



NUI Galway  
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# Remote Working

Opportunities, Challenges  
and Policy Implications

The Western Development Commission  
& Whitaker Institute NUI Galway  
**Report of the Expert Group on Remote Working**



Whitaker  
Institute

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# Foreword



**Tomás Ó Síocháin**

Chief Executive Officer  
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**Alan Ahearne**

Director  
Whitaker Institute, NUI Galway

In late 2019, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Western Development Commission, building on ongoing work in this area over many years, met with the Whitaker Institute, NUI Galway to discuss remote working. The discussion was prompted by three trends: improving technology, the transition to a low carbon economy and an increase in the demand for, and incidence of, remote working. It was decided to establish a working group: The WDC Whitaker Institute Expert Group on Remote Working.

In 2020, a global pandemic changed the world of work, and much else besides, in a manner, and at a speed that is barely believable. As set out in this report, the key impact of the pandemic has been a change in mindset; shifting the focus on the discussion to work remotely from ‘why?’ to ‘how’. The core issues: challenges and opportunities for the individual, for organisations and for policymakers, remain largely unchanged.

To address these issues, a group from the private and public sector, representing large and small organisations and drawing on policy, organisational and academic knowledge, met and drew up a list of consultees to help to inform our work. We want to thank the members of the group: Professor Alma McCarthy, Mark Gantly, Emma Kerins, Brian O’Donoghue and Deirdre Frost. They were hugely generous with their time and we greatly appreciate their commitment to the project from the outset.

*“There is currently a huge focus on remote work. We would urge policy makers to consider and draw on the recommendations in this report to help inform their work.”*

To the consultees, and those that engaged with the group, some of whom are named, and others who wish to remain unnamed, we are very grateful for your time and consideration of the many issues discussed over the last ten months. The group met with private and public sector representatives, employer and employee representatives and drew on the knowledge and experience of organisations large and small. In particular, we want to thank those who agreed to be included as case studies, their stories will help greatly in informing the experience of others.

The publication of this report is timely. There is currently a huge focus on remote work. We would urge policy makers to consider and draw on the recommendations in this report to help inform their work. More broadly, remote working offers significant benefits to the individual and to society. It can improve the work and personal lives of both rural and urban dwellers and offer new opportunities to both employers and employees. However, it is important to note that each organisation must make a conscious decision to support remote working. It requires senior leaders to embrace and lead it in each organisation. If they do, it can be transformative, sustainable, and to the benefit of all in the long run.

**Tomás Ó Síocháin**

CEO, Western Development Commission  
and Chair of the WDC Whitaker Institute  
Expert Group on Remote Working.

**Alan Ahearne**

Director, Whitaker Institute  
NUI Galway

December 2020



# Executive Summary

Remote working has been a feature of employment practice for some years and in 2019 the Western Development Commission (WDC) partnered with the Whitaker Institute NUI Galway to examine the issue. Following the emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020 remote working as a policy response to the pandemic led to it becoming a widespread practice. This has provided an opportunity to identify issues, challenges and opportunities associated with remote working which may be applied in a post pandemic environment.

## Recommendations

The report draws on the employee and employer experiences of remote working and identifies actions and recommendations at an organisational and governmental level, which if implemented, will support those who wish to remote work following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recommendations are set out and ordered below as they apply to organisations and Government. These are examined in detail throughout the report. Organisations refers to all those employers, be they large multinationals, public sector employers through to micro enterprises. The recommendations directed at government refer to government in its broadest sense, its various departments, state agencies and authorities.



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## Executive Summary

### Organisations

Organisations should deliberately analyse their organisational culture in the context of remote working, examining what elements of the existing culture facilitate or inhibit remote working and where possible changes should be made to facilitate remote working.

Organisations who wish to operate a blended model should consider a 'remote-first' culture and approach if they intend to have remote working as a significant feature of how they operate.

Organisations who wish to have effective remote working as a key part of their operations need to ensure some senior leaders in the organisation are themselves remote working and act as good role models for remote working.

Organisations need a mind-set change in terms of how performance is evaluated if employees are working remotely. The use of task-based management is required. Employees can have more flexibility as to how and when they do their work – what is more important is *what* employees do and the quality of that work rather than *when* they do the work.

Organisations should examine productivity change due to remote working and take required action to enable increases to be sustained or address falls in productivity where they arise.

Managers and supervisors must be trained to ensure they adapt and alter their performance and productivity management practices to ensure they are effective for remote working.

Organisations need to ensure that employees who are working remotely have sufficient and impactful opportunities for both formal and informal engagement and social interaction with colleagues.

Organisations must consider how to ensure new employees and early-career recruits are provided with good online opportunities to build their networks and have collaboration opportunities that will enable career advancement.

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## **Executive Summary**

In the context of company taxation, the Authorities have temporarily disregarded changes to employees' location where it is COVID-19 linked. Normal rules will re-apply and employers will need to communicate this to their employees as various company tax and legal implications arise.

Employers and employees should capture the time and carbon savings of reduced commutes and agree to commit that time to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) goals.

### **Government**

In a post pandemic environment, employers and employees will need a supportive policy environment to enable those who wish to continue the practice of remote working. The wider potential economic and social benefits from remote working include improved productivity, greater labour market participation, reduced emissions and more balanced regional and rural development. These benefits are complementary policy objectives that can be realised with a proactive Government policy on remote working.

The National Broadband Plan needs to be delivered as soon as possible. In the interim, mobile coverage black spots need to be eliminated and where workers cannot avail of sufficient quality broadband at home, they should be supported in accessing high quality broadband speeds at hubs close to their home.

Wider financial supports are needed to provide appropriate equipment for those who are obliged to work from home during current and any future COVID-19 restrictions.

An awareness raising campaign is needed to promote health and safety guidance and user-friendly templates for supporting those who are working from home.

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## Executive Summary

There is a need for an awareness raising campaign about existing legislation on working time and rest periods and best practice on communication protocols in remote workplaces for the benefit of remote workers and their employers. Even where employees are working from home, the working time legislation continues to apply and employers should therefore ensure they remind employees that they are to take their breaks, rest and not work excessive hours.

Government should consider extending the right to request flexible working to all workers and not just those with caring duties. In the context of the Government's Remote Work strategy, the right to request remote work should be explored.


As part of a national strategy for remote working a review of current tax reliefs around e-Working and expenses should be undertaken, to ensure that tax reliefs defray the costs involved in remote working. A review of the e-Working allowance rate should be undertaken, considering both costs and savings for both employers and employees realised through the practice of remote working.

The take-up of available tax allowances to enable employees to remote work should be promoted especially in the context of the wider social and economic benefits such as lower emissions. It is also advisable to ensure the system is simple and flexible, allowing for ad-hoc and part-time home working. As part of its policy to promote remote work, and in the context of savings achieved, Government should pay the allowance to public and civil sector employees. The public sector should also consider office space implications.

Hubs provide a range of services for a range of clients with a soon to be rolled system of common accreditation for facilities, health and safety management and communication. There is a need to raise awareness of hubs, the services they offer and their role in providing an alternative remote work location.



# Introduction



In 2019, the Western Development Commission (WDC) and the Whitaker Institute at NUI Galway partnered to examine the issue of remote working. There was evidence of a growing interest in remote working among employees and employers alike. At the outset of this collaboration, remote working was an issue in particular sectors and areas, and was largely driven by talent retention, improving technology, the move to a low carbon economy and regional and rural development. These drivers have been overtaken by the current COVID-19 crisis which has brought the issue of remote working very much to the fore.

The WDC has a long history of both practicing and researching remote working. Remote working is often considered as particularly advantageous to rural and regional development, supporting employment located away or 'remote' from the office location. Various WDC reports<sup>1</sup> have examined the incidence and practice of remote working (variously called telework and e-Work), while the WDC formalised a policy of telework in 2003.

The Whitaker Institute at NUI Galway researches innovation and change. The Whitaker Institute, following its namesake, has adopted an innovative, multidisciplinary and transformative approach to its research on challenges facing business and society in Ireland and internationally and engages in a broad array of policy focused research.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://westerndevelopment.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WDC\\_Policy-Briefing-no-7.pdf](https://westerndevelopment.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WDC_Policy-Briefing-no-7.pdf)

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## Introduction

The WDC and Whitaker Institute, NUI Galway collaboration is supported by the Expert Group on Remote Work, (hereafter referred to as the group), comprised of people with expertise and active engagement in remote working and representing different sectors of the economy. In writing this report, the group has researched various aspects of remote working, undertaken two national surveys (on employee experiences of remote working), consulted widely and met with key stakeholders. Key remote working themes emerged regarding questions about what is working well, what is not working, and different experiences of remote working. These themes are documented throughout the report. In the context of remote working, globally the COVID-19 pandemic has generated new material and learnings on a scale never anticipated – many of which are documented in this report. A list of the members of the group is in Appendix 1. Details of the stakeholder consultations is in Appendix 2.

The overall objective of the collaboration and this report is to examine issues, challenges and opportunities in extending the practice of remote working, to highlight best practice and to identify proposals to inform public policy.

### Concepts and Terminology

There are a range of terms used to describe remote working. Some terms are historical, for example, the terms telework and e-Work were more common in the past but generally refer to remote working – the practice of using technology (telework) and electronic methods (e-Work) to work at a location separate to or remote from the office. Some organisations, for example the OECD, still use the term telework.

More recently, the term flexible working has been used and can refer to the range of employment practices both in terms of time (i.e., hours worked) and place (i.e., where the work is done). Other terms are also used, for example Ervia (company case study, page 34) use the term agile working.

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## **Introduction**

The work practices arising due to the COVID-19 pandemic and various Governments' guidance is most accurately described as working from home, though the term remote working has generally been used. Working from home can be considered a subset of remote working, in contrast to working from a shared space such as a hub or working while travelling. In our consultation with employers, most used the term remote and it seems to be the most widely used term. Therefore, in this report remote working will mean working from home and where working from hub or co-working space is intended, it will say so specifically.

### **Structure of the Report**

The report is composed of two parts: Part A – Chapters 1 to Chapter 4 examine remote working in Ireland and what is working, the employee experience and the organisational view. Part B, Chapter 5 examines the policy framework, identifying what changes are needed and what policy responses might help to support remote working, especially in a post pandemic context.

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Part A

## Chapter 1

# Remote Working in Ireland





# Remote Working in Ireland

A person with long hair is seen from behind, sitting at a desk and working on a laptop. The desk is positioned in front of a large, multi-paned window that offers a panoramic view of a harbor. In the harbor, there are several boats, including a large ship and a smaller boat. A car is parked on the promenade in the foreground. In the background, there are rolling hills or mountains under a cloudy sky. The overall atmosphere is calm and professional.

In this chapter we review the extent of remote work over four broad periods. First, there is a summary of developments in the 'Pre COVID-19' period. This is followed by a review of the impact of the Government guidance to work from home at the outset of the pandemic in March 2020, the 'emergency COVID-19' period.

The 'planned COVID-19' period began in late August 2020, where there was planned re-opening of education and childcare facilities, though still a recommendation to work from home where possible. Finally, we examine the outlook for the post pandemic period when Government restrictions will lift considerably.

## **Pre COVID-19**

Remote working is not just a COVID-19 policy response, though the scale of it is. The WDC has been observing trends in remote working over the last two decades. Remote working has been a growing phenomenon related to various technological developments, principally the personal computer (PC) and broadband (previously narrowband) enabling electronic data transfer. The late 1990's saw the first emergence of Government activity on remote working (then referred to as e-Work or telework). A series of actions were undertaken to promote e-Work (largely working from home).

In 1998 the National Advisory Council on Teleworking was established by Government. It was charged with the task of advising the Minister for Enterprise on telework and related employment opportunities.

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## Remote Working in Ireland

In the early 2000s, the e-Work Action Forum (including WDC representation), assumed the role of the National Advisory Council and produced the report, e-Working in Ireland: New Ways of Living and Working, while in 2003, the Department of Finance issued a circular on pilot schemes to promote e-Working in the Civil Service.

While remote working and working from home has been a feature of employment practices since the 1990s, the extent of it has been hidden and unclear and the data was limited. The practice has also varied with trends in the labour market; broadly the trends suggest that over the last two decades remote working is highest when the unemployment rate is low suggesting a tight labour market has been a driver<sup>2</sup>. Of course, there are other contributory factors such as long commutes and a congested transport network also associated with high levels of employment.

The period of the late 1990s and early 2000s was a period of very strong economic and employment growth. This was followed by economic recession in 2007/2008 and interest in remote working waned. Unemployment peaked in 2012 and since then there has been a slow and steady decline in unemployment and increased employment levels and renewed interest in remote working in the latter part of the decade.

The most recent national data pre COVID-19, in 2018, suggested that 18% of workers, worked from home on some basis. For those who indicated they sometimes worked from home, 35% reported that they worked from home 1 day per week, 13% reported they worked from home 2 days a week while 11% reported they worked from home 5 days per week<sup>3</sup>. These data indicated a significant level of working from home and the CSO has confirmed that this question will be included in the next Census.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://westerndevelopment.ie/insights/working-from-home-the-new-normal/>

<sup>3</sup> This was a Central Statistics Office (CSO) pilot survey as part of the consultation informing the selection of questions for Census 2021, now postponed to April 2022. [https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/census2021/Census\\_Pilot\\_Survey\\_Report\\_2018\\_V1.pdf](https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/census2021/Census_Pilot_Survey_Report_2018_V1.pdf)

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## Remote Working in Ireland

At the end of 2019, the Government published the Remote Working in Ireland Report which pre-dated the current COVID-19 crisis and was part of the Government's commitment to promote more flexible working generally.

### Emergency COVID-19

One of the most significant public health measures introduced as part of the COVID-19 response has been the Government direction to work from home where possible. Introduced in March 2020, this practice has continued to varying degrees as the Government restrictions have lifted and then been re-introduced.

The period from March 2020 to late August 2020 can, in the context of working from home, be termed the emergency COVID-19 period. Not only were people asked to work from home where at all possible, school and childcare facilities were closed, and many were juggling both working from home and home-schooling. It was also a situation introduced very rapidly as an emergency response to the pandemic crisis.

Data published by the CSO in May 2020<sup>4</sup> show that of the 47% of persons aged 15 years and over that indicated COVID-19 had an effect on their employment situation, a third (34%) started working from home, while 12% have increased their hours working from home. The age group 35-44 years is the age group who most used remote working because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Eastern & Midland region, at 39%, had the most people using remote working as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic (with the Southern and Northern & Western regions each around 30%). Over a fifth (22%) of the age group 35-44 years experienced difficulties in working from home with their family around, with difficulties declining as the age groups get older from the 35-44 age group.

