

Have laptop will travel

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Modern life affords many luxuries and opportunities, as well as its fair share of stress and the feeling of being pulled in all directions. Many professionals work in excess of their contracted hours and the European directive of 48 hours per week. The Munro Stress Survey, found that over a third of researchers surveyed (albeit a relatively small base) claim to work over 40 hours a week¹.

The source of stress comes from many aspects of our lives, but how we deal with it is up to us, especially with respect to the way we work. Everyone is aware of the increasing flexibility that can be gained in the modern workplace, and for professional white collar workers the opportunities are increasingly dynamic.

The average UK worker spends around an hour commuting, with those in London spending considerably more time than the general population on their way to and from work². While some catch up on their reading, or watch that episode of Britain's Got Talent they downloaded over the weekend on their iPods, there is a growing group of professionals, market researchers included, who are, to all intents and purposes, already at work.

Additionally, there are growing numbers of people for whom commuting is no longer a five times a week activity. Taking opportunities granted by advances in technology, and the now easy access you can have to your organisation's network from anywhere in the world.

This modern phenomenon is growing, with many more people taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by greater technology and flexibility.

Within this paper, we do not aim to define the market or explain trends so much as look at the opportunities and challenges this new working practice has on business research and researchers. How it affects our world, the world of our clients and subsequently us, and the business respondents we need to engage with.

¹ Munro Stress Survey – *Market researchers, average hours worked per week.*

² Department for Transport - *Regional Transport Statistics, 2008 Edition*

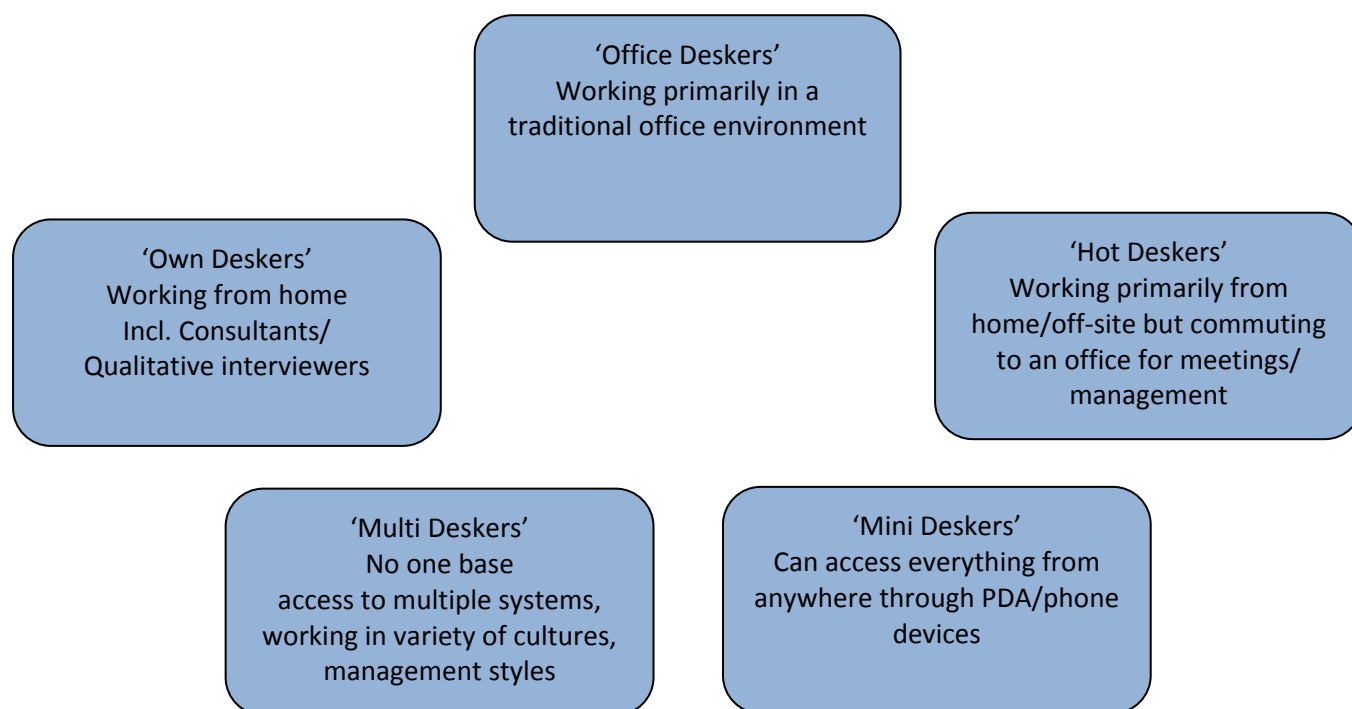
The researcher world

From the researcher perspective, remote working offers a chance to get closer to the holy grail of a work life balance. Commuting times can be cut out several days a week, you can get through your emails while on the move and you can always be on hand to answer questions from clients.

