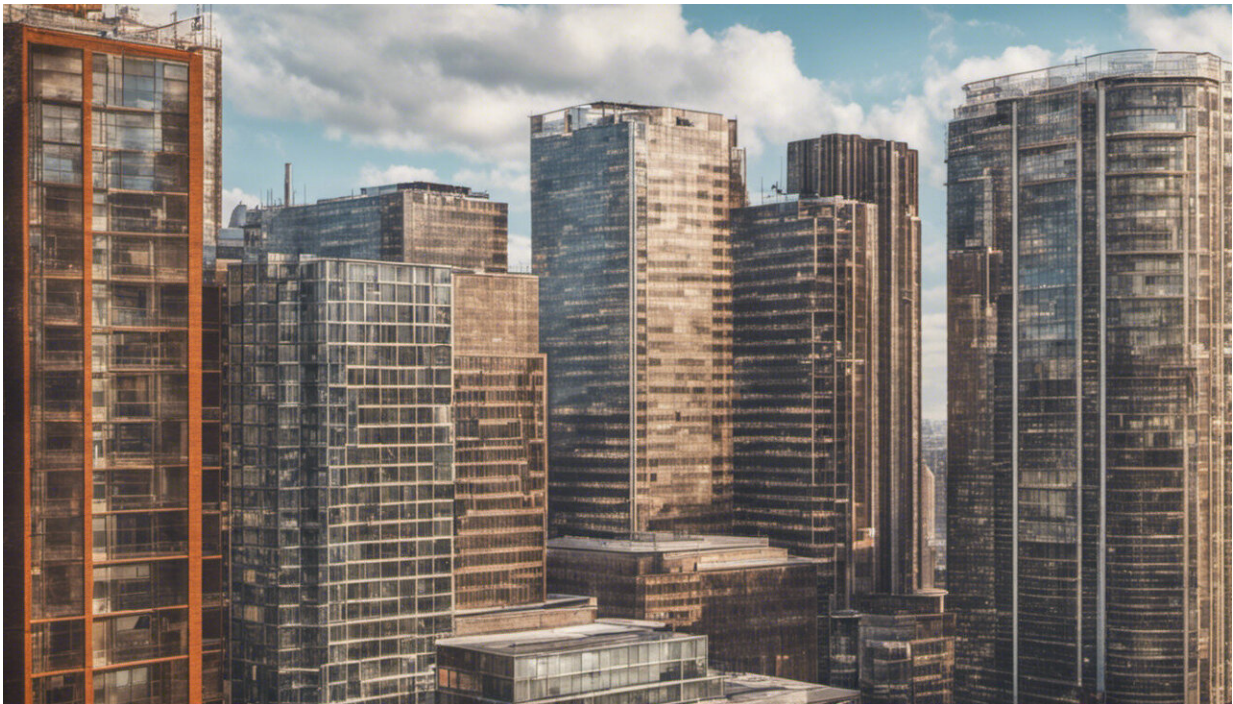


# Remote working is here to stay – but that doesn't mean the end of offices or city centres

September 2 2020, by Jane Parry

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When coronavirus lockdowns were introduced, the shift to remote working was sudden and sweeping. Now the British government is hoping the return to the office [will be just as swift](#) – to help the economy "get back to normal". But pushing everyone back to the office full time fails to recognise the many benefits that working from home has

brought. It also fails to capitalise on this moment of change.

The mass homeworking experiment in the middle of a pandemic presented some of the most challenging circumstances possible. Yet, coming out the other side of it, there's likely to be considerable resistance to simply readopting old ways of working. This is already evident at the start of a new research project I'm leading at Southampton Business School into the effects of COVID-19 on the workplace, called [Work After Lockdown](#), with partners the Institute for Employment Studies and work consultancy Half the Sky.

Coronavirus lockdowns accelerated the shift to flexible working in a way that had previously seemed impossible. They also provide hard evidence of how work can be done differently—and successfully. Most crucially, they have provided vivid illustration of this to resistant managers, who were previously [the key block](#) to flexible working.

By mid-lockdown in April, the [Office for National Statistics estimated](#) that nearly half of people in employment were working from home in some way. These were predominantly white-collar office workers. Considering that, prior to the pandemic, less than 30% of people had ever worked from home, this marks a significant shift.

Some organisations were much better prepared for this switch than others. Those who had already mobilised the necessary remote-working technology adapted more easily, as often did [multinational companies](#) already used to managing virtual teams with diverse needs.

But lockdown was nevertheless a shock for most employees. Few were ready to start performing all of their work from home, let alone manage this under far from ideal circumstances—such as children to care for and educate, or shielding relatives to support, not to mention health concerns to manage. Unsurprisingly, this was often a struggle. What has been

more unexpected in our research so far was how quickly people adapted, often finding more efficient ways of organising their time.

So far there seems to be little evidence of a drop in productivity. This is very difficult to measure due to the economic effects of the pandemic. [The OECD](#) think tank pointed to an initial drop, followed by reports of an upsurge in productivity, and argued strongly that the wellbeing of remote workers is central to sustaining productivity gains. This is a key message for employers—that well-managed working from home that is chosen and not forced upon people will make work more efficient and productive.

## **Rethinking the office**

All this is prompting employers to think about how their work spaces can be used differently and more effectively. Offices could be a space for convening and group thinking, while homes become the site of undisturbed, productive work.

In fact, there are already creative discussions going on in organisations about how they can ensure that they benefit from the disruption caused by the pandemic. As one manager at a large legal firm said: "We have a completely blank sheet of paper."

Banks including JP Morgan and technology companies such as Google are just some of the organisations that have welcomed working from home as part of their business models. Three-quarters of the 43 large companies surveyed by [The Times](#) spoke of moving towards flexible working more permanently.

Alongside the radical thinking that employers are doing, is a shift in how employees feel about their work. [Recent analysis](#) of attitudes around homeworking at Cardiff and Southampton universities reveals that 88%

of those who worked at home during lockdown want to continue doing so in some respect.

In our own research, benefits are emerging around family wellbeing and better use of time, with knock-on effects as workers become more conscious and proactive about their physical health. Many people we've spoken to feel that the adversity of lockdown gave them insight and understanding into the lives of their colleagues, and the length of lockdown gave them the time to work out better ways of organising their work tasks remotely.

Of course, lockdown experiences have been diverse. Employers told us they became more aware of staff who found enforced working from [home](#) to be a lonely or more challenging time, including those living alone or in small or cramped living conditions, as well as those with more outside responsibilities, such as caring commitments, whose intensity was heightened by [lockdown](#). This improved awareness of workforce diversity might yet have more positive consequences for future management.

Much of the recent government narrative has been one of calamity about what deserted offices will do to cities and jobs. But only a few companies are suggesting abandoning their offices completely. Quite the reverse, they could become more pleasant spaces in which we still socialise and buy coffee.

As we rethink the office, this provides an opportunity to consider what we want our cities to look like—and how they might become more inclusive, safer and greener spaces. Crucially, we can do this while making them spaces where work is organised more efficiently. This could be a once in a generation moment to make these positive changes.

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