers to help inclusion and optimise performance.



Gains and losses through time

In this section we consider the impact on individuals and organisations of extended working from home. We consider the gains, the losses and the learning that employees and employers have taken from this experience. First, we place that analysis in context by reporting on the scale and fluctuations in working from home across an 18 month pandemic period between April 2020 and September 2021.





Hybrid working is very much the norm in Professional, Scientific and Technical industries, and in Public Administration and Defence, with close to three-quarters of employees working from home some of the time 18 months after the first lockdown.

Working from home in context

Exclusive working from home, that is working from home all the time, was relatively rare before the first national lockdown in March 2020. Across all industries, around 2.7% of employees were always working from home in January/February 2020. At the same time around a quarter of all UK employees were working from home at least sometimes (24.9%). That picture changed dramatically, rising by April 2020, to almost a third of the UK's employed workforce working exclusively from home (31.4%).

The adjustment was even more dramatic in our focus sectors of PST and PAD, whereby in June 2020 (Figure 1) over half of employees were working from home all the time. Even Public Administration and Defence (PAD), which had much lower rates of exclusive working from home prior to the pandemic, experienced a shift far greater than the national average. By September 2020, the proportion of all employees exclusively working from home levelled at around 21%, but remained more than double in PST and PAD.

The subsequent lockdowns of late 2020 to early 2021 again brought exclusive working from home up to around 30%. However, the easing and gradual removal of lockdown restrictions during 2021 resulted in an exclusive working from home rate of 15.5% across all industries in September 2021.

Hybrid working is very much the norm in Professional, Scientific and Technical industries, and in Public Administration and Defence, with close to three-quarters of employees working from home some of the time 18 months after the first lockdown.

The scale of hybrid working patterns in the workforce is signalled by the proportion of employees who report working from home 'at least sometimes'. Hybrid dominates the pattern of working in our two focus industries. Rates are far high than the national average which reached its peak in January 2021 at 47.3% compared to 77.3% (PST) and 74.9% (PAD) in the same period.



As of September 2021, which is the latest date for which data are available, there was very little change in occasional working from home. Mirroring the situation across all industries, occasional working from home was the norm among the two sectors' employees: around 75% of employees in PST, and 70% of those in PAD, were working from home at least sometimes during that month. What these data tell us very clearly are that hybrid working patterns are persisting, at least for the time being.

A full demographic profile of the working from home population is included in Annex B.

Figure 1. Proportions of employees that worked from home by sector

	All industries		Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities (PST)		Public Administration and Defence (PAD)	
	Always	At least sometimes	Always	At least sometimes	Always	At least sometimes
Before lockdown*	2.7%	24.9%	4.1%	53.2%	1.5%	38.9%
April 2020	31.4%	46.1%	...	...	...	...
May 2020	30.9%	45.8%	...	...	...	...
June 2020	28.7%	43.6%	56.0%	73.0%	54.8%	69.9%
July 2020	25.4%	42.6%	51.3%	75.2%	49.9%	64.6%
September 2020	20.9%	39.9%	...	...	...	...
November 2020	23.7%	42.7%	...	...	...	...
January 2021	30.9%	47.3%	59.5%	77.3%	53.3%	74.9%
March 2021	26.9%	44.8%	53.8%	77.3%	52.2%	76.7%
September 2021	15.5%	40.0%	31.0%	74.5%	37.7%	69.3%

*January / February 2020.

Source: Understanding Society COVID-19 Study, Waves 1-9, and authors' calculations.



Gains and losses through time

As working from home lost its novelty value, new working practices became established and refined, and people became more aware of the longer-term benefits of working in this way, for both individuals and organisations. In this section we present data drawn from our well-being survey and our interviews with organisational leaders, managers and colleagues about their experience of leading, managing and maintaining performance through successive cycles of lockdown.

Figure 2. Gains and losses through time





Sustained gains from extended working from home

Improved team relationships

As organisations wrestled with what aspects they needed to prioritise sustaining during the pandemic, the importance of people rose to the surface. Time and again, managers talked about the centrality of staff ‘pulling together’ in making a success of coming through an unexpected situation,

“our people were phenomenal and just kind of dug in and leaned in ... and I think everybody felt really proud of that.” (leader, law firm)

“People being more willing to help someone else and show them. I think in the old environment, people were too busy to take time. So one of the things that I hope all organisations hold onto is that humanity and compassion.” (leader, local authority)

Given that work colleagues could no longer connect in person, it was essential to find a way of maintaining and enhancing inter-team relationships if organisations were to function as usual; technology was a key facilitator that enabled the switch to be made to working from home, while sustaining relationships between teams.

The cohesive effect of having worked together through a crisis to provide business continuity served to improve team relationships:

“I think there’s been some stronger connections made”. Lacking an option but to develop relationships online, employees found effective ways of doing so, **“and I think in this way we’ve developed our resilience and flexibility as a team.”**

This kind of collaboration was echoed through organisations; senior leaders had by necessity curated more regular meetings at the start of the lockdown, becoming closer and more effective as a result, **“I think throwing us all together two years ago on a daily basis via Teams for an hour every day just changed the relationships.”**

There was also some consensus that because people necessarily had to step outside of their traditional roles during the pandemic, in order to keep organisations functioning effectively, their inter-departmental knowledge and relationships deepened. A leader in a local authority also felt that the experience had **“brought the citizen closer into focus for people because we could see how they continue [to use] services, and how citizens were reliant on them to keep the wheels running,”** which in turn enhanced how staff performed their jobs.



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Increased managerial trust of remote working

An important way in which the intense and prolonged experience of working from home had shifted workplace relationships, was in terms of increased trust between managers and staff. An agile working lead talked about how the law firm had previously been quite low-trust and transactional about remote working, but that this was improving, ***“before it was a choice to give it, and now you’ve just got to give it and hope for the best that your team perform.”***

The pandemic period had amassed evidence for managers that their teams would rise to the challenge and that staff, ***“have a great pride in what they do, want to give their all, really care about making an impact and getting the job done well... we’ve all had the opportunity to prove we can do that whilst not sitting under the managers’ noses each day.”***

For some, the pandemic had provided the opportunity to change gear, and for organisations to connect with staff in a more caring way, as a manager of a law firm reflected, ***“treating people individually and not thinking there’s one blanket policy that covers everyone.”***

At an organisational level, the large-scale evidence that working from home could successfully be applied to a large volume of jobs, was shifting mindsets around how work could be organised in the future.

“Six months before the pandemic happened, if you’d asked anyone [here], ‘Would you be able to do your job from home?’ they’d all say no. And the fact that technology has allowed us to do it from home I think has been a real positive.”

Some felt that the experience was shifting the presenteeism organisational culture that had been seemingly ingrained into organisations, ***“I think that it’s enabled us to see that we can work remotely, people do get on with the job and the council hasn’t fallen apart, so it can work.”***

A manager talked about a major culture shift having taken place in the organisation, ***“I can remember having conversations with some of my team... they couldn’t actually see why they would work from home. Whereas I think that’s completely turned on its head... they see that more as having to come in when I need to rather than the other way around, so I think it’s really shifted the emphasis.”***

From the employee perspective too, there was a strong perception that some of the previous managerial resistance to flexible working practices had been countered with evidence of working from home’s effectiveness, which was creating a climate of more organisational openness.

“Six months before the pandemic happened, if you’d asked anyone here, ‘Would you be able to do your job from home?’ they’d all say no.”



Reduced commuting time and travel costs

Without doubt a valued and sustained gain for employees was less time commuting and the reduced costs associated with it, particularly among those working in London. The time saved was invested in alternative ways, both with people's families and in enhancements to their role. People with families very often commented on how much they valued being able to eat and relax with their children. There was a lot of discussion about the convenience of being able to walk children to school, take deliveries in, eat healthily, or simply put the washing out, all aspects which had positive impacts on their health and motivation.

“The best thing about this is that I’ve had that quality time to be able to be not just a mum that goes to work, because I feel like I’m able to be involved and engaged.”

For more senior leaders, not having to regularly travel to meetings some distance from their workplace offered another time and energy saving. These temporal gains had clear and attributable benefits for organisations, where interviewees frequently made large additional time investments in their work where they were not devoting ‘dead time’ to commuting.

In the law firms there was evidence of ongoing change around how travel fitted into their working practices. One law firm had recently developed a Thoughtful Travel policy, encouraging staff to reflect on the importance of journeys, and whether they could be bundled together.

For example, an interviewee was planning how she would use the time to make meaningful connections with staff when visiting the office, rather than just attending meetings, as she could have done online, **“I think it’s just thinking about what you want to achieve and why are you travelling.”**

The travel discussion was also being tied into environmental sustainability targets. An international law firm that had previously incorporated travel into its team-building practices, was able to reduce it by half, partly because other forms of collaboration had been fostered during the pandemic, and it did not see travel ever returning to previous levels.

Improved productivity and new measures

There is no objective measure of productivity for use in surveys, and most UK employers do not routinely collect data on output per hour worked. So, for our survey we asked employees to tell us whether or not they felt their own productivity has changed since before lockdown and after a sustained period of working from home. By this self-reported measure of productivity, we found at two points in the pandemic close to two thirds of employees (61.7% in 2020 and 68.9% in 2021) felt they got much more or a little more work done at home compared to when they were in the office.

Productivity in our two focus sectors remained consistently high and there was no drop in self-reported productivity through the phases of the pandemic even once half of our respondents had moved to a hybrid working pattern. Comparing those who were, in 2021, still mainly working from home with those who were mainly working exclusively in an office or on work premises, self-reported productivity was still higher in the working from home group.



Gains and losses through time



The shift to working from home prompted managers to re-engage with how productivity could be measured in terms of outputs rather than visible hours in the office.



Our findings echo those of other studies of people working from home during the pandemic. Recent data from ONS have shown that UK productivity across the economy rose during the core months of lockdown^{3,4}.

Reflecting both the investment of commuting time into active work time, and the release from day-to-day disruptions of working in communal office spaces, leaders and managers remarked upon improved productivity during the pandemic period.

“often in the office I would struggle to do dedicated pieces of work because it was an open plan, people would just come up and ask you things, whereas at least at home I can turn Teams off or say I’m busy and focus, so that’s nice sometimes rather than chopping and changing between tasks and then not really doing any of them terribly well.”

Another manager explained how it had become easier for her to manage interruptions when these were mediated by electronic communications, and she could thus prioritise her time more effectively, **“I think that working from home does make the workplace more efficient because it removes the chat essentially, like you don’t have anything to do other than your work.”** A leader in a law firm commented that, **“probably the client meetings are more productive when they’re on Zoom because you don’t have the social niceties.”** A manager in a local authority witnessed a qualitative change in how staff were approaching their jobs, concluding that the autonomy of working from home naturally facilitated productivity:

“I think what working from home has done, it’s given people ownership of their job, so they no longer feel that they’re managed, or that their manager is watching them ... it’s their job and they’ve taken ownership of that, and they’re proud of what they’re doing and they want to show off their work, so I think that’s been a real positive.”

A part of this was the flexibility that staff had shown in adapting to an unplanned situation: a willingness to work differently that managers were keen to retain and which they considered would be invaluable in tackling the next stage of workplace changes.

