



## Annual Member Survey | Results



2020 | The Covid Catalyst

## Foreword

It may be many years before we can draw a clear conclusion from the mass home working experiment caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and understand fully the long-term effects on businesses and people. Yet the results of this Cityparents Annual Survey are revealing. Carried out in September as many professionals prepared to return to the workplace (plans subsequently postponed) and as schools reopened, it has offered valuable immediate reactions and insights into the repercussions of recent events on work and home lives.

Last year, our Annual Survey highlighted that whilst many organisations permitted flexible working and corporate policies generally said the right thing, few firms really embraced or encouraged it. Internal career progression plans and performance management processes were rarely adapted for alternative working patterns, and a culture of trust in the productivity of remote workers was often lacking. Office-based work culture, developed and heightened over the last century, was ingrained and pervasive, and proved slow to accommodate a groundswell of demand for alternative ways of working.

Now, in a previously unimaginable shift forwards, remote work has been forced on a global scale and City businesses have shown themselves to be both agile and adaptable under extraordinary circumstances.

Of course, there is nothing normal about the ‘extreme’ flexible working we have experienced in 2020, and indeed this style of work is not permanently endurable for many. Wholly-home based work can create major challenges for both businesses and people around providing accessible technology, fostering creativity, transmitting culture and values, developing careers, promoting inclusion and supporting wellbeing – our survey results highlight very clearly how the pandemic has affected the mental health of working parents.

But for the first time, there is now a widespread understanding of what it is like to work flexibly and remotely, interweaving work and home commitments. Those who had never experienced flexible working have now done so. This empathy created by shared experience means flexible work can no longer be the preserve of mothers – a perk to be bestowed or permitted without support, integration and corresponding culture change.

We are all alert to what has to change or improve to make this style of working sustainable, inclusive and equitable. At the pre-Covid pace of flexible work participation and integration, these needs would likely have taken decades to emerge in the foreground as priorities.

At the same time, managing a long-distance relationship with the office has shone a spotlight on its attributes – the clear benefits that come from being physically proximate to colleagues and clients, such as collaboration, creativity, cohesion, networking and social engagement.



It is time to demolish the stigma of flexible working being unorthodox, less productive or a perk. It should be openly accepted as being the best way for many people to exercise their roles effectively

So it is no surprise that our survey results point clearly to the need for a sustainable middle ground: Cityparents members value highly their office-based interactions with colleagues and clients but feel more productive, efficient and in control of their working lives and responsibilities when based remotely. Organisations now need to consider how to enable individuals to leverage the best of both environments, and thus ensure that the City continues to innovate and adapt voluntarily to shape the future of work.

**We have distilled the survey results into 5 principal findings:**

1. Clear positives around increased employee productivity and improved employer trust have emerged from the mass home-working experiment, and the vast majority of respondents would not choose to return to their pre-Covid working pattern.
2. Employer support for working parents and acceptance of flexible work has improved, but lack of visible and relevant role models remains an issue.
3. Working parents' mental wellbeing has suffered during Covid-19 with the need to manage simultaneous home and work responsibilities resulting in very long working days and high levels of stress and anxiety.
4. Career progression has stalled for many and career paths, career development tools and performance management processes still need to be adapted to suit remote or hybrid working.
5. For flexible and remote work to be successful in the long term, there are many lessons to be learnt and new habits to adopt, in order to enhance and enable employee collaboration, motivation and creativity irrespective of physical location.

We hope you enjoy our report. Any feedback, thoughts or experiences are always welcome.

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There are no waking moments when I'm not on duty, either as an employee or as a parent

# 1. Mass remote working is being put to the test and the early results are promising

In spite of the many challenges caused by lockdown and the ensuing pressures on home and office responsibilities, our survey results reveal some clear positives resulting from widespread remote-working. Even in these circumstances, 74% of respondents felt they are at least as productive as they were before the pandemic, if not more so. 68% of respondents said that their employers' culture and values are translating well to remote work. Both productivity levels and trust by employers have improved compared with pre Covid-19.