Taking a wider picture, there is a growing trend³ in people living further away from work which looks set to last especially with the underlying shortage of housing stock in London and the South East – the home of many research companies. It can be done too. At Munro one of our IT analysts works from home in Thailand and there has been more than one deadline which has benefited from our ability to provide an almost 24 hour service in this area; one of our contractors is now based in Cape Town; and the author lives in Cornwall. Our clients are following suit too, we have clients who commute to their London offices from Yorkshire, Newcastle and even New Zealand.

A large proportion of the tasks we undertake are non-geographically sensitive; questionnaires, topic guides, reports can be written anywhere and with new technology even presentations can be held remotely with clients dotted across the country and indeed the world.

This has led to several new typologies for people who work remotely. By remotely, we generally mean away from the office, with a large proportion of this activity being undertaken at researcher's homes. A quick glance at the MRS Buyers Guide shows us the amount of people in our industry who do not have a traditional office, working in one or two person enterprises or as consultants, many of these have been working 'remotely' for years.



³ Department of Transport, *National travel survey 2006*

These are not meant to be all encompassing typologies offering a mutually exclusive view of the modern research world. Indeed this is becoming increasingly difficult, 'mini desking' is clearly undertaken by all groups to a greater or lesser extent, and the 'office desker' will occasionally take home a pool laptop to meet a reporting deadline. But all organisations are having to recognise the increased flexibility and opportunity offered by remote working practices and many are now building systems, both technology and managerial, that embrace this flexibility and enable researchers of all 'types' to work collaboratively.

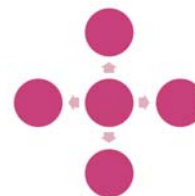
Remote friendly organisations

We know that each organisation has its own culture, and that the culture of large scale command and control structures will differ from smaller more organic consultancy businesses, but *how is this likely to impact on how the organisation maximises the benefits of remote working?*

With command and control structures, it may be easy to see how senior management may gain from the ability to 'multi-desk' and 'mini-desk', travelling between offices and locations both across the country and wider afield. However, these organisations are more likely to have process driven cultures which may leave less room for individuals further down the organisation to make the most of remote working practices (at least for now).



For a smaller agency, perhaps with four or five researchers working together, the opposite is true. Here, activity is likely to be organic, and we may question why a group this size even needs an office in the first place.



The extent to which remote working can revolutionise an agency, and be embraced wholeheartedly is therefore likely to be affected by organisational structure and cultural differences.

Benefits from remote working

So why do people want to work remotely?

With more and more of us working in non-traditional settings, i.e. not tied to the same office desk; there must be something to this. Benefits from this practice appear to span across researchers, agencies and indeed our clients.

Benefits to researchers

At first glance the main benefits lie with the individual that is able to work remotely and make more of their day. The 'martini researcher', working anytime, anyplace, anywhere can potentially be more flexible, with home and work space and tasks merging; making the most of every opportunity for example catching up on emails on the move.

Particularly for those working from home, the opportunity to remove commute times, and to potentially live many miles from the office are great and increased flexibility may be gained for such activities such as child care or personal interests.

Researchers often report the ability to focus more, concentrating on reports, tables or preparation for a presentation at home due to fewer distractions. This then provides a sense of wellbeing and job satisfaction that comes from doing a good job.

Benefits to research agencies

There are also opportunities from an agency perspective, which are especially clear when a business embraces remote working wholeheartedly. Opportunities exist for hot desking and therefore reduced office space, basing staff around the country can also offer regional coverage for client meetings and depth interviews and there are also advantages in terms of the environmental impact of organisations through less commuting.

This is not just a nice-to-have staff pleasing exercise. BT undertook an analysis in 2006 of the impact of their move to encourage remote working and found significant cost savings in terms of their office overheads – in the order of around £6,000 per year per remote worker⁴. They also describe estimates of the environmental impact of this policy saving 12 million litres of petrol a year through reduced commuting.

