



**Institute *for the*
Future of Work**

Spotlight report 4

Remote working and Covid-19

What is work and what is personal

IFOW interviews, August 2020

This spotlight is part of a series of short-insight reports produced over the course of Covid-19 which share the unheard voices of working people to complement statistical stories. We will bring these reports together later this year to reflect how the pandemic has presented systemic issues, reframed the conversation about work, and shapes new demands as the government looks to lift the lockdown, boost recovery and build resilience for the future.

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Remote working

The shock caused by the Covid-19 pandemic led to sweeping shifts in how and where we work, with many claiming these changes might last. To understand the experiences of the mass homeworking experiment, and interrogate the default position that remote work is the ‘future of work’, we conducted a series of interviews during lockdown, revisiting some interviewees in August 2020.

Informed by an evidence review and analysis of ONS statistics our interviews¹ focused, first, on everyday experience of homeworking. Second, we focused on the risks and opportunities associated with remote work.

Our interviews suggest:

Covid-19 will drive a movement towards more remote work

- Employers and employees are keen to retain the benefits they have encountered during lockdown.
- Remote working is likely to be accompanied by an acceleration of 'flexible' work arrangements.
- Remote working can support healthy working practices and wellbeing but should not be conflated with 'good' or 'future' work by default.

The risks and benefits of remote work fall asymmetrically

- Socio-economic groups vary in their ability to transition to remote work, and experience of it. Homeworking conditions matter significantly.
- Workers with caring responsibilities are particularly vulnerable to adverse impacts, including taking on new forms of unpaid work and the increased blurring of work-life boundaries.
- Young workers, and new joiners, need additional support.

Remote work may catalyse transformation of the wider work landscape in positive ways

- Technology has enabled a range of tasks to be conducted remotely. The restrictions of lockdown have acted as a catalyst: more tasks are now undertaken without face-to-face contact.
- Enabling technology works best when supported by human management and training.
- Temporal and geographical flexibility can come with remote working, which has the potential to change geographies of access to work.

Mitigating the risks associated with remote working will be important

- Shared physical space and face-to-face contact cannot easily be replicated.
- Workers are cautious about the introduction of remote management techniques and new forms of automated monitoring.
- Since experience varies hugely, consultation and choice is important to identify and minimise the risks of remote working.

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The transition is much easier for the tech-savvy digital natives; although the 60 year-old I have on my team seems to be doing quite well.

Systems Operator, 34

Background

Covid-19 led governments across the world to advise employees to work from home where possible, creating a major experiment in the suitability of different tasks to remote work. Remote working is not a new phenomenon: the number of people working from home tripled in the 30 years from 1980 to 2010,² and studies find that the detachment of work from place is a growing trend³ which Covid-19 is set to accelerate.⁴ In April 2020, at the peak of the pandemic, nearly half (47%) of people in employment were working from home.⁵

Recent analysis suggests that almost half of UK workers have not returned to their normal workplace, and two-thirds of white-collar workers are not back in the office full time.⁶

Despite the large numbers that began to work remotely, the ability to shift to homeworking is not evenly distributed across the population: employees from higher-paying jobs are more likely to be able to work from home (see Figure 1).⁷

Figure 1: Higher paid jobs are on average more likely to be able to performed from home



Source: IFOW calculations of ONS data available at:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/whichjobscanbedonefromhome/2020-07-21>

Background

A recent US study found that just 37% of jobs could be performed at home.⁸ In the UK a survey noted occupation level variations: less than 20% of the tasks that comprise jobs in farming, fishing and forestry can be done from home, whereas 70% of the tasks within a job in computing and maths can.⁹

For those that can work from home, the experience can take myriad forms, depending on the resources available to employees and other demands on their time such as children. For example, it has been reported that working mothers are undertaking 65 hours a week of unpaid labour on top of their jobs.¹⁰

Work related risks of the pandemic have already been found to be concentrated in specific groups, be that higher exposure risk key workers to Covid-19, or the gendered¹¹ and racialised¹² differentials in the probability of job losses. To ensure that further changes to work do not exacerbate the labour market inequalities which preceded the crisis, the impact of remote working, including adverse psychological impacts;¹³ changes to workplace trust;¹⁴ and differences in homeworking conditions, resources and degree of choice¹⁵ over workplace flexibility need further research.

