

Where will people work as we exit lockdown?

As we make slow progress out of lockdown there will be more discussion amongst businesses, Trade Unions and employees over where and when office work will take place. Many people will still have little choice. If you are a shop worker or factory staff you need to be there in person when the facility is open when it is your shift. Many others now see opening up the vista of keeping on with some homeworking after a year of working mainly or wholly from their living room. Many companies have found they can continue to meet their customer needs and fulfil their work requirements on line with many working from remote locations.

For the employee there is the advantage of not having to get up early and rely on trains or buses to reach the office, nor having to sit in the traffic jam if you go by car. You save plenty of money on the season ticket or the fuel bill. Although there is more heating and wear and tear at home, there is a substantial time and cost saving by cutting out commuting. For all those employees who have to juggle minding and maintaining a home, and looking after children or elderly relatives with paid work, the conflicts are reduced and multi tasking just got easier.

For others often living on their own life became a lot lonelier with home working. Seeing work colleagues on a zoom meeting call is not the same as having lunch or after work drinks with them and being able to swap stories and arrange social events over the coffee maker. Those who live in smaller properties, or have well occupied homes with others needing the broadband capacity and some quiet space to make calls returning to the office gives them a better environment for what they need to do.

Employers seem divided or unsure about what they want. Some do think they need people back in the office to provide discipline and framework to people's working hours. They value the advantages of in person collaboration, informal meetings and idea generation. Others think they can exert discipline through the well monitored systems of computers logged into the company network and can ensure the outputs flow from the home location. Maybe the individual is also less fussy about the time of some requirements because they are at home and can break off for domestic needs during what turns out to be a longer working day. Maybe the bosses often with larger houses like homeworking themselves and see the need to allow some of the same for others. There is little study yet of what has happened to productivity or how the wins and losses net out. Clearly many business meetings requiring travel and stays away were expensive and time consuming. It may be as good as well as much cheaper to do those on line.

Many say they want a hybrid week. That probably means Mondays and Fridays at home . Is that a good compromise for employers? Would that maximise output as well as employee satisfaction? What would it do to our city office centres who have travel and hospitality capacity for millions five days a week?