

## Homeworking experiences during lockdown

Like millions of others, call centre workers were required to work from home at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this blog, Professor Debra Howcroft and Professor Phil Taylor examine the experiences of call centre staff and provide recommendations for improvement in the future.

- Managerial staff often directly and indirectly control call centre workers and the expectations on workers remained the same despite the challenges of working from home.
- Workers missed in-person interaction with colleagues and found it difficult to achieve an appropriate work-life balance when faced with childcare responsibilities and inflexible work patterns.
- Some workers benefited from working from home and employers should aim provide safe, flexible options for all employees in the future.

In March 2020, evacuating the workplace became a key policy instrument to curtail the spread of COVID-19. [This saw an unprecedented move towards homeworking](#) as the UK government recommended that anyone who could work from home, should do so. While the en masse relocation of white-collar work was initially viewed as an emergency response to restore operational capacity, this is now looking like a potential watershed moment. Experiences differ based on sector, employer and role, and this article looks specifically at call centre workers.

### Teleworking of old

The assumption that digitalisation will transform work organisation has long been debated. When teleworking was [introduced in the mid-1970s](#), it led to romanticised visions of a technology-inspired future, with Alvin Toffler's prediction that the 'electronic cottage' would shift 50-80% of jobs back to the home. This perspective assumes that if technical capability exists, adoption is inevitable, regardless of wider political, economic, organisational, locational and spatial contexts. However, take up has been slow and this is [largely attributed to a lack of trust-based working arrangements](#) with teleworking seen as a perk for the already privileged cadre of managers and professionals. In 2019, [just over 5% of the total UK workforce mainly worked from home](#).

### Lockdown for call centre agents

Prior to the pandemic, call centre workers were predominantly office-based, which is reflective of their labour market position as predominantly lower-skilled, white-collar workers with limited autonomy. A [2020 survey conducted by one of the authors](#) asked call centre workers about their experiences of relocating from the office to the home took place during the first two months of lockdown (March-April 2020). The findings show that when speed of transfer to the home was critical, connectivity problems (23.2%) and the lack of IT equipment (20.1%) caused delays, leaving workers consigned to offices which were deemed no longer safe.

Further hold-ups related to management action or inaction were reported, with one respondent explaining that senior management had expressed concerns that productivity would fall. Such delays had health-related consequences, with two-thirds of the workforce in one office having to contend with self-isolation. Almost 16% reported that managers had neglected to protect employees from risk in the office.

In contrast with previous ranks of homeworkers, these largely lower-grade workers face various forms of direct and indirect control from managers, some of which are embedded in digital systems. Control is partly dependent on a range of performance metrics, with more than half (52.1%)

reporting that the same targets that operated in the call centre also applied at home. If homeworking implies an absence of visible surveillance, the evidence suggests concerted managerial efforts to overcome it through micro-management. This represents a particularly harsh form of management, given the demands of domestic responsibilities, home-schooling, and make-shift working arrangements. A significant number of workers (28%) stated that targets were either too rigid or unachievable and that they should be revised or even removed.

Control extended to monitoring by team leaders, which is perceived as the outcome of a pervasive lack of trust on behalf of managers – 41.3% of homeworking respondents commented that monitoring occurred to the same degree as in the workplace. Embedded forms of digital control operate, generating real-time performance data, prompting intervention by team leaders via the use of email, message alerts or telephone contact. Issues regarding visibility are featured in numerous testimonies, particularly concerning the use of recorded video-based digital platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype. A recurring theme was that of feeling infantilised as some are required to email their manager when returning from using the bathroom.

Workers expressed strongly held views that there should be flexibility in relation to shifts, breaks and schedules, even though two-thirds (67.8%) were subject to the same temporal patterns of work. Overall, employers were unwilling to make adjustments during such stressful times.

### **Flexibility to support home life and mental wellbeing**

Concerns around the deterioration in mental wellbeing during lockdowns are [well-documented](#). In the case of call centre agents, one in two reported missing social interaction with colleagues. This went beyond workplace humour and banter, extending to the erosion of peer collectivism which had functioned as a support mechanism to counter management control or ease workload. Social media helped slightly but was unable to compensate for the loss of immediacy and interdependent work activity.

When asked to comment on the most negative aspects of homeworking, problems of distraction or interruptions and the negative consequence for work-life balance were frequently reported. Workers highlighted the tension between management expectations that they would complete their usual shift 'no matter what', with some being asked to make up their hours in the evenings and weekends. These tensions are amplified by the demands faced by single parents.

The teleworking literature rarely addresses health and safety issues, but the recent haste experienced by the transfer of many meant that the third most commonly reported negative aspect of homeworking related to the unsuitability of their 'workstation'. Problems arose from ergonomic deficiencies, compounded by the neglect of workstation risk assessments. Aside from physical discomfort, homeworking also increases financial costs, with examples of workers having to buy their own equipment and pay for additional utilities.

### **Improving homeworking equity**

For some, including call centre agents, homeworking has brought benefits as well as drawbacks, particularly for those with lengthy commutes. As the reconfiguration of the loci of work continues to unfold, a range of options should be made available to all, extending possibilities beyond the privileged few. These need to broaden the binary of home or office and allow flexible combinations of home and office working to support employees' domestic circumstances and preferences. This could include a greater understanding of the need for reduced and/or flexible hours, the removal of

added stressors associated with performance metrics, and genuine efforts made to support mental wellbeing.

While data protection law places significant limits on employer monitoring of staff, [too few employees are aware of their rights and many feel unable to challenge the use of surveillance](#). Tougher regulation, along with trade union consultation and agreement, is required to prevent employers' excessive use of electronic monitoring and digital surveillance, both in the office and when working at home.

The risks associated with using display screen equipment must be [adequately assessed](#). For those who are homeworking 'temporarily' there is deemed to be no increased risk, which obviates the requirement on the part of employers to carry out home workstation assessments. Regulatory guidelines recommend that employers provide workers with basic advice on completing their own assessment, which contains suggestions such as 'avoiding eye fatigue by changing focus or blinking from time to time'. This is clearly inadequate. An overhaul of health and safety policy is required to address the needs of increasing numbers of homeworkers.

*This article was originally published in [On Digital Inequalities](#), a collection of thought leadership pieces on how to address the inequalities we are seeing in the digital space, published by [Policy@Manchester](#).*

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