Title of the study: Attitudes towards going back to workplace after lockdown

1. Research topic and background

• Introduction

In March 2020 due the Covid-19 pandemic, a large portion of the UK's workforce was asked by the Government to work from home where possible in an effort to curb the spread of the coronavirus. As indicated by multiple sources, this was probably the largest experiment of (forced) remote working that prompted thousands of office workers to drop their daily commute to instead work from their home offices.

Eight months later, with a second official lockdown imposed by the Government, many employees and companies are starting to outline a strategy for going back into workspace buildings, even though it is still unclear when that will be possible to implement. In some studies, employees have expressed unhappiness about being forced to a 100% virtual work mode whilst at the same time felt uneasy about venturing into an office building amidst a second wave of the pandemic.

On a personal note, as a working parent, I am worried about going back to the office too soon and what that will mean for my work/ life balance.

• Research question(s)

The goal of this study is to explore and understand what are the main concerns employees face when asked to go back into office buildings.

Moreover I aim to answer the following research questions:

- What is the main attitude towards going back to work outside an employee's home?
- What are the main concerns about leaving the home as the main workplace?
- What are the exogenous factors that can contribute towards making employees feel comfortable about going back?
- What are the responsibilities in terms of safety protocols that companies have? What are the government's?
- What are the aspects of the workplace that employees miss the most?
- Do employees feel sufficiently equipped to go back?

• Population

The population I will consider for this study are UK-based professionals who have worked from home in 2020. I will be excluding unemployed and essential workers since they are out of scope for the purpose of this study. I am interested in measuring differences by: age group, gender and whether or not respondents are parents.

• Domain concepts

This is the glossary for the most important terms in the survey:

Employee: person who is employed or was employed in 2020 and working from home.

Workplace: is defined as a physical building where employees go to work that is not located in their usual home residence.

2. Survey design

The measurement tool used for this study is a self-administered online survey. It consists of 13 questions, 12 are closed questions with multiple choice and 1 is open. I only included 1 open question to simplify the coding process and cross-tabbing.

The questionnaire structure consists of a screening question (to filter out non-eligible participants), then 9 questions about the research subject and finally 3 questions about demographics (gender, age, children yes or not).

Fieldwork was conducted from November 15th through November 25th 2020. Research questions were informed by previous studies as compiled by Gallacher et al (2020).

Q_#	Question	Type	Purpose/ Justification
1	Have you worked from home instead of office building at any point in 2020?	Multiple choice	Filtering out respondents who are not eligible
2	How comfortable are you returning to work (e.g., in an office, outside of your home, or at a specific location)?	5-point Scale	Evaluate respondents' first reaction to going back to work
3	What factors would help you feel more comfortable? Please select all that apply.	Checkbox	Identify which are factors that would help workers go back to a workplace
4	What are your main concerns about going back into your usual workplace? Please select all that apply.	Checkbox	Identify which are concerns about going back to work
5	I believe employers should determine their own health and safety policies/protocols so that employees can go back to office buildings	5-point Scale	Assess opinions towards self-regulation by companies
6	I believe the Government should determine health and safety policies/protocols so that employees can go back to	5-point Scale	Assess opinions towards Government's role

|			
	office buildings		
7	What are you looking forward to about returning to your workplace? Please select all that apply.	Checkbox	Identify aspects of workplace that would help workers with a return to buildings
8	If your role requires you to travel, how comfortable do you feel traveling at this time?	5-point Scale	Evaluate attitudes towards business travel
9	I have the resources I need to get back to work quickly.	5-point Scale	Measure readiness to go back
10	Do you have any suggestions on how to make the transition back to work easier? Please explain.	Open-ended	Capture any comments that might help with transition
11	Please indicate your preferred gender:		Demographics
12	Please tell us your age:		Demographics
13	Are there children living in your household?		Household composition

3. Survey Analysis

The survey received 53 responses, of which 1 was screened because the respondent did not qualify as a "work from home" worker.

Demographics

In terms of key demographics, following is the distribution by gender, age and household composition.

