

Remote working should not be 'one-off deal for individuals'

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Pre-legislative scrutiny of the 'Right to Request' remote working bill, this week, heard from a leading expert on remote working, who argued that a "systemic cultural shift" is needed – not just legislation.

Ms Joanne Mangan, employer lead with 'Grow Remote', says misconceptions about remote working persist – and that some of these misconceptions are embedded in the draft scheme of the 'right to request' remote working bill.

One such misconception is that remote work is not possible from day one of employment. This misconception is reflected in the bill by requiring 26 weeks' service of an employee before they could request remote working.

Hybrid goes wrong when the office is taken as "the default"

"We would question the need for this eligibility criterion ... it would mean a new hire would have no option but to live within commuting distance for the first six months" of their employment.

Another "damaging misconception [...] is the myth that people working remotely are not working as hard as office staff."

Grow Remote is a community development organisation helping employers develop remote working capability. Ms Mangan was speaking at a pre-legislative scrutiny hearing of the bill, convened by the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, this week.

Ms Mangan also argues that disciplinary or performance management issues "do not need to be called out in the legislation" and that appeals of an employer's decision to refuse a remote working request should be permitted on "substantive" issues, not just procedural.

She maintains that a "systemic cultural shift" is required, not just legislation, and that remote working "must move away from one-off deals for individual people."

'LEAD BY EXAMPLE'

Grow Remote is seeking three measures from the Government, to help further increase the use of remote working: establish a Local Enterprise Office fund to help employers facilitate remote working; run an awareness and communication campaign on remote working (a la the 'Brexit ready' campaign); and to "lead by example" by embedding remote working in the public service.

Ms Mangan, though welcoming the '20% remote working' for public servants initiative as a step forward, says that "1 day a week is not necessarily the transformative power [of remote working] Grow Remote would envisage."

There are anecdotal accounts of public sector employers being "slower" to adapt to long-term remote working than in the private sector, with some public servants being asked to return to full office working, once Covid-19 requirements to work from home were eased.

The recently-agreed Blended Working framework for the Civil Service has been welcomed in public, but there is an argument that it is an "overly cautious" approach to remote working (see [Remote Work Policy in IRN 14/2022](#)). The Framework states, for example, that no employee should work 100% remotely.

Ms Mangan takes issue with some of the reasons listed in the draft scheme that permit an employer to refuse a request for remote working, such as 'cannot reorganise work among existing staff', and noted that a reason for refusing remote working in the present can change in the future, demonstrating the need to be able to revise policy.

INTERROGATE ASSUMPTIONS

Another reason for refusal that doesn't stand up, according to Ms Mangan, is 'concerns for the commute between the proposed remote working location and employer's on-site location'

She said employers "need to interrogate the assumptions" around which jobs can or cannot be worked remotely.

However, "we need to give business a break", she said, referring to negative media coverage of some employers. "There's a lot of challenges in this transformation [to remote working] and we should give a little bit of leeway." She wants the focus on remote working to not just be on existing employees but on making remote working available for new hires.

Employers "should be intentional" about hybrid working, Ms Mangan advised. She said that "where hybrid goes wrong is when the office is taken as the default" and suggested that employees should have the choice on the ratio of remote to office work.

Other flexibility on working arrangements – not just location – is part of the picture, as well. Ms Mangan stated that some companies are providing flexibility around start and finish times for remote workers, but that none of the 'Grow Remote' clients have adopted a 4-day week so far.

She gave details of one Grow Remote partner, Liberty Insurance. This employer now offers full remote working for staff. There is a maximum of two days per week where an employee can attend the office – and only for a work function that cannot be done remotely.

REMOTE WORKING HUBS

Grow Remote is an advocate for the use of remote working hubs. Ms Mangan acknowledged the work done by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys, in helping to develop a network of remote working hubs across the country.

Three months ago, Grow Remote started an ongoing mapping exercise of remote workers across the country, which also collects data on what kind of work is being done remotely.

On remote working hubs, Ms Mangan finds that employers are not taking up hubs; that it's mostly employees and freelancers who are seeking to use hubs. She says also that employees should not necessarily have to cover the cost of using a remote working hub.

Glofox, a company that started hybrid working seven years ago and is now fully remote, compensates staff that need to work in a remote working hub.

She added that in large companies, it is common practice for employers to provide all equipment for remote working staff based at their homes, but in smaller companies, employees would receive a stipend to purchase equipment.

Ms Mangan also warned against excessive monitoring of remote working staff, as it goes against a fundamental principle for remote working, that of trust.

Wellness of employees "should be in the mind of employers" she added, and warned of the risk of "greying of boundaries" between work and home life for remote workers. The right to disconnect is important in this regard, she added.