

Six reasons why working from home is not all it is cracked up to be



Nearly half of UK adults in employment have been working from home as a result of the social distancing measures introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This represents a dramatic shift in the employment habits of the population: as recently as last year, only 5% of the workforce declared itself to be working mainly from home.

The large-scale move to homeworking is certain to be one legacy of the pandemic: the debate is no longer about whether it will happen but to what extent. Singing the praises of homeworking has become a popular national pastime, with bold claims being made about the benefits it brings in terms of lowering office costs, increasing employee morale and productivity, and reducing the carbon footprint. The more these claims have been made, the more they have come under scrutiny. It turns out, for instance, that homeworking brings environmental costs as well as benefits. Modern offices are built to high standards of energy efficiency. Our homes, for the most part, get nowhere near these standards: upping our energy usage at home through working there is bad for the planet.

We shall over the coming days be publishing articles on how the issue of homeworking appears from different perspectives and what its wider implications might be. We begin, in this article, by looking at the claim that working from home is liberating for you as an employee, allowing you to build your work around your life rather than your life around your work. Specifically, it is said that homeworking frees you:

- ***Spatially.*** No longer do you need to live close to where you work. You can settle where you want: small town, big town, rural, semi-rural, middle of nowhere, perhaps in a different time zone altogether.
- ***Temporally.*** No longer are you bound to a rigid 9 to 5 existence. Dead time is removed from your day: no more hours of frustration spent travelling to and from work.
- ***Socially.*** Working from home allows for an integration of the different elements of your life: no longer do you have to make trade-offs between the commitments you have to work and those you have to family and friends. Being stuck in the office keeps you apart from your nearest and dearest. Being at home allows you to accompany your partner to a hospital appointment or see your children perform at the end-of-term concert.
- ***Financially.*** With spatial freedom comes the opportunity to shop around for a higher standard of living. Working from home breaks the cycle whereby jobs follow economic activity and economic activity inflates the cost of living in the area where that activity occurs. Moving to an area of low economic activity means you can afford the house that would have been out of your reach in an area of high economic activity, while preserving the same level of income.

Given all of these apparent freedoms, what is not to like? Here is the case against working from home:

One: Its benefits are spread unequally across the workforce

Homeworking comes into its own in particular sectors of the economy: information and communication services, the creative professions, the financial sector, the scientific and research worlds. Other areas of the economy – health and social work, energy supply, transport, manufacturing, construction – are largely untouched by it. Homeworking, in short, is geared to jobs that are white-collar and/or that do not require in-person contact and/or that are based indoors. It is not set-up for those with jobs that are blue-collar and/or require direct contact with flesh-and-blood others and/or are conducted outdoors. Try getting an on-line haircut or root canal filling and see where you end up.

In its favour, the expansion of homeworking opens up the world of employment to those who are restricted by the physical requirements of getting to and from the workplace, say because of a disability that affects their personal mobility or because the area they live in has poor transport links or because they have to be close to home in order to do the school run. Against this, homeworking is no charter for across-the-board diversity: it is heavily tilted towards the knowledge economy and thereby towards the educational, ethnic, and economic profile of those who operate in that part of the economy. It is also, we argue below, tilted towards those who have the right kind of home to work *from*, itself a marker of economic status. The image of a workforce freed en masse by homeworking from the restrictions of space and time is the stuff of fantasy. Those on low incomes and/or doing low-skilled jobs will, in work terms, largely be as bound by space and time as they were before the pandemic, with the added downside of being on the frontline of its economic fallout.

Two: It is not an alternative career path

Your employer may be making liberal use of homeworking at the moment. It may be talking up the extent to which home working will be part of its business model in the future. But things change. Events may cause your employer to switch organisational tactics or a new management team might simply see the costs and benefits of homeworking in a different way from its predecessor. And even if *your* employer stays the course with homeworking, other employers may not. Making location and/or lifestyle choices on the basis of being able to work from home for the rest of your career is a high-risk strategy, one that may end up parking you in one corner of the economy and committing you to those choices even if your preferences change.

Three: Presenteeism may be a bigger problem working from home than working in the office

If you are in the office you are visible, if you are working on-line you are not. That, at least, is how things appear, leading some to the view that homeworking offers a way for employees to take greater control over their working lives, turning the tables on the authority relationship between managers and staff.

Homeworking is no skivers' paradise, however. In terms of inputs, on-line working is relatively easy to monitor. In terms of outputs, your boss has no reason to tolerate a lower standard of work from you now than in the past. Moreover, home-working drives a horse and cart through the idea that being at home means being off-duty. With it, goes the idea that there is time during the week that is yours and time that is your employer's. Far from being the master of your own schedule, you may find yourself being made to feel guilty about withholding time from your boss. Alternatively, you may be drawn into scoring points through being willing to give up more of your at-home time than your colleagues. Refusing a request to work late becomes harder if you can no longer plead you have a train to catch. Your weekends may no longer be sacred.