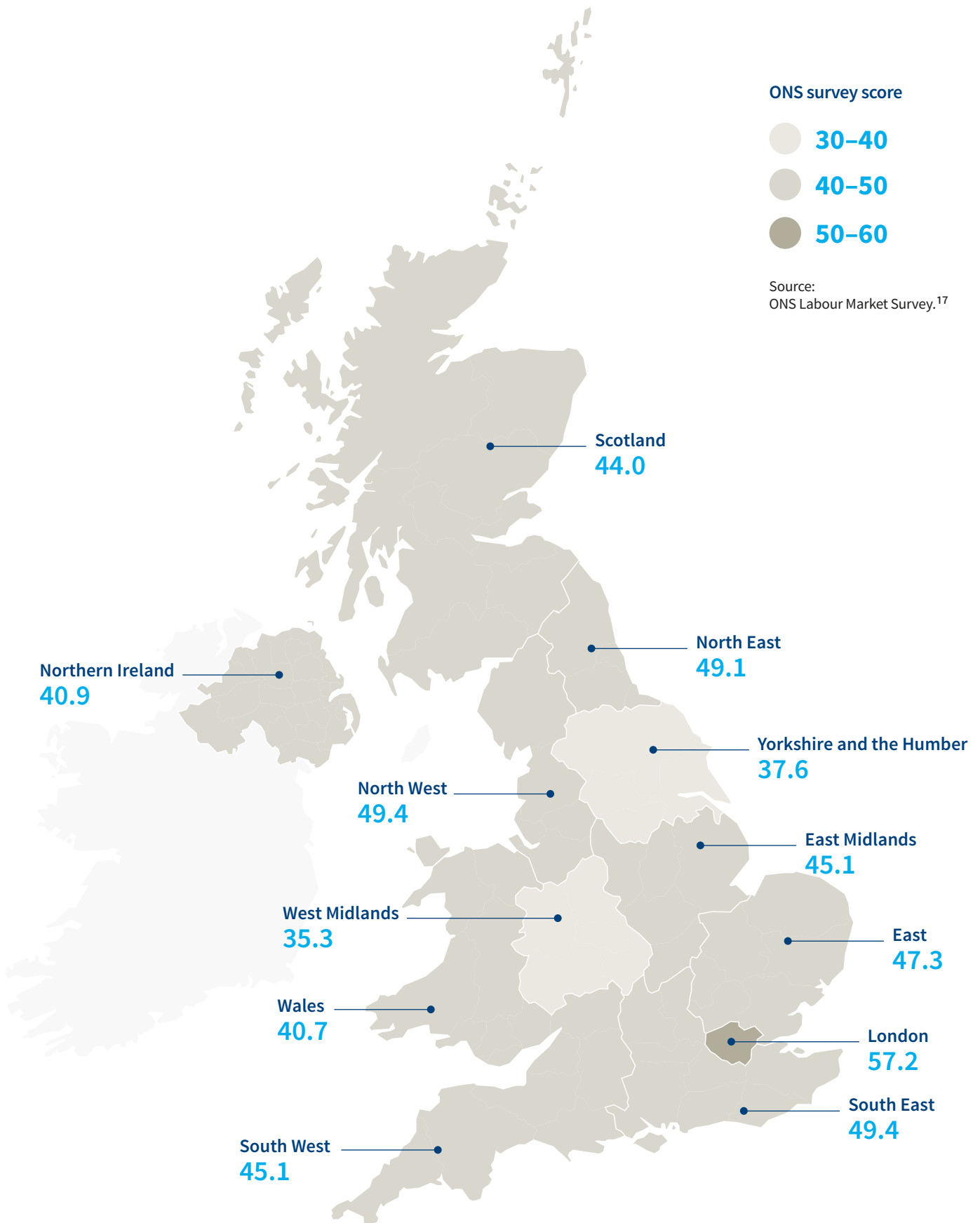
While this report focuses on individual experience, an IFOW analysis undertaken to complement our interviews points to striking geographic inequalities of access to remote work. For example, 57.2% of people in London have done part of their work from home during the lockdown, compared with just 35.3% of people in the West Midlands (see Figure 2). The extent to which such changes could be permanent is indicated by Figure 3, demonstrating the overarching share of work which could be conducted remotely, as indicated by regional home working scores. As remote workers gain overall shares of employment during the crisis – taking on a greater share of hours worked¹⁶ – and lockdowns become localised, this presents unique challenges and opportunities as the government seeks to support people back to work and ‘level up’ the country.

Long term impacts on contract type, propensity for work to be automated, and conditions for unionisation are not considered in this report.

Less than 20% of the tasks that comprise jobs in farming, fishing and forestry can be done from home, whereas 70% of the tasks within a job in computing and maths can.