Over three quarters of members replying to our survey said they would prefer not to revert to their pre-Covid work pattern, citing improved work/life balance, flexibility and time efficiency. Many commented on the value added by losing an inefficient commute.

However, respondents value highly their office-based interactions with colleagues and clients too, pointing to the need for a medium between working life as it was, and as 2020 required. A number of members advocated a "half and half" approach going forward, spending more time working at home than pre-pandemic, yet with the ability to use office-based resources when needed to benefit from in-person interaction with clients and colleagues.

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**MAKE A DIFFERENCE:** The mass remote working experiment reveals strong productivity, improved work life balance and the potential for better mental health. Organisations should adopt a clear and accessible remote working policy for employees which is unambiguous in the organisation's approach and clearly states lessons learnt from the pandemic. Involve employees in scoping the policy, acknowledging how employee resilience has highlighted how successful remote working can be. Communicating this publicly on your website will highlight your intentions of being a beacon employer to both current and prospective employees.

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"We have now proved that physical presence 5 days a week in the office is not necessary for effective collaboration"

**80%**

would prefer not to revert to their pre-Covid work pattern

"I would like a combination of pre and post pandemic – to work one or two days in the office, but mainly from home. The 2 hour travel time each day is just dead time"



**68%**

of respondents said that their employers' culture and values are translating well to remote work

## 2. Employer support for working parents has improved compared with before the Covid-19 pandemic

Covid-19 has presented challenges for many people, but with continued disruption to childcare and schooling in the face of rising work pressures, working parents have been dealt an unenviable hand.

Hearteningly, our survey reveals an improvement in employer support for working parents for 39% of respondents in comparison with before the pandemic. Nearly three quarters report an improvement in acceptance of flexible working, the shared remote-working experience created by Covid-19 forcing a change in outdated attitudes.

In some places employer support did not materialise much beyond having good intentions, with 34% finding that practical support and resources were limited and there was little acknowledgment of individual circumstances. Yet 57% of respondents said that they were actively supported by their employers with strategies and resources in place to improve mental health and resilience, and that the challenges/barriers that they faced were acknowledged. Unfortunately however, and a product of the extreme juggling act affecting working parents during lockdown, many respondents commented that even when support was available they just could not find the time to access it.

The importance of visible, transparent and successful working parent role models emerged from our results yet again with 96% of respondents valuing the promotion of good role models, but only a third reporting that their employer delivers on this.

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**MAKE A DIFFERENCE:** Deep-rooted barriers have been broken down due to enforced mass remote working. Now is the time for organisations to support their parent/carer employees fully and move beyond policies alone. Organisations can consider offering practical and helpful employee benefits such as childcare, home help and educational services to provide real support when and where needed. Greater acknowledgement of the challenges affecting parents, carers and the sandwich generation would help employees feel more motivated to stay with an employer that helps them balance family and other personal priorities. Ensure that senior employees lead by example, without compromise. Supporting visible positive role-models of both genders with different working patterns will encourage a culture of productivity and trust.

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“My employer has provided ongoing support and dialogue during the whole pandemic period”

73%

see an improvement in the acceptance of flexible working

“I felt very unsupported through a lot of lockdown, but it turns out that this may have been a knock-on effect of the stress my line manager was under, which made them much less communicative than normal”

39%

of working parents say their employer's support has improved compared with before the pandemic



### 3. Working parents' mental wellbeing has suffered during Covid-19 with long working days and high levels of stress and anxiety

Unsurprisingly, the need to carry out professional and personal obligations side by side has often meant for an extremely long work day; 80% of respondents admit to completing work outside of their 'normal' working hours either occasionally or frequently.

Our survey results show the significant strain the pandemic placed on the mental health of working parents, as they took on the combined responsibilities of managing work, childcare and home school. The symptoms of stress were significant for many; the ability to sleep well, concentrate and maintain a healthy diet rank as the most negatively affected.

Although many members commented on the importance of needing to look after their own health to build resilience, over half of respondents found that they had less time for self-care compared with life before the pandemic.

