



# **FLEXIBLE WORKING: LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC**

From the 'nature' of  
the work to the design  
of work

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## Report

# Flexible working: lessons from the pandemic

From the 'nature' of the work to the design of work

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## Acknowledgements

This report was written by Dr Charlotte Gascoigne.



## 1 Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that, in the case of flexible work design, the impossible turns out to be possible after all. An enforced trial of homeworking has demonstrated to many managers that it works better than they could have imagined – and given them the opportunity to develop their skills in making it work. Perceived barriers in the ‘nature’ of the work – which were said to render remote working impossible – have faded away as managers have learned to design work differently.

Although the pandemic has enforced total, five-days-a-week homeworking, our survey revealed that, after lockdown, 63% of employers planned to introduce or expand the use of hybrid working to some degree, combining time in the workplace with time at home, depending on the needs of the job, the individual and the team, and the team working practices.

There was positive news on the productivity of homeworkers too. Despite the difficulties of lockdown, more than two-thirds (71%) of survey participants said that homeworking had no detrimental impact on productivity. This figure is made up of 33% who said that productivity improved, and 38% who said it was unchanged.

This report identifies seven strategies which teams and their managers can use to make a success of hybrid working:

- 1 Develop the skills and culture needed for open conversations about wellbeing.
- 2 Encourage boundary-setting and routines to improve wellbeing and prevent overwork.
- 3 Ensure effective co-ordination of tasks and task-related communication.
- 4 Pay special attention to creativity, brainstorming and problem-solving tasks.
- 5 Build in time, including face-to-face time, for team cohesion and organisational belonging.
- 6 Facilitate networking and inter-team relationships.
- 7 Organise a wider support network to compensate for the loss of informal learning.





The situation regarding flexible hours has changed less: employers have not experienced an 'enforced trial' of flexible hours. The wide range of sectors and types of work covered in the interviews for this research led to very different outcomes. Some interviewees did work which, when done at home, facilitated greater informal flexibility of hours – giving individuals more autonomy to choose their start, finish and break times, and enabling them to mix work and personal tasks without rigid boundaries. However, others found that the work demanded hours similar to those worked in the workplace, although of course without the commute.

Some interviewees found that flexibility of hours was prevented by the sheer volume of work, regardless of its location. Others commented that it was harder to set work-life boundaries at home, finding that they worked longer hours at home than in the workplace.

### Benefits and challenges of homeworking

None of the benefits or challenges identified in our survey was mentioned by a majority of survey participants. This suggests that they are highly dependent on individual circumstances, both at home and at work. A tailored approach to individual needs, and to work design, is needed to maximise the benefits and minimise the challenges.

Employers reported the key benefits and challenges of homeworking as follows:

#### Benefits

- The most frequently mentioned benefit was increased wellbeing through avoiding the commute (46% of survey participants), followed by **enhanced wellbeing because of greater flexibility of hours** (39%).
- Although collaboration is often mentioned as a challenge of homeworking, survey participants reckoned that both **creating new ways to collaborate with IT tools**, and **IT upskilling**, were benefits of homeworking, at 34% and 23% respectively.
- A **reduction in distractions** also featured (33%), although given that lockdown enforced homeworking regardless of home circumstances, some employees were dealing with increased distractions.
- Normalising the use of technology could **help inclusion** for those with a disability or illness that prevented or impeded travel, and for those working in distributed teams.
- Finally, homeworking enabled people to **get to know their colleagues better** as individuals, learning more about their non-work life.

#### Challenges

The challenges of homeworking can be divided into three types: wellbeing, hygiene factors and work-related factors:

- 1 Reduced mental wellbeing of staff due to isolation was cited as a challenge by 44% of survey respondents.
- 2 Hygiene factors are those which, in a voluntary homeworking situation, would be dealt with in advance, or might preclude homeworking altogether: the unsuitability of certain jobs (36%); unsuitable home circumstances (31%); insufficient technology (15%); outdated technology (15%); and lack of staff proficiency with technology (14%).
- 3 Among work-related factors were: difficulty with staff interaction and co-operation (26%); lack of staff engagement (19%); line manager capability to manage homeworkers (19%); and line manager capability to monitor staff performance (18%).



## Expectations of change in flexible working

Employers reported the following expectations of change in flexible working:

- While 63% of employers in our survey said that they planned to introduce or expand the use of hybrid working to some degree, a remarkably high 45% said they planned to introduce or expand the use of total, five-days-a-week homeworking to some degree. However, interviewees from operational business units were more cautious about the feasibility of total homeworking, preferring hybrid working for most teams and types of work.
- The most common measures planned to facilitate the expansion of homeworking were: changing policy (45%), improving technology (41% investing in the quality of technology; 35% investing in the quantity of technology) and online guidance (33%). Only 28% of respondents said they planned to put in place manager training in remote working – a low figure given the challenges of work design and management identified in this report. This is discussed further in section 3.2.
- Almost half of employers (48%) said they were planning to introduce or expand the use of flexitime (formal or informal; employer-led or employee-led) to some degree. Forty-five per cent of this group cited fairness as a reason: employees who can't work from home should still be able to benefit from other flexible working arrangements.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The CIPD has recently launched its [#FlexFrom1st campaign](#) calling on organisations and the Government to introduce the right to request flexible working from day one of employment to support opportunities for all. This report makes the following recommendations for policy and practice to improve flexible working opportunities:

- 1 **Provide training and support to enable productive homeworking.** In order to achieve productive homeworking, employers need to provide training and support in hybrid working, using the seven strategies identified in this report and [our guides](#). Our findings suggest caution in the use of total, five-days-a-week homeworking: wellbeing, productivity and learning could all suffer without much more extensive manager training and change in working practices. Despite 63% of employers saying that they will introduce or expand the use of hybrid working, only 28% have plans to train managers in how to manage remotely.
- 2 **Proactively explore flexibility of hours.** Employers need to be more proactive about flexibility of hours, particularly for those workers whose jobs don't lend themselves to flexibility of location. Job tasks need to be analysed for hours flexibility as well as location flexibility, and a more proactive, team-based approach will often yield better results than reactively waiting for individual requests for flexibility of hours.
- 3 **Assess the differing business case for flexible working in different sectors and jobs.** The wide range of sectors and types of work covered in this project has shown how much the business case for flexible working can vary by sector and by type of work. Government and employers need to work together to assess the business case for flexible working in 'hard-to-flex' sectors and jobs, where work has not traditionally been designed for work-life balance. The first step is to assess how the costs of flexible working are currently distributed between individuals, the business unit, the organisation as a whole and the state, in different types of work.

This report is supplemented by seven organisational [case studies](#) and [guides](#) outlining practical advice for employers and line managers looking to improve their flexible working offering.



## 2 How the research was conducted

At the start of this project, we conducted a [review of the research evidence on working from home](#). The research for this report then consisted of two elements, qualitative and quantitative.

### Qualitative research

For the qualitative research, interviews with 32 senior managers and directors were conducted between October 2020 and January 2021, using insights from the evidence review. Seven interviewees were people professionals, but the majority were in operational roles. This approach enabled exploration of the practical challenges of designing jobs across a range of different types of work in hospitality, construction, education, IT, professional services, telecoms and local government. Some of these sectors have historically tended more towards employer-led flexibility, which is driven by business requirements for flexible resourcing, rather than employees' need for work-life balance.

Interviewees worked in both large and small organisations, in the public and private sector, and were located across the UK. Some worked for employers who were in the process of introducing or updating their flexible working initiatives and using lockdown as an opportunity to accelerate progress. Some interviewees embraced both flexible location and flexible hours, while others focused on homeworking. Interviewees were asked about the opportunities and challenges presented by homeworking, and how the pandemic has affected other types of flexibility. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed.

### Quantitative research

The quantitative research involved an online survey with a total sample size of 2,133 senior decision-makers in UK organisations, conducted by YouGov. Fieldwork was undertaken between 14 December 2020 and 4 January 2021. The figures have been weighted and are representative of the UK business population by size, sector, industry and nation.

## 3 Flexible location: seven strategies for hybrid working

### 3.1 Introduction: 'standard' and COVID-enforced homeworking

Working from home has long been an organisational strategy for both saving the cost of office space and improving work-life balance.

While the lockdown resulting from the pandemic offered a unique opportunity to trial homeworking, it's nonetheless important to remember that many jobholders can't work from home – health and care workers, delivery drivers, construction staff and supermarket checkout operators, for example, continued to work as before.

It's also worth remembering that there are several key differences between COVID-enforced homeworking and 'standard' homeworking: while the pandemic has provided a natural experiment in homeworking, it is far from being a controlled environment or ideal homeworking circumstances for many.



