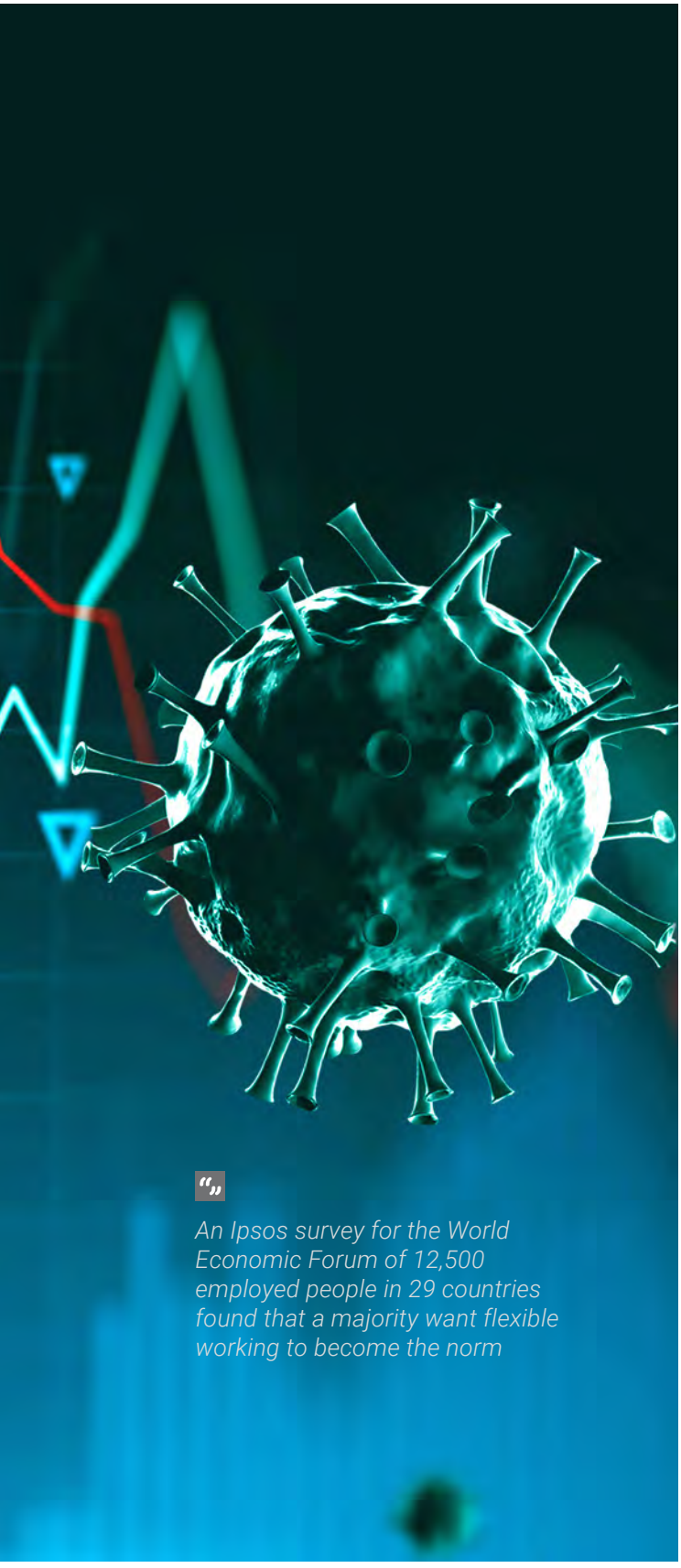
Are we really Never Going Back to the old ways of working?

Peter Thomson and **Mark Thomas** revisit the assumptions they made a year ago about the impact of the pandemic



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Never Going Back, we called it. That is the title of our ground-breaking book, published in May 2021, about how Covid-19 would transform the world of work. We forecast that the overnight shift to home and hybrid working forced on millions of workers across the globe would never be reversed. We also argued that the change would prove to be a good thing, focusing management on outcome rather than presenteeism, boosting workers' wellbeing, and that the wider impacts would ultimately lead to more rounded communities and a greener globe. With Covid-19 restrictions lifted in most parts of the world, including the dropping of 'work-from-home' directives, now is a good time to reflect on that forecast. We can start to answer two key questions: Were we right? Is hybrid working proving to be a good thing?

