



Working through the pandemic: Accelerating the transition to remote working

Stephen Phillips

SmartIM Ltd, UK

July 2020

The pandemic has had far-reaching implications for most of us as we adjusted to lockdowns and enforced working from home. There is no doubt they accelerated the adoption of remote working. In 2019, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that while over 30% had the opportunity to work remotely in 2019, less than 6% did so on an ongoing basis. During lockdown, this grew to over 48% according to the ONS.¹ A similar survey by the Chartered Institute for Personnel & Development (CIPD) found 61% of respondents working remotely (Houghton, 2020). The question is, will this lead to widespread, sustained acceptance? Much will depend on the practicalities of remote working, for some industries and activities it is not possible. The ONS found significant variations on remote working by sector in their 2019 survey.

As lockdowns ease, there is talk of the new post pandemic normal. How will organisations adjust their workplace strategy? It is likely that many will adapt to ongoing remote working, but most seem to be considering a partial return to the office where appropriate, using a hybrid model to split the workforce into cohorts to alternate between office and remote. This approach has many benefits. Reducing the number of people travelling to work; mitigates risk of infection while commuting. Enables compliance with social distancing guidance in the office. Improves resilience; any infections can be contained within the cohort. Enables the workforce to flex and adapt as circumstances change. Allows organisations to reconsider their real estate configuration and future requirements.

When considering the longer-term future, it is worth reflecting on the wider economic and societal trends that influence decision-making. Life expectancy has grown significantly over the last 150 years. A child born in 1870 could expect to live no more than 45 years.² The primary factors affecting life expectancy: communicable diseases, infections and child mortality. The second Industrial Revolution (Davis, 2016) saw improvements in sanitation, health services, medical research and production of medicines. Child vaccinations began at scale, Tuberculosis

(1921), Polio (1952) and Measles (1963). Bacterial infections fell with the discovery of penicillin in 1928. As the population aged, non-communicable diseases (cancer, heart disease and Alzheimer's) became primary causes of mortality. In 1962, the Nobel Prize-winning virologist Sir Frank Macfarlane Burnet noted: *'to write about infectious disease is almost to write of something that has passed into history'* (Walsh, 2019).

However, outbreaks of new infectious diseases continued, transferring from other species with devastating effects. Ebola emerged from fruit bats (1976) and HIV1 from chimpanzees (1981). COVID-19 is the latest in a line of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndromes (SARS). Previous strains included H1N1, responsible for Spanish Flu (1918) and Swine Flu (2009); SARS-CoV-1 (2002); H5N1 Avian Flu (2003); and MERS-CoV (2012). Vaccines are still not available for some of these viruses, which the WHO flag as potential causes of future epidemics.

The first reports of SARS-CoV-2 in December 2019 were of a local instance of a new respiratory virus. The ease of transmission, combined with a buoyant global economy and unparalleled mobility of the population escalated the virus to a significant threat. By the end of July 2020 and in just seven months, COVID-19 infected 16 million people and caused 650,000 deaths in 216 countries.³ By way of comparison, 39 years after the first case, HIV accounts for over 80 million infections and 35 million deaths.⁴ While COVID-19 mortality rate is comparatively low, the rate of infection and its long-term impact on life expectancy are concerning. With vaccinations and therapeutics still in development, on 14 May 2020, Dr Michael Ryan, head of the WHO Emergencies Programme stated '... this virus may become just another endemic virus in our communities... this virus may never go away'.⁵

As the world continues through the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2016), COVID-19 has accelerated the

Corresponding author:

Stephen Phillips.