The shift to working from home prompted managers to re-engage with how productivity could be measured in terms of outputs rather than visible hours in the office. Our participants in local authorities repeatedly spoke of the potential this offered to develop more effective working practices around hybrid, and the opportunity to re-analyse job roles. Rather differently, law firms have long drawn upon a utilisation model of costing, expecting solicitors to be able to bill around 80% of their time to clients. However, it was recognised that the pressure to compete had been driving this target, and in the context of the well-being issues that the pandemic had seen around work intensification, discussions were increasingly turning to more sustainable ways of measuring productivity.

3 Reuschke, D. and Felstead, A. (2021), “A flash in the pan or a permanent change? The growth of homeworking during the pandemic and its effect on employee productivity in the UK. Information Technology & People. (doi:10.1108/ITP-11-2020-0758).

4 <https://www.ft.com/content/ec40ebba-3b3c-4797-ad12-14569afe9f28>



Estate efficiencies and innovation in office design

The pandemic was making organisations think about not only how they used buildings, but where these were located. For example, an interviewee talked about how the council offices were poorly placed for public transport links, which encouraged a culture of car use. Consequently, parking and congestion issues were being much more seriously considered once alternative ways of working were possible. In practical terms too, mass working from home was enabling organisations to reconfigure buildings in a way that would otherwise have been disruptive to work. In cases where this reduced the footprint of a building, cost savings could be made which was welcomed by financially-stretched local authorities.

Changing how space could be used also applied to organisations moving to a different building. Where leases were expiring, the pandemic could be a catalyst to think about space better suited to hybrid working. One local authority had already scheduled a move before the pandemic and expected it to be challenging. However, prolonged working from home loosened workers' attachment to the old building, and it was easier to 'sell' the move to staff. They could combine getting used to a new building at the same time as taking on new and more flexible ways of working. The renovated building would house partner organisations as well as local authority staff. Another local authority owned their own outdated building and its limitations had become obvious during the pandemic. They could now explore how it could be run as a broader public sector hub.

Going paperless

Staff working from home got out of the habit of printing documents. For organisations that had targets to go paperless, this was a clear gain. Many participants in our interviews described the move to paperless as 'transformational' with cost savings for organisations. Workers, and particularly the solicitors we interviewed, talked about how they worked with documents differently during the pandemic; whereas previously this had involved close-up working with a marked-up document, during lockdowns this moved to sharing and editing documents online with more collaborative and auditable ways of working.

Part of this difference was getting better at focusing on online documents, *"I read things on screen a lot more efficiently than I used to. I've taught myself that,"* and using space differently in terms of the work and filing space this involved. This was not to say that adaptations had been straightforward; one solicitor still found it difficult to navigate long documents online, but she addressed this by purchasing her own iPad, which made the process of marking-up documents much easier. People talked about the radical change in their personal work practices which this represented, going from printing every day, to not at all, and the culture change it posed for organisations: something that would not have been achieved without the extreme circumstances necessitating the change.

Staff working from home got out of the habit of printing documents. For organisations that had targets to go paperless, this was a clear gain.



Better quality meetings

As workforces shifted to electronic communications to support home-based working, many senior interviewees observed increased participation in meetings. Virtual meetings had become more convenient to schedule and easier to attend, which on some level made them more inclusive and ensured that a wider range of perspectives could be included in decision-making. The ease of convening virtual meetings also offered a real advantage in that team meetings could be rapidly organised to discuss pressing issues. People were also developing more efficient time management practices around their participation, such as being able to ‘dip into meetings’ around relevant agenda items, or cutting the length of meetings from a pre-pandemic standard hour, to 30 or 45 minutes.

Virtual meetings also enabled people to be systematic about their interactions, keeping minutes of meetings in the chat, and sharing relevant documentation there or on a separate Teams channel. A senior lawyer felt that video calling would be a permanent change in working practices, particularly as this could reduce the firm’s carbon footprint and costs.

Law firms reported that the pandemic had illustrated that physical meetings for clients were largely unnecessary since DocuSign could be used as an alternative, and that they were more about formality and occasion than functionality. Furthermore, positive feedback had been received from clients who had previously found having to attend a physical signing inconvenient. Similarly, a local authority officer explained how he had used the opportunity of remote working to raise the issue with his manager about whether

clients necessarily wanted to attend sites to access a service, and that they should be given the option of a telephone conversation or video call. Local authority leaders were particularly enthusiastic about the way the pandemic had accelerated electronic communications with their electorate, potentially increasing their reach.

Improved access to work

It was also noted that the ability to work remotely had a positive impact in terms of keeping people in work who otherwise would have retired on ill health grounds, and that this was likely to have positive impacts in promoting a more inclusive workforce around disability:

“If they wanted to stay in work they could, because it’s much easier to do the adaptations for one person in their home than for an entire workplace, so you see what I mean? So I think there’s some real opportunity with stuff like that in the future.” (local authority leader)

The gains around less debilitating health conditions were also sustained, with a number of employees explaining that working from home enabled them to manage conditions such as migraine or anxiety in a way that wouldn’t have been possible in the office. Supporting this, a local authority chief executive noted that when COVID-19 was taken out of the equation, staff sickness levels had been reduced during the pandemic, **“we’re getting higher levels of well-being and therefore higher levels of attendance at work through people working remotely.”**



New digital skills

As a direct result of their need to adopt a new set of technologies in order to perform their jobs, workforces developed new digital skills around the software platforms used to communicate, and have become more sophisticated at utilising their functionalities, ***“I think everybody’s got more skilled at operating in a digital world because you’ve had to do it.”***

The pandemic embedded the importance of staff keeping their digital skills up-to-date. Common themes were how people had learnt to use the technology in more proficient and adaptive ways over time; for example, in sharing documents that could be collaborated upon in real time, using instant messaging services to communicate with colleagues in real time, or break-out rooms to pursue specialist issues within a larger meeting.

People felt that they would not have developed their digital skills, or kept their skills up to date, but for the nudge of the pandemic

New management skills around remote working

People also developed a new skillset around remote working. Honed over time it included aspects like time management and managing teams remotely. These new working practices helped to set boundaries while working at home, when people’s days were not structured by established office protocols. For example, a trainee solicitor talked about her twin strategy of parcelling off the periods that she considered empty pockets of office time, and using them to take some physical exercise, marking up her status as unavailable, and also using her previous commuting time to focus on tasks that required concentration.

A local authority employee talked about how she had learnt to develop boundary management techniques to stop work being piled on her in a way that was unsustainable, and that this was about ***“being comfortable and being kind to myself, and managing my emotional and physical health and well-being, rather than again working later to meet somebody’s deadline just because they think I’m still available.”*** An HR manager was conscious that the constant Teams meetings that characterised remote working were creating considerable follow-up work, and she needed to be ever more organised to stay on top of it.

Multi-tasking became more common, such as being able to attend to administrative matters during meetings that did not require staff’s continuous input, in a way that would not have been possible in-person. Running effective online meetings was an area in which many managers felt that they had rapidly accumulated skills, learning to manage the chat function and develop a deeper responsiveness to staff concerns, and developing protocols to ensure that meetings were inclusive and resulted in good decision-making.



We heard many stories about innovation in adapting home workspace to become as productive as possible working remotely, and notably people liked the flexibility they had to adapt this workspace in a way that may not have been feasible in the office. Managing multiple communications became a normalised way of working, and perhaps a more cognitively challenging one, as one manager explained, describing how she ran a recent conference:

“I’ll have my laptop, my screen where I’ll be running the presentation, be viewing the chat bars. And I’ll have the presentation and the next slides and running order on my iPad, so I’ll have three things running simultaneously. And in the past I’ve also had WhatsApp on my phone to communicate with the presenters.”

A vital part of being a good manager in the pandemic climate was taking on the issue of workforce well-being. An HR manager in a law firm explained that staff well-being had emerged as a key issue about six months into lockdown; the organisation had realised that they did not know enough about what staff needed, and put in training for managers to get better at connecting with staff: **“we think a lot about coaching our managers to have conversations, whether that’s about retention, whether that’s about how someone’s feeling, how it’s going in terms of their development, being better equipped to have quality conversations.”** She felt that self-support was equally important within teams, and managers could cultivate a culture where it was encouraged to share vulnerabilities and support one another. Connecting with staff could be more challenging for managers starting posts remotely, as a senior new starter commented, **“I didn’t feel connected straight away, it took me longer to feel connected.”**

An essential new skillset for managing virtual teams was being able to effect productive conversations with their staff around well-being, which could be more challenging remotely and require more deliberate and nuanced efforts than they might in-person where subtle facial and body language cues can be interpreted. A remote conversation requires more listening to what is being said and what is left unsaid. An IT manager commented that engagement with well-being was not necessarily more work, but it was more deliberate than the slightly more automatic way in which managers had previously operated: it was about changing the habits of management. He described his own biggest managerial learning as being, **“the kindness, be kind, be empathetic.”**

Managers spoke a lot about the importance of scheduling regular meetings with their teams and direct reports to capture well-being issues. One senior manager explained that she ran weekly team meetings with staff, but varied the pace of these, operating them on a rotating basis to focus on different aspects of work, such as well-being, performance, and problem-solving.

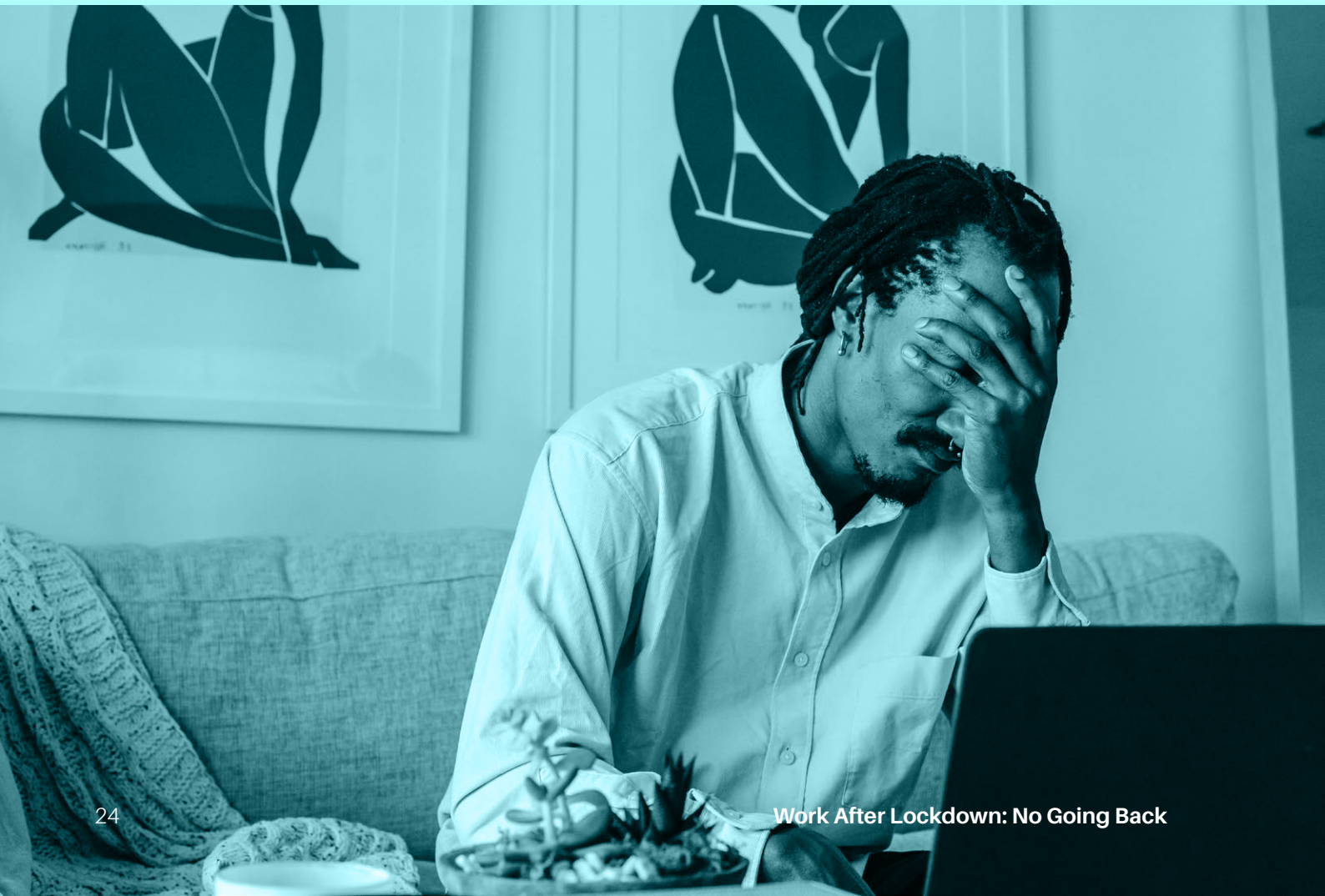
A manager described his own biggest managerial learning as being, “the kindness, be kind, be empathetic.”