### Voluntary and involuntary homeworking

First, and importantly, homeworking was enforced on the population whatever their personal preferences or home circumstances. Many people were working out of home environments that weren't suitable, using inadequate technology. In all, 43% of survey respondents said their employees had difficulty in working because they lacked space or privacy at home. Almost three in ten employers (29%) said their staff experienced reduced productivity as a result of poor internet connectivity, while 23% had difficulty conducting appropriate workplace risk assessments for people working from home. As one interviewee vividly reported, *'Some people, living with their family, just didn't have the space. Or the router was behind the back of the telly and they could only get access to it by sitting on the stairs.'*

COVID-enforced homeworking hit parents particularly hard because of the closure of schools and other forms of childcare (see section 4.2). Other interviewees reported that homeworking interfered with their household setup and relationships, so they preferred to be in the workplace: *'Some people are not interested in homeworking. They've always worked a particular way, they leave the house at that time, they get home at that time... and they don't want to change it.'*

Other interviewees noted that it was important that homeworking was a voluntary choice because different locations suited different personalities: the (usually) relatively quiet, static and socially isolated life of the homeworker wasn't for everyone. For example, a senior manager from the hospitality sector commented that *'the reason we choose this industry is because we like being out and about, we like being seen, not being trapped behind a desk, we like variety, that every event is slightly different. And now we're living a virtual life.'*

### Planned and unplanned approaches

The rapid imposition of lockdown without much advance warning meant that employers and managers had little time to organise changes to working practices. There was no planned approach, no pilot before rollout, and rarely any measurement of indicators of success. A mass shift to remote working might normally involve some manager training and support, to deal with issues of wellbeing, productivity and learning. Not surprisingly, these became challenges in an enforced lockdown (see sections 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6).

### Hybrid and total homeworking

Homeworking pre-lockdown (and most homeworking expected post-pandemic) usually involved partial or hybrid homeworking for a few days a week, rather than for five days a week. The interviews highlighted that the absence of any face-to-face contact, or variety of working environment, could be challenging. For example, one respondent commented that *'I found homeworking very intense. To come to the same room, however nice it is, day after day, and do a lot of video calls... I cope, but I'm more motivated if I've got variety.'* [Previous research](#) has suggested that hybrid working is likely to be more effective than total homeworking in many circumstances.

## 3.2 Expectations of change in homeworking

### Most employers plan to encourage more hybrid working post-pandemic

It's important to distinguish between five-days-a-week homeworking and hybrid or partial homeworking, where people split their working time between the home and the workplace.





More than six out of ten employers (63%) in our survey said that they planned to expand the use of hybrid working to some degree. Eighty-one per cent of this group were already doing some hybrid working, while the other 19% were planning to introduce it for the first time.

The survey also explored the predicted extent of this expansion: what proportion of the workforce did employers expect to engage in hybrid working post-pandemic, compared with the proportion that worked in this way pre-pandemic? Only 17% of survey participants said that more than half of their workforce was hybrid working before the pandemic, but 50% said that they expected more than half of their workforce to do so post-pandemic. At the opposite end of the scale, the proportion of the workforce that is expected to do no hybrid working at all has reduced to 16%, compared with 25% doing no hybrid working pre-lockdown.

**Table 1: Proportions of employers estimating (a) more than half their workforce working in a hybrid way; and (b) none of their workforce working in a hybrid way (%)**

*200% rise in employers expecting more than half of workforce to adopt hybrid working*

	(a) What proportion of employers estimate that more than half their workforce worked/will work in a hybrid way?	(b) What proportion of employers estimate that none of their workers worked/will work in a hybrid way?
Pre-pandemic (estimated)	17	25
Post-pandemic (expected)	50	16

Base: 2,072

In terms of employers' plans to facilitate this increase in homeworking, the most common types of measures planned were:

- changing policy (mentioned by 45% of survey respondents)
- improving technology (investment in the quality of technology was mentioned by 41%, and investment in the quantity of technology by 35%)
- providing online guidance (33%).

While these are all important hygiene factors, only 28% of respondents said they planned to put in place manager training in remote working. Given interviewees' perceptions of how remote working could be made both more feasible and more productive with changes to behaviours and working practices, more training in managing these issues is likely to be beneficial (see sections 3.4–3.6).

Turning to total, five-days-a-week homeworking, 45% of survey respondents (compared with 63% hybrid) said they expected to introduce or expand its use. A surprisingly high 31% said that they expected more than half of their workforce to work totally from home post-pandemic. Although this is lower than the 50% of employers who said they expected more than half their workforce to adopt hybrid working, it is nonetheless a remarkably high figure. Operational managers interviewed for this project tended towards a more cautious approach, citing the need for a degree of face-to-face time for wellbeing, for productivity, and for learning and development.

### **Most employers say that productivity has increased or stayed the same**

More than two-thirds (71%) of survey participants said that homeworking had no



detrimental impact on productivity. This figure is made up of 33% who said that productivity improved, and 38% who said it was unchanged, while 23% reported productivity had decreased.

When combined with the benefits for staff wellbeing, and the potential savings to the employer in office costs, it's perhaps not surprising that many interviewees had changed their mind about homeworking. A senior operational manager credited his staff for making a success of the enforced trial of homeworking:

*'If you had asked me this in March 2020, I would have said, "I cannot wait for every single one of my staff to be back in the office." I was a cynic about working from home. But I've learned a lot about our staff and what benefits there are working from home. With the results that they're producing, they have made it work, so it has been educational, to understand more about how we can operate better.'*

The pandemic has shifted perceptions even among those who were previously suspicious of homeworking because *'if I can't see you, then how do I know what you're doing?'* One HR director reported that, *'It's opened their eyes to say, "Maybe the perception I had before wasn't quite right. I can see the output still being delivered, and people are available, it's just that they're on a screen rather than in front of me.'"*

On the other hand, almost a quarter (23%) of survey participants said that productivity decreased during the enforced trial of homeworking. Some of that decrease was due to the involuntary nature of homeworking, including inadequate workspace and technology, while some was no doubt due to broader lockdown issues such as the need for home-schooling, or reduced wellbeing because of health anxiety. Other factors concerned how the team's work was co-ordinated, and how well it was managed (see section 3.5).

Perceptions of productivity also differed between those organisations that had offered line manager training in remote working, and those that hadn't. Forty-three per cent of those that offered such training said that productivity had increased during homeworking, but only 29% of those that hadn't offered training said the same. While these findings show correlation rather than causation, employers might want to explore to what degree training for line managers can maximise the productivity of homeworkers. There is more advice on this in sections 3.4–3.6.

### 3.3 The benefits and challenges of homeworking

Overall, our research found a range of organisational benefits and challenges resulting from the shift to homeworking. None was reported by more than half of the survey participants, which suggests that both benefits and challenges are highly dependent on individual circumstances, both at home and at work, and on the type of work being done.

#### Benefits

##### Avoiding the commute

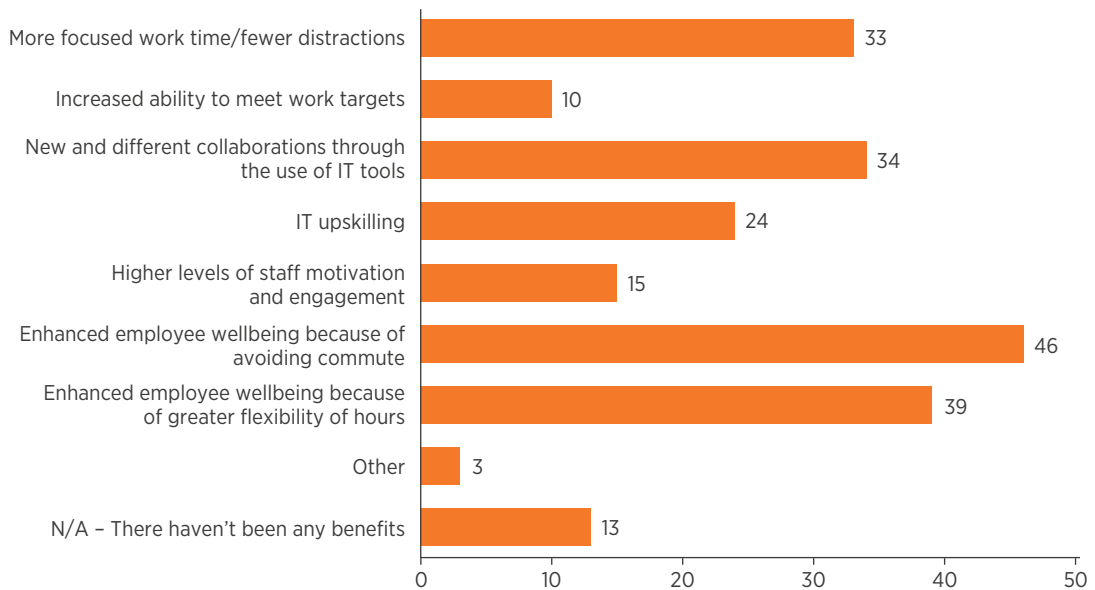
The most frequently mentioned benefit, cited by 46% of survey participants, was increased employee wellbeing because of avoiding the commute. Our interviewees echoed this finding: they enjoyed the increase in personal time, as well as the cost saving. Extra hours



in the day could be spent with the family: one graphically described how *'we discovered eating breakfast together as a family. I can't remember ever doing that, since I was on maternity leave. And because we didn't have the commute, we had dinner earlier, so we had an increase in our family time – games nights, movie nights.'* Others mentioned having more time for gardening, exercise, hobbies, online classes, cooking, housework, socialising (online), volunteering, helping neighbours and the joy of *'finishing work and being immediately finished'*. However, some interviewees also reported a tendency to work longer hours when homeworking (see section 3.4).

