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Remote working: unprecedented increase and a developing research agenda

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ABSTRACT

As we start to move beyond or acclimatise to COVID-19, a rise in remote working looks set to be the change in work practices most likely to stick long term. Specifically, a long-term growth in hybrid working seems inevitable. Pre-pandemic, work technology had already advanced considerably to enable remote working, but the lockdowns demonstrated that it is eminently feasible in many more jobs than previously thought and the demand from employees appears to have strengthened substantially. As a fundamental shift in how we work, there are implications for core HRD topics, including learning and development, organisational productivity, workload, effective communications and relationships, and people management capability. This special edition contributes to an important growing research agenda on remote and hybrid working, investigating its relationships with employee wellbeing and work-life balance; leader-member exchange (LMX); knowledge exchange; workforce inclusion; learning effectiveness; sustainable career development; and employee voice and choice in informing work practices.

KEYWORDS

remote work; COVID-19; flexible working; hybrid working.

Coronavirus and remote working

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns have been a huge lesson in organizational agility. Often working at speed and on various fronts at once, employers have had to adapt work premises to protect the safety of employees and the public, adapt to changes in customer demands, with new markets developing overnight and others falling off a cliff, make redundancies and navigate furlough schemes, and facilitate working from home (WFH) on a scale never seen before.

Of all the changes demanded, a rise in remote working and virtual teams looks to be the one that's most likely to be sustained permanently. Many have described it as a great enforced 'experiment' of homeworking. In some ways, organizations were primed to make the jump, as technologies to support remote working become more embedded over previous years, but despite a general increase, many employers were nonetheless reticent to embrace it. Indeed, in 2013 as CEO of Yahoo!, Marissa Mayer famously reversed the trend, demanding an end to all WFH arrangements (Smith 2013).

The lockdowns from March 2020 forced the issue unequivocally. In the US, the proportion of working days done at home increased from about 5% pre-pandemic to 50% at the peak of lockdown, and survey data projects that this will only fall to 20% post-pandemic (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis 2021). As Bloom (2021) notes, with pre-pandemic rates in homeworking doubling approximately every 12 years, a shift to 20% would effectively amount to almost 25 years' worth of change in a 2-year period. A UK survey indicates similar changes, with the majority of employers expecting hybrid working to become the norm: for example, 40% of employers envisage more than half their workforce to work regularly from home, compared to just 15% pre-pandemic (Brinkley et al. 2020).

Drivers of remote working

Various factors may explain why the temporary requirements of lockdown could result in more permanent change. At a practical level, these include that advances in technology have facilitated remote working and will likely do so even more, and that the upfront investments needed to set people up to work from home (in time, technology and furniture) have already been made (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis 2021).

At a deeper level, employers' attitudes appear to have shifted due to the homeworking 'experiment' going better than expected (*ibid.*). The lockdown appears to have demonstrated to many employers that with adjustments, homeworking can work and is appropriate for a wider group of employees than previously thought. As an employee benefit, WFH may now be less likely to be viewed as a privilege of professional or managerial jobs and not appropriate for many, especially more junior roles – for example, call centre workers using specialized office equipment, or personal assistants expected to be 'on hand' to provide support – or something for which such workers can be granted only in 'special cases' such as having caring responsibilities. Such a shift away chimes with the CIPD, the UK professional body for HR and people development, that 'flexible working should be the norm – not the exception' (CIPD, undated).

