



## 'My company has gone fully remote and I'm despairing': who wins in the new world of working from home?

As we move away from the traditional 9 to 5, the boundaries between office and home are increasingly blurred. Meet the bosses trying to get it right

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**I** am 20 minutes into my scheduled 30-minute call with Shivani Maitra when I start to freeze. Maitra, a partner at global consultancy firm Deloitte, is leading the firm's post-Covid-19 research into the future of work, and is giving me a seamless analysis of what business is about to look like: more autonomy, more remote work, happier workers, more accessible leadership - all facilitated by technology. But I can't get Skype for Business to function. It's a hot day and the connection comes and goes, leaving me contorted and sweating over my laptop.

Maitra is not necessarily wrong, but as my kids (aged three and five) thunder into the room, I can't help but think we have some way to go. Los Angeles-based tech company PORTL Inc has promised that, in five years' time, we will all be able to beam life-sized, talking holograms of our colleagues into our homes; right now, I think an impenetrable forcefield around my desk would be more useful. "Technology is going to be key to how we work in the future," Maitra concedes. "But it's going to be an enabler - it's not going to be an answer."

It is too early to know exactly what Covid-19 will do to office-based work (you can't "WFH" - work from home - on a factory line, or as a surgeon, obviously). But many businesses are predicting that whatever happens next - even if there is a vaccine - this moment could represent the end of the nine-to-five as we know it, and in particular the end of vast corporate offices with banks of identikit desks.

According to a recent study by Morgan Stanley, only 34% of UK workers who could go back to the office have actually done so, and many businesses have publicly stated that they will extend the option to WFH indefinitely. Facebook has said that 50% of its jobs will be remote within 10 years; Twitter is letting almost all its global workforce WFH forever, if they like; global law firm Slater and Gordon has given up its London office; fund manager Schroders says staff can continue to work flexibly for an indefinite period, as have investment bank JP Morgan and legal firm Linklaters. Work that would previously have been considered impossible to do remotely moved online within a matter of weeks of the UK going into lockdown.

But this doesn't mean all business districts are going to remain ghost towns. Organisations can't just tear up their leases, and many are wary of going completely remote. They want to keep a space to bring teams together, if only occasionally. How to do this safely, without encasing everyone in Perspex or turning office blocks into hundreds of self-contained pods is the critical question. (Multimillionaire Xu Weiping plans to release prototype cube offices this autumn, as he redevelops part of London's Royal Albert Dock.)

Darren Comber is chief executive of Scott Brownrigg, an international design practice specialising in the built environment, which not only shifted to remote working at the beginning of the pandemic, but also shifted the focus of its 300 staff to looking at ways of minimising contagion.

"One of the biggest things that has to happen is access to fresh air," he says. "At the moment, only 10% of the air, typically, in an air-conditioned building is fresh, and 90% is recirculating. We're going to see that flip around completely, because people want cleaner, healthier environments, and are less tolerant of somebody getting a cold at one end of an air-conditioned space, and then everyone getting it. That technology already exists. It's more expensive, but what's the human cost? Your staff will simply say, 'I'm not going to go in.'"

Instead, Comber is looking at the introduction of hydroxyl radicals into indoor air. "These occur naturally outside, and are one reason your chances of catching something outdoors are less. UV lighting is making a massive difference, too." He is keen on giving buildings, including offices, health badges, "in the same way that you have a hygiene rating system for restaurants".

Other tech solutions include contactless facial recognition to gain access to a building; voice-activated doors, windows and blinds; app-controlled vending machines; and smart wearables that detect signs of illness, or alert you whenever someone strays into your personal space. (Raising the question of how much personal data we might be prepared to hand over to our bosses, just to get back to the daily grind.)

"We have all just been through the biggest work-life experiment in decades," says Emma Morley, office designer and founder of trifle\* creative, who has worked with companies including online stationers moo.com, Coco de Mer and Soho House. Despite having had to radically alter her latest project, a 40,000 sq ft, 500-person, 25-meeting room office building, she is excited about what this year might offer. (Social distancing means that, where there would have been six desks, there is now only room for two, with wider corridors, and far more circulation space.)