Business Model Innovation

Technology has become a much more important part of how organisations connected with clients and communities during lockdowns, and they became more aware of diversity in communities through a conscious effort not to exclude anyone. Digital inclusion has become an issue that local authorities in particular were much more engaged with, in terms of how this affected different demographic groups that they represented, ***“So our business model was always to move in that direction: this has given a sort of fillip to that, but it’s also given a bigger priority behind protecting those people who may be disadvantaged as a result.”***

Chief executives in local authorities talked about the pandemic ‘super-charging’ their intended direction of travel to online service provision. Pre-pandemic, the shift online represented the single biggest change to the organisation’s business model, with greater use of artificial intelligence, chat bots, and automation of transactional processes helping to transform operations.





Tensions and losses arising from extended working from home

Sustained working from home has seen a number of tensions accumulate, to which organisations were actively seeking to develop effective responses so that the significant gains of the pandemic period were not diminished by these challenges.

More complicated communications with teams

Sitting alongside the positive gains around team-working, were that connections could also be complicated by virtual working. Some managers raised concerns that where communications with their staff had become more functional, they could miss important aspects about what was going on, and conversations could be misinterpreted and become more complicated than they might have been in person.

A manager who had newly started a job in an organisation felt that there was a lot of back-reading that she needed to do to help her accurately understand a situation, but that also having non-work conversations with her staff was an important part of getting to know them and being able to work efficiently:

“I think [casual conversations] was probably one of the biggest things that I found missing ... I felt as if it took me longer to settle in to my role.”

Another manager raised a concern that where contacts with staff were driven entirely by meetings, the quality of workplace connections might be diminished.

Poor quality line management

The role and responsibility of line managers altered dramatically during the pandemic, providing a period of intense learning for managers, as well as for organisations in terms of the characteristics that they would be looking for in their future managers. A frequent reflection was that there had been a ‘mindset change’ about effective ways of managing people, because lockdown **“forced them to reach out to people, to ask questions, to spend time talking to people, to reach out in a way that they wouldn’t have done before.”**

Not all managers had adjusted in this way to support their staff, some remained resistant to change, and this could be associated with a conviction that their methods were unalterably right. One manager in a law firm felt that this tendency aligned with lawyers, **“lawyers are quite hierarchical and stuffy, so they’re not probably known for their management of others’ skills.”**

Another manager in a local authority commented that while flexibility was now centre stage of how to manage effectively, **“a lot of our managers, people who’ve ended up being managers really, struggle with the concept of flexibility.”** With the move towards hybrid working, there is recognition that managers might need support in how to start conversations with people about new working practices, particularly as this could have important implications for retention.



Social deficit diminishes team-working

A slightly different issue was that workplace relationships often went beyond the functional, and that colleagues missed one another. A manager who had plenty of online contact with her staff, still commented that sometimes **“working from home can be quite lonely,”** and that the emphasis was on productivity rather than interaction.

While everyone was forced to adapt to new virtual ways of working, many remained conscious about what they were missing. For example, a male associate solicitor in his 20s talked about missing the social side of office life, and that he had chosen to work for his employer in part because the organisation was known for having good office space and social life, **“I’m looking forward to getting that back, so I guess I have missed it to an extent.”** And a graduate trainee reflected, **“I think that working from home does make the workplace more efficient because it removes the chat essentially, like you don’t have anything else to do other than your work.”** The concern is that over the long-term this missing level of connection in work relationships could diminish team-working capacity.

Lost opportunities for on-the-job learning

A consequence of extended working from home for a group of employees who were at the start of their careers, was lost training and development opportunities. They had been unable to observe from senior colleagues how their role should be performed and how it fitted into the organisation. This gap was accompanied by a sense that their skills and professional knowledge lagged behind earlier generations. A manager in a law firm explained:

“ours is a knowledge industry and a lot of it is assimilated on the job, like you do stuff, you understand what you’ve done wrong and then you don’t do that wrong thing on the next transaction. So if no-one’s explaining to you what you’ve done wrong, there is no book you can go to read, there is no training that you can attend to fill in those gaps.”

To counter this, managers in law firms were implementing check-ins with junior staff to ensure that they did not miss out on developing the professional skills that would ordinarily be picked up through observation when they were in the office. Seniors might ask clients if their trainee could sit in on meetings without expecting a contribution, and run feedback sessions afterwards, questioning the trainee on their learning. This kind of experiential learning is not written down anywhere and necessitates a different kind of consideration in a virtual working climate.



This perceived deficit in learning opportunities could have longer-term consequences both upon young people's future career trajectories, but also upon repositories of organisational knowledge. There is emerging evidence that managers are having to address this training deficit as a matter of business priority,

“their focus is around making sure that in this whole work from home revolution you don't miss out, the training doesn't drop because five years down the line you'll suddenly have a spate of bad lawyers making a lot of mistakes and then where are you as a business?”

This could also have an impact upon organisational culture and motivation, where new starts found it more difficult to learn about an organisation, and to feel involved. Some managers were already observing that new starts were relatively lacking in the softer skills that it was more challenging to acquire remotely, such as understanding working norms and sustaining collegial relationships.

Over 40% of our survey respondents reported experiencing fatigue, far more than in the first period of lockdown in 2020.

Fatigue

A number of managers raised well-being concerns among their staff, some of which were related to the lack of certainty about how long the situation would persist and what their future working environments would look like.

Our well-being survey measured any changes in physical and mental well-being over the 18 month pandemic period. Overall, we found that there had been small reductions in the proportion of people experiencing physical ailments such as poor sleep, musculoskeletal problems, eye strain, headaches and migraines. The fatiguing effect of sustained working from home and remotely from colleagues was obvious. Eighteen months into the pandemic response over 40% of survey respondents reported fatigue. This is far more than in the first lockdown of 2020.

On an emotional level some people found working from home to be a draining experience; a leader observed that this was particularly true of extroverts **“fatigue is definitely setting in for people who were kind of optimistic and positive about it at the beginning.”** People commented on getting into the habit of eating at their desk and working longer hours at home, dealing with additional emails, **“knowing when to switch off is a challenge.”**

People's adjustments to working from home changed over time, and some managers observed that while people had initially invested huge efforts into pulling together, at some point a realisation had hit them that working from home would be longer-term, and an increase in **‘tetchiness’** was observed, manifested in behaviours like difficult emails or people keeping their cameras switched off in meetings, **“people were entering into a spiral... HR were sort of seeing an uptick in pre-grievance activity.”**



“I think we definitely went through a tough spell as an organisation, and certainly as teams, and certainly as individuals working together.”

Another manager noted that when there had been a difficulty redeploying a staff member to another team, the process had become more complex and protracted than it might have been in person, **“some of the issues I think could have been nipped in the bud ... being remote allowed them to fester.”** Managers reported finding such situations quite draining to resolve, so well-being concerns, among even a small group of employees, could have broader impacts upon the organisation.

Managers also reported that staff’s anxieties about returning to offices, in a climate where hybrid working discussions were becoming more apparent, were mounting in situations where there was uncertainty, such as when the Omicron variant was identified in late 2021. People who lived alone and had experienced limited social contacts during lockdowns, might feel particularly anxious about returning to offices and require more support. Whereas for others, they may have been feeling increasingly lonely as time went on and be keen to return.

“I think the 9 to 5 has just gone, I don’t think it’s there anymore.”

Well-being ups and downs

Using the World Health Organisation Five Well-being Index (WHO-5) to measure well-being in 2020, on average our survey respondents in both sectors scored 47 out of 100 which was relatively low, compared to other surveys of UK and EU workers using the same measure at that early stage of pandemic restrictions.

Personal factors that complicated extended working from home experiences included the difficulty of balancing home and work commitments, particularly when work was intensified, and children’s needs had escalated with periods of isolation, illness, and a further period of remote learning for parents to support. So too when both partners in a couple were permanently working from home, this could place pressure on the relationship, or at least shift its dynamic when their contact with one another was in a business context for a large part of the day.

There has been a significant improvement in employee well-being over the 18 month pandemic period. Scores on the WHO-5 index rose from 47 out of 100 in 2020 to 68 in 2021.

In 2020, we found significant differences in well-being between those with caring responsibilities, and those with management responsibility, which reflected the limited care and educational support in place during the first period of lockdown, and the pressure experienced by line managers to maintain team performance through the crisis while simultaneously transitioning to new ways of working.



In 2021, there were no significant differences in well-being by gender, age, caring responsibilities or levels of management responsibility. We also found improvements in the well-being support being offered by employers, with an increase in the proportion of respondents having a health and safety assessment (from 40% in 2020 to 48% in 2021), and small increases in the proportion able to access occupational health and Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) support.

Work intensification

The idea of a uniform set of working hours had been challenged during lockdowns, ***“I think the 9 to 5 has just gone, I don’t think it’s there anymore.”*** For working parents the autonomy to schedule when they worked during a day or evening, or even weekend, was a coping strategy that enabled many to reconcile competing demands and to increase their productivity. An HR manager in a local authority observed that she was seeing a trend from people who had previously been part-time and working within fixed hours, to request going full-time, and she saw this as being a phenomenon that organisations stood to benefit from, and that could provide a boon for women’s and primary carers’ careers.

One of the paradoxes of this period is that while there has been greater managerial recognition that people had multiple commitments during lockdown and needed to work more flexibly; at the same time employees reported that their managers expected them to be contactable outside of the working day. The ease and increased use of digital communications has led to what has been described as ‘always on’ culture.

“there was more of an expectation to check in, or be close, actually to keep my phone with me all the time”

For some staff this was a new expectation that they could be contacted outside of their working hours. A combination of extended expectations around availability and the stretching of the working day around previous commuting hours, has led to work intensification. Staff are frequently working longer hours than they would have been expected to in the workplace, a phenomenon which may have positive consequences for organisations in terms of productivity, but which is not necessarily sustainable or desirable in terms of staff well-being and retention.

