



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance and Personnel

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Flexible Working Inquiry:
New Ways of Working

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had long journey times, admittedly — but it had a huge impact on the environment and the use of people's time. Consequently, they are at work. If you are travelling three hours to get to work and three hours home, work itself cuts off *[Inaudible.]*. The travel time becomes freed-up time.

Another very specific opportunity that has been identified through experience rather than theory is increased productivity. That is obviously related to the reduction in travel time *[Inaudible.]*. It will vary from person to person and from job to job, but, on average, reports of between a 5% and 20% increase in productivity are quite common.

Another important factor, which I have experienced myself but is sometimes overlooked, is that, by working from home on a full-time or part-time basis, people who acquire a disability can continue to be economically active, contribute to the organisation and keep their job. An example of that is someone whom I know who used to work for Eircom and has since retired. He suffered a minor stroke, which prevented him from travelling to work because of the difficulties of getting from A to B and using public transport. When he recovered sufficiently, he was able to continue his work from a home base, remain economically active and contribute to the organisation. Having to travel every day was simply out of the question, because he could not do so.

The Acting Chairperson: Thank you very much. Will you give us your experience of the code of practice? How was it developed and how does it work in practice? Are there any particular improvements that could or should be made?

Ms Carroll: Yes. The very important *[Inaudible.]* about the code of practice is that it was developed by people with experience of *[Inaudible.]* in conjunction with the employers' association the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (Ibec). Very importantly, it was also endorsed by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) was part of it, too, and is represented on the board. *[Inaudible.]* the interests of the employers, which is obviously very important that you support *[Inaudible.]* experience in the practicalities of e-working *[Inaudible.]* otherwise *[Inaudible.]*.

It was also noted in conjunction with that that *[Inaudible.]* sent a briefing document to the Committee, and the views that it expressed reflect very much the views that the trade union people have reflected in formulating the code of practice. The code of practice is a quite durable document *[Inaudible.]* quite durable *[Inaudible.]* interests of all parties involved establishing working in a fair and sustainable way.

The Acting Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much, Riona. I will bring in some of our Committee members now.

Mr I McCrea: I am a DUP member of the Committee. In selecting the jobs that are suitable for flexible working, are there certain attributes and skills that you feel are important? How do you test that?

Ms Carroll: Selecting the correct jobs, and the correct people in tandem with that, is very important. Let us put it simply: if people are incapable of doing their job independently in an office environment, they will certainly not be capable of doing it relatively independently when away from the office *[Inaudible.]* environment. *[Inaudible.]* a question of the jobs themselves. There are certain characteristics of jobs that would be desired *[Inaudible.]* to put it very specifically and straightforwardly, if you are in continuous touch with the public, particularly on an ad hoc basis such as in a reception area, obviously that is *[Inaudible.]* working, but *[Inaudible.]* the jobs that I worked in with people over the years, you would usually see a lot of information *[Inaudible.]*. Reference sources are becoming more and more available online, within networks, etc.

If you *[Inaudible.]* that could include, for example, one lady who was working *[Inaudible.]*. She was entering *[Inaudible.]* into the system. The way that that worked was that she attended the office one day a week. She would then bring the documents home with her and do the entries during the week. Hers was a very good job for e-working, because it was very easy to quantify how much work she was doing. If she was *[Inaudible.]* 100 invoices in the office, *[Inaudible.]* 80 at home, there was obviously a problem. Queries could always arise that she would have to deal with, but that was a very nice *[Inaudible.]* evaluation.

Other jobs *[Inaudible.]* home work, as far as I am concerned, would include people who a communications regulator — somebody processing applications for mobile licences. All of that was done electronically, so it did not matter where she was or whether she was in the centre of Dublin or in Tipperary, because she could do it anyway.

Again, there was quantifiable issue there, because if she was doing 10 in the office and only seven in similar circumstances at home, it was a bit *[Inaudible.]*. On the other hand, if she was doing 10 in the office and 13 at home, that was obviously a good thing.

A lot of senior people, particularly in the private sector but also in the public sector, would e-work to do report writing, which you associate with senior people. A lot of people would e-work perhaps one or two days a week because they needed to sit down and get the job done with relatively few interruptions. As long as the reference materials are at hand, and that is becoming increasingly the case *[Inaudible.]* Internet access *[Inaudible.]* internal network over secure connections, etc. However, you cannot take a job in isolation and say that *[Inaudible.]* for e-working. The person is also a major factor, because if people cannot work unsupported in the office, they will certainly not be able to work relatively unsupported from home.

Mr I McCrea: The code of practice on e-working states:

"the suitability of the e-worker's line manager should also be considered, having regard to the need for skills in distance management."

How do you determine that?