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4 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/elec19/employmentandlifeeffectsofCovid-19/>

### The Enterprise Impact

From an enterprise perspective, the CSO found that almost three in every ten (29%) businesses had the majority of their workforce working remotely during the March – April 2020 period and this increased further to 30.5% at the end of April – May 2020. Working from home is more prevalent among larger enterprises, 38% of large enterprises had most of their workforce deployed remotely compared to 27.7% of SMEs<sup>5</sup>.

Office based enterprises had an average of 59% of staff working remotely in the week at the end of July 2020<sup>6</sup> compared to an average of 13.7% of staff working for non-office-based enterprises.

As the summer of 2020 progressed and the rate of COVID-19 infections declined, there was evidence of some staff returning to work. Responding enterprises had an average of 8.5% of staff return from remote working to their normal place of work in the four-week period to 26 July 2020 with little difference reported between office-based enterprises and non-office-based enterprises<sup>7</sup>.

### The Employee Perspective

The Whitaker Institute at NUI Galway and WDC undertook two national employee pulse surveys on remote working: Phase I in April 2020 and Phase II in October 2020<sup>8</sup>. The NUI Galway-WDC Remote Work survey Phase I aimed to capture the initial response of employees to the experience of working from home due to the Government guidelines. This showed that after the initial few weeks there was a very positive response to remote working as reported by employees who could do so. The survey found that 83% of respondents indicated that they would like to work remotely after the crisis is over. The most preferred option cited by 42% is to work remotely several times a week. The second survey, Phase II undertaken in October 2020 six months post-lockdown, illustrated an even greater interest in remote working in a post pandemic environment. The infographic below illustrates the findings from Phase I and Phase II.

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5 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/bic19/businessimpactofCovid-19survey20aprilto3may2020/>

6 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/bic19/businessimpactofCovid-19survey29juntoto26jul2020/>

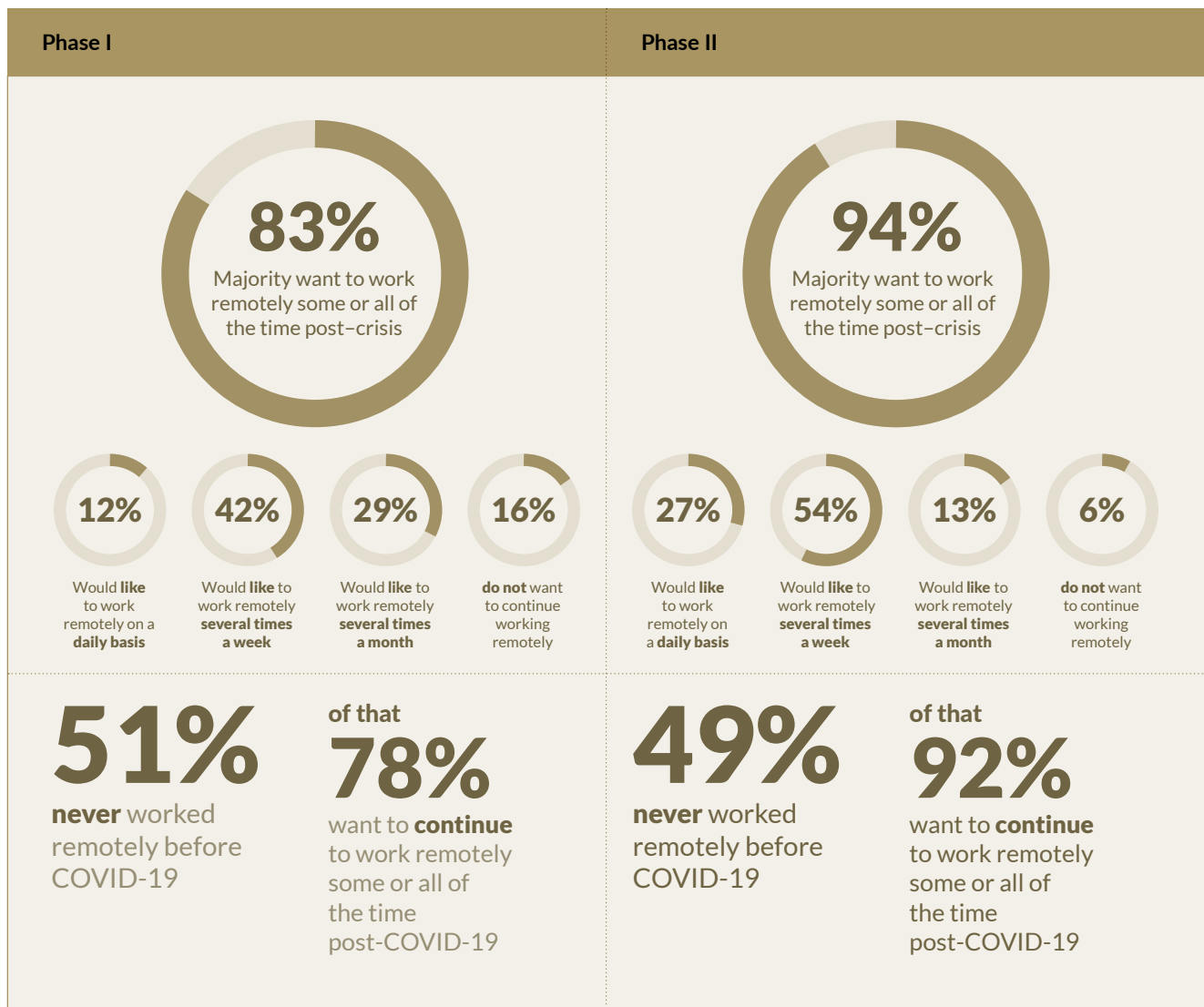
7 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/bic19/businessimpactofCovid-19survey29juntoto26jul2020/>

8 <http://whitakerinstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Remote-Working-National-Survey-Phase-II-Report-Oct-2020-Final.pdf>



## Remote Working in Ireland

### NUI Galway-WDC Remote Work Survey Results Phase I and II



However, the surveys also identified challenges which include:

- Not being able to switch off from work
- Harder to communicate and collaborate with colleagues and co-workers
- Poor physical workspace
- The challenge of juggling childcare with work commitments
- The need for the provision of better ergonomic equipment
- Under one-fifth (19%) identified internet connectivity as an issue.

### Planned COVID-19

The period termed 'planned COVID-19' has emerged since late August/September 2020, where childcare and education have re-opened, many for the first time since mid-March 2020. This has allowed a more 'normal' type of remote working (or working from home) for employees without the additional responsibilities of childcare. As the COVID-19 transmission rates reduced over the summer and the policy objective of re-opening schools was realised, there was also a return by some employees to the workplace subject to physical distancing and public health guidelines. Some companies have enabled employees to return to their offices on a staggered basis. However, the demand for working from home has continued. Some employers have reported limited interest for a return to the workplace and those wishing to return to the office often have work spaces at home that are not ideal.

### Post COVID-19

#### *Enterprises*

Based on data collected in the CSO Business Impact of COVID-19 survey published in August 2020, nearly a quarter (23.2%) of enterprise respondents plan to make remote working a permanent part of operations. More office-based enterprises (40.1%) plan to make remote working, in some form, a permanent fixture compared to 17.2% of non-

Table 1. Plans to make remote working permanent in some capacity. % of responding enterprises

Permanent remote working	Office based	Non-Office based	Total
Yes	40.1%	17.2%	23.2%
No	16.2%	37.8%	32.2%
Don't know	40.6%	25.6%	29.5%
Not applicable	3.1%	19.4%	15.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: CSO Business Impact of COVID-19 survey, September 2020

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## Remote Working in Ireland

office-based enterprises. On the other hand, almost a third (32.2%) of enterprises have no plans to make remote working a permanent fixture while 29.5% don't know<sup>9</sup>.

An Institute of Directors survey reports that 27% of respondents believe that in respect of Irish businesses, the primary legacy of COVID-19 will be changes to working practices, such as working from home. In relation to the respondent's primary organisation, 60% of respondents believe that the primary legacy to date of COVID-19 will be a change to working practices, such as working from home<sup>10</sup>.

### Outlook

In a post pandemic environment even with the roll-out of an effective vaccine, there will be a transition phase of return to the workplace and continued physical distancing measures. So, a return to the workplace in a manner that existed immediately pre-COVID-19 is very unlikely for some time, with some predicting that COVID-19 will have lasting impacts on how and where we work.

Whenever there is a 'new normal', it is likely that there will be much greater numbers working remotely. In the past, there was some evidence to suggest a relationship between economic growth, employment levels and the numbers working from home with a tight labour market linked to higher rates of working from home.

On the other hand it is likely that we will have a higher rate of unemployment than before the COVID-19 pandemic. As with the aftermath of the financial crisis (2008-2011), lower employment levels also lead to reduced congestion levels and commute times – both of which – congestion and long commute times have been key advantages of working from home cited by employees. The extent to which this relationship will prevail in the future is unclear.

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9 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/bic19/businessimpactofCovid-19survey27julto23aug2020/>

10 <https://www.iodireland.ie/resources-media/research-publications/research-reports/the-director-sentiment-monitor-q2-2020>

What is clear is that the 'enforced' working from home experience has created an interest in continuing the practice, from both employers and employees. The extent of remote working will depend on how suitable the work and role is and how effective the supports for employees working remotely will be.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a huge section of the workforce to engage in working from home, and in effect to trial it, albeit under rushed circumstances and on a full-time basis without choice. While unintended, this has provided a mechanism for much of the labour market to experiment working in a new way. For all those organisations and employees, the research findings outlined in the next few chapters aim to highlight best practice and inform them and their decisions on how to introduce remote working arrangements over the longer term.



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Part A

## Chapter 2

# Technology enabling Remote Working



A photograph of a person's hands typing on a laptop keyboard. A white coffee cup is on the desk to the right. The background is slightly blurred, showing a desk with some papers and a bag.

# Technology enabling Remote Working

## Technological change

Technological advances such as laptops, smart phones, next generation broadband, video conferencing and Wi-Fi, have been key factors in enabling remote working and extensive working from home under COVID-19. These technologies enabling remote working are, in the context of work organisation, potentially as radical, innovative and disruptive as the introduction of the assembly line in the early 20th century and the personal computer in the 1970s.

Before COVID-19, remote working was often seen as an occasional practice, often in the absence of a company remote working policy, at the discretion of the line manager and in the context of supporting work-life balance, reducing long work commutes and increasing staff retention. Following the COVID-19 restrictions, the realisation that much work, traditionally perceived as needing to be office based, can be completed at home and this can be done on a sustained, full-time basis, over a long period of time, is a considerable change.

Enabled by high speed broadband, some technologies have been very effective at supporting collaboration, productivity and employee engagement including the various video platforms Zoom, Cisco Webex and Microsoft Teams, many at limited or no cost.

The impact of technology is confirmed by the NUI Galway-WDC survey results where 60% did not experience a problem regarding tools and information required to work remotely. For the remaining 40% it was a

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## Technology enabling Remote Working

small problem. Similarly, getting tech support when working remotely was not a problem for most respondents, 62%, for 25% it was a small problem and for 10% it was a problem. Only 4% experienced getting tech support as a significant problem. In line with this, 87% agree or strongly agree that it is easy to use the technology required to work remotely<sup>11</sup>.

With widespread access, this technology enabling remote work, is also somewhat of a 'leveller'. The technology which is very accessible has created a more level playing field, enabling most office-based employees within companies, regardless of role or seniority to work remotely. As many are working this way, regardless of seniority, it has been described as more democratic and less hierarchical and more collaborative and inclusive. This is the case for many companies with office-based employees, regardless of size, sector or location.

### IT Infrastructure

Broadband infrastructure is a necessary requirement for remote working. As the technology has advanced over the decades (from basic broadband to next generation broadband) the demands required of the infrastructure similarly increased. It is only with high speed broadband that video conferencing has become pervasive and this has allowed the practice of meetings, a key aspect of working life, to take place online rather than face-to-face.

However next generation broadband is not universally available, and the National Broadband Plan (NBP) is set to deliver to 23% of the population (over 1.1 million people) over the lifetime of the plan, starting in 2020 with full roll-out to take up to 7 years.

The extent to which this deficit impacted on remote working was captured in the NUI Galway-WDC survey. In Phase II of the survey, internet connectivity was a significant problem for 6% and a problem for 9%.

This was borne out by the experience of employers we spoke to, for example for some Chambers Ireland members' staff broadband is still an issue.

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11 <https://westerndevelopment.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Remote-Working-National-Survey-Phase-II-Report-Oct-2020-Final.pdf>

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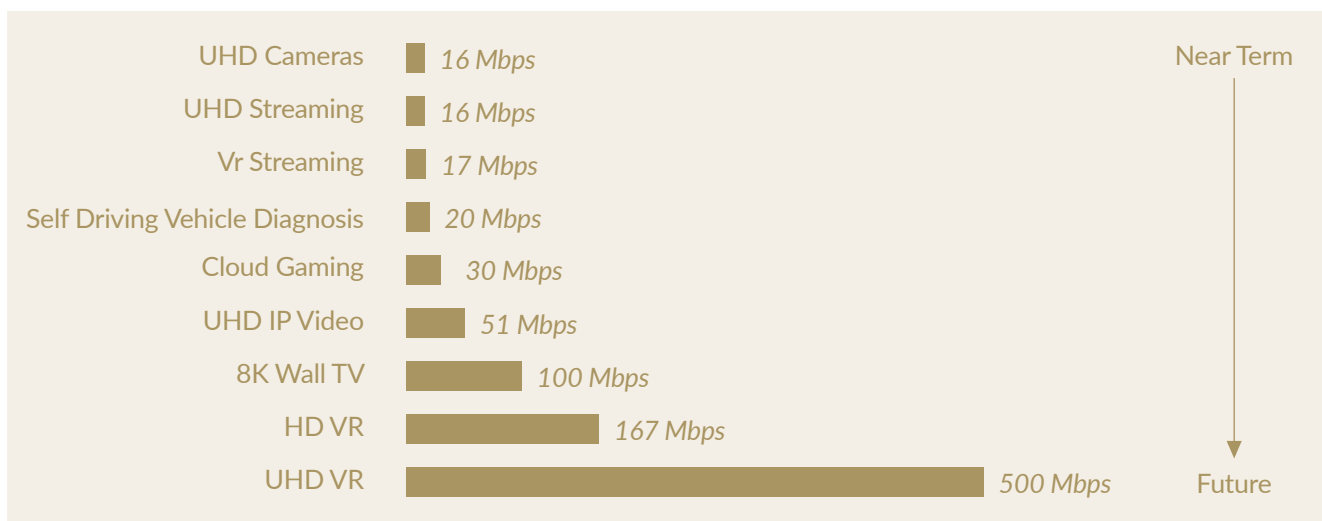
## Technology enabling Remote Working

Similarly, staff of larger multinationals, especially those living in more rural areas, had some difficulties with broadband. On the other hand, a large multinational did express the view that the experience of working from home under COVID-19 had dispelled the view that broadband is a barrier to working from home for the vast majority of employees.