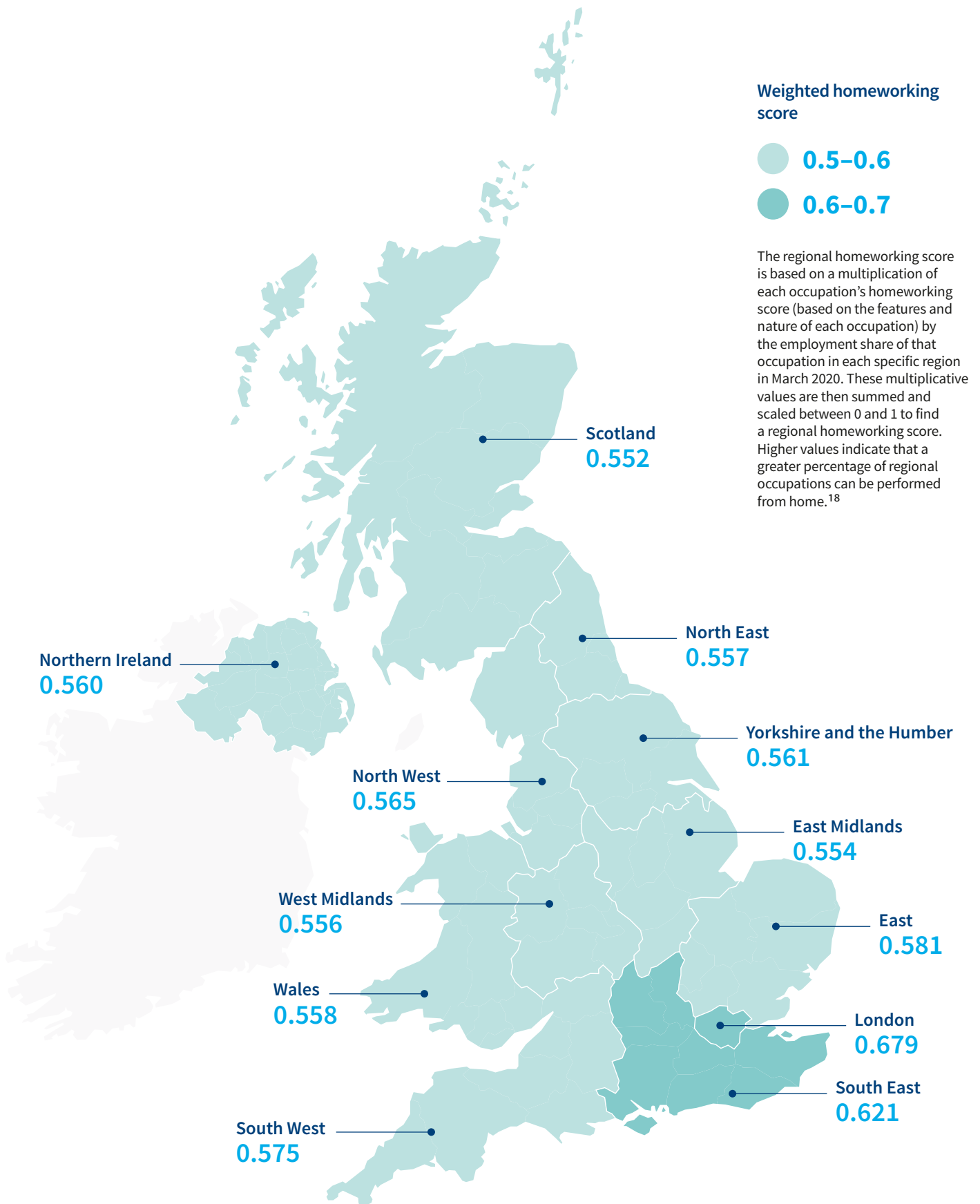
Background

Figure 2: Percentage of people doing at least some of their work from home, April 2020



Background

Figure 3: Homeworking across the UK



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Our expectation is that some degree of office working will be the norm, but we are thinking about what is the purpose of the office, and why would you bring people together.

Major Retailer

Section 1

Has Covid-19 driven a movement towards remote work?

Many employers and people have found remote working surprisingly successful

Covid-19 has disrupted working time, place and practice across the country. Our interviews suggest that many remote working practices introduced to comply with the restrictions of social distancing have proved surprisingly successful. Many employers are changing their expectations and working practices as a result, with some actively promoting part-time remote work or offering staff the opportunity to relocate.¹⁹

‘I think [the business] has coped fine. In fact my thoughts are: will I have a job at the end of it?...’

[Secretary, 57](#)

‘There’s a feeling that we won’t be expected to go [back to the office] unless you’ve got a client meeting...now they have proof that they can have a workforce all from home.’

[Planning Apprentice, 32](#)

‘This has really stress tested the notion that all work can be done at home because there was no preparatory work put in place. If we can do it under these conditions it is obviously possible.’

[Product Worker, 30](#)

Some interviewees associated remote working with higher levels of autonomy and flexibility:

‘Working from home helps me to guard myself against being pulled into all projects, and gives me the space to properly see things through.’

[Service Worker, 31](#)

‘All the meetings are by zoom and then you can see they’re happening and just ask to join.’

[Planning Apprentice, 32](#)

‘I think there might be a bit more flexibility about things like popping out... and we might be able to do some lesson planning from home, which is great.’

[Primary School Teacher, 29](#)

Has Covid-19 driven a movement towards remote work?

Regaining the time and wages spent on commuting was identified as a benefit by many of those that we interviewed:

‘I don’t want to go back in because I save so much money by not commuting...I’m tempted to say I can’t afford to go back because my pay was 80% for a while and I’m trying to make that back.’

[Planning Apprentice, 32](#)

‘I was initially happy about cutting down on the commute to work, I travelled two hours each day, so the time I newly had available for other things was excellent.’

[Civil Servant, 38](#)

‘I’ve regained an hour each way which allows me to play sport in the evenings.’

[NGO Employee, 35](#)

Many employers are learning from the experience of remote work to explore new ways to conduct operations

For many organisations, the demands of social distancing have led to reflection on the purpose of physical work space, and the nature of tasks which could be undertaken from any location:

‘We’ll probably have an office that’s high on meeting rooms but just a few desks as most people will want to work from home.’

[Planning Apprentice, 32](#)

‘Now is an important time to reflect on why we’re going into work, whether all of our employees should be recruited from London.’

[Accountant, 34](#)

‘Our GP meetings are really different because we actually do all sorts of things now and I don’t have to go into the office, which is an absolute blessing... we’ve now found that for many younger patients video visits are better, and it means that healthcare professionals are just able to get through a lot more of their work because they’re able to triage things differently.’

[Specialist nurse, 46](#)

Has Covid-19 driven a movement towards remote work?

Employers and workers are keen to maintain the benefits of remote working beyond lockdown

Most interviewees expressed a desire to continue some degree of remote working in the longer term:

‘I’m looking forward to going back – but I’ll want to work from home one more day a week because it works from a technical perspective, but also an adaptive perspective.’

[Civil Servant, 37](#)

‘I will definitely look to work from home more; at least one day a fortnight, or one day a week.’

[Accountant, 34](#)

Some interviewees expressed hope that the wider experience of remote working during lockdown would make employers and colleagues more sensitive to the needs of freelance and other flexible workers in the future:

‘I hope that now everyone else is remote working, that employers will continue using some of the changes that they have implemented during the pandemic in a way that is better for my needs (I am a freelance reporter).’