It is not just organisations the size of BT that can benefit though, there are many research agencies which could gain from encouraging remote working, especially when their leases are up for renewal and they have the option to consider alternative premises.

Financial benefits of remote workers for a mid-sized agency...

Employees	75
Overhead per employee (Property, Heat, Light, Insurance, Telephone etc.)	£4,300
Costs per annum	£318,200
Number of remote workers	15
Savings on overhead	£63,640
Net of additional costs of linking up remote workers (assumed 20% of saving)	£50,912

This assumes secondary property locations, so some agencies in premier positions could save considerably more.

⁴ BT Flexible working 2006

If a research agency of around 75 staff could facilitate just 20% of its workforce working remotely, the corresponding difference in floor space and overheads could amount to a saving of around £51,000 a year. When we consider this is a bottom line saving, this may be a very welcome addition in times of recession. With pretty standard revenue to profit ratio of around 10:1, we could be looking at this being the equivalent to winning around £500,000 of revenue each and every year.

There are also additional benefits to an agency. It may not have felt like it over the past few months, but there is an underlying shortage of talent in our industry, and remote working practices can help agencies tap into and keep a wider talent pool. As a practical example of this, one of our researchers recently returned to South Africa after spending a year with us; she proved herself to be a huge asset to our clients and so rather than breaking off ties, she continues to work for us from home and has already proved the value of this relationship through her ability to pick up projects with the knowledge of our working practices and indeed all the personalities involved.

Benefits to clients

Clients can also be better served by researchers who have the ability to work on the go. No longer will researchers be unable to view emails from clients until they are next in the office, or a client have to call many different numbers or speak to the switchboard to get hold of the project manager, now they will be able to respond while travelling, or at breaks in meetings. It is possible for actions talked about in meetings to be completed before the researcher even gets back to the office. Thus speeding up deliverables and enhancing the service provided.

Additionally, allowing our research teams to work effectively away from the office – from home or client site, we can further enhance the delivery quality of our outputs. When researchers feel they can provide better outputs by being quiet at home, they can do so, while still being in full communication with the office as needs arise.

Remote working tool kit

So how effective can we be?

How effective we can be working remotely as researchers depends on the tools we have available. By tools, we don't just mean technology, although clearly this has revolutionised the way we can work remotely; but also the management and organisational tools required to be effective outside of the traditional working environment.

Our tool kit includes:

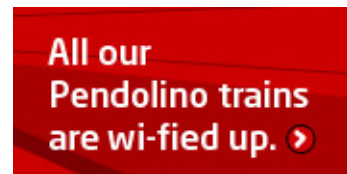
- technology to keep you connected – to your email and network files at home, or from practically anywhere on the planet
- ability to manage remote workers – motivate, develop, set boundaries, monitor performance all without them sitting down the corridor
- ability to manage others while working remotely yourself, may require a complete change in management style and practice
- acceptance within organisational culture
- a clear understanding of your own role and high levels of motivation
- above all, good communication methods

Technology

The specifics about technology are best left for the experts in IT, but it is the increased availability in home broadband through ADSL and cable, WiFi Hotspots and the relatively low cost of GSM Internet connections via PDAs and USB dongles that clearly provides the basis of being better connected and facilitates much greater opportunities for remote working for people like market researchers.

With the right connectivity, we can easily access emails, shared directories and files from the office network. Through virtual desktops and servers we can operate from any Internet enabled PC as if in the office and indeed some technologically advanced organisations are moving to a virtual PC networks which effectively make everyone whether in the office or not work as if they were remote through the use of dumb terminals.

'Martini researching', has been significantly advanced by WiFi Hotspots available in many cafes, public buildings, city centres and even on some trains and planes. Ofcom estimate there to be more Hotspots in the UK per head of population than the USA, France, Germany or Japan – 18 per 100,000 people⁵. Additionally, the increased use of Blackberrys, iPhones and the like have brought the office to almost any location worldwide.



www.virgintrains.co.uk

Use of the technology can be taught, we are a generally a *reasonably* IT savvy group and the technology, once set up, is pretty straightforward to use; but there is also the way it is used. Emails can be confusing and misleading at the best of times, and we have all made schoolboy errors responding quickly to clients, when we meant to be forwarding to colleagues. When the screen is so much smaller and you are not at

⁵ Ofcom – International Communications Market Report 2006

your desk but running to a meeting, the chances of mistyping/miscommunication grows and we need to be doubly careful to consider what exactly we are sending.

