

## That old chestnut learning to trust the homeworker

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In 2013, we commissioned [research on how homeworking was fairing for us as an organisation](#) (PDF, 1.68MB, 103 pages).

Summarising the report in the policy paper '[Agile but fragile: The changing face of UK homeworking – what works best for whom?](#)' (PDF, 151KB, 8 pages), Acas senior researcher, Andrew Sutherland, said that the secret to effective homeworking was "moderation in all things." In other words, a mixture of working from home and from the office seemed to provide the best of both worlds for many of our staff.

Fast forward a few years and what feels like several lifetimes, and a new piece of research on homeworking comes to some very familiar conclusions. To quote Andrew again, he warned that managers "must be willing and able to relinquish traditional notions of how best to manage performance, usually based on direct supervision, and adopt new ways of motivating and monitoring their staff."

It seems as if his words have not been heeded, with [research from the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research \(WISERD\)](#) (PDF, 764KB, 65 pages) finding that "a common fear among employers is that without physical oversight, employees will shirk and productivity will fall".

Figures for UK staff who work exclusively from home may be down from the lockdown peak of 43%, but numbers are still historically very high at 20%, and the predictions about if and when people return to the workplace offer a mixed picture.

A [survey from People Management](#), for example, shows that some employers, like National Grid, are keeping their workers at home; some are beginning to get people back to the office, and others remain undecided about the best course of action.

So, what's the truth about homeworking? It seems pertinent to revisit those perennial issues of trust, productivity and wellbeing.

### Can you be as productive at home?

The tide on flexible working has ebbed and flowed. A few years ago, companies like Yahoo were banning it altogether and forecasting increased levels of productivity; and yet law firm Linklaters have announced that they are giving employees the opportunity to determine where they get their work done, without having to request permission ([Personnel Today, 26 August 2020](#)).

Let's be clear that homeworking is often a privilege afforded to mainly professional occupations. And, secondly, flexible working is, by definition, about allowing employees to choose where and when they work. Current working environments have largely been imposed on organisations due to health and safety requirements; but, nevertheless, we do have a unique opportunity to learn some valuable lessons from what Sir Brendan Barber called a 'national experiment' in the policy paper '[Building back: making working lives better](#)'.

On the question of productivity, the answer seems to be yes, you can be just as productive at home. The WISERD research found that two-thirds of homeworkers said they were able to get as much done in June 2020 as they were 6 months earlier; and a quarter said they got more work done.

## Can line management survive in a virtual world?

Even if presented with irrefutable proof that productivity isn't an issue, managers may still find themselves worried their staff are either cyberloafing or just plain loafing. But the reality is that autonomy is such an important ingredient of job satisfaction and employee engagement that employees are likely to repay the trust placed in them. Personally, I see this as another dimension of encouraging an adult-adult dynamic between managers and staff.

Research Acas commissioned on the impact that [flexible working arrangements](#) have on individuals, teams and organisations found that "employees who have been allowed to work flexibly tend to demonstrate greater commitment and a willingness to 'give back' to the organisation."

Another interesting finding from this research was that managers "expect flexible workers in their team to be 'flexible with flexibility'" – for example, by attending meetings at short notice or swapping days worked. This sounds like a reasonable system of give and take; but for some organisations this kind of flexibility, switching quickly between work and home, may not be currently feasible.

## Can you learn to thrive at home?

The WISERD research finds that those working predominantly from home for the first 3 months after lockdown experienced a significant drop in their mental health. But there are some major caveats here.

Firstly, the background for many people was traumatic, with genuine fears for the health and safety of loved ones, as well as the real sense of loneliness and isolation.

Secondly, the mental health dip was worse for new homeworkers who had to suddenly adapt to zoom meetings and finding a quiet spot to perch.

And thirdly, people seemed to get used to working from home; so much so that 9 out of 10 employees who worked from home during the lockdown would like to continue doing so in some capacity; and half of employees wanting to work at home often or all of the time.

## What does the national homeworking experiment tell us so far?

It tells us that people can adapt surprisingly quickly. It tells us that trust is a difficult issue to overcome but that once invested it pays dividends. But it also tells us that we have still much to learn – for example, trying to recreate the informal interactions we all value can be a bit hit and miss.

At Acas we are carrying out a survey to find out how our own staff have found working from home during the pandemic. I think the overall lesson is to keep asking, keep listening and keep learning.