Gender (Fig. 1): 58% of respondents were female, 38% declared to be male and 4% preferred not to say.

Female

57.7%

3.8% Prefer not to say

38.5%

Male
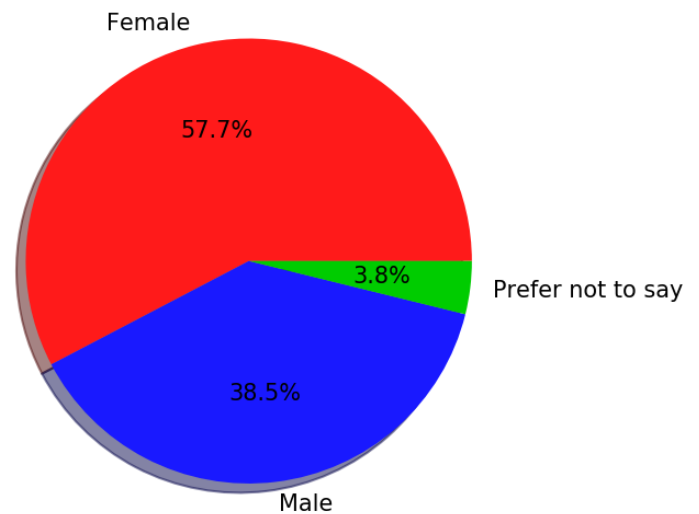
Age (Fig. 2): 56% are between 35-44 years old, 31% are between 25-34, the rest were above 45 years old.

25-34 years old

30.8%

3.8% +55 years old
1.9% Prefer not to say

7.7%

55.8% 45-54 years old

35-44 years old
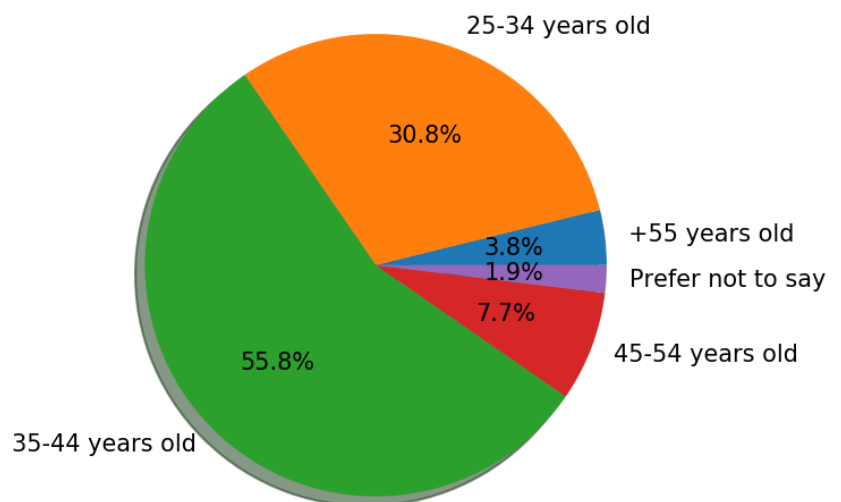
Household Composition (Fig. 3): 56% declared to live with children (people under 18 years old), whereas 42% do not to live with children.

No Children

42.3%

Prefer Not to say

1.9%

55.8%

With Children
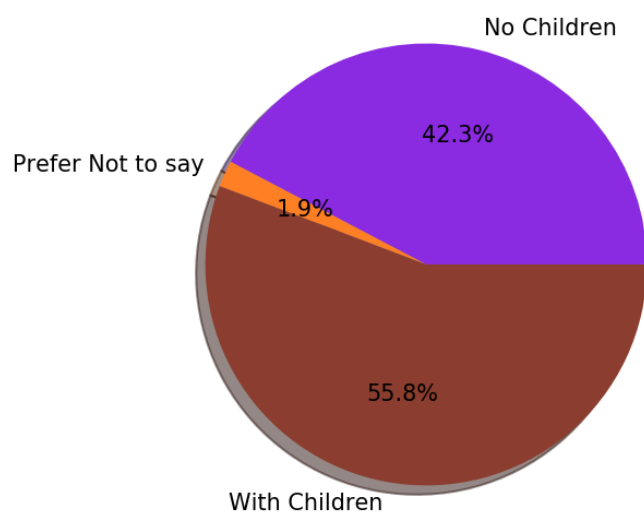
In terms of key variables, this analysis will focus on the following areas:
- Measure perceptions of return to workplaces whilst in lockdown
- Concerns that affect these perceptions
- Reasons for returning to workplaces
- Measures that need to be in place and actors that define those measures

