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Teleworking: The myth of working from home

By Margaret Ryan
BBC News

Yahoo has banned its staff from "remote" working. After years of many predicting working from home as the future for everybody, why is it not the norm?

When a memo from human resources dropped into the inbox of Yahoo staff banning them from working from home it prompted anger from many of its recipients.

"Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people, and impromptu team meetings," the memo said.

"Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home."

The move to get staff back into the office from June this year is thought to have been driven by new chief executive Marissa Mayer, who herself returned to work weeks after giving birth.

Virgin entrepreneur Richard Branson, who spends much of his time working on Necker Island in the Caribbean, [was quick to respond](#), calling it a "backwards step in an age when remote working is easier and more effective than ever".

People in the West are constantly bombarded by news about technology that makes it easier to communicate with the office. Many have fast broadband and webcams that allow their faces to appear through the ether at any important meetings. They are surrounded by smartphones, laptops and tablets.

Everything is surely there to free them from the daily commute. ~~Those~~ in manufacturing or retail might always have to be present, but in an age when so many work in offices, why can't they have their office space at home?

There are signs that the number of people working from home is on the increase in the UK, according to the CBI. A total of 59% of employers who responded to a [survey in 2011](#) were offering teleworking, up from 13% in 2006.

In the US, 24% of employed people report working from home at least some hours each week, according to the Bureau of Labour Statistics.

But only 2.5% of the workforce (3.1 million people, not including the self employed or unpaid volunteers) consider home their primary place of work, [says the Telework Research Network](#).

Yahoo is not a lone voice in espousing the virtues of physically being in the office.

Only last week [Google's chief financial officer Patrick Pichette said](#) when the company is asked how many people telecommute, their answer is "as few as possible".

"There is something magical about sharing meals," Pichette explained. "There is something magical about spending the time together, about noodling on ideas, about asking at the computer 'What do you think of this?'"

Google workers are provided with a free wifi-enabled bus in to the HQ. Mayer, of course, is a former Google executive.

There are obvious reasons why working from home has not proliferated in the way people thought it might. There is still ingrained cultural antipathy.

Not "being seen in the office" may affect a person's chances of promotion, result in a smaller pay rise than office-based peers and lower performance evaluations, according to research by the London Business School and the University of California.

They stress the continuing importance of so-called "passive face time" that is being in the office, regardless of what someone is doing.

The additional pressure not to be perceived as "skiving" may drive those who do work from home to exceed their hours.

Prof Jennifer Glass, co-author of a report on the US workforce published by the University of Texas at Austin, says for many people, especially those in their 30s and 40s, teleworking is part of their work after they have already done 40 hours in the office.

Glass was "flabbergasted" by the Yahoo memo. "This seems to be trying to bring Yahoo in line with corporate America, not high-tech industries," she says.

"The idea that this is going to promote more innovation seems bizarre."

Promoting the value of interactions in hallways and canteen seems strange at a time when face-to-face contact within the office is decreasing.

"I frequently email someone without getting up to see if they are there," Glass notes.

Managers can be biased in favour of those they can actually see working.

"There is this attitude that managers need to see people are close by and that those workers are more productive," says Glass. "It is a natural tendency to want to control things."

This seems outdated to many. "The best employers don't overlook staff because they are not in the office. That strikes me as yesterday's way of working," says Paul Sellers, policy adviser at UK trade union umbrella group the TUC.

Dame Stephanie Shirley, who pioneered home working in the computer industry in the early 1960s, says the concept has not taken off in quite the way many predicted at the time.

"Academics were predicting it would become more acceptable. Town planners were starting to incorporate the idea of home working into their designs. It felt like the beginning of a different kind of society."

When she started her company F International in 1962, the idea of people working from home was alien to most businesses. Offices were highly regimented. Some of the company's programmers did not even have home telephones.

Workers were used to signing in and having their output closely supervised. "It was about the time you were present, rather than what you had achieved," says Dame Stephanie.

By the mid-1980s F International was a pioneer of teleworking employing 800 home workers and turning over nearly £20m a year, and was setting up a national electronic mail network to link workers' home computers to the company's minimal headquarters.

Dame Stephanie said she was on a "crusade" to find skilled work for women who had left the workplace to start families or look after relatives.

But social changes can take longer than expected, says the 75-year-old, who quit the industry in 1993.

Decades later the issue has not gone away. Working from home still has its image problem.

London Mayor Boris Johnson once joked: "We all know that is basically sitting wondering whether to go down to the fridge to hack off that bit of cheese before checking your emails again."

For Alan Denbigh, co-author of The Teleworking Handbook and former executive director of the Telework Association, there are proven benefits of home working. "It gives you the opportunity to get on with a particular project and for those who are bringing up small families where it is imperative to have a degree of flexibility it works."

Having done both he does not recommend working from home exclusively, recognising the benefits of interacting with people in the office and the pitfalls of working long hours at home to keep up.

But he says it is "equally ridiculous" to feel you have to be at the office every day. He recommends a bit of both.

"A large corporation saying you can't work at home, especially an IT based company, seems counter-productive. You have to treat people as grown-ups."

