

Addressing problems resulting from transition to remote work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

Written evidence to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, in response to the evidence call “The impact of coronavirus on businesses and workers”, addressing the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on people's wellbeing, including physical activity.

Submitted by:

Professor Anna Cox (University College London), Dr Sandy Gould (University of Birmingham), Dr Marta Cecchinato (Northumbria University), Dr Joseph Newbold (Northumbria University), Dr Anna Rudnicka (University College London), and David Cook (University College London)

Executive summary:

- The Covid-19 pandemic lockdown resulted in many people in the UK working remotely for an extended period;
- This has led not only to a range of problems typically associated with remote work, but also new problems associated with having to move online without significant warning or preparation and without a clear plan for the future;
- We (a group of researchers from University College London, Northumbria University and University of Birmingham) conducted research exploring the experiences of office workers who transitioned to remote work as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown. Data from 349 survey respondents and 25 follow-up interviews were analysed;
- Newly remote workers struggled with maintaining focus, accomplishing tasks and the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal lives;
- Some problems have been successfully addressed by workers and employers;
- However, a number of important issues, such as focusing on work, remote collaboration with colleagues, understanding and managing the boundaries between work and home and finding appropriate physical spaces for work remain and require urgent attention from employers and policymakers;
- We outline key issues that need to be addressed in the coming months to protect the wellbeing and productivity of people working from home.

Introduction and reasons for submitting evidence:

The lockdown instituted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic forced many people in the UK to work from home (remotely). Adapting to remote work and developing effective remote work habits takes time; however, many people had to shift from offices to homes abruptly. Our research shows that these neophyte remote workers experience many challenges.

It is likely that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic many workers will not return to offices in the foreseeable future and will continue working remotely whilst others will alternate between office and home. In light of this, employers and policymakers need to provide the right support for these workers to protect their wellbeing and productivity and avoid potential ill health or burnout.

Written evidence

Challenges resulting from a sudden transition to remote working

The lockdown shifted many people's work from an office environment to their homes. We anticipated that these individuals would experience difficulties due to the generally rapid and unplanned nature of the transition.

We conducted a survey with 349 respondents (mean age 40 years old; gender: 251 females, 85 males, 3 non-binary, 1 transgender participant, 7 undisclosed); who had transitioned to working from home as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown, as well as 25 follow-up interviews (mean age 45 years old; gender: 20 females, 4 males, 1 transgender participant) to achieve an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by these newly remote workers, and the strategies used to address them.

We identified three key areas where people experienced difficulty and where the use of personal strategies was not sufficient and policy involvement may be needed. These areas are:

- 1) focusing on work
- 2) online collaboration with colleagues
- 3) finding appropriate physical space to work.

Below, for each of these issues, we outline the challenges workers experienced and the strategies (both personal and involving employers) that have been used to tackle those challenges. We also outline the areas where there is a need for policy involvement. Lastly, we summarise the policy recommendations.

Key areas of difficulty for remote workers

1. Focusing on work

a) Issues:

Personal Boundaries: The majority of the new remote workers who took part in our study found the home environment distracting and uncondusive to focused work. The sources of distractions included family members or flatmates (especially household members who did not work) and caring responsibilities (in particular childcare and home-schooling). The lack of boundaries between office and home reduced motivation and made both work and leisure

time less rewarding. There were problems with work intruding into time which was needed to deal with personal issues and be with family.

Physical Activity: Participants also reported that, previously, taking short spurts of physical activity (e.g. whilst commuting or walking to a meeting) used to support their focus and/or recovery from work. However only being able to leave the house for exercise once a day during the full lockdown made it hard to replicate those experiences.

Childcare: Parents, in particular, found it extremely challenging to both work and care for children (as schools and nurseries were closed). This had an impact on their ability to focus, their energy levels, and their ability to find any time at all to rest. The burden fell not only on parents of small children but also those with older children who mentioned having to put energy into supporting home schooling and motivating children to study.

b) Personal strategies:

Many people found it helpful to break work into small chunks and focus on tasks that could be accomplished quickly. To support focus, workers set physical boundaries, for example putting on headphones when working or designating a workspace in their home. They also set digital boundaries, for example blocking notifications on their phone.

c) Employer strategies:

Personal Boundaries: Employers need to ensure that workers can disconnect from work at the weekends, for example by providing them with a company mobile phone that can be switched off when not working. Some workers could not switch off notifications to relax or to focus because their work calls were redirected to their personal phones. Long term, this is not a good strategy as it makes it harder for people to draw boundaries between work and personal lives.

A more flexible attitude towards working hours can also help workers whose concentration levels shift due to working outside of their normal office environment, or people who experience distractions such as noise or the presence of family/flatmates during certain hours.

Childcare: Workers reported that the adoption of a flexible attitude to working hours helped them schedule work around caring responsibilities. However, many parents experienced fatigue, which got worse the longer the lockdown lasted. Employers may need to accept that in case of long lockdown periods where people do not have access to childcare, some workers will not be capable of working their full hours, and creative solutions, such as a 4-day week, may need to be adopted in order to protect workers from burnout.

d) Policy changes:

Personal Boundaries: There is limited guidance available for employers on how to support employees working from home. It would be helpful if guidance encouraged employers to support break-taking and create periods of time when workers can disconnect. Policymakers should encourage companies to support people in maintaining work-life balance and being able to separate the two areas of their lives, e.g. by providing remote workers with work phones and laptops, by encouraging break-taking during the day, and by discouraging out-of-hours calls. Managing work/home boundaries is a new concept for many employers and employees. For many, this is a novel conversation and will be a challenge for business owners, workers and policymakers. However, it is an issue and conversation that is growing

and will intensify – the longer people work remotely. One example of policy making is the French “El Khomri” Law, which introduces the right to disconnect from work outside of work hours. Policymakers in the UK should explore ways to ensure that companies protect workers’ personal time.

