

The future of work is flexible, says new study

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New research from the University of Kent and the University of Birmingham has found that mass homeworking during the COVID-19 lockdown has presented significant challenges for parents, particularly

mothers, but has also changed the way that many people intend to work in the future.

[The Working from Home during COVID-19 Lockdown Project](#), led by Dr. Heejung Chung of Kent's School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, and Dr. Holly Birkett and Dr. Sarah Forbes of Birmingham Business School, has highlighted a steep rise in the number of employees working flexibly with 86% of those surveyed working from home at some point during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The research indicates that attitudes to flexible working are changing as a result of lockdown. Most respondents noted they would prefer to work more flexibly in the future (including 52% of all [parents](#) and 66% of non-parents), after benefitting from a better work-life balance, increased productivity and improved wellbeing during lockdown. Parents predominantly wanted more flexibility and to reduce their working hours with 64% of fathers and 59% of mothers saying they would like to reduce their hours to spend more time with family.

Managers and organizations have also improved their support for homeworking during lockdown. 90% of those who worked from home during lockdown said their manager was supportive of the arrangement and 72.7% noted that their manager really cares about the effect that work demands have on their personal and family life. Employers have also improved the tools and support available to homeworkers during lockdown with 41% noting they had appropriate tools for homeworking pre-lockdown rising to 62% during lockdown.

The research also highlights some negative experiences of home working during lockdown, with two thirds of employees struggling to cope with the blurred boundaries between work and home. Many respondents (26% of the sample) particularly non-parents (41% of non-parents vs 21% of parents), missed interaction with colleagues. Lockdown has also

had a disproportionately [negative impact](#) on parents, especially mothers, with a majority noting that they have been carrying out more housework and care, as well as educating their children during the lockdown period. As a result, 48% of mothers in the survey said they had felt rushed or pressed more than half the time during lockdown. Many parents have had to cut down their [working hours](#) during lockdown by as much as 22%. Only 50% of mothers and 58% of fathers said they could secure a stable block of time in which to work during lockdown. However, more positively 36% of all respondents did report being more productive while working from home during lockdown.

The research does also find that fathers have become more involved in childcare and unpaid work at home during lockdown particularly those who took more than the two weeks statutory paternity leave when their child was born or adopted. This suggests that parents might have established new patterns of gendered care and [unpaid work](#) in the home during lockdown, which could potentially influence behaviors and wider cultural norms around care and housework in the future.

Dr. Chung said: "Many employees would have found themselves working from home for the first time during the COVID-19 lockdown, or at least in very different circumstances to what they are used to. Our research has brought to light the variety of experiences had, both positive and negative. We have seen a reduction in negative perception towards those working flexibly, and this is certainly a step in the right direction. However, it is clear that parents in particular need more support during school and childcare closures. There are signs that the increased workload and conflict between work and family has negatively impacted parents' mental wellbeing, especially mothers. We need a thorough gendered analysis on the economic impact of the lockdown and more resources and policies are needed to support parents especially mothers' labor market attachments."

Dr. Birkett said: "Large scale working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown has the potential to significantly impact the future of work in the UK and across the globe. Many employees and employers have had their first taste of home working and our research shows that both groups have seen the advantages of more flexible working. Our research also shows that employers have improved their systems and support for flexible working during [lockdown](#) and following this [home](#) working experience the majority of employees see flexible working as a way to improve their work-life balance in the future."

More information: Working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown: Changing preferences and the future of work.
drive.google.com/file/d/1Ooyxk...Ld14fVI8HI7xRGe/view

Provided by University of Birmingham

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