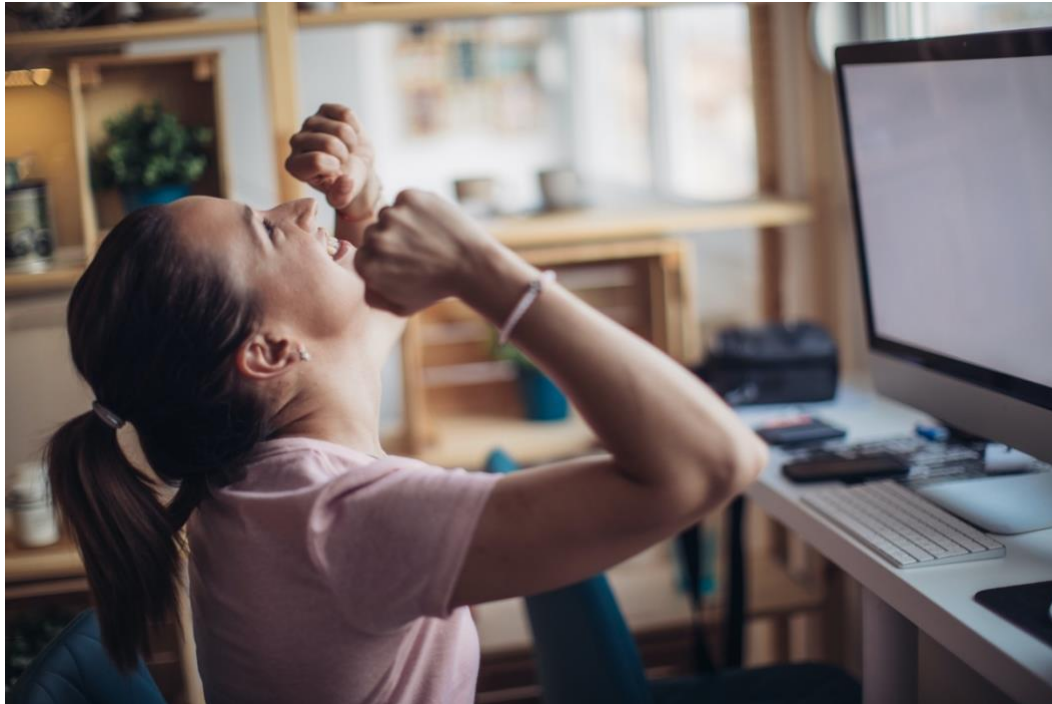# Remote Working (WFH) vs Office

With thoughts turning to a return to a more "normal" working pattern there seems to be a difference of opinion amongst many prominent business leaders as to the most appropriate way to move forward.

In this brief article we outline the pros and cons of remote working from the perspective of employer and employee.

We must remember that prior to the pandemic there was a growing trend toward homeworking and flexible hours. Businesses had started to adopt 4-day weeks and less rigid hours along with putting in place the technology and security to accommodate remote work.

Covid has accelerated the move that was already in motion and employers now need to find their own balance to ensure they can continue to provide the product or service to the same if not higher standards whilst enabling a workforce to stay engaged and happy.

Here below we look in detail at the Pros and Cons (yes in that order), to help better understand how you might address the process.

What of the <u>disadvantages</u> for employers moving to a more flexible arrangement for staff?

- **Assuming "one solution fits all" is dangerous. Working from home won't suit everyone** – as humans we are all unique in our make-up be it personality or working preferences. Introverts may have liked lockdown as a way to be saved daily stresses of meeting many people but equally extroverts may not be as confident as they first appear. The reality is we do all benefit from a level of routine and the discipline of knowing you need to be at a certain place by a certain time. The home working environment will vary dependent on personal circumstances and often a workplace can offer a release from pressures at home.

- **Feeling left out** – without a consistent and effective management approach to all employees and an awareness of individual mood and circumstance you run the risk of leaving some staff feeling abandoned.

- **Productivity and performance** – Staff don't appreciate being micromanaged and that's as true of online monitoring as it is of in-person "shoulder surfing". Effective management should be light touch but with clear expectations as to what is required of staff and what is considered acceptable behaviour with regards to home working.

- **Added financial pressure** – There can be obvious cost savings but potentially there are added pressures to working from home. If two or more adults are trying to compete for a quite space to work, it may prove too challenging. Alternative, rented space may prove necessary. Also setting up and maintaining a "home office" environment may require investment in re-decorating, kitting out and insulating the space. Upgrading I.T. may be necessary for security and potentially an effective broadband connection may also prove costly if the employee lives in a poorly served area.

- **Onboarding and developing employees** – As we identified above in Mr Solomon's comments, he is particularly concerned about his new generation of joiners and the need to offer face to face support. Virtual recruitment has certainly proved difficult, in that remote, online interviews will fail to pick up many clues relating to a candidate's personality, confidence, resilience and humour. These are all important traits and aspects that may become important in developing a strong working relationship. In short, employers are often taking a greater than usual leap of faith in their recruitment decisions. The probationary period therefore becomes ever more important and it's essential time and resource is afforded to new recruits to ensure the company's investment in staff is not wasted by leaving them to "sink or swim" and failing to undertake an effective onboarding process.