**Figure 1: Main benefits of increased homeworking (%)**

*What have been the main benefits to your organisation of increased homeworking?*



Base: 1,524

For the remaining 54% of survey participants who did not regard avoiding the commute as a benefit, it may be that the upside was crowded out by the downsides of enforced homeworking, whether personal or work-related. Only one interviewee mentioned missing the work-life boundary provided by the commute, and that was more than compensated for by the extra time gained: *'I suppose the downside for me personally is, I like listening to audio books in my car. I miss that wind-down, I haven't got that detox at the beginning and the end of the day. However, I don't think it's a major issue because if I'm not driving, I'm going to use that time for myself.'*

### **Enhanced employee wellbeing through flexibility of hours**

The second highest benefit (39% of survey participants) was enhanced employee wellbeing because of greater flexibility of hours, meaning that six out of ten (61%) survey participants did not regard flexibility of hours as a benefit of homeworking. This presents a complex picture, depending on both work and non-work factors. Some types of work, when done at home, allowed greater flexibility of hours, particularly informally, but for others, the same constraints on hours applied as when working in the workplace (see section 4.1). Some people found it harder to set boundaries around taking breaks or stopping work in the evening (see section 3.4). Some simply preferred a traditional routine of nine to five, and some undoubtedly found that work and family clashed when homeworking.



### **Team communication and collaboration**

The third highest organisational benefit cited in the employer survey, at 34%, was ‘new and different collaborations through IT tools’. Although team communication and collaboration is often cited as a barrier to homeworking, this finding suggests that with appropriate technology and working practices, homeworking might actually benefit organisational effectiveness (see section 3.5). Related to this, another organisational benefit was IT upskilling, cited by 23% of respondents: one HR director reported that *‘even though we’ve always had the technology available to us, I think it’s really forced us to embrace that technology so much more.’*

### **Reduction in distractions**

A reduction in distractions, leading to more focused work time, is often cited as the major benefit of homeworking, but only 33% of our survey participants cited this, perhaps because the lockdown enforced involuntary and total homeworking, regardless of the suitability of the home workspace. While some people had fewer distractions at home, others had inadequate space and were dealing with partners, children, pets, and the inability of everyone to leave the home during lockdown.

### **Other benefits**

Other benefits included normalising the use of technology, which could help inclusion, particularly for those with a disability or illness that prevented or impeded travel, and for those working in distributed teams. In one operational team, the manager commented that *‘we’ve got somebody who works in Ireland; he used to be in an office that closed but now works permanently from home. He said that he’s never felt so much part of a team, having that structure, the regular Teams calls, that connection.’*

And finally, several interviewees reported getting to know their colleagues better as individuals. A director noted that, *‘previously, you would have seen me quite polished, in a suit, and now it’s much more relaxed. That barrier of the work persona and the home persona has slipped. We have seen babies, kids, husbands, but that has forced people to talk more about their situation. I actually feel I know my team better now than I ever did before. I think that is a positive.’*

### **Challenges**

As with the benefits, the organisational challenges of homeworking presented a complex picture which varied between different settings. Overall, the organisational challenges can be divided into ‘hygiene’ factors, work-related factors and wellbeing.

#### **Reduced mental wellbeing**

In all, 44% of survey participants cited reduced mental wellbeing due to isolation as a challenge to their organisation during the pandemic. Many of our interviewees, particularly those from HR, reported needing to focus more attention on wellbeing (see section 3.4). Isolation due to separation from work colleagues was of course exacerbated by the absence of a normal social or family life during the pandemic.

#### **Hygiene factors**

Hygiene factors are the issues of workspace, technology and home circumstances which, in a voluntary homeworking situation, would be dealt with in advance of a decision to move to homeworking, and might indeed preclude homeworking for certain people or types of task:

- 36% of respondents cited the unsuitability of certain jobs
- 31% unsuitable home circumstances
- 15% insufficient technology
- 15% outdated technology
- 14% lack of staff proficiency with technology.



### Work-related factors

Among work-related factors:

- 26% of respondents cited difficulty with staff interaction and co-operation
- 19% said lack of staff engagement
- 19% said line manager capability to manage homeworkers
- 18% said line manager capability to monitor staff performance.

Section 3.5 explores these factors and how our interviewees overcame them.

## 3.4 Wellbeing

Both HR and operational managers reported an increased focus on managing staff wellbeing – not only because of homeworking, but because of the broader social isolation imposed by the pandemic, combined with increased health anxiety and the difficulty of home-schooling during school closures.



### Strategy 1: Develop the skills and culture needed for open conversations about wellbeing

Many managers reported that they found it harder to pick up on how staff were feeling when working remotely. Body language and non-verbal cues were more apparent when working side by side: *‘I’ve had concerns as to how people were and whether you actually get an honest response when you ask. I’m not always convinced of the answers. I get the feeling that some people, certainly those who are anxious about the whole COVID-19 situation, are living a bit more in isolation, which is not as healthy.’* In the workplace, managers could find *‘an opportunity to maybe have an ad hoc meeting, a check-in to make sure everything’s fine’*, but it was harder both to notice, and to fix, reduced wellbeing for homeworkers.

### Solutions

#### Upskilling managers to discuss wellbeing confidently

Good managers incorporated wellbeing into their regular one-to-one conversations about objectives, progress and workload: *‘I’ve had to make sure that I’ve had my one-to-ones. And I’ve tried to keep as open an environment as I can so that people feel comfortable, if any frustrations come up, to speak to me.’* The frequency of these conversations depended on the work, but also on the individual’s needs, and managers needed to be alert to the signs of reduced wellbeing. An HR director noted that, *‘sometimes when the work is being done, you perhaps don’t think, “Is everything else alright?” We set up catch-ups; we made time, and perhaps it was once a week to start off, and then it went to once every fortnight, and then perhaps we did it once a month, but it was just a check-in that we were all okay.’*

In a remote environment, managers needed to create opportunities to talk about non-work issues and actively encourage openness to talk about wellbeing. One operational manager described how team check-ins normalised the conversation about wellbeing, using *‘a list of headings, to explore, what’s going on for you at the moment? What have you been doing outside of work? How do you feel today, mentally? And physically? How are we all looking after ourselves? It can be a bit uncomfortable but people do resolve important things; it gives them a place where, if something’s going on, those things come out.’* He noted that embarrassment could be overcome with practice, and particularly by setting an example from the top: *‘I share what’s going on for me as well; that helps.’*

More information about how managers can develop skills and demonstrate behaviours which will build the trust necessary for open, supportive conversations can be found under the [‘Building and sustaining relationships’](#) section of the CIPD’s line manager support materials.



### Creating an organisational focus on wellbeing

An organisational focus on individual wellbeing (see [Fujitsu and Onecom case studies](#)) could help to set the tone and encourage appropriate behaviours. There's more advice on how people professionals can support wellbeing at work under the wellbeing page of the CIPD website and in the [introduction for people professionals](#) to the line manager support materials.