Early labour market exit

We asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they intended to stay with their organisation, as this can be a measure of morale, motivation and commitment. Over 90% of respondents reported that they intended to stay in their job for at least one year. This is a positive indication of labour stability at a time when there is considerable turbulence in the labour market and commentary around resignation rates and labour turnover. However, we found that 26% of our respondents reported that they were considering retiring early. This echoes the trend during the pandemic of a significant proportion of older workers dropping out of the labour market⁵.

5 <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/working-well-how-pandemic-changed-work-people-health-conditions>



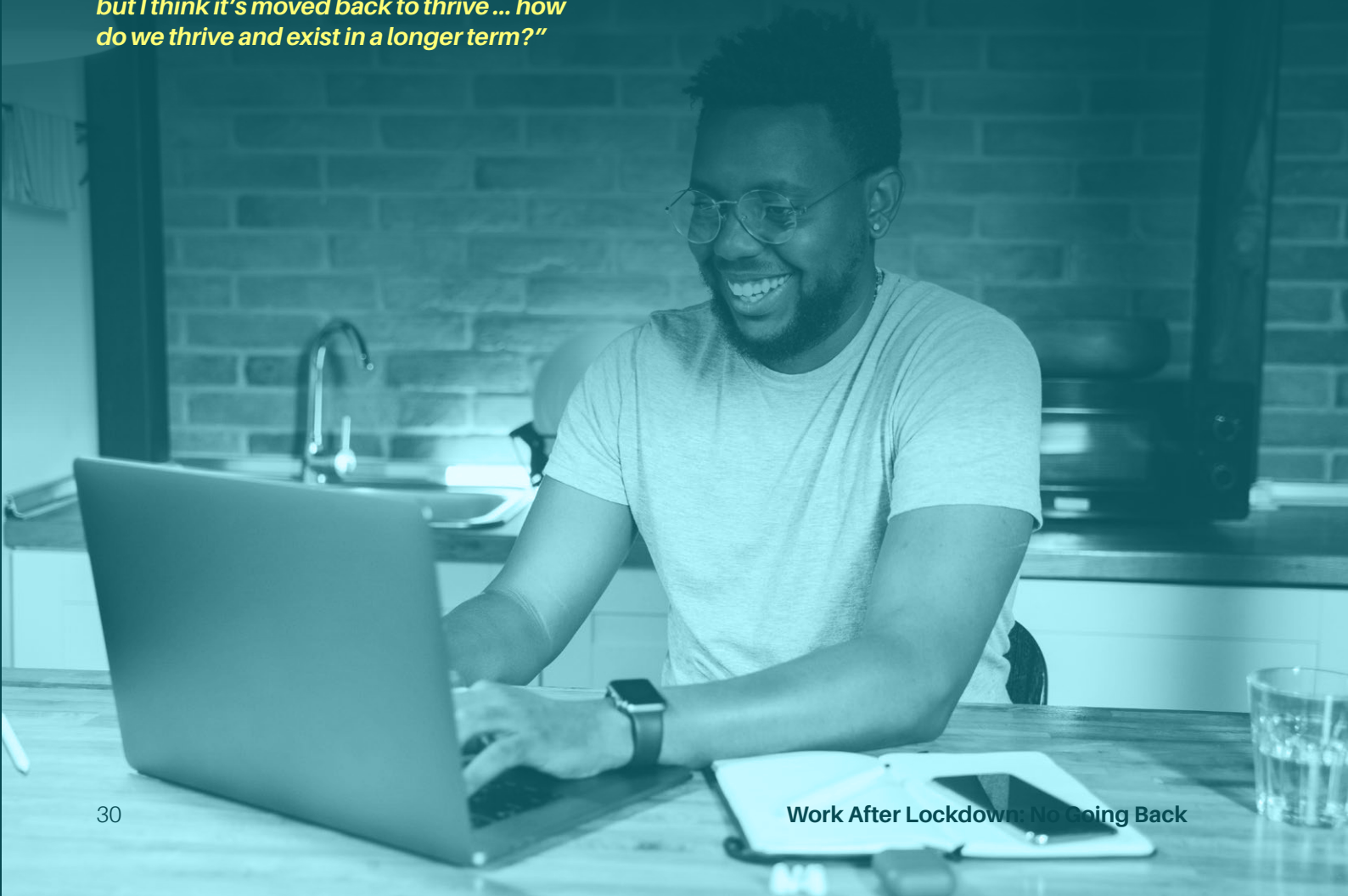
Adapting and learning

Adaptation to extended working from home has been a common theme as people have got used to a different way of working and provides valuable learning around this unique period of workforce change.

The overwhelming sense was that people had adapted much more effectively than might have been anticipated. Adaptation is a process, and learning went on throughout the 18 month period that we followed organisations' experiences.

At the start of the pandemic there was evidence of employees putting their own well-being on hold to help the organisation adapt rapidly and successfully. But as time went on, employees made efforts to develop better practices that protected their own well-being, ***"it was a survive thing, but I think it's moved back to thrive ... how do we thrive and exist in a longer term?"***

A chief executive of a local authority talked about the organisational approach having shifted from one of 'dealing with the pandemic', back to 'business as usual'. A leader in a law firm made the point that while, ***"working from home was something his firm could adapt to easily"***, the challenge was that ***"lockdown-driven working was exclusive working from home"***, and was thus more complicated. Another leader took a different view, that a complete shift in expectations was necessary to really break habits and establish a new and effective way of working.





The chief executive of a local authority noted that the extreme nature of the pandemic provided organisations with more goodwill from their staff than they would otherwise have had, ***“I think it is different when you’re in the eye of the storm, it’s the immediate requirement and people go along and make it work, and I’ve found the staff hugely adaptable in that context.”***

A manager in a local authority observed that as time went on, and organisations went through multiple lockdowns, people became more used to adapting, and business continuity became easier to achieve, ***“everyone is just a little bit more prepared, and a bit more straightforward in terms of what we need to resolve.”***

A common theme raised by organisational leaders was that the culmination of the extended period of change and adaptation was that organisations had become agile in a way that they previously had not been, ***“our ability to be adaptable and flexible has been demonstrated ... we’re actually able to respond quickly, competently and swiftly to a whole range of challenges that we might not have known that we can achieve.”*** The organisational learning that has made this possible is difficult to quantify but can be understood as being ***“more of a mindset change rather than concrete structural changes that need to happen.”***

Part of business continuity, which all of the organisations in our research were adept at, was contingency planning. For example, a manager in a law firm explained how they had ***“robust plans in place to recover from any sort of disruptive incident, whether that’s to our physical premises, our people, or our technology.”*** So there was already guidance in place for different scenarios, which would apply to different groups of the workforce. The manager noted that lawyers were knowledge workers, who were flexible in this respect, ***“so our default position on business continuity was always if the building burnt down we’d work from home.”*** He conceptualised business continuity as a process, supporting each phase appropriately, but differently; the most important aspect at the outset had been making sure that staff were safe.

For local authorities, their bottom line in business continuity was delivering the services that they were legally obliged to do, and this meant that they needed to be contactable by communities in diverse circumstances. Organisational agility was key to achieving this. For example, the chief executive of an inner-city local authority explained how they needed to redeploy large numbers of staff to food distribution, and to convene volunteers.

Local authorities have had to run a huge range of services through extraordinary circumstances, from school meals to social work, which made their business continuity planning complicated. Some services were inevitably disrupted for a period, such as how much intervention was possible on child cases in social services, which then had knock-on effects upon casework. An ongoing issue for local authorities was having to step back on some services, and step up on others, and in the coming months they expected to see new kinds of pressures arising on services.



Factors instrumental to successful adaptation

Five factors determined success in making these adaptations:

- 1 **Investment** in IT infrastructure
- 2 **Private space** to work at home
- 3 **Listening** and responding to employees' needs
- 4 **Trusting** managers and teams
- 5 **Deliberate** messaging/communications

Organisational investment in IT infrastructure

Good digital resources enabled organisations and individuals to adapt their daily working practices to carry on performing their jobs from their homes. On a very practical level, most people had to get used to not printing out and working from paper documents. Many found this a challenging adjustment at first; for example, some solicitors talked about how they felt they were more efficient checking the accuracy of documents when they had a printed copy in front of them, but that, ***“you make the best of it, right, and it’s difficult at times, but it’s not that difficult.”***

The shift from in-person meetings to virtual ones was the most marked change in how people communicated and collaborated. People found ways to develop collegiate relationships that went beyond the functional by being more deliberate in their communications, especially with new colleagues. Some people were already working in spatially-dispersed teams, which meant that they were used to using online platforms to communicate with their colleagues, ***“we’ve had less of a step change,”*** although the formats of these might change as organisations moved towards platforms with greater functionality.

Private space to work at home

People needed to establish a suitable home workspace. This involved collecting vital documentation from their offices, as well as equipment and office furniture, ***“what this has meant though, is our offices have been stripped bare.”*** Some organisations made this process easier than others, organising for kit to be sent home for people so that they could start working from home as quickly as possible.

For people who had inadequate home workspaces, the adaptation issue was different from those who had good home office set-ups. For example, a trainee solicitor living in shared accommodation had to work across the dining room table from her housemate, with both of them needing to take confidential calls throughout the day, and negotiating this around each other.



Some people were tied to working in a particular part of their house because of where the wi-fi worked best, which was not necessarily the most convenient or private space. On the other hand, people who owned their own homes, and particularly the more affluent ones, were able to supplement their working from home set-up to make it more convenient:

“I’m probably at the lucky end of the spectrum, I have my own office here, I’ve set up with three screens, I’ve got high-speed broadband, I’m probably more productive than I’ve ever been because I can get to my desk at 7 o’clock in the morning.”

Access to private work space is determined by household circumstances, especially how many other people are attempting to work or learn from the same home. In this respect working families with children stood out as the most squeezed for space and support. We heard detailed stories of how working parents coordinated their days with precision to ensure that they were able to put in a full working day.

Listening to employees’ needs

Key to organisational adaptation from the extended period of working from home was finding ways of listening to the workforce consistently when that workforce was not co-resident. All of the organisations we studied were using ‘pulse’ surveys to gauge the temperature of the workforce. Implementing these regularly gave organisations a good understanding of how attitudes were shifting, for example, around working preferences. Staff surveys enabled organisations to pick up on what employees missed about work, and factor that into their hybrid working plans.

Listening to staff could be utilised in the human resources management (HRM) process in responsive ways; for example, a local authority’s appraisal process had shifted the order of questions on its documentation, so that meetings started with a section on well-being, in a climate of no judgement, to try and anchor the point that this was a key priority for organisations:

“And I suppose for us we thought that was a really important shift for the organisation as well to start with: how are you feeling? You know, how are things for you? And have that as the first point of the conversation, not the last point that perhaps gets left off. So, we’ve purposefully shifted it that way. So it’ll be interesting this year to see how that goes down.”

Trusting employees

There was evidence of a shifting expectation away from office presence as a marker of productivity, towards outputs, and trusting staff accordingly, although it was acknowledged that this could be a slow learning curve, **“that is still a challenge, the concept of when people undertake their work.”** But there is still a lot of learning going on here, in terms of managers developing a better understanding of what useful outputs are for different jobs, **“we need to get a little bit smarter ourselves about what are the outputs we’re expecting people to do, and then letting them get on with it.”** There is a big cultural shift underway in moving away from presenteeism, and an important part of this was managers and organisations becoming more proficient at utilising flexible work to align with employees’ diverse circumstances.