- **Cyber security** – An area not to be overlooked. Working from home may involve multiple devices being adapted to support the employees work. This equipment will need to be vetted and approved or alternatively supply your own dedicated devices with pre-loaded security software. I.T. will need to ensure that all staff are using the latest versions of virus protection, firewalls and operating systems and this should extend to smartphones. Our phones may provide very convenient and powerful

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processing capability however we all too often overlook the risks once they're connected to a business network.

- **Wellbeing** – Employees and employers are adapting to a new working pattern and the past 12 months have proven that it can be both beneficial and at time detrimental to our physical and mental health. We have also had the added stresses of living with a global pandemic which should not go without reference or credit to those who have continued to work through. In truth whilst many feared home working as a license for staff to lounge around and become easily distracted from their work the reality has been quite the opposite. With a mixture of fear over job security and/or determination to prove a point there is a danger many home workers have in fact got close to or reached burn out. Overworking has been all too common, and employers owe a duty of care to staff to ensure that they are taking breaks and not falling into the trap of "always on" because their home has also become their place of work. In addition, long exposure time to "blue light" screens can cause major disruption to sleep patterns effecting health and energy levels.

- **Does the role support remote working?** – Pretty basic but not to be overlooked. There are the obvious jobs that require attendance e.g., site as a builder or medical professional, in store or in factory but there are also roles that may prove at face value to be workable from home, but reality makes it too challenging. It is for you the employer to thoroughly and reasonably assess an employee's role and its suitability for functioning remotely or from a domestic location. If a member of staff raises a concern you should investigate and evaluate as soon as practical. The difficulty may also not relate directly to the job but to the place in which they are expecting to work from.

- **Buffering blues and lagging behind** – We mention the costs of bringing a broadband connection in line with expectations however that's all well and good if it's a simple solution. If there is no "quick fix" to a poor connection and it's essential to have an online connection that member of staff may need to attend an office to use the company network. As the employer you will need to take all reasonable steps to support the employee and ensure that they are not being treated any differently to colleagues save for the fact they need to have ready access to a working connection. On occasion a "poor connection" can prove convenient for an employee not wishing to join the weekly Zoom team meeting but if it becomes all too regular an occurrence, you'll need to investigate the true connectivity and options available to avoid them becoming isolated.

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On the other side of the coin let's look at the <u>benefits</u> of home working….

- **Work Life Balance** – As school's have been impacted by lockdowns the option of working from home for parents has been both a godsend and I'm sure at times a trial. On balance and with more time given to adjust, the opportunity to be there for children, when needed, has provided greater comfort and peace of mind for employees. This improvement in balancing home and work will support employee's contentment and reduce stress.
- **Stickability** – If an employer can adapt the working patterns to suit employees and provide the appropriate support it is likely that this will support greater staff loyalty and dedication to the organisation. Respect and empathy build trust which should be the goal of employers and employees alike.
- **Recruiting** – Being a forward thinking, creative, caring and flexible employer is an attractive feature now actively sought out by Gen Z employees and a growing number of millennials. Being very traditional in outlook and not encompassing home working would have the opposite effect.
- **Performance levels** – Enough evidence exists of productivity and improved output / performance to support the objective of keeping staff happy. One clear way to improve the mood of your staff is to offer a working environment that is both safe and comfortable. If their home and the role is able to accommodate remote working, there's a strong possibility they will be happy to fulfil at least 50% of their working time from that location.
- **Proactivity** – When you're less stressed by a commute or distractions of a busy open plan office you can find clear head space to be creative, innovative and put constructive suggestions forward. This creativity of thought should be strongly encouraged as it also improves staff morale as they see their ideas become a reality and feel as though they are being heard.
- **Health & Wellbeing** – We've touched on the negative side of home working which needs to be considered however this offers employers an opportunity to create programmes that encompass staff needs. Active mentoring of staff at all levels can prove essential in heading off any negative thinking or issues borne out of isolation. Collective challenges around activities that are non-core work such as fitness and number of steps taken each day or mental stimulation through a team quiz can help bond employees and support teamwork.
- **Cost savings** – For the employer there are clear savings in office space usage, heating, catering and parking. Reduced commuting also supports a kinder approach to the environment. The challenge as far as the real estate is concerned needs to be addressed. If the business owns a large office how will it be repurposed? If you're the tenant what are the terms and how can you best negotiate reduced usage?
- **HR Practicalities** – Two of the larger headaches faced by HR relate to sickness days and holiday requests. With the introduction of greater flexibility in hours and more relaxed working
arrangements, employers benefit from reduced cases of sickness absence. Equally, albeit aided by Covid, fewer requests for holidays have materialised. The reduced

demand for holiday may be a result of feeling as though a break from work is being at home however as this is normalised, and pandemic conditions abate expect the requests to return.

- **Developing Technology** – VR is an example of adapting technology to suit an improved experience for remote working staff. Creating an environment that is virtual albeit has greater resemblance to a social setting and not Zoom or Teams screens can help team members engage more. Well-designed intranets, project software and apps that help with mindfulness, fitness and relaxation can all contribute. One warning should be the amount of time employees are spending in front of screens and working to find a suitable balance. The blue light emitted from our technology impacts the body's biological process that takes place over a 24-hour period and controls when we feel awake and when we feel sleepy. This circadian rhythm is governed traditionally by sunlight but is disrupted by the light emitted from our smartphones. You can purchase screen protectors or glasses that filter out the blue light.

Whichever route you take to manage your staff it's a given that the working patterns, for a majority of us, have changed and are unlikely to return to the routines we had prior to Covid-19.

Notes: