

Zoom, Zoom, Zoom – No slowdown in the pace of life under lockdown

Initial findings from Working@Home



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We are now at the end of May. The UK has been under lockdown or partial lockdown for nine weeks. Facebook and Twitter have announced that they will make a permanent move to Home Based Working for up to half of their staff. This announcement has been mirrored by other companies in the UK. Is this really a good idea? We have interviewed a range of people from across the UK about homebased working under lockdown. This is what we have found so far.

Domestic Space - People have coped well so far, but for many it is in the knowledge that this is for the short term. People are sitting in bedrooms or corners of living rooms and competing for broadband with children and partners. Others have returned to their family home and are living and working in their childhood bedroom, renegotiating relationships with parents.

There has been good support from most organisation in terms of supply of IT equipment and sometimes office furniture, but for those that have only been provided with a laptop and no access to keyboards and screens or appropriate desks and chairs we are seeing reports of physical discomfort. Home office set ups that worked for a few weeks are beginning to show signs of strain.

Work Intensification – electronic presenteeism has been mentioned by several participants-need to be seen to be online and to be logging on all the time to respond to things that would previously been carried forward to the next working days. There is significant and possibly unprecedented seepage between work and nonwork time and space. Meetings are taking up so much time that *actual work* is seen to be something that has to be pushed back, often undertaken in evenings and weekends. Not only is there no physical boundary between work and domestic space but there is no virtual boundary either with conferencing software being used for both work and socialising.

It is no wonder that people are seeking solace in quiet time with family and friends (which is in itself becoming more of a challenge over time) and a positive appreciation for the quiet streets and the outside world. Several participants mentioned that they are missing their commute as an opportunity to take their time to transition into work and to relax, read and prepare.

Zoom fatigue. Zoom fatigue is definitely setting-in with participants mentioning that ‘meetings’ have to be arranged when previously they would have popped round to someone’s desk. What was previously a relaxing five-minute chat and gossip is now a half hour zoom meeting (or not at all). Moreover, the excess use of conferencing platforms during the day can lead to a reluctance to socialise using them in the evening and weekend. The need to proactively attend virtual drinks meet up, mediated by the same equipment people have been tied to all day is exhausting.

People had a lot of Zoom meet ups at the start of lockdown but it was all becoming too much leaving people with an increasing sense of social isolation. The need to rely entirely on verbal cues rather than a mix of nonverbal cues was becoming exhausting, adding to the exhaustion of visibility and presenteeism. People are reporting increased fatigue overall, despite some companies introducing 'Zoom free' hours and similar forms of respite.

Wellbeing – Organisations have been broadly proactive in terms of employee wellbeing with provision for mental health support, good line management and rest days. Participants have been really positive about physical health, many taking up running and engaging in online classes. No one felt physical health was worse although a couple felt they were drinking more from being based at home the whole time.

However, organisational support was again reliant and embedded in conferencing software and as a consequence, a reluctance to engage in mental health sessions and exercise sessions is starting to emerge. Many report that they are struggling to engage with leisure activities such as reading and falling into 'bad habits', for example, watching too much TV. To start they were putting life on hold and getting through it but now they are struggling to adjust to the idea of a new normal where watching Netflix every day isn't really what people want in the longer term.

Younger participants felt frustrated at missing out on socialising and optimising their 'youth'.

The future – The media over the last week has been discussing how this rapid adoption of new technology means that working from home will be the new normal. Our data so far does not entirely support this being in employees' best interests. There was a universal perspective that working from home *at the start* was a positive experience. However, people are genuinely concerned about it becoming long term or even permanent. Whilst everyone felt the positive impact of spending more time with family and with neighbours and felt more engaged with their local community, no one wanted to become a full-time homeworker.

Participants said that the optimum would be 1-3 days at home and the rest in the office. Whilst some missed the journey to work, there was an appreciation of the lack of commute both in terms of time and money. However, all age groups clearly missed the face to face company of colleagues and friends. Organisations need to avoid reacting and think about the longer term impact and possible isolation for home workers.

Some people had reevaluated their lives and wanted to put a greater emphasis on family and travel in the future but were sceptical as to whether this will actually occur. This opportunity for change (or not) is very much the one of the focuses of the project and we will be tracking participants over the next year or so to see how they are faring and how their lives are panning out.

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