Work will never be the same

So far, the answer to question one is irrefutably 'yes'. The evidence to support this conclusion has continued to mount since the book was published. One of the largest, most comprehensive and up-to-date studies, the Microsoft Work Trend Index of 31,000 people in 31 countries concludes: "One thing is clear: we're not the same people that went home to work in early 2020. The collective experience of the past two years has left a lasting imprint, fundamentally changing how we define the role of work in our lives." In an article, published at about the same time to mark the two year anniversary of the WHO declaring Covid-19 a pandemic, the global management consultancy McKinsey list of 10 lessons states: "Work will never be the same. The pandemic's first year proved … most knowledge workers can do the job from home … employees and employers see the world differently."

An Ipsos survey for the World Economic Forum of 12,500 employed people in 29 countries found that a majority want flexible working to become the norm. And almost a third (30 percent) said they would consider looking for another job if they were forced to go back to the office full time. In the UK, a report from the influential Chartered Management Institute and

the Work Foundation found that almost nine in ten workers don't want to return to pre-Covid working patterns. Based on a poll of 964 managers and 1,000 remote workers they found that the majority of workers would prefer to spend their working week combining days on site and working from home.

A good thing?

Next question: Is hybrid working proving to be a good thing? This is more complex and the answer very much depends on who you ask, which some would argue closely relates to who benefits. A culture war has been brewing in the UK for most of the last year with the perceived poor performance of many organisations being blamed on home working. This has been a particular feature in the reporting about public sector services.

One article in Britain's biggest selling quality newspaper, The Daily Telegraph, best encapsulates the stance taken by many right-leaning commentators. "How the 'HR Blob' took over the workplace – and put the brakes on Britain", by Associate Editor Gordon Rayner, makes the case that HR departments and their focus on wellbeing are negatively impacting on productivity and customer service. "HR departments tell bosses they have to allow home working, bosses roll over, and staff end up working from home whether they want to or not – or whether it works for the business or not. Nobody has to take responsibility for anything, and everyone hides behind the HR handbook of being told what to do. And, more than two weeks after the Government's work from home guidance was scrapped with the ending of Plan B Covid restrictions, data suggests that at least 6.5 million people, or one in five workers, are still working from home all or part of the week, with a potentially catastrophic knock-on effect for the economy. Because while HR departments turn their attention to wellbeing, exercise and the work-life balance, the home working revolution is now costing the country an estimated £20 billion to £30 billion per year. The laptop classes might be saving money by living in their slippers, but in the long-term they, too, will pay the price for the handbrake they have put on economic recovery."

Media backlash

The media's anti-home working agenda has put otherwise little-known public sector managers in the firing line. Sarah Healey, who combines her role as the Civil Service's Health and Wellbeing Champion with her day job as permanent secretary at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, became a figure of fun to some in the media when she wrote in a blog about the benefits of being able to hop on her Peloton exercise bike "whenever I have a teeny bit of time".

More recently Paul Fotheringham, the newly-elected President of the Police Superintendents' Association (PSA), became the subject of much merriment when he suggested that the future of the police could see more officers working from home and choosing their own hours in a bid to improve diversity. He said such arrangements would especially help women with young children to reach senior ranks, rather than making them feel they had to bow out of the force due to shift patterns that are unworkable with family life.

He added that the pandemic had hastened the adoption of new technology, with remote working now becoming the norm and that flexible working would benefit non-emergency response officers, who make up more than half of the police workforce. There would, however, continue to be frontline officers working around the clock to respond to emergencies. This seems perfectly reasonable to us and yet he was ridiculed across large parts of the British media. These kinds of stories ignore the fact that hybrid working has been adopted by many private sector businesses, including some of the world's largest and most successful, pretty effectively.