It's also apparent that many employees want to work remotely longer term. The unmet demand for WFH alongside other forms of flexible working, such as flexitime and compressed hours, was evident before the pandemic. A UK survey found that two thirds of workers wanted to work flexibly in at least one form that was not currently available to them and, more specifically, 49% of those who could not WFH wanted that choice (Wheatley and Gifford 2019). In July 2020, a further wave of the survey suggested that the lockdown affected attitudes to remote working more positively than negatively: 6 in 10 UK employees working remotely indicated they would be more likely to request WFH in the future, whereas only 5% thought they would be less likely to do so (Gifford and Green 2020). The value placed on WFH as a benefit can be substantial: a US survey found that on average, employees considered it equivalent to 7 or 8% of salary (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis 2021). At the time of writing, some employers are considering whether they can force employees fearful of Covid to return to the office (Hoeritzauer 2022) but the longer-term trend we can expect is that, having seen what's feasible, employees' expectations will pressure employers to cater more for WFH.

Changing contexts of remote working

There is a rich vein of research into the outcomes of remote working in performance and organizational life and the moderators that affect them. In advancing this research now with the prospect of increased homeworking long term, we must consider changes in the nature and context of remote working.

The nature of homeworking had already evolved substantially from centring on manufacturing in the 1980s, to office work in the last decade or two: as Felstead (2022) notes, ‘Today’s homemaker is no longer typified by the Christmas cracker maker or sewing machinist but is more likely to be the finance director or personal assistant’ (p.52). More recently, over the last decade, the capacity to conduct information-based work from home has increased substantially, due to advances in videoconferencing, file sharing and cloud-based systems, which have become more accessible and higher quality. This has become further embedded in the last two years due to lockdown, as more people have been using these technologies on a daily basis.

In addition, much of the research evidence on remote working has historically focused on multinational enterprises and as a result some may not be relevant to current contexts: for example, the challenge of synchronizing work schedules for different time zones will not apply when remote workers are based locally.

In the following sections I consider some of the main research themes in the body of research and how this special issue contributes to them.

Effectiveness and performance

There is mixed evidence on the effect of remote working on performance. Previous research has highlighted that it is more challenging for virtual teams to be effective than face-to-face teams (Ortiz de Guinea, Webster, and Staples 2012). However, there is evidence that working remotely instead of face-to-face can improve performance: for example, a randomized trial with call centre workers in China showed that it resulted in a huge 13% increase in productivity (Bloom et al. 2013). Explanations for this result included the simple arithmetic of cut commuting time allowing for longer work hours, but also more focused work, due to many homeworkers having a quieter environment.

Cross-sectional surveys during the pandemic indicate a more muted view. For example, a UK survey indicated that during lockdown, the great majority of employers had observed either no change in performance (37%) or only small changes (40%), and the figures for increases and decreases were very evenly split (Brinkley et al. 2020). A US survey found a more positive outlook, with employers on average anticipating that hybrid work would improve productivity by 5% (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis 2021). In general, it seems employers do not anticipate large benefits from hybrid working, but importantly do not envisage worsened performance either.

Workload and work-life balance

There is mixed evidence on how digital and remote work affect workload and work intensity. In and of itself, it does not appear that digital working is any worse for our health than other forms (Barends et al. 2021); thus, evidence for

a generalized notion of ‘technostress’ (Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008) is limited. But specifically for remote working, there is a clear potential dynamic with workload. This is an issue to be taken seriously, as long hours are a prominent risk factor in work-related mental health problems (Ng and Feldman 2008; Virtanen et al. 2011).

On the one hand, there is a persuasive argument that constant connectivity through ICT may erode work-life boundaries by fostering ‘always on’ work climates (Schlachter et al. 2018). This is typified by the worker who checks their emails on their phone before turning off the bedside light: by increasing employees’ availability, remote technology can contribute to pressure to be available at all hours. On the other hand, there are obvious potential gains from remote working in reduced commuting times, which can be substantial: prior to the pandemic, a CIPD survey found that UK workers typically commuted nearly four hours per week, rising to 6.5 hours for Londoners (Wheatley and Gifford 2019). Considering both risks and opportunities, it seems the number of hours we work remotely is worth managing carefully.

