

Remote work: Drawing the line between home and office

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.

1. What are the pros and cons of working remotely?
2. Do you prefer going into the office, working remotely, or having a hybrid working arrangement?
3. Do you think office-based or remote workers are more productive? Why?
4. How should remote workers separate their personal and professional activities?

2 Key words and expressions

a. Read the definitions below and find key words in the article that match them. The section number is given in brackets to help you. Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using them to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition. Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

1. when two things compete or happen at the same time in an inconvenient way

_____ (subtitle)

She cited a _____ of visions as the fundamental reason for the dissolution of their partnership.

2. do something that looks real but isn't _____ (paragraph 1)

Scientists can use supercomputers to _____ the climate and other earth systems.

3. recreate or imitate _____ (paragraph 2)

New in the role, he is trying to _____ his previous boss's management style.

4. increase strongly and suddenly _____ (paragraph 2)

Following the success of the popular television series "Numbers" first season, interest in finance and accounting _____ and universities have reported higher registration rates.

5. the careful watching of a person, especially when they have done something wrong or committed a crime

_____ (paragraph 4)

Is it ethical for students to be under constant _____ and for schools to monitor their internet use?

6. formally ask someone to do a special piece of work _____ (paragraph 6)
The airport _____ seven artists to create suspended sculptures and murals worth several million pounds.

7. existing within something else _____ (paragraph 7)
We want to take actions to make sure that sustainability is _____ in our corporate culture.

8. the flow or rhythm of events _____ (paragraph 8)
There are many factors to consider when establishing a meeting _____, including the goal of the meeting, how much time is required for each item, and who needs to attend.

9. caused to fail or divert from a purpose _____ (paragraph 9)
Rising labour costs threaten to _____ our annual financial plan.

10. feeling angry because you were forced to accept something you do not like
_____ (paragraph 9)
The return to the office is placing financial strain on employees and causing many to feel _____.

11. control or govern yourself, or cope with your own states and behaviour in a healthy way
_____ (paragraph 9)
New research suggests that digital devices hinder children's ability to _____.

12. become intentionally involved in a situation to prevent it from getting worse
_____ (paragraph 9)
Should the government _____ to protect small businesses?

13. the act of making something known _____ (paragraph 11)
Climate _____ rules force companies to be more transparent about their carbon footprint.

14. work with less effort than usual _____ (paragraph 12)
Roughly a third of workers report being less productive in this season, so HR is trying to combat summer _____.

Should employers monitor more than mouse clicks of remote staff?

Bosses are encouraged to help employees manage clash of domestic and work responsibilities

Anjli Raval

- 1 US bank Wells Fargo this month said it had fired more than a dozen staff after an internal investigation found employees were simulating keyboard activity to create the impression of “active work”.
- 2 It is unclear what these workers were doing exactly. But since the pandemic moved office-based work into homes, sales of so-called mouse jiggers and other devices aimed at emulating work have surged.
- 3 Part of this is in response to some large companies using their own tech tools to monitor employees’ work, such as tracking clicks on keyboards and searches on websites.
- 4 Such devices are usually deployed in workplaces where there is little trust between bosses and their employees and a tendency to think that only the things that can be measured can be managed. Tight surveillance of staff only encourages them to game the system.
- 5 But there are broader questions that still need to be asked on workplace etiquette outside of the office. For example, should staff be taking legally sensitive calls from a co-working space? How about taking a hands-free team call while driving to the post office? Would your employer be responsible if there was a crash? Another issue is whether employers should be concerned not just about staff productivity but also their ability to switch off.
- 6 UK housing company Aster Group commissioned a study to understand how employees felt about hybrid working. It found that while its staff liked to get life admin done during the working day, they felt endlessly torn between their domestic and work responsibilities. The pressure was often leading to overwhelmed, distracted and burnt out workers.
- 7 “People are attempting to ‘do it all’ due to the absence of socially embedded boundaries,” said the authors of the research by BiBO Studio, a consultancy that designs sustainable places. “Switching between activities comes at a cost – multitasking can seem efficient, but in fact this interrupts our ‘flow’, means we pay less attention to the task at hand, we are less productive, more distracted, and are not in complete control.”
- 8 Academics are now suggesting managers step in to help employees manage the cadence of their homeworking day. “If people are using their break to do the school run, are they actually having a break?” said Harriet Shortt, associate professor of organisation studies at Bristol Business School, who conducted the work for BiBO.
- 9 She suggests managers should encourage their teams to think about how they can appropriately separate work and personal responsibilities to avoid being derailed or distracted, or becoming resentful of their living rooms turning into office space. “Maybe managers can think about how they can encourage employees to record their behaviour in order that they can shift how they work,” she adds. The hope is that if staff write down exactly what they are doing and when, they may be better at self regulating and managers may be able to intervene when necessary.
- 10 Aster said its motive was to improve its employees’ wellbeing. Others might suggest that asking what domestic tasks are filling their working day is a type of surveillance. If a manager was to suggest when staff might do their laundry or weekly grocery shop, they would no doubt face accusations of overstepping the mark.

