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Professor Frank Peck is research director of the Centre for Regional Economic Development (CRED) at the University of Cumbria's Institute of Business, Industry & Leadership

Working from home – the new normal?

As businesses emerge from the coronavirus crisis, Professor Frank Peck examines what will become of the world of work and remote working

As the economy begins to emerge from the immediate effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, much speculation now surrounds the future of work. In the short term, we have grown used to new categories – essential workers that provide vital goods and services such as in healthcare, emergency services, food production and distribution, postal services. Then there are displaced workers that, temporarily at least, have been removed from employment, disproportionately affecting those working in tourism, hospitality, non-food retailing and consumer services. Lastly, we have growth in the numbers of remote workers who have been able to work from home.

Surveys conducted by ONS indicate that working from home has become widespread. During the first lockdown, it was reported that around 46% of employees did some work from home and of these 86% attributed this to the pandemic (*ONS, Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK: April 2020. ONS Statistical Bulletin*). A lifestyle survey conducted by ONS in the second lockdown estimated that around 38% were working from home in November 2020. In the North West region, this figure was 33%. Cumbria Business Survey indicated that at the time of the survey (October to December 2020), 28% of business respondents indicated that some staff were working remotely, and two-thirds of these expected this to still be the case in autumn 2021 (Cumbria Intelligence Observatory).

There is much discussion now about the extent to which 'working from home' might become a more accepted feature of employment that has been tried and tested by lockdown experiences since March 2020. Employers (and workers) have been forced to address line management and communication issues that may otherwise have been a reason to doubt the feasibility of this pattern of employment. Workers too have needed to adjust to create suitable workspaces in the home and find ways to use technologies to facilitate corporate communication.

Many commentators speculate about a partial return to office, or 'hybrid' working patterns at least in the short term. The World Economic Forum (WEF) for instance published its *Report on the Future of Jobs* in October 2020 in which key points are made about the role of the pandemic in accelerating some key trends in technology and the labour market, that include remote working and digitisation of the workplace, as well as further



automation and application of artificial intelligence.

Based on a survey of executives in global companies, WEF conclude that the pandemic has accelerated the need for digital skills and abilities in self-management as well as leadership. The WEF survey of executives suggests that around 44% of workers could feasibly work from home with appropriate organisation and technology and 34% stated that they are already taking steps to create an online "sense of community" as part of a shift to remote work (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2020.pdf).

But the evidence of a dramatic shift to remote working is mixed and opinions vary. It has recently been reported that the Centre for Cities believe that, after a period of transition and experimentation, the five-day office week could well become the norm again within two years (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-57339105>). In a recent survey (KPMG 2021 Outlook Pulse), only 17% of CEOs say they plan to reduce office floorspace. There is, it seems, evidence of reduced enthusiasm for widespread use of remote working due to its many challenges – feelings of isolation, reduced opportunities for learning by interacting, threats to work-life balance (<https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2021/03/ceo-outlook-pulse.html>). For most workers, of course, working from home is not an option, but for those now working remotely in the pandemic, the pull of the workplace could well reassert itself.