### Strategy 2: Encourage boundary-setting and routines to improve wellbeing and prevent overwork

Many interviewees recognised that the loss of boundaries – in time and place – could lead to working longer hours. An operational director mentioned *'blurred lines between when work ends and when personal time begins. Maybe your bedroom is usually a place for personal time. When you're working at home, it becomes a place where you're working as well. And so you don't have that clear cut-off or transition.'* Others referred to *'day drift'* and *'struggling to differentiate between what is work and what is home life, so perhaps I'll be working and the kids will be downstairs, and at 5:30, I'll be thinking, "Right, I need to finish this and then I'll go and have my home life." But then something else will come in, and something else. People don't know when to switch off.'*

While many were glad to use their commuting time for personal and family activities, others donated their commuting time back to their employer: *'I've not said to anybody, "You must do this," but people are starting at home in front of the computer at the time they would have left to go to the office.'* The attraction of long hours might be particularly strong – and financially beneficial – for those working on commission or a bonus that could be earned by putting in extra hours: the leader of a sales team reported that *'prior to March, every single person's start time was 8:30am and it was a clear line. Our more aggressive top sellers will log on now at 7am or 7:30am. And their performance has increased. We don't ask them to, but some of them will stay on working, not all the time, but it could be until 8:00 at night.'*

Some managers found it harder to monitor whether staff were overworking without being able to see and hear what they were doing: *'It's not obvious that they're struggling. If you're next to them, it's easier to be aware if people feel overwhelmed with work.'* When working patterns across the group were diverse, it could be hard to tell whether someone was sending emails late at night because they were flexing their hours, or working too many hours in total: *'It's something we've been bothered about, people getting burnout, especially if the laptop is switched on in your kitchen.'* Some managers in workplaces that used physical access control systems to monitor overwork had no equivalent for the virtual world.

In addition to longer hours, the temptation to work without taking breaks could also be a challenge: *'I'm moving far less than I would do previously, and I'm taking fewer breaks, because I don't have people around me to take my breaks with.'* For those living alone, or whose colleagues weren't in regular contact, *'homeworking's more intense. You don't have the normal interruptions that you get in the office – someone popping in to ask a question, or someone doing a coffee round, or going to find someone. People are on their own with their computers, and there's nothing else going on.'* For those whose days were normally broken up by face-to-face meetings, which at least offered a chance to get away from the screen and a change of environment, back-to-back video calls were more stressful and tiring: *'Your diary is full all day, every day, on a call. When I'm in the office, I'm wandering about all the time, talking to people. Now I don't go anywhere, so my steps have dropped through the floor. My physical wellbeing is being discounted in that respect.'*



## Solutions

### Establishing boundaries and routines – and monitoring them across the team

Some organisations were offering training in boundary-setting and the use of routines to create appropriate start and finish times, and build in breaks to the working day. One manager described wellbeing as a basic, routine life skill: *‘If at school, when they teach us how to cross the road and wash our hands and brush our teeth, they taught us all about taking breaks, and an hour lunch break, and walking 10,000 steps, we wouldn’t need to be teaching our employees this now.’* HR departments had to define *‘a whole new set of disciplines that, as individuals who are less familiar with homeworking, we’re having to learn. That’s part of the role that we’ve been playing centrally in HR, helping people to be aware of what those healthy practices are.’* These routines could be particularly effective if a team developed them collectively, so that colleagues could assist each other in monitoring progress and sticking to them.

Routines were needed for use of space as well as use of time. Another HR director recommended *‘even something as simple as putting your laptop away when you’re done for the day, moving into a different room, or finding a way to separate the space’.*

### Taking breaks between video calls

To avoid the draining of energy that comes from constant video calls, one participant proposed, *‘Don’t have an hour call, have a 45-minute call. If it was going to be 30 minutes, do it as 20 minutes, so you can build the natural breaks into your day.’*

### Noticing signs of overwork

For monitoring overwork, time-recording software could measure the time spent logged in. However, software is a blunt and partial instrument for checking on overwork: *‘We have a timesheet system, so I’m always watching to make sure they’re not breaking the Working Time Directive, but the timesheets are the backup, because we’re watching out for people just through normal communication. Because you can see, you know? Our managers know. I rely on my local managers to go, “Tony has been working a lot of hours, what are we doing with him?” We’re having far more conversations with our people, so we know when people have got too much to do.’* Managers needed to develop, or be trained in, the skills of setting realistic workloads and looking out for signs of overwork.

There’s more advice on managing remote teams in the [CIPD’s podcast on managing the wellbeing of remote workers](#), in the [webinar recording](#) of the session on managing remote teams, as well as [guidance for line managers](#).

## 3.5 Productivity

The amount of work that can be productively done from home in any particular job depends on the nature of the work, the line manager, and the team’s working practices, as well as the preferences, personality and home circumstances of the individual. At the start of the pandemic, the focus was on the hygiene factors: having an appropriate workspace and desk; obtaining appropriate technology and learning how to use it; and negotiating shared space and attention with other household members, particularly children during school closures.

Over time, some teams and managers learned how to work differently, and discovered which team working practices suited them best, sometimes by trial and error: *‘I’d say we got to the point of over-communicating, to make sure everyone is aware, until we got to the point where, when everyone’s adapted to the working-from-home environment, we*



could kind of scale it back a bit and find the right level of communication.’ Many reported homeworking as different, rather than harder, and some had developed strategies which were so beneficial that they planned to build them into normal practice post-pandemic.



### Strategy 3: Ensure effective co-ordination of tasks and task-related communication

Many interviewees recorded having to change the way that they co-ordinated work when it was performed remotely. Managing the distribution of tasks to achieve collective goals needed a different approach when working remotely. In the workplace, reported one operational director, *‘I sit very tight with my commercial manager, and things just come up: “Have we dealt with this, have we dealt with that?” Whereas now it all has to be formalised, you have to sort of list it down, before you pick up the phone: “I’m going to talk to him about this, I’m going to talk to him about that.”’*

Some managers were more comfortable with ‘management by walking around’ as a means of co-ordinating work and sharing information across the team: *‘I have a walk around, and then we look at things and we take actions. I’m a new set of eyes walking around and saying, “Consider this, think about that, why are we doing this?”’* These managers were reassured if they could hear that work was getting done: *‘That kind of crosstalk, like communication by osmosis, when you hear those conversations going on, you kind of know that things are being managed.’* Some managers also relied on informal communication to share task-based information with, or gain information from, other teams: *‘The extra bits that you overhear in the office, that’s one area that we do miss out on. When we were all in the office, somebody would be talking about some issue or project, and somebody from another team would overhear and go, “Ah, I think that might cause a problem.” We might lose some of that information or that interaction.’*

A particular challenge for those organisations that were new to homeworking, or that didn’t use software to indicate whether homeworkers were available, was whether and when to approach a colleague. There was sometimes a reluctance to ‘disturb’ other homeworkers – perhaps a hangover from the days when homeworking was a means of getting away from distractions and phone calls: *‘In an office you might just wander over. And that’s a bit harder to manage at home. You don’t know how busy someone is, you don’t want to kind of burden them with another call.’* Task-related communication could be harder because of this reluctance to contact people, as an HR director reported: *‘Somebody had a pensions issue and they hadn’t done it for a while. In the office she would have gone, “Right girls, what do I need to do here? How do you do these?” But she said, “I struggled for about a day, and then I thought, why don’t I just pick up the phone and ask somebody? I was trying to work through this minefield.”’* Younger, less experienced or less confident people, or those new to the organisation without established networks or social capital (see section 3.6), might feel particularly reluctant to disturb their seniors or managers with questions or requests for information.

## Solutions

### Setting clear objectives

A key element of remote co-ordination of work was to ensure that clearly defined and measurable objectives were in place, regardless of work location (see [Onecom case study](#)). One senior finance manager described how the team’s short-term, transactional goals were measured: *‘I can see on the system how many things have been processed. We’ve got targets in place; we can always run reports, to see how many documents have been processed, or how many invoices have been raised, or how many supplier invoices*





*we've taken in that day. There's nothing new in terms of the targets we use when people are working remotely; we haven't needed to change anything.'* A project manager in a longer-term, less routine type of work recognised that the necessary trust came from having clear goals and seeing them being met: *'Checking against project performance and service goals has proved it [homeworking] does seem to be worth that extra level of trust. I can't see any of them, to know whether they are working or not. So I have to go on outcomes.'*

#### **Calibrating the frequency of task-related communication**

Remote co-ordination of work also required more formal, deliberate communication, often at pre-arranged times. If the work was fast-moving, time-sensitive or interdependent with other people's work, more frequent co-ordination of tasks might be needed: some interviewees described several group meetings a day to co-ordinate work remotely, while others got by with once a week. These meetings needed to be managed to ensure that all the necessary task information was shared, and everyone contributed their expertise. There's more advice on this in the [guides](#) for HR and line managers and our report on [developing effective virtual teams](#).