Email: sjp23480@gmail.com

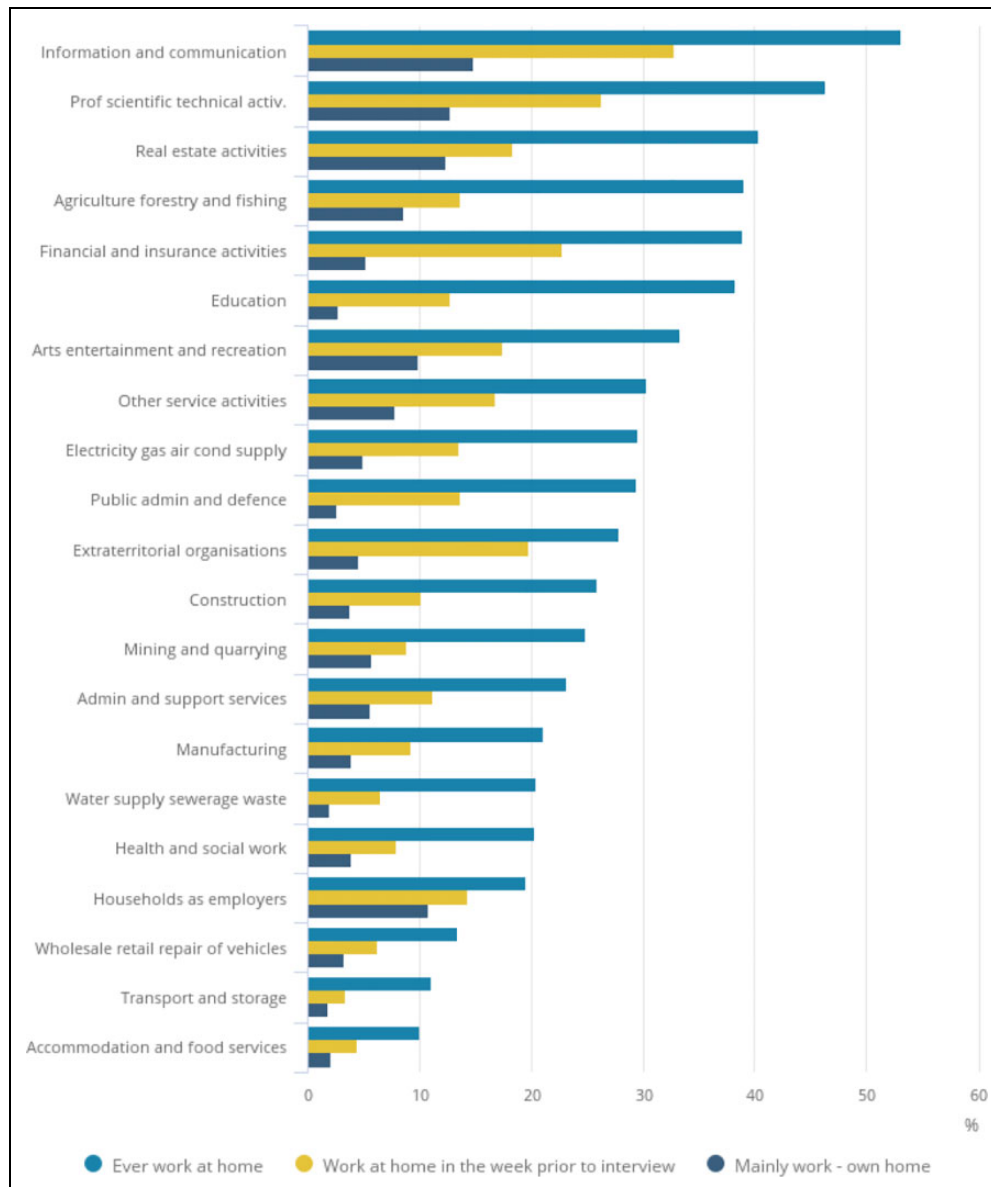


Figure 1. Around one third of employees in the information and communication industry worked from home in the week prior to the survey. Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey. Technology intensity and homeworking in the UK, updated 1 May 2020

trend to develop and sustain an effective and efficient remote workforce. Firstbase founder Chris Herd stated, ‘Office-first companies will be replaced by remote-first ones in the next three years’.

What needs to happen to make this transition successful?

Leadership and management

Effective leadership and management will be essential. Leading and managing remote teams is much like managing any other. Recent trends to embed or regionally deploy staff mean that if you have staff in these settings, you will

likely have some remote management skills. As the proportion and frequency of remote working increases, there is a need to cultivate and nurture traits taken for granted in the office, including processes, camaraderie and culture. To do this, managers must develop the most important qualities to lead a remote workforce: trust, respect, communication, shared values and culture.

Timeliness and dependability are simple but effective ways to engender both trust and respect in the team. Make sure meetings start on time; meet deadlines; be accountable and honour commitments to the team, clients and management. Remote working enables greater flexibility; when team members schedule work around other commitments

and priorities this may lead to irregular working patterns. Those commitments may include childcare, home schooling, or caring for a sick or vulnerable relative. Developing empathy in the team enables everyone to understand one another's situation and avoid possible resentment or guilt of perceived inequalities.

Providing timely and candid feedback is vital to address potential issues quickly before they also become a source of resentment. Encouraging and being ready to receive feedback on the arrangements will engender trust and respect. Be open, honest and transparent about challenges, reflect regularly with the whole team on what is, and is not working as the arrangements evolve.

