Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 8: The future workplace

Speakers: Dr Matthew Davis and Afshan Iqbal

Matthew:	Welcome to the Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Podcast. Today's topic is the future workplace. I'm Dr Matthew Davis.
Afshan:	And I'm Afshan Iqbal.
Matthew:	And in today's podcast, we're going to be talking about working from home, looking at what it is, why it's different to working in the office, and some of the key things that we know from existing research. Afshan, I guess a really good place to start is just to define what is working from home.
Afshan:	So, the way that I would describe it is essentially people that work regularly from home, rather than going into a traditional office or workspace, and it can often fall into this umbrella term of flexible working arrangements, which would perhaps incorporate lots of different working practices, such as you've got mobile or teleworking, which is where people will split their working week throughout various locations.
	So, it could be split between working in the office or working from home, or perhaps even spending a day or two on client sites as well. And also, we're seeing a rise in perhaps more co-working spaces as well, and, you know, it just provides more flexibility for how people want to work and spend their days at work, essentially.
Matthew:	That's interesting, so we might have somebody working completely on their own, from home, full time, but also people might be talking about just spending one or two days a week working at home, they might be in shared space. So, a range of types of working, place and patterns, I guess, are part of this.
Afshan:	Absolutely, spot on.
Matthew:	And I think one of the reasons this has been all over the press in 2020 has been because of the COVID lockdown and people who maybe had never worked from home before being expected and forced to work from home very rapidly, overnight. And it's interesting, looking at the stats from the Office for National Statistics. So, 2019, we had about 5% of people who worked

mainly from home, and then, if you look in March 2020 that had shot up, I think to about 44% of people who reported that they had been working from home for the full week before.

So, this potentially is a whole load of new people who have never had the chance to work from home before. So, with that in mind, Afshan, shall we maybe have a think about what they might be able to expect? What do we know about the experience of working from home? What has research told us about this in the past? And, I guess, maybe the first thing to start off with: is it really any different to being in an office?

Afshan: Really good question. And I think what's really interesting to note here is: when you compare the situation of working from home prior to a global pandemic, you know, a lot of the times working from home was introduced with careful planning and consideration. So, you know, it was something that was well thought out, processes were put in place first and employees that are working from home, well they had the option to opt into that, so perhaps their job was advertised and that was a criteria of being able to work from home.

So, you almost had people self-selecting into that way of working, whereas now, in the context of a global pandemic, it's literally shifted to working from home overnight, within hours, of a government introducing lockdown measures, people are now having to work from home. So, I think that's a really interesting and important thing to consider when we're talking about working from home. We're not in normal circumstances.

Matthew: That's a good point, and I think, potentially in the past we had people who were maybe relatively self-selecting. So, who had a particular, maybe a reason or a desire to work from home, maybe to commute times or family commitments and so on. And I guess it's a bit more widespread now, one of the things that makes it really interesting, doesn't it?

Afshan: Yeah, of course. The population of people working from home now is so diverse compared to what we might have seen previously.

Matthew: It's interesting. One of the things that struck me, looking back over the past research and the data we've got, I think, is how much it challenges some of the, maybe, stereotypes, misconceptions that people typically have about home workers. So, there tends to be a bit of a standing joke when you talk to

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people about, maybe, colleagues who get to work from home and it's seen as their easy day, or the day they don't do very much. And I think the stats on this, and the research that we have are really interesting because I think that something that isn't too surprising is that people who work from home or work remotely, tend to be more satisfied with their job. That probably isn't surprising in itself.

The thing that maybe is more surprising to people is that people who work from home more frequently or work virtually, tend to be rated as more productive by their supervisors, so not just that they think they are more productive, but the supervisors actually recognise them as being more productive. I don't know if that chimes with your experience, Afshan, or…?

Afshan: Absolutely. I think people that work from home are considered to be, you know, there is that in-joke of, "Oh, part-timers," and "Oh, here you are showing your face today", and "fancy seeing you in the office." There are loads of jokes around, you're absolutely right, but in terms of the productivity, yes, research has reported that those that are working from home or have more flexible working arrangements do seem to be more productive, and that's partly because of the autonomy they have over their working day. Essentially, they get to choose when they start work and when they finish work, as opposed to being told that you have to be in the office by 9am, and you cannot leave before 5pm, for example. So, there is that autonomy that allows greater job satisfaction at work.

