

Homeworking - The “New Normal”?

It's not just about the technology

Introduction

Many of you reading this article will have shared a common experience. Someone – it may even have been you – will have discussed the current Covid-19 lockdown and how employees are having to work from home, how it seemed impossible or improbable that it would work, but actually “it’s not as bad as we thought!”

This article is about what happens in the “new normal” when the lockdown is lifted and social distancing is a distant memory. We have already heard a number of clients asking the same kind of questions:

- Do we need to have everyone working back in our offices?
- Do we need as many or as big offices?
- Do our employees need to lose as much of their own time commuting in the first place?
- Will we still be able to run an effective operation?
- What are the risks to the organisation, data, compliance, standards?
- Will our people even want to work remotely from home?

Change is never easy and nobody would have instructed their employees to work from home overnight in normal circumstances, yet here we are. So this change has been thrust upon us but it will need careful planning and crystal clear structures and roles to make it effective when the lockdown is lifted, or else we will simply return to the way we were before. The truth is that some companies will go back to how they were, either because they have to or because they don’t know how to reshape the organisation. However, there will also be many organisations that embrace the change, identify which roles and teams can and cannot work from home and structure their business around the new possible.

The Benefits of Homeworking

Prior to the coronavirus breakdown many organisations had embraced homeworking, in varying degrees. The Labour Force Survey conducted by the Office of National Statistics in 2018 revealed that 4.3 million people regularly work from home. This accounts for 13.7% of the UK workforce. And some major UK organisations such as BT, PwC, Proctor & Gamble and Surrey County Council are active proponents of homeworking. These organisations have realised the wide-ranging benefits of homeworking.

Individual Benefits of Homeworking

Homeworking can be a very popular option with staff, for good reasons:

- Less commuting costs – working from home means less or even no commuting costs. According to Totaljobs the average UK employee spends £146 on their monthly commute, amounting to £1,752 annually. This represents a sizeable chunk from the annual salary.
- Savings in travel time – the average UK worker spends a lot of time commuting – travelling 31.3 miles and making 53 minute journeys every day. That is before taking into account how long it takes to get ready, being stuck in traffic jams, or waiting for delayed or cancelled public transport.

- Greater flexibility with home life – moving away from the office environment allows people to set their own working schedule so that they can manage their home life more effectively. Whether its waiting for a delivery, doing the school run or going to appointments, working from home provides that flexibility.
- Less distractions – the office environment makes it very easy for people to distract each other. A distraction itself may only take a few minutes to deal with but it can take much longer to regain concentration. Working from home removes these distractions.
- Improved health and fitness – with time saved on commuting and the ability to set their own working schedules people have much more time and opportunity to focus on their own well-being. It also means that people are less likely to be exposed to illness by avoiding public transport and busy offices.
- Preferred working environment – being at home gives people lots of flexibility when it comes to workspace preferences. Maybe they need a certain temperature. Maybe they prefer to be surrounded by plants. Maybe they work best sat on a sofa. Homeworkers can arrange their working environment to suit their individual needs.

Organisational Benefits of Homeworking

Homeworking can help organisations operate much more effectively:

- Reduced overheads – allowing people to work from home helps to reduce overhead expenditures. If office space is properly rationalised to reflect lower occupancy office costs can be significantly reduced. This may include rents, rates, energy consumption, office supplies, furniture and/or office equipment.
- Increased productivity – studies show that homeworkers are more productive than those who work in a typical office environment. According to a Canada Life survey, homeworkers rank their productivity as 7.7/10 compared with 6.5/10 for office workers. They have greater autonomy, fewer interruptions and greater focus.
- Higher staff morale – people who work from home often have higher morale and enjoy their job responsibilities more than those in a traditional office environment. Increased morale often has a positive impact on productivity and work quality, which benefits the organisation's performance.
- Reduced staff turnover – allowing people to work from home can reduce staff turnover. As people are generally happier when they work from home they are less likely to quit. Greater loyalty and reduced attrition mean less time and money spent on staff recruitment.
- Increased talent pool – by allowing people to work from home organisations can access a much wider pool of talent – whether that's the sizeable older workforce, millennials who place greater emphasis on work-life balance, people from more geographically remote areas, or people who may not be able to travel to an office.
- Reduced absenteeism – studies show that home workers take fewer days off sick than those based in an office. A Canada Life survey found that people working in an office took on average 3.1 days of sick leave per year, whilst homeworkers only took 1.8 sick days. Also, homeworkers are less affected by bad weather or travel disruption.
- Corporate Social Responsibility – homeworking cuts down on commuting. In addition, people who work from home often conduct virtual meetings and facilitate communications electronically. This helps the environment and allows organisations to position themselves as good corporate stewards.

