

# Why we need to hear more voices on what work should look like post-COVID

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What employees and employers want to retain from home working post-COVID may not always be compatible. Jacob Lund/Shutterstock

For many of us, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented shift towards full-time working at home. The suddenness and scale of this shift saw it being referred to it as a “mass experiment”. But the real experimentation is still to come. The systems and processes that were rapidly improvised to work around COVID restrictions were not designed for a post-pandemic world of hybrid (or blended) working that incorporates aspects of working remotely.

As organisations begin to envisage what the future of work might look like, concerns have been expressed about the potential creation of a two-tier workforce, with some denied the possibilities of flexibility. Even for those who can access flexible, hybrid working, there has been very little discussion

around what day-to-day working lives might look like, how the benefits of flexibility might be successfully realised and what the [longer-term challenges](#) might be.

## Contesting the future of work

Since May 2020 our [research](#) has used surveys and interviews to study the experiences of home-based workers across the UK in depth. It is clear that there is much about working from home that both employees and employers would like to keep as we emerge from the pandemic.

However, what employers want to retain (increased productivity, adaptability, decreased costs) and what employees want to retain (connecting with family and community, flexibility, lack of a commute) may not always be compatible. The forms of home-based working that have been adopted during the pandemic are those suited to heavily restricted lives outside the home and, in some cases, accepted by those in fear of losing their jobs. Working hours, working patterns and levels of productivity may not be sustainable post-pandemic.

The UK has a widely discussed [productivity problem](#) and there are [indications](#) that people are more productive when hybrid working. But the degree to which working from home has benefited employees – or will do so in the future – is open to question.

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**Read more: [How to boost UK productivity after coronavirus](#)**

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There are costs to employees working from home, and our study found that only half of people felt they had been adequately supported by their employers in this additional outlay. Still, if working from home is framed as a benefit for employees, then the costs will be skewed towards them. The additional costs become the price for their opportunity to take advantage of these benefits.

For example, a [report](#) from Deutsche Bank suggested additional taxes on the incomes of home-based workers to support the large number of people unable to work remotely. This is one way of tackling some of the dangers of creating a two-tier workforce.

But there is a [very different framing](#) from less prominent voices suggesting that employers have effectively “requisitioned” the homes of their remote workers. While the Deutsche Bank report sought to spark debate, subsequent discussions did not focus on taxing the businesses that directly benefit from cuts to their costs, increased productivity and other financial gains.

The benefits of flexibility – for example to employees with caring responsibilities – have not yet fully materialised and will need significant work to achieve. Accommodating flexibility, especially among teams, is not simple and will require measures such as a “[right to disconnect](#)” to create clearer boundaries between home and work.

### How Will Work From Home Work After Covid?



Post-pandemic, when some colleagues are in the office and others are working remotely, this will create very different dynamics from those that developed during lockdown. [Studies](#) of home-based working have found a significant negative impact on promotion rates compared to office-based colleagues.

This may be reflected, for example, in the disadvantages of being the one member of a team working remotely when colleagues are working together in the office. It is easy to inadvertently exclude people when the Zoom call has ended and workers on-site continue their conversations. These kind of issues may begin to create pressure on some team members to limit their flexibility so they do not limit their careers.

## What do we actually want?

An employee sitting at home, using their own electricity, working at a personal laptop to collaborate with colleagues they have never met, for an employer they have limited engagement with beyond performance monitoring, might start to feel like a contracted freelancer. As some employers seek to reduce costs by radical changes in the amount of office space required, changes in employment rights could represent the next big cost savings.

If workers have been separated, isolated and subjected to new forms of precarity and insecurity, these new ways of remote working could have an impact on workers' rights, in the same way that Uber drivers have experienced. For example, workers classified as "independent contractors" have seen their pay, pensions and right to unionise all affected. We have spoken to employees whose feelings of insecurity are heightened by a sense that, separated from the office and physical interaction with colleagues, their roles could easily be outsourced or moved offshore.

While it is vital to identify the challenges of remote working, it is also important to examine the opportunities and the benefits of remote working. Public debate needs to move beyond abstract notions of flexibility and consider the future of work that not just employers, but employees want to develop too.

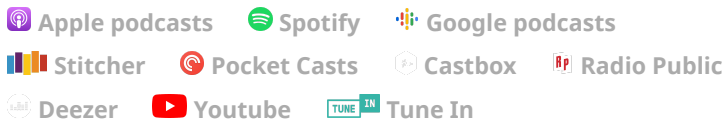
Hybrid working will look very different when it is not conducted under COVID conditions. The issues that will affect people's day-to-day working lives and how these will be contested have largely been ignored. We need to debate what we want from our working lives – and more widely our homes and our communities – and we need to do it now.

Now listen to *The Great Remote Work Experiment* podcast below:



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