Key Findings

When it comes to perceptions at the time of the survey, respondents seem ambivalent about returning to work, with 36% respondents indicating to be "Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable" about returning to their workplace. There are similar proportions of comfortable and uncomfortable responses (23%), hinting that most respondents haven't made up their minds about how they feel towards going back to an office building.
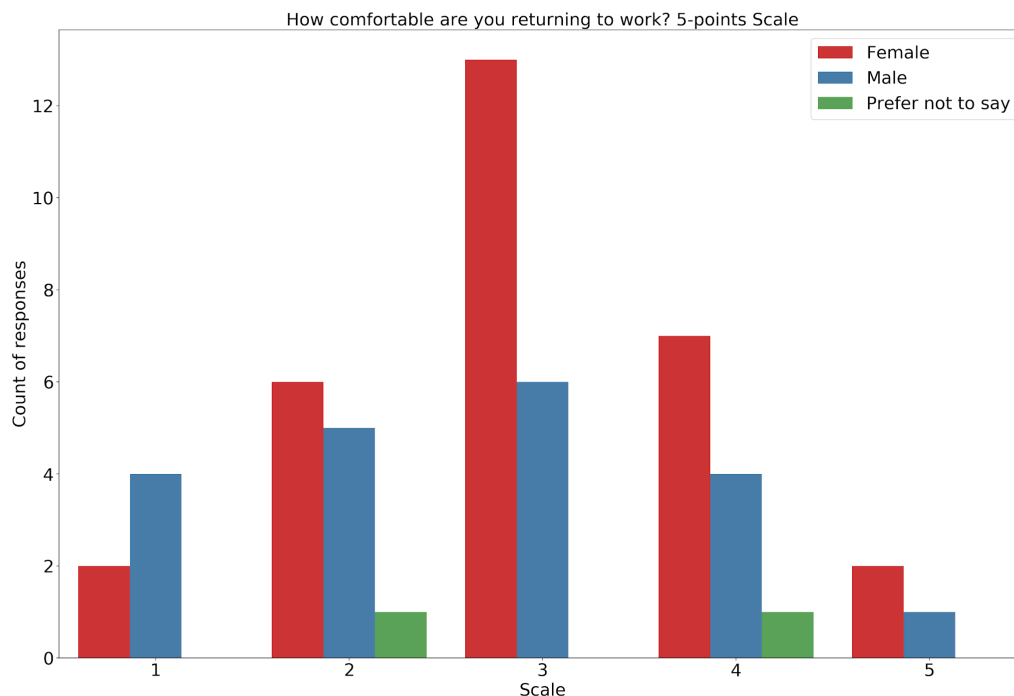
Fig. 4 5-point scale: 1 = Very Uncomfortable, 2 = Uncomfortable, 3 = Neither Uncomfortable nor comfortable, 4 = Comfortable, 5 = Very Comfortable

If we compare responses between parents and not parents, we can see a larger proportion of people living with children who are more reluctant to return to a workplace versus those who don't have children in the household. This could be explained by a concern of: a) getting the virus and transmitting it to their children; b) being unable to care for their children if they get ill.