Societal Benefits of Homeworking

Homeworking can have enormous societal benefits:

- Environmental impact – the environmental impact of a shift towards homeworking comes from fewer people commuting to work. Homeworking may do more for the planet than expected. Coronavirus lockdowns have had a noticeable impact on pollution levels across the world. Here are some of the most impactful positive environmental benefits of homeworking:
 - Reduced greenhouse gas emissions – Monster suggest that the average person in the UK could reduce their CO2 emissions by 988 kg per year by working from home.
 - Decreased consumption of fossil fuels – based on an average UK commute of 31.3 miles (Total Jobs) a homeworker could reduce the fuel they consumed by 200 gallons per year.
 - Reduced congestion – Monster suggest that there would be 1.1 million fewer cars on the road in 12 major cities if the number of homeworkers in the UK was doubled to 8.5 million.
- Community impact – the community impact derives from the improved work-life balance from home working. This allows people to spend more time with their families or in their communities. Research into the impact of Coronavirus lockdown measures by the Office of National Statistics has revealed that more people are doing more to help others in their community. This has been reflected in the media which has reported a terrific revival of community spirit. A lasting legacy of this crisis might be the demand for more homeworking so that people have sufficient capacity to focus on the things in life that really matter – family, friends and community.

The Downsides of Homeworking

Whilst there are plenty of benefits of homeworking, there are also some well-established downsides. In a recent article about homeworking, the Society of Human Resource Management highlighted the recent trend in America towards organisations reducing remote working. IBM, Yahoo, Aetna and Best Buy are among the organisations that have required those working from home to return to a main office or worksite. There is little evidence that UK organisations are following this trend. However, there has only been a relatively small increase in homeworking since technologies made it possible in the 1990s. The share of adults in the UK who work mainly or exclusively from home has increased to 13.7 per cent in 2018 from 11.1 per cent in 1998. The potential reasons for this are as wide-ranging as the benefits of homeworking.

Individual Downsides of Homeworking

Homeworking can have a negative impact on individuals:

- Social isolation – people who work in an office become accustomed to work colleagues, the office buzz, team working, and sharing problems. This is very different to working at home which can be quite isolated once people are removed from the social environment of an office.
- Remote isolation – research has indicated that as well as social isolation homeworkers are also distanced from the opportunities that being in an office provides. This includes:
 - Resource isolation – in an office people generally have the resources that they need to hand – stationery, IT support, admin support, mail room etc. At home, people are sometimes overwhelmed with the time it takes to find or provide resources for themselves.
 - Opportunity isolation – ‘out of sight’ and ‘out of mind’ can be applicable to people who chose to work at home. Without the visibility of an office environment, it is hard to achieve the top-of-

mind status that is so beneficial for promotion, performance review or development opportunities.

- Development isolation – a lot can go on at the office in an average working day: meetings, updates, successes, problems, changes, developments etc. When working at home, people may miss out on a great deal of activity and information which limits their ability to develop.
- Difficulty in separating home from work – when people work and live in the same place it can be very difficult to separate home life from work life. When they leave the office, it is easy to declare work over for the day, but when they work from home those boundaries get blurred. And some may find that work never stops.
- More distractions – homeworking can very often present its own form of distractions. Family members, pets or other distractions can quite easily take your attention away from work. And comfort can be part of the problem, the fact that you are in your own home may tempt you into relaxation instead of getting on with things.
- Need for high self-discipline – working from home requires strong will and determination. Without managers and co-workers looking on it is far too easy for people to turn on the radio, do a bit of housework, search the Internet or engage in anything else other than work. For some, the quantity and quality of work can be greatly reduced.
- Increased expenses – despite savings on commuting costs, homeworkers may have additional expenses that are not covered by their employer. There may be an increase in utility bills from extra use of heating, electrical equipment, telephones and internet services. And people may also need to purchase furniture or equipment.

