

Working from home

Is Working from Home really the Future of Work?

Article 4

COVID has made working from home the new normal for many professionals, administrators and clerks in the Illawarra. Whilst we are unsure of what normal looks like, many employees and employers are willing to accept the situation as a necessary part of continuing employment. But if working from home becomes the new normal then organisations will need to adjust to new leadership and management paradigms and the challenge of developing corporate culture with minimal shared experiences. Solutions will need to be found for health and safety management and responsibility, as well as recognition of the operating costs transferred from employer to employee.

Working from Home; the employee's dream! Roll out of bed (or don't), grab the laptop, log into the company VPN and you're at work. No need for power dressing, forget the commute, no arguments about the setting for the air-con and no need to share the kitchen with flatulent Phil from Accounts. It sounds too good to be true, but for many it is just that.

After the initial COVID-19 lockdowns in mid-March 2020, many workers have yet to return to the office full time – or at all. Employees who set up temporary workstations in the kitchen or on the dining room table have now migrated to the spare bedroom or carved out a permanent working space in a corner of the quietest room available. Hastily developed IT processes have been refined to provide the same functionality as workers enjoyed in the office, delivered through the just-completed NBN.

It seems we are in for the long haul, but is working from home really the Future of Work? There are certainly advantages for individuals and the broad community. Sixty-seven percent of people are expecting to work from home more than ever before. Working hours are flexible, commuting time is down, personal time is up, traffic congestion is reduced and (personally distanced) seats are available on public transport.

However, there are also disadvantages and many issues that need to be resolved if working from home is to become the accepted and equitable option as the Future of Work.

Firstly, not many homes are designed with a home office: those living in a three-bedroom house (which is the majority of us in the Illawarra) with two kids will be looking at setting up a temporary working area each day – their office might be a kitchen benchtop.

Secondly, sharing that working area with other family members and the distractions that they bring: argumentative children; needy partners; and attention-seeking pets that just want to photo-bomb the Zoom conference with your new client, or your boss.

Next, not everyone has reliable, high-speed internet (17% of Wollongong residents did not, according to the 2016 Census) and this is a significant barrier to working from home and communicating with others via video technology.

Living alone and working alone can lead to isolation, social disconnection and a decline in mental and physical wellbeing. Who is responsible for the wellbeing of those who are working from home? Where does the duty of care end for an employer with a workforce that is entirely remote? Are these workers even

considered to be employees, or do they become part of the 'gig economy'?

Whilst a return to 'normal' is expected at some future date, many employees and employers are willing to accept the situation as a necessary part of continuing employment. But if working from home becomes the new normal then health, safety and reimbursement of operating costs for a home office will need to be addressed.

Employee wellbeing is an issue that will require management, but the remote workforce will also require a new paradigm in leadership style and the development of corporate culture. Managers will no longer have daily face-to-face contact with their direct reports; no kitchen or water-cooler discussions and it gets harder to catch Zoe from Marketing surfing the net when she should be following up with clients. Leaders of a remote workforce will be more skilled in communication, able to manage employees to deliver outcomes, lead diverse and dispersed teams across multiple projects and be consummate problem-solvers. Technology will be a key enabler of their success, as we discuss in a later article.

are professionals or administrators who can potentially work from home; this is a significant number of local residents who could find that being an employee at home is their Future of Work. Fair Work Commission president Iain Ross has recognised the significance and magnitude of the change in working behaviour, "it is likely the direct economic and social impacts of COVID will be felt for some time to come".

Fair Work has released a draft plan to change Awards and include more flexibility in working hours, start/finish times, leave and days worked within the enterprise as, "There will (likely) be a continuing need for flexible work arrangements..."

Whilst a welcome step forward, these changes are in draft and do not cover issues such as the costs of operating from a home office on behalf of one's employer.

Is working from home the Future of Work? There are benefits, disadvantages and many issues to be resolved if that is to be the case.

Beyond the welfare issue of social isolation and loneliness, organisations will need to adjust to

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Iain Ross - Fair Work Commission

Then there is the question of how the employee is recompensed for using part of their home to carry out the business of their employer? If working from home becomes the accepted norm, organisations have no need for large head office infrastructure and can significantly reduce operating costs by downsizing and transferring those costs to the employee. Costs of home office, air conditioning, printing, phones, internet all add up for the employee, and would once have been borne by the employer. These expenses must now be claimed by employees via working from home tax deductions, with the ATO providing different options to claim.

Though significantly affected by COVID-restrictions, the Illawarra had over 26,000 workers who were daily commuters to Sydney or Western Sydney. Over 60% of these workers

new leadership and management paradigms and the challenge of developing corporate culture with minimal shared experiences, especially for new employees. Solutions will need to be found for health and safety management and responsibility as well as recognition of the operating costs transferred from employer to employee.

In our next article...

Who decides where we work?