Frequent and deliberate messaging

The visibility of leaders was important to provide clarity and reassurance and to speak directly to people's concerns. By the summer of 2020, the key issue on which organisational messaging focused was return to the office expectations and hybrid practices. Pulse surveys had indicated to organisations that future working expectations were the 'hottest topic' amongst staff, and that it was vital that organisational messaging spoke directly to people's concerns. Often organisations had branded their hybrid programme and formed a project group around it; the tangibility of this approach provided clarity about the stage they were at and how this would affect staff. However, this was not simply a matter of reporting the logistics of hybrid plans, the effectiveness of the messaging was bound up with its attentiveness to staff well-being.

Organisational messaging often trod a thin line between communicating a clear message that reassured people, and conveying an unsettling one that nudged people towards looking for alternative employment that was more in tune with their priorities. A linguistic nuance that a local authority leader emphasised was not using phrasing like 'return to work' in organisational messaging, since this was dismissive of people's efforts over the past two years, ***"of course people have been working wherever they've been."***

A senior lawyer saw policy as one way of communicating organisational messaging, although this could quickly feel dated. He commented that the firm's fairly recently developed working from home policy emphasised the importance of client contact, but that this narrative already felt out of place, ***"I think they'll have to accept, they'll have to acknowledge, is my feeling. They will have to in fact, just grow up and acknowledge the fact that working from home is here to stay."***

For messaging to be effective it had to change over time; for example, in one local authority, for a long time their messaging emphasised that there was no pressure to return to offices, but now it was shifting towards encouraging staff to make more practical preparations,

"We're encouraging you to come in, check your commute, see how you feel about it, start to reconnect with your colleagues and your team. And then we're going on, and this is the date at which we expect you to be back, unless you've got a good reason not to. So there's that slight change in narrative."

The clarity of organisations' messaging was diluted by government directives which steered plans away from setting definite start dates for hybrid working. A leader reflected that the pandemic made this an abnormal time to be adopting normal messaging protocols, and anxieties about returning to the office had to be acknowledged as a priority, ***"the messaging around it has got to be very, very carefully done so that we don't make people feel pressured when they do have a choice."***



In this sense, organisations saw their messaging as being a process to enlist buy-in to the transition, and they did this through a 'series of communications' that engaged, on a piece-by-piece basis, with the concerns that people might be facing, building up to agile working policy, ***"So it's staged and staggered in terms of these communications."*** A chief executive in a local authority explained that, ***"getting the precise message has not been easy, but I think there is a sort of acceptance that it is complicated."*** In this context, managers' work mediating expectations to staff was essential; a leader in a local authority commented, ***"I think we have been quite fortunate in that it's a very skilled and sensitive middle management to have those conversations, and also in a pastoral way, try to keep the spirits up."***

Organisations also deliberated about the most effective way to deliver organisational messaging, as well as how much information to impart at any one time, ***"not swamping people ... it's always that really fine line between if you give people too much, they'll never read it. If you don't give people enough they'll moan that they're not being kept in the loop, and we're absolutely trying to make sure that we walk that line."*** A leader in a local authority explained how organisational messaging had picked out some very measurable changes, like implementing a clear desk policy and no one having offices, that could drive larger transformations and make the process more relatable to staff.

"They will have to in fact, just grow up and acknowledge the fact that working from home is here to stay."



Preferences for hybrid working

This section describes our findings about how extended working from home during the pandemic period have impacted the ways in which people want to, or are willing to, work in the future. We highlight the new opportunities and the new challenges presented by changing workforce preferences for hybrid and flexible working patterns.

... when almost all social distancing restrictions had been removed, this hybrid working preference was stronger than ever.



Preferences across the labour market

In September 2021, around 96% of all employees across the whole labour market who were (at least sometimes) working from home, stated that they would like to be able to work at home in the future. Figure 3 also shows that only around 18% of employees would prefer to exclusively work from home in the future.

These estimates show that there is indeed a very strong and widespread preference for hybrid working among UK employees with some experience of home working. This support for hybrid working has become stronger during the pandemic; in September 2021, which was a time in the UK when almost all social distancing restrictions had been removed, this hybrid working preference was stronger than ever.

Our survey findings mirror national data that shows there is a very strong and widespread preference for hybrid working among UK employees, which has become stronger during the pandemic period.

Figure 3. Preferences for future WfH among current WfH employees over time

	Always	At least sometimes
June 2020	13.3%	87.8%
September 2020	16.1%	92.5%
January 2021	12.8%	85.8%
September 2021	18.0%	95.6%

Source: Understanding Society COVID-19 study, waves 3, 5, 7, and 9, and authors' calculations.

Notes: All sectors; weighted data; percentages are among employees that are currently working at home at least sometimes.



A permanent shift in future working preferences

In our case study work we were able to explore shifts in future working preferences over the extended period of working from home during the pandemic. The predominant theme that emerged here was that a permanent shift had taken place in people's perceptions about this aspect of their working practices.

People had been reflecting at length about how they wanted to work in the future, drawing upon both the positive and more challenging aspects of their working from home experience. A typical comment was provided by a female employee with young children, ***"I can't imagine going to another job where I have to now be a lot more office-based. It's actually a bit of a constraint now."*** Reflecting this, an HR director in a local authority reported that their recent pulse survey had overwhelmingly found that people wanted to spend a maximum two days of their working week being office-based, a trend that was confirmed by the managers that we spoke to in these organisations.

There was a sense that the pandemic had prompted some deep thinking about what people valued in their lives, and that the 'Great Resignation' could be closer than organisations appreciated if they were overzealous in their push back to the office. These attitude shifts were not limited to employees without managerial experience; a senior manager explained early on in the research that his working preferences had changed, and remained consistent throughout the three interviews we undertook with him:

"I can't image how I would feel if we got to the end of this and somebody said to me, "Now you'll all be back in the office five days a week." That would, from a personal point of view, probably be enough to make me think, well I just don't probably want to work there anymore. Do you know what I mean? I'm not being churlish about it, I just think, well actually we know we can do this, what is the benefit of dragging me in to the office five days a week."

Generally speaking, however, specific arrangements about future working had not yet been agreed with managers.

One manager talked about how, as his team adapted to working from home and established more effective systems, they became more ***'hardcore'*** about it. It was common for managers to recognise that retention could be an issue if this shift in attitude wasn't taken seriously, ***"I don't know if I said to my team, "You've got to come back to work," I don't know if they would."*** Within organisations, it seemed likely that job-specific factors would create variation here; for example, IT workers could easily find work elsewhere, and could afford to be demanding about their future working arrangements. Another manager reflected that remote working entitlements were ***"the number one discussion now when they talk to people about jobs as head hunters."*** This was in large part connected to well-managed working from home being regarded as important in achieving a better work-life balance, and a benefit to well-being.



Most problematic for managers was when staff wanted a permanent working from home arrangement, while managers felt that some degree of office presence was important in the role. However, this issue was still live since hybrid working was at a low level during the research. An issue that caused more tension for some managers was when people wanted to work from

home around their childcare and were inflexible about this, which managers felt was inappropriate outside of lockdown conditions. Other managers, however, took a different perspective, and considered that if this kind of flexibility enabled staff to be more productive then it was a new working practice that could be supported.

Ensuring hybrid and flexible working is inclusive

This issue that flexibility could be deployed as a more inclusive workforce practice that offered mutual benefits to organisations and employees was coming up in discussions about working preferences. A trainee solicitor in her 30s from an Asian background noted that as her parents lived overseas she only saw them once a year, and so in the future she would be looking to have the flexibility of working from home to accommodate their visit, ***“there is an angle of being inclusive, which firms want to do so much more, and recognising that flexibility is actually a really good tool to do that.”***

An employee recognised that while hybridity was a broad preference, preferred degrees of this would vary around personal circumstances, ***“people with school age children I’m sure would still appreciate being able to work from home full-time, but it depends on your job and depends on the requirements of the organisations.”***

It was also recognised that where people lived would play into this, and that people who had to travel some distance into work were likely to be less keen to travel in regularly, and may have seen their productivity rise significantly during the pandemic.

Some interviewees perceived that younger, ambitious, member of staff were concerned that their careers would be frustrated by long-term working from home and were keen to return to offices and be visibly performing, and noticed for their efforts:

“young lawyers who join the firm because they want to succeed and progress, I think realistically speaking they’re not going to achieve that progression sitting in their bedroom on WebEx ... I think their nature is if they see their mates, their cohort in the office, they’re going to be in the office too I think, because it’s all about being seen and networking, and getting your capabilities understood by those more senior.”



Who benefits from more office presence?

Notwithstanding the broad swell of enthusiasm for continued working from home as part of a hybrid working experience, our research also highlighted groups who were likely to appreciate greater opportunities to work on-site, and who had found prolonged working from home more challenging.

Young people

Leaders often made an observation about younger people, who were perhaps less affluent, that they were more likely to be living in small and/or shared accommodation that had proved inadequate for working from home during the lockdowns. This was particularly the case in London. For this group, working in the office could be a lot easier, and a local authority leader observed **“a bit of a creep back to the office”** around this kind of preference.

New starters

People who were newer to a role described the benefits of more office time, in getting to know colleagues better, and learning about the role and the organisation during casual conversation.

As one graduate trainee in a local authority explained, **“it made me feel more integrated and that’s why I like going in, because it’s sort of a confidence booster.”** However, this graduate trainee’s preference would not be to go into the office every day and given the choice, she would probably do a maximum of three days a week on site. **“I need the office element for like social aspects, but I also need the working at home for convenience.”**

This experience contrasted sharply with another graduate trainee’s at a local authority who voiced their concern about their entry to professional life.

“I guess I worry that I’ve missed that experience, you know, I’ve missed the norm of going to the office five days a week and like normal office relations, I’ve missed that boat it’s gone. And I’ll only ever have the new normal which I think I worry about quite a lot, like it’s something that I regret not having done, and I think I always will.”

The demand for opportunities to be office-based by some parts of the workforce, should be qualified by the recognition that working from home remained valued for them too.

Well-being motivations

Another motivation for retaining some earmarked office time was well-being. This was an issue for some employees who missed the in-person social connections more than others, perhaps reflecting their household circumstances or mental health challenges. Conversely, one new starter articulated that returning to the office full-time would have negative mental health effects for many people, **“it’s not the work has been easier, but because you’ve got more comfort at home and people have got more time because they’re not travelling, some people may feel that they spend a lot more time with their children.”**



There was not a straightforward relationship around working preferences and mental health, which provides a challenge for managers in understanding individual motivations and providing support accordingly.

There were two different perspectives going on, that were difficult to reconcile. A leader commented, ***“it’s very polarised. I’ve got people saying, ‘This is the best thing that’s ever happened. We don’t ever want to go back to the way it was before.’ Or people say to me honestly, ‘When are we going back to the office?’”*** An IT manager in a local authority raised a concern that fundamental differences in working preferences within teams could potentially fracture teams and prove challenging for managers to navigate, ***“I think it’s going to be more disruptive than the start of the lockdown was, and more difficult, and more fraught.”***

Alignment of employers with workforce preferences

One of the main challenges that employers have had to face has been that of aligning the needs of the organisation with the working pattern preferences of the workforce.

