

REMOTE WORKING 2020: ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES



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Introduction

Remote working is now widely recognised as part of the way businesses operate.

According to a 2019 report by the International Workplace Group, almost two-thirds of companies worldwide have a flexible workspace policy¹. In Europe, German businesses are the most accepting of flexible working (80% have a flexible working policy), and while those in Belgium are the least accepting, those that allow flexible working are still in the majority (53%). The UK sits somewhere in between, with just over two-thirds of companies (68%) offering flexible working.

Despite this widespread acceptance, however, every business looking at teleworking still faces the same questions. How will it impact productivity? How will employees respond? What new challenges does a remote workforce create? What additional IT support and technology will be needed?

Similarly, employees unfamiliar with remote working will be concerned about the effects of not spending so much time in their office, about whether they'll be able to motivate themselves, and about whether their boss will think they're working hard enough. They may also worry about having access to the tools, information and resources they need to do their job properly in a remote location.

This research set out to examine the importance of all these questions. Because the survey coincided with the period in spring 2020 when European countries were locked down to prevent the spread of Covid-19, responses came from across the spectrum of remote working experiences. As a result, the survey gives a comprehensive picture of employee feelings, from those who were already committed to remote working to those whose situation would discourage them from trying it in normal circumstances.



METHODOLOGY

The Remote Working 2020 report is based on a survey of 531 EMEA business professionals currently working remotely from home, conducted in the second half of April 2020. Respondents included those working in a range of business functions. The survey was publicised by London Research, its sister company Digital Doughnut and a third-party research panel provider.

1

Working patterns



36% of respondents say they are more productive working from home, compared to **27%** who say they are less so.



Over half (**59%**) say they've had to change their working hours as a result of working from home.

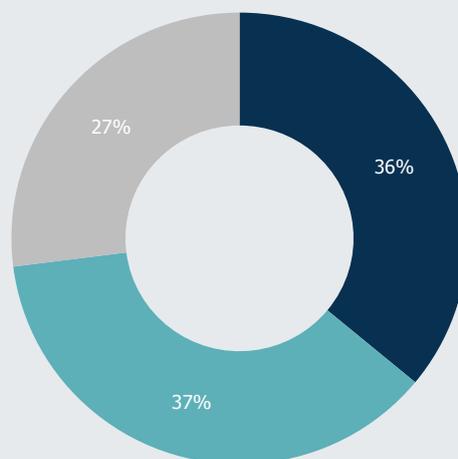


The most common change to people's working hours is to start earlier and finish later, with more time off during the day (**31%**).

One of the biggest question marks around remote working is whether people are more or less productive when working from home. The results of this survey show that, overall, people feel they are slightly more so (*Figure 1*). Just over a third (36%) said they felt they were more productive, compared to just over a quarter (27%) who felt they were less so.

FIGURE 1

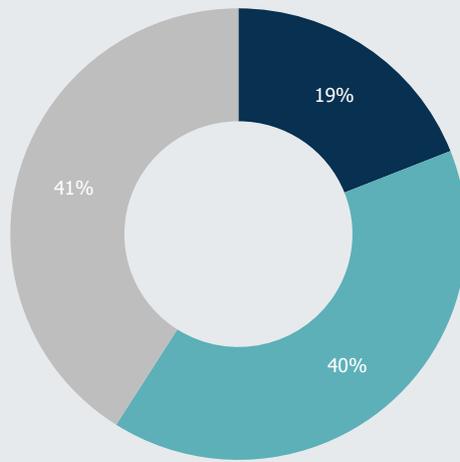
Do you feel you are working more or less productively as a result of remote working?



More than a third (36%) of respondents say they are more productive working remotely, compared to around a quarter (27%) who are less productive.

● More productively
● About the same
● Less productively

FIGURE 2
Have you had to change your day-to-day working hours as a result of remote working?



The majority of remote workers (59%) say their working hours have changed.

- Yes, significantly
- Yes, slightly
- No, the same working hours

Digging deeper into the results suggests that, in fact, companies could expect a greater productivity lift from staff working at home under more normal circumstances. Many of the survey respondents said they were having to combine home working with childcare and home schooling, for example. Others reported having to cope with domestic circumstances that were less than ideal for home working, such as insufficient space, no proper desk or a poor internet connection. A planned adoption of home working would mean people in unsuitable situations would be able to opt out, increasing the percentage who would feel they were more productive at home.

