

Returning to work?

To many people working long hours at home to do what they used to do from an office it is strange to be told now is the time for them to go back to work. It is even odder to be urged back by the Head of the CBI who then concedes that she has not herself been working from the expensive HQ of the CBI in central London in recent weeks. She may decide to work just two days a week from the London office from next month to show willing or to get through the obvious interview questions about her advice to others.

Something has changed in the mood of both employers and employees as a result of the CV 19 crisis. Yes, the immediate reason for the mass exodus from city centre offices was a combination of government instruction and fear of the virus. As the virus has receded and as companies and transport systems have tried to reassure about safety other issues have come to the fore that were there long before the pandemic hit.

More people were seeking and gaining flexible contracts which allowed them to work just part of the week in the office and have more time off work for family and domestic reasons, or to work some of the time from home. There was a growing expectation that employers would allow parents to take time out of a working day to attend school events or care for their children. Employers became more flexible about everything from dentist appointments to weddings and funerals, and from sports sessions to shopping. They allowed some of this to fit into the working day. Office computers were used by staff to plan holidays or buy items on line, so staff were not always working for the employer when at the employer's premises.

The lock down crystalised a couple of things for employees. They found in many cases they could do all their work from home given on line technology and an office in the cloud. It was a huge bonus to save the large amounts of time and money taken up by the daily commute. They could punctuate the working day at home with the drinks, meals and domestic chores of their choice. They could extend their working time into the travel and home time of their old lives to compensate if they took some of the day time for a personal need.

It also surprised employers. They found that many employees worked just as hard or even harder when trusted to work from home. Many of the employers themselves came to value the freedom it gave them in their own personal lives, no longer under observation from employees of how much time they spent in the office. It could lead on to economies for the company, though most so far are paying the rents on the largely empty offices and delaying big strategic decisions about how much space and what type of space they will in due course need.

Of course there are issues that need managing with a workforce more at home than in the office. Those who gamed the system in the office can game the system more easily when at home. Good managers stay in regular touch with homeworkers and assess their contributions and send sufficient work to them.

Meetings and informal discussions can be an important part of resolving problems, innovating and improving service. People have to be encouraged to pick up the phone or the on line link as regularly as they had informal talks in the office. In practice in offices colleagues increasingly talked to each other by email anyway. Teams need to get together in person as well as on video link , which managers can decide and supervise.

Homeworking and the virus should not become an excuse for reducing service levels or building inconvenience and delay in for the customer. Some of the most competitive businesses, like the on line retailers, have shown you can raise service standards and take on more work even against the background of the virus and enforced social distancing.

It is difficult to forecast what might now happen. Some think there will be a gradual return to five day office working and we will restore the rush hour, the five day commute and the busy city centre in due course. Some think employers and employees will over the next few months evolve new ways of getting the work done and dividing up their time, with on line emails, conference calls and video meetings playing a permanently larger role in our lives. If sufficient businesses decide to allow substantially more homeworking in the mix then we will see lost jobs and lost businesses in city centres, along with lower office rents and some office conversions to other uses. There will also need to be big changes to trains, buses and tubes as they adjust to the two or three day week season ticket and the staggering of hours.

Meanwhile the parlous situation in city centres for small businesses is also the result of continuing social distancing rules, the absence of tourists and the cancellation of many events and entertainments.