

Covid-19 and Working from Home

Over half of workers (57.2%) living in London did some work from home in April 2020 according to a study by the ONS-Labour Market Survey. That's a staggering 2.2 million workers. Most (91.6%) cited Covid-19 as the main reason. What are the implications for health & safety and collectivism?

Remote working has existed for years, but its extent has been limited. Only 5.1% of the UK workforce were working from home in 2019 according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Most of those working from home (WFH) pre-Covid-19 were in professional, technical, senior administrative or managerial roles, so the wholesale home-working of office workers since March 2020 is unprecedented. Accordingly, millions have now experienced extended home-working for the first time. ONS indicates that in April 2020 46.6% of employees did some work at home, 86% as a result of Covid-19.

Declining Covid-19 infection in summer 2020 prompted government to urge a return to work with a specific instruction for civil servants. When infection rates soared, these attempts were aborted and potential industrial conflict involving PCS avoided. In the present context of infection levels returning to, if not exceeding, those of spring 2020, little prospect exists of a return to (highly risky) workplaces. In sum, workers in unprecedented numbers have been working from home for several months and will be doing so for at least several more.

In the early months of Covid-19, the urgent task for trade unions was to ensure workers' evacuation of hazard-

ous workplaces. The priorities have now changed. Understanding workers' experiences of WFH have become crucial for unions, as the locus has shifted from offices to workers' homes. Under these conditions, what are the issues of concern for workers? What priorities should inform bargaining agendas as unions strive to represent members' interests in negotiations with employers? How might unions sustain worker collectivism when members are now atomised? In what ways can unions protect workers from hazards when WFH that may jeopardise their physical and mental health?

A survey of 708 WFH call centre workers in April-June provides valuable indicative evidence. Workers reported mixed experiences. The most frequently reported - by 75% - positive was not having to commute, which removed the inconvenience of travel and, equally, saved costs. Second in importance was the profound relief of no longer being exposed to Covid-19 in potentially high-risk working environments. Around one-in-three favoured WFH because of the fewer distractions and one-in-three also experienced improved work-life balance. One-in-six reported improved mental health.

Conversely, 75% missed social or work interaction with colleagues and resulting in feelings of loneliness. A quarter complained they were not receiving sufficient support from team leaders or managers. Many reported ergonomic problems at inappropriate workstations, such as this woman working in financial services:

'I don't have a proper workspace. Pregnant sitting on the couch with my laptop on a



dinner tray for 10 hours a day is extremely uncomfortable and causing great stress on my back'.

Others reported that WFH had been accompanied by increased work volumes and little adjustment to intense demands. The outcome of combined pressures was mental ill-health, as reported by a sizable minority, perhaps exacerbated by spill-over from work into home life.

'Expectation to work beyond normal hours. Speed and quality expected to be the same. I've gone off work with stress now. Bombarded with Skype, What's App, emails, system issues.'

Workers also expressed dissatisfaction with having to shoulder the burden of telephony and equipment costs and, notably as winter approaches, the expense of utilities.

Employers' legal duties are essentially the same for homeworkers as for employees in a workplace.

Homeworkers under a contract are covered by Section 2 of HSWA, while those under different arrangements are covered by section 3(1). For example, the display screen equipment (DSE) regulations equally apply. The HSE Covid-related link 'Protect home workers effectively' confirms that employers 'have the same health and safety responsibilities for home workers as for any other workers'. The challenge for unions is to ensure that employers do comply with their legal responsibilities for their locally-dispersed workers. Unions must develop innovative means to involve members and respond to their concerns. Effective representation depends partly on knowledge of their WFH experiences.

Completing this survey can help provide the hard evidence. <https://phil.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/working-from-home-wfh-your-experiences>
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