

2 Jul 2020 - Ed Houghton, Head of Research and Thought Leadership

Coronavirus and the workforce: working from home in the 'new normal'

The pros and cons of using digital technologies to work from home during COVID-19

For a long time, working from home was an option for a relatively limited number of UK workers – often those in high status, high paying roles. Many others were not (and many still are not) afforded the opportunity to work at home. This of course changed with the onset of the pandemic this spring. Many working in office-based roles were thrust, some over the course of 24 hours, into home-working, with little or no time to adjust or prepare, often with the expectation that business will continue as normal. Somewhat surprisingly, for many it has.

CIPD data collected at the very beginning of the crisis during April, showed that 61% of workers who had not been furloughed were working from home or remotely five days a week. The size of the shift is astonishing when you compare the number to pre-COVID-19 levels of 24%. Of course, to work effectively many are reliant on technology provided to them by their workplace, including laptops, mobiles, and access to cloud-based and web-based software. And while the same survey showed us that 82% have the right equipment to do their job effectively, there are still important questions to be answered about the experience of these individuals. What are their expectations of working from home? Is technology a help or a hindrance? While it is possible to work from home, is it truly sustainable?

For many this is a new experience, one with considerable uncertainty, but also high levels of intrigue. Ultimately, many workers want to know 'does working from home really work'?

Adjusting to the 'new normal'

To understand the experience of UK workers during the crisis the CIPD set about interviewing almost 40 managers and workers via online discussions with YouGov. We

wanted to find out if and how technology has supported the shift to working from home. The full results are contained within the CIPD's new report [Workplace technology: the employee experience](#). Below we share a few of the reflections.

One important reflection is the ability of technology to support productive work. Throughout the crisis not all teams have suffered a drop in productivity. For those working on projects, some time away from meetings has meant that they've been able to focus on the task at hand and use technology to connect with colleagues they wouldn't usually collaborate with:

'It's been easier to get different teams involved in project work, because everyone is available. Normally, people are quite siloed in their teams, and some are out and about so hard to pin down. Now we're getting people involved in different projects (for example, massive organisation changes). It's been good for pushing projects over the line.' **Joanna, Manager**

We know that online/virtual meetings differ from face-to-face meetings in a number of ways. [Technology is connecting teams](#) but changing the way they work together and collaborate. When teams are faced with ideas to discuss and explore, technology can help to change the playing field, and potentially encourage those without a voice to speak up – but only with management support:

'Cooperation and discussion is a big one for me – previously with everyone in a room only the loudest people got air time and the quieter people could sometimes feel like there was no opportunity to get their thoughts across, but on video calls and phone calls it feels like people are more respectful of allowing people the space to respond.' **Angela, Manager**

Tech is therefore offering a different environment through which line managers can foster good team working.

Work flexibility through technology: pros and cons

Working from home has enabled some individuals to change their working practices for the better, but we have also seen reports of many working longer hours than they would in a typical office environment. Individuals' daily routines have shifted – for those no longer commuting there is additional time in the day, but for some this means they are working longer hours.

'I am definitely working more hours than in the office, however this is more than compensated for by the three hours daily I save in commutes. When I am finished for the day I turn my laptop off and put it away - completely out of sight.' **Steven, Manager**

A work-life balance can be difficult for some home-workers to manage during COVID-19. Some may find it difficult to step away from work, being tempted to check on emails or pick up work, particularly if they work part-time or flexibly. Others, because they are not set up to work from home, may not have the means to work for long periods:

'I am always tempted to log back into my laptop and see if I have missed anything as I work only four days a week and finish at 4pm, so there is often something I will miss if I do not check.' **Samantha, Manager**

And;

'My desk is in my bedroom as it's my only quiet space. I try to make sure I fully pack it away when I'm not working.' **Natasha, Manager**

While technology does appear to support home working, for example when internet connections are strong, the potential to compromise work-life balance is high. This is something that needs to be actively managed by the individual with the support of their line manager. Yet for some workers, a manager can be the source of anxiety and stress:

'As soon as I leave work, I try not to think about it until I go back. Group chats on my personal phone annoy me. I don't want my manager reminding us of stuff at the weekend. It's my time. Digital technology can be intrusive if you let it.' **Sandra, Team member**

Flexible working using technology: a brave new world for many UK workers

'I think that working from home will become much more normalised now that employers can see that it can work. Clearly for some roles it isn't appropriate, but it works for many. I would expect that most people would like to still have some face-to-face contact though, even if it is a mix of working from home and going to the office for fewer days a week.'

James, Manager

For some, the COVID-19 crisis has meant that they are keen to re-evaluate their working practices to incorporate working from home, but to retain regular office-based work as an option. Therefore, instead of home working being an opportunity that is nice to utilise from time to time, it would instead become standard practice:

'I would like a mixed bag of working from home and going into the office. Flexibility to choose while meeting the business needs is key for me... and this period shows it can be done for those managers who have been hesitant [to adopt flexible working practices in the past].' **Shaidul, Team member**

'I would like it to continue as a norm but with the option of going into the office on a regular basis for that face-to-face interaction. I think organisations should be in a position

now to offer it up as a choice and become more flexible overall. This pandemic has forced businesses to be brave and make quick decisions, and there are bound to be positives from that.' **Angela, Manager**

Moving beyond the crisis: the positive impact of technology at work

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that - when supported by technology - organisations can rapidly adapt their working practices to both maintain operations and support workers during a time of crisis.

Many of the workers we interviewed had learned a lot from their experience of working from home and were keen to take the lessons and adopt them in their day-to-day work in the 'new normal'. However, technology alone will not lead to effective practices. People professionals are key in embedding these practices, learning from the experience of workers, and ultimately supporting businesses to make the best use of technology in a way that is supportive of both business objectives and employee experience.

The CIPD is inviting people professionals to take part in an online hackathon, from 10-20 August 2020, to try and uncover, explore and co-create a vision for the People Profession 2030. Follow updates on the [People Profession: now and for the future](#) site and the CIPD's social media channels for further details. Read the articles and blogs on our [Latest insights](#) page and prepare to share your insights and reflections on the future for the people profession.