Considering the long lead time in delivering the NBP, co-working hub spaces can be part of the solution. These are communal workspaces already established with high-speed broadband. Additionally, the Government is rolling out approximately 300 Broadband Connection Points (BCPs)<sup>12</sup> throughout the country, see Chapter 5.

The importance of improved broadband speeds is highlighted in the diagram below. As video continues to be an important technology to support effective remote working, there will be a transition from Standard Definition (SD), to High Definition (HD) and eventually to Ultra High Definition (UHD), which sees bandwidth requirements grow from 1-2Mbps per SD call, through to 2-4Mbps per HD call, and up to 18Mbps for an UHD call. According to Cisco, the average broadband speed in Western Europe will increase from 45.9 Mbps in 2018 to 110.4Mbps in 2023<sup>13</sup>.

**Figure 2. Bandwidth Requirements for Different Video Uses**



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<sup>12</sup> <https://nbi.ie/broadband-connection-points/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/solutions/executive-perspectives/annual-internet-report/air-highlights.html>



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## **Technology enabling Remote Working**

The importance of higher broadband speeds and the development in video quality goes beyond office-based work and will be critical to online service delivery of education and health care. The practice has been identified pre COVID-19 but is likely to become a more established form of service delivery into the future.

### **Other Technology Issues**

There are other connectivity issues which can impede remote working. For those living in the National Broadband Plan Intervention Area and not using hubs or BCPs (especially under COVID-19 restrictions), mobile coverage is another option to access broadband.

However, mobile coverage ‘black spots’ is an ongoing concern especially in some rural areas. This can also impact on connectivity in transit, with gaps in coverage along the road and rail network. The roll-out of 5G and continued availability of 4G and 3G as well as the eradication of any black spots will be needed to ensure that remote working will be available to all rural as well as urban dwellers and especially those awaiting roll-out of the NBP.

Another issue is the wide variations in mobile and broadband pricing plans and packages available. The remote worker and their company finance teams need to be aware of any data limits and extra costs that may be incurred should these data limits be exceeded.

### **Recommendation**

The National Broadband Plan needs to be delivered as soon as possible. In the interim, mobile coverage black spots need to be eliminated and where workers cannot avail of sufficient quality broadband at home, they should be supported in accessing high quality broadband speeds at hubs close to their home.

### **Data security**

Pre COVID-19, one of the concerns cited by a large public sector organisation, in response to requests for remote working, was data security. This is a very legitimate concern though it is clear the data security systems have proven effective during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is therefore important for employers to ensure that they have appropriate IT security arrangements and IT support teams in place to facilitate remote working for employees. Various concerns arise when workers are accessing company data from outside the network, and care needs to be given to keep data safe. Some organisations may deal with particularly data sensitive concerns requiring more robust and secure systems. However, the COVID-19 working from home experience has also illustrated that most businesses can and have conducted their business safely with their employees working from home. Overleaf are the Key Requirements for Successful Remote Working, identified by Cisco.

Technology solutions, both hardware such as broadband, and software such as video-conferencing, have enabled an entire office-based workforce nationally and internationally, to change work location from the office to the employee's home, fairly seamlessly within a few days. This change has been sustained for over 9 months (at the time of writing) and the technology has delivered and enabled remote working on a large scale, continuous basis.



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## Technology enabling Remote Working

### Requirements for Successful Remote Working<sup>14</sup>

#### 1. Secure managed mobile devices

##### (laptops / bring your own device - BYOD)

- Secured: encrypted; complex password; remote wipe; full Hardware Software inventory; Operating Systems and apps secured, patched and up to date Anti-virus and Anti-malware software; Phones not jailbroken/rooted; all connections via Virtual Private Network - VPN and with Domain Name Systems (DNS) protection.
- Managed: Mobile device management checks security status during connection; Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA) log on to company services.

#### 2. Secure scalable connections from home/device to Intranet/Internet

- VPN software agent or home Access Point/router with firewall
- VPN-less software agent to selected secure cloud services

#### 3. Group collaboration tools (meetings, teams, video) in Data Centre or Cloud

#### 4. HR work performance management tools & 'work from home' policies

#### 5. A culture of remote working teamwork.

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<sup>14</sup> Cisco

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Part A

## Chapter 3

# Remote Working – The Employee Experience





# Remote Working – The Employee Experience

COVID-19 has created an unplanned global-scale experiment in remote working. Concerns about health, economic uncertainty and the suspension of normal social life are continuing challenges. For remote workers, perhaps the greatest challenges were the added burden of childcare and home schooling, which were also part of the COVID-19 response. However, COVID-19 itself will have a 'long tail', and when the world does finally emerge from the pandemic, the lessons learned over the last 9 months of remote working, can be applied to remote working in general and over the longer term.

Further, with all the survey evidence illustrating a significant majority interested in continuing remote working on a hybrid basis (a mix of remote and on-site) the lessons we have learned have broad applicability – they are not targeted to a niche 'remote worker' group, as may have been perceived previously.

## **The experience of working from home**

In general, people approached the COVID-19 remote working situation as an open-ended experiment – they did not have an expectation that the experience would be perfect, that their employer could solve all problems or that it would be anything other than a short term response. Longer term, one might expect that workers will expect more support from their employer. Certainly, unions, having been relatively supportive during the initial COVID-19 period, have indicated that they see a need to protect workers and ensure that employers behave responsibly.

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## Remote Working – The Employee Experience

There is consistent feedback that some of the top advantages of remote working include no traffic and no commute (cited by 76% in NUI Galway-WDC Survey Phase I and 81% in Phase II) as well as greater flexibility in managing the working day, reported by 48% in Phase I and 51% in Phase II.

For many people, this was their first remote working experience, as reported in NUI Galway-WDC Survey (51% in Phase I and 49% in Phase II). As it happened, they benefited from the ‘democratic’ nature of that experience. Given that many, if not all, of their colleagues were in the same situation, there was no sense of disadvantage. Those working remotely pre-COVID-19 have had to deal with being disconnected from the ‘normal’ workforce located in the office – missing out on the verbal and non-verbal interaction that gives context to daily business.

This levelling of the playing pitch had some interesting effects. For example, at one major manufacturing business, geographically distributed expertise was more easily gathered remotely to tackle operational challenges in manufacturing – where previously only locally-based expertise would be called in.

In the long term, with a blend of remote and on-site working, working practices will need to ensure that a hierarchy does not re-appear with remote workers feeling disadvantaged. Alternatively, a model may develop where the workplace is exclusively for collective and collaborative activity, and all relevant employees are required to be present for such collaborative work, with individual activity conducted at home.

The desire to continue some degree of remote working is evident across gender, age, where people live and their family circumstances. There is some suggestion that those living alone are less likely to want to continue remote working, though it is also likely that the range of Covid-19 restrictions is an influencing factor. Currently, all work is conducted from home in addition to limited if any opportunity for social activity outside work.

### Practical Challenges

The physical work environment at home creates difficulties for many. Aside from the distractions of family life (22% of the age group 35-44 years experienced difficulties in working from home with their family around)<sup>15</sup>. Some do not have the space or facilities to create an adequate home office. The problem is compounded if several members of a household need to work remotely. In some cases, it is just less than ideal, in others there may be genuine health and safety concerns such as inappropriate desks.

### Wellbeing

The most cited advantage of remote working was ‘no traffic and no commute’, reported by 81% in Phase II of the NUI Galway-WDC survey. The next most cited advantage was ‘greater flexibility as to how to manage the working day’. Both findings suggest a likely greater degree of wellbeing among remote workers. The survey evidence also suggest a common experience was that people felt they were being more productive by working at home (62% agreed or strongly agreed that remote work increases their productivity while 57% agreed or strongly agreed that remote work enables them to accomplish their tasks more quickly), but often that was at the expense of working longer hours (52% indicated that they worked more hours, while 7% indicated that they work less hours. 41% indicated that they work the same hours).

The flexibility that remote working offers can cause the working day to extend well into what are normally non-working hours. This experience points to a need to think carefully about the design of the working day, and to institute practices like “right to disconnect” in order to protect workers - not just from demanding employers, but also from themselves.

Less commuting has been identified as a primary benefit. This results in additional time now available to the remote worker which creates an opportunity to spend time on other activities, personal, professional and civic.

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15 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/elec19/employmentandlifeeffectsofCovid-19/>

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## Remote Working – The Employee Experience

Supervision of remote work is a challenge, and many people in supervisory or management roles reported high stress levels. Remote working certainly favours a results-based model for performance management over a traditional hours-worked model.

There are also downsides to working remotely in terms of the employee experience and productivity. The WDC-NUI Galway survey found that the three biggest problems employees reported about working remotely are loneliness/feeling of isolation, staying motivated and issues with their physical workspace. The survey found that the top recurring theme in open-ended comments relating to the challenges of working remotely was the loss of the social element of work. Employees referred to missing the human interaction that happens when working on-site and being physically present with colleagues and customers.

Social isolation is an obvious risk of remote working, and the risk is highest where workers depend on their workplace for social interaction. Workers who had recently relocated to take up employment, particularly from overseas, and had yet not built up a social network, found it difficult. Employee driven initiatives, like regular video calls exclusively for social interaction, helped mitigate this, but the strong feedback from the surveys is in favour of a hybrid model of work. Alternatively, we may see the growth of local hubs, where work is still remote from the main place of work (and therefore reduces commute time) but retains a social element - even if 'colleagues' are actually unconnected professionally.



### Professional Development

The cohort who showed greatest dissatisfaction with remote working were those in the 18-30 age group. In the NUI Galway-WDC Survey Phase II, 24.7% reported that they would not like to continue to work remotely or only to work remotely several times a month, the highest of all age groups and slightly higher than those over 60 years. This age group often have inadequate home working facilities, many have a greater need for social interaction, and, as they are early in their careers, need more intensive mentoring - which is difficult to deliver remotely on a full-time continuous basis. We now have large cohorts of recent graduates being recruited remotely into their first employment, which would have been largely unheard of pre-pandemic. Employers are giving serious consideration to how this can be done successfully, but it will be interesting to examine the professional progress of these cohorts over the next number of years. It seems unlikely that, in the post COVID-19 world, wholly remote working would be an optimum choice for many early career employees.

For the wider population, there is a general sense that while well-formed work (pre-existing projects) can be executed remotely, the formation of new projects is a collective effort and is best done in-person.

Those who cannot participate in these activities run the risk of missing out on progression opportunities. Remote workers may be seen as the 'do-ers' rather than the 'creators'. This fear of missing out (FOMO) actually manifested itself during the COVID-19 experiment – at one major manufacturing business, remote workers were anxious about missing out on opportunities despite the fact that all their colleagues were also working remotely! This caused project teams to synchronise annual leave days – all team members agreed to take leave on a specified day so that nobody would feel they were missing a key meeting.

Despite the way in which remote working has been introduced to a huge section of the workforce, there seems to be a very strong interest in continuing the practice post pandemic. Various aspects of working life have been impacted by remote working, from working hours to practical challenges such as home office equipment to professional development, all of which will need consideration.

## Ervia case study

### ervia

Ervia is the commercial semi-state multi-utility company responsible for the delivery of Ireland's national gas and water infrastructure and services. Ervia is composed of three businesses: Aurora telecom, Gas Networks Ireland and Irish Water. Ervia has over 1900 employees at locations in Cork, Dublin, and in several regional offices. Ervia is composed of a diverse, cross generational workforce with a mix of long serving employees and newer entrants.

#### Pre COVID-19 Remote Work Ervia Agile Programme

Ervia has an Agile working programme in place since 2018. That programme enabled staff to work from home or from another Ervia location one day per week. It also enabled flexible hours, via an early or late start. This programme was supported by staff and there was much interest in increasing the number of days in which it could be availed. Robust IT systems supported remote working as well as clear guidance on this working arrangement. This experience allowed Ervia to operate remotely effectively when the COVID pandemic occurred.

#### Ervia - Agile by Numbers

- 57% of the workforce were availing of working from home prior to March 2020
- 30% of the workforce were working from home one day a week
- Friday was the most popular day to work from home with over 43% of total working from home days
- 10% of the workforce had availed of working from another office location



### COVID-19 Response

In late January 2020, once it became evident that COVID-19 was spreading to Europe, Ervia mobilized its Crisis Management Teams (CMT). This was to;

- Provide reassurance to staff on our procedures to ensure their continued safety at work.
- Ensure essential services in gas and water would continue to operate in the event of a pandemic.
- Ensure business continuity procedures were tested including remote working testing of our IT systems.
- The CMT continues to meet on a weekly basis monitoring the national response to the pandemic as well as ensuring critical services are maintained.

Following the Government guidelines in March, Ervia moved quickly to a remote working environment for most staff. Front line workers in Gas Networks Ireland and Irish Water have continued to respond to emergency situations and have ensured that these essential critical services are maintained.

In the initial months of remote working, the organisation and employees were focused on adjusting to the new way of working: from getting set up to work remotely, to managing commitments at home and concerns around contracting the disease.

### **Taking stock**

Six months on the company is reviewing the new way of working and the impacts on employees and Ervia's clients. The benefits, challenges and considerations outlined below were provided by Ervia employees in internal surveys during COVID-19. The benefits identified were:

#### **Reduction in commuting times**

The primary benefits experienced by Ervia employees during this period of remote work have been wellbeing related. The single biggest benefit for staff has been the reduction/elimination of commuting times. With a large workforce travelling to the major urban centres many staff were spending excessive time commuting.

#### **More control over employees' personal time**

Many employees have noted the benefit of spending more time with family and other interests.

#### **Reduction in business travel**

The reduction in business travel has also had a positive environmental impact.

#### **Continuing to deliver against our objectives**

From an employer's perspective, there has been no evident drop off in productivity during this period of remote work, with the primary business objectives continuing to be delivered.

While there are many benefits to working from home, there are also some challenges. Initially, the primary challenge our employees have faced has been balancing additional caring commitments. This issue may have been alleviated for some by the return of schools and other challenges highlighted below may now become more prevalent.

