

Home workers of the revolution

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22/05/2020

Comrades, we gather here today to pay our respects to a way of life that passed earlier this year having lived to a ripe old age... and evolved into the equivalent of a cantankerous old git who's long overdue a planting.

Traditional office-working life died suddenly in March 2020 (change date to reflect market you work in) with the onslaught of coronavirus.

Its demise has prompted the dawning realisation that – in retrospect, and according to numerous infra sources – it had long outlived its useful lifespan... and many of us really didn't like in the first place.

So donning black tie to mark respect for the late office working life... if you can find a tie. You know, behavioural scientists will one day likely point to the relaxation of tie-wearing as the first, tentative step on the path to mass home-working.

Dark suits all round – not much of a stretch as that's normal office garb, unless you live in the Netherlands; and, as Kingsman rightly points out: Oxfords, not Brogues.

Eulogies ready, the mourners (10 of them, given Covid-19 restrictions) brace for cheering tales of nightmare commutes, all-nighters to get deals over the line, and that time when such-and-such came back to the office and slept under their desk.

Strikes, over-crowding, signal malfunctions, train cancellations and that 20-something twerp who will leap gazelle-like for the length of a carriage to bag a seat so as to continue playing that silly game on his phone, gleefully elbowing pregnant women out of his way.

And that's before you even get to the office where the air-con is inadequate and you're in daily battle with the person who (even in summer) insists on turning it into a heater because they're a "little bit chilly" – and the office bore who you fantasise about throwing down the lift shaft.

A sandwich for lunch? Why not? Thirty-plus years of eating highly-calorific, bread-based delights on a daily basis is in itself an express route to mental ill-health.

And then for the commute home, avoiding eye contact with sane and barking mad alike, ignoring the oaf who just has to wolf down an Upper Crust baguette with gusto, devouring it like a washing machine with the door open.

Sitting on a grubby train, sharing space with people you considered to have poor hygiene in the morning... something that doesn't improve as the day wears on... is far from ideal.

While it's not all bad and most of us met our other halves in the working environment, it truly looks like the number's up for this way of life – and we have coronavirus to thank for bringing us to this revolution.

A new way of working

Talking to folk around the market this week, not everyone's a convert but even those who are staunch supporters of a 9-5 (and the rest) way of life recognise that change is coming like a run-away train.

And while this impacts different functions across the infra community to different extents, we can all expect to spend more time working from home in the future as DocuSign works its way into our daily lexicon.

As to meetings, one technology solution for video conferencing has yet to emerge as a leader and one senior infra source says he is signed up to five: Zoom, Teams, BlueJeans, Google Hangouts and Microsoft Visio.

The contact who first set me on the path to writing this story said that his organisation had already conducted a staff WFH survey to gauge how keen they were to return to traditional office working life... and 80% were in favour of continued home working post Covid-19.

Work life has changed with one Covid-dodging contact going as far as to say: "Zoom has fast become the new boardroom. It's better than Microsoft's solution, which can only show a minimum number of people."

He adds: "I had to dial into a conference call this morning and hadn't done that since lockdown. Everything's now on Zoom. Life's not perfect, but the work/life balance is so much better."

Another quarantiner adds: "No packed trains, no pointless rush to get to the desk as it's only 20 steps away from my bed. I strongly believe that a good proportion of people will work from home in the future – not just for safety, but for efficiency and life."

Gosh – work/life balance is something this infra hack hasn't mentioned since being an infra head-hunter, glibly fibbing that the role wouldn't have them chained to a desk for their entire tenure... which, as it now turns out, is accidentally true!

And, all of a sudden, you can't point a finger at the beleaguered millennials and insist that work/life balance is all the alleged snowflakes want. Not many of the people approached to discuss this Friday Editorial were the youthful side of 50 (including the author who is 100% in favour of WFH).

The vast majority of folk approached anticipate working from home for 3 days in the week, possibly coming into the office for the other 2... which is going to have a massive impact on city-centre commercial real estate.

I left my heart at home...

Change in the way we work is inevitable. That's the verdict. Which – beyond concerns over office space and companies that have signed 3-year leases with no break clause – is going to impact many across the board, not to mention all the infrastructure providers.

In the UK, it throws even more doubt over the future of HS2... which sadly appears to have sailed past the point of no return as it remains the single most dubious project to have graced a European drawing board in recent years.

One self-isolator says: "Personally I'm ok and well set to WFH, but I miss the City and the office, so a balance would work very well. Whatever the outcome, it sucks for city centre commercial real estate!"

They add: "I'm increasingly hearing the term 'hub' being bandied around for future offices, but the reality is I'm only going to come in if it's worth it. It is highly unlikely that I'll commute into London without an absolute reason, and not just to 'show my face in the office'."

Another lockdowner is of the same view: "Most offices won't be open fully until there is a vaccine and by then people will have got used to the new norm. Offices as we knew them are history. Getting together will be more for social reasons than pure work."

"I've told people I see myself working from home maybe 3 days and then coming into London maybe 2 days a week outside rush hours like 10am-2pm or at 2pm-10pm to meet clients, friends or colleagues in social environments like restaurants and coffee shops.

"We would use our offices if it is safer/ easier to arrange meetings but not for work as we used to. Clubs are definitely the way to go. Just not the Pall Mall style geriatric suit and tie ones."

A stay-home source says: "I reckon 2-3 days a week working from home will become the norm. However, pitching and negotiating deals will still require face-to-face meetings. Also bankers will still want coffee time and lunches as before. From now on, office time will mean full-on meetings while the work (changed word from an anagram of carp) can be done at home."

Work/life balance for all

The situation is summed up rather nicely by one WFH-er who says: "Airport expansion, road widening, faster, better trains – it all seems a bit futile. Will smaller towns benefit from this? Almost certainly. I am already talking to other parents who work in the City about renting an office for us to share near our home and close to the train station, in case a London trip is required!

"The big corporations need to adjust their mind-set. Will this happen again? The virus has been cruel to some humans, but kind to the environment. Can they, or – more to the point – do they want to adjust for their shareholders, employees and the environment?

"The speed at which this has happened has shocked everyone, so let's see how the CEOs of the major corporations in the City respond. Will they be brave – like the CEO of BlackRock with regard to sustainability last year, which was a game changer – or will they try to ignore where the world is heading?

"If they do, they will make their companies a much better place to work, they will improve their ESG credentials, reduce expenses as well as make their employees so much happier."

So, what is to be learned from all this?

You might want to invest in membership of a club to host meetings, possibly to stay the night and to give you a central location to operate from.

We all missed the boat to invest in the likes of DocuSign and Zoom and the importance of living in major financial centres is diminishing rapidly with a possible exodus to the countryside where 60-90 minute commutes are a lot less daunting if you are doing it twice a week at most, possibly spending a night at your charming club.

Good lord.

Is life starting to look civilised, finally?

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