Organisational Downsides of Homeworking

Homeworking can have a negative impact on the organisation:

- It's hard to make sure the Culture and Values of the organisation are understood and embraced by its people. So much of the reinforcement comes from meetings and discussion, formal and informal, that take place every day. How do organisations get a new recruit to take on their culture if they almost never physically meet their leaders or other employees?
- More difficult to manage homeworkers – managing homeworkers and ensuring that they are doing what they are supposed to be doing can be more difficult. Managers and homeworkers may have to work harder to build trust. Also, it can take more effort for managers and colleagues to communicate with homeworkers, and vice versa.
- Lower staff morale – long days spent working from home can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnect, leading to a sharp drop in the level of employee satisfaction and happiness. Building and maintaining individual and team spirits can be harder when people are working in different locations.
- Reduced productivity – concerns about productivity levels are one of the key stumbling blocks for employers considering allowing people to work from home. And left to their own devices some homeworkers will slack off. But they need managing just like office workers that have a tendency to slack off.
- Higher staff turnover – not all people prefer to work from home. Some may prefer the social interaction of the office environment. Or some may not have homes, homelives or even broadband that are appropriate for homeworking.

- Increased costs – there will be an outlay in setting up homeworking. Employers are responsible for the equipment and technology they give people so that they can work from home effectively. But savings from reduced workplace overheads should be greater in the long run.

How to Make Homeworking Work

Within the context of the Coronavirus lockdown, homeworking has provided an alternative and viable means of working for the many organisations that are still able to operate. Whilst the arrangements have been relatively successful, it is highly unlikely that they are sustainable in the longer term. In order for homeworking to work effectively organisations need to provide the correct environment and support. This will allow them to reap the many benefits of homeworking whilst avoiding the various downsides.

Some fundamental considerations for organisations to start with include:

- Creating a sustainable homeworking strategy – first and foremost organisations need to consider their unique needs and motivations for implementing or improving their homeworking policy. From there, formal guidelines, technologies and organisational arrangements can be established.
- Developing the right organisation – to be successful homeworking needs to operate in harmony with the rest of the organisation. This means thinking about homeworking within the context of each element of the organisation in order to properly align and embed the arrangements.
- Selecting the right jobs – not all jobs are suitable for homeworking. A key requirement is that jobs should be capable of being performed just as well by someone working at home. Suitable assessment criteria are required to test whether jobs can be feasibly done at home.
- Selecting the right people – the question of who is suitable for homeworking is more complex than that of which jobs are suitable. This needs to take into account the skills and needs of the worker, their manager and the impact that homeworking may have on their work colleagues and the organisation itself.
- Setting up the homeworker to work from home – homeworking brings about a distinct set of challenges in relation to the working environment. Home circumstances need to be considered closely to ensure the domestic arrangements are suitable for homeworking.
- Managing homeworkers effectively – how staff who work from home are managed will influence whether homeworking will be a success. Some of the key ingredients for managing productive homeworking include:
 - Being attuned to the wellbeing (physical and mental) of homeworkers and ensuring the duty of care that the employer has for their employees is not overlooked.
 - Building trust between staff who work from home and their manager.
 - Constructing ways for people to get help and support from their (remote) colleagues.
 - Agreeing how work performance will be monitored and managed.
 - Creating and continuing regular and clear channels of communication.
 - Paying a great deal of attention to motivating homeworkers.
 - Helping homeworkers overcome social and remote isolation.
 - Ensuring that homeworkers get the developmental support that they need.

How Vivant Can Help

Making homeworking work isn't just about providing robust technology and letting people get on with it. It is about purpose, clarity and connectivity. Some teams and roles cannot work from home, so don't try to force the impossible but many will.

When we conduct an Organisation Design exercise, we look at how the corporate and specific team strategy is turned into an operational model. We look closely at the structure and how each individual role fits into the mix. We look at resources, both people and technology, to see how it will work and we ensure that corporate culture and values permeate from the top to the bottom of the org chart roles.

Working from home requires specific clarity in roles so that employees know what they should be doing, how they should be doing it and how they collaborate and support each other in their combined business objectives.

First stage is to review current working practices. This means looking at the current organisational structure, the key purpose of both teams and roles, the objectives and outcomes and any specific regulatory or legal aspects which must be observed.