- 11 In any case, how many employees would be truly honest in any disclosures? More importantly, would bosses – many of whom already have expanded roles and are increasingly managing the mental wellbeing of staff – be willing to add more to their plate?
- 12 The latest news from Wells Fargo will have triggered managers who already feared that staff working from home were slacking. And there are times when managers do need to step in, for example if they believe staff are “quiet vacationing” – or taking time off without telling their boss.
- 13 But what is more likely is that employees are making the most of the “in-between moments” of the working day, while getting their work done.
- 14 Most companies have been clear about basic remote working guidelines, laying out expected working hours; how staff should collaborate, communicate or record their decision-making; how they should store data and what their legal rights are should they choose to work from home.
- 15 But with hybrid work here to stay, it is becoming more likely that managers will need to get more involved in the personal lives of their employees, willingly or unwillingly.

FT

Anjli Raval, 23 June, 2024.

© The Financial Times.
All rights reserved.

Articles republished from the Financial Times

3 Understanding the article

a. Are these sentences True (T) or False (F) according to the information in the article? Correct any that are false.

1. A bank sacked over a dozen workers after they found that they were only pretending to work.
2. It is not uncommon for large companies to use technology to track their staff's website searches or keyboard clicks.
3. The writer thinks that tight surveillance makes workers less likely to find ways to cheat.
4. The writer emphasises that employers should be more worried about productivity than their work–life balance.
5. The Aster Group study found that remote work lessened the pressure experienced by its workers.
6. Research by BiBO Studio suggests that a lack of socially embedded boundaries is to be blamed for people wanting to do it all.
7. Academics think it is not managers' responsibility to help employees find their work–life balance.
8. Harriet Shortt recommends that managers support teams to become more aware of their own behaviour to help them change their habits and improve their self-regulation.
9. The writer predicts that it will never be socially acceptable for managers to get more involved in the personal lives of their employees.

4 Business language – phrases

a. Complete the phrases using the words in the box. Then find and circle each phrase in the article to check your answers. Talk about the meaning of each phrase and look up any you do not know.

between in off out (x2)
the mark the system to your plate

1. to game _____
2. to switch _____
3. to be torn _____
4. to be burnt _____
5. to step _____
6. to overstep _____
7. to add more _____
8. to lay _____

b. Choose three phrases from task A and write personalised sentences.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements. Give reasons to justify your opinions.

- It is unethical for companies to track workers' website searches or keyboard clicks.
- Tight surveillance improves staff productivity.
- There are many ways in which companies can help workers prevent burnout and promote work-life balance.
- Managers should intervene in workers' personal lives, especially to promote more balance.
- Remote or hybrid workers should have strict schedules for domestic and professional activities to improve their work-life balance.

6 Wider business theme – addressing work-life balance

a. Discuss the importance and effectiveness of the following strategies that promote work-life balance:

- creating routine or structure, or time-blocking
- setting goals and boundaries and the power of "do not disturb"
- using tools to organise, optimise and manage work (e.g. apps for time tracking, making to-do lists, blocking time)
- reducing distractions
- making social connection
- prioritising movement / self-care

Advanced

BUSINESS NEWS LESSONS

b. Come up with a schedule for yourself with the aim to increase productivity and work-life balance.

| Time | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |

Advanced