

## 'Out of Office' - how, and why, to get homeworkers to think again

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### #WorkingWorld

As our [Future of Real Estate report](#) recognises, a greatly increased amount of homeworking is almost certainly here to stay, causing a revolution in thinking about the purpose, location and configuration of office space. But, as both the report and a wide range of external commentators have recognised, homeworking is not a panacea. There is a well-documented cohort of employees for whom homeworking is, at best, a difficult compromise – those sharing cramped accommodation, those with very young children at home, those in unsupportive or even abusive relationships.

After almost seven months of enforced separation, many office workers who enjoy working at home and feel more productive, are also starting to miss certain aspects of the office. Humans are social creatures and are beginning to notice the lack of the more convivial aspects of office life that they once took for granted: camaraderie, chatting, joking, rolling their eyes at the occasional corporate absurdity, bringing in cakes on their birthdays, wearing Christmas jumpers on Christmas Eve, helping out struggling colleagues, mentoring and guiding new recruits. Thoughtful employers are also beginning to notice the importance of what all this represents.

Whilst strong teams may have enough social and intellectual capital to survive for six or even 12 months of remote working, beyond that thriving may become more challenging, particularly as new team members join and struggle to integrate.

Our report predicts that in the future the smart money will be on landlords and real estate developers who can respond to what this points to – a reimagining of the office as a space where all these advantages can be had, but perhaps two or three days a week rather than five and perhaps in conjunction with some other things that will make a journey to the office worthwhile:

'Businesses that see this as an opportunity to reduce their real estate requirements will need to re-think their office space according to the importance of the roles and type of work that people are going to carry out in them. It will no longer be acceptable to require an employee to travel 1.5hrs by public transport in order to reach an office to carry out tasks which could have been carried out at home. This means social interaction, and interaction between teams is likely to have more prominence than ever before.'

Here, we have identified a key factor in the alacrity with which office workers have taken to homeworking – the tedium, financial and energy cost of the daily commute. Add to that the health risks associated with using public transport in a pandemic and office workers have unsurprisingly voted with their feet in their millions.

But now employers are starting to think about whether and how to entice them back. From the employer's perspective there are lots of good reasons to grapple with this. Firstly, missing your colleagues can, particularly in more junior or vulnerable staff, fairly quickly morph into a mental health issue. If unchecked, this may lead to seriously impaired performance as well as a miserable time for the employee. Employers have a duty of care to their staff and duties under the Equality Act that could be engaged where problems of this nature arise.

Secondly, in many office environments, people learn an enormous amount from simply being in each other's presence, watching each other at work, exchanging ideas informally, noticing how colleagues deal with challenging situations (or indeed difficult colleagues), collaborating to solve a problem. It is unlikely in the future that this is going to happen in the unstructured, automatic fashion we became used to but the value of these exchanges of tacit knowledge, experience, wisdom, good sense and problem solving nous will make it worthwhile for employers to consider how to recreate them as best they can in a reimagined office world.

Some of these interactions can be achieved by structuring meetings and other forms of work-related and social contact in a thoughtful way in a

remote environment. But it is also likely to mean getting people back to the office some of the time. That can of course be achieved by edict, but it is more likely to be successful and productive if employers make going to work interesting and enjoyable.

Things that employers may want to think about are:

- Location: will the Central Business District be a thing of the past?
- less 'desk', more 'collaborative space': how will your employees work best when they are in the office? What do they need to concentrate yet collaborate effectively?
- The optimum number of days for office attendance: orchestrating and encouraging creative, 'water cooler' moments will vary dependent on the nature of the business and the role of the employees; and
- what do your employees like to do before, during and after work – eating, drinking, exercising, socialising, engaging with culture (art exhibitions and concerts anyone?), how can you promote that?

Why go to the office? Employers may need to come up with a good reason.

For more information on our changing world of work, take a look at our [#WorkingWorld campaign](#).

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