#### **Developing more deliberate task-related communication**

This more thoughtful, deliberate style of communication was regarded as a positive by some: *'I think that one of the positives is that we've had to be more deliberate in our communication, everybody's had to think much more about communication. So you can afford to take much less chance now.'* Although social communication was generally regarded as having suffered because of remote working (see section 3.5), when it came to task co-ordination, it was acknowledged that the informal mode of communication might not be the most effective way. An operational director commented that, *'We've all had years of getting results by saying, "Right, everyone get into an open plan office together." But that doesn't necessarily create the best way.'* HR departments needed to develop people's skills in task co-ordination, as one HR director suggested: *'I think people professionals have had to become more conscious about how people communicate within the company, rather than leaving it to assumption and chance.'*

Refer to the [factsheet on employee communication](#) for more advice on this.



#### **Strategy 4: Pay special attention to creativity, brainstorming and problem-solving tasks**

Some tasks were harder to do remotely than others: brainstorming and problem-solving were often cited as particularly difficult, because some of the shared ideas, energy and creativity was lost. In some types of work, the need for intense periods of collaboration was hard to plan for: *'One of our challenges is that the work we do is very collaborative. So it's not the type of work that is just done in isolation, it kind of feeds off each other. You come up with ideas, and then you bounce around, and people add on to it. When you're working in the office, someone says, "Look, I'm working on this, I want to run my idea past the team. Can we go to the conference room and discuss it?"'*

Other types of deep collaboration, such as strategy development, were more plannable but still required a change of behaviour and outlook: *'If we are trying to look at our strategy for the next 12 months, really working it through and coming up with ideas, we have the technology to do it [remotely], but we have not quite moved the mindset away from being in a room and sticking bits of paper on a board, or chewing things over.'*



## Solutions

### Taking time to explore the functionality of the technological solutions

It might take months of practice for people to get to grips with the technology that, in theory, allowed these types of tasks to happen online. An impromptu group meeting to share and develop an idea could be started via a project chat facility, and then continued on a group video call. An online strategy meeting *'can be productive, because you get things done in a timeslot. We are using things like Kanban boards and technology to submit ideas in advance, so that people can do some of the thinking outside of the room. You can still post a Post-It note virtually. You do smaller discussion groups and then come together, or break it out.'* There is more information in the [Coleg y Cymoedd and Fujitsu case studies](#).

### Identifying which tasks are more effective face-to-face

It remains to be seen whether, with practice and habituation, the quality of creative, brainstorming and problem-solving tasks can be made materially identical online. It may depend on the technological tools available, the skills of the group leader, and the underlying quality of the group relationships – which develop over time and would almost certainly need some element of face-to-face time. Some operational managers remained convinced that energy and focus would always be missing if these types of tasks were conducted online: *'It's just not quite the same as when you're face-to-face across the desk from someone and you're explaining your idea and it kind of really pulses through to the other person.'* Another manager commented that, when these tasks are carried out online, *'our ability to be creative and connected, to really do some deep thinking, is challenged.'*



### Strategy 5: Build in time, including face-to-face time, for team cohesion and organisational belonging

During the pandemic, the enforcement of total homeworking, without any opportunity to meet face-to-face, over an extended period of time, undoubtedly challenged engagement with one's team and colleagues, and, ultimately, with one's employer.

At the organisational level, HR directors were aware of the challenge of maintaining an organisational culture virtually. Keeping people motivated and engaged required a sense of connection: *'This is quite intangible, but how do you create the feel of the place virtually? If you go into an office, the culture is almost quite tangible. How do we get that common thread in terms of the culture when we're in a more virtual world? We can't claim to have cracked that, but we're keenly aware of asking, "How do we exactly do that?"'* Some questioned whether remote work could meet fundamental human needs in the same way as in the workplace: *'Work is not just about work: people go to work for all kinds of reasons, a sense of purpose, the need to belong somewhere. And I think the big question is, how do we recreate the employee experience in a virtual environment?'*

At the team level, it was harder to create team cohesion when there was no opportunity at all for face-to-face communication: *'The behaviour has always been to be together physically to create that connection. The team cohesion has to be forced more. So, we have to pay attention to it and create it almost artificially.'* The shared energy and motivation were harder to transmit online: *'The energy within the room, you know? You feel energy within a room. It's very buzzy within the office, there's negotiations going on, there's success, there's rejection, there's all those emotions, up, down, up, down. On Teams, it's just not that real energy. When I'm in that office and in that environment, I know what I need to do, and the energy then takes me forward.'*



## Solutions

### Creating common purpose across the organisation

At the organisational level, the sense of common purpose had to be engineered more formally when people were not in close contact with each other (see [Skanska and Wychavon and Malvern Hills District Councils case studies](#)). Part of that sense of belonging came from frequent visual contact with colleagues: *‘Being able to see other people in the company, being able to see them each day, it makes us feel that we’re all working for the same company and we’re kind of in this together.’* Large-scale company-wide events such as town halls or Q&A sessions enabled senior directors to become more visible and more accessible, and to build the sense of connection with organisational goals: *‘We’ve had to think much more, and much more creatively, about how we reach more people. Once a month, our CEO now does an all-hands Teams meeting. So we’ll have upwards of 3,000 people on those. So it’s the only opportunity we’ve ever had for him to get to that many people, and you kind of think, “I wish we’d done this before.”’*

### Building personal and team relationships online

At the team level, in addition to the ubiquitous pub quizzes, line managers tried to reinforce team cohesion with a wide range of online team events, including fitness initiatives, charity fundraisers, and all types of social event involving games, food and drink (see [Onecom case study](#)). Many reserved sections of team meetings for relationship-building and sharing non-work news, being sensitive to the team’s changing needs over time: *‘In the first lockdown, we had a real social element to the call. So, what books are people reading, what are they watching on TV, who is doing the latest this, that, and the other? Then people got a bit fed up so we dropped that. Anyway, I’ve asked for feedback from the team and they said, “Can we have that bit back again?” We’re having to force the social conversation, because you don’t naturally have that when they don’t bump into each other.’*

One HR director suggested focusing HR interventions on line managers who found this type of engagement harder: *‘I think 80% of the teams are just fine. It’s that 20% where the line manager may not be doing such a good job of reaching out and engaging. Typically, the good managers that we had before will be doing it well. And the others, it’s probably no surprise that they’re not doing it so well in the virtual environment.’* Operational managers were grateful if HR departments supplied new ideas for activities to create team cohesion: *‘Variety was the key. No one solution is going to fix everything, so they’ve [HR] got to keep these things coming. We need the constant flow of new ideas and new initiatives going on.’*

It was important for managers to be sensitive to, and not make assumptions about, individual needs. For example, it’s commonly assumed that introverts are more suited to homeworking (see [Onecom case study](#)). Another HR director noted that introverts still wanted social contact, but behaved slightly differently: *‘People have engaged happily with social elements on the remote platform. The typical introverted thinkers, they’re going to be much less effusive, but they like the engagement, to still have that connection. The raging extroverts want to be on the call and occupying the space.’*

### Building in face-to-face time, post-pandemic

In the end, commented one operational manager, there was no substitute for face-to-face contact in getting to know people as individuals, and building the relationships that were essential to effective working together: *‘To actually get to know your teams, you need body language, human moments. I think you really do need to spend time with them face-to-face.’* Organised team communication, and particularly timetabled team



jollity, could become formulaic, removing the spontaneity and autonomy of personal relationships: *'In this remote working, the temptation is to keep setting up Teams meetings. Then there's this sort of overly organised communication. It's just trying to keep that time a bit more light-hearted, because a Teams call can get a bit regimented. I mean, they're very efficient, at times. But there's a little bit less of the personal.'*

### **Timetabling co-located working within teams**

Nearly all the operational managers we interviewed felt that, in the post-pandemic workplace, some degree of co-located working was needed to ensure informal relationship-building. Managers needed to plan homeworking patterns to create days when the whole team was in the workplace together, and avoid a situation where *'staff are like ships passing, because their remote days might be different from their colleagues' remote days.* Among geographically distributed teams, global teams, or mobile teams, there might be an increased role for face-to-face 'keeping in touch' events or days when work was not discussed at all, and the purpose was wholly social and team-building.