### **Lack of dedicated workspace at home**

As an employer, Ervia has obligations under health and safety legislation to all of our staff and we recognise the challenges that the majority of our employees faced when moved from an office environment to remote working overnight. Most employees did not have a home office and understandably people were working from a variety of locations. At Ervia we provided office peripherals such as chairs, IT equipment and other supports to employees. While we recognize that employees have many different home working arrangements that are acceptable in the short term, longer term solutions will have to be put in place that continues to support workers who are now likely to have a greater mix of home work in the future.

### **Difficulty switching off in the evenings**

Ervia intends to provide further guidance and support to help employees switch off in the evenings.

### **A loss of social connection with colleagues**

A further concern in respect of the continuance of remote working is the social isolation and the impact this may have on employee's mental health and wellbeing. While employers can put various programmes and practices into place to promote wellbeing and support mental health initiatives, the benefits of spending time in a physical office location with colleagues must not be underestimated. In addition to the mental health impact, there are also concerns about how this lack of in person interaction will impact on collaboration, innovation and creativity in the longer term.

### **Effective collaboration, innovation and creativity - Technology enablers**

Technology should support all of these endeavours but it is apparent from our experience that there are limitations and the benefit of face to face interactions should not be underestimated. New entrants and people starting out in their careers benefit hugely from on the job learning, much of which is through observation and interacting with peers.

### Future ways of working

Feedback from our employees has shown that post pandemic, a mix of home and office work is the preferred way of working. Certain considerations will be required from a company perspective to ensure that this can be effective for both employees and employer.

### Considerations for the company

- Assessing future work requirements for both employer and employee and updating guidelines and supports to accommodate a mix of home and remote work.
- Finding the balance between allowing employees to determine their schedule with the requirement for certain teams to be in the office on the same days, to maximize the social and collaborative benefits.
- Making the most efficient use of office locations in this new environment.
- Technology investment required to enable an effective hybrid workforce.

At Ervia, we recognise and welcome the Government's commitment to, and support of, remote working. We believe that the following specific matters should be given further consideration.

- Guidance on Health and Safety for Remote working, employer and employee obligations
- Financial incentives/supports for employees and employers to facilitate a mix of working from home and the office
- Additional development of working hubs within communities and counties
- Continued roll-out of high-speed broadband across the country.



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Part A

## Chapter 4

# Remote Working – The Organisation View





# Remote Working – The Organisation View

## **Effectively Managing Remote Working in Organisations**

This chapter examines how organisations can effectively manage remote working focusing on the key issues raised during our stakeholder consultations and survey findings. The chapter looks specifically at organisational culture, managing performance, leadership, and communication and collaboration in the context of remote working.

### **Organisational culture**

Organisational culture refers to the norms, habits, rhythms and routines that impact how an organisation operates, how work gets done and how employees communicate with each other as well as communications more generally between employees and management. Culture is usually intangible and experienced through what are often unwritten behavioural norms and expectations. Some organisational cultures are more conducive to remote working and many IT and tech companies have a long tradition of remote working for many of their staff. For these companies, there is a long-standing culture and norm that a significant proportion of employees work remotely either some or all of the time. However, other organisations have more traditional cultures which are in-person or on-site based with remote working being rarely used or expected in terms of norms and practices. The impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent government mandate for employees to work remotely where possible has resulted in many organisations having to rapidly shift to remote working whether their organisation culture facilitated remote working or not.

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## Remote Working – The Organisation View

During our stakeholder meetings, representatives from divergent organisational contexts and cultures spoke of the impact of organisational culture on remote working.

A representative from a large public sector organisation based in Dublin spoke about the dominant working model being on-site before the outbreak of COVID-19. Previously, the culture was not conducive to significant levels of remote working and there was resistance to measures such as desk sharing that would be synonymous with a large scale remote working environment. Historically the culture was very much focused on employees being on-site and a rules-based culture including ‘clocking-in and clocking-out’. It was difficult to envisage how such a culture and organisational form would be conducive to remote working which requires a much more trust based model. If it was, it would require considerable change to the culture. The COVID-19 crisis catapulted the organisation to work remotely following government mandates to do so where possible. At the time of writing, the majority of employees are continuing to work remotely in this public sector organisation.

An interviewee from a large manufacturing company also referred to their culture being very much an in-person and on-site culture pre-COVID-19. In manufacturing this was considered the norm. There was some limited remote working before the crisis (about 100 staff worked remotely for some of the week before the crisis). In a matter of days in March 2020, 1300 staff were working remotely due to the Government requirement to do so. Before COVID-19, the company was getting increasing requests for remote working and was noticing that flexibility and remote working options were important in the talent attraction and recruitment process. Candidates who were not taking up job offers mentioned the cost of accommodation in the city as an issue. Management in the organisation were starting to explore if remote working should be introduced in some form for those sections of the business that could effectively operate remotely. At the time of writing, employees who are not required to be on-site for manufacturing purposes are working remotely. The company has recently surveyed their employees on employee remote working preferences going forward. 40% of employees would like to work from



home for some or all the time. The organisation expects to operate a blended or hybrid model post-pandemic. The interviewee spoke about the need for the organisational culture to adapt to facilitate the change.

A representative from a large IT company – Cisco, also discussed the importance of organisational culture with the group during key stakeholder engagement meetings. This company has a long tradition of remote working and a culture that facilitates and enables remote working. The culture included flexibility around working times and included communication channels suitable for remote participation and engagement.

### **Managing the culture in blended/hybrid models**

Many organisation representatives project that a blended or hybrid model will prevail post-pandemic where a significant portion of the workforce will work remotely some of the time and work on-site some of the time. One of the key challenges highlighted by organisations was how to effectively manage hybrid or blended working in terms of the organisational culture. There was a sense that when the majority of employees are working remotely, as now under Government guidance, it is more straight-forward to manage as everyone is on the same footing. Employees are facing the same challenges in terms of how they connect with each other, manage their team working and stay connected, to mention but a few of the key challenges. Likewise, managers and leaders have the same challenges for interacting with, engaging and managing their team when the majority, if not all, are working remotely. However, when there is a hybrid or blended model, the challenges may become more difficult to manage – both for employees and managers.

In a hybrid or blended model, some employees will be on-site some of the time and some employees will be working remotely some of the time, either at home or in a different remote location. The challenge is to ensure that the culture enables an equally engaging and positive experience for employees who are remote as those who are on-site. This will include ensuring that informal ‘corridor’ and ‘water cooler’ conversations that happen when

in-person and on-site are replaced by similar opportunities when working remotely. One organisation has focused on this particular issue and the policy is that any informal ‘corridor’ conversations that impact their team’s work, projects or goals should be documented and shared with the full team to ensure everyone is connected and has access to the same information, regardless of where they work.

### **Remote-first culture**

Another dimension of remote working that is related to culture is the balance between working remotely and working on-site as well as the value and importance attached to each option. Grow Remote, the advocacy group for remote working, argues that for remote working to operate effectively, organisations should consider adopting a ‘remote first’ culture. This would mean that the culture of the organisation places emphasis on facilitating and enabling effective remote working as the primary option, subject to role suitability and those who want to work on-site have that option. Organisations that build a remote-first culture establish remote work as the norm rather than something that is approved of only in certain circumstances. When employees on remote teams are working on-site and in-person, they perform their job using the same tools and processes as if they were working remotely. A remote-first culture ensures that those who are remote working are not adversely impacted vis-à-vis their colleagues who may be on-site. If a company adopts a remote-first approach, the culture will ensure that those who are remote working are embedded in the organisation and will determine the organisational culture.

### **Recommendations**

- Organisations should deliberately analyse their organisational culture in the context of remote working, examining what elements of the existing culture facilitate or inhibit remote working.
- Organisations should identify changes that need to be made to the culture to effectively facilitate remote working.
- Organisations who wish to operate a blended model should consider a ‘remote-first’ culture and approach if they intend to have remote working as a significant feature of how they operate.

### Leadership

The impact of leadership and how managers approach remote working is another critical organisational factor impacting the effectiveness of remote working. For remote working to be successful, many of our stakeholders referred to the need for senior managers and leaders to practice remote working themselves in their roles. If senior leaders are continuing to work on-site while the organisation is promoting remote working, there is a disconnect between the policy and practice of remote working. Role modelling by senior leaders whereby they themselves work remotely for some or all of the time will have more positive impact for leaders and management grades across the organisation. Leadership behaviour is also integral to the culture – if senior leaders are themselves not working remotely, it is more difficult for the culture of the organisation to change to facilitate remote working. The following is a key recommendation relating to leadership and remote working.

### Recommendation

- Organisations who wish to have effective remote working as a key part of their operations need to ensure some senior leaders in the organisation are themselves remote working and act as good role models for remote working.

### Managing Performance and Productivity

A key concern for all organisations is how they manage productivity and performance. There has been a lot of debate about how remote working impacts employees' productivity, KPIs, performance and outputs and the overall impact on organisational goals and objectives.

There are interesting case studies and data available on productivity before COVID-19. Bloom et al. (2013)<sup>16</sup> conducted a working from home (WFH) experiment at CTrip which is a 16,000 employee NASDAQ-listed Chinese travel agency. During the experiment, call centre employees who volunteered to WFH were randomly assigned to work from home or in the office for a period of nine months. During this time, their productivity was closely monitored by the organisation and research team with the

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18871>



employees' agreement. Those employees who were working from home had a 13% increase in their performance, of which about 9% was from working more minutes per shift (fewer breaks and sick-days) and 4% from more calls per minute (attributed to a quieter working environment). Home workers also reported improved work satisfaction and experienced less turnover, but their promotion rate conditional on performance fell. Similar findings are reported in the OECD (2020)<sup>17</sup> report which suggests that remote working can increase job satisfaction and worker efficiency leading to productivity gains but highlight that, unless carefully managed, remote working can adversely impact productivity due to solitude and the challenge of managing the boundaries between work and personal life.

Cisco has reviewed remote working productivity and performance for many years (case study p.87) Before COVID-19, the company's employees worked an average of 2 days at home per week and 40% of employees were not located in the same city as their manager. From staff surveys, the company estimated that 60% of the time saved commuting was spent working. The company has generated an estimated annual savings of \$277 million in productivity. Remote working can also lead to a higher employee retention rate, as more than 91 percent of respondents say it is somewhat or very important to their overall satisfaction. Thus, there is evidence available before the pandemic crisis regarding the positive impacts of remote working for performance and productivity.

We can refer to some data that is available with reference to remote working during COVID-19. The NUI Galway-WDC Survey phase II<sup>18</sup> found that 62% of the 5,639 employee respondents report that their productivity is higher when working remotely compared to working on-site with 24% indicating they neither agreed or disagreed and 14% indicating that their productivity was lower. However, 51% of respondents indicate that they work more hours when working remotely compared to working on-site and so that increase in hours worked could account for the increase in self-reported productivity more so than the working remotely per se. Regardless, self-reported productivity levels are high.

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17 [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135\\_135250-u15lwp4jd&title=Productivity-gains-from-teleworking-in-the-post-COVID-19-era](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135_135250-u15lwp4jd&title=Productivity-gains-from-teleworking-in-the-post-COVID-19-era)

18 <http://whitakerinstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Remote-Working-National-Survey-Phase-II-Report-Oct-2020-Final.pdf>

Consultations with key stakeholders revealed several key themes pertaining to performance and productivity when managing remote working. The representative from a large public sector organisation reported that contrary to what they might have expected at the outset, productivity is not down due to the COVID-19 lockdown. However, he argues that it is hard to measure productivity in a knowledge-based organisation. While there is an increase in productivity in some areas, he reports that it is difficult to determine if that is due to employees working harder in response to the crisis or if such productivity increases are sustainable into the future due to efficiencies and effectiveness of remote working.

Trust was another issue raised during our consultations as being important to performance and remote working. Trusting that employees are doing their work and applying themselves is fundamental to effective remote working. There is a lot of work to be done by organisations regarding changing performance management approaches and expectations in response to remote working. Existing practices and approaches suited to an on-site and in-person workplace are not likely to be adequate or suitable to remote working performance management.

One of the issues raised by one of the stakeholders is the need to examine and manage the source of reported productivity increases. Productivity increases arising may be from more efficient and effective working practices gained from remote working (e.g., less distractions) or may be the result of employees working longer hours. If productivity is as a result of increased working hours, this would need to be closely monitored and assessed and increases in productivity may not be sustainable if they are as a result of poor work-life balance. It may also be the case that increased working time is derived from time saved on commuting, which would be more sustainable for organisations and employees. Thus, organisations need to further examine these trends and the implications that arise.

The large manufacturing business representative referred to remote working needing clear calendar management for meetings and if there is good communication about availability and managing calendars, it can help productivity. Common holiday days for teams were introduced, at the teams' suggestion so that all team members were off at the same time. This assisted with fear of missing out (FOMO) and helped align the team.

It is clear from our stakeholder interviews and from previous research, that managers are likely to find it challenging to monitor employee performance and progress when working remotely. Furthermore, employees may be less inclined to seek out feedback or guidance in the absence of being in a position to call into their manager's office in an informal manner. Human resources teams will have to plan around these limitations and develop practices that will enable both managers and employees to be able to have honest conversations about performance and productivity including how to manage remote performance reviews.

The following are the recommendations in relation to productivity and performance management in relation to remote working from the group's research and stakeholder meetings:

### **Recommendations**

- Organisations need a mind-set change in terms of how performance is evaluated if employees are working remotely. The use of task-based management is required. Employees can have more flexibility as to how and when they do their work – what is more important is what employees do and the quality of that work rather than when they do the work.
- Organisations should examine productivity change due to remote working and take required action to enable increases to be sustained or address falls in productivity where they arise.
- Managers and supervisors must be trained to ensure they adapt and alter their performance and productivity management practices to ensure they are effective for remote working.

### Communication and Collaboration

McKinsey (2020)<sup>19</sup> argue that one of the most important leadership decisions in managing remote working is deciding how to communicate with employees, which is just as important as the content of communication. A lot of the time, organisations focus more on the content of the message rather than looking also at how the message can best be communicated. The method for communicating with employees when the majority are remote working is particularly important to encourage engagement and a sense of connection and belonging. The discussions raise the challenge of virtual teleconference communications and the sense of fatigue that is setting in nine months after the start of the pandemic. It should be noted that the current context is particularly extreme with enforced working from home due to Government restrictions. In a post pandemic context, there is likely to be more of a hybrid pattern, but nonetheless the insights we have learned in the COVID-19 period will be useful.