Positively, the need for families to remain home together along with efficiencies created by the lack of commute/travel time and increased flexibility in working pattern, have generated significant improvements in work life balance and family time; 74% felt they were able to spend more time with family and 45% said their work/life balance had improved compared to pre-pandemic.

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**MAKE A DIFFERENCE:** Individual situations vary considerably depending on job type, work pattern, parent/carer status and age of dependants, so be mindful and compassionate around individual circumstances. Ensure employees set boundaries between work and home life and that role models lead by example. The relationship between manager and employee is key to success; consider facilitating holistic mental health programmes that include training for line managers with an emphasis on the value of listening and questioning skills, and offer appropriate signposting. Good mental health at work is fundamental to business success; it is therefore paramount to be included within an organisation's diversity and inclusion strategy.

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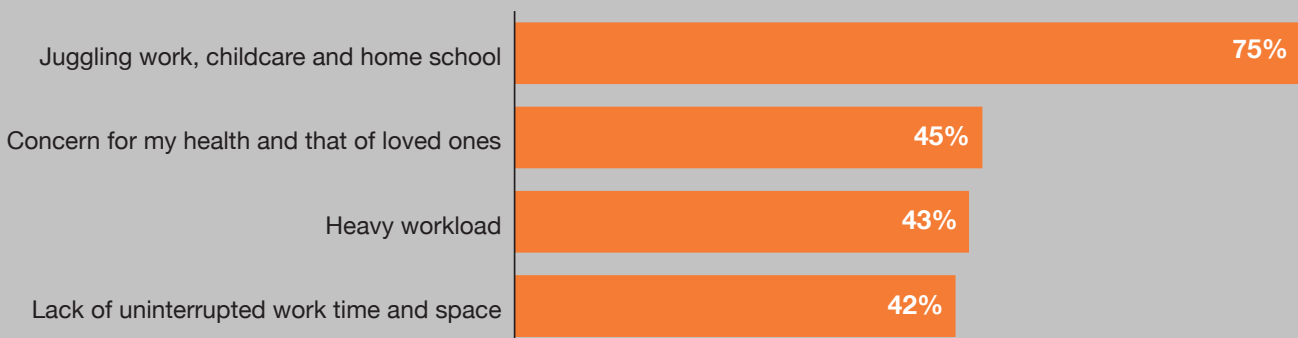
“Getting up at 4am for a few hours of uninterrupted work before the daily juggling act of work, and school begins”

**75%**

said that the biggest source of anxiety was the need to juggle work, childcare and home school

“Lack of transition and structure. Work leaches into everything else and transition to “off” time doesn't happen so easily”

#### What factors have created the most stress and anxiety for you in recent months?



## 4. For many, career progression has stalled

Covid-19 has disrupted schooling, childcare, eldercare and domestic support, and all too frequently we hear that it is women who have had to pick up the brunt of domestic work and family care. This increase in responsibility and workload at home is affecting progression at work; 35% of respondents felt that their career prospects are worse now, than before the onset of the pandemic.

Less than a third of all respondents said that career development discussions had continued as expected whilst traditional career development tools – such as professional networking opportunities and training – have not always been offered or adapted for remote-workers.

Digging a little deeper, our survey reveals that respondents are looking for flexibility within their careers. Firstly, through the need for adaptable and flexible career pathways; 93% said they valued different pathways for progression at work, but only 29% said their employers offered this. Second, by adapting performance management processes and targets to accommodate flexible working patterns. This is highly valued by employees (94%), yet rarely offered (only 31% said their employers provide this).

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**MAKE A DIFFERENCE:** Organisations need to adjust performance management objectives to focus on results and productivity, with flexibility around how these are delivered, to ensure a sustainable hybrid model of working is supported. Identifying specific milestones for career progression through clear, direct and consistent communication will engage remote employees during times when face to face meetings are not possible. Consider alternative career paths including sideways moves to stretch and broaden experience, while adapting to different life stages of employees.