### **Strategy 6: Facilitate networking and inter-team relationships**

When everyone was working from home, communication changed not just within teams, but between teams, and networking across the organisation suffered. While intra-team networking might be taken care of by organising online team meetings and socials, inter-team networking was often still being left to chance: *'When I was in the office, I'd be walking around and meeting lots more diverse people. Now I'm speaking less to the random members of staff and more to my own team.'* This could be a particular problem for those whose job involved working across the whole organisation: a senior strategy manager reported that *'we probably feel less connected with other teams than if we were in the same building. You don't know what they're working on, and whether you can help. When you're in a team that is driving organisational priorities, you need to work across teams, and that is hard.'*

### **Solutions**

#### **Creating opportunities for co-working with other teams**

One solution was to roster the overlap of days in the workplace with other teams in the same way as rostering days in the workplace within a team: one manager whose team was partially back in the office reported that *'one of the teams who I work with on quite a lot of stuff, or we just bounce ideas off each other, I've arranged the rota so we're in together quite a lot. Otherwise all those conversations wouldn't be happening.'*

#### **Encouraging inter-team relationships and networking at organisational level**

Other solutions were cross-company social events (see [Onecom case study](#)) and mandating a minimum amount of time in the office (see [Wychavon and Malvern Hills District Councils case study](#)).

Even when teams are co-located and spending all their time in the office, it cannot be assumed that relationships are built automatically through mere presence in the same building. However, employers may need to create more formal opportunities for inter-team relationship-building and individual networking among homeworkers. Although networking and career-building were not front of mind in the relatively short period of the lockdown, [other studies](#) have shown that reduced networking may have long-term implications for career progression. Long-term homeworkers themselves might need to pay more attention to seeking out networking opportunities. Indeed, personal and professional development needs to be viewed differently when homeworking, as reviewed in our next section.



### 3.6 Learning and development

While formal training courses can be adapted for online delivery – often by reducing the length and the number of participants, and adapting the types of activities – much of the learning in organisations is informal or on-the-job. Managers were conscious of reduced opportunities for *‘shadowing, and the things that you just instinctively pick up by being sat with a group of people with a similar responsibility to you’*. Homeworking, particularly if it’s total rather than hybrid, may have long-term impacts on personal and professional development, and on career-building, which were not apparent from the relatively short period of the 2020–21 lockdowns (see our review of [previous research on working from home](#)).



#### Strategy 7: Organise a wider support network to compensate for the loss of informal learning

While informal learning can take place at any point, interviewees recognised several points at which learning needs were particularly intense. The most obvious was when joining the organisation: *‘How do you help new starters to onboard effectively, and to build relationships and establish themselves? I think however senior you get, it’s a bit harder if you’re not in the office.’* The challenge was not limited to technical learning about the job, but extended to learning about the organisation. Even when *‘the work is getting done and everyone is productive’*, new starters missed out on *‘getting the measure of how this organisation works. You can do it through reading documents and structured sessions, but they miss the opportunity to experience the environment or really absorb the non-structured content.’*

Learning needs might also increase after a promotion, or when taking on a new task or area of responsibility, or switching project team. However, many felt that younger workers, recent graduates and apprentices faced the biggest challenges, because they were not only new to the organisation, but also to the sector, and sometimes the world of work too: *‘It’s quite tricky when you first come into the industry, or the profession, and you don’t know which way is up, you don’t know necessarily what your job role is, you don’t know what to go and start doing. They might be sat next to someone in a traditional way, then they could just go, “How do you do this?” And it might be a 10-second conversation to say, “You just press this button there.” Remotely, that requires a 15-minute Teams call or they might sit there for a couple of hours going, “I’m not sure how to do this.”’* Younger workers *‘don’t have the same level of social capital or networks established, and it’s harder to know what the rules are’*.

#### Solutions

##### Recognising the points when learning needs are more intense

This challenge was still a work in progress for most of the interviewees, although many felt that it would be easier in a hybrid world than in the period of total, five-days-a-week homeworking imposed by the lockdown. The first step was for line managers to recognise the points when more support was needed: *‘I don’t think we can claim to have overcome it, but the first thing is about becoming aware of it. So all of our onboarding is now virtual, it’s about sharing the stories of these people who have onboarded over the past few months, and what has worked for them. And also, the manager should be paying really keen attention to the fact that it will be more challenging for somebody where they’re building relationships.’*

##### Organising more structured development opportunities

More calculated planning of development opportunities was needed: *‘Those development conversations have to be a bit more formal and a bit more planned than they would be in the physical office environment.’* Organising a wider support network instead of a single



buddy, together with more documentation, was another solution: *'Instead of buddying with one existing colleague, training was arranged with a wider range of existing staff during the first two months, backed up by more formal documentation of training procedures.'* In project-based work, managers could deliberately mix people up on consecutive projects to create greater opportunities for development.

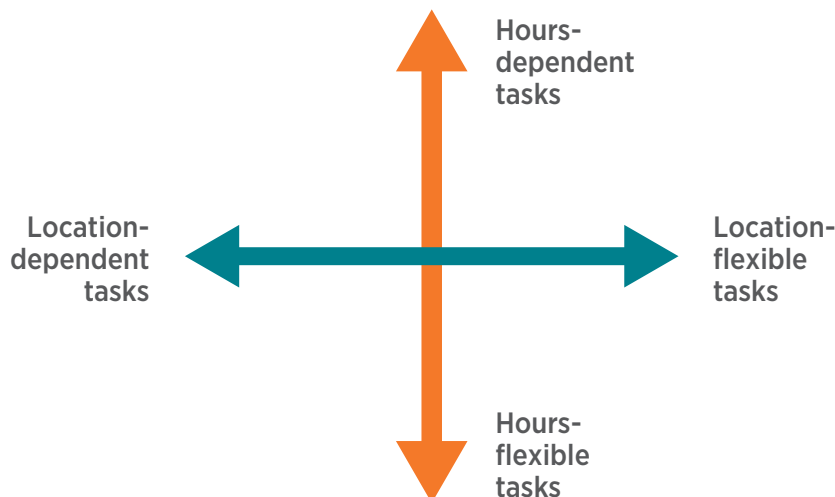
Another solution was to rota colleagues' time in the workplace, to avoid a new starter feeling unsupported by remote-working colleagues: *'Someone new, I would want them to be in the office, but to do that, I then need people with them, to make it worthwhile.'* Depending on the nature and complexity of the tasks and the expertise of the new starter, colleagues could be asked to co-locate in the workplace for a set number of days or weeks.

## 4 Flexible hours: seizing the opportunity?

### 4.1 Introduction: work tasks can be flexible in terms of hours or location – or both, or neither

In many jobs there is a mixture of tasks which can be done anywhere, and tasks which have to be done in a specific place. Similarly, there are tasks which can be done at any time, and tasks which need to be done at specific times. When the tasks within any job are added together, some jobs will result in little flexibility on either dimension, while others will offer a wide degree of autonomy to the job-holder on both dimensions.

**Figure 2: Identifying tasks that are location-flexible, and tasks that are hours-flexible**



On the location scale, tasks at the location-dependent end include the physical handling of goods or materials, the use of equipment or machinery, and personal service tasks in health and care. Tasks at the flexible end include information processing, administrative tasks, creative thinking, and some types of sales and customer service. Tasks that might fall in the middle – capable of being done remotely, but requiring some degree of face-to-face contact for maximum effectiveness – include tasks that require personal or group relationships, such as teaching, people management, group problem-solving and some sales or customer service tasks that require long-term relationships with clients.



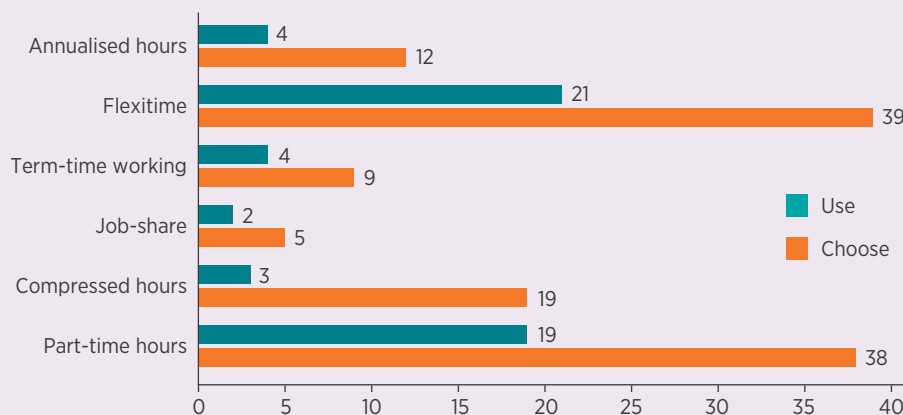
On the hours scale, constraints may come from customer requirements or team resourcing patterns, and in project-based work, may vary at different stages of a programme of work. In any kind of customer-facing role, hours may be determined by customer needs. In catering, meals have to be served at times when customers want to eat, and in education, teaching hours are specified at pre-arranged points in the timetable. In shift-based environments such as manufacturing, call centres or hospitality, the hours are controlled by the pattern of demand and by team resourcing patterns – although as in any team-based work, flexibility of hours for individuals can be increased by the way that resourcing is managed (see [Compass case study](#)). In construction, working hours are defined by the sequence of interdependent tasks laid down by the project plan.