[Journalist, 28](#)

One interviewee noted that she had been required to articulate and record her tacit knowledge for others’ use:

‘A lot of what we do is intuitive. We had to make explicit what had become implicit over years of practice.’

[Specialist Nurse, 46](#)

However, there was widespread recognition that some tasks could not be undertaken remotely:

‘It was just really hard not being able to actually physically be there, and physically see what was happening.’

[Specialist Nurse, 46](#)

The blurring of boundaries between work, home-life and leisure created by the closure of offices was a common theme:

‘We’re working on how to delineate what is work and what is personal.’

[Specialist Nurse, 46](#)

Has Covid-19 driven a movement towards remote work?

Some interviewees expressed concern about the increased stress and longer-term mental health impacts of remote workers, suggesting this area needs further research.²⁰

‘Now all I do is work, and then live – rather than live, and then work.’

Civil Servant, 37

‘It’s been really difficult to get the team to stop and say, no, this important, we need to check in with each other.’

Specialist Nurse, 46

‘If you physically work from home it is difficult to mentally delineate what is work and what is home. It’s much harder than being in an office, as levels of stress at home are just much higher.’

Journalist, 28

‘My job is to solve people’s problems and I now don’t get enough disruptions, either its back to back conference calls, which can be very draining, or no one speaks to me.’

Engineer, 62

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Working from home can be quite liberating, but it can also end up being a bit of a prison.

Sara Charlesworth from RMIT statement

Section 2

How are the risks and opportunities of remote working distributed?

The pandemic has exposed differences in the experience of work between demographic groups, between sectors and between jobs within sectors. A large focus of this conversation has been on key workers, and their disproportionate shouldering of risk during the pandemic. IFOW research suggests that there are also significant inequalities in terms of both access and work quality between those who are remote working. Our interviews provide suggest that these inequalities reflect socio-economic status, gender, age and place.

Homeworking conditions, related to pay and socio-economic status, impact worker experience

It is starting to become clear that remote working is easiest for those on higher incomes.²¹ Household size, the number of residents, and private space available for work are all important factors in determining whether employees are able to recreate a focused space for work at home.

‘I have been working in my bedroom a lot, usually when one of the housemates has a conference call.’

[Service Worker, 31](#)

‘The people we’re going to try and get back to the office first, are those for whom it is difficult to work quietly at home.’

[Major Retailer](#)

‘It’s hard for those of us don’t have families in the UK, we don’t have as many connections and have to share space; and so, there are fewer benefits to staying at home.’

[Researcher, 37](#)

Working conditions were a significant factor in determining whether the transition to remote work succeeded. For many at the beginning of their careers, or in low-paid jobs, working from home presents additional challenges, with cramped and shared accommodation identified as a particular issue.²²

‘I’m lucky as I have a room I can cordon off, but many colleagues are in the kitchen with people walking past.’

[Engineer, 62](#)

‘Even as a charity we employ graduates on reasonable salaries, however, there are obvious divides. Do you have a private workspace, or not, do you have a garden or not? You need to mentally step out of your bubble and think about these issues for others.’

[Accountant, 34](#)

How are the risks and opportunities of remote working distributed?

Interviewees had mixed responses to the use of video calls. Some felt uncomfortable about the way in which video calls removed privacy. Others noted the forced familiarity created by having a small window (dictated by the computer's camera) into colleagues' lives. Some commented on the way that seeing into their employers' homes made stark distinctions of socio-economic background, family background, gender or seniority.

'It's a little uncomfortable having your bosses see into the inside of your home; and it really accentuates what remains hyper-private – that space just outside the camera that nobody can see. [...] It's clear to me that my bosses curate the backdrop of their Zoom calls; pot plants, beautiful spaces. Many of us can't do this; we work in shared spaces and are confined to bedrooms for conference calls.'

[Service Worker, 31](#)

'I've had my clothes and environment commented on much more than I would usually expect.'

[Product Worker, 30](#)

'My colleague's son appears in 80% of the calls I've had with her, it seems quite frustrating for her and distracting; and I suspect that some of the team's reluctance to get on video relates to both privacy and the prospect of comparisons being made.'

[Accountant, 34](#)

Some workers expressed concern that the shift to homeworking would increase the demand to be available 24/7. With the separation between work and leisure time blurred, receiving out-of-hours e-mail,²³ and meetings scheduled for outside working hours were increasingly common.

'I think people might decide not to have offices when they can see people can work from home productively.'

[Secretary, 57](#)

'In this situation more is expected to work outside hours because emails need responses. This isn't the same as when I worked remotely in the past, but right now people are working at different hours and it's lengthening the day at work.'

[Researcher, 37](#)

How are the risks and opportunities of remote working distributed?

Gender and caring responsibilities add additional challenges for home workers

The period of school and nursery closures during Covid-19 means that workers with children have suddenly been faced with demands from two jobs; their 'day job' and childcare, imposing a significant burden on employees trying to juggle both.

'I've gained some time from losing my commute, but that has all gone into childcare, I am busier than before.'

Accountant, 34

'Family commitments really affect the ability to work.'

Researcher, 37

'There are lots of people who are having difficulties with their kids, and the way management can help is to be accommodating, and organise around them.'

