

The Office We Need: Heading Back in a Pandemic

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People lacking space, equipment, and carers disproportionately affected by working from home

57% of workers want to choose where to work to be the most productive

Chris Biggs, Partner at accounting firm Theta Global Advisors, discusses why flexibility is now a must not an option for productivity and mental health.

In January, over one third of British workers worked exclusively from home according to the ONS, and many of the largest British firms have no plans to return staff to the office in the new future according to a BBC survey. Therefore, these conditions are set to continue, with Theta's research showing that almost two thirds of people do not want to go back to normal ways of working in an office environment with normal office hours.

However, the UK workforce is most definitely divided, and for some, lockdown conditions have proven to be been purgatory – with an office environment providing invaluable resources, space, and time away from homely responsibilities. The University

of Oxford found that parents are experiencing significant mental health issues due to lockdown and the balancing act it requires, and according to the Covid-19 module from the UK Household Longitudinal Survey, people who don't have access to effective equipment, sufficient space, or those who have caring responsibilities, are struggling to stay productive, which is negatively impacting their mental health.

Whether this is because they are having to home school children, or because they lack a strong WIFI and phone signal, the office is a vital resource for many people. To ensure people are at their happiest and most productive, flexibility is needed in both where and when they work. Freedom from the office must also mean freedom to go to the office to avoid unfairly burdening those that are struggling in the current conditions.

Theta, a global accounting and advisory firm, have commissioned nationally representative research that shows:

- 35% of Brits say going back to work in a traditional office environment will have a negative impact of their mental health, which in turn will negatively affect their productivity – 6,969,000 people
- 57% of people do not want to go back to the normal inflexible ways of working
- 65% of Brits do not feel comfortable commuting to work via public transport anymore and think it will be one of the most stressful parts of their day – 13,257,000 people

Chris Biggs, an accounting and consultancy disruptor has commented:

“With companies adopting new policies and a substantial number of the workforce not wanting to return, as well as the Government’s expansion of the Covid testing regime, it seems it will be a while until offices look like they did in 2019.

To many people, this is great news, however to others, not having access to an office is a substantial burden and adds difficulties and stresses to other areas of their lives. Having a lack of personal space, effective equipment, or internet, or having caring duties, are issues predominately felt by some far more than others, and this shows that offices are vital for some people, even if many others enjoy working from home.

In our haste to praise the new conditions, we must not forget those who benefit from or need the office; it provides a vital function in our economy and society. What we need is for businesses, organisations, and companies to cater to everyone – by providing an office space, and the structured flexibility to allow people to use it if they need or want it.”