Home Working – Is it Here to Stay or a Passing Fad?

The Institute of Directors (IOD) in a recent survey of company directors indicated that 74% of companies would be keeping increased homeworking after Covid-19 ended. More than 50% indicated that they intended to reduce their long-term use of workplaces with more than 20% reporting their usage would be significantly lower.

One of the key findings was that more than 40% said that that working from home was proving more effective than their previous arrangements of working from an office or similar. Other findings included 43% had embraced greater use of flexible working such as compressed hours, while over 20% had moved a service they provided online.

The IDO has called on the Government to do two key things to support any longer-term home working:

- **Improve access to leadership and management training**, to reduce concerns around the potential impact of remote working on productivity and employee wellbeing. Boosting management skills could be one target of the National Skills Fund.

- **Lower employment costs**, particularly Employers' NICs to encourage job creation among businesses and help more firms retain staff. This could be done by increasing the Employment Allowance or raising the threshold for paying National Insurance Contributions.

Aside from skills and cost, the challenge for employers is that although their directors may want it, home working full-time, permanently is not right for all staff. Such a move raises some real questions around an employer's legal responsibilities for staff outside the office. As the weather turned this week, questions around heating bills, electrical testing of portable heaters and icy slips for those going down the garden path to a home office, became even more prevalent amongst our clients. As just some small practical examples.

The attraction of home working for businesses is clear with productivity proven to increase and the benefit of reduced overheads, but it's important to measure what is being lost as well as gained. The culture of the organisation can shift significantly and working from doesn't work for everyone. Managing teams remotely can prove far from straightforward, and companies must make sure they are going out of their way to support employees' mental wellbeing. The World Health Organisation's Mental Health Day, may provide a useful immediate opportunity to do so.

Also, any remote working is only as good as the technology that enables it. Staff can be let down and organisations will not see the benefits if the IT technology is a barrier for people doing their jobs. Fortunately, many companies have seen this as a spur to invest in their IT infrastructure and to reinvest office rent savings in creating an effective virtual environment. But where that investment isn't able to take place, the frustration of increased downtime, not being able to join in meetings and not chatting informally with colleagues has impact on job satisfaction, data protection and culture.

Another barrier is that of space. Home working proves the importance of, well, home. And for a large employer with staff living on a diverse range of household incomes, that gap can feel all the more real if some of the team are working from a purpose-built office in their secluded garden, and others at their kitchen table. For some staff, escaping to an office may be their only escape from domestic violence or the strain of caring for someone they live with. Losing a physical escape, having to give up physical space in a small room previously used for family time or having to ask a partner to take pre-schoolers out for the day so another parent can work in peace might not be captured in productivity statistics.

At ema, we see main offices and office hubs as still being essential. Amongst our own team we've seen the importance of sharing immediate thoughts and how the loss of non-verbal language cues can reduce the impact of creative sessions. Product development and creativity is entirely possible remotely, but it takes time to embed new hierarchies, overcome learning new software and to facilitate discussions which include everyone. One size fits all never works when it comes to human behaviour and needs. This simple but comprehensive guide from Acas is a useful check back to ensure people who are home working, can do so well.

Looking ahead, it seems more and more companies will take a blended approach to where they work. Any transition can cause challenges, and it's crucial that the legal and economic implications of this change are grappled with from the start.

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