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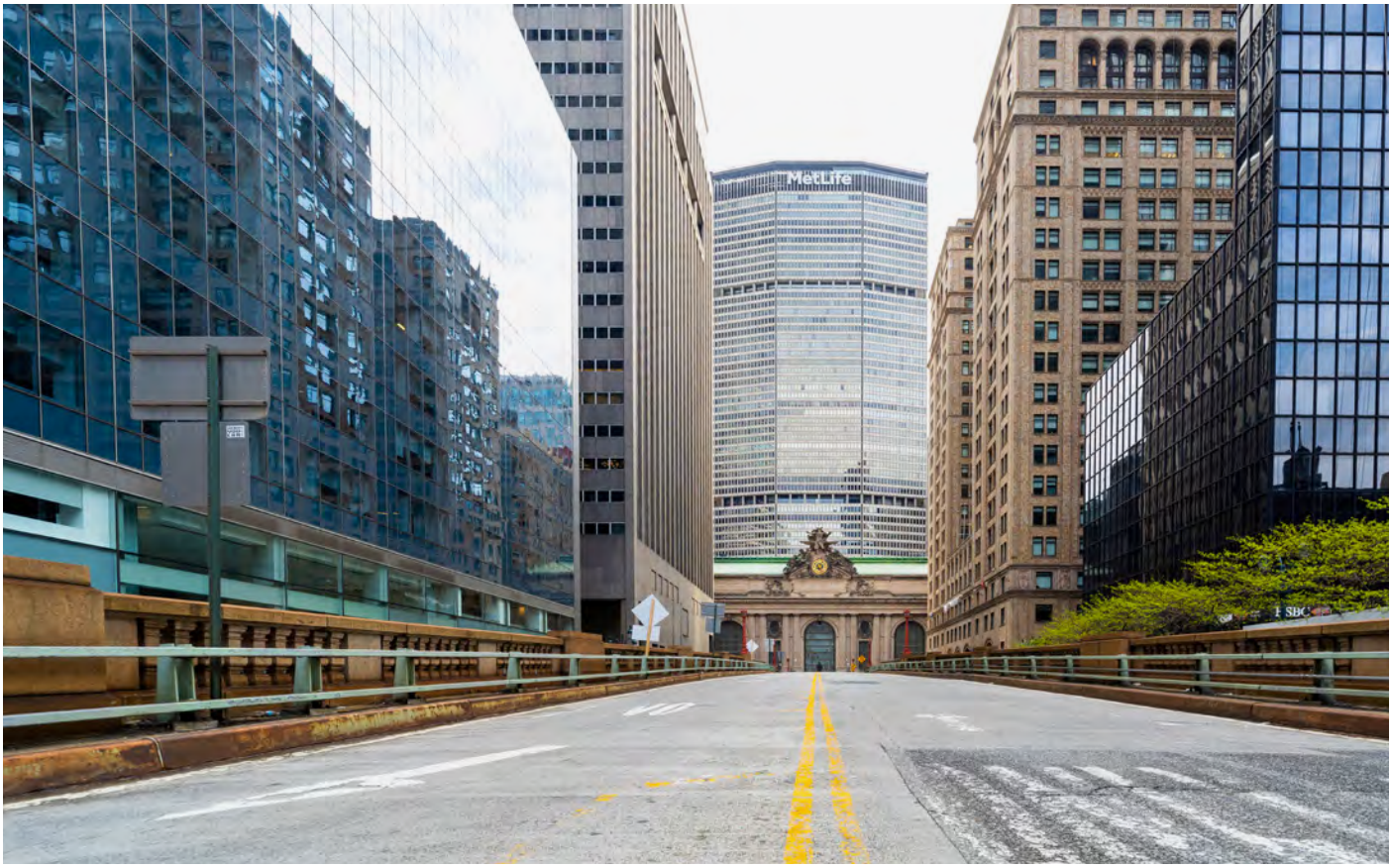
Productivity impact

What though of productivity? The world economy has had to recover from Covid-19 and is now being impacted by the devastating war in Ukraine and yet here in the UK, our economy grew above its pre-pandemic size for the first time as long ago as November 2021. What does the research show about the productivity impact of home/hybrid working? A reduced commute, fewer workplace distractions and lower rates of absenteeism are often cited as reasons why someone who works from home may be more productive than those who work away from home. However, increased opportunity for shirking due to a lack of supervision and the intrusion of home responsibilities, such as caring, may contribute to a productivity penalty associated with working from home.