We asked a number of questions about the specific working arrangements and flexible working practices which employers were offering, and the extent to which they matched the preferences of respondents to our survey. In terms of the process of aligning the offer with employee preferences it is significant that almost half of respondents reported that their organisation offered little or no consultation about changes to working practices.



People who were newer to a role described the benefits of more office time, in getting to know colleagues better, and learning about the role and the organisation during casual conversation.

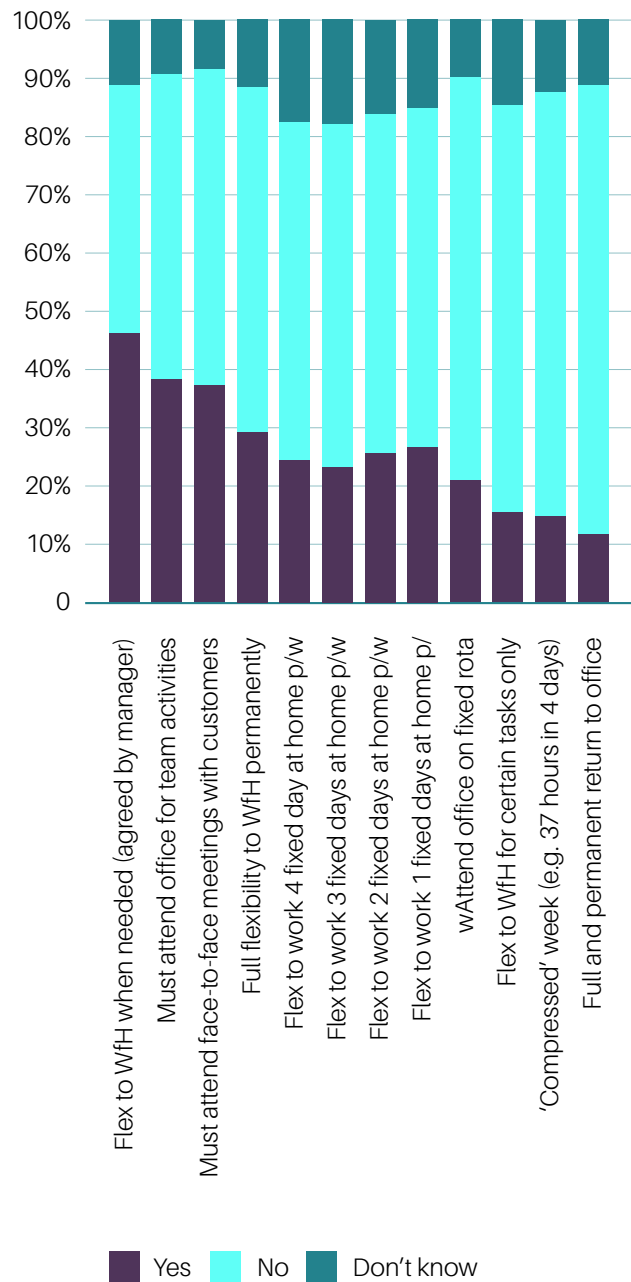


In Figure 4 we present data showing the percentage of respondents whose employer had offered at least one flexible working practice. In general, organisations appear to be displaying considerable flexibility and relying on individuals and their line managers to reach an agreement about where and when an individual should be working.

For over 1/3 of respondents there was an expectation that they would attend their work premises for face-to-face meetings with clients and to take part in collaborative or team activities and tasks. Just under 30% of respondents reported that they had full flexibility to work at home permanently and about 25% of respondents reported that they had access to flexibility to work from home on fixed days during the week, ranging from one day to four days.

The picture painted by our survey is of an array of flexible working arrangements and considerably more permissiveness amongst employers together with a willingness to accept a variety of individually negotiated working arrangements.

Figure 4. Which Post-Lockdown working arrangements were offered by your employer?*



*Source: Work After Lockdown Survey, 2022



Do organisational options and workforce preferences align?

In Figure 5 we present data indicating the extent to which respondents felt that these arrangements matched their preferences on a 5-point scale. A high mean score (>3) indicates a close match between what the employer is offering and the preferences of the employee. In general, the match is quite strong with a clear preference among most employees responding to our survey to have the flexibility to work at home more frequently than prior to the pandemic; mirroring the national dataset.

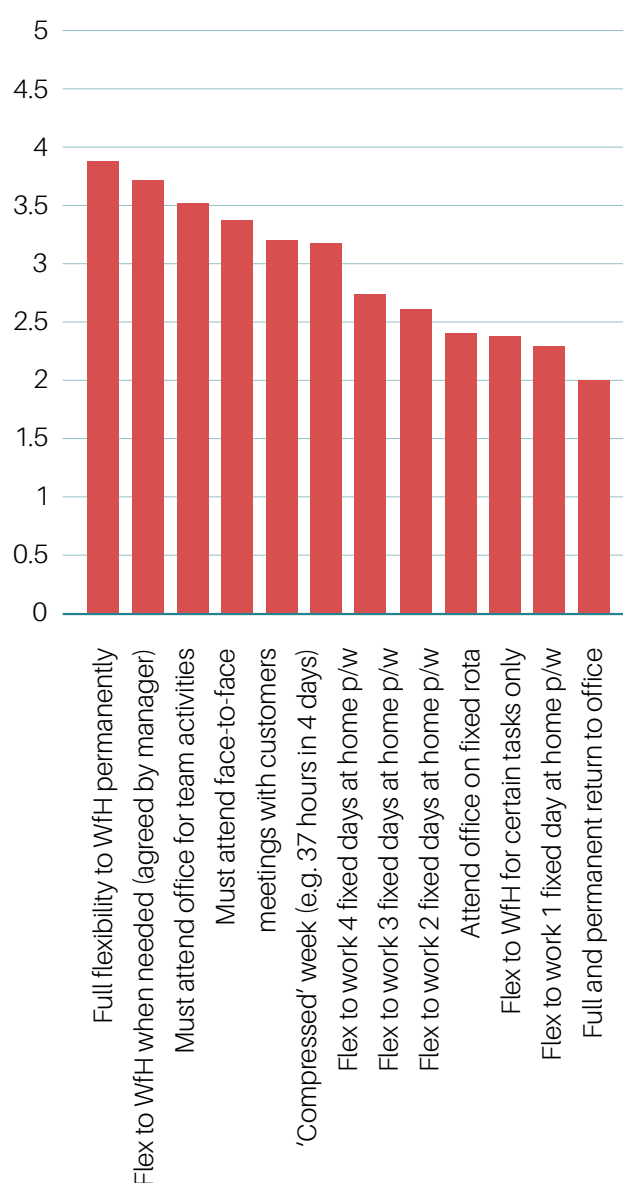
There is a clear recognition among employees that some attendance at an office or work premises is necessary for some types of work, certain tasks or meetings with fellow team members, or with clients or customers

The work arrangement which received least support - unsurprisingly - was a full and permanent return to the office or work premises, reinforcing the view that for many employees the pre-pandemic model of mainly working in an office is now in tension with their preferred way of working.

Using the data about working pattern preferences above, we calculated a composite 'work preference' score which indicates how many options the employer offers match the ways on which the employee wants to work.

A work preference score of 0 indicates that the respondent's employer was offering no work arrangements which matched their preferences. By contrast, a score of between two and four indicates that the employer was offering between two and four working arrangements which matched the preferences of the employee.

Figure 5. Which Post-Lockdown working arrangements most closely match your preference?*



*Source: Work After Lockdown Survey, 2022



Plotting this work preference score against indicators of employees' work satisfaction and satisfaction with their employer shows very clearly that respondents are significantly happier across a range of organisational factors if a high proportion of their work preferences are offered by their employer.

In other words, the more options for flexibility in location and schedule of work an employer offers that align to the ways in which employees want to work, the happier they are across a whole range of measures. This is good news for employee performance and retention.

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New workforce tensions

A point that cannot be overlooked is that there remains a tension within workforces between people who wanted to take forward the learnings of lockdown into new ways of working, and people, ***“who are very much, you know, stop all this nonsense, get back on that train, put your suit on, come and sit at a desk.”***

In our interviews with senior leaders and managers in organisations we were told about tensions between elected members and local authority staff, where members were keen for staff to return to offices, ***“the politicians have probably found it difficult not to see people face to face all of the time.”*** At the heart of this opinion, appeared to be a more damaging perception that working from home was inefficient, as one local authority leader observed: ***“They think they sit in their pyjamas all day doing nothing. Yeah right, when we are all working 50 hour weeks.”***

A lead on agile work in a law firm explained the work that was going on managing these tensions, ***“I don’t think that this is the optimum way of working, but neither necessarily is everyone being forced to be in the office all the time ... at the moment, everything around agility is inextricably linked with the pandemic and people’s highly emotive feelings about that,”*** and another leader was conscious that solicitors had high-value skills that they would take elsewhere if working preference tensions were handled insensitively by employers.

If these tensions are not resolved, and employees are not given clarity and feel listened to, there could be negative impacts upon staff retention. Indeed, one interviewee indicated that he was already applying for jobs in organisations that he regarded as being clearer around their hybrid working policy. ***“organisations that offer the best overall package are going to win ... it’s not just about the salary, it’s not just about how interesting the work is, it’s about how work is organised.”*** One interviewee commented that, notwithstanding the gains seen during the pandemic, cohesion around trust remained fragile. Some organisations were being very astute about this and were deliberately picking off talent by having a clear line on hybrid expectations which was deployed in their recruitment.

These differences around future working preferences, and their variation around employees’ circumstances, will be important aspects for organisations to factor into a context where more bespoke combinations of home-based and site-based working are possible.



Optimising a hybrid future of work

A new default. As the end of the pandemic has seemed in sight, organisations have been focusing upon the next stage of adaptation. Hybrid working is now being discussed as the default position within organisations. A permanent shift to hybrid represents a very significant change to organisations' business models and will have a sustained impact upon work organisation, managerial practice, and estates costs.

This has involved complex discussions about what new spaces will look like, how they will be inhabited over the course of a typical week, as well as what are the best ways to implement a transformation that looks set to be more significant than the initial mass movement of office-based work into people's homes. There are concerns from staff that their efforts to change work habits and learn new practices during the

pandemic period could be in vain if people are expected to simply return to old ways of working, when there is will to do things differently.

"I think a return to hybrid working will be disruptive because it's less certain, it will actually be more difficult than moving from one certain state to another certain state."





Utilising space differently

At the heart of this discussion is the idea of using space differently. Extended working from home has provided organisations with a great deal of information about how space matters in work tasks. In the latter part of 2021, organisations were focused upon how office space could be reconfigured to become more conducive to collaborative working.

In some organisations cellular offices were becoming all but obsolete and the emphasis was upon transforming offices into places that people would want to attend, ***“to make the office more attractive because, suddenly people are like, well, why should I come to the office?”***

A property manager at a law firm recognised that offices needed to offer something different from the home workspaces that people had adapted over this period, and so was investing in developing new spaces, ***“it’s what the tipping point is, of coming into the office and still feeling like it’s got a nice buzz and environment.”***

“offices aren’t going to be quite what they used to be ... this is the biggest change we’ve seen within our profession in many years.”

... organisations were focused upon how office space could be reconfigured to become more conducive to collaborative working.