Many of our stakeholders forecast a significant change to the use of office space which they believe will be re-purposed to facilitate collaboration and team working with individual work being done remotely. One of the key issues is facilitating interaction and communication when working remotely. One of the organisations interviewed by the group has moved to 15-minute block scheduling for meetings and conversations. This move is aimed at facilitating more regular contact and connection among employees.

A key issue that was raised with stakeholders is the challenge of recruitment when working remotely and the need to focus on ensuring good networking opportunities for new employees. Working fully remotely means employees do not get to ‘meet’ their colleagues and learning by observation that happens in the workplace is more difficult to replicate online. However, organisations that are fully remote (e.g., Shopify or Glofox) have effective strategies for recruitment and networking new employees and so it is possible to achieve if there is a clear strategy and action plan. It is important organisations consider how to ensure new employees and early-career recruits are provided with good online opportunities to build their networks and have collaboration opportunities that will enable career advancement<sup>20</sup>.

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19 <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/a-blueprint-for-remote-working-lessons-from-china>

20 <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/lack-of-face-to-face-learning-and-networking-could-damage-careers/>

The stakeholders raised the importance of training for managers and supervisors on how to adapt and change their management and leadership styles and behaviours to align with what currently is a significantly different management landscape and likely to be quite different into the future. One of the interviewees spoke about the need to be much more deliberate in providing forums for communication and collaboration when working remotely including provision of online forums to replace the informal yet valuable interactions that happen when working in-person or on-site (e.g., corridor conversations and water cooler meetings). One organisation has provided an online system where any employee can book a virtual coffee with the CEO to encourage communication and openness.

### Recommendations

- Organisations need to ensure that employees who are working remotely have sufficient and impactful opportunities for both formal and informal engagement and social interaction with colleagues.
- Organisations must consider how to ensure new employees and early-career recruits are provided with good online opportunities to build their networks and have collaboration opportunities that will enable career advancement.

Chapters 1-4 have identified a range of issues and challenges which will need to be addressed if remote working is to continue successfully post pandemic. The next section identifies policy responses that can support employers and employees in operate remote working for the benefit of organisations, their employees and wider economy and society.



# Cisco Telecommuting Policy



This example of a remote work policy is from a large multinational company. Smaller organisations may benefit from less detailed and formal policies but this policy provides an indication of the range of employment aspects to be considered.



## Cisco Telecommuting Policy<sup>21</sup>

Guidelines for Remote Work and Telecommuting include policies and best practices on:

- Enrolment (with manager approval) – with FAQ on:
  1. Remote Work agreement between employee and manager
  2. Work location flexibility
  3. Impact on promotions, bonuses, per diem expenses (none)
  4. Process to review / revoke Remote Work approval
  5. Process to review with new manager or new job
- Updating profile in online directory to alert co-workers
- Ergonomics of home offices in detail
- Ordering office supplies for home office (and expense policies for reimbursement)
- Shipping and receiving inbound mail
- Shipping and receiving PC refresh
- Travel for work

21 [https://www.cisco.com/c/dam/en\\_us/solutions/industries/docs/gov/flexible\\_work\\_practices\\_cs.pdf](https://www.cisco.com/c/dam/en_us/solutions/industries/docs/gov/flexible_work_practices_cs.pdf)

- Other best practices around employee working from home, e.g..
  1. Communicating with manager and colleagues and project stakeholders, clearly & consistently (video preferred),
  2. Use of technology
  3. Enabling productivity through scheduling and time management
- Other best practices around managing employees working from home:
  1. Using video communications and focusing on plans, milestones, results and outputs rather than daily on-site connections.
  2. Discuss and set clear expectations
  3. Record or send out notes of meetings where people may be missing
  4. Using video and async tools like Sharepoint and Webex teams to communicate status and direction.
  5. Check in with team members regularly (weekly with performance management tool (TeamSpace), and weekly or biweekly meetings).
  6. Identify key productivity metrics to help focus work
  7. Recognize employee's milestones and successes
  8. Maintain and reinforce Cisco culture
  9. Conduct project reviews / post-mortems
  10. Recognize difficulties with remote working and potential for misunderstanding, learn to recognize and address misunderstandings quickly.

## Chapter 5

# Policy Responses



# Policy Responses

## The Policy Barriers

The policy framework supporting employees and employers to navigate a new way of working will be very important. The remote working practices under Government guidance due to COVID-19 have been undertaken in the national public health interest. In a post pandemic environment, employers and employees will need a supportive policy environment to enable those who wish to continue the practice of remote working. The wider potential economic and social benefits generated, in terms of improved productivity, (generating a potentially greater tax take), greater labour market participation, reduced emissions and more regional and rural development are complementary Government policy objectives. Therefore, there is an onus on Government to support organisations and employees to facilitate and increase the incidence of remote working.

For businesses to fully avail of the benefits of remote working, several factors need to be considered in terms of rights, responsibilities and regulations that will be essential to establishing adequate flexible working policies. Within this section, we will review some of the challenges identified by employers and employees in the implementation of remote working and identify recommendations. These views are informed by dialogue and interviews that took place between the group and with employer representatives, public sector bodies, multi-nationals, trade unions, remote working advocates, and SMEs.

### **Remote Working and COVID-19**

While the circumstances many businesses have operated in under COVID-19 restrictions have been enforced, lessons can be learned for a post pandemic work environment. First, it shows that roles that are suited to remote working, in most cases can be facilitated. Further, the experience of remote working during the COVID-19 emergency has demonstrated that many roles can be carried out remotely in ways that are productive, cost-effective and attractive to employers and their staff. Workers value the flexibility that remote working can bring, while managers cite access to talent, improved productivity, and cost savings as benefits. Enhanced remote working also has huge potential to boost climate action and regional development as well as labour market participation.

### **Remote Work Policy Guidance**

The stakeholder consultations have indicated that broadly employers would greatly benefit from clear guidance on how to introduce a remote working policy, including health and safety, communications, training, the policy on requesting remote. This was noted in our engagement with SMEs and larger companies, for example the case studies Employflex, MHP Solicitors and Ervia. Given the lack of widespread experience for most companies in operating formal remote working policies, there are challenges for employers around the lack of guidance on how to correctly establish and implement a formal HR policy around remote work with many organisations having reservations about committing to a policy in writing. For example, a concern expressed was the inability to make all roles within an organisation remote and the potential equality issues that may arise from this. Furthermore, a lack of clarity on occupational health and safety has emerged as a key influencing factor for employers considering the introduction of a formal remote working policy.

In discussions with trade union and employer representatives, both referenced the scale of disruption facing the workplace, and the need, at its core to support flexibility, both from the employers' and the employees' perspective. What is becoming increasingly clear is that there is no 'one size fits all approach' to administering and regulating remote work.



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## Policy Responses

It is clear there are important organisational size, sectoral and cultural differences which influence the capacity and interest of an organisation in adapting to current COVID-19 guidance to work from home as well as their interest in continuing the practice. While remote work may be well established among some larger companies especially in the tech sector, not as much is known about the practice within SMEs. For example, SMEs make up 99% of enterprises in Ireland. Pre COVID-19 data suggests that only 9% of SMEs offered remote, flexible, or smart working arrangements<sup>22</sup>. However, one in three employees regard flexible working as a top priority in their current role, 50% in a future job and 34% were either likely or very likely to move jobs if they could avail of it, demonstrating the demand for more flexible and accommodating workplace practices.

Post pandemic, it is clear that an extensive cohort of employees wish to continue some form of remote work, (the majority preferring a few days per week) and for organisations to attract the best employees they will need to be more receptive to supporting the practice to some degree at least.

Chambers Ireland advocates for the benefits of flexible working as a way of boosting labour participation and supporting work life balance. Remote working is of course one component of flexible working. They note that while SMEs across sectors succeeded in introducing full time remote working during the COVID-19 restrictions, the lessons learned from the experience of the COVID-19 restrictions suggest that it would not be the preferred way of working for many smaller businesses over the longer-term. A wide range of obstacles were noted, including everything from employee preference for in-person collaboration, technological uncertainty, inability to meet clients etc. Along with the identification of these barriers, opportunities for reform were also identified, and these included tax reform, additional investment in training and skills and legislative reviews to ensure that current regulation is fit for purpose.

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22 <https://n.vodafone.ie/aboutus/press/new-vodafone-ireland-study-shows-majority-of-sme-employees-in-fa.html>

### Recommendation

- In a post pandemic environment, employers and employees will need a supportive policy environment to enable those who wish to continue the practice of remote working. The wider potential economic and social benefits from remote working include improved productivity, greater labour market participation, reduced emissions and more balanced regional and rural development. These benefits are complementary policy objectives that can be realised with a proactive Government policy on remote working.

## Employflex case study

### **EmployFlex**

EmployFlex, defines itself as a fully flexible company which is 'hybrid' when it comes to remote working. Founded in 2015 the company specialises in recruitment specifically for flexible roles.

Initially established to support women returners, EmployFlex, formerly EmployMum, re-branded in 2019. Up until that point, 30% of the placements that the company recruited for were for men, suggesting a growing interest in flexible work – this cultural shift inspired the re-brand.

The company has four employees in fully flexible roles operating from both Cork and Limerick. Each of the employees work either from home, co-working hubs, or a mix. Once a month, they aim to meet in a co-working space in Cork city called Culture co-work. They also meet in Republic of Work in Cork where the hub provides a lounge membership allowing EmployFlex to meet clients and candidates in a professional space.

Recruitment for flexible roles is the company's main service. Before COVID-19, the focus of the organisation was meeting clients and candidates, and hosting trainings and seminars on flexible working. They also offer an accreditation mark to companies who offer flexible working. All of this work has now moved online.

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## Employflex case study

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the team now work from home. As EmployFlex was a fully flexible organisation before the pandemic, the office did not face many obstacles in switching entirely to remote working, but some issues have been identified. Face-to-face meetings are now virtual and there are additional weekly check ins on a one-to-one basis.

Through client feedback, EmployFlex have noted that the largest challenge faced by businesses, particularly SMEs, in going remote during the COVID-19 restrictions was the fact that it had to happen almost overnight, without the opportunity to plan.

Interestingly, EmployFlex have found that larger organisations are now more open to flexible and remote working than before. Due to hands on experience with remote working, preconceived barriers, such as security, GDPR, trust and investment in technology no longer seem to be noted as an obstacle or concern for many companies.

Additionally, it was recognised that some companies had introduced hiring freezes since March of this year, triggered by concern over the challenges involved in on-boarding new staff. Common reservations include – how are they going to train new staff? How will new staff learn the company culture? How will they learn the intricacies of the job if they are not sitting beside a colleague?

To increase the success of remote working for this company and others, EmployFlex identified investment in training and skills development as essential. Training for managers was particularly emphasised, as the skills for overseeing remote colleagues are completely different to managing a team in an office. Training for remote workers is also required to ensure that staff are supported in learning to work in this new way and environment. Companies engaging in remote working because of the pandemic should recognise that staff need support in this transition.

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## Employflex case study

In the context of health and safety, EmployFlex noted that Government must provide additional guidance and reform. The rapid transition to remote working means that many companies may have left themselves exposed, with staff working from home without proper equipment or appropriate working spaces. Without additional Government support, there is a risk of possible legal challenges arising from accidents that may happen at the home office. To support both employees and employers, there could be merit in providing grants for home office fit-outs. Further, a revision of the remote working tax relief is required so that it is more accessible for employees. At present, the availability of the e-Working allowance is at the employer's discretion. In the absence of that, while applying for tax relief is an option for employees it is not a simple procedure. For example, claiming 10% of utility bills etc. only works where your name is on the utility bill so for someone renting or sharing a house or living with parents, it is not an option.

While the pandemic has shifted the norms of working, it has also re-enforced within EmployFlex that working remotely all the time is not the ideal. Everyone wants to meet their team at some stage, and this drives better collaboration which cannot be achieved in the same way online. When it is safe to do so, the team at EmployFlex hope to go back to a hybrid model of working and they believe that this is the best scenario of going forward for most organisations.

For more information, contact Karen O' Reilly or visit [www.employflex.ie](http://www.employflex.ie)





## Health and Safety

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Acts, all employers are required to take steps to ensure that their employees are working in as safe an environment as is reasonably practicable. Given that remote work appears likely to remain as Government guidance for many workers for a number of months to come, it is vital that employers familiarise themselves with their ongoing health and safety obligations, which apply regardless of whether employees are working in the office or remotely. Employers should continue to monitor Health and Safety Authority guidance in this regard, which includes a helpful set of FAQs on remote working which has been updated recently.

The NUI Galway-WDC national survey found that in April (Phase I), 43% responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that My organisation is providing me with ergonomic and health & safety advice for working remotely. Six months later the survey reported 38% disagreeing with the statement, indicating a little improvement but overall, many employees feel their employer has not provided the correct ergonomic and health and safety advice.

Feedback from employers suggest that while the guidelines on Health and Safety obligations are clear, they can be viewed as overly rigid and appear to disincentivise employers from offering flexibility and work from home arrangements. Currently there is a lack of policy guidance on both employer responsibility in the event of work-related accidents and risk assessments for employees working at home or in a hub. This is particularly true for work situations that are of the hybrid model, where some time

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## Health and Safety

is spent on site, at home or indeed in a hub. This has resulted in a fear of liability amongst some employers which makes ad-hoc worker arrangements seem like the 'safer' option in responding to employee demands. This concern was also reflected in research published by the Department of Business, Enterprise, and Innovation in 2019, where there is 'a lack of clarity around Occupational Health and Safety requirements, leading to a fear of litigation. Ultimately there is a need for increased awareness and guidance across multiple areas for employers and employees'<sup>23</sup>.

There is concern that through poor understanding of how to properly implement health and safety audits, and uphold obligations under the legislation, employers may be leaving themselves exposed under employer liability, insurance costs and legal responsibilities. Throughout our interviews with business and organisations, it was proposed that wider financial supports to provide equipment would be welcome. SMEs also noted that the availability of COVID-19 guidance and Return to Work Safely Protocol was very useful. More user-friendly templates would be welcome. Additional guidance in this area could include the topics of work-related accidents, balancing risk assessments with an employees' privacy and clear procedures regarding bullying and workplace harassment when an employee is working from a hub or co-working space. It should be noted that some of the case-studies included in this report were undertaken before the latest Health & Safety Guidance was updated. There is a need to improve awareness of this advice. A clear accessible information campaign (similar to the Government's COVID-19 messaging on health guidance) is suggested.