Of the limited research on the productivity impacts of home working, Bloom et al. is the most widely reported. This study found a positive effect of working from home on hours worked, employee productivity and retention. Dutcher (2012) also found positive effects of working from home on productivity, but only for more engaging creative tasks. Data from the Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS) suggests that some industries had a much more positive experience of home working in 2020 than others. Surveys in early 2021 suggested that increased home working had been negative for productivity in around a third of businesses, positive in around 10 percent, and the remainder saw no change. IDC research of employees in Asia/Pacific shows that more than 70 percent of the employees said their productivity was higher or at least at the same level compared to pre-pandemic.

Bearing in mind that for many employers and employees home working is a new phenomenon, these studies are relatively encouraging to those of us who support hybrid working. The truth is that productivity has held up in a great many workplaces despite the disruption and challenges of the pandemic and the lockdowns. It is our contention, therefore,



that the hybrid working backlash is not driven by any perceived or indeed real fall in productivity. Instead, it is partly based on humanity's innate desire to get back to what we perceive as normal life. This feeling has been exacerbated by the sense that the country is no longer working as efficiently as before, with fuel shortages and cost of living increases being examples.

Most commentators agree, though, that these have been primarily caused by the post-Covid recovery and, in the UK, by Brexit challenges. Additionally, we would argue that those organisations perceived to be providing the poorest service are often within the public sector. We believe that these failings are more likely to do with the poor customer service culture that has been ushered in under the excuse of Covid-19 and the lockdowns.

One example is the UK's Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, renamed 'Doing Very Little Actually' by those who blame the home working programme for the long delays in issuing licences. A Times Newspaper investigation into the agency's poor performance concluded: "The answer turned out to be pretty simple: for most of the past two years a sizeable chunk of its workforce has been at home watching re-runs of Columbo and comparing the dunkability of Rich Teas to digestives. While a million drivers were hit by delays, thousands of those tasked with keeping us on the road were on 'special leave': no work and full pay. It is easy to blame home working, or hybrid working for poor performance and for organisations to hide behind the Covid excuse."

The Times article concludes: "Whoever is to blame, the fact that a sod-the-public attitude has persisted at the DVLA for so long highlights a widespread problem: 'because of Covid' has become a justification for slackness, a blanket excuse for poor service, a cover for laziness, a defence for mediocre performance."

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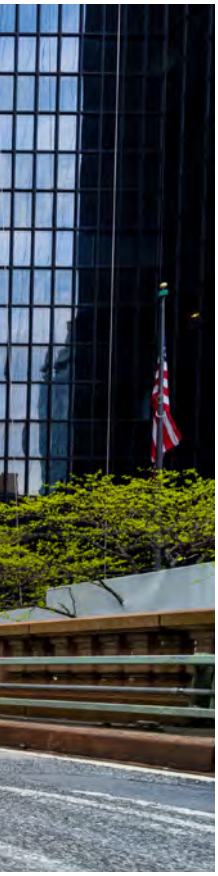

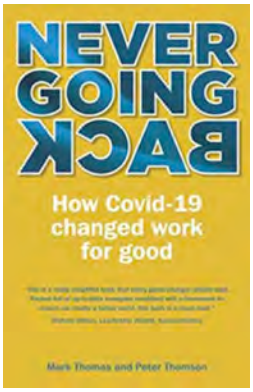

A new mindset

We think this proves our central point that the perceived poor performance of some public sector organisations is really to do with culture and management and little to do with where people work. All of these negative noises about home working, the 'Never Going Backlash' as it could be framed, risk losing the other benefits of hybrid working that we talk about in the book if public sector policy makers overreact and force workers back to the office. Those in the public or private sector that are struggling to make home/hybrid working a success could do worse than follow Microsoft's advice, a thriving company that is making hybrid working a success. That Microsoft Work Trend Index we referred to at the beginning of this article concludes with this advice, which echoes one of the key themes of Never Going Back:

"Employees value flexibility and wellbeing, and these great expectations create an opportunity for every organisation to reimagine work-life integration as a win-win. Giving people agency to do their best work is not only in their best interest – it's good for business. To make hybrid work work, leaders need to empower managers to be the culture keepers, rethink the role of the office, rebuild social capital for a digital-first workforce, and create new practices for sustainable flexible work. Technology plays a key role, but this moment calls for a new mindset. As the world continues to evolve, organisations that take a culture-first, learn-it-all approach will come out ahead."

Buy the book: https://amzn.to/3v4k5sd
www.nevergoingbackbook.com

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