Ms Carroll: In my experience, managers need to buy into the e-work concept. If a manager is resistant, the situation becomes difficult, and no matter how well the e-worker is performing, if the manager is uncomfortable with the situation, there may difficulties.

On a basic level, I have seen difficulties arising with managers failing to acknowledge no increase in productivity, which was proven *[Inaudible.]* staff members. It was because the managers *[Inaudible.]* were not comfortable working with email and electronic documents. There are still such people, who may be older and have just not got used to using keyboards or doing emails. *[Inaudible.]* I was doing an evaluation, and part of the process was to send out questionnaires to managers at the end of each month to get their views on how the evaluation was going. Let us say that there were 10 managers. I would send out the forms by email, and in eight cases they would come back by email completed. However, in the case of two managers who were not happy with it, their questionnaires were printed out, and I would get the evaluation forms handwritten and by post. That showed, in my opinion, that those people were not comfortable with the technology.

It is a big ask for some managers if they already manage people working term time, doing flexi work etc. It is quite a big ask for managers then to take on an e-working scenario. Managers need to be enthusiastic and to be reassured that because somebody is working from home does not mean that *[Inaudible.]* where they want. That is not the case. The more *[Inaudible.]* required to work within the normal parameters. *[Inaudible.]* There should be an agreement in place that they are available at certain hours, and managers should take account of that.

They should also include e-workers in all activities, including the allocation of work, even though they are out of the office. Sometimes, managers tend to look over and see that so-and-so is not there and give the work to somebody else. Then the people left in the office end up getting more work than they should just because somebody is e-working. Managers need to include the e-workers in all aspects of professional life, including work, as well as in the social aspects of being involved in the team and organisation.

It is an extra ask for managers, but if they are comfortable with the concept of what the organisation is trying to do, with its objectives, and with the technology required *[Inaudible.]* often that extra little step, and if the right employee is e-working — not someone who is unreliable, undependable and needs support — he or she will very often be happy to go that extra step to improve productivity and achieve the objectives of the organisation.

Mr Weir: I will follow on from Ian's question. There is sometimes some reticence in embracing flexible working, particularly home working, owing to the issue of performance management — how managers adapt to managing the performance of remote e-workers. What are your thoughts on any differences in approach that would be needed for e-workers, as opposed to those in the much more traditional office environment, when it comes to performance management?

Ms Carroll: The e-working scenario may *[Inaudible.]*. It is not like seeing somebody sitting there at a desk; rather, they actually see what is produced. My experience has been that, in an e-working

scenario, there needs to be a lot more formal reporting to management than there would be if someone were based in an office whom people could see, because the manager will normally very quickly cotton on if a difficulty arises for someone working in the office, or if the person who is working in the office has difficulty, they can sort that *[Inaudible.]*. It is more difficult to do that in an e-working scenario.

Generally, what is done is that there is *[Inaudible.]* reporting on the part of the e-worker. That does not have to be complicated; it does not have to take hours to do or to read. At the end of every week, for example, the e-worker would be required to send to the manager a report on what the objectives for the week were, what the tasks were and where progress has been made. If there are difficulties, they can be sorted out at an earlier stage rather than let them go on, allowing problems to become bigger ones. Reporting has to be much clearer and more formalised, without being over-complex.

Another thing that happens very frequently is that managers will — they really should — keep in touch with e-workers by having regular meetings with them, or even by linking up as we are doing now, via Skype, to ask whether there is a problem. If somebody sitting in the office at home encounters a technical difficulty — for example, if *[Inaudible.]* Word documents has become a big problem — a person in the office could sort it *[Inaudible.]* very informal basis. What some organisations do as well is that they have on their internal websites an area for e-workers, where common difficulties *[Inaudible.]*; for example, sorting out a difficulty with a printer *[Inaudible.]* where common trouble-shooting issues and their solutions are posted. However, reporting and communication are key. It does not have to be complex, but it has to be clear.

Mr Weir: From that point of view, there is some irony there. Whereas we are looking for more flexible working and working from home, there is some irony in the contrast. Perhaps both the reporting mechanism and the interaction directly with line managers arguably has to be a bit more structured and formalised than it would be otherwise, because the opportunities to go to the end of the corridor where the manager is on a more ad hoc basis are diminished.

Ms Carroll: Yes. *[Inaudible.]* flexible work has to be structured; otherwise, it can be chaos. Somebody thinks that you are doing something and somebody else thinks that you are doing something else. In all fairness to managers, *[Inaudible.]* because, let us face it, it is easy for a manager to handle a situation in which he or she sees people. Managers can allocate work, etc. The e-worker situation has to be more structured and formalised. Better planning needs to take place. Certainly, there must be very close monitoring to see whether there is a problem.

