

COVID-19

4 August 2020

Doing our homework

The extended spell of homeworking we've all been thrown into during the pandemic has led some to discover the immutable nature of their social needs.

Extroverts in particular have suffered due to the limited opportunities they've had to recharge through unpredictable, engaging and wide-ranging human interaction. Without this, they can experience boredom, dissatisfaction and low motivation.

Many people have delighted in constantly being at home, sharing coffee breaks with their partners, helping with home schooling or lunching in their garden. And not having to commute has added productive hours to people's days while improving work/life balance.

Some are fearful of going back to office working and all the associated rushing from place to place. Others are worried that homeworking will become the status quo, leaving them bereft of relational team cohesion.

Fewer interactions

Sociologist [Ray Oldenburg](#) has written about human interaction and where it happens. Oldenburg splits our environment into three places: home, work and public.

Less time in the workplace means fewer opportunities for interaction around the photocopier – where some of the best workplace ideas are concocted. Where is the equivalent in a digital world? Another consequence is that there is less exposure to the third, public place.

Not commuting is a blessing for many, but it also means that there are fewer spontaneous interactions between places – with café staff or the people who regularly cross your path on the station platform. Oldenburg argues that this third place is a source of community and social vitality.

Unpredictable and random social interaction in the workplace (Oldenburg's second place) or outside community (third place) can often develop in unexpected ways, leading to unanticipated positive outcomes – fresh perspectives or unexpected introductions.

There are clear pros and cons for employers and employees of home-based and office working – which supports the idea that there should be greater flexibility in future. Staff may not want to choose just one place to work.

Looking ahead

Employers are now wrestling with how to proceed – to define what ‘back to work’ will look like. Many start-ups have terminated their office space contracts, while other, often larger, organisations are consulting employees to gauge their preferences and testing ideas such as rotational desk use. Some informal surveys have shown that teams that don’t need face-to-face contact, such as finance and HR, are finding benefits with flexible working to suit family needs.

The changes we make now could have far-reaching consequences – including the design of workspaces and even the communities we live in. In future, the regeneration of town centres could be done in a way that takes into account new work styles, by repurposing high streets with workspaces for those who need an alternative to their own homes, as well as making services more accessible for local people, enabling health staff to be closer to patients. This would also help shops to survive by keeping high streets busy and increasing footfall.

It has also revealed a shift in responsibility when looking for new homes; workers will need to assess options based on the assumption that they will be living and working in their new accommodation. They will need more than just a small studio or one-bedroom flat for that – which will drive up rental costs.

This process of reassessment is also going on across the NHS, where non-executive directors are looking at models that might shape the future delivery of services. Some hospital trusts have found that productivity has gone up and absenteeism has gone down.

Others NHS trusts are looking at repurposing bricks and mortar, reviewing unused spaces more economically and effectively which could, in turn, release space across the public sector. Hospitals are particularly interested in reviewing services that can be more aligned to patient need by moving delivery away from the hospital and nearer to the patient – in person and virtually.

Technology: benefits and limitations

The lockdown workstyle changes we have all had to get used to have largely been powered by IT, which has become more closely aligned to user needs during the pandemic. Online meeting platforms have been available for years, of course, but we have been forced to embrace them like never before since March.

But the success of online meetings depends on much more than just good, stable technology. A multitude of factors are at play in any successful online meeting, including content, facilitation skill and timing, as well as audience stress levels, workload, personality and mood. For facilitators, as we have discussed in previous bulletins, the reduction of non-verbal communication and the reduced understanding of colleagues’ frame of mind means meetings are harder to position and messages are harder to land.

Online meeting platforms are less engaging, with fewer opportunities for spontaneous interactions. Zoom jokes are typically texted or written in the chat, which can sometimes be nothing more than a distraction – the online equivalent of passing notes in class.

Typical home-working social replacements like Zoom happy hours and team meetings aren’t quite the same online as in person. People who enjoy spending face-to-face time together don’t necessarily like the same sort of activities when they’re conducted online.

Team cohesion is good for morale as well as helping to build employee engagement, which in turn benefits productivity. But online cohesion has produced very mixed experiences within teams and across organisations.

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Decision time

Ultimately, a remote and flexible working policy should be carefully considered to benefit both employee and employer. For now, it's employers who must decide where employees spend their time, although employee demands for flexibility may grow.

Homeworkers save on commuting costs, but lose on the costs of heating and lighting their workplace. The responsibility of creating a suitable work environment lies with the homeworking employee too – although the employer still has a duty of care to ensure their staff work in suitable conditions.

Some questions for boards to consider, as we begin to emerge from lockdown:

- How can you engage staff effectively to help guide the way forward in future workplace decisions?
- How will you ensure your board has fully considered workspace opportunities for the near and longer-term future – and considered how decisions will effect employee engagement and productivity and patient quality of care and outcomes?
- How will workplace plans in your locality impact future population health?
- As an anchor institution, how can you ensure effective use of your bricks and mortar to create maximum social value?

If you have any questions or comments about this briefing, please call us on 07732 681120 or email advice@good-governance.org.uk