The pandemic enforced and accelerated the expansion of flexible location, but there was no such enforcement of flexible hours. Many employers embraced the sudden widespread expansion of homeworking, but were at different stages of their journey towards flexibility of hours – and many of the barriers that prevented hours flexibility pre-lockdown were largely still in place during lockdown. Business unit leaders tended to be more cautious than HR interviewees about the opportunities for flexibility of hours, pointing out the costs and practical challenges when staff wanted to work at hours that were less than ideal for the team’s deliverables. These practical challenges are also evidenced by a recent CIPD survey of employees, which demonstrated the gap between actual and preferred flexible hours working arrangements (see box below).

### Unmet employee demand for flexible hours working arrangements

A CIPD-commissioned YouGov survey of 2,000 employees (weighted to be representative of the UK workforce) conducted in January 2021 shows a significant gap between the sorts of flexible hours arrangements people use and the arrangements respondents would use if they could choose (see Figure 3). This suggests there is significant unmet demand for different forms of flexible hours working arrangements.

**Figure 3: The proportion of working people who use different flexible hours arrangements currently and the arrangements that respondents would use if they could choose (%)**



Base: 2,127 (all UK employees)



## 4.2 Expectations of change in flexible hours

### Hours flexibility is expected to change less than location flexibility

Among the flexible working arrangements that employers were planning to introduce or expand the use of, almost half of survey participants (48%) cited flexitime, much higher than for any other type of flexible-hours arrangement, but lower than hybrid working (63%). Flexitime is a very broad term that covers a range of formal and informal arrangements about working hours; it may serve the interests of either the employer, the employee or both.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the operational managers cited constraints on flexibility of hours in the ‘nature’ of the work. For customer-facing jobs, *‘there are limitations to how much we can flex the hours that people are working, because we have an SLA that we’ve got to meet for our customers.’* In IT support, *‘because our users are predominantly 9:00–5:00, and that has not changed, our support of those users has to mirror that.’* In some types of work, the expectation is that workers will be flexible to meet the project schedule (employer-led flexibility) rather than their own needs: *‘Everything’s programme-related and tasks are at particular times: I need to do this by then, and that by then. They think flexible working should be sort of standardised, you know, “Every Friday I’m off.” It’s not flexible then really, it’s just a change of working hours.’* In education, *‘our priority is making sure that the curriculum and the timetable is right for our learners. Where the timetable has been shifted around towards staff working patterns, it hasn’t always suited the learners.’*

The expectations of availability could be strong even when informal: *‘There’s almost an unwritten expectation that people will generally be there between half nine and half four. During lockdown, everyone kind of had the feeling that that was what was expected. And often there will be meetings put in your calendar, so you need to be there at those times.’* The sheer volume of work might also preclude flexibility of hours: *‘I think there probably is some flexibility, although it’s probably quite hard to fit that in if you’re really busy, and you’re already working too many hours. If the workload is right, then there’s a lot of scope for moving the hours around.’*

Of course, for those whose work was hours-flexible before lockdown, that could continue when homeworking: *‘I work in a group of people where we’re generally flexible anyhow. I don’t even expect my team to say to me, “I need to nip out for an hour at three o’clock.” They do it if they need to and they make the time up whenever. Because we have that environment where you can do that. It’s not the same if you’re on a shift or you have to be there because of your customer. But we’re output-driven rather than sitting at a desk from nine to five.’*

### Some types of work, when done from home, allowed greater informal flexibility of hours

For some types of work, homeworking provided more informal flexibility of hours – making changes to start and finish times, or to break times – because *‘when they are in the workplace, they are more than likely an hour away from home, so they are not going to pop home and pick the kids up, or drop parents off at hospital appointments.’* Some found it easier to have *‘a proper break from work at lunchtime’*, particularly where *‘there’s not a lot of staff space available at the office, so a lot of people tend to have lunch at their desk, in front of their computer. Whereas if I’m at home, I’ll go and have lunch with whoever’s in the house. And watch the news, or read a book or something like that. And it’s possible to get away from feeling you’re at work for half an hour.’* Of course this depended on the workload, and the home environment, but a segment of the working population reported more autonomy in organising the timing of their work and non-work tasks in a way that worked for them.

<sup>1</sup> The CIPD’s definitions of a range of different types of flexible working can be found on the [CIPD website](#).





While flexibility of hours was partly determined by the nature of the work, there was clearly also a cultural element at play. Some noted that they found autonomy easier to achieve if nobody was watching them: one manager suggested that *'no one really knows what you're up to if you're working remotely; there isn't someone sat next to you looking at what you're doing, which is pure autonomy, I guess.'* Another said that taking time out *'is much easier when you're working from home because you don't need to worry if you need to go away for 15 minutes'* – which begs the question of what caused the 'worry' when taking time out from a day in the office.

### **It's not just the 'nature' of the work: a team-based approach to availability**

The 'nature' of the work can sometimes be used as an excuse to not offer flexible hours. However, flexibility of hours lies not only in the 'nature' of the work but the way it's designed, and particularly in how teams co-ordinate work between team members to cover required time slots. Some employers in this project were on a journey to proactively create more flexibility of hours as part of a broader workforce strategy (see [Skanska case study](#)). Some individual teams (see, for example, [Wychavon and Malvern Hills District Councils case study](#)) had embraced a team-based approach to covering hours of service, agreed and then rostered by the team themselves.

Where the organisational and individual needs for hours of work didn't match, there were different perspectives. As outlined above, for many operational managers, the working hours were non-negotiable: the employee had to work the hours required by the job, or find another job. However, another option in some circumstances was multi-skilling: a larger group of employees with the same interchangeable skills could cover the required timeslots by juggling hours between them, building schedules from week to week that met individuals' requirements. This could create more flexibility of hours, even in jobs with very specific hours requirements (see [Compass case study](#)). Beyond these options, the perception was that extra costs would be incurred, because resourcing needed to build in a degree of slack in order that people could cover for each other.

### **Employers perceived fairness as a reason to improve flexibility of hours**

Among those employers who had plans to improve flexibility of hours, the reasons were the usual ones: to improve staff work-life balance, wellbeing, motivation and productivity, and to attract and retain staff. However, almost half (45%) also cited the need to ensure that employees who can't work from home can also benefit from flexible working arrangements, suggesting that the pandemic might have highlighted the concept of fairness for non-homeworkers (see [Skanska case study](#)).

### **Has lockdown reinforced the connection between flexibility of hours and parenting?**

Over the last 20 years, many employers have tried to reduce the automatic association between flexible hours and parental responsibilities, aiming instead to encompass reason-neutral flexible working that depends on the needs of the job rather than 'accommodating' individual caring needs. However, when asked about flexibility of hours, most interviewees in this project – both HR and operational managers – replied in terms of parents. The pandemic – specifically school closures and the need for home-schooling, as well as the loss of informal childcare by extended family, friends or neighbours – may have reinforced the connection between flexible hours and parenting. The spotlight was again on flexible hours as an (inconvenient and potentially costly) 'accommodation' of parents' needs, rather than part of a proactive organisational approach to work design for all. However, a few interviewees also pointed out that enforced homeworking raised the visibility of the challenge of combining work and childcare.



Many employers tried to facilitate more flexible hours for parents who were trying to combine work with childcare and home-schooling: *'We just tried to work around that because it wasn't something that anyone could do anything about. No one really had any choice in the matter. I think it's been a hugely challenging issue for parents.'*

However, the pandemic also challenged employers to reconsider who should bear the costs if parents were unable to fulfil their work obligations during working hours. One view was that parents should make up the hours – and the productivity – later in the day or week, but this only worked with job tasks at the hours-flexible end of the spectrum. Others thought that the employer should take responsibility for the costs, so that parents were not disadvantaged relative to other workers: *'We told people, "It doesn't matter if you don't do all your hours, just do as much as you can and class it as if you've done your full contractual hours," so it's not detrimental. So we were recognising that people had childcare issues.'* Yet another view was that, where tasks were at the hours-dependent end of the spectrum, the state should pay, via the furlough scheme: *'We've got a colleague whose partner is in the Army, and he was unfortunately out of the country. She has a six-month-old and a two-year-old, so there was no way that she was able to do a nine to five job. So, in that instance, we used the furlough scheme and she was so grateful for that.'* Different employers therefore had very different perspectives on who should bear the costs, when non-work commitments prevented job-holders from doing the work in normal hours, and the nature of the work prevented them from doing the work at different hours. In some cases, individuals had to bear that cost, while some employers said it should be absorbed by the organisation, and others expected the state to pay.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

### 5.1 Homeworking

#### **Conclusion: the enforced trial has highlighted seven strategies to realise the benefits of hybrid working**

The enforced trial of homeworking has improved perceptions of its feasibility, as managers have learned from experience how to make it work. Most employers (71%) say that productivity has either increased or stayed the same. Many of the challenges can be overcome by adopting hybrid, rather than total, homeworking: indeed, more employers are planning to encourage hybrid working (63%) than total homeworking (45%) after the pandemic.

