

Travel behaviour

Has the daily commute to work become a thing of the past?

Alan Felstead discusses his long-standing interest in remote working and its implications for travel in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic

Travel patterns of the past have been thrown up in the air in the last 20 months. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, commuting to work fell off a cliff and is struggling to return to pre-pandemic levels, especially in large cities. Behind these trends has been the vast movement of work away from traditional places – such as offices in city centres – towards spare bedrooms, kitchen tables and sofas in people’s homes.

Working at home was growing well before the pandemic began, but the rate of change was slow and gradual. For example, it was relatively rare in the early 1980s when only 2% of those in employment in the UK reported working mainly at home. By 2019, it had only risen to 5%. It had taken 40 years to rise by a mere three percentage points.

The pandemic turbo-charged this shift. The proportion of people reporting working at home rose to 43% almost overnight as lockdown restrictions were introduced across the UK. At its height 12 million people were working exclusively at home. Despite the relaxation of government restrictions, the latest official figures suggest that 30% of workers are still working at home because of coronavirus. That, of course, means that they are not commuting to work, but are instead walking a matter of feet to their new places of work.

The big question is: will these patterns stick after the pandemic is well and truly behind us? While it is still too early to provide a definitive answer, the evidence suggests that working at home will not revert back to its pre-pandemic level.

We have faced potential tipping points in the past, but they were short-lived shocks to our way of life. For example, in 2000 farmers and lorry drivers blockaded refineries in protest against rises in fuel prices. Seizing an opportunity to sell more of its services, British Telecom – the largest provider of telephone services at the time – took out newspaper adverts encouraging people to work at home. To save on fuel, many did just that, but the crisis lasted just eight days. The dispute was resolved and everyone quickly went back to work.

This time, circumstances are very different. To get a grip on the spread of coronavirus, the instruction and then advice to work



at home if you can has remained in place for months, not days. This has come from governments seeking to save lives and not from companies seeking to make a quick profit. The message has been more powerful.

Employees and employers have had much longer to get accustomed to this new way of working. Many people have been working at home for the first time, often because they were previously not trusted to work off-premises. This was born out of the ‘if they can’t be seen, they must be slacking!’ mentality. Employers, too, have got used to managing their staff remotely. On the whole, employee productivity has not worsened.

Technology has made working at home easier for managers and employees. It is easy to forget that the iPhone was launched in 2007. The ability to make video calls was added three years later – in 2010. Holding video conferences with multiple callers on a laptop, smartphone or tablet is a more recent innovation. Zoom was launched in April 2011, Google Meet in February 2017 and Teams was unveiled a month later.

However, working in an office with others close by does have benefits that we cannot recreate online, despite our best efforts. Social bonding, incidental learning, being visible and serendipitous knowledge

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exchange are all best achieved by being in the same space. It is for these reasons that hybrid working is getting a lot of attention as workers and employers try to harness the best of both worlds.

Commuters into and out of large cities are unlikely to return to their pre-pandemic levels. Instead, they are likely to become more infrequent and longer as workers move out of large cities in favour of more spacious homes in the suburbs or further afield.

On the other hand, travel within smaller areas is likely to rise as workers satisfy their needs by popping out for a sandwich, getting a haircut or doing some retail therapy in nearby neighbourhoods. While this may entail getting in the car or on the bus, it might also include walking and cycling. While it is still too early to make precise predictions, it is certain that the world of work has changed in ways which will have profound implications for patterns of travel in the years ahead with the daily commute a thing of the past for many.

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