The largest working from home experiment

Many people have been asked, where possible, to work from home as a means of containing Covid-19. This is resulting in a working-from-home experiment of significant scale

Working from home is nothing new

But the nature of how people work has been changing for a long time. Hot desking has replaced personal desks in many cases, mobiles have superseded the traditional desk phone, remote personal assistants manage multiple executives in different countries, video conferencing enables collaboration among disparate teams and chat platforms provide alternative ways of sharing information.

It's not only office-type environments where these changes have been happening. Universities and educational facilities provide online learning materials that can, in some cases negate any need for students to attend a physical classroom. In the medical world, remote access is increasingly relevant and is of particular benefit where, as we're seeing today, reducing the spread of Covid-19 means limiting personal contact. Much of how people access financial services is now online as well, meaning these services can also be supplied remotely, by humans or even bots.

Tech driven

Much of these changes to the ways we work are underpinned by technology. We are now at a point where remote activity is not only possible but can provide a service or output that is close to, if not identical to what would be produced if done so in person.

And businesses have an interest in supporting their employees to work from home. If working from home does end up working out long-term, organisations stand to save money on space and furniture, drive positive environmental impact through reduced commuter travel and boost productivity through attracting diverse teams.

But we don't all do it

So, working from home is possible and potentially beneficial for a range of professions and has been for some time. But the presence of Covid-19 is now quickly accelerating the adoption of new practices.

This hadn't already happened for a number of key reasons. It's difficult to change a habit, particularly if there is no clear reason for doing so. If output is similar when working at work or at home, there is no obvious benefit to starting to work from home long-term. There is also no urgency, meaning people could always change later, prolonging adoption.

Until now, some have made the switch based on anticipated benefits though. Some studies suggest working from home boosts productivity. Quieter home environments offer fewer interruptions and distractions and time saved not commuting. Working from home has also been shown to increase productivity, employee satisfaction and overall work-life balance. In one study, employees who didn't come into the office over nine months were also less likely to quit or to take sick days.

We are social creatures despite commuting hell

But different ways of working mean changing our social habits, and this is likely a deterrent for some, particularly if considering the practice long-term. Working from home is different from working in an office for many reasons. But a key one is having opportunities to interact with colleagues, see people face-to-face and share experiences in person. We are naturally social creatures, and this is likely a big reason for why people brave the uncomfortable commute each morning. To chat to their mates.

Commutes are rarely enjoyable, but they are done every single day. Astoundingly, one study found that couples in which one partner commutes for longer than 45 minutes are 40 percent likelier to divorce. The researchers could not explain why, but another study finds that mood is lower during the commute than other daily activities and stress can be induced by congestion, crowding and unpredictability. Satisfaction also decreases with duration of commute.

Once we have braved the commute, socialising is not just for fun. Informal knowledge works are essential in a range of professions, they provide opportunities but require maintenance. And for many, their profession plays an important role in their identity, with networks key to their life outside of what strictly constitutes as 'work'.

Different roles require different levels of interaction or socialisation, meaning that what role

someone has can reflect how likely they are to enjoy working from home or find it beneficial. For example, one study found that the beliefs, attitudes and quality of social interactions of those working from home are strongly associated with productivity at home. This indicates it will suit some more than others. Indeed, in the previously mentioned 9-month study, after the experiment, some employees chose to return to office-based work because they liked the social aspects of work. This was also the reason many employees didn't opt into the study in the first place. Those who returned had decided working remotely didn't work for them. And they actually performed better once they were back in the office.

Working remotely requires adjusted management styles, clearly defines roles and responsibilities, manageable (usually shorter) delivery timeframes, trust and technology that supports collaboration and productivity. Satisfaction with how performance while working from home is tracked and the technical and emotional support offered are also important. Making these types of changes can feel risky which is also why we haven't all already been doing it.

Working from home has challenges

And it's not all rosy productivity outside of the office. The link between work and home-life can get blurred when working from home, potentially increasing stress levels. At home, we also arguably have a different type of accountability and varying routine. While one study found little impact of interruption based on the home environment, we don't have a lot of evidence of the impacts of working from home over extended periods, such as anticipated will be required to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

And it suits some activities more than others. One study suggests that productivity when working from home is higher for 'robotic' work, while another indicates that the effects may be positive for 'creative' tasks, but less so for 'dull' activities. Indeed, the characteristics of a position and the company have been found to affect the satisfaction of employees working from home more than how they work, or the features in their environment.

Wide scale experiment

We don't currently know how this large-scale working-from-home experiment will impact productivity and wellbeing in the long-term, particularly across a broad suite of roles. While working from home is not something new, an aversion to unnecessary or uncertain change, a preference for social engagement and the fact that some things are simply better done in person mean that only a few have trialled working remotely over extended periods.

But now that we have to, if something positive is to come from this, it is an opportunity to measure the impact of workplace flexibility at a much bigger scale.