This can be difficult for people for a short period, but once the system begins to flow, it should become very easy. If it does not become very easy, the situation can be reviewed.

Mr Weir: There seems to be a paradox here, in that, at least initially, e-working can place an additional burden on the line manager. Are there also advantages for line managers? They have to be arguably slightly more directly hands-on, so can it mean that there is a greater level of familiarity with their staff and with the tasks that need to be performed? The concern is sometimes expressed that line managers can become semi-detached from people, but here they have to be a bit more structured in the way that they deal with them. Does it give the line manager a greater level of direct involvement?

Ms Carroll: Yes, probably, a bit. If we go back *[Inaudible.]* the people who are e-working, and the skills that they have *[Inaudible.]*. If the selection process works, and that is very important for jobs and people, the system should flow nicely. However, where there is a problem at the selection phase, there can be problems. The thing to remember in the whole e-work *[Inaudible.]* is that there should always be, in any e-working arrangement contract, *[Inaudible.]* reporting takes place. There should also be *[Inaudible.]* a termination clause. In some cases, it just does not work or people want to work e-work for the wrong reasons. Instead of becoming an advantage to the organisation and a management system for the manager, it becomes a disadvantage, and things go astray. It is very important that there be a trial period that is long enough to be realistic — for example, four or six months — and a termination clause, whereby if the e-working scenario is not working out, it can be terminated.

Mr Cree: I wish to ask you a question on e-working initiatives. How can they best be evaluated, including baseline data and other information? How do we collect all of that for subsequent evaluation?

Ms Carroll: The evaluation can be difficult enough. Sometimes *[Inaudible.]* goes on the *[Inaudible.]*, so how it is working from the point of view of the manager and the e-worker. Some jobs that people do are easily quantified. Assuming that the organisation's objective is at least to maintain current levels of productivity and hopefully increase them, where there is a situation in which, for example, somebody inputs data, *[Inaudible.]* invoices or *[Inaudible.]*, it is easy enough to quantify the amount of work that is done. You start when they are in the office. If they do, on average, 50 a week — *[Inaudible.]* figure — and, when they are at home, they do a total of 70 a week, obviously, you have an increase in productivity. Where the job is less easy to quantify is, for example, when somebody does a report. We have all come across it. Sometimes, you sit down and do a report in a day, half a day, or whatever. At other times, it can take you three days, simply because of its complexity or because you may not be in the right form for doing it. What is easily quantified *[Inaudible.]* is beautiful, because you have got the information. On the other hand, there is often a judgement call to be made on behalf of the manager and the e-worker. It is just not altogether crystal clear. People will use their judgement and experience to evaluate how the e-working is going. Is that all right?

Mr Cree: That is fine. I think that what you are saying is that it is absolutely crucial that the baseline data be known to everyone.

Ms Carroll: Yes. When you start, it must be known. That will be done on review of output in the office in the three months prior to the introduction of e-working. There would then possibly be a wobbly phase when people are starting off. They might *[Inaudible.]* two weeks. Problems arise *[Inaudible.]* communications infrastructure and everything else. After around a month, things will have settled down. It should soon be clear how the situation before compares with the post-e-working situation.

Ms Boyle: Good morning, Riona. You have touched on some issues around training practices. Can you elaborate on how training requirements are evaluated and managed and on how that works between office and home?

Ms Carroll: Let us begin by looking at possible home workers. If they need training in their actual job, they are not skilled. It is assumed that their professional skills are independent and good. There could be training, even for people who are very skilled at their job — for example, in the whole area of handling IT equipment such as hardware — so that if they have a problem with a printer jamming or running out of toner, they know how to sort it out. It might be assumed that they know already. However, when you work in an office environment, there is usually somebody to come along and do those sorts of jobs for you. *[Inaudible.]* training, which is for standardisation of equipment *[Inaudible.]* for the IT people. I could be at home working with a Hewlett Packard printer, and you could be at home working with a Samsung printer or whatever it is. They are all different. The standardisation of equipment makes life a lot easier for the IT people, as they can put up on the website common problems that arise and how to solve them.

Other forms of *[Inaudible.]* that are frequently needed *[Inaudible.]* are managing their time. In a home situation, at the beginning people work very long hours, they wear themselves out and then start working badly or start working short hours. So time management is one of the areas that could be important.

Self-discipline is also important: if you are going to work, you will be leaving the house and will be getting some exercise between the house and the car or the bus. There is also a bit of sociability. However, if you work at home and have a family to mind in the evening, it is very easy to get into a situation where you are going into the office at home in the morning, coming out in the evening and going straight into making dinner, washing dishes et cetera. The social element can become lacking from your life. It is very important that people keep a social element if they are not going to the office and meeting people. People have to keep themselves active socially and not become hermits who do not go out of the house from one Saturday to other when they do the shopping.