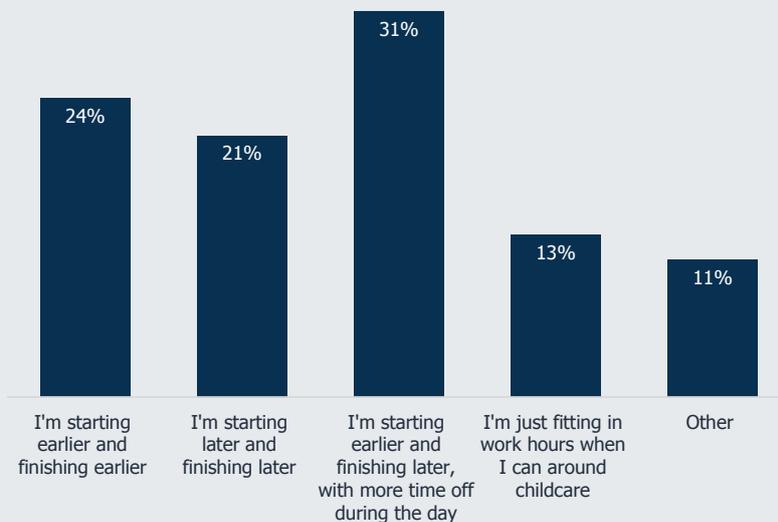
This split can also be seen in the way people said their day-to-day working hours had changed (*Figure 2*). The majority of respondents (59%) reported that

they have changed the hours they work, with a fifth of those saying the change had been significant.

Figure 3 shows these changes in more detail. Some people chose to start work earlier and finish earlier (24%), and a similar percentage chose to start later and finish later (21%). However, the biggest proportion (31%) report starting earlier, finishing later and taking more breaks in between. A further 13% were fitting work around childcare without a clear work pattern.

It's clear from the respondents' comments that, despite the unique circumstances under which many of them began remote working, the ability to manage their own working hours is a significant benefit for people, and contributes to their sense of increased productivity.

FIGURE 3
How have your day-to-day working hours changed as a result of remote working?



Almost a third of respondents (31%) say they're starting work earlier and finishing later, with more time off in between.

2

Advantages of remote working



The single biggest perceived benefit of remote working is the reduction in commuting time, seen as an advantage by nearly all respondents (**95%**).



Linked to this is an improved balance between work and personal life, which more than four-fifths said was an advantage (**86%**).



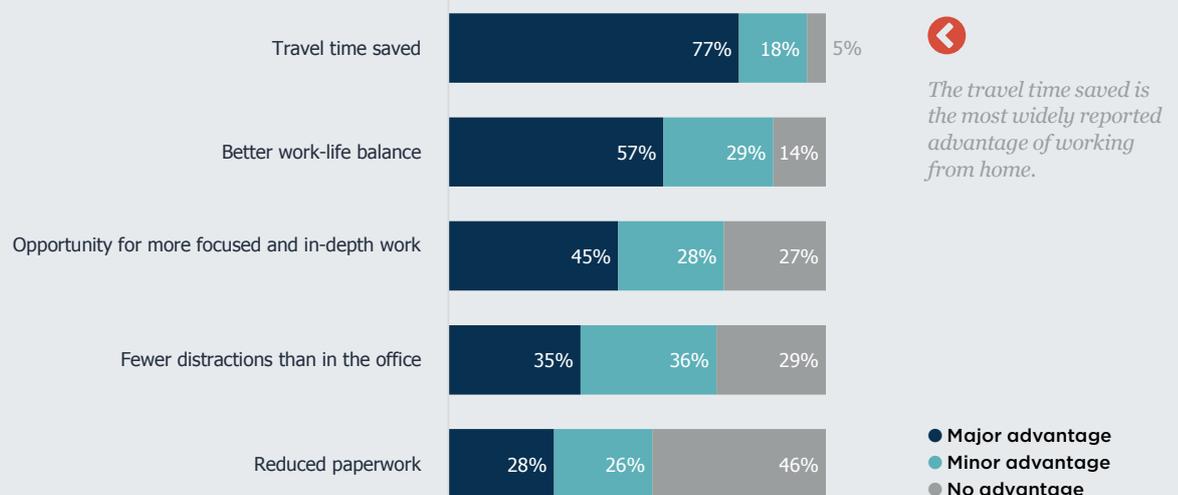
Getting away from the distractions of the office and being more focused were seen as advantages by over **two-thirds** of people.