Four: As quantity of leisure time goes up, quality may go down

Working from home brings some obvious wins in terms of the quantity of time you can call your own. Very few people *enjoy* commuting and reclaiming the time otherwise spent in trains, planes, and automobiles would be a great bonus for most of us. Against this, commuting has benefits as well as costs. It delivers you to the hustle and bustle, with all the possibilities for entertainment and human contact that involves. If your home is a sleepy suburb, you might find yourself spending the extra time at your disposal twiddling your thumbs. Frustration at the narrowness of the social and cultural options available to you nearby may push you back into commuting all over again, less for reasons of work than to get your daily dose of human interaction and varied leisure.

Five: The social gains are outweighed by the social losses

The attractions of homeworking vary according to your age, relationship status, and position on the property ladder – and perhaps personality type. Working from an office in your

comfortable, spacious house is very different from having to move between kitchen, sitting room, and local café to avoid your noisy flatmates: for many, the reality of home working will be sinking in as the novelty wears off. The pleasure the middle-aged couple derives from being able to spend more time in one another's company stands in contrast to the sense of frustration a young singleton might feel at being trapped within four walls all day, deprived of human contact and unable to see the world. At its best, going into the office provides a sense of occasion. It broadens your horizons and gives meaning to your work – something that may well be more important to younger workers than to older ones.

People derive satisfaction from work in different ways. For some, the satisfaction is intrinsic. It flows from the nature of the work itself: writing a book, for instance, is an exercise in creativity and self-expression. For others, the satisfaction is extrinsic to the content of the work: they might enjoy the buzz of being part of a team or engaging in office banter or staring out across the city from the window near their desk. How many of us truly find our work intrinsically satisfying all or even most of the time? The UK already faces a problem of under-employment, with barely a third of graduates moving into graduate-level jobs. Take away some of the extrinsic satisfactions of work and the danger is that boring jobs come to feel even more boring. To say that people go into work to get the job done is a bit like saying that people go to university to study. It's true but it misses an important part of what makes the experience attractive – which is why universities are struggling to sell the idea of socially pared-down degree courses to students in the upcoming academic year.

Beyond this, the integration of home and work has an obvious downside. The sense of home as a place of refuge from the pressures of work, somewhere you can escape to and re-charge your batteries in, can very quickly get lost. When it does, a feeling of suffocation sets in. Whichever way you look at it, widespread homeworking will highlight the inadequacies of housing policy in the UK and the extent to which younger generations have had to make compromises about where and what they can afford that older generations did not. *There is no place like home* is a line that rings increasingly hollow for many.

Six: The financial freedoms are exaggerated

The image of homeworkers living the life of Riley away from the centres of economic activity to which they were hitherto bound is an appealing one. But it faces several challenges:

- Few home-workers can expect to stay away from the office altogether. Even if the requirement to turn up at a company building somewhere, or to travel for work, is kept to a few days a month, that will still constrain how far afield you can move.
- Areas far away from concentrated economic activity can still have high property prices: Devon and Cornwall are obvious examples.
- It is questionable whether there really are highly desirable areas to live in that have been untouched by the house price inflation that has swept across Britain in recent decades. Put crudely, property prices in a particular area are likely to be low *for a reason*, be that the standard of the local housing stock or the quality of transport links and public services or something as unchangeable as the weather. An influx of (relatively) high earners,

taking refuge from centres of economic activity, might indeed transform an area and leave those who got in when prices were low blessing their own good judgement. But transformations of this kind rely on a critical mass of newcomers. Even then, they take years to come good: while waiting for this to happen, you might feel a sense of social isolation setting in. Faced with the downside of going cold into an under-developed area, the temptation for newly-freed homeworkers is to adopt a risk-averse approach and pick locations that are already on an upward trajectory (or indeed well-established) and whose attractions, in terms of quality if not quantity, mimic those of big cities. The conundrum is that the lower the risk of a location, the pricier it will be, thereby undermining the marginal advantage of moving there in the first place. Living in York is certainly cheaper than living in London. But buying a house there is beyond the reach of all but high earners.

- The see-saw effect. The consequence of large-scale movement from more expensive parts of the country to less expensive ones is to lower prices in the former and increase prices in the latter. Simply re-distributing demand does not make for affordable housing, whether you are a homeworkeer or not: only changes in planning laws, backed perhaps by large-scale public investment in increasing the housing stock, can do that. In the matter of housing costs, you can run but you can't hide.

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