

# CHICAGO HEADLINES

## Remote working: thriving or surviving? Dr Ryan Thomas Williams University of Sunderland

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Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdowns certainly expediated the idea of working and learning in a remote environment. Nevertheless, remote working as a concept has long been an option for employers and employees. Some organisations previously enabled their workers to opt-in a homeworking on Fridays, or build up flexitime, as an example. Despite being around for decades, only a relatively small proportion of people worked in this way. A seismic shift caused by the pandemic now meant that millions of people migrated to a remote format.

The U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson famously coined the term “if you can, you must work from home”, and this presented new opportunities for businesses to experiment with a remote or hybrid workforce. The benefits of this way of working were soon realised and included: reduced commute, lower operational costs, greater employee flexibility, and access to a wider pool of candidates. Nonetheless, there were challenges to working in isolation, and many workers felt lonely, anxious, and out of sync. A case study from Harvard University’s [Remote Work Revolution course](#) puts it:

You send an important email to your colleague first thing in the morning with a question or request. And you do not get a reply in a day, two days. What goes through your mind? Was it a low priority? Am I being ignored? When is the right time to follow up? Why didn’t they respond? The reality could be as simple as your colleague never saw your email.

To work successfully remotely, an individual must have the correct tools. This could be as basic as access to appropriate broadband to enabling workers to access servers from home. To ensure the continuation of communication, collaboration, and ultimately productivity, enabling digital tools becomes a necessity. Digital tools and technology remove the barriers of not being fully aligned with the team, having misconceptions about a specific task, and other communication obstacles. Technology may also create a social presence for employees, allowing them to bridge an emotional connection with colleagues.

Furthermore, an individual must have support from their employers to thrive in a remote environment. There can be a blurring of lines between work life and home life. There may be a tendency to ‘never switch off’ as the home has become the office, and organisations should not take advantage of this to increase the working day. Managers and leaders will have to up their game to improve ‘office-life’ for all, and there may be changes to employment law to protect those working from home.

Organisations should also consider health and wellbeing as they remain responsible for this during their time at work. Reports of mental health and other related problems increasing significantly during isolation remain worrying. The U.K. registered charity, [Mind](#), writes:

“Since March 2020, my mental health deteriorated, and by the end of 2020, I was at breaking point once again.”

Thirdly, organisations may rethink some of their internal processes to suit the online environment. Tension occurs when leaders substitute a task or activity with the same but now online. Across schools, colleges and universities, educators had to rethink how learning outcomes could be achieved remotely, allowing them to transform tasks into something that was previously inconceivable in a face-to-face environment. [The Economist](#) argues that managers can no longer hope that subordinates pick up information by osmosis, and must think of new ways to communicate effectively.

In remote working, minor issues may rapidly evolve into major ones due to underlying issues; however, this can often be mistaken for reduced productivity. There may be a reason that prevents a team from working as effectively together to produce the same results as face to face, such as communication lapses. This is not to say that the same results cannot be achieved in a remote environment.

A physical location certainly contributes to building trust, such as seeing colleagues in the office or having informal chats. Trust builds between colleagues when they see each other frequently. Not interacting as much as face-to-face may be the most influential factor in a lack of collaboration and trust between employers and employees. Continuing interaction within teams becomes significant in developing emotional and cognitive swift trust.

Whilst it is not yet known if remote working will continue to become the norm for businesses, the past 2 years have allowed us to truly explore the benefits and drawbacks of this way of working. It is likely that the hybrid approach will be adopted by most with remotely only companies being a minority. Conversely, some companies, such as Tesla have outright [banned remote working](#) claiming that leaders must make themselves physical present in the office. Elon Musk went further and added that Tesla may not be the company it is today if he didn’t sleep in the office.

### Media contact :

Email: [Ryan.williams@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:Ryan.williams@sunderland.ac.uk)  
Name: Dr Ryan Thomas Williams  
Website: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7708-8907>  
Website: [sunderland.ac.uk](http://sunderland.ac.uk)

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