

Major survey reaffirms high employee demand for remote working

ANDY PRENDERGAST

A strong preference for majority remote working remains amongst employees, one year on from the start of the Covid-19 crisis, according to the latest NUIG/WDC national remote working survey, which also shows an apparent low level of interest in remote working 'hubs'.

The third NUIG/Western Development Commission remote working survey shows 95% of workers want to keep working remotely some or all of the time, after the Covid-19 crisis has ended.

The new survey, conducted in April 2021 with nearly 6,500 respondents, also presents some areas of concern that employers and policy makers will need to be alive to.

25% of workers thinking of relocating want to leave Ireland

It is clear from the survey findings that the preference for remote work is not so much to do with making work easier but making life easier for employees, with a better work-life balance being associated with remote working than onsite working.

Published days after Ibec's 'returning to the workplace' survey (see Ibec Survey in this issue), the new NUIG/WDC survey shows some similar indications for the proportion of hybrid, fully onsite and fully remote working, post pandemic: nearly 80% will use a hybrid model, 16% of organisations will return everyone to onsite work, with 6% of organisations keeping everyone working remotely.

There is more divergence between the surveys when it comes to the number of days working remotely, or onsite.

For those wanting to work remotely for part of the week, a majority (52%) of respondents want remote working 3 days per week; 20% want 4 days per week; while 25% wants 2 days per week.

Flexibility is key to this preference. NUIG/WDC note that people indicated that they would like to vary the number of days working remotely, depending on their circumstances. Some suggestions included working half days remotely and having the flexibility to choose.

The Ibec survey of employers showed that 20% of employers prefer 3 days onsite, using a hybrid model; 9% said 1-2 days onsite, 13% said 2 days onsite and another 9% said 2-3 days onsite. But one-third of employers have yet to decide what the ratio of onsite/offsite will be or indicated it will depend on the role of the worker.

The greater variety of preferences amongst employers on the ratio of days onsite/offsite – and more certainty amongst workers – is not surprising, however, as employers have the whole of their organisations to factor into account, while employees are indicating personal preferences.

COMMUTING CONCERNS

Another area of divergence between employers and employees is on the issue of commuting, post-Covid.

The Ibec survey suggested that most employers are not concerned about commuting times of their employees. However, the NUIG/WDC survey shows clear concern amongst respondents: 68% are either concerned or somewhat concerned about their commute, pointing to the stress and time of the commute impacting wellbeing.

A clear majority of employees (70%) are also concerned about readjusting to office life.

While the vast majority employees surveyed would like to continue remote working for some or all of the time going forward, around half of respondents indicated they are, on average, working more hours remotely than onsite. Yet, just over two-thirds of respondents find working remotely increases their productivity.

What might be of concern to the government and employers is that of those indicating they would consider relocating, due to the experience of remote working since Covid-19, the most popular answer (25%) was “outside Ireland.”

It is noted that the forthcoming ‘right to request’ remote working law is not expected to apply to workers seeking to work from outside the island of Ireland (see [IRN 14/2021](#)).

Of those who have already relocated since the start of the pandemic, over 25% have moved to the West of Ireland (Galway, Mayo, Roscommon).

HUB WORKING

Another matter of note is the low level of interest in hub working: for those who would like to work remotely after the crisis is over, 9% would like to work a mix of home and hub; 7% would like to work a mix of home, hub and onsite; while just 1% would like to work solely in a hub.

The government is making a big push to develop the hub (work-sharing space) network across Ireland, especially in the West, with over 400 hubs identified to date (see [IRN 16/2021](#)).

The second pillar of the Government's Making Remote Work strategy is to enhance the remote working infrastructure, such as developing more working 'hubs' and find ways to accelerate the broadband plan.

As noted in IRN before, greater use of remote working hubs – as opposed to home working – might aid a revised public transport policy, as well as helping service industry businesses connected to offices, such as cafés, to make more informed decisions. Hubs can also counteract some drawbacks of home remote working, such as poor connectivity and worker isolation.

The low level of interest in hub working might simply reflect that more work is needed to make hub working more attractive, and more promotional work needed to attract mobile workers.

There is a strong preference of employees to keep working remotely from their homes (60%), after the Covid crisis has ended, while one-quarter of workers would like a mix of home and onsite working.

SUPPORT FROM EMPLOYERS

Of those surveyed who have people management duties, a majority indicated no increase in difficulty in managing people remotely but a number of challenges were cited as significant all the same, such as "onboarding" new team members. Less than 20% of managers said they have received sufficient training to manage remote teams.

Nevertheless, worker respondents generally give a positive impression of organisational support they are receiving. High level of communication and support were cited. Satisfaction levels with the provision of ergonomic and health & safety advice was a bit more mixed.

Employees do not think working remotely, or working onsite, has any real impact on the ability to return to their normal income.

While collaboration has generally been viewed as a benefit of onsite working, just 51% of NUIG/WDC respondents said they believe collaboration would be better working onsite.

RIGHT TO DISCONNECT

The same proportion of respondents (44%) believe remote working would positively impact productivity as those who think remote working makes no difference to productivity.

Nearly 60% of respondents believe the right to disconnect would have a positive impact on their own productivity. Just over half of respondents believe the right to disconnect will have a positive impact on the productivity of their team. The rate of respondents finding the right to disconnect as negatively impacting productivity was negligible.

Just under half of respondents indicated that everyone returning to onsite working will have a desk; another 35% will have 'hot desks' available.

On post-pandemic team meetings, 43% of team managers said they will be dual mode: in-person with others joining virtually. Two-fifths of respondents said they will run a mix of in-person and virtual meetings, while small numbers said meetings would be fully virtual or fully in-person.

A majority of respondents work in the private sector and near 60% of companies are large organisations. Just over two-thirds of NUIG/WDC survey respondents were female.