Fig. 5

How comfortable are you returning to work? 5-points Scale
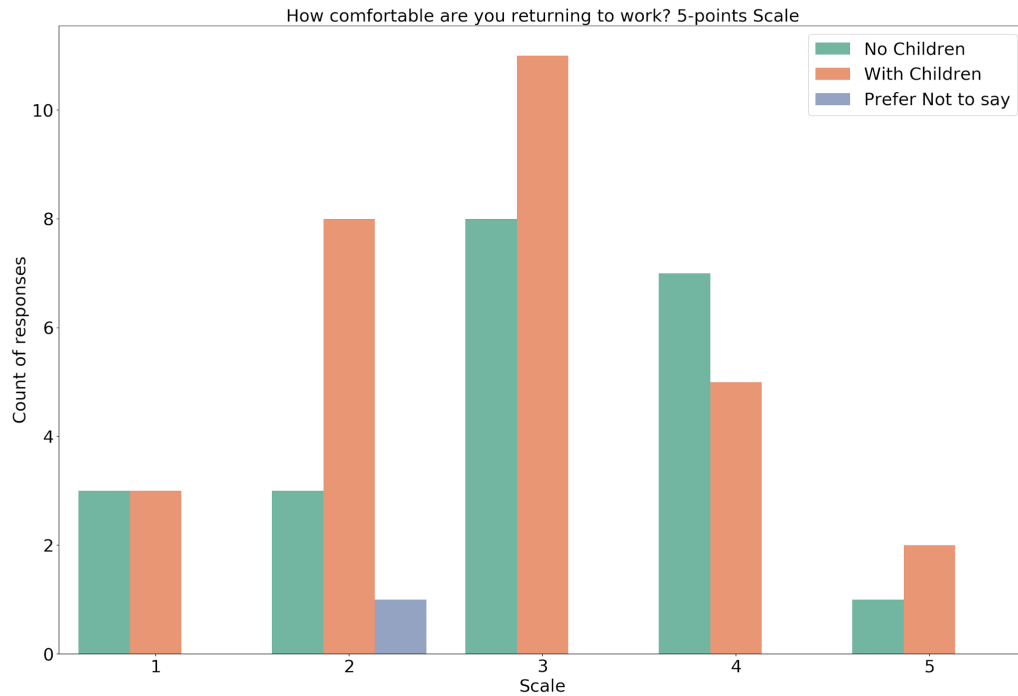
After assessing the willingness to return to a workplace, the survey enquired about the factors that need to be in place for a safe return. Prevention and safety protocols are top of mind for respondents. The top 3 factors are: 'Knowing work spaces are cleaned/sanitized daily', 'Maintaining social distancing protocols' and 'Public health regulations being followed (e.g., government, WHO)'. The treemap below (**Fig. 6**) shows the full distribution of all factors.

Fig. 6

What factors would help you feel more comfortable about returning to a workplace?
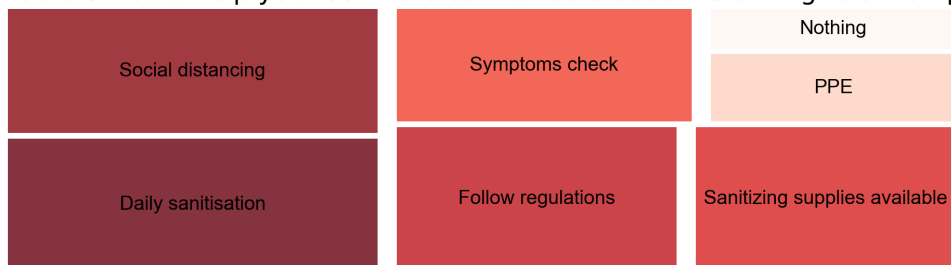
In terms of sources of concerns about a safe return (Fig. 7), Commute is the top concern by far for both women and men, mentioned by 70% of respondents. For men, it is equally of concern that 'Public health regulations are not being followed', but for women is less so. 'Readjustment to office life' is more of a concern for women than it is for men.

