The end of "commuter society"?

…a few thoughts on remote working

By Tom Hayes

Last January we watched in horror as Australia burned. A fire that could not be controlled ripped the heart out of community after community in New South Wales and Victoria. Places I knew by name from my many visits were wiped out, families left destitute. The politics of global warming looked set to dominate discussions in 2020. Little did we know what was coming next.

While the fires were raging, a virus was making its way out of China, unknown, unseen. Covid19 has changed the way we live and work, forever. The world of 2019, of international travel, meetings, conferences, commuting, socialising after hours in a pub or restaurant, the closeness of others, the hug, the kiss, even the handshake, now seem like a galaxy far, far away, as the virus has wrought havoc across the world.

A change that was due?

Within an instant, cities were closed, offices emptied, all but essential factories shuttered. Working from home (WFH) became the norm for those who could, furlough for those who could not in Europe, unemployment on enhanced benefits in the US.

When it came to working from home, people adapted, and adapted quickly. Those lucky enough to be able to do so, turned spare bedrooms into temporary offices. Others had to make do with the kitchen table or find a space somewhere in the house from which they could work. Corners were cut in emergency circumstances to keep things moving.

As we look forward, it is unlikely that office-based work, as we have known it until now, will still exist. In ten years' time will we look back at film clips of crowded commuter trains and kilometre-long traffic jams and tailbacks and ask: "Did we really live like that?" Why did we waste so much time just travelling to work?

What we are now seeing with Covid19 is not the end of "office work". Such work is still being done today and will still be very much needed in the future. It is what makes our societies work and holds them together.

Instead, what we are seeing is the end of the centralised office and "commuter society". It probably would have happened anyway, but Covid 19 has acted as a great accelerator, just as other great disruptions, such as WWI and WWII, speeded up technological and social change that was already in train.

Workers who have experienced the benefits of remote working, the ending of the draining *get up at 5 or 6, get organised, get the kids ready for school, not forgetting to feed the dog, do the school run, then drive on to work or get to the train station on time* routine, will have no desire to go back to that. In the words of the old WWI song: *"How are you going to keep them down on the farm, now that they have seen Paris?"*

A new work/life balance?

Covid19 has shown that a new work/life balance can be struck. The genie is out of the bottle and will not be going back in.

Instead of the "centralised office", a great big building located in a dense city centre, to which workers must commute daily, we will move to a hybrid system, a hub and spoke system, if you will. There will still be a centre, a hub, which people may travel to once or twice a week, but no longer daily. But more and more people will work remotely at the end of the "spokes". And, at the end of the spokes, there will be a plethora of different workplaces.

Some companies may have a series of regional workspaces, complete with high-end conference facilities, where employees drop in for complex conference calls, to meet colleagues or for some quiet space in which to work. Other companies will simply allow people to work remotely, whether that be from home or from a new generation of "internet cafes", which will also serve as social clubs, helping to break the isolation of working from home.

Because they will only have to travel to the "hub" once a week, they will look at where they live. Why have a small, cramped apartment or house to be as near to the office as you can be, when you can have more living space elsewhere, connected to fibre optic cable or the emerging 5G networks?

People and businesses will adapt. New businesses will emerge to service the new work architecture. Existing businesses will adapt also. For example, local hotels could change redundant conference facilities into internet cafes, offering access on a range of terms, including, perhaps, access to leisure facilities.

Yes, many businesses operating in city centres will suffer, cafes, restaurants, sandwich bars, dry cleaners, and others. Hardest hit will be the owners of soon to be permanently empty large office blocks. But there is no obligation, moral or otherwise, on employers or employees to organise work in such a way as to underwrite the economic interests of third parties. Businesses and their employees must be free to structure work in whatever way they find most efficient and advantageous.

If city centres lose out, then local town centres may benefit as more and more people eat and shop locally. That is the nature of economic life, what has been called "creative destruction". For example, if sandwich bars and retail outlets in city centres have lost out, how many jobs has Amazon, and others, created as online shopping has boomed?

Learning by osmosis?

Of course, remote/hybrid working will bring new problems and issues that will need to be addressed. For example, my colleague, Rick Warters, former VP for Global Labor Relations at UTC, points out:

> *Many newer entrants to the workforce expect/need to be told very specifically what to do. They do what they're told and stop... waiting to be told what to do next. "I did what you asked."*

> *That's fine when remote work is transactional, but true knowledge work demands more. Many of us "apprenticed" by watching what worked around us. Who got recognized and rewarded? What did they do? How did they do it? We carried their bags, listened to their stories, and watched them in their interactions with the bosses, their peers, and their adversaries. There wasn't a training program. We learned by witnessing how things really got done. How do you replicate that?*

What Rick says is undoubtedly true, indeed many of us learnt our tradecraft exactly as he describes. We can't recreate the past, but we can fashion the future and we will need to think about how we can pass on the organisation's culture, values, language and ways on working to newcomers.

