



NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh



WESTERN
DEVELOPMENT
COMMISSION

Remote Working

Opportunities, Challenges
and Policy Implications

Executive Summary

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



Whitaker
Institute

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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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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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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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.



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