“Rather than feeling hindered, let’s turn that around and say we’ve got the greatest opportunity to create a workspace design revolution. We can say to people: what do workspaces really need to be? Because if we don’t need all those desks, happy days. Desks take up 70-80% of space - and if we’ve all got a desk or table at home that we can work on, then when we go into the office it’s about collaboration, socialisation and sharing ideas. I’ve been talking about this for 15 years - about the importance of having different types of space to work, about not filling spaces with desks, because desks are not the best places to come up with ideas. And, now, all of a sudden, it’s here.”



Photograph: Lol Keegan/The Guardian

Morley has chosen a hybrid setup for her own team, which she plans to phase in this month, as long as it seems safe to do so. “We will be together two days a week, and three days a week from home,” she says. “As humans, we need to be together. Collaboration does not happen very easily over Zoom.”

Even before the pandemic, the senior team at Awin, a global affiliate marketing agency with staff in 20 countries, was planning a major shift away from the office, having already experimented with remote working among its UK staff. When the crisis hit in early March, they were ready. “We didn’t want to take any risks - we shut everything down almost overnight,” says Adam Ross, COO, who was happy to take a breather after six years of constant travel between the UK and Berlin offices. “All 1,200 staff: one day they were in the offices and the next day they weren’t, and everything worked perfectly.”

After a virtual workshop in which the board planned for a fully remote 2023, they realised that most of what they wanted to achieve in three years could be done now. When the staff were surveyed and found to be in favour, the board decided not only to move to an entirely remote workforce, but also to a flexible four-day working week (with no salary reduction), which they hope to introduce early next year. “We realised everyone needed more time, whether for home schooling, or younger kids and the nightmare of that. Or if you don’t have family, you need time for you - so we gave everybody Friday afternoons off. It was incredibly well-received, and it didn’t reduce productivity. So we thought, ‘How can we go one better?’” In order to implement a four-day week, “we are looking at automation, easing some of that grunt work. We believe this is the way forward,” Ross says. They intend to shrink their offices, keeping some space for collaboration, but with few or no desks.

“We are going to actively discourage coming into the office every day,” Ross says. “We’re very conscious of the pitfalls that might come from having a hybrid situation, because you end up with a weird halfway house and nobody knows where they stand.” A 2019 study published in the academic journal *Organization Science* showed that remote employees have to do more than their in-house counterparts to get their achievements noticed, often making more personal sacrifices to do so. Although it’s too soon to have data on this, it seems likely that this will apply most to younger or newer remote employees.

“Our younger staff, when we surveyed them, did report that they loved [office] culture,” Ross says. “We had a vibrant atmosphere and a beautiful space. But [the results] were still overwhelmingly in favour of more flexibility, depending on the age group - older staff were less keen on coming in at all, and younger people wanted to come in one or two days a week.” An Awin taskforce is now researching a package to help people work wherever they choose, potentially also contributing to home broadband or utility bills. “If you give people trust, and you respect that they need a work-life balance, then they give it back to you in spades,” Ross explains.

At the award-winning architectural firm Selencky Parsons, most of the team are already - safely - back in their London office, with newly spaced-out desks all facing away from each other. “Most of our employees are young, and they don’t have massive homes to work in,” says co-founder David Parsons. The business managed lockdown by instituting virtual morning meetings and Friday beers (they got a local brewery to deliver to everyone’s home), along with Zoom quizzes.

“And that was fine for about 10 weeks, but what started to worry me was a lack of enthusiasm in the team.” He also worried that some staff were very lonely. Although there was plenty of work coming in, productivity seemed to drop. “It wasn’t that people weren’t working as hard. It was that they weren’t getting to the answers as quickly - not feeling like they could call and ask any question, at any time, as they would if they were physically next to us.”



Photograph: Lol Keegan/The Guardian

His concern was that his younger team members were missing out on both formal and informal incidental learning. “The amount you learn from just listening to other people’s conversations is huge. To be completely isolated from all that, I think, is a big problem,” he says.

