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End of the Office: The Quiet, Grinding Loneliness of Working from Home

Before Covid-19, many of us thought remote working sounded blissful. Now, employees across the world long for chats by the coffee machine and the whirr of printers.

[The Guardian](#) Simon Usborne



Many people live in flats that are entirely unsuited to working. Photo by Dan Douglas / Surveillance / Getty Images.

Dahlia Francis is sitting on a small couch at the foot of her bed, in her shared flat, on a housing estate in south London. She wears her new uniform of pyjama bottoms and a Zoom-ready plain T-shirt. Her room used to be a living room. Now the only communal space is the kitchen, where Francis's three flatmates occupy a small dining table. They, like almost half of Britain's workforce, are also [working from home](#).

Francis, who is 29, is a credit controller for a charity in central London. She commuted there, by bus and tube, for a little more than a year. There were baking competitions and quizzes and a kitchenette, where gossip and tea flowed freely. Now the kettle is silent and the cubicles are empty. They are likely to remain so for the rest of the year.

For the first few weeks after her office closed in late March, Francis was too busy to consider her new circumstances. Then they hit her – and got her down. Days spent in her bedroom hunched over a laptop, centimetres from where she slept, blurred into endless weeks. She has become lonely.

Francis has worked for a tool hire firm and a betting chain, as well as for charities. The offices she remembers have taken on a different shape in her mind. “I used to think of a desk as like a kind of prison cell, where I was chained for eight hours a day,” she tells me over the phone. “It was always like serving time. But, at this point, my desk would be my saviour.”

Lockdown has not so much redrawn the workplace of millions as it has chewed it up like a broken printer. Working from home, a mode traditionally viewed with suspicion by bosses and with envy by commuting bureausceptics, has become the norm for those whose livings are tied to computer screens.

As weeks become months and offices remain closed, [many are predicting their permanent decline](#). Buildings that for decades have defined urban geography, diurnal rhythms and the meaning of work may never hum in the same way to the sounds of keyboards and fluorescent lighting.

“I’ve spoken to about eight startups that have already got rid of their office,” says Matt Bradburn, the co-founder of London-based People Collective, which advises companies on human resources. “And we’re talking companies of 50 to 100 people.”

Elsewhere, [firms including Twitter and Facebook](#) have said they will allow employees to work from home for ever.

The potential demise of commutes and the soul-sapping trappings of office life is a cause of celebration for many among the [49% of workers now toiling at home](#). But for people such as Francis, whose flat is unsuited to work, offices provide space to share ideas, socialise and maintain a work-life divide that has become hopelessly blurred.

[According to a survey](#) by the global financial services company Jefferies, 61% of more than 1,500 UK respondents said they would return to work immediately if they could. Facebook says half of its employees will work from home by 2030, but Mark Zuckerberg said only one in five were enthusiastic about doing so. More than half “really want to get back to the office as soon as possible”, he told the Wall Street Journal.

When Bradburn polled his network of more than 5,000 HR bosses, he asked for the biggest reasons their teams had shared for wanting to go back to the office. Seventy per cent cited social and mental health issues, including feelings of loneliness. “I think young people in particular really need that connection,” Bradburn says.

The effects of working from home have been little studied, partly because remote working was pretty rare until this spring. The proportion of the UK workforce who worked “mainly” at home went from 4% to 5% in the UK between 2015 and 2019, according to [the Office for National Statistics](#). Permanent home working was vanishingly rare.

“It’s always been a pretty backwater topic,” says Nick Bloom, a British economics professor at Stanford University in California and an expert in home working. The last time Bloom’s phone rang so much was 2013, he says, when Marissa Mayer, then the chief executive of Yahoo, [banned remote working](#). “Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home,” read a leaked memo to staff.

The assumption has been that remote workers slack without direct supervision. But do they? In 2010, a Chinese travel agency with 16,000 employees came to Bloom in search of evidence. Ctrip, which assumed workers would prefer being at home, was spending big money on offices in Shanghai. It wanted to know what remote work might do for the bottom line. “Their proposition was that they’d save on rent, but lose on productivity,” Bloom says.

Bloom devised a trial – the first of its kind – involving 250 members of a Ctrip call centre. Half of the group were selected at random to work from home for nine months. The other half would continue to work in the office and the productivity of both teams would be measured.

None of Ctrip’s assumptions were right. Productivity in the home group went up by 13%. Without the distractions of the office, agents were making more calls and taking fewer breaks and sick days. “They were truly stunned by the results,” Bloom says of Ctrip. Its executives calculated not only that they could save millions in rent, but also that they could make \$2,000 (then about £1,300) more in profit annually per employee.



*Since April, more than half a million people have listened to *The Sound of Colleagues*, which pipes simulated office noise into their homes. Photo by Maskot / Getty Images.*

But the experiment also measured happiness. When Ctrip polled staff, half of the home-based group wanted to go back to the office. “Loneliness was the single biggest reason,” Bloom says. Plus, they were not in lockdown conditions: only people with a spare room took part; none had children at home or flatmates; and they still worked one day a week in the office.

Bloom is now constantly fielding calls from anxious executives. “They have said productivity has been great and they’re thinking of abandoning the office,” he says. “I’m counselling that it’s shortsighted and high-risk.” Bloom had always been supportive of remote working, if not full-time, even after the Ctrip experiment. “Now I feel like I’ve gone from being an evangelist for working from home to an evangelist for the office,” he says.