Some individuals may prefer an office environment, or their home or personal situation may not be conducive to work. The remote manager will support and coach their team to help them understand and adopt good remote working practices, recognising and acknowledging both the physical and mental challenges of adapting to the new normal. The most significant of these is the need to set boundaries. Studies have found that remote workers tend to work up to 20% longer hours (possibly offsetting the loss of their commute) but there is significant risk that they do not switch off, compromising their work life balance. This blurring of the boundaries can be difficult to manage. If remote working is going to be a sustainable option, employees will need the explicit support of their manager to address this issue (Houghton, 2020).

Mental wellbeing has received significant publicity since lockdown but there is emerging evidence that people are settling into the routine of remote working and experiencing a decline in their stressors (Bernstein et al., 2020). It is important to prioritise mental wellbeing, to be continually aware of it and asking colleagues how they are doing. People in difficulty may not want to talk about their struggles, but they will likely exhibit a number of signs. These include poor performance and motivation, missed deadlines or lack of attention to detail; physical changes like lethargy and tiredness, weight fluctuations, headaches or increased sick leave; strained or broken relationships with colleagues or family; poor work/life balance, including working unusual or extended hours and failing to take vacation.⁶ While the workforce may be remote, their employer still has a duty of care for their health, safety and wellbeing.

Office design and ergonomics is something most office workers take for granted, but employers commit significant resources to the office in terms of the furniture, technology and general office environment (see Figure 2). Remote team members may need guidance and financial assistance to set up their physical space, home workstation and associated connectivity. Again, there is anecdotal evidence that organisations are re-allocating budgets to equip employees for remote working.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

Implement a comprehensive communications plan. Given a remote workforce, frequent and effective communication is vital to ensure everyone stays informed and has a shared understanding of the vision and purpose. The plan should include:

- Frequent and regular formal meetings for the whole team
- Frequent and regular subgroup/workgroup meetings
- Frequent and regular one to one sessions

All formal meetings should have a purpose and agenda. Recording, documenting or transcribing meetings will allow asynchronous communication with those individuals unable to attend. Stay nimble, formal meetings may be longer and more frequent at the start, but settle into a different rhythm once things settle down.

Social connections between co-workers are vital for building trust within the team. Creating informal meeting opportunities replaces the organic conversations of onsite teams. People with genuine friends at work are more likely to enjoy their job and perform well. Despite the social nature of these engagements there needs to be intent to drive these conversations, they do not happen naturally in remote teams. Ensure you make time for virtual coffees for the team with no formal agenda other than to talk about their life outside work. Encourage everyone to leverage available platforms to facilitate communication. Some organisations have seen employees using enterprise social networks to give insights that are more personal and bring their 'whole selves' to work.

The CIPD survey (Houghton, 2020) found that widespread adoption of collaborative technology has improved team dynamics. Louder individuals tend to dominate in person meetings, while less vocal members of the team tend not to contribute. Phone or video meetings have levelled the playing field; participants are more respectful of one another, which gives space for the quieter members of the team to contribute.

'The faintest ink is better than the best memory', Chinese proverb

As previously mentioned, maintaining effective documentation is essential for a remote workforce. Working onsite tends to encourage a 'high context culture'; communication is largely verbal, accompanied by a complex range of non-verbal cues including facial expressions, gestures, intonation and relationships. These cues are less accessible to a remote workforce, so it is important to nurture a low-context communication culture. Communication needs to be direct, explicit and precise, but this relies heavily on an individual's ability to capture the essence of their message