It is also too soon to evaluate what effect collaborative technologies such as Twitter may have on remote teams. Whether the dynamic of interaction will change and help to minimise the need for physical interaction.

Remote management

A massive topic in itself is just how we manage these remote workers, or how to achieve success as a remote manager. Working at home, from multiple offices or client sites, requires a change of attitude and for some this is a big change.

There is an increasing body of academic thought around distance management and even training courses springing up to teach managers how to manage remote workers remotely. But there are some common themes which suffice for our considerations:

- Performance measurement needs to focus on outputs rather than inputs. It is not practical to monitor start and finish times, when all parties are working remotely.
- Trust and communications are vital, many managers recommend regular face to face meetings in addition to communications by phone, email and virtual meetings.
- Pastoral care and boundary management become more important. The manager needs to trust researchers to get on with their jobs, and focus on taking away the barriers and issues they face to achieve their goals.
- Training and development needs to be monitored and prioritised. Learning by doing is increasingly difficult when the peer network is remote from each other.

These are not necessarily easy issues. In some businesses, especially where people have become used to certain management styles there may be significant challenges ahead for managers. Not all staff may have the same work ethic, and it can be extremely difficult to allow some staff to work remotely while others are asked to report into the office each day.

Health warnings and preventative tactics

We've seen many benefits from remote working, and it appears so far to be a win-win situation where researchers, agencies and clients all benefit. But as we all know, this is far from the case and there are plenty of pitfalls and areas where we need to apply careful management of situations.

Researchers

Identified health warnings from our brainstorming:

- **Security**, probably the most pertinent health warning for remote workers especially when dealing with personal and commercial sensitive data.
- **Management styles** can have a significant impact on outputs, success, motivation, morale and skill sets.
- **'Sit by Nellie'** training is difficult or just doesn't happen. If senior researchers are working remotely, how can junior staff pick up the tricks of the trade and learn as effectively from their experienced colleagues?
- **Innovation**, much innovation is achieved through teams working together; remote working can offer barriers to this if not accounted for through technology or face to face meeting solutions.
- **Miscommunications and water cooler moments**, communication is a human activity and we need to recognise where emails, phone calls and web-conferences are not effective. People are still flying for meetings in New York, even though video-conferences have been around for decades.

Security

While offices can have 24 hour security and suitable alarm systems, this can not be achieved in researchers' homes, cars and while travelling to and from locations. Laptop theft and loss of data on memory sticks and other data storage devices are areas of particularly high risk for remote workers. Almost half of robberies involve the theft of a mobile telephone⁶ and according to Silicom.com, over 6,500 laptops were reported stolen in London alone and that only includes those stolen while in transit.

We are often in possession of large databases of customers/clients and personnel and have a clear responsibility to maintain the security of these listings. Our work is often commercially sensitive and when working for Government clients any break in data security no matter how insignificant can make it into the press.

There is also the potential loss of physical data files; presumably the majority of us are not carrying around dossiers relating to Guantanamo Bay but we do carry around competitive information, including often unchecked data which would be embarrassing at best for our clients should it be released.

We can mitigate these risks though through sensible measures for remote working including:

- encryption of laptop hard drives
- dumb laptops, which contain no data – all information is downloaded from the network each time it is needed
- secure Internet connections and encryption of file transfer
- carrying only electronic copies of tables and reports

⁶ www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk

- ensuring shredding of paper files rather than disposal in to the domestic rubbish system
- education programmes amongst staff of the elements of risk and potential impact on the business

Remote working policy

This leads to the need for research companies to establish clear remote working policies which determine the responsibilities of those staff engaged in this activity towards:

- security of system access
- transfer of hardware from office to home
- the need to adequately shred or return hard copies to the office
- training on security implications

Policies also can help set out issues such as whether working at home is a privilege or a right and help to set down good practice including:

- the expectations of agencies that remote workers will source suitable working conditions
- health and safety requirements
- core hours
- output task measurement

Some policies we have reviewed also include:

- who is responsible for paying any costs associated with working from home, Internet connections, phone calls, even heating/lighting
- exactly what outputs are required, and even
- set response times or key logging targets

Research traditionally has more than its fair share of conscientious employees who need remarkably little management, however with the risks being so high, especially with respect of security, it is important to have the policy in place to safe guard all concerned. It makes a mockery of your IT security policy so proudly included in PQQs and other submissions if staff can leave their laptops on a bus, and anyone can have access to your whole network.