Erin Mackenzie, 23, knows what it can be like to work remotely full-time without the stresses of lockdown. In the summer of 2019, she got a junior marketing job with an online education company based in the Middle East. Mackenzie, who lives in a small house in a small town 50 miles north of New York City, thought working from home would be great.

After four months of long days alone at the tiny desk in her bedroom, Mackenzie had a panic attack. She had lost weight and become depressed. “At first, I thought it was because the job was demanding, but I realised it was more the isolation and not being able to interact with people,” she says. “I hadn’t realised I’d relied on that so heavily for my mental health.”

Mackenzie also felt suffocated by the digital monitoring, which was already becoming standard in big firms. Hers was relatively light. An agenda app would track tasks and alert faceless bosses when they were done. Response times to chats were noted. “It definitely added to me feeling like I didn’t have set hours and the anxiety of it all,” she says.

If offices were to evolve to extract as much as possible from human resources, there are concerns that firms would use technology to tighten the screws further in our homes. Interest in the software offered by Teramind, a Florida-based employee monitoring and analytics firm with more than 2,000 clients, has tripled in lockdown. When downloaded to employees’ computers, Teramind’s “agent” can measure time spent on different windows. It can play back or live-stream a view of an employee’s

screen and record his or her every keystroke. It can also raise a flag if certain predetermined words are typed.

Before lockdown, 70% of Teramind's clients were concerned about security – leaks of sensitive information, for example – while 30% saw productivity as the priority.

“Now, it's flipped,” says Eli Sutton, the firm's head of operations. But he rejects the suggestion of Orwellian overtones. “I can say first-hand that employers have better things to do than to spy on you all day,” he says. “Teramind is an extra set of eyes to make sure distractions aren't causing issues.”

Will Gosling, who leads Deloitte's consulting on “human capital” in the UK, says:

“We're at the beginning of a very big ethical debate about this. We were already seeing businesses wanting to get more data on employees and the pandemic has brought it into sharp focus ... but they need to support and build health and wellbeing.”

Trade unions worry that working from home will challenge privacy and rights, making it harder for employees to organise or be aware of how colleagues are being treated, particularly in the most onerous fields of white-collar work. There are questions about liability. [Mental health](#) is part of the picture. “Employers have a responsibility to ensure worker wellbeing and that doesn't end just because people are not in the office,” says Tim Sharp, the senior policy officer for employment rights at the Trades Union Congress.

Mackenzie quit after the panic attack and got a job with an insurer. She immediately felt better, even while enduring a two-hour commute to Manhattan for her training. She now works in a smaller office a short drive from home – or, rather, she did until the pandemic. It helps that she now works for a better, kinder company. Her fiancé is working at home, too. “Without him here, I probably would have crumbled,” she says.

At their best, offices are crucibles for ideas and lifelong friendships, particularly among younger workers with small homes but big social circles. [The Office](#) was not just a comic study of business park malaise – it was a love story. Working from home may boost productivity for a while, “but it’s so costly in terms of creativity and inspiration”, Bloom says. “We’re all suffering from Zoom overload and feeling worn down.”

Flick Adkins, who is 28, counts some of her colleagues as her best friends. For three months, she has been cut off from them while working from the flat she shares with five other people in north London. She works for LRWTonic, a market research company, and takes a lot of private calls. She has to sit cross-legged on her bed, stacking her laptop on part of her vinyl collection. She has settled on 20 records as the optimal height.

Adkins’s now empty office has a ping pong table and a coffee machine, where she would chat with friends before starting her day. On Fridays, she and her 20 mostly young colleagues would go out for lunch and have drinks after work.

Like Francis, Adkins feels lonely, down and unmotivated. “Having an office was symbolic of normality,” she says. “I loved just being at my desk and hearing the buzz and all the conversations ... I can count on two hands the number of times I’ve said: ‘I don’t know much longer I can do this.’”

Last month, Adkins’s boss, Anna Dunn, floated with her team the idea of ditching the office for good and saving £200,000 a year in rent. “I said that the money would be distributed to them in a bonus, to some degree,” Dunn, 40, says from her kitchen. She, too, misses the office. “I thought there might be this desire to stay remote, but not one person does. They all want to go back.”

The sounds of the office have a new resonance. More than half a million people have tuned into [The Sound of Colleagues](#), a web page and Spotify playlist of workplace sounds, including keyboards, printers, chatter and coffee machines. Red Pipe, a Swedish music and sound studio, created it in April as a joke, but its data suggests that people keep it on in the background.

Progressive employers are racing to find ways to recreate the joys and perks of office life. Google is laying on cookery classes and mindfulness sessions, as well as offering \$1,000 (£780) to each employee for equipment. Lauren Whitt, Google’s wellness manager and resilience lead, says demand has grown for her team’s services, which include video counselling and therapy by text for people who lack privacy. “We’re also seeing more families having more access [to these services],” she adds.

If reports of the death of the office have been exaggerated, everyone agrees it won't look the same. Bloom envisages a new landscape of smaller offices, with employees alternately working at home for half the week to bring down costs and make physical distancing more viable. Budgets for nice interiors will fall. "I think the office will be more suburban, more spacious and nastier-looking," he says.

Francis would not care. When I speak to her, she has taken a week of holiday. She had anxiety before the pandemic, which partly expressed itself in a need to be busy all the time. But, after three months of sometimes 12-hour days and a deepening sense of unease, burnout has become a worrying prospect. Not that she can really escape her place of work. "I'm just sort of winging it this week and not planning too much," she says from her bedroom couch. "I just need a bit of time to gather myself."

Simon Usborne is a freelance feature writer and reporter based in London. He was previously a feature writer and an editor at The Independent.