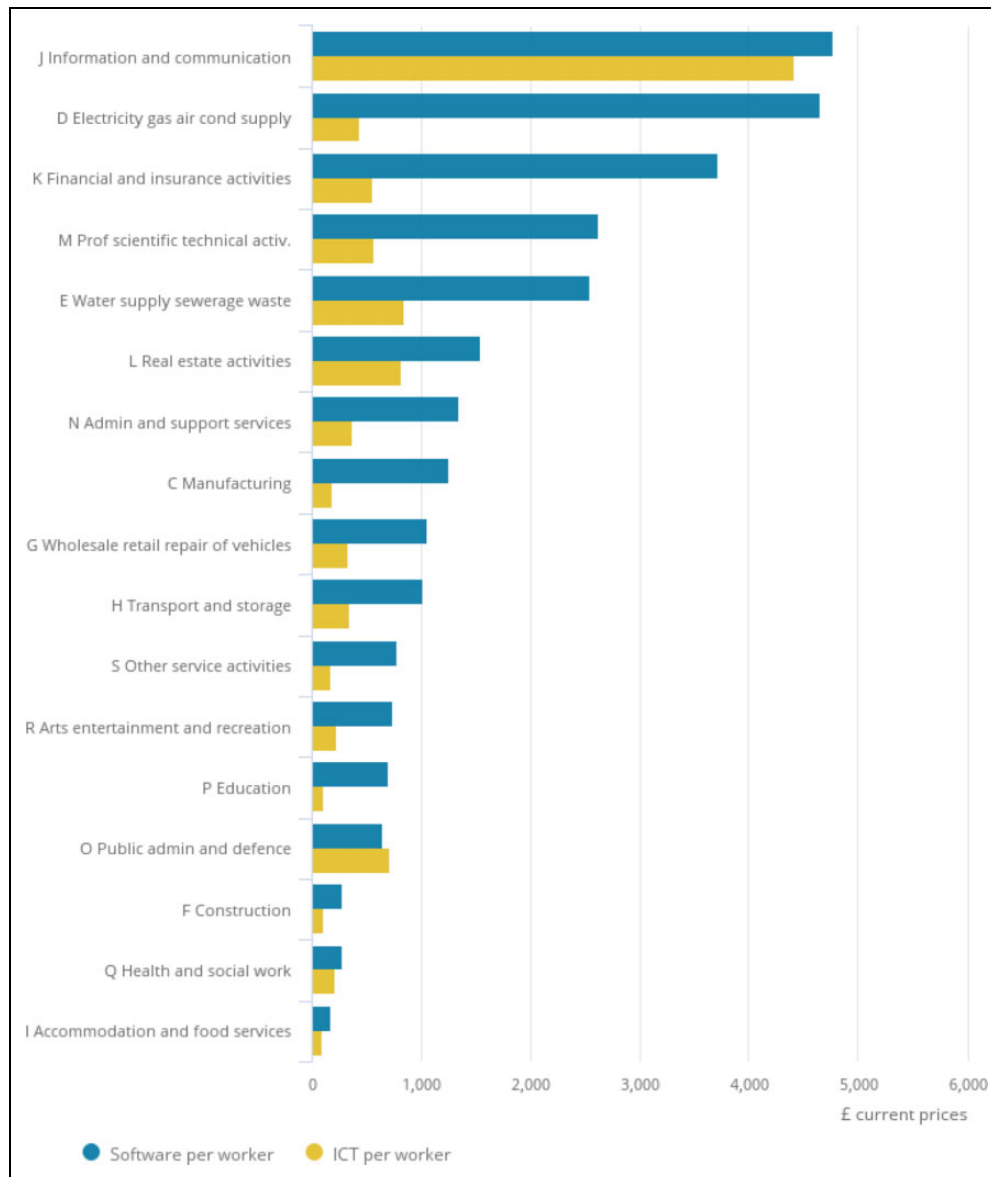


Figure 2. The information and communication industry invested almost double that of the utilities industry on information and communication technology and software assets per worker. *Source:* Office for National Statistics – gross fixed capital formation. Technology intensity and homeworking in the UK, updated 1 May 2020

and convey it accordingly. This can be challenging to master and may require training and support.

When compiling documentation, a useful first step is to assume your audience knows nothing about a topic but want to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible. Achieving precision requires you to put yourself in the other person's shoes and understand their perspective. Take time to be deliberate, give yourself time to read and reflect on the documentation to ensure it is direct, explicit and precise. Winston Churchill once said, 'This report, by its very length, defends itself against the risk of being read'.

Documentation or text-based communication is inclusive and enables remote teams to work asynchronously. A single

point of reference for the team provides one place for guidance on policy, process and procedures. This 'golden source' ensures consistency and enables efficient working environments by reducing duplication or rediscovery of existing processes. Documentation should enable the team to understand who is responsible for specific tasks and the reasoning behind specific decisions. Once documentation is in place, you should encourage the team to adopt a self-service and self-learning mentality. This will help ensure all members of the team invest in the documentation to ensure the ecosystem will function on a sustainable basis. A good example of why effective information and knowledge management will be a key part of remote working strategy.

Shared culture and values

One of the biggest challenges of remote working is sustaining workplace culture. Values drive a strong culture, most organisations clearly state their values but these need to be more than just words if they are to be effective. It may be necessary to translate those values for employees to help them understand how they apply to them and a remote setting. Consistent values will align the whole team on how to prosecute their business and resolve challenges or issues.

Whatever behaviour an organisation rewards will become that organisation's values. Those values may evidence themselves in a number of ways, including how leadership behaves, during the hiring process, when onboarding new staff, behaviours we compliment or give feedback on, criteria used for compensation and promotion decisions, managing underperformance, and when the organisation lets people go. Do not take culture for granted; it is easy to lose sight of the culture when working remotely. The HBR found that it requires intentional work to reinforce values across the whole team (Bernstein et al., 2020).