Effective communication

The potential challenges in communication and information sharing are worth considering in their own right. It is well established to be important influence on teams’ shared understanding of their goals and tasks, and thus on their effectiveness (Hülshager, Anderson, and Salgado 2009). Prior research has found that virtual teams are less effective at sharing information (Ortiz de Guinea, Webster, and Staples 2012) but it seems we are now better equipped to meet this challenge.

A particular problem in remote working has been the lack of rich interaction than is possible when working face to face: in short, the closer the medium is to face-to-face conversations, the better (Kahai, Huang, and Jestice 2012). Even in the last five years or so, videoconferencing has become less ‘glitchy’, more ‘frictionless’ and as a result a richer medium for communication.

We also stand to benefit from people becoming more familiar with and adept at using remote ICT. In the case of remote learning, there is evidence to suggest that virtual classrooms – that is, synchronous learning activity with facilitators interacting with learners in real time – are broadly influenced by the same moderators as face-to-face classrooms (Wietrak, Rousseau, and Barends 2021). For example, key success factors include minimizing cognitive load (Mutlu-Bayraktar, Cosgun, and Altan 2019); incorporating classroom discussion and interaction (Dixson et al. 2017; Wei, Chen, and Kinshuk 2012); and scaffolding or mastery learning, which is to say that is, learners should first gain a full understanding of one topic before advancing to the next (Doo, Bonk, and Heo 2020). If facilitators can incorporate these into their practice, there is no reason to fear a growth in virtual classrooms.

Social climate: cohesion, trust and support

Social cohesion and trust has been shown to be an important influence on team effectiveness (Chiocchio and Essiembre 2009; De Jong, Dirks, and Gillespie 2016). There is also evidence that they are more important in virtual teams (Breuer,

Hüffmeier, and Hertel 2016; CEBMa 2020) and that they are harder to achieve, because communication through electronic media reduces the social cues that help build relationships (Lin, Standing, and Liu 2008). Remote team relationships are clearly helped by considerate use of emails and social media – we can doubtless all recall times when messages sent in haste have caused misunderstandings or upset. In planning work, managers can also help by investing in team-building (Kennedy, Vozdolska, and McComb 2010).

Moving from team effectiveness to mental wellbeing, another aspect of work relationships is social climate. Factors such as whether work environments are encouraging and supportive, relaxed, or distrustful have been shown to predict mental distress (Barends et al. 2021; Finne, Christensen, and Knardahl 2016). Evidently, after two years dominated by the pandemic lockdown, many workers are missing social contact: a 2020 survey found that 50% of UK home workers felt their work relationships had suffered as a result and 56% of those with existing mental health issues believed the lockdown had worsened their mental health (CIPD 2020).

As we move ever more into hybrid working, managers should be considered in planning the limited face-to-face time, recognizing that it takes more effort to maintain relationships in virtual teams. It would be sensible to prioritize face-to-face time for activities like periodic team building that are most dependent on it. Team relationships can also be supported with more regular videoconference calls, but investing upfront in quality face-to-face activities will provide a more solid foundation from which to work.

People management capability

Several of the areas above suggest that remote and hybrid working place particular demands on people managers. Felstead (2022) cites survey evidence that the organizations that adapted to remote working best through the pandemic seem to be those with better management practices, such as focusing on objectives instead of micro-managing inputs. Similarly, qualitative research published recently in HRDI found that HR practitioners and general managers viewed people managers as playing a critical role in supporting effective remote working, highlighting the importance of developing people management capability (Delany 2021). This was seen both for coaching and supporting staff working virtually and for more active and timely management of poor employee performance. Overall, Delany concludes that ‘There is no doubt that the transition to more remote working will expose any competency deficiencies in the manager community; many of them may be working with remote staff for the first time’ (Delany 2021, 6).

The limits of remote and hybrid working

Clearly, working from home is not a feasible option for many workers and may not be a preference for others. Indeed, the pandemic may have highlighted how certain roles are not suited to remote working. For example, a UK survey found that those not working from home in the summer of 2020 were even less likely to request it in the future (Gifford and Green 2020).

