

# Organisational support for the work-life balance of home-based workers\*

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The shift to working from home following the lockdown necessitated by COVID19 has been sudden and significant. Many of the tasks and activities that have traditionally been positioned as 'impossible' to conduct online were rapidly and effectively enabled via zoom calls, cloud computing or facilitated by other forms of technology. What has been referred to by some commentators as a 'mass experiment' in working from home (Gratton & Stern, 2020) has resuscitated, with renewed intensity, debates about working from home and work-life balance, including 'family-friendly' flexibility, greater productivity and well-being (including extensive media coverage of studies such as Bloom et al., 2015). At the time of writing, UK employees have been advised to continue to work from home wherever possible for the foreseeable future and debates about home-based working continue apace. What has often been absent from such debates are the practical steps employers can do to support their employees, including in terms of the provision of equipment and IT support.

The working from home ‘experiment’ was rapidly hailed as a success by popular media (e.g. Hern, 2020). High profile businesses such as Twitter and Facebook have enthusiastically embraced home-based working for their staff and initial research has indicated that many employees want to remain working from home at least some of the time (Bartik et al, 2020; Chung et al., 2020). What we might now think of as ‘traditional’ (pre-COVID) working from home has been widely considered to offer a potential for greater flexibility (Felstead et al., 2002; Sullivan & Smithson, 2007) for many who may have found themselves more constrained by long commutes, extended office hours and imposed routines. Writers have long argued that properly implemented home-based working can enable employees to achieve improved work–life balance by facilitating the optimisation of both work and family responsibilities, also providing more time for family and leisure (Crosbie & Moore, 2004; Powell & Craig, 2015). Work-life balance and home-based working therefore remain at the heart of debates around the potential for improvements in employee wellbeing and productivity.

However, in hailing the working from home ‘experiment’ a success, there has been a lack of thought about the highly varied and variable circumstances and experiences of home-based workers. Not everyone has the luxury of a spare room, or even a desk, that can be dedicated to home-based working, or are engaged in work tasks that can be conducted expediently via technology (or indeed have unproblematic access to this technology). There have been significant gender differences in the experience of home-based working, particularly with additional pressures on childcare throughout the school closures (ONS, 2020). In the homework and telework literature pre-dating COVID, such heterogeneity in experiences has led to contradictory findings (Bailey & Kurland, 2002, Sullivan, 2012). While working from home can have a positive outcome for both employees and organisations by enhancing work-life balance, well-being and productivity, it is important to recognise that home-based working can also present vulnerabilities,

including overwork and social isolation (Cooper & Kurland, 2002; O'Neil et al., 2009). In the heightened context of COVID19 lockdowns, this has also manifested in increased rates of divorce and domestic violence (Ford, 2020; Grierson, 2020). Clearly, the relationship between home-based working and work-life balance is not a simple one (Moore, 2006; Sullivan, 2012).

Organisational support for home-based working is likely to be a significant factor in its success (Lewis et al., 2007). Gálvez et al. (2011) identified three key factors in organisational support for work-life balance for teleworkers: a widely available telework programme; technological infrastructure; and line managers who support those teleworking. Support is also important in limiting any negative organisational factors such as poor career opportunities, fragmented teams and professional isolation (Sullivan, 2012). However, a remote relationship with the organisation can also create challenges. The sense of control implicit in notions of flexibility may itself be illusory: policies and practices can obscure persistent rules, prohibitions and other means of control derived from organisational norms and expectations and home-based working has been identified as having the potential for work intensification (Bathini & Kandathil, 2019).

When troops of workers are suddenly, and with little warning, working from home in the midst of a global pandemic we are in a unique position to try to further understand the relationship between home-based working and work-life balance as well as the impact of organisational support on the success of homeworking. What can the recent national lockdown, which forced over 40% of the UK workforce into home-based working, teach us?

### **Surveying locked down home-based workers**

This article draws upon data collected during the lockdown period in the UK as part of an ongoing, longitudinal study of home-based working under COVID19 measures, funded by the UKRI/ESRC. Seventy-nine semi-structured interviews and a survey of 1338 respondents were collected to

understand home-based working experiences in depth. Both research instruments focused on work life balance, well-being, performance, financial security and organisational support. The aim of the project is to better understand the expectations that organisations have placed on workers, as well as the robustness of support systems that have been put in place in order to help plan for the future.