Among the challenges of homeworking, the hygiene factors – home workspace, technology, and domestic and family circumstances – can be resolved post-pandemic by making homeworking a voluntary rather than enforced arrangement, although this will preclude homeworking for certain people or types of task.

Once the hygiene factors are dealt with, managers can turn to work design. It's important to identify which tasks can be done remotely, and which need face-to-face contact, taking into account the wellbeing and learning needs of each individual and the whole team, and bearing in mind that these will change over time. The seven strategies for effective homeworking are:



- 1 Develop the skills and culture needed for open conversations about wellbeing.
- 2 Encourage boundary-setting and routines to improve wellbeing and prevent overwork.
- 3 Ensure effective co-ordination of tasks and task-related communication.
- 4 Pay special attention to creativity, brainstorming and problem-solving tasks.
- 5 Build in time, including face-to-face time, for team cohesion and organisational belonging.
- 6 Facilitate networking and inter-team relationships.
- 7 Organise a wider support network to compensate for the loss of informal learning.



### **Recommendation: employers need to provide training and support in hybrid working and determine carefully when total homeworking might be appropriate**

Effective and productive homeworking requires different working practices, so employers need to train and support line managers and teams to adopt the seven strategies outlined above.

Despite 63% of employers saying that they will introduce or expand the use of hybrid working, only 28% say they have plans to train managers in how to manage remotely. A further incentive for training line managers might be the fact that 43% of employers that offered training said that productivity had increased during homeworking, while only 29% of those that hadn't offered training said the same. While these figures show a correlation rather than necessarily cause and effect, it would be wise to consider managers' skills in the seven strategies before widespread rollout of hybrid working.

Employers should also explore the differential impact of total homeworking and hybrid working on wellbeing, productivity and learning before embracing it too extensively.

## **5.2 Flexibility of hours**

### **Conclusion: informal flexibility of hours was a side effect of homeworking in some jobs – but in others, the constraints still apply**

Informal flexibility of hours happened in some jobs during lockdown: people changed their start and finish times, or took breaks at different times during the day. However, this was



limited to certain types of job: the pandemic did not enforce or accelerate the expansion of flexible hours to the same extent as flexible location. Flexibility of hours needs to be considered separately from flexibility of location: many of the barriers that prevented hours flexibility pre-lockdown remained in place during lockdown.

Almost half (45%) of those employers who were planning to expand flexitime said that part of their motivation was fairness for those whose jobs couldn't be done from home.

**Recommendation: employers need to be more proactive about flexibility of hours**

In order to meet the demand for flexible hours, and be fair to workers whose jobs don't allow flexibility of location, employers will need to analyse job tasks on the hours scale as well as the location scale. A more proactive, team-based approach can maximise flexibility of hours, rather than waiting for individual requests, because in many jobs (particularly interdependent jobs, and customer-facing ones), flexibility of hours needs to be considered at a team level in order to ensure service cover.

### 5.3 The business case for flexible working

**Conclusion: the pandemic has raised questions about who pays when flexible working isn't cost-neutral**

The wide range of sectors and types of work covered in this project has shown how much the business case for flexible working can vary. The concerns of operational managers about designing effective flexible jobs, particularly flexible-hours jobs, demonstrate the policy-practice gap. In some types of work, there is a mismatch between HR policy and the practical challenges and costs faced by operational business units.

In terms of the business case for flexible location, the mass trial of homeworking has normalised the idea that employers should cover homeworkers' expenses – workstation, IT kit, broadband: *'You wouldn't send an engineer out without a toolbox, so why send a homeworker out without their toolkit?'* However, the lockdown experience has raised questions beyond out-of-pocket expenses. Individuals and their managers might have acquired different perspectives on the effectiveness of homeworking: *'If I'm running a team of 30 project managers, we might need them to be in Birmingham one week and the next week in London. We're starting to get people going, "Well, I don't really want to work in London because I used to be able to work from home." And if somebody has worked from home for six months, they might not want to go and work in the office for the next six months.'* Employers will need to consider changes in employee expectations alongside the traditional business case for homeworking as a means to reduce office costs, and the costs of redesigning work and training managers to implement the seven strategies.

The business case for flexible hours usually resides in the need to attract and retain staff. During the pandemic, schemes to support workers, such as additional carers' leave or extra wellbeing time, involved costs which could be treated as a central overhead – an organisational investment in the long-term health and wellbeing of staff – or as a cost to be borne by the business unit: *'The company gave additional carer's allowance but different people interpreted that in different ways. My boss was like, "Oh, we don't want people to take that." Obviously, it's going to cost her money to give people this time. I could understand that.'* As detailed above, home-schooling during lockdown has also challenged employers to reconsider who should bear the costs if parents can't fulfil their work obligations during working hours, and the work can't be done at a different time.



The pandemic has also brought unprecedented government intervention in the labour market, with the state not just paying some of the wages of furloughed or part-furloughed staff, but also allowing employers to furlough staff whose caring responsibilities rendered them unable to work from home or at the times the employer needed. This has raised the larger question of the degree to which government should support workers when the business case for flexible working at the organisational level is not clear, because non-work needs render people unable to fulfil their organisational responsibilities in a particular timeframe.

**Recommendation: further research is needed into the costs of flexible working for the individual, business unit, organisation or state**

Although the pandemic is expected to create more flexibility overall, [CIPD research](#) and our organisational case studies have shown a very variable landscape. For some types of work, there are costs to implementing some types of flexible working – or at least employers and line managers perceive there to be costs. In the wake of the pandemic, more research is needed on where costs – or perceived costs – lie, for different types of worker and for different types of flexible working, particularly flexible hours. This research needs to focus on how those costs are distributed between the individual, the business unit, the organisation and the state.

Once such costs have been identified and articulated, better policy can be developed on how support for flexible working could be divided between the organisational centre and individual business units. Furthermore, the collective impact of the costs borne by individuals is, of course, a cost to the economy as a whole, and therefore a matter for the state.

## 5.4 Summary of conclusions

Overall, the research finds that the pandemic is likely to lead to a significant long-term shift towards more home and hybrid working, which will mean organisations will have to think carefully about how they manage and support employees working in this way.

The evidence in this report suggests employers that train their line managers in core people management skills and focus on supporting employees' wellbeing and providing opportunities for collaboration and networking will be best equipped to benefit from this shift.

Employers will have to think carefully about how they can promote and support the uptake of other forms of flexible working besides home and hybrid working to ensure flexible working opportunities are inclusive and are accessible to those who can't work remotely.

Organisations and policy-makers will also have to consider who bears the costs of flexible working for some sectors and types of work. Such costs often fall on the business unit, but may need to be considered at the level of the organisation or the state.

This is something the UK's Government's Flexible Working Taskforce will consider as part of its forthcoming review of hybrid working, overseen by Small Business Minister Paul Scully MP.

The taskforce, which is co-chaired by CIPD Chief Executive Peter Cheese, will also feed into the Government's forthcoming consultation on making flexible working the default position and consideration of other possible changes to policy such as making the right to request flexible working a day one right.

More information is available on the [CIPD website](#).



## 6 Further resources on flexible working

This project includes other resources:

- Seven organisational [case studies](#) accompany this research.
- There is a [guide for HR professionals](#) and a [guide for line managers](#), extending the recommendations made throughout this report.
- This report was based on a review of previous research evidence on [working from home](#).

The CIPD publishes a wide range of materials on flexible working and related topics:

- Advice about how line managers can support the health, wellbeing and engagement of their team can be found [here](#).
- If you need a quick-access resource, try our [10 top tips for managing remote teams](#).
- A review of research evidence on developing effective virtual teams can be found [here](#).
- The CIPD's campaign to make flexible working a day one right is [FlexFrom1st](#).
- Advice on how organisations can begin to prepare for a return to the workplace once pandemic restrictions begin to ease and plan for a longer-term move to hybrid working can be found [here](#).



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