



Work Location: Beyond the Pandemic in 2021



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Zoom calls, home-schooling and PE with Joe Wicks – all hallmarks of daily life since the SARS-CoV-2 virus swept its way around the globe. With a shift towards long-term working from home we wanted to know how things had changed since those early days of the Coronavirus pandemic, what employers could reasonably do to help their employees and, crucially, what employees themselves could do to adapt to sustained periods of working from home.

"The first few months were pretty horrendous. I remember being locked in the toilet, co-leading a Zoom call with 2,500 participants from around the globe. The kids were going mental outside and I was just doing everything I could to balance my laptop on my knee and not drop my phone down the loo at the same time. It's got much better since then." Of the 24 people that we interviewed throughout January this wasn't an uncommon scenario – trying to figure out how to do work, look after children and create just enough space for oneself to not go crazy. We spoke to people from rural Ireland to urban Australia, CEOs to front-line salespeople, working parents to single twenty-somethings.

This is what we found:

What was right for March 2020 isn't right for March 2021 and beyond.

At the start of the pandemic some employers were quick to shift to full-time working from home, others waited until government restrictions forced their hand. Regardless, most employers and employees believed (or hoped) that this was a temporary 6-week solution. It didn't really matter if the solutions they put in place weren't perfect as they were good enough to get by until the end of April 2020. In January 2021, and with the probability of working from home extending well into the end of this year, the solutions that were in place in March 2020 may require a fundamental overhaul. And we're not talking about a quick update of the existing work from home policy – a fundamental shift in the employment relationship is happening and organisations need to catch up.



On balance, most people are positive about working from home.

With almost a year's worth of experience under their belt our participants were unanimously agreed on one thing: working from home is fundamentally different to working from home during a national lockdown. When there are no children to school and when you can get out of the house, almost all of our participants believed that working from home was a positive experience. With more flexibility to devote to other aspects of their lives, and significantly only a 2-minute commute to the office, most of our participants are looking forward to this being a permanent move. Even those that are vying to get back to the traditional office still want to have the option to work from home two or three days a week.

Dedicated space is vital

Working at your kitchen table? That might work for a short period of time, and regardless of whether you live on your own, flat-share or have a busy family household it's clear that working from the kitchen isn't ideal. Try selling that concept into the marketplace – a co-working, co-living, co-cooking, co-entertaining space. Feels like a recipe for disaster. That's certainly what our participants told us.

Working from your bedroom? We found that whilst it might be common (especially for our twenty-something flat sharers) it's not conducive to creating an ideal environment to live in. Cabin fever soon sets it.



Working from a dedicated space in your house? Somewhere that you can lock the door and put up the 'Do Not Disturb' sign? We believe that you're onto a winner. Replicating your 'proper' desk also seems to be a good strategy - we even spoke to people that literally set up their desks in the same way as their office desk, right down to where they store the post-it notes. A dedicated space that helps you get into 'work-mode' is a key success factor when working from home.

Organisations need to set clear boundaries

Suffering from Zoom-itis? Fallen into a Team-induced stupor? You're not alone. Our participants reported a distinct lack of video-call etiquette with back-to-back calls a regular occurrence. It's not good for productivity, efficiency or team cohesion. Not to mention the impact on physical health – our skeleton isn't designed to sit all day and our eyes protest when we stare at an electronic screen 36 inches from our face.

We also uncovered a distinct reluctance to turn off, metaphorically and literally. Our participants revealed an increased pressure to respond and a sense of guilt if they didn't. "They know I'm available – where else would I be anyway?" shared one senior manager. This also raises questions about managing for presenteeism instead of contribution. That's one lingering 20th century approach to management that's unlikely to survive this pandemic-induced work revolution.



Relationships and contact are essential, yet hard to replicate

"I speak to my manager once a week on a Wednesday. Other than that every bit of communication is through my screen. Don't get me wrong, I have everything I need to do my work. It's the real-life, human interaction that I miss." This scenario was recognised early on as people shifted from water-cooler conversations to Zoom-pub quizzes. The problem however is that 'organised fun' doesn't quite cut it, even for the most gregarious and upbeat members of the team.

Not being able to have a casual chat with colleagues appears to be a missing link in the system. We're not quite sure what the answers are. We do believe that organisations have an important role to play in working these out with their people. even if that's just giving them space and permission to have those all-important virtual corridor conversations.

Individuals can choose to adapt....or not

Personality plays a significant part in our findings. At the outset most of our participants reluctantly accepted that working from home was for the greater good. It was to be endured rather than embraced. Fast forward into the pandemic and most of the people we spoke with had readily adapted and were enjoying the experience. We've identified a series of key personality characteristics and competencies that suggest some people will be more suited to working from home.

So does that mean that the others just won't be able to cut it? We don't think so, but they are likely to need a little more guidance on how best to adapt. It's like most things in life that involve change – you can choose to embrace it or choose to resist it, but it won't stop the change from happening.

Our Next Step

Our interview series has given us an invaluable glimpse into the complexities of working from home long term and we know that we've only just scratched the surface. In February 2021 we're launching our dedicated global survey to really dig deeper. How can the impact of working from home be measured, what can an organisation do to really maximise productivity from a digitally remote workforce, how am I as an individual suited to working from home and crucially what can I do about it? These are just some of the questions that we're looking to answer through our work.

Want to get involved? Contact us to to be included in the next step of our work.

We hope you can join us. Your insight will make a difference.

About aermid

We are a start-up consultancy helping people to find balance in life and work.

We're small with big ideas and the experience to match.

Come follow us - be part of our journey.

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