Book Review: Easy Living: The Rise of the Home Office by Elizabeth A. Patton

In **Easy Living: The Rise of the Home Office***,* **Elizabeth A. Patton** *explores how the status of the home as an intimate space and locus of economic activity is closely tied to the economic, social and cultural transformations of the past century. This accessible and engaging account sheds necessary light on the history of working from home and the vested interests behind our changing work practices, writes* **Ignas Kalpokas***.*

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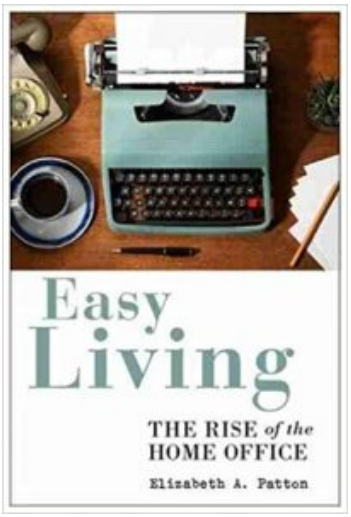
***Easy Living: The Rise of the Home Office*. Elizabeth A. Patton. Rutgers University Press. 2020.**



In *Easy Living*, Elizabeth A. Patton tracks the history and the rising and ebbing fortunes of working from home. In a world emerging from pandemic lockdowns, it is easy to forget that the home office was also a thing before COVID-19. In fact, the status of the home as not only an intimate space but also a locus of economic activity is a rich and complicated one, closely tied up with the economic, social and cultural transformations of the past century. By primarily engaging with popular culture and the interests of various industries, from real estate to technology and communication, Patton casts a glance over US society as a whole and shows close interdependencies between the diverse elements that constitute the way of life of a particular era.

Patton convincingly demonstrates that there is nothing accidental in the trend towards working from home (either in lieu of or after regular hours at the 'real' office) – instead, it is the product of 'the typewriter, telephone, computer, and real estate industries, along with cultural producers and critics' (4). This is an important revelation in the sense that it helps uncover the underlying structures behind one of the most important societal functions – work – while also unmasking the ideology of working from home as something authentic, flexible and desirable. The latter perspective has gained new momentum in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes it ever more important to also understand its history and the vested interests behind it.

As the book shows, the fate of working from home has been closely intertwined with the invention of privacy in the nineteenth century, with the home becoming a place for domesticity (which Patton, quite aptly, describes as a 'cult') – part of the Victorian Romantic idea of running away from the newly sprawling cities and the noise, pressure and pollution that characterised urban life at the time. This required the drawing of clear lines of separation between home and work.

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Hence, while in pre-industrial Europe and America home was a legitimate hub of economic activity, following the major transformations of the period it became anything but – at least for those who could afford the separation. Indeed, particularly in the US, working at home became associated with poor immigrant communities and, hence, treated as a social, economic and educational (since it was often children engaging in such work) problem to be eradicated. Nevertheless, the push for a strict separation was not going to last due to the introduction of the first technology to connect – both literally and metaphorically – the private sphere of the home with the public sphere of the city: the telephone.

The initial message was quite simplistic (but simultaneously still recognisable) – that of connecting people (although, at the time, effectively affluent *men*) wherever they are and allowing them to keep in touch with one's business or workplace across distance. Over time, it is shown, such marketing gave way to a more elaborate idea of the home as a hub – even a nerve centre – from which all daily activities could be accessed and run.

Importantly, this shift also increasingly embraced women as a target market, whose primarily home-bound lives of the first half of the twentieth century were increasingly modelled after the idealised lives of their husbands (the home as a woman's 'office'). Such transformation of the home into an office was further extended by the introduction of portable typewriters. This was marketed as an opportunity for men to bring work back home (turning home into a secondary male office) and for women to be economically active well into their marriage, such as by undertaking secretarial and other typing-related work that could be carried out from home (turning home into a primary female office). No less importantly, it was typewriter manufacturers that identified a further demographic for home work – children – by advertising their products to parents as a means to both socialise children into work practices and improve their educational outcomes. Hence, the home became an important place of work for the entire family.

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The rise of the home office was also sustained through two otherwise seemingly contradictory trends: suburbanisation and rediscovery of city life, only for different reasons. First, the emergence of suburban living as a desirable family way of life and the ensuing increase in commuting times necessitated an office at home from which part of the work could be carried out. Moreover, the larger size of the typical suburban house allowed for the introduction of an extra bedroom that could be used as a home office. Meanwhile, urban living was increasingly seen as desirable for single men (and, later, women) and necessitated a work area at home for a different set of reasons. First, the urban home was seen as the pinnacle of modernity and technology and, therefore, it necessitated all the latest gadgets of the time. Second, it needed to sustain an urban lifestyle that was constructed, both economically and culturally (here, publications such as *Playboy* are shown to have been at the epicentre), as hectic and always-on, combining work, play and pleasure in a single space, perhaps best encapsulated as a desirability by the *Playboy* penthouse apartment.

Ultimately, though, it was the arrival of the personal computer that, according to Patton, amalgamated all the previous trends and technologies, converting the home into a neoliberal workspace. Moreover, as this shift coincided with the increasing acceptance of feminist ideas and men's increasing involvement in domestic and family matters, working from home became a unisex solution for having the best of both family and professional life. This enabled the framing of home work as something desirable and beneficial while simultaneously legitimising the blurring of distinctions between the public and the private and between work and leisure. The latter is, once again, closely intertwined with the prevailing neoliberal ideology. In this way, technological, societal, economic and political transformations have ultimately coalesced to produce the home office as we recognise it today.

To wrap up, *Easy Living* sheds necessary light on the practice of working from home. It is also (and seemingly unintentionally) timely: as societies negotiate an exit from the pandemic emergency and attempt to move towards some form of the new normal, choices about whether to continue working from home or to return to the office are being made on both corporate and individual levels. Under such circumstances, greater awareness of where we are coming from in terms of our working practices and the vested interests behind them is of the essence, and Patton delivers her account in a way that is engaging and accessible to a broad readership.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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