Which is not to say it will be easy, but neither was any other economic paradigm shift. Answers will be found once the questions are identified. That is what human progress is about. But the problems should not be underestimated. "Learning by osmosis", as described by Rick, cannot be replicated online or remotely.

Jobs at Risk?

Let's dismiss one alleged problem for a start. Claims in the UK press in recent weeks that "working from home will put your job at risk" misstates the issue. If your job is at risk, your job is at risk, no matter where you work.

Again, as Warters puts it: *"Oh, and once your employer wakes to the fact that your work can be done virtually from anywhere, your employment is definitely at greater risk than it was when your competition was only the local labour market. It's supply and demand for knowledge work on a global basis."*

True, but if your job can be outsourced and offshored it is going to happen if it makes business sense, no matter where you are working from.

Employment law framework?

"Jobs at risk" brings us neatly to the issue of the employment law framework that will govern remote working. This paper is focused on Europe with its tradition of robust employment laws, but the questions will be the same elsewhere, even if the answers are different.

The issues that will come into focus include:

- How is the infrastructure of remote working to be paid for? Who pays for computers, internet connections, office furniture and office supplies, and whatever else may be required?

- What about the extra costs of home heating if employees are working from home? If employees had enjoyed subsidised meals at work, should they be provided with meal allowances while working from home? Conversely, what happens if travel allowances/subsidised travel are no longer needed?

- Taking the first two bullet points together leads to the question: *What is an appropriate benefit package for remote workers?*

- There are also significant data protection and data security issues to be considered. Inevitably, connections from home will be less secure than connection in the workplace. How is sensitive data to be properly protected? How vulnerable will computers be to hacking and attacks? Further, will companies insist that tracking and surveillance software be installed, including the use of cameras, to monitor performance?

- Employers have a duty to ensure that workers have a workplace that conforms to health and safety regulations. How is this to be guaranteed? To put it simply. If you are working from home and you trip over the dog while making a coffee, is that an industrial accident? Does this take us into supply chain territory: if an electrical overload burns down a home office with fatal consequences, how far is the employer liable? What does home working mean for home insurance and, again, who pays if there are extra costs?

- What about working time and stress? Many years ago, I once heard someone remark that if you work in a virtual office, how do you ever leave it? Already, there are demands for a European law on the right to disconnect. These will become even more pronounced as remote working becomes part of the organisational paradigm.

- But the working time issues cuts two ways. If you are working from home then it is close to impossible to insulate yourself from what else is going on in the house. Another colleague, Robbie Gilbert, posed the question: *"For example, if your partner loads the washing machine before he or she heads off to do some shopping do you empty it and hang it out when the machine finishes?* In other words, how do you draw dividing lines?"* Do we need to acknowledge that working from home means that "home" and "work" are now inextricably mixed and cannot be unmixed?

- We are social beings, used to the company of others. What impact will remote working have on mental health if workers find themselves working increasingly alone? **See** this.

- Will businesses continue to see remote workers as employees, or will they be moved towards contractor status?

- How to you recruit, onboard, and train remote workers, to return to Warters point?

- How do you deal with issues of employee representation, which has traditionally been based on the collectivism of the workplace? How do remote workers elect or relate to members of works councils or other representative bodies if they have never met, or only meet infrequently?

- How does management structure dialogue with works councils and other representative bodies when workers can be scattered across the country, or even across countries?

Put it all together, and when it comes to remote working, we will need a fundamental rethink of the labour and employment law framework, which was largely designed with a "9 to 5", fixed workplace in mind. The list above is not exhaustive and there are other issues that will surface as work gets reorganised.

As I finish writing this piece on the morning of August 31, the *Times* has an article headed *Coronavirus: reluctant office staff defy government call to commute.* The *Financial Times* reports:

> *Several of the UK's biggest banks are converting underused parts of their high street branches into office space as an alternative to bringing staff back to larger buildings and high-rise headquarters during the pandemic.*

Also, see this from the *Times.* The change is underway, and it is unlikely to be stopped or reversed.

Oh, and "Australia burning" is not going away. Climate change remains a bigger problem than Covid19. A big part of the answer to that may also require the demise of commuting.

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