Critical or persistently negative feedback can erode culture and create apathy ('nothing I ever do is good enough'). Make sure any negative feedback is specific and provides actionable insights to help the recipient address the issue. Remote workers can feel isolated and unappreciated, as much of what they do can go unnoticed. It is particularly important for their manager to build a more detailed insight into the work of their people, it is also important for the remote workers to be more forthcoming with their achievements as there may be fewer opportunities to discover these things serendipitously. Managers should give praise for stand out performance and express gratitude by recognising contributions. Calling out achievements to the rest of the team helps build morale and keeps the wider group aware of their co-workers activities and contributions. It is important to be consistent with the whole team to prevent individuals feeling neglected or unappreciated, given the negative connotations for morale and their well-being. Once again, documenting the rules that engender a remote working culture is useful, helping to set expectations and ensuring consistency across the team.

Interestingly, previous studies found that when only some employees are remote they tend to feel left out, less respected and have less affinity for the organisation. In lockdown, remote workers are no longer the minority, so teams and organisations have come together to establish new conventions and adapt their culture to remote working (Bernstein et al., 2020).

What next?

We continue to figure out the long-term implications of COVID-19 and the workplace. Early indications suggest most organisations recognise the benefits of remote

working. Many are instructing those that can to continue well into 2021, some are making it a permanent option. Maintaining the efficiency and effectiveness of the workforce is critical and early indications suggest that productivity and efficiency have not suffered (Bernstein et al., 2020). There appear to be few compelling reasons to revert to a 100% office bound model, although most organisations will likely adopt the hybrid approach.

Knowledge and information managers will have key roles if the organisation is successfully maintain the new model. Firstly, they will need to ensure their own teams' efficacy in a remote setting. With this in place they can use their expertise will help the wider organisation by providing oversight and governance for its collaborative platforms. These will help convey the culture, ethos and values to the workforce, as well as making information and documentation accessible at the point of need.

Notes

1. Technology intensity and homeworking in the UK: recent trends and insights into technology as an enabler for homeworking. Analysis considers differences in technology usage across industries. Office for National Statistics, 1 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/technologyintensityandhomeworkingintheuk/2020-05-01> (accessed 6 August 2020).
2. How has life expectancy changed over time? Office for National Statistics, 9 September 2015. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/articles/howhaslifeexpectancychangedovertime/2015-09-09> (accessed 4 August 2020).
3. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. WHO, 31 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019> (accessed 2 August 2020).
4. WHO Factsheet: HIV/AIDS. 6 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/hiv-aids> (accessed 28 July 2020).
5. Virtual Press Conference, 13 May 2020. Dr Michael Ryan. Available at: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronavirus/transcripts/who-pressconference-13may2020.pdf?sfvrsn=ee0d2cde_2 (accessed 4 August 2020).
6. Remote working resources. Mental Health First Aid England. Available at: <https://mhfaengland.org/remote-working-resources/everyone/> (accessed 28 July 2020).

References

- Bernstein E, Blunden H, Brodsky A, et al. (2020) The implications of working without an office. *Harvard Business Review*, 15 July. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2020/07/the-implications-of-working-without-an-office/> (accessed 2 August 2020).
- Davis N (2016) What is the fourth industrial revolution? 19 January. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/what-is-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/> (accessed 28 July 2020).

- Houghton E (2020) Coronavirus and the workforce: working from home in the 'new normal': the pros and cons of using digital technologies to work from home during COVID-19. *Chartered Institute of Personnel Development*, 2 July. Available at: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/news-views/changing-work-views/future-work/thought-pieces/coronavirus-working-home/> (accessed 6 August 2020).
- Schwab K (2016) The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond. *World Economic Forum*, 14 January. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/> (accessed 28 July 2020).
- Walsh B (2019) *End Times: A Brief Guide to the End of the World*. New York: Hachette. ISBN: 97-80316449618.

Author biography

Stephen Phillips is an information manager with over 30 years-experience. Most recently, he was Global Head of Business Information at an international investment bank. In 2020, he founded SmartIM, a consultancy focusing on information management and strategic sourcing of third party data products. He has presented at numerous industry conferences and contributed to *Business Information Review*, CILIP Information Professional, SLA Information Outlook and the *Emerald Handbook of Modern Information Management*. He is Vice Chair of the CILIP Knowledge & Information Management Special Interest Group and past president of the European Chapter of SLA.