### Recommendations

- Wider financial supports are needed to provide appropriate equipment for those who are obliged to work from home during current and any future COVID-19 restrictions.
- An awareness raising campaign is needed to promote health and safety guidance and user-friendly templates for supporting those who are working from home.

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23 <https://dbe.i.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Remote-Work-in-Ireland.pdf>

## MHP Solicitors case study



Michael Houlihan & Partners LLP

Founded in 1933, MHP Solicitors (formerly Michael Houlihan and Partners) is based on Bindon Street, Ennis, Co. Clare. The company employs approximately 29-32 staff members depending on solicitor training rotations.

Prior to COVID-19, MHP Solicitors accommodated flexible working to suit staff member's needs (be they family or non-family related). This was changed to a formal policy two years ago when remote working also was facilitated for three staff members. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 the firm was beginning to consider how to expand their ability to offer remote working – this was driven by the occurrence of extreme weather conditions like flooding. For example, they had started to replace older desktops with laptops to facilitate remote working if the need quickly arose.

In advance of the pandemic, concerns regarding a lack of connectivity, available technology and trust were highlighted as barriers to offering remote working on a more wide-spread basis. In particular, there was a worry that staff may find it challenging in a practical sense as the legal profession largely deals with hard copies of material.

As early as February, the business had started to prepare for adjusting to a possible outbreak of COVID-19 and the impact this might have on the workplace. For example, the company undertook the installation of sanitisation units, restricting face-to-face meetings and linking in with their IT providers.

Following the announcement of the first wave of restrictions, all members of staff had to work remotely. MHP made sure that all staff had access to services, or home office items/equipment. Once the initial technical teething issues were resolved, the team adapted well to working remotely, with some noting that they felt that their productivity was boosted due to a lack of interruptions throughout the day. Since then, the loss of daily social interactions has been acknowledged and the significance of the office culture has been underlined as a key factor for the productivity of staff.

The importance of work-life balance is stressed and there are concerns that staff might be struggling to ‘switch-off’ and working longer hours than needed. In response to this, reminders are sent to staff to clock-off on time so as to keep a normal work routine while at home. Reminders are also sent to reassure staff that not all work needs to be urgently completed and can wait until the following day.

As offices began to reopen in the early part of the summer, MHP consulted all members of staff how they wanted to continue to work. In addition to the staff who already availed of flexible working, the vast majority of solicitors responded that they would like a hybrid offering where they could mix office and home on different days of the week. To support those returning to the office, staggered hours were introduced in order to ensure that social distancing was facilitated, and shifts were allocated to ensure that there is no overlapping of people working in the office.

As MHP looks to the future, facilitating flexibility will be part of how they support staff, but they do note that the culture of the office is important and will be central to their future plans. The experience of the pandemic and full-time remote working posed problems for many of the secretarial

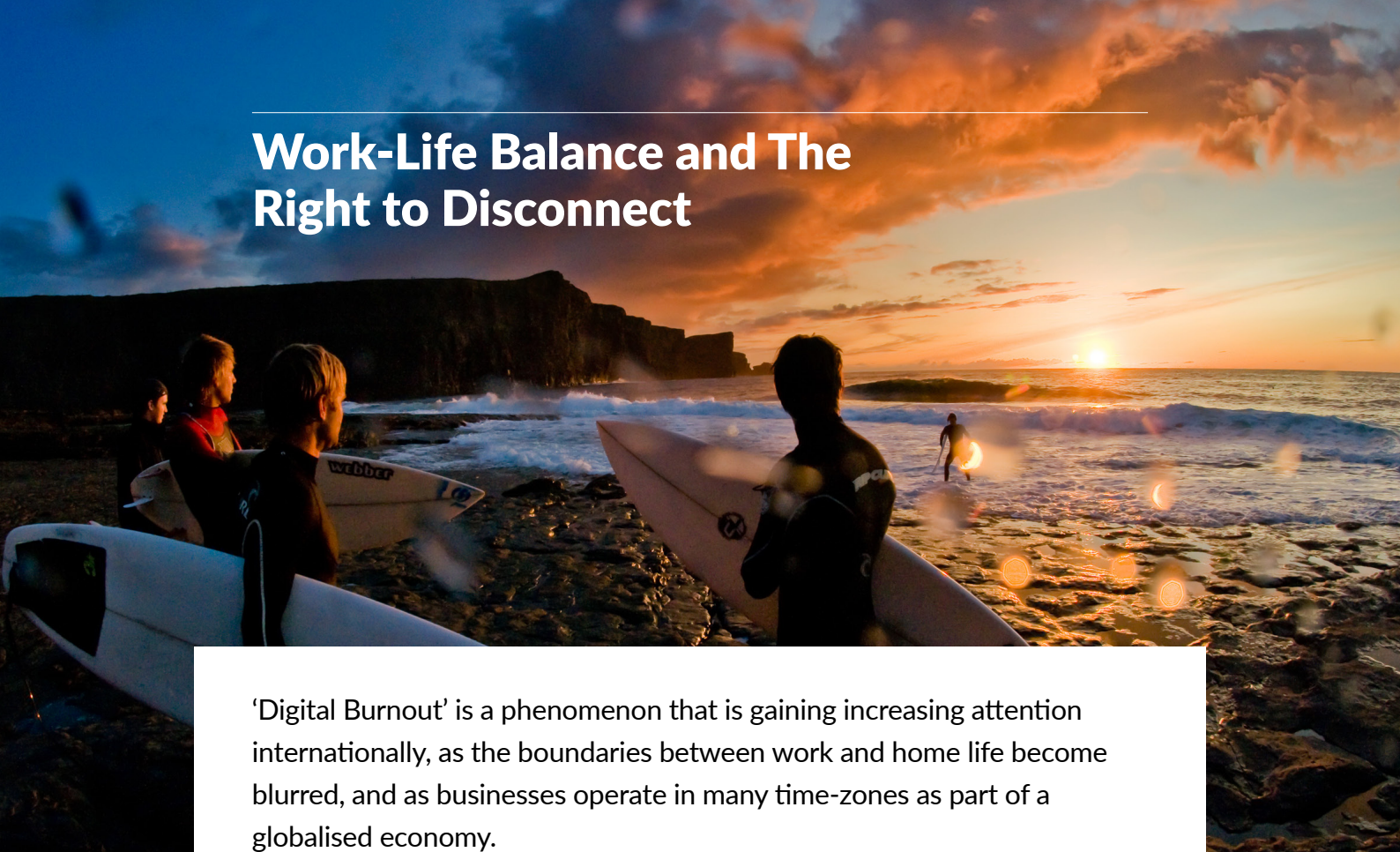
staff who require the use of the office infrastructure to carry out their duties for the court. There is also a concern that remote working is challenging for their trainee solicitors who need to be present in the office, working with the team, so they can learn.

Regarding additional supports, it was suggested that Government could do more to support businesses manage their health and safety obligations. Facilitating remote working is very new to many businesses and getting the correct advice and support can be expensive. User-friendly templates on implementing health and safety protocols would be helpful in assisting the company to ensure they are compliant with legislation.

For more information, visit <https://www.mhp.ie/>



# Work-Life Balance and The Right to Disconnect



‘Digital Burnout’ is a phenomenon that is gaining increasing attention internationally, as the boundaries between work and home life become blurred, and as businesses operate in many time-zones as part of a globalised economy.

In response to this, some jurisdictions have implemented a formal ‘right to disconnect’. This issue has been advocated for by trade unions as a way of ensuring work-life balance is protected<sup>24</sup>.

From the employer’s perspective, there is a concern that the positive work-life balance impacts remote working offers could potentially be negated through over-regulation. Additionally, some, especially multinationals cite the benefits of flexibility in engaging with workplaces across different time zones (see Cisco case study documenting the benefits of such flexibility). Employers groups like IBEC, have noted that it is important for Government to consider the legal framework on working time as it currently stands. As is evidenced from statistics from the Workplace Relations Commission on the enforcement of working time legislation, there exists a very effective right to disconnect under Irish law, enforceable through the established employment rights bodies. Before any additional measures are proposed, better communication of the existing framework, and the obligations it imposes, should be considered<sup>25</sup>.

International consideration for implementing the Right to Disconnect have been mixed and notably pre COVID-19. France implemented Right to

24 [https://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/congress\\_submission\\_to\\_dept\\_justice\\_and\\_equality\\_on\\_flexible\\_working\\_april\\_2020.pdf](https://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/congress_submission_to_dept_justice_and_equality_on_flexible_working_april_2020.pdf)

25 <https://www.ibec.ie/connect-and-learn/insights/insights/2020/01/30/is-there-a-need-for-a-right-to-disconnect>

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## Work-Life Balance and The Right to Disconnect

Disconnect legislation in 2017 and Spain began its implementation in 2019<sup>26</sup>. In the case of both countries, the Right to Disconnect was established in a package of legislation relating to the workplace.

Employees previously unfamiliar with working from home may find that they struggle to disconnect from work because of the convenience of their devices and others' expectations or perceived expectations of an immediate response, regardless of the time of day or night.

As noted in Chapter 4, the WDC-NUIG Survey of employees noted higher productivity levels, but this may be in part due to longer working hours. The WDC-NUI Galway Survey Phase II found that 64% responded to emails and communications outside of working hours. When asked why, 26% chose to, 26% because of workload, 7% because they felt they would not be taken seriously by their employer and 4% said they feared missing out if they did not.

In the Irish context, the Right to Disconnect is present across existing workplace relations legislation and particularly the Working Time Act. In Ireland, the Organisation of Working Time Act (OWT) continues to apply in respect of employees who work remotely. Employees are entitled to their usual breaks and rest periods as defined in the Act and cannot work in excess of 48 hours per week, over a set reference period. Employers continue to be bound by certain record-keeping obligations regarding working time of workers as set out in the Act. The most appropriate system will vary between employers depending on the nature of their business but in general terms should include a process for recording and documenting working times.

Some of the organisations we spoke to, including Tógan Labs and Grow Remote noted the importance of communications protocols or a communications charter in companies that operate remotely. Tógan Labs has very clear protocol regarding internal communications between teams and staff. All staff members are made aware of, and regularly reminded

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38479439>

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## Work-Life Balance and The Right to Disconnect

about, the appropriate channels of communicating with colleagues and project partners. While employees can choose the hours that they prefer to work, Tógan Labs asks that employees equally respect each other's schedule and working hours.

From a policy perspective some organisations have noted that there are aspects of the existing Act, that while pertinent in 1997, are now believed to be outdated for application to the modern working world. Chambers Ireland has noted that it is especially important that the legislation underpinning the OWT Directive is re-contextualised for a 21st Century workplace. Several European countries have reviewed and modernised Working Time legislation, so that it more accurately reflects the realities of a flexible workplace. In 2019, Finland introduced a new Working Hours Act, which replaces the concept of a 'workplace' with a more neutral concept 'working place', and the new Act seeks to better address the current ways of working. In practice, this means that the working hours will no longer be tied to a specific place of work, but rather working hours will mean time spent working<sup>27</sup>.

Even where employees are working from home, the working time legislation continues to apply and employers should therefore ensure they remind employees that they are to take their breaks, rest and not work excessive hours. It may also be useful for Government to raise awareness through an information campaign on current legislation regarding working hours, rest period, and how to manage work-life balance when working in the home.

### Recommendations

- There is a need for an awareness raising campaign about existing legislation on working time and rest periods and best practice on communication protocols in remote workplaces for the benefit of remote workers and their employers. Even where employees are working from home, the working time legislation continues to apply and employers should therefore ensure they remind employees that they are to take their breaks, rest and not work excessive hours.

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27 <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190807-why-finland-leads-the-world-in-flexible-work>



## Tógán Labs case study



Tógán Labs is an Irish open-source embedded software development company. It was founded in 2017 as a fully distributed company, meaning it is fully remote and does not have a headquarters or a central office. The company employs 5 fully remote employees with the majority based in Ireland and North America. Niamh McNally, Chief of Staff at Tógán Labs, lives and works in rural west Mayo.

In open-source software development, working remotely, or having a fully distributed or hybrid company, is the default, and this open-source community consists of people who have often worked together on different projects around the world across different time zones. Tógán Labs notes that if they were ever required to work in a co-located office, they may not have established in Ireland. The talent pool of open source developers is small and because the company works in our specialised area of embedded design, being fully remote isn't something that the company does because they can; it's essential if the company wants to have the best people involved in their projects.

The company, through the Chief of Staff, actively ensures there is regular team engagement. This includes daily drop-in coffee breaks (for team members, but also clients, contractors and friends), engineering 'stand-up' meetings, weekly all-hands meetings where all company employees report and discuss active projects and operations, and virtual workspaces for people to work 'side by side' as and when they're online.

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## Tógan Labs case study

In a small company, it can be easy to take that closeness for granted and simply call it the 'culture' but this needs to be fostered, especially in a remote company.

Tógan Labs have very clear boundaries and protocol regarding internal communications between teams and staff. All staff members are made aware of, and regularly reminded about, the appropriate channels of communicating with colleagues and project partners. While employees can choose the hours that they prefer to work, Tógan Labs asks that employees equally respect each other's downtime. For example, they ask that emails be scheduled to be sent in the morning instead of late at night or at the weekend. This is rarely an issue in-house but is often a challenging boundary to hold with external parties who are less accustomed to working from home.

The onset of COVID-19 did not alter the working patterns of Tógan Labs. All staff have worked remotely throughout their careers and are well accustomed to working in this way. The company also ensure that staff are availing of necessary supports such as the e-Working allowance.

That being said, extra consideration was given to employees during the initial restrictions in the spring, as some staff members have children who were now in the house with them and others were living alone and lacking any social contact for days at a time. The company gave as much flexibility as possible to staff to deal with each of their personal situations. Tógan Labs has the mindset that it is not up to the management to decide on what hours suit an employee. Rather they ensure that the needs of each staff member are met, so people can work in a way that they find the most productive.

Although in many ways the company was well positioned to adapt to full-time remote working, the inability to meet or travel has had impacts. All international conferences and staff retreats were cancelled this year. These interactions are very important to remote companies and the lost opportunities have challenged the development of the company and the



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## Tógan Labs case study

staff this year. It is their view that even the strongest remote companies in the world still advocate for getting the team together on occasion to meet up.

Work-Life balance can be a challenge for fully distributed companies, particularly for start-up companies or companies navigating multiple time-zones. Ensuring that there is clearer understanding of a 'right to disconnect', working hours and rest times will help protect both employers and employees.

