MANAGING EMPLOYEES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

**Flexible working and the future of work**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between 24th July and 11th August researchers from the Working from Home During the COVID-19 Lockdown Project, run by the University of Birmingham and the University of Kent, conducted a survey with UK managers with the aim of understanding the organisational perspective on managing homeworking since the COVID-19 lockdown. This research builds on previous published research from the project team on employee experiences since lockdown that showed a steep rise in the number of employees working from home with most (86%) employees working from home, and a remarkable 75.3% of parents reporting they would like to work flexibly to spend more time with family (Chung, Seo, Forbes & Birkett, 2020). This research on management experiences over lockdown produced the following key findings:

**Most managers have had to manage staff remotely since lockdown**

* The majority (58.2%) of managers in the sample report that less than 20% of their employees worked from home before lockdown. However, since lockdown, the majority (54.7%) of managers report that now over 80% of their employees have been working from home.

**Managers are much more positive about working from home and flexible working since lockdown**

* Fewer managers now believe that presenteeism and long working hours are essential to career progression within organisations. Before lockdown, 57.3% of managers believed that employees needed to be physically present in the workplace to progress, decreasing to 37.5% of managers since lockdown.
* Managers increasingly believe that working from home increases productivity due to their experiences in lockdown. 58.6% of managers surveyed said that working from home increases productivity, whereas only 44.1% agreed with this statement before lockdown.
* 50.9% of surveyed managers also believe that working from home improved concentration based on their experiences of managing since lockdown.
* Managers say they are more trusting of their teams since lockdown.
* Manager say they are much more aware of the work-life balance issues their staff face since lockdown.
* Managers believe working from home will become much more commonplace in the future, as company Directors have seen that it can work.

**Lockdown has led to an increase in support provided for homeworking**

* Organisations have significantly increased the support they provide to employees working from home since lockdown, particularly tools for working from home. For example, 80.6% of managers say their organisations have supplied computers and 70.1% supplied online meetings software to staff. There has also been an increase in the professional support employers have been offering, such as line manager support, software guidance and support for wellbeing. This was particularly true for large organisations with 250+ employees.
* The managers surveyed indicate that working from home would be encouraged and better supported in the future with more jobs advertised as available for flexible working (50.0%), improved support for working from home (70.5%), more tools to support working from home (71.4%) and improved support for working from home by the organisation (72.7%).

**Managers intend to encourage more flexible working and homeworking in the future**

* Since lockdown managers are supporting more requests for flexible working, working from home and part-time work. 70.1% percent of managers said they are now supporting more flexible working requests.
* Managers say organisations will continue to provide more support and tools for working from home. 72.8% of managers agree that their organisation will now provide improved support for working from home.
* Managers believe there will be more support for senior roles to be done more flexibly in the future. This includes senior managers being given the opportunity to work from home (49.1%), utilise a job share (19.3%) and work part-time (19.0%).
* Managers realise they need to manage differently when their teams are working remotely and recognise they may need more training to do so.

**Wellbeing and mental health of employees when remote working has been a particular concern for managers since lockdown**

* Mangers were more likely to say that working from home leads to isolation since lockdown with responses rising from 46.5% before lockdown to 58.7% since lockdown.
* Overall, 36.3% of managers report that their organisations have provided wellbeing counsellors for staff and 55.7% of managers reported that their organisations provided guidance for wellbeing since lockdown.
* Managers felt they needed more support and guidance from their organisations on how to manage these issues.

Overall, the data included in this report shows that working from home has been commonplace since lockdown and managers have faced a steep learning curve regarding how to manage remote teams, often with very little support or guidance. Despite this, managers have been pleasantly surprised about the results with their teams generally performing really well during this time. While there have been some performance issues these were generally where this was already an issue prior to lockdown. Due to these positive experiences, managers are keen to support more working from home and flexible working in the future and for their organisations to develop the policies and process to facilitate this and give them the training they need to manage remote workers more effectively. It was generally recognised that working remotely over long periods of time can be very isolating and that some people much prefer working in an office environment. This suggests that in the future, organisations should seek a balance. On one hand, organisations need updated flexible working policies, good support and tools for those working from home and properly trained managers. However, on the other hand, organisations need to retain some office space to facilitate those who want to be office based and support group activities and events to bring remote teams together periodically to avoid isolation and other issues. These findings also raise broader questions about the future of work and the impact on the broader economy and environment that will be of interest to policymakers. Recommendations for Policymakers and Organisations are provided at the end of the report.