Fig. 7
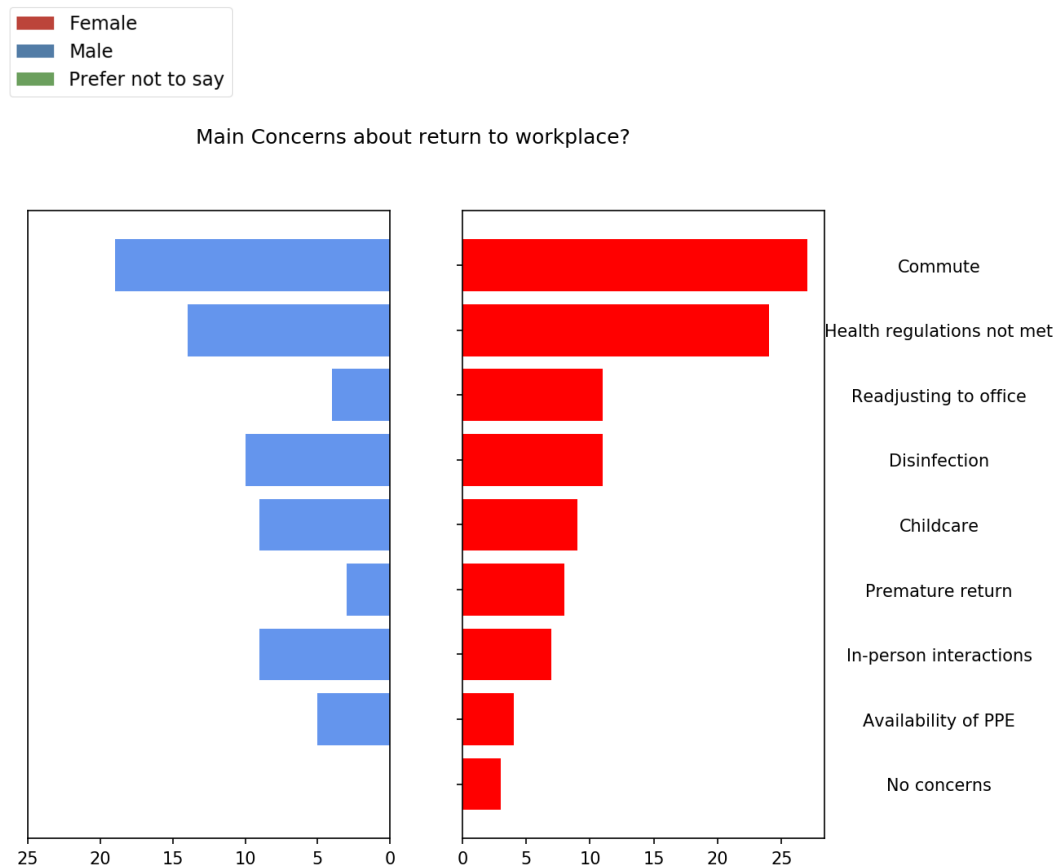
When asked about who should be providing guidelines for return to work (Fig. 8), respondents clearly agreed that it should be the Government (50% agreement) that would be providing the guidelines and regulations over employers (42%).