Collaborative working spaces were at the centre of organisations’ plans for hybrid working. An important distinction from the individualised workspaces of the pre-pandemic office, was the personalisation of space by a team, rather than by individuals. In a local authority, an HR manager talked about the idea of staff moving around spaces as central to hybrid working, ***“I think the days of having a set base ... isn’t really something that will be going forward.”***

Collaborative spaces were anticipated to be used differently by different teams, and it was observed by a local authority leader that HR teams benefited from collaborative working and a more permanent zone for their activity, while others, like payroll were more independent and transactional workers, who could effectively work anywhere.

“It isn’t ‘my office’, it’s ‘an office’”

New protocols for those who had returned to office spaces were being introduced – leaving a clear desk was key, ***“If we can crack paper that then allows people to share spaces and then it isn’t ‘my office’, it’s ‘an office.’”***

Such small steers around collaborative practice could have a large impact in how spaces are viewed. However, so too, spaces for informal connections cannot be squeezed out in hybrid design, since as one leader in a law firm noted of these more spontaneous interactions, ***“It is kind of the glue that holds things [together], makes things work efficiently.”***



Designing hybrid ratios

One of the most challenging aspects of moving to a permanent hybrid working model was – and remains – reconciling the call for clear organisational messaging about office presence expectations with the needs and preferences of diverse workforces. Whether the presence ratio was expected to be three days at home, two days in the office, or expressed as a percentage of time over a month, or a season or a year, organisations needed to think carefully about how they would communicate and implement a ratio expectation.

Uniform expectations for office presence proved unhelpful to organisations that provide a diverse range of services, **“it sort of feels a bit antiquated again to be dictating almost that you should be in one or two days.”** A local authority was planning for a phased shift into hybrid working, and crafted a message that was designed to be interpreted by teams in ways that worked best for them:

“We don’t want to say, ‘this is how it’s got to be,’ but in fact our more bottom-up message was capable of being interpreted in all sort of ways. So we’ve sort of now said, ‘well, this is what we expect on average,’ and that’s how we’re trying to communicate the broad direction of change.”

Setting fixed ratios for office presence runs counter to the considerable variation in working preferences for more or for less time in communal offices across a workforce. A leader in a law firm saw hybrid as something that would **“take a while to find its pace as people explore it and what works for the team ... on the outliers we’re going to have people who want to be in five days a week, and we’re going to have people who want to be at home five days a week, and some of those, we might have to encourage one group and discourage it from the other, just to smooth it as well.”**

There was widespread recognition amongst our interviewees that their organisations would need to spend some time experimenting with hybrid ratios, although the perspective was less about a numerical ambition, and more about finding a balance that would be successful for the organisation.

Curating space by work styles

Implementing hybrid working will go beyond designing buildings and jobs around different working expectations; a skilled part of the permanent move to hybrid is finding effective ways of curating when staff would be in the office, and coordinating this with their teams and the broader workforce. This needs to be more sophisticated than simply letting staff pick their preferred days to be on site, as this would likely mean that there was a peak of activity on Tuesday through to Thursday, which congested communal spaces, **“from a real estate point of view you’ve got to smooth the peak, you’ve got to flatten that.”** Some of this might happen naturally as people self-selected into a more comfortable routine, but it is likely to need some guidance. The chief executive of a local authority commented, **“hybrid doesn’t work by accident, it only works if it’s planned and structured.”**

A variety of systems have been trialled by organisations, including a rota system, a booking system, zoning, decision making trees, checklists, and an app to identify **‘stress points’**. Others were still at the level of having conversations with managers about what was possible.



One local authority had been working with a tool that enabled them to categorise staff into five distinctive work styles with different level of attachments to the workplace. This technique appealed to staff in being accessible and transparent, and it provided an important step in working out where and how frequently people would need to be in the office in different teams. This information could then be used to coordinate fairly different groups' needs.

Branding change

One approach to handling the complexity of rolling out hybrid was to brand both the organisation's approach to hybrid working, and to give names to different phases of change, so people could better contextualise what was happening. One organisation had a New Ways of Working project which was aiming to address issues of cultural change, ***"that will be our vehicle to try and change how we perceive the ways of working,"***

Another set up a Future Ways of Working group, one of whose tasks was to think about how a new building would be populated, ***"It's sort of two phases: it's how we bring people back into our current accommodation, and retain some of the new ways of working that we now have."*** Connected to this branding were changes in organisational policy which could then 'sit' inside the approach and provide clarity, although a common criticism was that these sometimes lagged behind the pace of change.

A time of experimentation

Organisations are demonstrating commitment to experimentation with new working practices before formalising them, allowing mistakes to be made, and to learn from a period of workplace change that is without precedent. An agile working lead saw the need for a period of at least a year of 'test and learn', ***"we'll all kind of have to feel our way and find our way,"*** although other organisations suspected that this period would need to be compressed.

There were few examples of formality around an experimental period, such as setting time limits for evaluation of defined success measures. Rather there was a preference for letting a transitional period continue to maximise learning. Experimentation felt informal and intuitive, rather than planned, designed and managed. A human resource manager in a local authority talked about how they were approaching this next period by recruiting internal 'change influencers' for each team, who would be required to 'facilitate conversations' in the next stage of change around issues like well-being and space use, as well as to act as a conduit between managers and teams.

... a skilled part of the permanent move to hybrid is finding effective ways of curating when staff would be in the office, and coordinating this with their teams and the broader workforce.



Implications for HRM practice

The transformation and learning that occurred during the pandemic, raises particular issues for HRM practice and how it can evolve to support well-being and maximise productivity of a spatially-dispersed workforce. There are four main (and inter-related) components to this: recruitment, induction, staff development, and diversity management; together they form part of a growing awareness that remote, and in turn, hybrid management is a complex and evolving skill that will be central to organisations' business continuity in the future.

Recruitment

Organisations rapidly adapted to running online interviews during the pandemic, and managers have recognised some of the benefits that these offer around time-management, participation and efficiency, as well as removing some of the stresses and logistical challenges for candidates, which can potentially enhance recruitment panels' assessments of their capabilities.

Given that the infrastructure is now in place for online recruitment, organisations have an opportunity to refine its processes. This could include:

- Developing competency-based questions on remote working skills.
- Ensuring that they have a robust offer in place around the hybrid working questions that candidates increasingly have, and that managers have the necessary flexible work management skills to negotiate around individual job roles.
- Responding to shifts in the recruitment market in relation to weakening geographical ties, and being prepared for more complex flexible work demands from candidates who cannot commute on a regular basis.

Induction and onboarding

Our research has highlighted some of the difficulties that new recruits face in making meaningful connections, developing organisational knowledge and building professional skills, and deficits have often been prolonged in a remote environment with insufficient support. Organisations can respond to this by:

- Building a robust organisational induction programme, made up of multiple modules that can be progressed sequentially, and which has add-on components for new recruits in their first role who would benefit from additional support around working norms and etiquette.
- Assigning a mentor or buddy to all new recruits who can help them to navigate the organisation and build their understanding of organisational culture.
- Providing training to line managers on induction as well as allocating time in their workload, to ensure that they can support new starts in a consistent and ongoing way.
- Setting up meetings for new recruits with key colleagues during their first weeks in post, and signpost to other connections.
- Where possible, facilitating some office-based time with team members early on in people's contracts.



Development and training

Extended working from home has offered considerable challenges for maintaining consistent standards of experiential training, which unless addressed, will have long-term consequences both for professional development (particularly for young people) and organisations' portfolio of professional skills. Actions that can be taken here include:

- Providing training and guidance, as well as workload time, to managers on how to ensure that everyday aspects of learning are reiterated and discussed, on a regular basis, with new starts.
- Extending organisation training programmes to incorporate the evolving new skills that will be required around hybrid working and the management of hybrid working.
- In recognition of the proliferation of online training that is now available to employees, varying provision, for example, using external/engaging speakers or different formats.
- Ensuring that training resources are recorded and accessible to all of the workforce, as well as publicised so that staff do not miss out on important resources.

Extended working from home has offered considerable challenges for maintaining consistent standards of experiential training ...

Diversity management

One of the biggest learnings for managers during the pandemic was the importance of their knowledge of their staff's diverse circumstances, and how these affected their well-being and productivity during the unusual circumstances of the pandemic. Circumstances like living alone or in cramped or shared accommodation, having young children or those with special needs, and mental health issues were flagged as areas where managers can provide support. Areas where organisations can develop their response include:

- Providing workload support to managers' more structured communications with staff that are necessary to support a distributed team with diverse circumstances.
- Developing organisational training and guidance on job design, managing flexible working arrangements, and hybrid management.
- Reflecting upon pandemic learning in terms of the characteristics that the managers of hybrid teams will need in order to be successful, and build this into recruitment, development and promotion processes.
- In recognition of the importance of team connections for well-being and peer-learning, as well as productivity, ensuring that workload models have non task-based time built into them.
- Factoring diversity management into organisational strategy.

Conclusions

Working from home under successive cycles of lockdown and pandemic restrictions has disrupted norms and thinking around the need for office presence such that employee preferences for ways of working in the future have permanently shifted towards hybrid working.

Succeeding with hybrid

Success implementing hybrid requires organisations to:

- 1 Engage with staff preferences
- 2 Consider working hours flexibility as well as location
- 3 Devote more managerial time to implementing hybrid
- 4 Equip with effective technology to support inclusive hybrid meetings
- 5 Deal with resistance
- 6 Assess individual jobs for office presence needs
- 7 Implement clear and careful messaging of expectations
- 8 Consider health and well-being factors that limit office presence
- 9 Share experiences and learn from other organisations implementing hybrid
- 10 Assess training needs



Managers have been linchpins in this dynamic so far and will continue to fulfil a pivotal role as the translators of new corporate strategies for hybrid and flexible working ...

New working practices have emerged during this period that have enhanced organisations' operations, including working in paperless format, digital teamworking, improved time management, and organising workload around more flexible working hours. So too a new set of management skills around remote working have emerged and been refined, which now form a valued part of professionalisation.

Striking the right balance between employer need for control over the quality and timeliness of outputs, and employee preference for autonomy over what they do, when and where they do it has been the longstanding barrier to achieving successful implementation of flexible working. Now it has new factors to consider and organisations cannot risk failing to take account of personal circumstances and preferences.

Managers have been linchpins in this dynamic so far and will continue to fulfil a pivotal role as the translators of new corporate strategies for hybrid and flexible working into workable practices within their teams.

The pandemic has catalysed the development of new methods and approaches to analysing the time and location constraints that require jobs to be performed in certain times and places. Nuanced job analysis, combined with a performance focus on outputs, and careful attention to equality and inclusion outcomes are the three things that will support organisations manage smooth transition to a hybrid future of work.

The extended period of time spent working from home has focused people on what they miss about offices: sociability and collaboration. At the same time there has been an incremental increase in managerial trust around remote working. Together, these elements are providing a will to utilise time spent in offices more productively. If a good balance can be achieved in organisations between time spent working from home and office-based work then there can be a positive reinvigoration of work tasks. Handled well, in a way that constructively engages with employees' preferences and recognises their dedication in making a success of remote working during lockdowns, the movement to hybrid may simultaneously improve organisational commitment, productivity and well-being.