The survey and invitation to interview were promoted via UK-wide advertisements utilising local newspapers, social media and social networks. The majority of survey respondents were women (83.2%), median age group 46-55, with median household income £41-60K. Interview participants represent a more balanced gender profile with 66% female and 34% male participants.

The current article focuses on work-life balance. The survey adopted questions from Weper et al. (2015), as the focus is on work and 'non-work' life (as opposed to a more specific focus on 'family' or 'private life'). It is, therefore, more inclusive in terms of lifestyles, as the distinction between work and 'non-work' is broad enough to include time spent among work, responsibilities (caring, domestic work, etc.) and leisure (either with family/friends or on one's own, i.e. 'me time'). The survey also explored whether organisational support (questions adopted from Day et al. 2012), homeworking space (shared or not; dedicated room to work or not), gender or parenthood (considering the group age of children and those without children) account for potential differences in the experience of work-life balance.

### ***The impact of the home environment on the experience of work***

The survey data shows that the home-based workers' work-life balance under the COVID19 pandemic measures has been under strain. Four out of 10 survey respondents reported concerns with the boundary between work and life. Some key findings are:

- parents of young children (up to 10 years old) report the poorest levels of work-life balance;

- surprisingly no significant differences are found between males and females in terms of work-life balance;
- home crowdedness (estimated as the number of people per room) is not associated with reported work-life balance;
- responsibility for a greater proportion of domestic work between adults in the household is associated with lower work-life balance.

In terms of the last of these findings, the gendered nature of domestic work appears to be a factor. 52% of women and only 16% of men suggest that they undertake a greater proportion of domestic work. The women who contribute a greater proportion of domestic work have lower work-life balance than both men and women who contribute equally and women who contribute a lower proportion of domestic work.

The interviews support the survey findings. For example, participants frequently discussed the problems associated with having young children at home.

... it has been ok and then I have found this week he [10 year old son] has been a little bit, he has been a little bit disruptive. [...] And you know there have been things where there has been a bit of a challenge and you have to take time out and deal with that and you feel frustrated with the child for taking you away from work. But you think well you know they are used to having someone supervising them for six hours a day aren't they.  
[Female, employed in adult social care].

Moreover, the interviews also supported the finding that having a dedicated space to work is more important than the extent of crowding within the home, as the quote below suggests.

I mean in terms of where we work, I am set up downstairs in the living room, we've got a little study that my wife tends to use with the computer, in there, my daughter has her bedroom that she works in, she's got an iPad, my son has his iPad, he's also got a laptop, and he either works, he can work in his bedroom, or he sometimes prefers to work in the kitchen, it just depends really, but you know, it's not easy [laughter] they're very much- I'm sure like every family, it's peaks and troughs in terms of people's moods, in terms of people, and their levels of concentration, but you know, we've been okay. [Male, secondary school teacher].

The homeworking environment clearly plays a significant role in work-life balance with survey respondents who were afforded a dedicated room for work (53% of respondents), reporting statistically significant better work-life balance.

Similarly, those who share their homeworking space with family members or co-residents (33% of respondents) report statistically significant poorer work-life balance than those who do not share their space.

The survey findings, however, suggest that organisations can support the work life balance of their employees by:

- supporting *the homeworking environment* (e.g. providing essential devices, an ergonomically appropriate chair, proper desk, second monitor);
- providing *IT support* (file sharing, video conferencing, remote collaboration tools, professional software, etc.).