Matthew: I think the flexibility that you talked about, and that autonomy is again, looking at the research, that the autonomy and the control over how and when you work, seems to be really valued by employees, by workers. I guess potentially a flipside of this, a bit of a risk here in terms of when the workday is so loosely defined, that's great, so it will fit around dropping the kids off, if I've got chores to run or what have you, I can be flexible, but I think the data as well, and I think you've noticed this in your own research, Afshan, that people can often just end up working longer and working more. So, either because they want to show that they are being productive and they are online, or just you find it difficult to switch off, and to step away from work.

Afshan: Yeah, I agree. I think there is a combination of all of those elements that you just mentioned there Matt. There is this… people want to show that they are being productive, or that they

are available to work, and also just to be able to fit it around their lifestyle. So, if you want to make sure that your working day is coinciding with, perhaps, the school run, you know, to be able to drop off your kids at school and collect them at the end of the day, or whether it's to factor in, I don't know, other lifestyle choices, hobbies and things like that, the working from home arrangement provides that flexibility.

And because we've got the technology to be able to do that, the technology that we have, allows us to work anytime from anywhere, as long as we've got a good, decent internet connection, we can work from anywhere. So, it does help in that sense, but, as you rightly say, people do then end up working extended working hours, or that there becomes this blur between the boundaries of working… of work and home, essentially, because if you are working from home, when does your day end, and that your life begins? Because you're cutting out that commute time of going to and from the workplace.

Matthew: So, it sounds like there needs to be a fair bit of, I think, self-discipline and structure you bring to this as well to avoid falling into some of those pitfalls. I think one of the things that is interesting to me, hearing you talk, Afshan, and thinking about, again, the research data, is how much technology seems to be able to help with communication, but that it can't replace everything. And I know there's research around the effect on how much you share knowledge, who knows what, the nature of the interactions as well, and how that might affect how you manage, kind of, co-workers, subordinates, and what it means for things like culture in an organisation.

I think some of these questions we don't have good answers to in terms of how do you manage people who are sometimes at home, sometimes in the office, where you have a mix of virtual and office workers? What do you see as the key things we should be thinking about in terms of, you know, what do we need to understand better to help people be productive and happy when they're working from home?

Afshan: Yeah. I think that's a really important point that you touched upon there, that we have to be mindful of, once we come out of this current pandemic situation, what does the future of our workplace look like, and how do we get to better support our employees when they are working remotely? And a way… you know, we don't want them to feel like they are out of sight, and

therefore out of mind, so whilst technology is great, you know, you've got so many ways of communicating with one another, whether it's video calls, telephone calls, emails, texting and so on, and so forth. What we have to also be mindful of is that there is that lack of social interaction, the lack of face-to-face interaction between colleagues can also, perhaps, lead to some isolation. What if people are living on their own and also working by themselves? What does that mean in terms of their mental health and wellbeing? So, things like that do need to be at the forefront of our minds when we're looking at trying to create a happy, productive workplace.

Matthew: That's great. And I think one of the things we're going to do in future episodes, because I think this is a topic where we're only just starting to scratch the surface, is to start to think about a few of those key points coming through, so how do people actually work more effectively when they are working from home, or part of the time remotely? And I think your own research Afshan, and other work that colleagues have been doing around strategies we can use is really interesting.

Also, what is the role of technology in terms of knowledge sharing, in terms of innovation? What is the future of the office? So, lots written around, you know, the office is dead, seems to be a bit premature, but maybe the purpose of the office needs to change. Well what could that look like? What should it look like? And then more broadly, how do we manage these kind of diverse teams effectively? So how do we reap the benefits of the inclusivity that we might get through more flexible work arrangements, without disadvantaging people?

So, lots of things to touch on, which I think we'll follow up on in future episodes, but for now, I'd like to thank you for joining us for this particular podcast. If you're interested in the topic and you want to hear more, or you're interested in being involved in research, then drop us a line, we've got Twitter handles and LinkedIns and webpages, or there is the Research and Innovation Blog and site you can get to as well. So, thanks very much.

Afshan: Thank you for joining us, we hope you enjoyed listening, and please stay tuned for future episodes.