

No promotions, no buzz. Home workers pay high price while bosses save on costs

At the age of 25, casting around for what to do next, I was lucky enough to get a few weeks paid work at a newspaper. The work itself wasn't exactly thrilling. But my colleagues were funny and friendly.

How does one decide on a career? Some are anointed with a vocation at the age of 10, others in time to apply for an apprenticeship or graduate trainee scheme. But for most of us it's not so much the work but the world that draws us in: the people, the culture, even the building.

Mickey Down, who co-wrote *Industry* – the 2020s' best and biggest workplace drama, renewed last week for a fourth season – once told an interviewer that it was the clothes that seduced him into banking. "Everyone wore ties and really nice suits, and had very shiny shoes, and all the old boys wore braces. Even if you're working 'til 2 o'clock in the morning, you look around and everyone is still wearing their suits and ties.... It's good. That can sustain you for a surprisingly long time."

What romantic idea of their working selves is sustaining young people now? Junior employees can of course expect to be stuck with the tasks no one else wants to do – but many are now doing them from the unromantic world of their own kitchens. Newbies are used to being told they've missed the peak of the party – journalists of my generation are sick of hearing about the boozy lunches and freebies of years past. But now the party really is ending – almost half of us aren't turning up at all, and offices have a hangdog air, with rows of empty chairs and blank screens.

Working from home is winning: according to the Office for National Statistics, 44% of UK employees were remote at least part of the time in 2023. We often worry that kids, stuck to their phones, are failing to learn social skills that will help them in the real world. But what if no "real world" awaits them?

It isn't quite clear when it became "left wing" to advocate for working from home, and "right wing" to urge people back to the office. But the positions seem set. As Jacob Rees-Mogg once plumped himself on one side – leaving pointed little notes for absent civil servants ("I'm sorry you were out") – so, for balance perhaps, Keir Starmer has adopted the other.

Last week we heard that new legislation on workers' rights is to confront a "culture of presenteeism", and allow staff to work remotely "by default". Yet, it is beginning to look like employers are the winners when people work from home, and employees the losers – particularly the badly paid ones. Shouldn't Labour be helping the latter?

After all, it helps to have your staff work from home if you want to save money. Rent, electricity, air conditioning, internet connections, office equipment, snacks, cleaning services, security – all these costs can be passed to the remote employee, dialling in from their flat or the nearest WeWork. Then, too, if your workers get out of bed and straight on to a Teams call, you can extend their working days. Neither do you have to worry about paying people enough to live within commuting distance. You can find someone else who'll work from somewhere cheaper, 50 miles away. Better still, you can replace them with someone from a different country altogether. Remote working, remember, is a global market.

Meanwhile, employees are losing out on mentoring, skills and career progression. Junior workers are most likely to be overlooked for promotion if not physically present – it's harder to ask for advice over a Zoom call, or to make your voice heard.

Women can suffer, too. Studies show they get less feedback and less mentoring when working remotely, and any time they save tends to get spent on household chores. Labour's intervention is more likely to help senior workers, who have already secured their place in the hierarchy and have plusher pads to dial in from.

Data on whether remote working helps or hinders productivity is mixed – but it also tends to focus on the short term. What will be its long-term effects on stamina, creativity and communication skills? And that's not to mention mental health. What we are so quick to recognise in children and teens (socialising is good for you, too much time spent online is bad), we fail to notice in ourselves. We are social creatures, and do not thrive in isolation.

Workplaces matter. Senior politicians should know this: there is after all a chorus of protest whenever it is suggested they move out of the crumbling but magnificent palace of Westminster, with its ancient stone curlicues and atmosphere of intrigue. Chatting to a senior No 10 adviser about his new office last week, he remarked he was lucky to be placed close to the prime minister's: the further away the desk within Downing Street, the shakier the influence. Quite. Labour's worries about a "culture of presenteeism" are misplaced: what we have is a culture of absenteeism. It's a problem worth fighting.

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