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THE FUTURE OF WORK
BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

∧ As the practice of flexible working evolves for organisations and their staff, there are inevitably consequences for transport

The future of work beyond the pandemic

Author **Glenn Lyons**

In October 2021, the PTRC Fireside Chat series returned after a summer break.

Continuing with its overall focus on the transport implications of the pandemic, attention turned to whether or not we should be expecting a big return to the office for knowledge workers as we see Covid-19 restrictions on our lives being eased. With over 140 people joining us for the event, I had the pleasure of chairing a discussion on the topic involving the excellent panel:

- **Jo Bacon**, Head of Behavioural Science, Department for Transport
- **Halina Jaroszewska**, Executive Coach
- **Jonathan Bray**, Director, Urban Transport Group
- **Meleiha Youngs**, Head of Impact, The Liftshare Group
- **Alan Felstead**, Research Professor, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University.

What follows is an account of some of the key points that stood out for me and thoughts that were provoked, having had the privilege of exploring the topic with the panel and questions from our audience.

From backwater to torrent

Interest in homeworking or teleworking has been longstanding and stretches back at least to the 1970s, possibly further, yet it has spent much of its history in the backwaters of research and policy, with a slow pace of development and take up. My own first day of homeworking was in 1995.

The rapidly maturing digital age progressively unlocked more flexibility of working for some as the technological means of working differently shaped where, when and how we could and did work. According to the National Travel Survey for England, between 1997 and 2017 the average number of commuting trips per person per year went down by nearly a fifth and business trips by over a quarter. Changing working practices were changing work-related travel. Change has been incremental, if powerfully cumulative. It has been evolutionary. Then the working revolution of 2020 arrived, as we were all thrown into a global behaviour change experiment. It was like the flick of a switch as lockdown was imposed on us. The virus shocked us, perhaps providing a chance to break free from the slumber of the long-established rituals of working life for the masses.
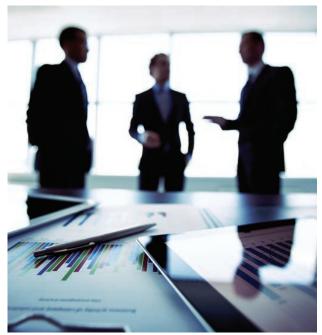
Adaptation on an unprecedented scale

In April 2020, an AA survey of 20,000 drivers in the UK revealed that of those still working during lockdown, 43% were working five or more days from home, compared to only 8% before lockdown. A YouGov survey of around 5000 adults in Britain in September 2020 found that 48% of workers were working from home all of the time or some of the time during the period 2nd–6th September.

Media interest in working practices surged as a huge part of the population, especially that associated with knowledge work, adjusted to a new formula of work and home life. The change was abrupt. Organisations had to adapt rapidly alongside their employees. Some people adapted better than others, depending on: the home environment; household composition; available equipment for work; quality and reliability of digital connectivity; and prior experience of and appetite for working from home. In some cases the change provided the gift of time, with the disappearance of commuting. Meanwhile, caring responsibilities and home schooling needed to be accommodated alongside work. There were winners and losers. Mental health was put to the test.

Unlike other disruptions we have seen to the functioning of society in recent times – for example, the fuel tax protests in 2000 – this has not proved to be a short-lived behaviour change experiment. It has lasted for some 18 months and is indeed ongoing for many people. Such a span of time has allowed, if not required, us to adapt and evolve, equipping ourselves with new skills and adjusting to new norms of work behaviour alongside making adjustments to our home-work environments. Organisations and individuals have normalised online working environments for sharing and working on documents, for workshops, events and correspondence. People have come to terms with what they like and do not like about the way of work they have had to adopt, and been able to judge how it is affecting their productivity. The change in working has of course brought about consequences for travel and transport, affecting people's need for and/or willingness to use public transport and to share car journeys. It has also affected and is affecting our towns and cities.

Thinking through what lies ahead

What then of the outlook? This was a large part of the Fireside Chat discussion, from which I draw out eight themes.

∧ The past arrangement of labour and working practice has been a product of gender

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1. Hybridising work

The workforce is diverse, even within the knowledge economy, and different ways of working suit different people. A UK survey of UK knowledge workers in February 2021 from Claromentis suggested: 'almost 73% of UK knowledge workers want a hybrid arrangement, splitting their time between home and the office'. It would seem there is no going back; the genie is out of the bottle. Some employers have seemed to signal a 'back to business' mantra, espousing the values of co-location for productivity, career development and wellbeing. Perhaps the more mindful mantra is 'your work, your way', seeking to accommodate employees' preferences for where, when and how they think they work best. There are already signs of employers redistributing the geographic choice of offices open to individuals to use flexibly. Expectations or guidance on the office-home balance of work are also being more flexibly specified – for example, moving from two days a week to eight days a month.