Fig. 8
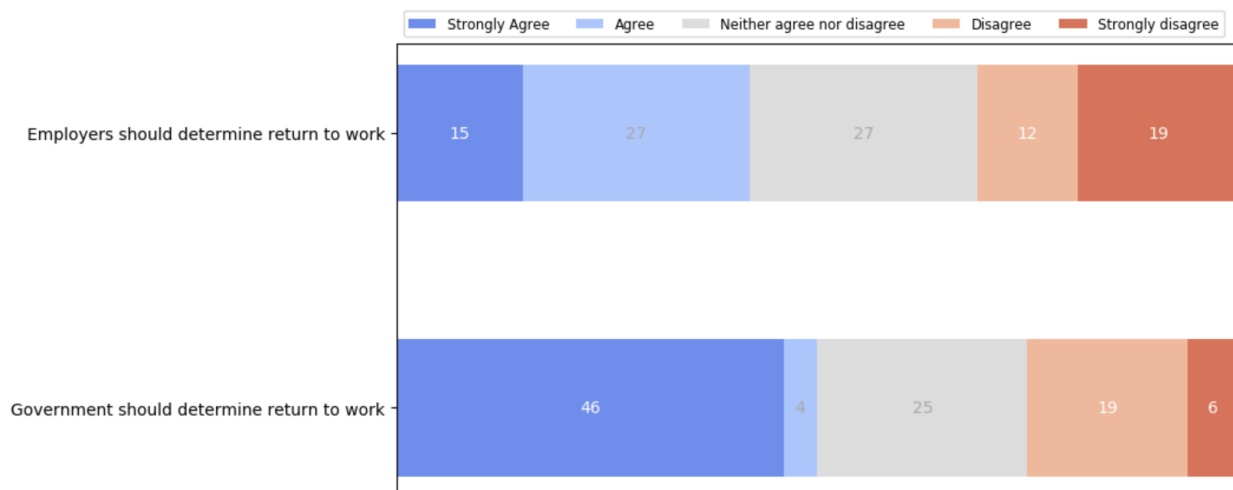
On a more forward-facing note, respondents indicated that 'Seeing friends, colleagues, and teammates' is the top reason for going back to an office building for both women and men (Fig. 9). This was closely followed by 'Easier collaboration with co-workers/customers', hinting that some respondents struggle with the shift to 100% digital collaboration. It is also worth highlighting that men expect to have a better work/ life balance by returning to a physical workplace than women.
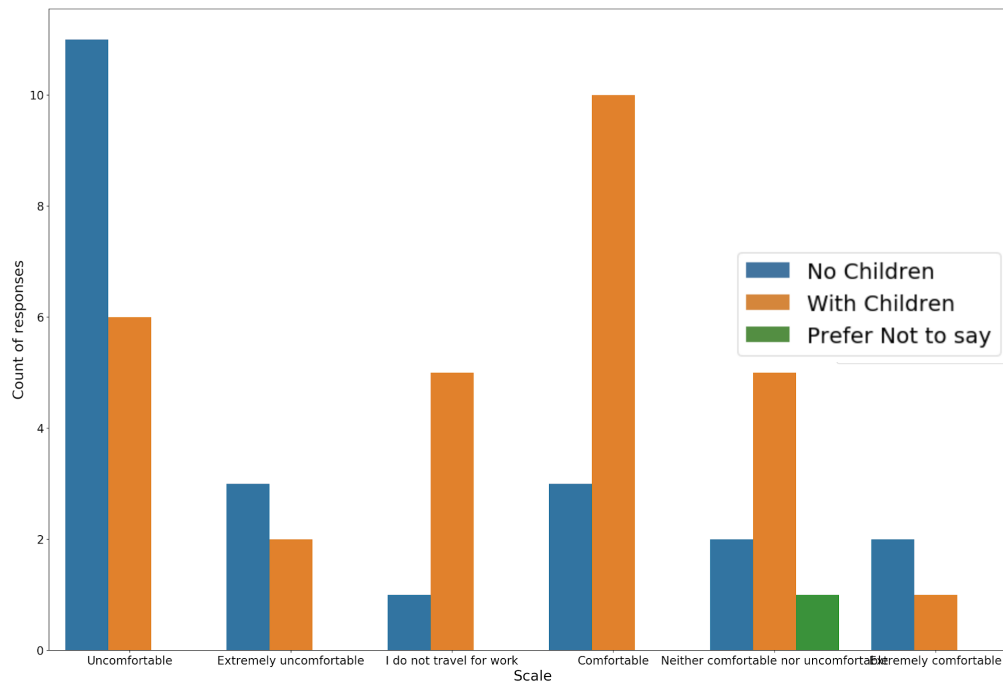
Fig. 9
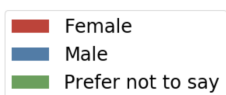
What are you looking forward to about returning to your workplace?
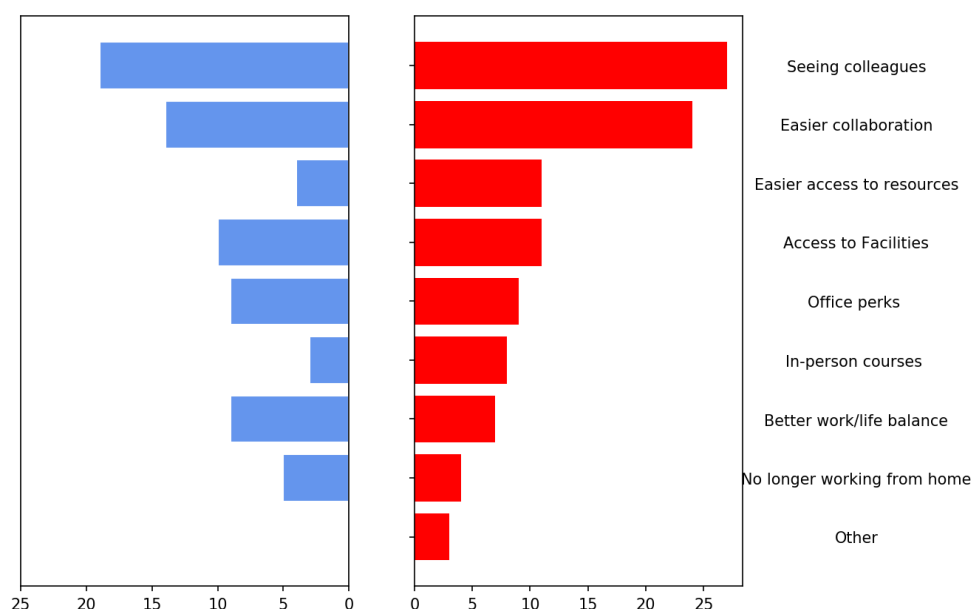
The survey also enquired about business travel (Fig. 10) and how comfortable would respondents be to go on the road for business purposes. Surprisingly respondents with 'No Children' were more reluctant to travel for work, whereas parents expressed they would be comfortable doing so.