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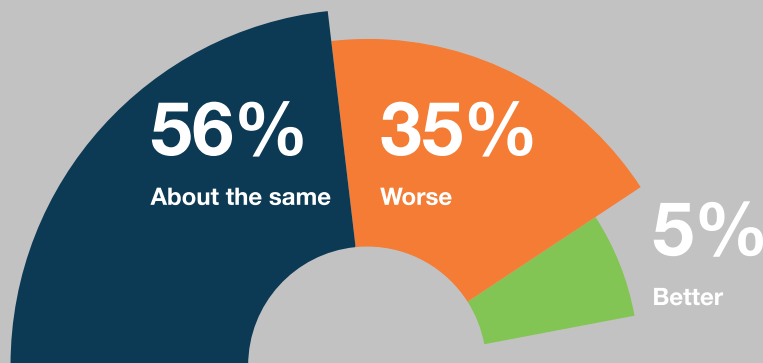
“I would like employers to monitor actual deliverables rather than time spent”

**22%**

said career development discussions have not continued through the pandemic

“My employer was understanding but ultimately targets have not been adjusted, so those employees with young children will be disadvantaged compared to those without (or those with a non-working spouse)”

How do you rate your career progression prospects now as compared with before the pandemic? (All respondents)



## 5. This is only the beginning. For flexible and remote work to be successful in the long term, there are many lessons to be learnt and new habits to adopt

2020 has brought to the foreground the realities of remote work, and the areas that require further focus to make agile working successful in the long term. Our survey found that for 25% of respondents, relationships with colleagues have deteriorated; for 39%, motivation has waned; whilst 30% felt they were less in touch with organisational changes and developments.

Unsurprisingly, the role of technology featured prominently in our survey. Covid-19 has been the digital accelerant of the decade; according to Twilio's Covid-19 digital engagement report, it has fast-tracked companies' digital communications strategy by a global average of 6 years. Our results show that employees believe having the right technology is central to successful long-term remote working and that improvements are needed: 50% of respondents felt their home working set-up is about the same as in the office but 39% reported it was worse. There was repeated and unsurprising feedback about poor internet speed, frustrations with unreliable video conferencing tools and general technology fatigue. Many commented on the value of walking over to a colleague's desk or the coffee machine to get a break from the screen and enjoy human interaction.

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**MAKE A DIFFERENCE:** Find innovative ways to enhance employee creativity, collaboration and motivation which are suffering due to the lack of face to face contact at work. There are now a range of available technologies to help teams communicate and collaborate across remote distances in a variety of forms. Understanding when and when not to use technology, and encouraging appropriate use of boundaries and regular screen breaks, will support employee wellbeing over the long-term.

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“Our employer has adapted very well. We already have laptops, headphones, telephones via the computer. Desk Assessments at home would be helpful”

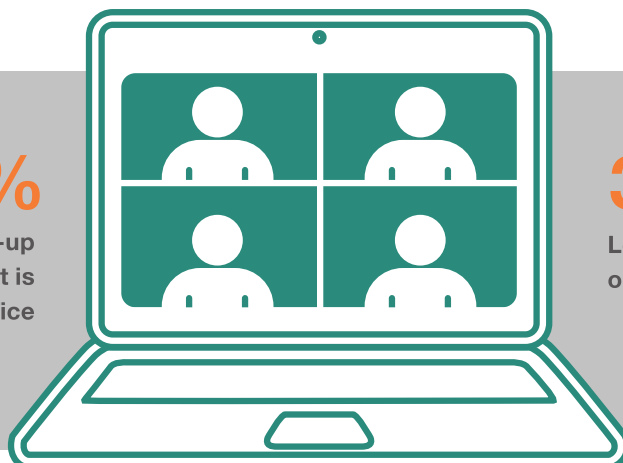
**25%**

told us relationships with colleagues have deteriorated

“I would like flexibility and an appreciation of what the office brings in terms of socialising, relationships, culture and learning”

**39%**

Technology set-up is worse than it is in the office



**30%**

Less in touch with organisation



## Survey Methodology and Demographics

Cityparents' Annual Members Survey 2020 was conducted from 14 September – 5 October 2020.

This Survey reflects the views of 481 professionals working in corporate roles predominantly in the UK but also internationally. The gender split is: 85% female, 15% male and 89% of respondents are parents.

