Will we ever fully return to the office?

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With many people across the UK still working from home, a big question marks hangs over the future of offices, and if they will ever fully return to normal and how they were just six months ago.

For many employees, home working has offered them greater flexibility, and they're in no rush to return to the old routine. On the other hand, some are itching to get back into the office as they work more effectively in a traditional 'work' environment.

However, many businesses are embracing the 'new normal', and have shifted towards a more remote workforce for the long-term. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said as many as 50% of Facebook employees could be working remotely within the next five to 10 years (1), and Twitter will allow its workforce to continue working from home "forever," if they choose. This gives employees the flexibility to work from home if they can, or to interact at the office some days a week. Although a lot of employees are now off the furlough scheme, many staff continue to be advised from their employers to work from home for safety measures.

Last week, Ministers warned employees working from home that they could be vulnerable to losing their jobs. There is a major drive to persuade businesses to get their colleagues back to the office where possible, and if this isn't actioned people could be 'sacked' (2). Employers will be required to reassure their employees that it is now safe to return by highlighting measures taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19. For those that are vulnerable, they will be exempt from working in the office building. And for those businesses that simply can't arrange social distancing measures in much smaller offices and workplaces, employers are continuing to embrace working from home.

With schools in England now reopen, this may make many want to get back into the 'normal' routine. However, home working parents will no longer need to spread themselves across work and childcare, so the appeal of working from the comfort of their own home without so many distractions may return. Ministers say people have got used to

the way of working from home, but it is now time to reintroduce the 'office' work life back into day-to-day lives to help the economy increase again. But, will this make people return, if they have the option to work from home for the foreseeable future?

As offices continue to gradually re-open, many employers are looking at new lifestyles of work. Unfortunately for many, companies have had to make redundancies across the business, in order to save costs where possible. One of the biggest ways to save money is, of course, cutting office space. Companies have saved money by employees working remote from home, including utility savings, travel expenses and rental costs.

It seems many prefer the change to work life being at home rather than at the office, with the experience of lockdown changing business practices for good, making it easier for employees to work efficiently. Many bosses fear that the immediate return to office working will actually disrupt employee's productivity. If the employee has a comfortable working home office, and access to work files, then there is no reason to rush back to the office, surely.

One popular strategy that could become a long term change is a new timetable structure for employees. For example, a turnover of staff on different days in the office to reduce the number of people in the office per day. This could mean, that staff could be flexible and work 3 days in the office and 2 days at home prior the timetable. Managing Director of Utility Bidders, says it is likely that many bosses will choose to opt instead for a gradual return to work, where staff are based in the office on some days, and work from home on others (3). For employees that enjoy both home and an office lifestyle, this is a great way to keep staff productive, but it also means face-to-face interaction with employees can happen again.

Unfortunately, some employees have struggled with remote work from home with many factors including distractions, mental illnesses, and not enough equipment to complete their work. This should be discussed with the company, to find a solution on work-life balance. It's important that we get that time to socialise and get to know our colleagues, in order to improve team work and productivity.

Travel time has been a massive reason that many prefer to work from home. For example, an employee working in the suburbs of London, or Birmingham, would need to travel back and forth to the office each working day. For those who commute hours long hours each day, just to get to work and back, it's no wonder why so many aren't in a rush to return to the office, if the routine simply didn't work for them. Taking travel time out of the work day, offers employees more time to spend on a project, eating a proper breakfast, or spending precious time with family, creating a more positive workday.

Platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams have been a great asset during lockdown and continues to be successful for employees working from home. Meetings and conversations can be virtual from the comfort of employee's homes rather than travelling to an office or venue to attend the meeting. These applications are a great way to communicate between the team and check to in on employees to see how they are coping.

Large scale companies have different proposals for remote working. With Google extending working from home until the end of the year and Microsoft having said working from home will be extended until October for most employees (4). Businesses have different solutions, and will ultimately do what is best for their workforce. But, currently, working from home continues to be effective and sustainable for many of us.

Working from home, and with more flexible timetables, seems very much to be the new 'norm' for many employees. As negative as COVID-19 has been, it has made employees think differently about what they want from their jobs, and how their employer can support them and their lifestyles more. If we ever fully return to the office is yet to be seen, but for the meantime, for many employees, the 'new normal' works.

1. *https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/22/tech/work-from-home-companies/index.html*
2. *https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/08/27/go-back-work-risk-losing-job-major-drive-launched-get-people/*
3. *https://www.shropshirestar.com/news/business/2020/07/20/will-working-from-home-become-the-new-norm/*
4. *https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52765165*