Product Worker, 30

'Working from home can be quite liberating, but it can also end up being a bit of a prison.'²⁴

Sara Charlesworth from RMIT statement

Research suggests that the burden of balancing childcare and work is falling disproportionately onto women. Women continue to take on the majority of unpaid care, and employers expect women to take on this care, which risks undermining progress made to close the gender pay gap.²⁵ Evidence for this trend comes from the surveys of work arrangements,²⁶ evidence of job losses relating to childcare responsibilities among women,²⁷ and evidence of falls to female workers output.²⁸ Our interviews reveal individual experiences of this trend:

'My colleagues help by scheduling weekly planning meetings around her nap time, but there was another time that she just screamed and screamed during one of my meetings.'

Primary School Teacher, 29

'On our helpline we have heard that many people are losing their jobs, or being furloughed on the basis of gender suppositions.'

Jane Van Zyl,
Working Families

How are the risks and opportunities of remote working distributed?

Despite the potential for remote working to offer more time for childcare, remote working alone is not enough. Temporal flexibility helps busy parents who need their children to be asleep or cared for by another responsible adult, in order to focus on work.

‘It’s particularly hard for single parents and that has been our single biggest issue. We need to think about how to manage our loads around childcare, I’ve got one colleague who is just always surrounded by toddlers.’

[Specialist Nurse, 46](#)

‘Homeworking is no substitute for childcare...what we have found is that parents of primary age children and younger, when they are sharing caring responsibilities are utterly exhausted. This is true for anyone with caring responsibilities.’

[Jane Van Zyl, Working Families](#)

While some of those with families found an upside to staying at home, homeworking is not a substitute for childcare, or parental leave.

‘It will help people with caring responsibilities; many of my colleagues can spend more time with their children.’

[Civil Servant, 37](#)

‘Good quality employers have looked at roles and reprioritised, or completely redesigned jobs to ensure that these could be done on an outcomes basis to enable parents to carve out times to work that suit them.’

[Jane Van Zyl, Working Families](#)

‘My work gave 20 extra days parental leave, I don’t know how we would have managed without it.’

[Accountant, 34](#)

‘I think slightly older people get more benefit from working at home, they see their family, they see their children.’

[Researcher, 37](#)

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UK parents are locked out of the UK labour market – or locked into their current, flexible role – because of the lack of good quality flexible, including part-time, jobs. We would like to see all jobs designed and advertised flexibly as the norm, unless there are good business reasons they can't be.

Jane Van Zyl, Working Families

How are the risks and opportunities of remote working distributed?

Young workers and new joiners may need extra support

Some have started to identify a trend that young people, and new recruits, may be facing particular difficulties with remote work, as they have fewer opportunities to get to know, observe and learn from other colleagues by absorbing how they do their jobs.²⁹

‘For colleagues who aren’t as experienced, [remote work] was really hard.’

[Specialist Nurse, 46](#)

‘Young graduates barely speak now, they don’t want to interrupt, but that makes me worry because they need to ask questions to learn I don’t think people are learning as well.’

[Engineer, 62](#)

One apprentice noted that while they received less supervisory support, they could observe more meetings than they usually would because there is greater transparency about when they are happening:

‘Now all meetings are by zoom and you can see they’re happening and just ask to join, so I can see what’s going on and learn that way. So from that perspective there’s actually more chance to pick things up.’

[Planning Apprentice, 32](#)

Workers who had spent longer embedded within organisations, and those with more experience in their role, tended to be less worried about remote working, than new employees and apprentices, for whom establishing social connections presented a particular challenge.

‘I had a coffee break with someone who had recently joined. New people find it fundamentally destabilising as they can’t get to know anyone, and the coming recession makes probationary periods particularly stressful.’

[Product Worker, 30](#)

‘My gut feeling is that we are a bit less coherent as a team, and that this will get worse as it goes on for a longer amount of time – the main way to get to know people is face to face.’

[Engineer, 62](#)

For workers without deep relationships, or insecure roles, there is a risk that a move towards remote work increases the expectation to be ‘on’ all the time.

‘I’ve been pretty disciplined about nine-to-five because I have kids; and that helps me to delineate boundaries between work and home.’

[Systems Operator, 34](#)

How are the risks and opportunities of remote working distributed?

Some miss the social interaction of shared work space

Work is the sole source of social relationships for some who live on their own, and an important source of community and identity for others. An IFOW survey conducted at the height of lockdown found that remote workers chose ‘belonging’ as a word to describe how they currently feel about their job just 19% of the time, whereas 29% of those still going to work chose this.³⁰

However, remote work, particularly where accompanied by temporal and geographical flexibility, can offer opportunities for workers to spend more time with their families and social connections outside of work. We found that individual preferences vary hugely, with several interviewees missing the everyday social interactions of the a shared work space.

‘I’ve been surprised at how I miss the office... the office is almost a kind of democratising space between the people who work there.’

NGO Employee, 35

‘I think people would become more isolated and lonely, its not the same as going to work.’

Secretary, 57

‘It’s quite lonely [at home] because I don’t have much human interaction.’

Civil Servant, 37

‘I work at the kitchen table with my partner, their focus during the day helps me to properly allocate time to work; and then we eat and exercise together.’

Service Worker, 31

‘It’s so nice, my daughter is starting to develop long-term memory, and we were there to share that experience.’

Primary School Teacher, 29

However, to properly enjoy these benefits, our interviews emphasised that greater flexibility than being at a desk in your home between nine and five was key. This builds on research that shows remote and flexible working offers a good opportunity to advance good health, and healthy working practices.³¹

‘I think this has really shown us the importance of flexibility, particularly for people with little ones to look after, who need to work at different times of the day, and over the weekends.’