Nonetheless, in a hybrid world of work, there is a risk that differences between homeworkers and on-site workers create or reinforce labour market disadvantages. On the one hand, it may be that homeworkers career trajectories suffer because they are ‘out of sight, out of mind’. On the other hand, unequal access to remote working – evidenced by the unmet demand for it, as already discussed – is a concern. Survey research by Barrero, Bloom, and Davis (2021) shows that for higher paid jobs, US employers’ intentions generally tally with employees’ desires for hybrid working (that is, anticipating about two days’ WFH per week) but for lower paid jobs, there is a gap: workers want a similar amount of WFH, but employers intend to offer less.

It seems reasonable to expect tensions between some workers and some employers. In the face of growing expectations from employees to be able to WFH, many employers are desperate for a return to the office, especially for the face-to-face interactions that can contribute to more effective working relationships.

HRDI special issue: contributions to a growing research agenda

As well as an actual growth in the amount of remote working, there has been an explosion in commentary on the topic. For example, Felstead (2022) calculates that UK newspaper articles on WFH rose from about 150 a month before the pandemic to nearly 6,000 a month in March 2020. Updating and expanding the body of academic research to inform these discussions should be a priority, considering not only the increased scale of remote working, but also its changing nature and implications.

This special issue of Human Resource Development International tackles new themes as well as established ones in the changing context of remote working. Two articles deal with the impact of remote working on employee wellbeing. First, Mina Biegi, Wee Chan Au and Melika Shirmohammadi review empirical studies on how work-life balance has fared through the period of enforced remote working during the lockdown. Their lens of person-environment fit brings useful insights into the potential tensions – such as between flexitime and ‘always on’ working – that may exist as trade-offs or factors to balance. Second, Dae Seok Chai reviews the literature on how virtual teams affect employees’ psychological well-being and builds on this with two practical case studies of remote working during the covid pandemic.

Three papers in the special issue focus on facets of work relationships. Firstly, Arup Varma investigates changes in leader-member exchange (LMX) in the context of remote working, with some useful suggestions for practice and future research. Second, Consuelo Waight, Tania Nery-Kjerfve, Amanda Kite and Brittany Smith explored how remote work has affected colleague relationships and knowledge exchange in Brazilian workplaces. In particular, they provide evidence that previous informality and non-verbal communication, which led to serendipitous exchanges and fostered shared tacit knowledge, were eroded by remote work. The more planned exchanges that took their place left colleagues feeling less connected, despite the synchronous technologies on offer. Third, Marilyn Byrd’s article considers new barriers to inclusion in virtual work contexts, in particular focusing on belongingness and meaningful work.

Two papers look at learning and development. First, Jessica Li and Roland Yeo's in-depth study investigates how differing expectations of and psychological reactions to remote working can affect learning effectiveness. In particular, they explore differences between those for whom remote working was planned, who took a longer-term view and adapted and coped better than those for whom it was unplanned. Taking a longer-term view, Kim McDonald and Linda Hite assess the challenges and opportunities facing remote workers in developing their careers in a sustainable way.

Finally, Sarah Pass and Maranda Ridgway consider fundamental aspects of employee relations, reviewing evidence to take stock of the enforced period of remote working to propose an agenda for ongoing hybrid working. They make a case for employees being given voice and choice in where they work, with hybrid working being characterized by consultation, flexibility and autonomy.

The articles in this special issue demonstrate the evolving nature of remote working and the variety of aspects of HRD that it impinges upon, and make noteworthy contributions to this body of research. They also provide useful recommendations for HRD professionals managing the shift to remote or hybrid working and supporting staff in this transition. Remote working looks set to become more embedded in contemporary organizational life; within this there are opportunities as well as challenges and risks to manage. A strong and contextualized research agenda will be vital in helping practitioners navigate this likely, if not inevitable future.

Disclosure statement

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