This year’s abrupt shift to remote work has better suited more experienced workers, who are less in need of on-the-job training and career development, and who are more likely to live

somewhere with room for a desk. A woman in her early 30s who works for a large organisation (and asked to be anonymous) told me, “It’s quite a shock, as when all this started we were told to expect a phased return in September, and then maybe not till next year. But now it’s pretty much: ‘Expect this indefinitely, with the odd day in.’ I am still coming to terms with it. I’m single, so it really is just me, all day long. Working from home suits middle-class families who have enough space and a garden. I worry about my future and meeting new people organically.”

Another woman told me about a flatshare in which the living room had been repurposed as a bedroom, to lower the rent; as a consequence, four people were all working full-time in the kitchen. Untold numbers are perched at worktops, on their beds or, in the case of my friend Jo, an ironing board.

Remote work may be very hard for some (it is also tough on carers of all kinds), but in the longer run, the tilt away from five days in the office may mean more choice about where to live. If you’re only visiting the office once or twice a week, you can live farther from it, perhaps somewhere more affordable. If you rarely visit at all, you can, in theory, live almost anywhere. And, as Maitra points out, this could create a more diverse workforce: “The most far-reaching effect is going to be [organisations saying]: ‘You can live anywhere you want to, but you could still come and work for me.’ People then don’t have to live in expensive city flats.”

Will workforces move away from cities in general, and from overpriced London and the south-east in particular? The book publisher Hachette recently surveyed its staff about which UK cities they would like to live in, and is now hunting for regional hub offices in Edinburgh, Newcastle, Manchester, Sheffield and Bristol to match the results. The pandemic has opened up a home-buying rush in the countryside: inquiries from city dwellers across the UK who want to move to a village are up 125%, according to Rightmove - and one reason is the disappearance of the commute.

Some of the downsides to remote working will take longer to reveal themselves. While people working from home may currently appear highly productive, pre-Covid research by Cardiff University, carried out in 2017, showed that they are also prone to longer hours, and struggle to set boundaries between work and home life. Even before the pandemic, remote workers reported comparatively high stress levels, according to a 2017 UN report (41% of remote workers compared with 25% of office workers).

For every Awin, which has 70 volunteers working in five taskforces (known as Wherever/Whenever; Office Redesign; Four-Day Week; Change in Mindset and Culture; Ease Workloads), there is another organisation whose employees feel abandoned. “My company has decided to go fully remote and I am despairing about it,” says Paul, an IT developer. “I used to be notorious for how fast I worked, but it was because I’d give myself incentives - lunch with a colleague, or getting out on time for a drink. Now I mostly feel like I’m wading through treacle.”

Some employees are working at an unsustainable speed because they don’t want to be forced back into an office, or because they are afraid they will lose their jobs. Juliet, who works in exhibitions, tells me: “Everybody is up for the chop. I’m trying to be as indispensable as I can. I find myself logging on at all times. The boundary between on and off is very blurred. We’re all vying to show how productive we are.” Laura, a manager who works in the energy industry, also struggles with virtual presenteeism. “Leading a team, I feel pressure to be available and online through extended hours. I need to believe it’s OK to close the laptop and switch off.” Lucy, who works in marketing and has small children, tells me she is at breaking point: “Every

moment is interrupted or interruptible. My husband and I both work every weekday evening to keep up, despite not having a commute to eat into our time. There are no real breaks.”

This autumn marks a critical moment in our work culture: could it be the tipping point where office work changes unrecognisably, and for the better? Or will less enlightened organisations see it as a chance to lower their overheads, encouraging staff to work remotely and then failing to support or nurture them? For now, a hybrid model, blending the best of both worlds, looks the best bet. If you eliminate the office completely, Emma Morley argues, you eliminate “the culture and community that a business creates, and the opportunities for human beings to thrive and grow”. Whatever they choose to do, employers need to embrace the fact that this has been a year of unimaginably rapid change for their staff. Getting work wrong could lead to an epidemic of burnout. But getting it right could have huge dividends, for everyone.

*All employee names have been changed.*

. Solo: How To Work Alone (And Not Lose Your Mind), by Rebecca Seal, is published by Profile Books on 17 September at £14.99. To order a copy for £13.04, go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).

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