

Half-term breaks used to be the time of the year when offices were at their quietest as parents took leave to spend time with their children when they were off school. These days, though, there is perhaps little difference, as many offices are quiet throughout the year due to working from home. Whilst this has clear benefits for many, some parents would view working from home during the Halloween break as something of a horror story, with no prospect of peace and quiet to be productive.



Indeed, it could be said that we are currently in a state of flux regarding working from home. It was a necessity during the pandemic, but as that need has receded, some employers are reassessing whether it actually works for their businesses. Some are viewing it as both a trick and a treat in that they think some employees are using working from home as an opportunity to skive, and for others it's a treat that helps them avoid the commute, be more productive, and ultimately have a better work life balance.

In recent months we heard many big companies saying it is time for its workers to return to

the office. In August, even Zoom, the facilitators of remote working and video meetings, told employees that they would have to come in to work two days per week. Last year, Google and Apple employees were told that they had to return to the office at least three days per week. Amazon, has a three days per week in the office minimum and its Chief Executive, Andy Jassy, has said that for those workers who cannot commit to this minimum “it’s probably not going to work out”. Meanwhile, Elon Musk called it morally wrong for “laptop classes living in la-la-land” to work from home.

In the UK there have been similar moves, with large corporates watering down working from home policies. HSBC ordered its 18,500 UK staff back to the office three days per week. Similarly, within the UK Civil Service, there have been moves to get civil servants back into the office. You may recall Jacob Rees Mogg last year pinning notes on civil servants’ desks to entice them back.

Nick Bloom, a respected Professor at Stanford University, who has become something of a working from home expert, argues that working from home is here to stay and indeed will actually grow in prominence. He says that, yes, there has been something of a post-pandemic correction, but that we will see it take off again in the shape of a Nike swoosh.

Working from home used to be something done occasionally in order to look after a sick child or let a plumber in. Before the pandemic five percent of full paid days were at home and now 25 percent work on a hybrid schedule. Another eight percent work fully remote. Nick Bloom thinks that in a decade we will see 30 percent of days worked at home. By comparison, he says that in 1965 0.4 percent of days worked in the US were from home.

Bloom thinks that employees put a value on hybrid working equivalent to eight percent of their remuneration (i.e. only an eight percent pay increase would compensate for losing working from home entitlement). There used to be two big employment perks – your pension

and health care - but it could now be viewed as the three big perks with the addition of remote working. According to Bloom's analysis, hybrid working can reduce staff turnover by 30-50 percent. And he says that whilst fully remote working reduces productivity, hybrid working actually increases it.

In terms of jobs advertised locally in Northern Ireland, around a fifth this year have been either hybrid or fully remote. Some insightful research from Ulster University in this area shows that NI is actually lagging behind the UK as a whole in terms of take-up of working from home. The Republic of Ireland's take-up of working from home is even higher than in the UK. A lot of this is linked to the type of jobs people are doing, with NI having higher instances of retail, manufacturing, hospitality and healthcare roles where there isn't the same opportunity to work from home. Working from home in Northern Ireland actually peaked at 40 percent during the pandemic and now sits around 17 percent (compared to 31 percent in the UK as a whole). This compares to around 10 percent in 2019.

Working from home has taken something of a toll on towns and city centres across the UK and Ireland. CEOs believe that it is also hard to instil a culture if interaction is done solely through the sterile environment of Zoom / Teams and emails. In terms of mentoring and staff development, there is also no substitute for face-to-face engagement. Working from home is also always on the proviso that you have suitable accommodation to do it in. In NI, the lack of private rented accommodation could prove to be a barrier for many.

Bloom is convinced that there will be a big uplift in working from home again, but there are many barriers to that happening and there is still a lot to be played out on this topic in the months and years ahead.

This article appeared in the [Belfast Telegraph's Business Telegraph](#) on 31st October 2023

Share this:

- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Email](#)