One of the important factors we picked up during our review of policies was the need to keep them up-to-date especially in the face of changing technology and to ensure staff are kept informed of any changes.

Clients

Health warnings also extend to the way we deal with our clients, clients are just as likely as us to work remotely and while each client will be no doubt conscientiously deliver on their objectives, there does exist potential for our service to them to be affected by their remote working behaviour. For example clients can:

- be difficult to contact, some don't have numbers on which they can be reached out of the office
- be in different locations on different days of the week, or be job sharing resulting in different contact points on different days
- be spread out from other members of their team

- rush their communications with us or mis-communicate with their colleagues leading to unnecessary work on our part or confusion in the research undertaken
- require more teleconferences and virtual presentations even when we may feel a face to face meeting would be more appropriate and focus group viewing or fieldworker briefings also may be done remotely
- have travel bans which restrict their internal communications.

As with researchers, the ability of clients to effectively gain from remote working practices will vary; therefore, as researchers we need to place particular emphasis on the way that we interact with clients moving forward.

We have seen an increasing number of clients experience difficulties communicating internally due in part to email heavy cultures. As teams become more geographically dispersed there can be a tendency to drop face to face interactions, especially with travel bans that may be imposed during times of recession. Emails are a great business tool, but are not the answer to everything, and when teams are working remotely, they can not rely solely on this form of communication.

As with remote working generally, there is technology that can help us with our communication with virtual teams outside our company – clients, their consultants or other researchers. There are many virtual presentation programmes – Powwownow for example offers easy to use desk top sharing / presentations and voicemail. There are also many document sharing facilities such as Google Docs where you and your client can access the same document without the need for Network access.

However, the main need is to develop even stronger communications from researchers with a focus on ensuring our work will dovetail within the clients environment and therefore we suggest:

- an increased focus on set-up meetings
- paper trails and written agreement on key decisions
- quality management systems which address the challenge of limited client communications

Respondents

Even Barack Obama is never without his PDA, and so it is no surprise that we as researchers are not alone in working remotely. Our audience are often senior decision makers from across business; this group is of course already hard to reach, but as remote working increases this may also offer additional complications to our methodological design and sampling.

We will have to accept that business respondents can be anywhere; they may be distracted or have variable levels of connectivity. We may for example, call a CEO on their UK number, but be routed to their iPhone while they are round a pool in Bangkok. We therefore need to be aware that even if we get through, people are willing to talk, and they pass all our screening criteria, that they may be in a very different mind-set to that from which they make the majority of their decisions.

Respondents are also likely to be increasingly aware and used to new communications media, the business audience tends to lead the way in ICT. There

are therefore many opportunities that exist to maximise the use of this, especially with better online panel and sample listings coming on board.

Technology also helps us to benefit from researching remotely, we have for a long time been used to CAPI and downloading of data overnight from interviewers' homes. Now though, this can be done in real time via the GSM network and this brings opportunities for remote working of business interviewers. Halls and focus groups can also be achieved this way, with GSM based technology such as FlexiHalls® that allows us to have a whole group of laptops connected to the Internet at almost any location across the country. For business researchers, conferences offer an obvious opportunity to recruit for focus groups that will involve online stimuli, CAPI surveys and so forth which can be easily convened in any conference facility or hotel anywhere in the world.

Tomorrow's World

Working remotely is rapidly becoming a normal part of the work landscape. Reacting to it effectively and adapting the way that we work to consider the variety of different work environments encountered by fellow researchers, clients and respondents will be one of the elements of our longer term success.

- We want to harness the benefits from remote working in terms of cost savings, the access to a wider pool of researchers, increasing efficiency and greater client service; while addressing the areas of potential concern.
- We have the opportunity now to establish protocols to deal with the data security challenges involved with remote working with encrypted lap-tops, policies to encourage staff to maintain data security.
- We can take stock of the way that we manage those working remotely, how we remove barriers to their work and encourage them to perform and provide high quality outputs.
- We can also utilise the technology to gain greater access to respondents, but beware that they may not be where you think they are when they respond.

So with thought about security and management we stand well placed to reap the benefits of remote working across our industry.