The survey clearly showed that people regard improving their own well-being as the main advantage of home working, more than any benefits to their work.

What stood out most was how much people dislike commuting. This was evident both in the response to the survey questions and in the comments made. *Figure 4* shows that 77% of people who responded to the survey feel the travel time saved by working from home is a major advantage, while a further 18% see it as a minor advantage.

This links to the second-highest ranked advantage – better work/life balance – and to the greater sense of autonomy mentioned in the previous section. Over half of respondents (57%) said they felt an improved work/life balance was a major advantage of remote working, while a third more (29%) regarded it as a minor one.

FIGURE 4
To what extent do you regard the following as advantages of working from home?



54%

of people said that reduced paperwork was an advantage of remote working.

Maintaining concentration

The main reported benefit of being based at home in terms of actual work was the greater ability to concentrate. Almost half of people (45%) said the opportunity for more focused and in-depth work was a major advantage, with almost another third (28%) saying it was a minor one. This was reinforced by the third who felt having fewer distractions than in the office was a major advantage, and the further third (36%) who saw it as a minor benefit.

However, a third of people experienced neither fewer distractions nor a greater ability to focus. This presumably includes those with young children, who might not have chosen to work from home under normal circumstances, and who found themselves struggling to combine work with home-schooling and childcare during the lockdown.

The survey also looked for possible benefits in the reduction in paperwork brought about by remote working. Almost a third of respondents (28%) saw this as a major advantage, and another quarter (26%) saw it as a minor one. This suggests that more than half of businesses have yet to fully digitise their working processes, and that pressure from employees to do so will increase as life returns to normal.



3

Disadvantages and difficulties



The biggest problem faced in remote working is reduced communication with colleagues, a major disadvantage for **72%** of respondents.



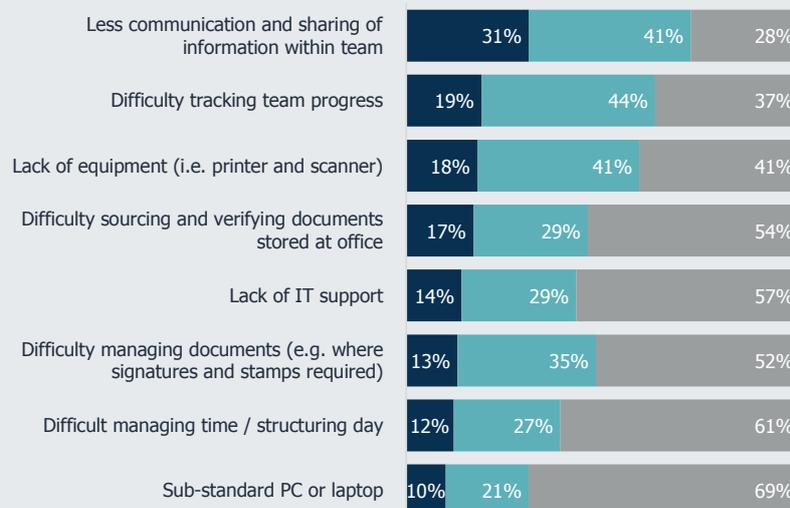
Linked to this, the feeling of isolation was the most significant challenge to respondents' physical or mental health, cited by **75%**.

The research found that problems around team communication are more important for home workers than technological or administrative issues.

This is clear from *Figure 5*, which shows what survey respondents thought were the disadvantages of working from home. Top of the list was 'less communication and sharing of information within team', which was rated a major disadvantage by almost a third of respondents (31%) and a minor disadvantage by just over two-fifths (41%). Another management issue - difficulty tracking team progress - was next, with a fifth (19%) saying it was a major disadvantage and just over two-fifths (44%) saying it was a minor one.

