How Covid-19 has Impacted on Ways of Working

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the way work is undertaken not only in the UK but across the world. Workers now travel to their bedrooms, attics and kitchens instead of by road and rail, and the boundaries between work and home have, for some workers, become indistinct.

One of the major changes in work has been the increase in the use of technology for meetings—platforms such as Zoom were virtually unheard of at the start of 2020 but have now become a regular part of workers' lives. This has meant that managers are learning how to trust staff to work remotely and learn new skills in managing workloads, supporting and engaging their teams remotely. Key so far has been the role of leaders in managing employees' mental health. This has meant, in some organizations, managers seeing their staff for the first time in home surroundings, seeing their children and pets and having to develop innovative ways to support these workers with their individual challenges whilst at the same time ensuring the consistent application of policies and procedures. Many organizations are likely to see, in future, the breakdown of traditional management structures with a shift from managing inputs to measuring outcomes—flatter and more fluid structures are likely to be introduced. Probably something businesses have aspired to introduce anyway but which, without Covid, may have taken a decade to introduce instead of a just few weeks. The huge changes that Covid has brought have impacted on company cultures and the expectations of employees. Reflection on future corporate values, culture and vision will be needed.

One of the many surprising impacts of the pandemic has been how businesses have gone from office to home-based working at a speed never before contemplated. One implication of this is that some organizations are reporting that employees now expect similarly fast responses from employers on new issues—Black Lives Matter, progress with diversity and inclusion and the specific protection of Black and Asian minority ethnic and older workers in light of their susceptibilities to Covid, are examples.

With the office based at home there has never been such challenge to the 9-5 working day with work being what you do, not a place to go to. Collaboration between colleagues, creative sharing of ideas and the development of teams have undoubtedly suffered and present a challenge to organizations as to how these benefits can be incorporated into the home-based office working structure which is likely to be a constant feature, either full- or part-time, in the future.

The pandemic has been an opportunity for occupational health professionals as businesses have sought out advice on how to make workplaces safe and how to support all employees including those believed to be more susceptible. Occupational health has extended into homes with some practitioners being asked to ensure that home working environments meet health and safety requirements. This has raised issues about the extent and range of support available and ultimately who is liable for the home working environment. Many home working spaces are entirely unsuitable for prolonged use—they can be cramped, shared with other family members and ergonomically non-compliant with the display screen equipment regulations. I predict that it is only a matter of time before these environments lead directly to reports of work-related musculoskeletal health conditions as well as negative impacts on mental health due to isolation and reduced human contact experienced by some workers, especially those who live alone.

Ultimately, we may end up with a new inequality—some workers will have the ability to work from home in a safe and productive manner and others not. Occupational health professionals need to be aware of these new and novel causes of occupational distress and ill-health.

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