Major Retailer

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The success of working from home during the lockdown has the potential to widen access to opportunities.

Peter Lampl, Sutton Trust

Section 3

Is remote work changing the wider work landscape?

Work which is suited to online mediation could see wider geographical access

Social distancing restrictions have catalysed changes to organisational management which reduce the need for face-to-face contact.

‘I’ve set the business up now to work from home.’

[Secretary, 57](#)

The transition to online working has made aspects of some jobs easier than it might be otherwise, with knock-on impacts.

‘A girl in my team was living in Putney but she’s from Liverpool – now she’s going up there to live with her Mum and Dad and she can save up to buy a house.’

[Planning Apprentice, 32](#)

‘We can now get hold of footage of government press conferences and no longer have to attend due to the health-risk; this means that fewer people will need to be based centrally in cities and you’ll have better coverage as a result. It won’t repeat the absurd situation where 80% of the reporting power is based in London.’

[Journalist, 28](#)

‘I can now attend webinars in far-flung locations that there is no chance I could have participated in otherwise.’

[Researcher, 37](#)

‘It’s been proven to work thanks to advances in technology... there’s always a need to have a network but going to work will be more about closing the deal, getting buy in. Everything else can be done elsewhere.’

[Civil Servant, 38](#)

‘The GP meetings are really different now because we actually do all sorts of things and I don’t have to go into the office, which is an absolute blessing.’

[Specialist Nurse, 42](#)

Is remote work changing the wider work landscape?

Remote working means that fewer people need to be in specific offices at set points in time. Companies have seen a significant surge in flexible office space outside the big cities, with office providers anticipating a shift towards a hub- and spoke- model with headquarters in city centres and satellite offices in the regions.³²

‘Remote work will open up new opportunities for some people who will no longer have to think about travelling every single day.’

Major Retailer

However, many occupations, and tasks within occupations, remain difficult to undertake remotely

For many workers, particularly those with elements focused on affective labour, transitioning to remote work has presented significant challenges which could change business incentives to making remote work a lasting transformation.

‘Half of my work is interviewing people, it works at a kind of functional level, but it’s very different to my kind of experience of doing more face to face interviews. The difference in dynamic is quite stark.’

NGO Employee, 35

‘It’s very different visiting patients virtually. The NHS got things up and running quite quickly in terms of the technology, and we had a system enabling telephone interviews with patients, but it’s much harder to make a diagnosis or see the effects of a change in medication when you’re not there....It meant I just felt as if I hadn’t doing my job properly, and I had to go back to thinking about things in a ‘tick-box’ kind of way.’

Specialist Nurse, 46

‘When working with clients it’s harder to be spontaneous via zoom, you just can’t see body language and the physical reactions to what has been presented that you would in person.’

Service Worker, 31

‘I’ve been handing over my class to year two at the minute, and we’ve had to do this all online... I’ve had to record my voice with a PowerPoint – whenever I mess it up I need to redo it.’

Primary School Teacher, 29

Is remote work changing the wider work landscape?

Jobs and tasks requiring relationship- and team- building have experienced particular challenges.

‘We need to build relationships with people at the council, to kind of bring them round to our way of seeing things, and you just can’t build trust the same way over Teams as you can in person.’

[Planning Apprentice, 31](#)

‘A lot of my work is tapping into the knowledge of other teams, and it’s difficult to personalise these relationships. [...] you can’t just can’t build the same bond over zoom and sometimes you need a bond to bring people on board with your agenda.’

[Civil Servant, 37](#)

‘We try to have the same team meetings we usually have, but of course they are a bit monotone.’

[Engineer, 62](#)

For managers, identifying and meeting employees’ pastoral needs, particularly those who might be struggling, has proven to be difficult online.

‘I think it’s different for people who are in managerial roles because it’s difficult to gauge team’s moods and responses to things. Some just don’t put their video on which makes it hard to know people are feeling.’

[Accountant, 34](#)

A separate challenge involves tactile and visual work; the restrictions created by sharing information on a computer screen stymie creative expression in a range of ways.

‘I have found it is much harder to use visual tools on zoom; and instead we need to describe things much more in words. This has been quite challenging, especially for those designers who usually rely on visualisations to communicate their ideas.’

[Service Worker, 31](#)

Interviewees highlighted that tasks involving teaching and coaching had been less effective online:

‘The biggest difference is not being able to sit and explain something on a piece of paper in front of someone.’

[Engineer, 62](#)

Is remote work changing the wider work landscape?

Remote work reduces business overheads as many organisations look to save costs

For employers facing the economic downturn, remote working offers prospects for employers of cost savings, reducing office space, optimising time 'lost' to commuting, and greater flexibility.³³ For smaller organisations, with shorter leases on their assets these changes may take place at a quicker pace as they will have more opportunities to implement changes in a more agile way, and response to the possibilities afforded by Covid-19. The cost of office rent, and the extent to which employees commute will all be factors that determine the extent of stickiness.

'We've been talking seriously about the possibility of working remotely permanently, and this will save costs.'

NGO Employee, 35

However, for many employees there are concerns about the drive towards cost efficiencies on job security and stability.

'I don't think you can really talk about remote working without thinking about the status that this working entails. Remote work is often freelance work, it is more precarious. Remote working is fine if you're making good money and have a home office, and things like that; but personally, I work in the kitchen and that is frustrating because that's a shared space.'

Journalist, 28

'What we really need is to be pragmatic, and structure jobs so that they are human size and can be done within the time allocated.'