Additional reporting by Brian Wheeler

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Here is a selection of your comments

I worked in an office with my company before moving to the States where I initially worked exclusively from home. At first, I loved being at home, to have the comforts (indeed the fridge) and the freedom to wear whatever I wanted. The idea that you do nothing is nonsense - as the article points out, I would put in extra hours to avoid the label of 'skiver'. However, after a while I did miss the interaction with colleagues and also instant answers. By that I mean you can confer with peers for an immediate decision rather than wait for a reply to an email. Now I've moved into an office and will have 1 or 2 days a week at home, I feel I am more motivated as it breaks up the monotony of the same surroundings all day every day. We are all adults and if you abuse the trust by sitting watching TV all day then of course there will be problems but you should have the discipline to carry on with your work no matter where you are. I totally agree with Alan Denbigh: a bit of both is the ideal solution.

Max, Ware, Hertfordshire / San Francisco, California

Not only do I work from home....but I work from home in France. I believe that my clients who are based in the UK benefit far more than when I managed their accounts from a busy office in London. They have my focused attention, I have far less distractions from co-workers, etc....it's just me and the buck stops with me!! My clients would soon see if I wasn't delivering. I am more flexible with time and availability, I often work longer hours and my rates are far more competitive than when I worked agency side.

Delia Bourne, France

I've been working from home, full-time, for someone else for eight years and more. With an office at the bottom of the garden, my greatest problem is the isolation: I don't even have the pleasure of turning away hawkers at the front door any more. When I'm busy, I may not get out for days on end, and there's no natural point at which to go home, because you are home. I would much prefer to be in an office with people, provided I could, sometimes, close a door to get on with things.

Hugh, Coventry

As a home worker for a company that has closed several offices as a result of a major restructure, I feel the problem here is with management techniques and not with employee activity. My company, which has a number of offices around the UK, makes good technological provision for communications between workers who may be at opposite ends of the country. My job as a bid writer means I welcome the lack of interruptions and ability to concentrate that comes from home working. Rather than move back an evolutionary step by forcing all employees back into the workplace, why not bring management techniques up to date by requiring managers to undergo training in effective management of the remote workforce? Learning to balance good communication with 'hounding', developing a team spirit among widely disbursed workers, balancing workloads, maintaining separation between work and home life etc. could all be ingredients in the training.

Lisa Thiel, Leeds

In corporate life my employer at the time pioneered home working and allowed it from the mid 80's. Nowadays, I run my business from an office at home. It requires some discipline and does not suit everyone. Face to face meetings are still valuable. It's appropriate to some kinds of work but not everything. Some people prefer the clear physical distinction between work and home life, others don't seem to need that. I'm surprised at this policy from a supposedly hi-tech business such as Yahoo. It seems to me to be a retrograde step.

Ken Smith, London

Interaction with other staff is, of course, potentially healthy and productive. However, for every positive interaction, there are probably four others which are time-sapping, peripheral to the task, tiring, and just plain irritating. And let's remember the time taken by office staff to sit hidden deep in their cube farms and catch up on social networking. Where did this myth of productivity come from? The

Yahoo lady sees only one aspect of office life. It does not consist of sitting around with a latte, coming up with solutions to invincible profitability and world peace. Much appears to be in the age-old corporate pursuit of "presenteeism", that is, unproductive "being-there-ness". Yes, I have a bias. I've home-worked since 1985, apart from a short period circa 1997, when was forced to present myself at an office regularly in order to...erm..present myself at an office regularly. I did thoroughly enjoyed that time, but had to catch up on meeting-free, interruption-free, boss-snooping-free REAL work when I got home. It was all jolly good fun, but I was staggered how much time folks wasted. Was this "real" corporate life? And I inhabited an unreal world of concentration and productivity? Why was I seen as the odd one out? However, homeworking can be slow-motion career suicide. I don't care. Bring it on. I've seen my children grow up, been involved in community life, nurtured my marriage at unusual times of the day. We all face a fork in our own career road. What really matters to us? Corporate life is not a safe place to invest. Life and family is. Has anyone, at the end of their life, said "I wish I'd spent more time at the office".

Rob Govier, Eaglescliffe

I think this article portrays a false choice; home working and being co-located in an office both offer advantages. What doesn't work is a rigid policy of one or the other. There are instances of employers offering 'home working' as a way of reducing their overheads by not having to provide desk space, desks, chairs, heating, lighting etc. When this is the primary driver and the advantages of shared ideas, discussions, efficiency arising from being 'on-hand' are overlooked, then home working is a bad thing. If, on the other hand, it enables flexibility to employees in an era when more is expected of individuals and lives are very busy, then it's a good thing. Both work methods are valid but rigidly saying it's one or the other is the pathway to failure.

Ian Bartlett, Chesham

My husband & I both work from home - it's a nightmare! I have teenage kids which technically should make it easier but they forget stuff & assume that because we're at home we can drop it into school. Then when they get home we have to get involved in every dilemma. Facebook calls me A LOT of the time as does the dishwasher/washing/ironing etc. Time with my husband is no fun as we just have work life & home life to talk about. That said I LOVE that I can meet up with my friends whenever & go for sneaky breakfasts with my husband!