After the initial high-level and strategic overview, it is time to initiate a real change management programme. Despite nearly everyone knowing that change fails because we fail to take people along with us, it happens all the time. This is the crucial stage! As mentioned at the start of this document, nobody likes change thrust upon them, so it is important to involve employees of varying ranks into the discussions about how this could work. In unionised environments, make sure representatives of the trade unions are included as they will have a significant influence on their members.

What will ensue is a sense of "we are in this together" and people will start to feel that they are able to influence the discussions, put across their concerns or ideas and feel like they are part of the solution. They need to feel ownership and if they do, they soon become the change advocates and catalysts that we need for any change programme to work and become embedded into the organisation.

There will be many considerations on a team or role basis that will impact the feasibility of that team or role being able to work from home. Risk/Standards/Compliance are major factors in what is and isn't possible. Technology is key to enabling people to work from home.

We review each role and identify if it can be remotely worked or not. We would look at the activities, objectives and outcomes of each role, ensuring that the corporate or team objectives are met across the family of roles. This is a collaborative exercise with both business leaders and role holders. The end result is crystal clear role profiles and job descriptions that encapsulate everything an employee will need to do – and how.

We also help reshape performance management so that it is fair and effective. We will structure (and provide training to managers) on how to manage people remotely so that it works well and employees do not feel like they are forgotten, or at worst when something doesn't go right, victimised.

One important aspect of home working is the disconnection from the organisation that some employees can feel. As experts in organisational culture, values and capabilities, we ensure that these are explicit in everything relating to employees, and specifically, their role information. We structure training events that either we lead, co-lead or hand over to organisations to deliver to employees that encourage the feeling of "us" and not "them and us".

No employee should ever feel like they cannot identify with (or in some cases even describe) the culture and values of the organisation they work for, whether they work at home or in an office. An organisation needs to be confident that each employee, and especially those who interact with customers, suppliers or regulatory bodies, espouse the values of the organisation – and not their own or an interpretation.

A significant factor is the feeling of being “connected” to colleagues. In the same way that an employee may ask a colleague in the office for some advice, this needs to be replicated for remote workers, using technology, that will either allow collaboration on an instant-chat type basis or even setting up a “help desk” facility for those who will need answers quickly – i.e. customer facing employees.

Making the transition to home working usually takes a great deal of time. For the first time in modern history, we have people forced to work from home. The change was thrust upon everyone from organisations to our own government. The question is: do you want to go back to how things were before or do you want to capitalise on the best opportunity ever to change the way people can work effectively for your organisation?

About us

We help organisations with their Organisation Design, role clarity, Development and importantly, the organisational culture that wraps around everything that is done from the shop floor to the boardroom. How can homeworking work, what are the considerations, risks and advantages? We can answer that because, the thing is that as a business consulting firm, Vivant has already been here and successfully practising this ourselves for over 10 years.

In 2006 when we started the company, there were two of us – one actually building the business and one remote director who was providing funding and support. I was the one building it and I had one goal: get staff, get an office and grow the company. As I sat alone for the first 4 months, it was tough but then in early 2007, I recruited our first employee, who worked remotely from home and we provided her with IT equipment and a phone line. It was the days when Skype was the go-to video conferencing software and from the start we had regular meetings throughout each week, ensuring that she felt very much an important part of the company.

However that didn’t satisfy my dream and although we took on another home worker, by mid 2007 we had opened our office in the centre of Reading. I was very proud! We had something tangible for all the hard work of growing the company. It was a joy to come into a busy office and it felt like we were on the road to building a successful and scalable business. Then our change came in the form of the financial crisis, which hit us very hard. Clients hunkered down, stopping all business as usual or development activities and our services were almost exclusively reduced to our Outplacement service. Our staff were never in the office as they were either out with a client or running a workshop. I would drive into the office and often find myself alone again.

In 2009 we closed the office and used the money saved to invest in more technology and made all our employees home workers. At first it was not welcomed by anyone but very quickly people started to recognise that it was very effective and had many advantages.

As of today, we still employ people to work from their homes. We have run a successful consulting business over the last 10 years with a team that is distributed across the entire UK and yet who are as effective, connected and who live and breathe our corporate value and culture, as any office based team would be.

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