

Première partie de l'épreuve**The Future of the Office**

Self-styled visionaries and people particularly fond of their pyjamas have for decades been arguing that a lot of work done in large shared offices could better be done at home. With Covid-19 their ideas were put to the test in a huge if not randomised trial. The preliminary results are now in: yes, a lot of work can be done at home; and what
5 is more, many people seem to prefer doing it there.

Some companies appear relaxed about a domestic shift. Others seem to be against it, encouraging people « back to work » – by which they mean « back to the office ». They face a difficult task since working from home seems to have suited many white-collar employees. As lockdowns have eased, people have gone out into the world once more:
10 retail spending has jumped across the rich world while restaurant reservations have sharply risen. Yet, many continue to shun¹ the office, even as schools reopen and thus make it a more feasible option for parents. The latest data suggest that only 50% of people in five big European countries spend every workday in the office. A quarter remain at home full-time.

15 Many employees do not want to or are discouraged from using public transport and one quarter of commuters in New-York City live more than 15 miles from the office, too far to walk or cycle. Besides, it also appears to be the case that working from home can make people happier. A paper published in 2017 in the American Economic Review found that workers were willing to accept an 8% pay cut to work from home,
20 suggesting it gives them non-monetary benefits. Average meeting lengths appear to decline and people commute less, or not at all. That is great for well-being. The working-from-home happiness boost could, in turn, make workers more productive.

However, not everything about working from home is pleasurable. In July a study from economists at Harvard, Stanford and New-York University found that the average
25 workday under lockdown was nearly 50 minutes longer than it was before, and that

¹ Shun: avoid

people became more likely to send emails after work hours. There is also wide variation between workers in how much they enjoy working from home.

Satisfaction varies according to whether the person has dedicated office and desk space or not. Moreover, it is uncertain whether the benefits of working from home can
30 last for a sustained period of time. A study found that, eventually, many people were desperate to go back to the office, if only every now and then, in part because they were lonely. Some companies which have tried large-scale remote working in the past have ultimately abandoned it, including Yahoo, a technology firm, in 2013. “Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting
35 new people, and impromptu team meetings”, a leaked internal memo read that year.

Another problem relates to employment laws. The increased popularity of home-working puts pressure on laws which were constructed around the assumption that people would be toiling away in an office. No one has yet thought through how firms should go about monitoring contractual working time in a world where nobody
40 physically clocks in, nor about the extent to which firms may surveil workers at home.

Battles over employers’ responsibilities to their home-workers surely cannot be far away. Should a business pay for a worker’s internet connection or their heating in the dead of winter? Grappling with² such questions will not be easy. But governments and firms must seize the moment. The pandemic, for all its ill effects, offers a rare
45 opportunity to rewire³ the world of work.

Adapted from the Economist, The Future of the Office, *What a way to make a living*,

12 September 2020

² Grappling with: dealing with

³ Rewire: réorganiser, moderniser