Fiona B, Southampton

Going into my office is often a waste of time -- I'm interrupted almost constantly, and people often stand right behind my desk and have loud conversations, oblivious to the damage they do to their co-worker's productivity. As a software developer whose work requires intense concentration -- with management's typical move towards open offices, sometimes without even partitions -- I find that my productivity is significantly higher when at home, where I control my environment and my schedule. Yes, sometimes I go and take a break in the sunshine, but I also sometimes do a burst of work at 10pm. I'm sure writers and others who require long periods of concentration would agree.

Ichiro Furusato, New Zealand

I think we could easily combine working from home and the office, to have the option of both would be a great advantage and would make us more productive. Wouldn't you want to keep a job that gave you this flexibility.

Rowan Schooling, London

Why do most people not work from home? Well it might be that most people do jobs that require a presence....teacher, nurse, doctor, receptionist, dustman, shop assistant, gas engineer, plumber, bank worker to name but a few. Or do you not consider that "work"? The number of people who work at a screen in an office is small by comparison. Home working is for the privileged few.

Eleanor London, Berkshire

You don't say anything in this article about how home working can be an essential asset to those with mobility issues or other disabilities. I am currently on a split week as my commute is too painful to do everyday. Luckily this should be a short term (less than 6 months) solution for me but I have had to do this in the past and predict I will again, and I am sure there are many for whom this is the only way they can work.

Lucy Bannister, London

I work in local government; many of us have been 'forced' to work from home as offices have closed and greater numbers of staff are shoehorned into ever smaller amounts of office space as part of this Government's obsession with cost cutting. In theory, it's a good idea I suppose but unless the organisation you work for kits both you and its IT section out with the tools to allow you to work from home

properly, I've found it can be very, very frustrating!

Andy, Preston

I worked from home 3 days a week in my last PAYE job. Now I work 100% from home as a freelancer. The difference between working from home and at the office was simple. Day in office - Stagger in after 2 hour commute. Gossip and moan with colleagues, try to work but fail to do so due to hot desking problems and noise in open plan office. Give up after required hours, commute 2 hours home. Cry with exhaustion and feelings of failure. Day at home - Get up, boot up PC, start work. Plough through work mountain with clarity & drive. Realise it's midday and I'm still in my nightie. Get dressed, eat, start washing machine. 10 minute chat with colleagues online. Return to work mountain. Finish work mountain by 17:00. Spend evening reasonably awake and happy with life.

Natalie, Essex

What is it with this notion that everybody works in an office! I work in radiation safety on nuclear submarines and there isn't any working from home! For those that can it's a decent idea, but please BBC, try to remember that for many millions of people it's not an option.

ajl655, Plymouth

Why is it that every journalist has to include the sentence "who herself returned to work weeks after giving birth" whenever Marissa Meyer is mentioned? Would you add this if you were talking about a male CEO? Surely in this age of alleged equality, mothers have the same right as fathers to choose how much leave they want to take after the birth of their baby, and they have the right to do so without being judged. There are very few articles about Marissa Meyer nowadays that don't mention this fact, as if it is now an inextricable part of her personality. I find it very irritating.

Eleanor, Hamburg, Germany

I work for the public health team in Brighton and Hove and lead on physical activity. Physical inactivity is a major public health concern as it is a risk factor for a number of serious health problems including diabetes, CVD, some cancers, and obesity. Working from home takes away opportunities to be active. For example the journey to and from work is a chance for people to build physical activity into their daily routines by leaving the car at home and walking, cycling, jogging etc Even people who take public transport are more active than those who drive as they generally have to walk some distance to the stop or station. A growing number of employers are recognising the benefits to productivity and reductions in sickness absence a more active workforce can bring and so are supporting activity during the working day by facilitating sport and physical activity sessions. At Brighton and Hove City Council staff can take part in lunchtime health walks and badminton sessions, and after work volleyball. These are great opportunities to be active and to build social networks. I feel that your photos of people working from home in pyjamas, relaxing and generally being very sedentary will be the case for the majority of those choosing home working.

David Brindley, Brighton

Who are you selling this article to? It is absolutely unbelievable that the BBC are so far from its audience. I go to work every day to an environment where presence is required, expected and monitored. And like most of my fellow workers I am still very used to signing in and having my output closely supervised. Do you not understand how the rest of British society lives? What's more, this practice has only become greater in the past five years or so, not less since the 60s. Where do people get to feel that it's "equally ridiculous" to feel you have to be at the office every day. Such a shame for those of you who feel that working from home should be part of everyone's life. I say you should get a life, and look at the real people who are out there, working, not worrying about or demanding that they work from home. Wise up, the country's corporate businesses do not allow this, only managers might get the odd day working from home. So it seems to me that your feature about working from home is only directed towards those in management. I say BBC should seriously look at who is reading their news. So annoyed, can you tell?

Cath Cochrane, Leeds