On the wider challenges of working remotely, managing health and safety obligations can be an ongoing challenge for Tógan Labs. The company noted there can often be conflicting advice on how to manage health and safety protocols. Clearer guidance is needed in this area so that both employees and employers fully understand their responsibilities.

For more information, visit [www.toganlabs.com](http://www.toganlabs.com)

# Remote Working and Labour Market Activation

## Labour Market Participation

Flexible work practices (and remote working as an element of this) have long been recognised as an important policy tool in improving labour market participation<sup>28</sup>. Indeed, the Government's Remote Work in Ireland Report, 2019, was produced in the context of increasing labour market participation. The Irish female labour market participation rate, while increasing, has been consistently below the European average<sup>29</sup>. At a regional level the labour market participation rate is lower in more rural regions than in the Eastern and Dublin regions<sup>30</sup>.

One of the advantages of remote working, highlighted with the current experience, is that it can improve labour market participation among many groups that have felt dissuaded from seeking employment for a variety of reasons. This can include those seeking more flexibility for example those with various caring responsibilities including women returners and others with childcare or eldercare responsibilities, those with disabilities, the retired and the 'third age'. The Western Region and rural regions generally have an older age profile than the national average<sup>31</sup>. Additionally, there is a need to provide more training for all those not digitally literate, in terms of COVID-19 and the need to improve remote working skills as well as the increasing need to access services online.

28 <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/Publications/Remote-Work-in-Ireland.html>

29 <https://www.ibec.ie/connect-and-learn/media/2019/05/03/female-participation-rates-rise-but-more-needed#:~:text=Ibec%2C%20the%20group%20that%20represents,labour%20market%20participation%20in%202018.&text=Overall%2C%20there%20was%20in%20excess,in%20the%20decade%20since%202009>

30 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurvey/lfsquarter22020/>

31 <https://westerndevelopment.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WDC-Insights-GMIT-29-Nov-2017-online.pdf>

### Labour Supply

From an employer's perspective, remote working can extend labour market access by broadening the available supply of opportunities. This can be particularly relevant in more rural regions, broadening labour markets and supporting those residents which may otherwise have more limited employment opportunities. This can also enhance labour market choices for dual income households which can support population retention in more regional locations. The OECD have noted that employers realise organisation savings through labour costs savings arising from a larger pool of workers supporting a better skills match<sup>32</sup>.

### Age Friendly Workplace and Supporting Older Workers

Some of the inhibitors to labour market participation (care of young families, limited childcare options), start to dissipate as employees get older which makes remote working easier. If public policy is to have greater 'third age' participation in the labour market, remote working can help facilitate it.

Even those employees who have spent much of their working life office based have been able to appreciate the benefits of remote working. For example, Ervia, has a diverse workforce including many older workers, previously with little experience of remote working. Through the combination of planning by their employer (pre COVID-19) and the forced working from home under COVID-19, has highlighted many of the benefits of working from home to these employees.

### Persons with disabilities

As noted by Eurofound<sup>33</sup>, when remote working became a more common practice in the 1990s, many suggested it was an opportunity for people with disabilities to re-enter or participate more in the labour market, removing significant obstacles to work such as commuting and unsuitable workspaces. Again, the extensive working from home practice under COVID-19 has highlighted the opportunity for those with disabilities.

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32 [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135\\_135250-u15liwp4jd&title=Productivity-gains-from-teleworking-in-the-post-COVID-19-era](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135_135250-u15liwp4jd&title=Productivity-gains-from-teleworking-in-the-post-COVID-19-era)

33 [https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/how-to-use-the-surge-in-teleworking-as-a-real-chance-to-include-people-with-disabilities?&utm\\_source=crm\\_newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=corporate&utm\\_content=20200817&\\_cldee=ZGVpcmRyZWZyb3NOQHdkYy5pZQ%3d%3d&recipientid=contact-7ed6f02ca2fde511943900505682489a-94a28b6678454c6a84334b7d78e088db&esid=fa88e03e-40dd-ea11-9481-00505682489a](https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/how-to-use-the-surge-in-teleworking-as-a-real-chance-to-include-people-with-disabilities?&utm_source=crm_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=corporate&utm_content=20200817&_cldee=ZGVpcmRyZWZyb3NOQHdkYy5pZQ%3d%3d&recipientid=contact-7ed6f02ca2fde511943900505682489a-94a28b6678454c6a84334b7d78e088db&esid=fa88e03e-40dd-ea11-9481-00505682489a)

### Women returners

There is a lower labour market participation rate among women than men. Though female participation rate in education is comparable to the male rate, there has been disincentives for women to continue active labour market participation, largely associated with having a family and undertaking more of the caring responsibilities. This is often compounded by expensive childcare services. This issue often comes to the fore in periods of skill shortages and various policy responses are advocated<sup>34</sup>.

In the context of supporting those undertaking caring responsibilities and as part of the steps taken by Government to develop a national strategy for remote working, it is critical that such a strategy is paired with guidance around family-friendly workplaces and is cognisant that remote and flexible working is not just something that is offered to care-givers. Actions that inadvertently contribute to making a policy like remote working, something only suitable for one gender, can and will contribute to widening of the gender pay gap. It is also notable that more flexibility is appreciated by all, indeed one of the case-studies, Employflex, which originally started as a company focusing on women returners, soon realised that at least one third of their clients were men seeking more flexibility.

### Chronic Illness and Long-COVID

There is a growing body of evidence that COVID-19 may have long-term effects on the health of some people who have been infected with the virus. Employers should familiarise themselves with their obligations to employees which could include 'long COVID-19' sufferers. Where an employee suffers from a disability which compromises their ability to work, the employer is obliged to provide reasonable accommodation to that employee to enable them to participate in the workforce. These measures could include reduced hours, working from home, part time working and remote working where the role allows<sup>35</sup>.

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34 <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Boosting-Medtech-Manufacturing-Engineers-and-Finance-talent-to-drive-Jobs-Growth-in-the-West-Region-Galway-Executive-Skillnet.pdf>

35 <https://www.eolasmagazine.ie/the-future-of-work/>

This also applies to employees who have chronic illnesses or cancer diagnoses<sup>36</sup>. Remote and flexible working can support employees in these situations to retain their link with the workplace, maintain employment or return to work more easily following a period of illness.

### **A Right to Request Flexible Working**

In the context of the EU Work Life Balance Directive, which came into effect in August 2019 and is to be transposed into Irish law before 2022, the Directive aims to improve the labour participation rate of those with caring duties by strengthening parental leave and access to flexible working options. In order to comply with this Directive, Government will be required to introduce a right to request flexible working for those with caring responsibilities. Chambers Ireland have noted that should a right to request flexible working be introduced, requests for flexibility should apply to all workers, rather than just those with caring responsibilities. There is a concern that if a right to request flexible working, is limited to carers, who are primarily women, then it risks making remote and flexible working something that is “gendered”, which could inadvertently create obstacles to progression, career advancement and ultimately widen the gender pay gap. The group consider that in the context of the Government’s Remote Work strategy, the right to request remote work should be explored. The group also notes that any right to request must also be balanced by a transparent user-friendly set of criteria that employers can refer to when deciding whether it can approve such a request.

### **Recommendation**

- Government should consider extending the right to request flexible working to all workers and not just those with caring duties. In the context of the Government’s Remote Work strategy, the right to request remote work should be explored.

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36 [https://www.mariekeating.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Marie\\_Keating\\_Back-To-Work\\_booklet\\_Final\\_web\\_single.pdf](https://www.mariekeating.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Marie_Keating_Back-To-Work_booklet_Final_web_single.pdf)





## Costs and Financial Supports

Working from home incurs costs and who bears these costs is likely to become more of an issue as the practice of working from home continues, both under the COVID-19 restrictions and post pandemic.

Broadly there are two types of costs; (1) initial set up costs and (2) ongoing costs. On the initial set-up costs the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) provides useful guidelines on what the employer needs to provide typically equipment already in use in the workplace e.g. laptop, mouse, monitor, keyboard and headset. Following the introduction of the work from home Government guidelines in March, for the most part, employers responded quickly and effectively in enabling employees access equipment for working from home. In the WDC-NUI Galway survey Phase I, 22% of employees indicated that they themselves provided the equipment they needed to work from home, compared to 25% who said that their employer provided it. Finally, for 40% the equipment was provided by both them and their employer. 13.5% indicated that they did not have the necessary equipment to work from home.

The issue of ongoing costs is the one that is likely to need more consideration. The additional household costs (heat, light and broadband) which arise from home working are costs traditionally borne by the employer. Separately many workers are saving on transport costs. On the other hand, companies are not incurring office costs, and some are saving money due to reduced office space and reduced property rental/purchase costs<sup>37</sup>.

37 <https://money.cnn.com/2016/06/09/pf/dell-work-from-home/index.html> In 2016, 25% of Dell employees work from home full-time or a few days a week generating an estimated saving of \$12 million pa in real estate costs.

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## Costs and Financial Supports

Currently there are two mechanisms by which employees can defray ongoing costs associated with working from home, through (1) tax relief given through the employer (2) tax relief claimed by the employee.

### **Tax relief given through the employer**

There is provision for an eWorking Allowance of €3.20 a day, which is tax free. With the onset of COVID-19, increased attention has been paid to this allowance, whether it is adequate and there is some concern that it is optional.

There is a view that the €3.20 per day allowance is inadequate and needs to be reviewed considering increasing utility costs (the figure of €3.20 has not changed since before 2013). In France there is provision for an allowance of up to a maximum of €50 Euros per month, for 5 days of remote work per week<sup>38</sup>. In the UK tax relief can be claimed for those who have to work from home at a rate of £6 a week from 6 April 2020 (for previous tax years the rate is £4 a week)<sup>39</sup>. A review of the eWorking allowance rate should be considered, examining increased costs incurred by remote workers, reduced costs borne by organisations and the international evidence.

The provision of the allowance is optional. Unions express concern that some workers may be penalised and the costs for younger people and lower paid workers are proportionally higher. There is also a concern that it would lead to an increase in remote workers becoming contractors or task-based workers rather than employees, giving rise to the spread of the gig economy. As part of its policy to promote remote work, and in the context of savings achieved, Government should pay the allowance to public and civil sector employees. The public sector should also consider office space implications.

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38 <https://www.mondaq.com/france/litigation-contracts-and-force-majeure/949086/Covid-19-and-telework-reminder-of-the-obligations-imposed-on-businesses>

39 <https://www.gov.uk/tax-relief-for-employees/working-at-home>

### **Tax relief claimed by employee**

Alternatively, if your employer does not make this payment you can claim for allowable expenses through the employee's tax return. However, this is relatively cumbersome and currently will not defray the costs to the same extent as tax relief through the employer. Under the current system, estimates suggest that the value to the employee would be just one tenth of that of the tax relief given through the employer.

Both employers and employees were very quick and effective in responding to the initial requirements to work from home arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. A different approach is needed for longer-term arrangements.

### **Recommendation**

- As part of a national strategy for remote working a review of current tax reliefs around e-Working and expenses should be undertaken, to ensure that tax reliefs defray the costs involved in remote working. A review of the e-Working allowance rate should be undertaken, considering both costs and savings realised by both remote workers and organisations.
- The take-up of available tax allowances to enable employees to remote work should be promoted especially in the context of the wider social and economic benefits such as lower emissions<sup>40</sup>. It is also advisable to ensure the system is simple and flexible, allowing for ad-hoc and part-time home working. As part of its policy to promote remote work, and in the context of savings achieved, Government should pay the allowance to public and civil sector employees. The public sector should also consider office space implications.

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40 <https://www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/employee-expenses/e-working-and-home-workers/index.aspx>



# International Taxation

COVID-19 and working from home has additional implications for international workers. Just as with the consideration of costs above, short-term arrangements in aspects of international workers and taxation have applied with the pandemic, but longer-term arrangements will need to be considered.

Ireland has a relatively high proportion of international workers. The EU single market for labour has facilitated significant inward migration, and not just into roles requiring language skills. The American Chamber of Commerce estimates that amongst their member companies, 26% of employees were born outside Ireland. The percentage is highest in urban locations, particularly Dublin. Facebook estimate they have over 90 nationalities across their workforce here.

Through the initial lockdown period, many of these international workers returned home and worked remotely from there. Many of these roles lend themselves to remote working, for example marketing, inside sales, business operations, IT, software development.

Employers have been typically supportive of this, and public services have facilitated it, for example from a company taxation perspective, Revenue have agreed to disregard a relocation, for example an Irish employee located abroad or an employee of another country working in Ireland, where it is COVID-19-linked.



Given the low availability and high cost of residential accommodation in urban locations here, there is an obvious incentive for international workers to extend their remote working experience beyond the short term and COVID-19. It may also be easier for companies to attract and retain employees who are 'vested' in where they are living. This would have significant implications economically, most obviously for the commercial real estate market, but also for Ireland's overall FDI proposition, a key part of Ireland's economic policy.

However, we can expect that, beyond the immediate reaction to COVID-19, factors will come into play which will impede this 'repatriation' trend. Some will apply only outside the European Economic Area (EEA) e.g. immigration, but the others, for example corporation tax, are of real significance. All are covered extensively in a report by Deloitte<sup>41</sup>, but in summary, they include:

- Personal Taxation
- Factors associated with Company Residence – 'Irish' employees who are located outside the country may create a so-called Permanent Establishment with multiple implications:
  1. Corporation Tax
  2. Transfer Pricing
  3. VAT
  4. Tax incentives, for example R&D Tax Credit & other incentives
- Tracking, Monitoring & Compliance. Companies will have to deal with the complexity of legislation on employment, taxation and data protection in all the jurisdictions where they have remote workers.
- Other Factors: Different reward/compensation packages depending on different cost of living/tax regimes. And, of course, the day-to-day challenge of managing a highly distributed workforce with little scope for regular face-to-face interaction.

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41 <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/ie/Documents/Tax/Deloitte-Future-of-Work-August-2020.pdf?logActivity=true>




Both employers and employees were quick and effective in responding to the initial requirement to work from home arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. It was reasonable and prudent to extend arrangements to any employees who were based outside of Ireland at the time of the COVID-19 outbreak or who moved home to other countries during the pandemic. However, this change was under exceptional circumstances and normal rules will re-apply. Employers will need to communicate this to their employees as various company tax and legal implications arise.

**Recommendation**

- In the context of company taxation, the Authorities have temporarily disregarded changes to employees' location where it is Covid-19 linked. Normal rules will re-apply and employers will need to communicate this to their employees as various company tax and legal implications arise.