There is also increased recognition that traditional expectations about fixed 9–5 office based working patterns align most with particular types of employees with fewer caring responsibilities, and that hybrid and flexible working patterns promote a more inclusive workforce, ultimately providing organisations with benefits around workforce motivation and cognitive diversity. At the same time, the opportunity that hybrid provides for more office time is likely to have particular benefits for younger and early career staff, who can benefit from in-person connections, network-building, and experiential learning.

Moving to a permanent hybrid working model is a very different challenge to mass working from home when the expectations were more standardised. Success will rely on skilled conversations and habit-breaking practices.

Conversely, there remain some challenges around hybrid working, which organisations will want to engage with in order to implement it successfully. Most obviously, since there is no single fixed place of work, hybrid working requires more coordination and thought from both managers and individuals, than a simple 'return to the office'. Managers need to coordinate teams coming together at the most useful times around workloads, and individuals need to plan around resourcing and what will be needed in the office, as well as when to factor particular sorts of work tasks into the week.

There will be a need for clear organisational messaging around this next phase of change to build a strong workforce understanding and buy-in to change, particularly when this will have significant implications on their lives. There are some very emotive and divided feelings among workforces, which handled badly, could damage productivity and staff retention. Varying messaging about organisational expectations of presence, and a failure to engage with how this fits with team needs, can be damaging to morale and motivation.


Moving to a permanent hybrid working model is a very different challenge to mass working from home when the expectations were more standardised. Success will rely on skilled conversations and habit-breaking practices.

Complicating this, some managers remain resistant to remote working despite the learnings of the pandemic and there is a concern that presenteeism will be reasserted regardless of the opportunities that hybrid working offers organisations. Inclusive, empathetic and humanistic leadership will be valuable in this phase to ensure that workforce inequalities do not deepen around office presence. Added to this, hybrid provides a whole new way of managing, so managerial buy-in and knowledge will be essential in good quality hybrid management.

From a practical point of view, there are likely to be challenges around managing hybrid meetings, and until good technology, purpose-built meeting rooms, and protocols have been established, there is a danger that remote participants will be less well included than on-site ones, which can have negative impacts upon decision making and ultimately careers. Managers will need training in how to run hybrid meetings in an inclusive way and to challenge bad behaviours, since hybrid meetings require skilled facilitation as well as infrastructural investment.

A key learning will be to factor sociability into future hybrid working arrangements since this has been the aspect of offices that people have most missed, and it can play a central role in maintaining momentum for work changes. Reflecting this, organisations need to make room for informal relationships to be built and sustained as a key part of the work culture that will underpin the success of hybrid.

The intensity of working from home will not translate into offices and could result in workforce attrition, but organisations can make site-based days count and be meaningful to people.



The intensity of working from home will not translate into offices and could result in workforce attrition, but organisations can make site-based days count and be meaningful to people.

Some of the early learning around hybrid can be refined through participating in learning groups with similar organisations to share experiences and ideas.

The accidental experimentation around working from home has already had more far-reaching consequences around organisational learning than could have been anticipated at the start of 2020. While staff have rallied, reskilled and found innovative new ways to sustain business continuity, leaders and managers were catalysed to reflect upon how and why work had been organised in standardised ways. The next stage of recovery change – mass hybridisation – presents new opportunities to further refine the practices that have developed during this period. Tapping into the workforce goodwill and agility seen over the past two years can help organisations to create the kind of decent work that preserves gains around autonomy, flexibility and work-life balance, and enhances those around workforce collaboration. This will be to the mutual benefit of the people and organisations who have worked together through this unpredictable and unique period of industrial history.

Appendices

Appendix A: Methodology

Online survey

The original questionnaire was devised based on an earlier IES study⁶ to examine the wellbeing of workers who were working from home since the start of lockdown in March 2020. The questionnaire used for the *Work After Lockdown (WAL)* first wave survey included a range of demographic questions, attitudinal items to assess views on the experience of working from home, a number of aspects of the way respondents felt their employer had managed and supported them, their views about work-life balance, and their views on both the benefits and disadvantages of working remotely. There were also questions about physical and mental well-being, including the WHO-5 mental health Index. The questionnaire also included a measure of self-reported productivity, a self-regulation scale and questions exploring work aspirations, preferences and intentions after lockdown ends.

The survey was publicised to employees in local authorities and law firms across the UK. We had collaboration from the Local Government Association (LGA) in helping us to develop occupational classifications and from the Local Government Association in Wales to disseminate the online survey link. We had support from the Public sector People Management Association (PPMA) who emailed the link to all their members, which we supplemented with targeted social media posts. In the legal sector, we had support from the Law Society of England and Wales, the Law Society of Scotland, People in Law, LawCare, a number of individual law firms, and from the

Government Legal service. A total of 1035 usable responses from local authority employees and 338 from law firms were received.

The scope of the second wave survey was extended to the Public Administration and Professional Services sectors to allow us to include and go beyond local government and the legal sector for respondents. For the wave 2 survey in late 2021, the questionnaire was adapted to add further questions about the post-lockdown working preferences of respondents and about the ways that employers were consulting on and agreeing a return to workplaces and the introduction to 'hybrid' working.

The questionnaire was administered to two populations. The first was those wave 1 respondents who agreed to participate further in the study. In total just over 40 per cent of the wave 1 respondents agreed to be contacted again for the wave 2 survey and 345 useable responses were received, allowing longitudinal analysis to be conducted. The second population was a cross-sectional group who were sent the URL to the questionnaire using our contacts with a range of organisations in both sectors. This included the PPMA, the LGA, the Law Society, a number of Civil Service Departments, the Trade Union Prospect and contacts in large accountancy, building services and other professional services employers. Here, 503 useable responses were received.

6 Bajorek Z., Mason B. and Bevan S. (2020), Wellbeing under lockdown: Results of a survey of British homeworkers, *Occupational Health at Work*, 17(2):29-34.

Case study organisations and interview programme

Four organisations participated in the *Work After Lockdown* research as anonymous case studies: two local authorities and two law firms. Each organisation convened around 10 one-to-one interviews between the *Work After Lockdown* researchers and leaders, line managers, and colleagues without line management responsibility in a range of front-line, professional/technical, and business support roles.


38 interviews were conducted during Wave 1 September–November 2020 using video technology. We returned to interview 11 leaders during Wave 2 in May–July 2021, and a further 23 interviews in Wave 3 in November–December 2021. Leader interviews were with Chief Executives and Executive Directors with responsibility for people strategy, policy and programmes, technology, business continuity and digital security, focused on organisational responses to pandemic restrictions and changes. Interviews with staff with and without management responsibilities concentrate on personal experience of transition into the first national lockdowns, and latterly on the experience of sustaining working from home through successive cycles of lockdown and continuation of work from home orders in the UK nations. Wave 3 also included a subset of new starters in case study organisations.

Appendix B: Future preferences for working from home across sector, gender, and age

Figure 6 presents a more detailed picture of the preferences for future working from home (WfH). These data cover the whole 2021 – we need to increase the sample sizes in order to be able to estimate more accurate percentages disaggregated by sector, gender, and/or age. The first thing to note in Figure 6 is that the preference for future hybrid working is even stronger among the employees of our two industries of interest: such a preference reaches 97% of employees in both PST and PAD.

Figure 6 also disaggregates these preferences by gender and age. The picture of an overwhelming preference for hybrid working is still clear across all presented demographic characteristics. However, there are some patterns that are worth mentioning. First, while for ‘always WfH’ the differences between men and women are neither pronounced nor statistically significant, women are less likely than men to want to WfH at least sometimes across all industries. This may reflect the more challenging demarcation between work and home duties for women when they are WfH. This gender difference, however, is not observed in our two sectors of interest.

Second, we can observe a stronger preference for ‘always WfH’ among older workers. This is more clearly observed in PAD, but also across all industries. For WfH at least sometimes, this pattern is significant only across the whole labour market. One explanation for these results may be that older workers are more likely to have more favourable working conditions at home (e.g. larger spaces) relative to younger workers.



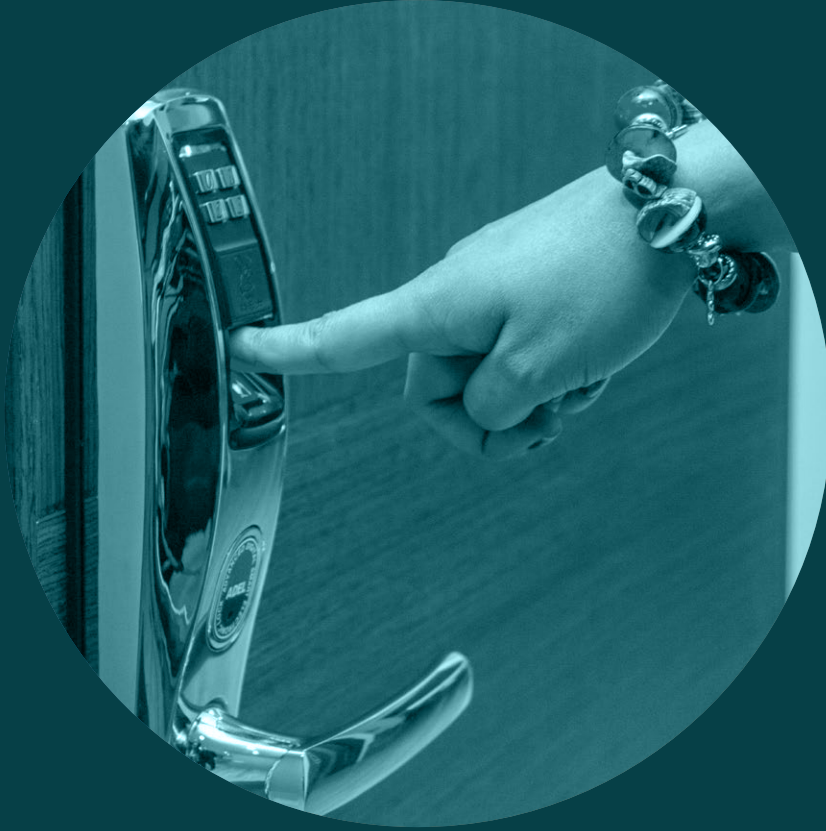
... the preference for future hybrid working is even stronger among the employees of our two industries of interest: such a preference reaches 97% of employees in both PST and PAD.

Figure 6. Preferences for future WfH by sector, gender, and age in 2021

	All industries		Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities (PST)		Public Administration and Defence (PAD)	
	Always	At least sometimes	Always	At least sometimes	Always	At least sometimes
All	15.2%	90.4%	13.2%	97.0%	15.5%	97.1%
Female	14.6%	87.9%	14.0%	97.1%	17.4%	98.2%
Male	16.0%	93.4%	12.6%	96.9%	14.0%	96.1%
16-34	12.2%	88.3%	12.6%	97.1%	11.3%	98.3%
35-54	15.2%	90.9%	12.9%	97.7%	14.1%	98.1%
55+	19.6%	92.2%	15.0%	94.9%	25.8%	92.8%

Source: Understanding Society COVID-19 Study, Waves 7 & 9, and authors' calculations.

Notes: Weighted data; percentages are among employees that are currently working at home at least sometimes.



Work After Lockdown: No Going Back What we have learned working from home through the COVID-19 pandemic – March 2022. **For more information on this report contact: Jane Parry, Work After Lockdown** Principal Investigator, University of Southampton j.parry@soton.ac.uk