Jane Van Zyl,
Working Families

The transition to greater remote working decouples work from working hours, and other aspects of the formality of a workplace relationship. This could accelerate wider changes in contracting style and employment terms and conditions, in ways which may serve the interests of business.³⁴

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I think our productivity has waned, and as a team we're not as efficient, the water cooler conversations just aren't happening.

Civil Servant, 37

Section 4

Making a success of the transition to remote work: mitigating the risks

As employers, employees and families have struggled to adapt to the demands of working from home as a result of the Covid-19, a number of issues relating to homeworking have emerged.

Workers are cautious about remote management and work ‘intensification’

Management involves multiple tasks including motivation, supervision, training, technological management throws up new challenges, including alleviating worker anxiety, gauging working wellbeing remotely, and maintaining morale. For some employees, there are concerns about employers normalising tracking of worker activities and productivity, ‘hidden overtime’³⁵ and even fears about what some have termed workplace surveillance.³⁶

‘How do you enable people managers to measure productivity in a positive way? This is especially difficult in the context of remote working because some of the signals that someone isn’t keeping up with the pace disappear. This is the big unanswered question.’

Major Retailer

‘Managers only email when something big enough to warrant an e-mail comes up. But if you were in an office you would be constantly chatting about the matter at hand.’

Journalist, 28

‘I’m always conscious that I need to deliver stuff, there’s nothing said explicitly, but I need to show the evidence of my work, and if I don’t then the assumption might be that I’m not doing the hours. I feel like I’m being monitored on my login times in the morning.’

Civil Servant, 37

Making a success of the transition to remote work: mitigating the risks

For many workers, there is anxiety about remote management; concerns about what work needs to be carried out and the extent to which managers were monitoring their work, and using productivity tracking technology to assess their performance. Several interviewees mentioned that video-calls and emails offer less nuanced platforms for feedback, risking employee discouragement.

‘When you read an e-mail you don’t capture the words, which can make them seem dryer, or harsher. There is something in electronic communication that is missed; or gets lost.’

[Researcher, 37](#)

‘I’ve found myself being micromanaged in ways I never was before; I think its down to experience.’

[Civil Servant, 37](#)

‘Managers are often not good at expressing clear requirements and deadlines which leads to anxiety and lack of focus.’

[Product Manger, 30](#)

For many, remote management needs to have a human face to be effective, including deliberate work to check employee welfare, and build team rapport.

‘Everyone’s struggling, but some people are more honest than others; so, it’s hard to know when to step in and be supportive when people aren’t communicating very much.

I ask via chat how people are; but often don’t get much back.’

[Accountant, 34](#)

‘Our head is good at recognising the importance of emotional wellbeing and she’ll always go around and ask how we’ve been getting on and what we’ve done.’

[Primary School Teacher, 29](#)

‘It can be really difficult to gauge how people are feeling, and to run interactive sessions. In the past I have used post-it notes on the door and created physically energising sessions which are hard to replicate.’

[Accountant, 34](#)

Making a success of the transition to remote work: mitigating the risks

The office provides a range of resources, that employers need to think carefully about how to replicate

Preparedness for remote working – including level of equipment purchased, distributed and mainstreamed with the workforce, varied by firm. In general, larger companies have equipped more of their workforce to go remote.

Shared space can help with developing interpersonal rapport between employees.³⁷ Social interactions in the work place can help workers with the rhythms needed to complete projects, and a sense of collective purpose.

‘The office is almost a kind of democratising space between the different people who work there. It enables you to be equal on a personal level, and on a personal level I really miss going to lunch with people. Now work feels more stripped down to the bare bones.’

NGO Employee, 35

‘Getting on the phone feels much more invasive than just popping around to someone’s desk.’

Systems Operator, 34

‘I used to work from a coworking space but that shut. Even that wasn’t a substitute for an actual office, because you didn’t get a sense for the other meaningful work that other people do, but it was important for me to be in a shared space from a social perspective.’

Journalist, 28

‘Either its back to back conference calls which can be very draining or no one speaks to me.’

Engineer, 62

In some professions job satisfaction is directly tied to the feedback given by customers, clients or students; and it can be difficult to replicate this online.

‘One thing I’ve noticed is that I need to see students for my job satisfaction, so for my morale it has been important to receive an email about what a kid has been doing, or a picture of their work; this communication by email was a helpful innovation by the school, but it isn’t the same.’

Primary School Teacher, 29

Making a success of the transition to remote work: mitigating the risks

One option for employers is to think about job-redesign to reflect the changed environments. For example, by reprioritising tasks within a role.

‘We have been forced to completely rethink our offer over the course of coronavirus; and focus on the elements that we can do online. This means that we have collapsed the breadth of our work in the planning and prototyping stages into work focused on consultation.’

[Service Worker, 31](#)

Some organisations are moving towards a hybrid-remote model in which some employees are in the office, and others work from home, notwithstanding organisational challenges.³⁸

‘We want to help those partners who want to return – for example those who live in a one-bedroom flat, because they really welcome coming into the office, our approach to return has therefore really been led by partners.’

[Major Retailer](#)

Technology can help through this transition to remote work, so long as it is supported by management and training

Employers need to think about how to enable technology, and investment in self-management and ICT skills³⁹ to be used effectively by human managers to deliver good work.

‘Frustratingly only part of the organisation has been moved onto Slack, making work more difficult for everyone, and we haven’t yet won the argument that they should expand it; but it’s so important for checking-in.’