Fig. 10

When asked about their 'readiness' to go back to work, younger respondents aged between 25-34 showed to be 'more ready' than those aged between 35-44, suggesting that younger participants are more eager to abandon remote work whereas the other category seem more reluctant (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11

To conclude the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide suggestions for what things would make it easier for them to return to a workplace. A quick review of the comments (Fig. 12) will show us that the keywords are "Gradually" and "Flexible" - in other words respondents imagine a 'phased' return to workplaces, a process that will need to be staggered and in stages.

Fig. 12

One comment illustrates this view: "*Not mandatory/ maintain flexible hours/ maintain working from home option*". And, of course, the fact that the pandemic is under control is key, as another respondent

suggests: "*For me, the only help I need is to have confidence that the virus is under control. And that's not going to be the case over the next 12 months. The new normal will be a cautious one.*"

4. Conclusions and discussions

The study suggests that, after several months of working from home, employees have mixed feelings about returning to a workplace or continue working remotely, exhibited by neutral opinions about this. Ensuring that public health regulations in terms of disinfection, personal protective equipment and symptom checks are factors that can help employees to feel more comfortable to go back to an office building. It would fall on the government rather than employers to determine what health regulations and protocols should be adopted in order for large numbers of workers to return.

Following an abrupt shift to working remotely and having to interact virtually with co-workers most respondents seem to miss in-person interactions and consider that it is easier to collaborate by being physically in the same place. However business travel seems not to be a priority for now, with most respondents still feeling uncomfortable about this.

After this fieldwork for this study ended and as cases increased sharply during December 2020, new and more stringent lockdown measures were adopted in England. It would be advisable to field a second wave of this questionnaire to gauge how perceptions might have shifted following these events.

Another limitation of this methodology is that it does not control for different professions neither accounts for differences between the public and private sector. A further follow up to this questionnaire could either have a controlled sample that will ensure sample quotas for public and private employees. Finally the aspect of mental health is hard to gauge with a quantitative methodology, therefore an additional chapter of this study could consist of anthropological interviews with a smaller sample to dig deeper in the mental impact that working remotely for several months has had on employees.

To conclude the study reveals that when employees return to an office building both workers and employers will have to consider a gradual and flexible approach, ensuring that Government's guidelines and regulations are followed.

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