

What is wrong with working from home?

Although the benefits of working from home are numerous, Dr Esther Canonico outlines the challenges both employers and employees can come across.



It's common for employers keen to promote a healthy modern workplace culture to offer at least some degree of flexible working to employees, whether they are parents who duck out of the office early to make the school run, those faced with lengthy commutes or even employees who simply wish to stay home – accessing emails from the coffee table rather than their desks.

The benefits are numerous. There's no morning commute, meaning diligent workers who choose not to spend extra time in bed can begin their working days earlier and finish later, and there are less distractions to contend with.



Early studies of the effectiveness of stay-at-home workers showed such employees were more effective in their day-to-day roles than office-based staff. One reason was, quite simply, gratitude. Staff were so keen to prove the merit in home-working that they consciously worked harder and longer, producing better results for their organisations.

Today, 4.2 million people in the UK work from home according to the TUC. Thanks to the promotion of better work/life balance and increasingly savvy tech it is no longer unreasonable for employees to ask for, or expect, a degree of flexibility. But what happens when gratitude runs out?

By conducting a study on the long term impact, surveying over 500 staff and managers on attitudes towards flexible working, my research attempted to discover whether these effects have waned.

The results revealed that, after a prolonged period of remote working, employees no longer viewed working from home as a privilege and therefore behaved no differently to office-based staff, producing very similar results. In fact some employees began to harbour ill-feeling towards their employers as they felt they were not supported enough.

Working from home, although convenient, also brings added expense. Greater use of lighting and heating pushes utility bills up – something their office-based colleagues do not have to consider. Remote workers may also feel that homeworking brings significant savings for companies, which should be shared with homeworkers.

Aside of additional financial support remote workers craved personal and professional support as well. Home workers had less communication with office staff, limited face-to-face interactions and, over time, found it harder to integrate with staff inside the office walls. Reduced engagement, limited communications and a lack of opportunities for knowledge-sharing stunted their professional progression.

The isolation faded company loyalties to the point where remote workers were almost free agents – a worrying prospect for any employer looking to retain top staff. Not only was it difficult to convince remote workers to come into the office, but the breakdown of relationships often caused employers to resent their remote employees, feeling they were taking liberties, and were not dedicated enough to the organisation.

As Director of Consulting & Innovation at recruiter Alexander Mann Solutions, Jeremy Tipper has experienced this breakdown first-hand. He says, “Encouraging flexible working in a manner which best suits employees’ lifestyles is the norm now for a vast number of businesses. The majority of the workforce now goes so far as to expect access to more flexible options. However, it can be detrimental to the business if an employer or even other members of staff fall into the trap of viewing those making this choice as ‘second-rate’ employees.” Despite this, many companies lack the organisational structure to manage remote workers effectively.

There are three simple methods an employer can utilise in order to better manage those working from home...

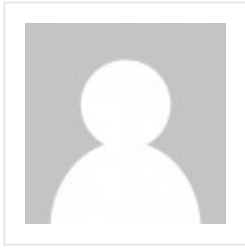
- **Manage expectations:** Implementing flexible working without actively managing the arrangement is a huge problem for many companies. Some remote workers operate without instruction, little communication and no training. Companies should set flexible working policies at the beginning of the employment contract, and review practices regularly with employees to ensure mutual understanding and satisfaction, and to foster wider organisational support.
- **Better communications:** Many home workers may prefer to have less contact, but this can be detrimental to team cohesion and affect both company compliance and productivity. A communications strategy should be employed from the outset and followed. Regular catch-up meetings, skype and video conferencing can all help to bridge the gap between the home and the office and keep remote staff integral to the team.
- **A supportive company culture:** Better support for flexi workers from the inside of an organisation can avoid any growing ill will. Buy-in from all sides is essential. Establishing opportunities for employees to give feedback on working practices and suggest areas for improvement can give workers a perceived sense of control over their roles, and establish equilibrium between remote and office-based workers. Jeremy Tipper agrees, “These individuals are just as valuable an employee to the business as those who are at their desks nine-to-five every day and it’s the responsibility of employers to ensure this comes across clearly in the corporate culture. This includes ensuring they feel like they are part of the business, even if they aren’t physically in the office.”

As flexible working practices are unlikely to be eradicated from office culture it is vital for employers to be better equipped to manage remote staff. Ultimately, if companies are expecting home workers to be more productive, or if workers are expecting greater levels of flexibility or support without reciprocation, either party – or both – will be disappointed.

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