By contrast, personal management was not a widespread problem. Only a little over a third of respondents (39%) said they regarded managing their time as an issue.

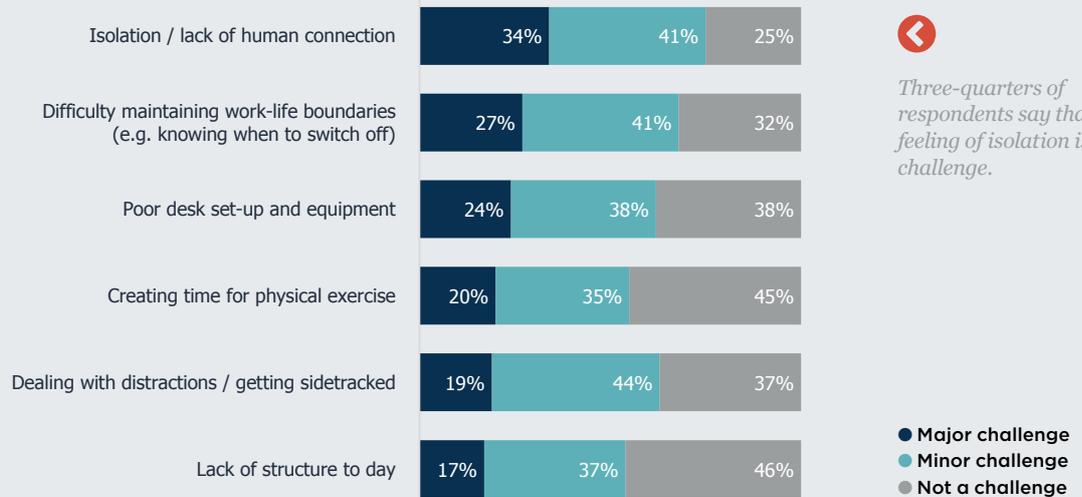
FIGURE 5
To what extent do you regard the following as disadvantages of working from home?



The greatest challenge for remote workers relates to communication and information sharing.

● Major disadvantage
● Minor disadvantage
● No disadvantage

FIGURE 6
To what extent do you regard the following as mental and physical health-related challenges related to working at home?



Reflecting the relatively unplanned nature of the move to home working for many people, respondents' experience with technology was a mixed bag. Almost a third (31%) said the quality of their PC or laptop was a problem, while over two-fifths (43%) complained about the lack of IT support, and the lack of peripheral equipment such as a printer or scanner was a major disadvantage for a fifth (18%) and a minor one for two-fifths (41%).

Admin-type matters were also seen as significant. The difficulty sourcing and verifying documents stored at their office was seen as a disadvantage of home working by 46%, while the difficulty of managing documents (for example signing and posting) was a disadvantage for almost the same number (48%). This may reflect the same lack of process digitisation indicated by *Figure 4* and suggests the need for greater investment in this area in the future.

Figure 6 delves further into the personal issues involved in working from home. The biggest problem for respondents was isolation. Just over a third (34%) said the lack of human connection was a major challenge, with a further two-fifths (41%) saying it was a minor one.

The second biggest issue was the difficulty of maintaining work/life boundaries, which was a major challenge for almost a third of respondents (27%) and a minor one for two-fifths (41%). Once again, respondents' comments suggested a number were struggling with working in very small flats and apartments, making it impossible to create physical space between work and non-work activities. Under normal circumstances, these people would seem unlikely to choose to work from home.

FIGURE 7
Which of the following is your company doing to help you work remotely?



The majority of respondents feel that their employers are supporting them with a range of measures, including regular virtual meetings and providing the right tools and IT support.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Employer support

Figure 7 shows that the majority of survey respondents feel their employers are working to help address various issues. Over four-fifths (84%) agree that their employer is organising regular virtual team meetings, and two-thirds (65%) feel that the company is ensuring those meetings are efficient.

Respondents also felt their employers were helping with tech issues. Three-quarters agreed they were being provided with the right tools and software, and two-thirds (68%) said they were getting the necessary IT support.

However, they were less enthusiastic about the management support they were getting. Only a fifth (20%) strongly agreed that what management expected of them in terms of productivity was being communicated clearly, with a further third (33%) only 'somewhat' agreeing. What's more, only just over half (54%) felt their employers were assessing their performance on output rather than hours worked, a key pillar for making remote working successful for both employers and employees.