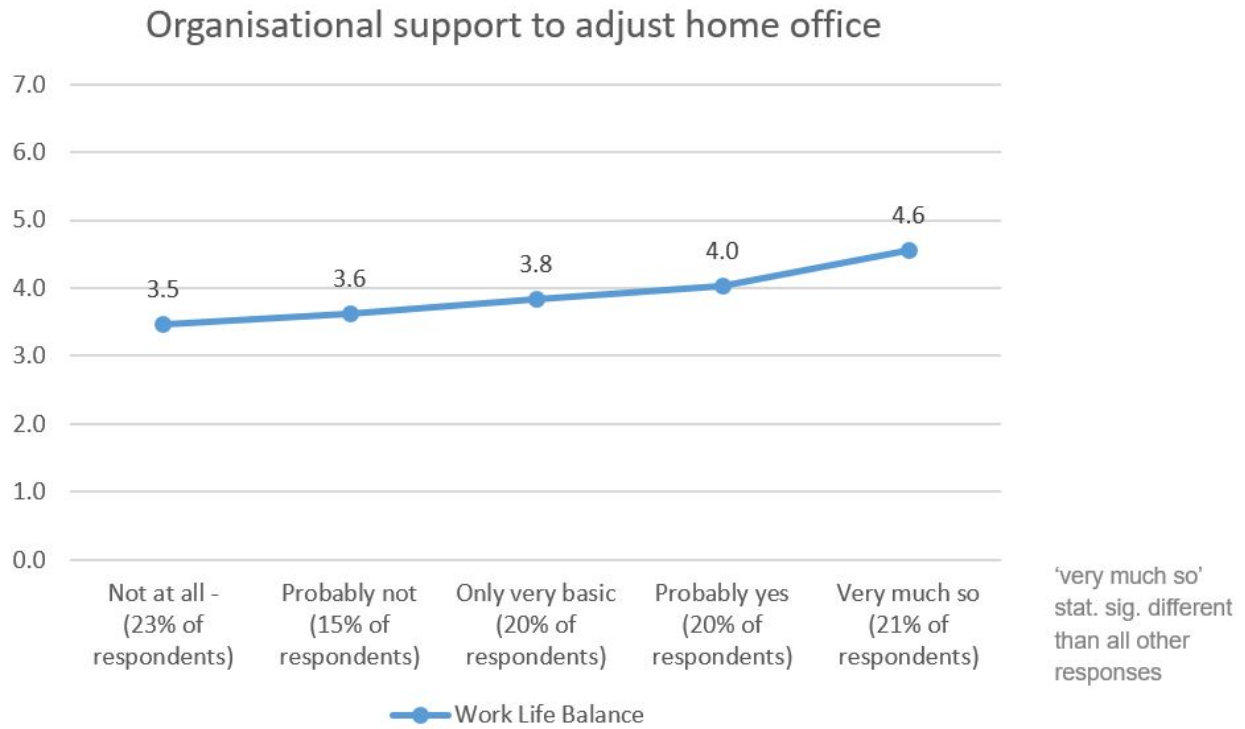


Figure 1: Organisational support to adjust home office

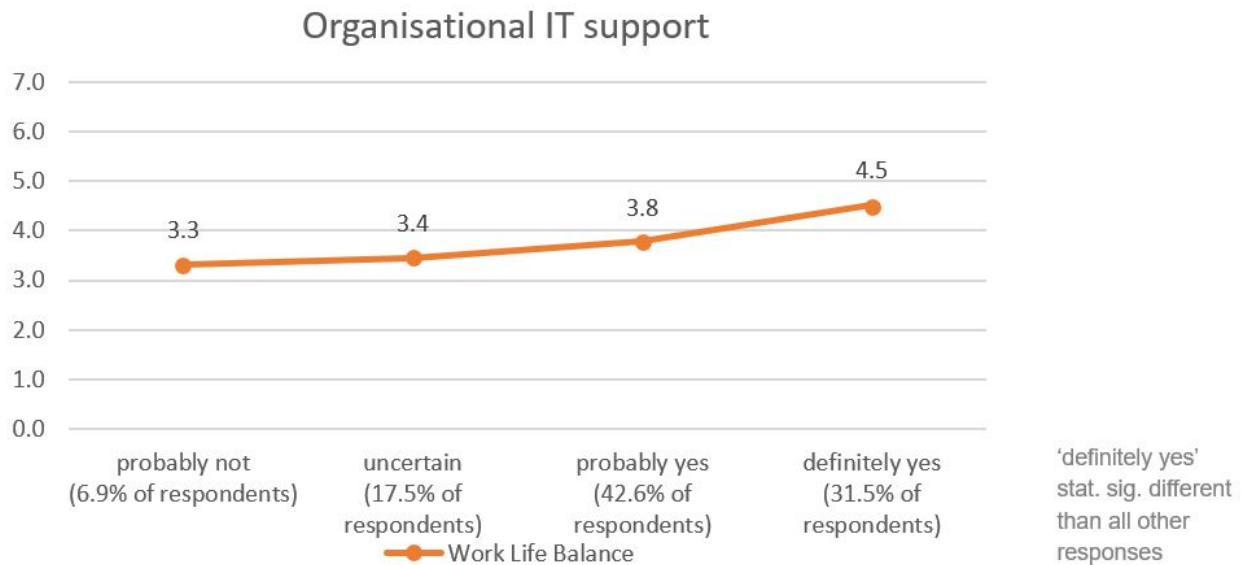


Figure 2: Organisational IT support

Repeatedly in the interviews, respondents confirmed this need for organisational support and how effective IT support is specifically key to effective homeworking success.

I've no concerns with the IT. So, there is a connection up and running so all happens very smoothly. IT support is all there. Offline or remote IT support have been brilliant. [...] One specific example, when I have an IT issue I can continue to be able to log on to our system and talk to a person or chat to a person that, I've no idea where the person works but this person provides remote or online support and the minute the person engages with you, interacts with you can I have access to your computer and to make the necessary adjustments that you have [...] And changes so, so I'm glad that they keep, the company kept these vital IT support functions. [Male, works for a hotel chain].

Interviewees also shared positive experiences of organisational support in terms of the provision of material goods to support homeworking:

Your headset may have broken, the microphone may have stopped working or whatever. So, rather than go out and order one from Amazon as it were, there's been a system of being able to log that via an HR form online, and then if you needed any additional kit to support any basic day to day activity or specific physical needs that you'd have, via the IT and HR system, you're able to log that. It's assessed and then the relevant kind of supporting equipment, whether that's an office chair, whether it's a new laptop, a new headset, whatever it might be, has then been made available for a collection at a certain time or delivery at a certain time to the specific individual need. Yeah, it's been very supportive all through. [Male, project manager for a city council].

So I think getting people comfortable required investment from the business to invest effectively in dispensing tables, chairs and creating home tech which again the business



did really well. It took a couple of weeks to get ready but they didn't really put up any barriers in terms of cost or, you know, risk of security. [Female, analytics for an online grocery business].