Childcare: Policymakers need to rethink the role of parents in home-schooling during periods of lockdown. Teachers were able to conduct lessons remotely, but this still left parents with significant new responsibilities in monitoring and motivating their children. Additional support should be provided by schools to reduce this new burden on parents. For example, schools could employ wellbeing coordinators to facilitate pupils’ motivation and social contact with peers, shifting this burden away from parents.

Physical Activity: Public policy also needs to encourage physical activity during the workday for remote workers. This will both help workers focus and support their general health. We recognise that some constraints were necessary during the full lockdown but with the easing of the lockdown it would be appropriate to encourage remote workers to exercise more. In addition, we believe that it would be better for workers’ health if future lockdowns do not limit the number of times people can leave the house but instead emphasise that people should avoid all physical social interactions with others outside the home.

2. Remotely collaborating with colleagues

d) Issues:

Accomplishing tasks when working from home was also made harder by the lack of face-to-face contact with colleagues. This was mitigated to some extent by use of online meeting tools, but many workers found the initial sharp rise in the number of online meetings tiring. These meetings were not always fully effective due to limitations in individuals’ broadband connections.

Even with meetings moving online individuals felt less connected with their colleagues and felt that this hindered their productivity. Some workers felt lonely and isolated as a result of transition out of the office while others felt inundated with online meetings.

Some felt that it was harder to collaborate with co-workers when all communication happened online.

b) Personal solutions:

Workers reported using a range of collaboration tools to increase their level of connection with colleagues.

Some of the strain of dealing with lots of online meetings was mitigated by adopting an online meeting “etiquette” so that individuals knew better what was expected of them during meetings.

c) Employer strategies:

Some employers shifted from long meetings to shorter ones which helped workers maintain focus.

d) Policy changes:

As a matter of urgency research is needed to identify the best ways to facilitate collaboration between newly remote workers. Research needs to address ways to facilitate collaboration on tasks as well as informal exchange of knowledge between co-workers.

Encouraging employers and broadband providers to provide more support for individuals trying to make the most of their Internet connections would be helpful as some individuals felt that they were on their own in trying to deal with connectivity issues.

3. Creating an appropriate space to work

c) Issues:

While some people had or were able to create a suitable work environment at home, many people did not have adequate space and therefore had to work in suboptimal ways, for example sitting at the kitchen table or on the sofa. This was especially the case for young people living in rented accommodation. Moreover, many people were not able to take needed office equipment such as a screen or a chair home. As a result, several of our participants reported back pain, eye strain and an overall lack of satisfaction with their workspace.

b) Personal solutions:

Many people created a dedicated workspace at home and avoided working in areas where they relax in order to create physical separation between work and home. Some people purchased new equipment such as a chair or desk. However, this solution required employees to spend their own money on creating an appropriate work environment and was not widely adopted.

c) Employer strategies:

Some employers allowed people to take equipment such as monitors and keyboards home and this helped avoid eye strain. This also communicated that employers care, an important message to send, as people who were not able to take equipment home sometimes felt let down by their employers.

d) Policy changes:

We are concerned that remote workers may develop physical symptoms such as back pain and eye strain due to inadequate workspaces which, in due course, will put an additional burden on the NHS. More extensive guidance from the government to help individuals improve their home-work environments could have a significant return relative to its cost.

Currently, if workers are working from home on a temporary basis, the Health and Safety Executive places no requirements on employers. Should workers move to working from home on a permanent basis, then there is a requirement to ask employees to conduct a home workstation assessment. There is, however, no definition of what temporary means in this context. In our research, we have found that even after several weeks of working from home, people started experiencing negative health symptoms such as eye strain and back pain. Policymakers should make it mandatory to conduct “at home” health and safety assessments for all remote workers after a clearly defined period of time. Whilst physical

examination of the work environment will not be possible in the current environment, many aspects of an assessment could be performed remotely.

As many people in the UK have now been working from home for several months, policymakers should make it compulsory for employers to provide basic workstation equipment. Employees should also be made aware of the responsibilities of employers in this area.

Some people will not be able to have an appropriate workspace at home due to a lack of space and companies should be encouraged to allow some of their workers to work from offices on a rota basis based on their need and ability to effectively work from home.

Recommendations

In conclusion, people working from home during the Covid-19 lockdown faced many challenges and barriers to accomplishing work. We make following recommendations:

1. Policymakers should ensure that companies support people in maintaining work-life balance and being able to separate the two areas of their lives, by creating breaks from work and periods of time when employees can disconnect. We believe that legislation to mandate this is appropriate.
2. During periods of lockdown, additional support should be provided by schools to reduce the burden on parents of monitoring and motivating their children's remote learning.
3. Public policy needs to encourage physical activity during the workday for remote workers. Future lockdowns should avoid limiting the number of times people can leave their home to exercise.
4. Policymakers should ensure that employers and broadband providers give more support to individuals trying to make the most of their Internet connections.
5. Currently, employers are not required to conduct health and safety assessments for temporary home workers. Policymakers should make it mandatory to conduct "at home" health and safety assessments for all remote workers after a clearly defined period of time, taking into account that even relatively short periods of working in inappropriate conditions can put workers' health at risk.
6. Policymakers should make it compulsory for employers to provide their employees with appropriate equipment (e.g. chair, desk, monitor) after a clearly defined period of time. Companies should be encouraged to allow some of their workers to work from offices on a rota basis based on their need and ability to effectively work from home.