

## Where should you work?

In the current debate about the return to the office I have only one firm conclusion. It is not the job of government to tell the private sector how to organise their workplaces or how to run their companies.

It is the job of government to lead the management of the public sector. Ministers appoint the most senior managers, like the bosses of Network Rail, the Environment Agency and all the other nationalised businesses and quangos. Ministers direct the work of the civil service. They do need to make decisions about how many staff need to attend an office, and where that office should be, on the advice of the senior managers.

It is clear Ministers and the heads of the civil service think the core civil service is needed in person in the central offices of the state. The task is now set for civil service managers to bring that about. It is also the case that where public service is falling behind in meeting demand for licences, permits, passports and the rest compared to pre pandemic levels there needs to be an urgent review of working practices to ensure good service levels.

It looks as if parts of the private sector have decided that the five days a week commuting model into a central City office is not a good one for some of their staff. In many cases staff can work from home given ubiquitous digital technology. Many staff are trusted to work from home, and can be monitored in detail by the use they make of their computer, on line conferences, email and phone. Sensible companies want enough good quality output more than they want someone to sit at a given desk for specified hours. Companies seem to be saying they want a new settlement where some people attend the office all the time and some part time. Some meetings will take place by on line call, and some in person around an office table.

For any given individual there is a reward if they have trusted status and permission to work from home some or all of the time. They save a lot of lost time and money on commuting. Quite often employees reward the company by working additional hours or hours not within their formal contract to get the work done well from a home setting. If the employer lets you supervise the plumber or pick up your child during the working day, why wouldn't you take a call from a customer in the evening?

What has emerged from lockdown is just how much many commuters dislike the travelling part of their old lives. Poor train and bus services that let people down with cancellations and delays, and crowd people on uncomfortably is neither a good start nor a good end to the work day. The collapse in demand for public transport brought on by anti pandemic controls is being seen by many as a bridge to not having to travel daily even after the virus has subsided as a threat.

There remain many employees who do not have the option of homeworking. Most of the much damaged tourism, leisure and hospitality industry requires staff to assist the public at the place of service supply. Public sector offices

helping the public may need the maintenance of physical offices with staff to carry out the work, as well as on line options for many to use.

I would be interested in your views on what the new settlement might look like. How much flexible and homeworking will there be in a year or so's time, assuming the virus threat continues to retreat?