Ms Boyle: On the practice of working from home, have you ever encountered envy from other employees? Sometimes, people will abuse their time management when they are working from home. For example, they might pick the children up from school, go shopping or meet friends during the day. How is that managed?

Ms Carroll: *[Inaudible.]* If you have family duties to see to, as most people do, home working makes it easier to deal with situations where you have to pick up children or go to the dentist et cetera. That is also related to the reduction in absenteeism in that you do not have to take an entire day off to do something. There cannot be envy.

People still have to do their jobs. If they take half an hour off to collect the children, they will have to make up that productivity elsewhere. There have been cases of people saying, "So and so can work where they want and when they want." You have to keep a disciplined regime and complete the tasks required.

Ms Boyle: How is that managed and policed so that such abuse does not exist at home?

Ms Carroll: It largely depends on the person who has been selected for home working; they must be responsible and know what they have to do. If they have to take time off to do something, they should communicate that with their manager and say, "Is it OK if I am not available between 10.00 am and 11.00 am?"

Ultimately, *[Inaudible.]* having a certain amount of work to do, reporting to your manager at regular intervals about how you stand with your work. The work has to be done, and if someone takes advantage and takes extra time off, it should become fairly visible because they will not be getting their work done.

Personal choice is very important. If you have somebody who skives off regularly when they are in the office, they will probably skive off more when they are at home. You chose the right people, and, if their motivation is positive, that abuse should not happen.

Ms Boyle: So it is very much up to the individual.

Ms Carroll: It is, ultimately. It is also up to the work that the individual produces: if they are not producing, there is a problem. There are no magic answers to that question.

Mr Girvan: Thank you for being present this morning. There seems to be reluctance, perhaps not just from management but from unions, on the matter because of maybe one member of staff who feels that they are being disenfranchised because they are not being offered the opportunity to have flexible working. How have you overcome that or how do you feel that we can overcome it?

Ms Carroll: First, it has to be objectively introducing home working *[Inaudible.]* If it is to reduce space *[Inaudible.]* If it is to increase productivity and to foster family-friendly initiatives *[Inaudible.]* Having said that, I am always afraid that when you say it is a family-friendly initiative, people think that they can work and mind children at the same time, which is totally out of the question, from all points of view. You cannot possibly do it. It is as simple as that.

Not every job or every person is suited to e-working, so it has to be introduced with a clear statement that, after analysis of suitable jobs, the following jobs would be eligible. It has to go through a clear and transparent process, but the person has to be assessed as suitable as well. Something that is often overlooked is that the person has to have a suitable place in the home to work: you cannot do a day's work sitting at the table. Certain criteria have to be met. After that, there are usually certain quotas or percentages introduced, if there are suitable people to do it.

As in any case, there is often a judgement call as to how to react, but it has to be clear and transparent. There are a lot of criteria that have to be met for somebody to be suitable for e-working, including the provision of a suitable workspace in the home. *[Inaudible.]* and you only need five to be working, the manager would have to decide who the five are *[Inaudible.]* and maybe roll the situation out further so that more people could be included as they go along. Again, it is a question of judgement. There is no absolutely neat solution to it.

Mr Girvan: On the point that you made about management making those types of decisions, is there any compulsion to engage with the union to ensure that management has appointed the right people and is not just doing it for a point of favouritism, which does happen? You end up with a whistleblower coming along and saying, "We know that so and so has been offered flexible working and during their flexible working they are having appointments with their doctors, going to the dentist, getting hair appointments, attending a beautician — some of us might need to do that —

Ms Boyle: Or the barbers.

Mr Girvan: Some of us might need to do that more often than others. Because of that, there is a necessity for unions to be engaged so that fairness is seen.

Ms Carroll: I imagine that, in drawing up the criteria for e-working, there will be a case for the unions to *[Inaudible.]* because it could be seen as *[Inaudible.]* However, if somebody is going to hairdressers, beauticians and gyms *[Inaudible.]* it should quickly be seen that they are not getting the work done. Reasonable work would be allocated and would have to be done within a certain time. It would not be practical on a sustainable basis for someone to indulge in leisure activities and get their work done at the same time, unless there is a huge underestimation of how much work can be done within a certain time. If somebody is abusing the situation, it should become clear quite quickly as long as it is monitored corrected.

The Acting Chairperson: Thank you very much, Riona. That was very helpful, indeed. The Committee appreciates your courtesy and the information that you gave us. We will review this session, and, if you do not mind, if there are issues that we want to correspond with you on, we will be in touch. Thank you very much for your time. Take care.

Ms Carroll: It is a pleasure. Thank you very much.