Further evidence that many managers have yet to adapt to the challenges of managing a remote workforce came from the fact that only half the respondents (51%) felt they were getting the emotional support they needed from their employer.

4

Technology issues



More than four-fifths of remote workers (**84%**) report an increase in their use of video conferencing, and two-thirds (**64%**) say they're using messaging apps more.

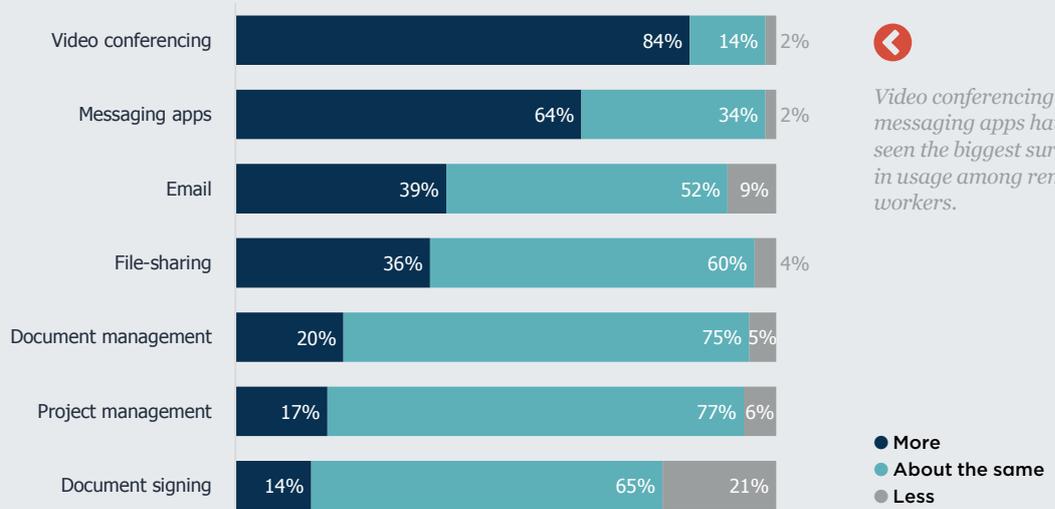


In contrast, the majority report their use of other technologies, particularly project management and document management, has stayed about the same.

Looking at how remote working changes people's use of technology, it's unsurprising that communication tools have seen the biggest increase (*Figure 8*). More than four-fifths of respondents (84%) said they were using video conferencing more than before, while almost two-thirds (64%) said they were making more use of messaging apps. Email and file-sharing have seen less of an uplift (39% and 36%, respectively), presumably because they're seen less as a replacement for face-to-face communication.

The use of other management-type tools - project management, document management and document signing - is much more likely to have stayed the same. This may be because many companies didn't have the technology in place before the lockdown started.

FIGURE 8
Are you using the following types of technology and software for work-related purposes more or less than previously as a result of increased remote working?



Video conferencing and messaging apps have seen the biggest surge in usage among remote workers.

● More
● About the same
● Less

Key Takeaways



1. The research found a nine-percentage-point gap between those people who said they were more productive at home and those who said they were less so. Bearing in mind that a number of respondents were working in less than ideal domestic situations, it seems likely that the productivity uplift could be significantly higher under more normal circumstances.



2. The main benefit employees see from home working is an improvement to their work/life balance, particularly in the reduction of their commuting time. The improved sense of well-being and the use of commuting time saved for work seem likely to be major contributors to better productivity.



3. There is a broad spread of technological preparedness for remote working, with some provision being less than basic (a third of people felt their home computer was sub-standard, for example). Companies looking at remote working in the future must ensure their IT infrastructure supports both the hardware and software remote employees require.



4. Companies need to invest in the digitisation of processes and workflows to reduce the burden of paperwork which is an issue for significant numbers of remote workers. The difficulty sourcing, verifying and signing documents whilst teleworking is a challenge that technology investment can help to eradicate.



5. Human issues are even more of a problem for remote workers than technology ones are. They're also harder for employers to fix. Companies need to make sure their managers understand the issues that employees face when working from home and adapt their approach accordingly.

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