[Accountant, 34](#)

‘I feel like I’ve come to know my team better through a virtual happy hour every Thursday.’

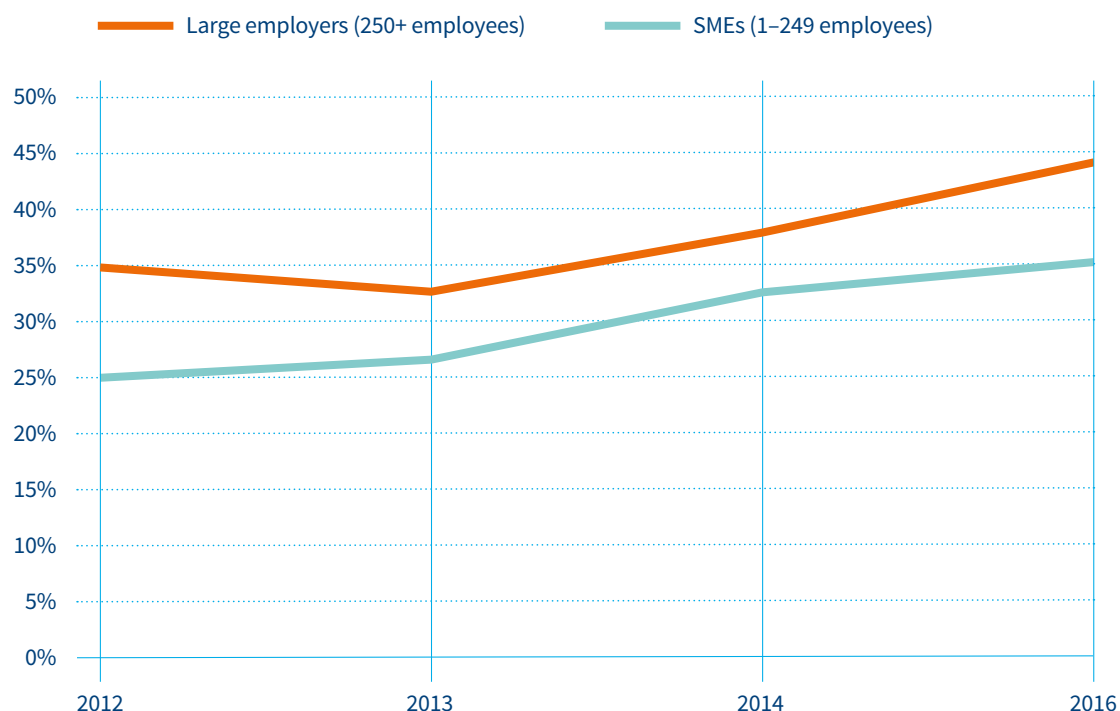
[Civil Servant, 37](#)

‘We now do remote virtual drinks.’

[Engineer, 62](#)

Making a success of the transition to remote work: mitigating the risks

Figure 4: Percentage of UK employers providing more than 20% of their workforce with portable devices, 2011–2016



Source: European Union Digital Agenda dataset available at: <https://digital-agenda-data.eu>

Employers and employees have had to fast adjust to tools designed to facilitate remote working. Physical and digital infrastructure is important.

Some interviewees spoke of steps to reimburse workers, including temporary staff, for the expenses associated with setting up home offices. Resources provided by employers include ergonomic office equipment, extra screens, assistance with household bills, additional expenses for parents with children. New computers and phones may also be necessary fixes to prevent employees from dropping out of meetings (see Figure 4).

‘Work arranged for people to buy a screen to ensure we met with health and safety requirements for people to work remotely, they were delivered to people’s houses.’

Engineer, 62

‘We all got £250 to spend on adjustments, I got a chair and a monitor; but I also want a standing desk which don’t be covered.’

Systems Operator, 34

Making a success of the transition to remote work: mitigating the risks

However, our interviews suggested that human training and other support is also needed to make remote working a success in the longer term.

‘A lot of the better managers are promoting [a mental health drive to support remote work], how they are working to manage it. But it’s kind of what department you’re working for really and your line manager.’

[Planning Apprentice, 32](#)

A lot of people choose not to put their video on, as many don’t have a strong enough broadband connection to do that.’

[Engineer, 62](#)

‘The hospice made us all join a WhatsApp group, which has been really helpful for our team building alongside other support, I think we’ve become closer.’

[Care Worker, 46](#)

“

I've been surprised at how I miss the office... the office is almost a kind of democratising space between the people who work there.

NGO Employee, 35

In conclusion

This spotlight reinforces the conclusions our recent rapid response Commission report.⁴⁰ Technology adoption and applications are accelerating and many changes are set to stay. But Covid-19 could accelerate labour market inequalities if there is not an explicit focus on building better work through current and future transitions.

As far as remote working is concerned, many organisations are at pivotal point in deciding whether and how to continue remote working and associated changes for good. Understanding the texture and wider implications of remote work will help steer present and future transformations to support the creation of good work for more people, reduce risks and spread benefits.

“

Young graduates barely speak now, they don't want to interrupt, but that makes me worry because they need to ask questions to learn I don't think people are learning as well.

Engineer, 62

Endnotes

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$$18 \text{ Regional Homeworking Score} = \frac{1}{\sum_{j=1}^J \text{Employment Share}_{jr} * \text{Homeworking Score}_j}$$

Where Employment Share_{jr} is the employment share of a particular occupation *j* in region *r* and Homeworking Score_j is the individual homeworking score for occupation *j* as calculated by the Office for National Statistics.

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