

Working from Home – the new frontier?

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Are you sitting comfortably....at home, required not to come into work? Have you been encouraged to “self-isolate” and do your work from the dining-room table, or the spare bedroom office? Is this a novelty, or have you tried it before?

For many it seems, at least initially, a real joy. You can respond to your body-clock and work when you are at your best, you may be a lark or an owl. You don't have to dress in your glad-rags, or worse, experience the commute to the office.

You can set the room to the temperature you like, and even play background music of your choice. Is this not paradise? Will you ever want to go into the office again? Perhaps this virus-crisis will cause everyone to re-evaluate the whole ‘working from home’ option.

However, work is not a place you go to: it is something you do. And, of course, where you work is really important to your health, happiness and productivity.

We know all the supposed benefits of this work style:

- Less (indeed no) commuting time (and traffic congestion/pollution)
- Greater autonomy and flexibility about when, where, how to work
- Better work-life balance (for carers, the disabled and parents)
- A better talent pool (no relocating, retain valuable workers)
- A distraction-free(ish) environment.

Companies may see other obvious bottom-line benefits. Home-working can dramatically cut office costs: space, heat, light and mobile workers can work anywhere and everywhere.

So, what are the down-sides? You have to work for an extended period (a couple of months) to get some idea of what they are.

Work is a source of stimulation, social contact, identity. It gives time structure and an opportunity to exploit natural talents. We are social animals not used to isolation. Proximity is the best predictor of friendship at work. You get to know, like, even marry those you work with and contact on a daily basis – so what happens when this is removed?

Below are some of the key issues, not all easily solvable, but with some suggested tips, associated with working at home.

Equipment, bills and breakdown: who pays for all the work equipment – computer, desk, phone? What about bills? Who is on hand to repair and service equipment when it goes wrong? Companies need to ensure they can provide remote IT support as needed and that employees know who to contact!

Health and Safety Rights and Protection: There are now directives on how to deal with ‘outworkers’. Has an ergonomist studied the proposed work area? What happens if a (sober) employee falls down the stairs, electrocutes themselves or has an asthma attack at work? In short, what are the insurance implications?

How can one instil or maintain the corporate culture? In a ‘normal’ environment, remote workers can be invited to do “top-up-time” in the office to ensure they still understand the same culture. How can you ensure that your company ethos is being maintained with workers in various locations? Team video calls can go some way to addressing this – as can encouraging one-to-one calls throughout the day so that each worker continues to feel valued.

How to control, measure and monitor the home worker? Nowadays, this can be done electronically, but many home workers deeply resent this obvious lack of trust. Imagine one's chair being monitored for heat or weight; the computer for key depressions or even a discrete camera. Obviously, this level of “Big Brother” monitoring won't be accepted by many. So how can you ensure your team are actually on the job? Results orientation works best here – set clear, reasonable, challenging targets and allow the individual to decide how to achieve them. This will help secure the results, as well as motivate the home worker on an ongoing basis.

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There are notably fewer learning opportunities through observation, coaching, mentoring and training. So, preventing the home-worker becoming professionally 'stuck' becomes a concern. Distance learning may be possible, but people tend to prefer to learn from others in a real, rather than virtual environment. Try training /educational sessions which are specifically targeted at the home worker and ensure you receive feedback from these too.

Communication with others can cause issues. If you miss a call when working from home, there can be the assumption you're 'playing hooky'. There must be formal guidelines, agreed and contracted hours in order to establish a clear teleworking work culture.

Family and friends not respecting work time/space can also be problematic. Colleagues interrupting your work is one thing; neighbours popping by for a chat, or children seeking attention are harder interruptions to manage. It's important here to set clear boundaries at the outset and for individuals to be disciplined.

Subtle and effective communication: Electronic and face-to-face communication are not the same. The subtle tone of voice and nuances can be easily misinterpreted in text, it's worth trying phone calls or, better yet, video calls to ensure that any misunderstandings can be navigated.

Having a few weeks being a remote worker can be an interesting experiment. It certainly doesn't suit everyone but in these unchartered times, both employers and employees will need to be flexible and understanding to ensure working from home can be not just a viable, but a successful option.

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