

The Future of Remote Work

Simon Bond, Director, Bond Legal Limited

Working from home ('WFH') and remote working remains a contentious issue, that divides politicians as well as employers and employees. The Labour government's plans to make hybrid working a mandatory option for employees unless the employer can prove it is unreasonable, have been criticised by opponents. The Daily Mail called the plans a '*WFH charter for idlers*', whilst the Times referred to employees '*shirking from home*'.

A number of organisations and prominent business leaders have also pushed back against home and hybrid working. WWP and JP Morgan, have recently announced plans to end hybrid working, whilst Lloyds Banking Group plan to link senior bonuses to office attendance. Meanwhile Lord Rose, the former boss of M&S, has accused WFH as creating a generation unaccustomed to '*proper work*'. Rose argued that WFH was bad for productivity, personal development and mental health, stating that WFH was responsible for a decline in the nation's working practices.

However a number of surveys indicate that work-life balance is an increasingly important issue for employees and is, for many, a greater motivator than pay. One study found that a third of 25 to 34 year olds would quit if they were forced back to the office. WWP's plans for a mandatory 4-day week in the office prompted a petition against the move, which garnered 8,000 signatures. In addition, towards the end of last year, staff at the Metropolitan police voted against a proposal to return to the office for 60% to 100% of their working time.

Those campaigning for the rights of working mothers argue that flexibility at work reduces the '*motherhood penalty*', and makes it easier for women to juggle work and childcare.

Sadly, it seems that issues around WFH and hybrid working have created divisions between workers and management, as well as along lines of politics, age and gender. Lord Rose, who is 75, may well be right that he benefitted from working in an office environment, but many of the younger generation, who have grown up with social media and online communities, may feel much more comfortable with remote working arrangements.

There are undoubtedly both advantages and disadvantages to WFH, and the feasibility and impact of remote working (whether positive or negative) will depend upon the nature of the work, industry sector, organisational culture, managerial skill and the personality of the employees who WFH. Much of the debate around WFH has failed to recognise these factors and has, unfortunately, become something of a binary culture war.

The tensions involving remote working are most keenly felt by HR professionals who have to address flexible working requests and any managerial resistance to WFH, whilst managing the risks to the business involved in encouraging or discouraging remote working. Particular challenges include the following:

- maintaining a positive workplace culture with a remote workforce;
- the risk that declining flexible working requests from particular groups (such as mothers returning from maternity leave) may amount to indirect discrimination;
- managing any resistance from employees to return to work policies;
- talent retention and finding suitable candidates for future roles, dependent upon the corporate approach to WFH;
- ensuring that junior employees have the opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues whilst working remotely;
- addressing different generational attitudes towards WFH;
- discouraging presenteeism where a return to the office is mandated;
- training senior staff to ensure that those who WFH are adequately managed and that productivity is maintained;
- adopting strategies to ensure that those working remotely do not feel isolated and that their mental wellbeing is maintained; and
- establishing adequate internal communication systems.

After 20+ years as a Solicitor in private practice specialising in employment law, disciplinaries, redundancies, advising on employees and disputes for SME businesses and PLCs, Simon Bond now runs a private consultancy specialising in tribunals and independent investigations. For more information on protecting your organisation with Employment Law and HR Consultancy expertise, visit Bond Legal at <https://www.bondlegal.co.uk/>.