## Low carbon



Research shows employees consider reduced carbon footprint a significant advantage of remote work<sup>42</sup>. This view was ranked fourth in the WDC-NUI Galway national survey Phase II (more than 7000 respondents), and the second place reason was the reduced costs of going to work and commuting. Collectively in terms of intention and impact, the scope to reduce carbon emissions and work closer to home through remote working is significant. The costs of commuting, the methods of travel and in particular, the benefits in terms of work-life balance are topics that prompt considerable discussion in the context of remote working.

While much of the focus in terms of commuting is on cost, there are two other, separate impacts: reduced journey times and reduced carbon emissions. It is difficult to illustrate the carbon emission saving at an individual level, and the most significant impact will be at a cumulative or societal level<sup>43</sup>. This is part of the broader climate emergency challenge of short-term change for long-term gain. Any savings must be acknowledged and rewarded at an individual level to sustain it.

Separately, perhaps the most significant benefit of a reduction in commuting times is additional time for the individual. This is an immediate and tangible gain and should form part of any discussion between employers and employees on the costs and benefits of remote working.

<sup>42</sup> <http://whitakerinstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Remote-Working-National-Survey-Report-May-2020.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> [https://westerndevelopment.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Transition-to-a-Low-Carbon-Region-WDC-Main-Report\\_FINAL-August-2020-1.pdf](https://westerndevelopment.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Transition-to-a-Low-Carbon-Region-WDC-Main-Report_FINAL-August-2020-1.pdf)

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## Low carbon

There are broader considerations however, and potential savings and benefits for both employers and employees. An examination of the carbon emissions savings from working remotely by the Western Development Commission found an annual saving, based on 20 staff in 2018, of 21.8 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent. This is the equivalent of taking 10 cars off the road for a year. More broadly, 2020 CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are projected to fall by 5% in Ireland as a result of lower levels of traffic due to COVID-19<sup>44</sup>. These metrics give an indicative sense of the potential impact of a broad transition to remote working at a societal or cumulative level.

Remote working offers the opportunity for employees to work close to where they live, in turn helping to reduce congestion on transport networks. This can shift the mode of commuting from car to bike or even from a diesel car to electric vehicle (EV). It further aligns with the overall goals of Ireland 2040 by supporting compact development. The development of a national network of hubs also offers the opportunity to align low carbon initiatives and the roll-out of EV infrastructure, for example, with the hubs network. Greater demand for local area transport networks will help to drive the alignment of existing public and private transport services, and aligning the associated data, linking private and public bus service data via an app for example.

The likely increase in time spent in local areas by employees working remotely, will also be an economic driver, generating activity, and local retail spend and in turn, demand for building upgrades. The pressing need to update the existing housing stock is a particular challenge in rural and regional areas<sup>45</sup>, and commitments to meet Government climate change goals will prove very challenging.

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44 <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/1007/1169989-cycling-renaissance-Covid-19-pandemic-ireland/>

45 [https://westerndevelopment.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Transition-to-a-Low-Carbon-Region-WDC-Main-Report\\_FINAL-August-2020-1.pdf](https://westerndevelopment.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Transition-to-a-Low-Carbon-Region-WDC-Main-Report_FINAL-August-2020-1.pdf)

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## **Low carbon**

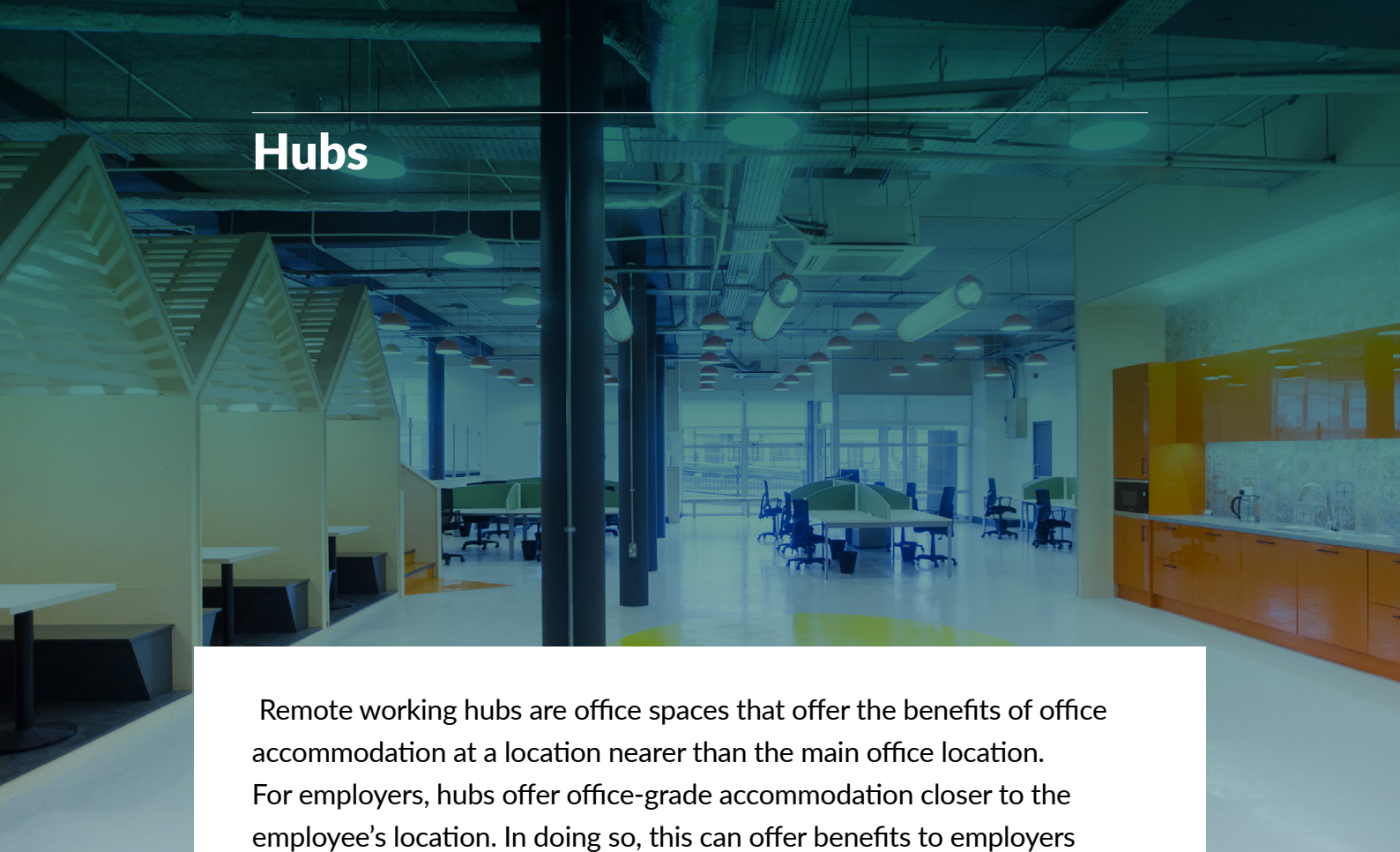
As identified at the outset, however, perhaps the most tangible saving in this context is time previously spent commuting. This presents an opportunity for employers to capture that commute saving as a carbon emission saving and contribute to their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) goals. This should also be a significant benefit to employees with improved work-life balance and for example more opportunity for personal and community development.

### **Recommendation**

- Employers and employees should capture the time and carbon savings of reduced commutes and agree to commit that time to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) goals.



# Hubs



Remote working hubs are office spaces that offer the benefits of office accommodation at a location nearer than the main office location. For employers, hubs offer office-grade accommodation closer to the employee's location. In doing so, this can offer benefits to employers in areas such as facilities, health and safety, connectivity and insurance, while going some way to meeting the needs of employees working remotely, separating home and work, avoiding isolation and improved working environment.

Remote working hubs, connected hubs, rural/regional hubs, co-working spaces and enterprise spaces are some of the many names used interchangeably. The services offered by these spaces vary widely, and for clarity the use of the term hubs in this report is intended to include all. The common service is high speed broadband connectivity. There has been considerable discussion about the role of hubs in supporting balanced regional development, and hubs are referred to frequently throughout the current Programme for Government<sup>46</sup>.

Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphries TD, has committed to the development of a national network<sup>47</sup> of hubs. The creation of remote co-working facilities for public servants is also being considered. It is welcome that remote working is to be promoted within the public sector showing it is leading policy by example. However, specific hubs for public servants only may undermine the economic sustainability of all hubs including publicly funded hubs.

<sup>46</sup> [https://www.fine Gael.ie/app/uploads/2020/06/ProgrammeforGovernment\\_Final\\_16.06.20-1.pdf](https://www.fine Gael.ie/app/uploads/2020/06/ProgrammeforGovernment_Final_16.06.20-1.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Min Humphries via Irish Times <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/oireachtas/remote-working-hubs-for-public-servants-to-be-rolled-out-across-rural-ireland-minister-1.4401500>



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## Hubs

Government should also support remote working across all levels within the public sector. As noted in Chapters 2 and 3, the enforced working from home experience under COVID-19 has been somewhat of a leveller with widespread access to the technology and where most office based employees within organisations regardless of role or seniority are working remotely and therefore it can be seen as less hierarchical, more collaborative and inclusive.

Hubs offer benefits to rural and regional areas by supporting local services as economic drivers, attracting skilled employees to areas and also as potential 'second sites' for both large Irish companies and FDI / multi-national companies. The use of hubs, by both private and public sector employers, rather than dedicated regional or additional offices, will create a more sustainable and resilient network across a greater number of locations, and entice smaller enterprises, particularly SMEs to follow suit. Hubs can also provide support for students of Higher Education Institutions with poor broadband access<sup>48</sup>.

There has been significant organic growth of the number of hubs, particularly in rural and remote areas where broadband was not available. Allowing for overlap between the Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) Hubs Network (more than 100 hubs between Donegal and Kerry) the National Association of Community Enterprise Centres (NACEC) (120 community enterprise centres) and Broadband Connection Points (projected to include more than 300 locations with public Wi-Fi) would indicate that there are currently more than 350 locations nationally, with more to follow.

The awareness of hubs may be an issue. Research shows that hubs as the sole location of work are not a primary choice, but they do form part of the suite of solutions for some employees. For many employers, hubs offer the means to address isolation, number one of the top three challenges to remote work identified<sup>49</sup>. It is likely, however that this interaction will

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48 <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40050092.html#.X2Mu8acOOFE.twitter>

49 <http://whitakerinstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Remote-Working-National-Survey-Phase-II-Report-Oct-2020-Final.pdf>

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## Hubs

need to be structured and supported to ensure it addresses the challenge of isolation. Furthermore, structured interaction in hubs can facilitate networking and personal development, particularly for those at the start of their careers.

For employees, hubs offer social interaction, appropriate facilities and in moving from home to hub, a clear delineation between home and work. A key issue is cost, and whether it falls to employee or employer to carry the cost. ICTU are of the view that this cost should be borne by the employer. IBEC see costs as an issue, but also scope to offer hubs subvention rather than funding home offices and facilities. Both employers and employees acknowledge the need for the public sector to take a lead in supporting the take-up of hubs. This merits further consideration in the context of the current work from home allowance discussed earlier.

### Recommendation

- Hubs provide a range of services for a range of clients with a soon to be rolled system of common accreditation for facilities, health and safety management and communication. There is a need to raise awareness of hubs, the services they offer and their role in providing an alternative remote work location.

## Cisco case study



Cisco is a US multinational with sites across the world. In Ireland there are two sites one in Oranmore Co. Galway (240 employees approx.) and one in Dublin (170 employees approx.).

### Pre COVID – Teleworking

Cisco, in common with many technology companies has a long-established practice of remote working or 'teleworking'. The company has had a teleworking policy for many years as part of its HR Flexible Work Plan which includes Part Time, Flex Time, Leave of Absence Telecommuting (work done away from location) and Remote Work (work from home).

### Benefits of Teleworking

Before the COVID pandemic, Cisco had measured the benefits of remote working globally<sup>50</sup> which include:

- Cisco has generated an estimated annual savings of \$277 million in productivity by allowing employees to remote work.
- Cisco employees average 2 days working from home.
- 40 percent of Cisco employees say they are not located in the same city as their manager.
- 60 percent of the time saved by not commuting is spent working and 40 percent is spent on personal time.
- When remote working, 83 percent of employees said their ability to communicate and collaborate with co-workers was the same as, if not better than, it was when working on-site.
- Approximately 69 percent of the employees surveyed cited higher productivity when working remote, and 75 percent of those surveyed said the timeliness of their work improved.
- 67 percent of survey respondents said their overall work quality improved when remote working.
- Remote working can also lead to a higher employee retention rate, as more than 91 percent of respondents say it is somewhat or very important to their overall satisfaction.
- In 2008, Cisco remote workers prevented approximately 47,320 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions from being released into the environment due to avoided travel.
- Cisco employees report a fuel cost savings of \$10.3 million per year due to remote working.
- With a significant increase in time zone flexibility, remote working supported the operation of better global teams (by being able to attend meetings earlier in the day or later in the evening, while balancing work/lifetime more flexibly).
- Remote working allowed for significant work flexibility to respond to changes, local or global, for example power outages, poor weather conditions, office building issues, or pandemics.

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50 <https://newsroom.cisco.com/press-release-content?articleId=5000107#:~:text=The%20study%2C%20conducted%20to%20evaluate,their%20ability%20to%20work%20remotely>



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# Appendices





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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

Members of the WDC & Whitaker Institute NUI Galway  
Expert Group on Remote Working

- Tomás Ó Síocháin, CEO Western Development Commission, Chair Expert Group on Remote Working
- Professor Alan Ahearne, Whitaker Institute, NUI Galway (to July 2020)
- Deirdre Frost, Policy Analyst, Western Development Commission
- Mark Gantly, Chair, Regional Skills Forum
- Emma Kerins, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Chambers Ireland
- Brian O' Donoghue, Systems Architect, Cisco Ireland
- Professor Alma McCarthy, Whitaker Institute, NUI Galway

## Appendix 2

The WDC and Whitaker Institute NUI Galway Expert Group on Remote Working met the following stakeholders, employer and union representatives over the course of five months from April through to August 2020.

Stakeholders consulted by the members of the Expert Group on Remote Working

Stakeholder	Representative Name
IBEC	Maeve McElwee
Large medtech manufacturing company	Director
Large Dublin based Public Sector Organisation	Director
Cisco	Rich Gore, Paula Ruttle, Cisco IT Bobby Reynolds, Cisco Account Manager
Ervia	Dawn O'Driscoll, Eoin Cahill
ICTU	Dr. Laura Bambrick
Grow Remote	Tracy Keogh



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