## Conclusions

While home-based working, and teleworking specifically, have in recent years become prominent in many industries, the measures taken in response to COVID19 have created unprecedented, sudden changes in the way many of us work. This has generated new pressures on employers and employees but also new opportunities to find approaches to balancing work and home-life. Some pressures involve factors that are difficult for organisations to manage. Whilst workers do not typically have their children at home, for women in particular, the balance for those with young school age children was clearly a significant challenge. Moreover, having a dedicated workspace substantially supports effective homeworking and again, it is women who are most likely to suffer from an absence of such spaces. In other areas, however, organisations can make a positive impact on the work-life balance of their employees.

The initial results of this study suggest that, in terms of work-life balance, home-based work is most effective when there are budgetary allowances and resources in place to enable employees to quickly and simply adjust their homeworking environment and best utilise IT tools. The salience of appropriate IT tools is often mentioned in the press, governmental guidance and business practice (e.g. the Scottish government COVID-19 guidance for homeworking checklist explicitly refers to IT equipment and infrastructure). However, the significance of tangible goods such as desks, monitors, chairs or of an ergonomic workstation set up when working from home has attracted much less attention. There was perhaps, initially, an assumption that working from home

would involve only temporary arrangements. For many workers this has proven not to be the case and home-based working has become a long-term, ongoing reality for the majority of those able to conduct their employment in this way (BBC, 2020).

Material support for home-based working is essential and has the potential to positively contribute to the experience of working at home. Bringing the work laptop home is not in itself as effective in promoting work-life balance as is sometimes implicitly assumed. Staff have an improved experience of home-based working when their employer demonstrates their support by providing employees, quickly and without difficulty with the necessary resources to enable them to adjust their working environment.

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