< Large urban centres have been hit hard by the pandemic

2. Rethinking transport

As the practice of flexible working evolves for organisations and their staff, there are inevitably consequences for transport. The patterns of demand for public transport have changed and continue to change. Total demand may change, as well as distribution of demand across the day and across different days of the week. Mondays and Fridays seem prime candidates for lower demand, with weekend demand a potential beneficiary in terms of increased leisure travel. Those providing transport services need a flexible offer corresponding to the new flexibility of work, as well as to new imperatives for addressing climate change – for example, emerging from the pandemic, Liftshare.com has a zero commute mission, recognising that commuting may not always take place, but when it does it needs to happen in the most sustainable way. Flexibility requirements may play to the hoped for strengths of mobility-as-a-service – individuals' usership of transport modes as opposed to ownership of vehicles.

3. Balancing tactical and strategic planning

When Covid-19 flicked the switch on our ways of living and working, individuals and organisations faced a need in the first instance to plan tactically: how to cope financially, how to keep food on the table, how to keep the wheels turning in the case of public transport operators. This might be called muddling along. However, because the switch is never going to be flicked back the other way, individuals and organisations also need to be able to create the headspace to be able to think and plan strategically about the future: where to live, how to work, who to work for, what type of business to run, what type of working practices and office provision to have, what form of transport services to provide. In tactical and strategic planning, uncertainty is faced in how things are changing, might change and could be changed. Change is the new constant and puts new pressures on planning effectively.

4. Changing economic geography

Large urban centres have been hit hard by the pandemic. Used to a daily influx of knowledge workers that help urban economic life to flourish, their vitality has been diminished. Not surprisingly, there has been a wish to see this reversed. However, this may not be altogether compatible with hybrid ways of working, for which strong demand seems to exist. Meanwhile, in smaller urban areas where the makeup of the labour force is different (car led), vitality has returned as people have come back to work and high streets are busy (or busier). Is there now the prospect of a longer term redistribution of population and economic activity? As organisations and individuals turn towards more strategic planning, locations outside the large urban areas may be more affordable and accommodating of the flexibility of working and living that is sought. Perhaps a levelling-up dynamic is in the offing, though there might also be new issues of gentrification distributional impacts from changing property prices and rents.

5. Disrupting housing

While we have tended to focus upon the disruptive implications for our lives and mobility systems of technological innovations from Silicon Valley, perhaps a new target for disruption now exists or should exist, namely, the planning sector, and housing in particular. Not only should housing provision have transport access in mind – and we still look forward to an end to housing estates that bake in car dependence – but it should also have working provision in mind. How suitable is the current housing stock for people's flexible working needs in terms of appropriate space and digital connectivity? Buyers and renters may now have a significantly changed set of requirements when looking for places to live and work.

6. Changing mindsets

Such issues as those above are pointing towards some quite fundamental changes in future expectations and dynamics. Attention turns next to asking how well equipped some of today's organisational leaders are to rise to the challenges and opportunities that are presented. It would be a concern if they were planning on doing what they always did and getting what they always got, in other words acting with yesterday's logic in planning for a different tomorrow. Cognitive fluency is the unconscious bias that reflects finding things more believable if they are more understandable. Will minds be open to it being the less understandable dynamics that require more, rather than less attention being paid to them when planning?

7. Creating inclusive cooperation

The balance of power in determining the future of work is something that needs to change. Where the notional old guard of the past had top-down control over working practice, there is instead a need and opportunity for a more democratic and cooperative approach. An article by Deloitte: 'Returning to work in the future of work', challenges organisations to seek insight from their employees and embrace, understand and shape the new dynamics of work: 'Rather than shrinking from, or preparing to fight, the oncoming storm of change, they [leading organisations] draw energy from it. In the context of Covid-19, they will leverage the opportunity to return to work by designing the future of work.' The past arrangement of labour and working practice has been a product of gender – typically male dominant. Now is the time, following the great reset, for this to change; the diversity of the workforce must have a say in shaping the future of work. Shaping this future must also recognise that 'your work, your way' could lead to winners and losers. Cooperative behaviour that respects the collective good is therefore important.

8. Understanding immobility

Reflecting upon pre-pandemic working practices from a transport planning perspective, it seems we were neglectful of the central tenet of transport planning, namely that travel is a derived demand. Relatively little attention was paid, in terms of research and policy formulation, to understanding how and why working practices were changing as a route to understanding and influencing travel patterns. In some respects, perhaps the slate has been wiped clean by the shock of and changes brought about to working by the pandemic. Nevertheless, we should recognise the need to devote more attention to this. In short, a rebalancing of our analytical effort between work related travel and the immobility of work is needed

In conclusion

A discussion on a topic such as this could not have hoped to come to any firm conclusions. It was instead a chance to explore possibilities for what could or should lie ahead. There are innumerable questions to consider and finding their answers in many cases amounts to trying to hit moving targets. What is clear is that the sleeping giant of flexible working has finally been woken.

My thanks to our panel and audience for making this yet another stimulating Fireside Chat and one that was personally rewarding.

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