

YOUNG ADVISORY COMMITTEE THE FUTURE OF FLEXIBLE WORKING

The Young Advisory Committee (YAC) represents those aged 35 and under in the workforces of Cambridge Ahead Member organisations. The YAC has monitored the changing priorities, mindsets, and expectations of young professionals over the course of the pandemic through a regular series of surveys. The latest results of this research focus on the attitudes of younger workers to the future of flexible working. We, the Young Advisory Committee of Cambridge Ahead, put forward the following recommendations and commitments to support industry in Cambridge to transition into the new era of working ahead of us all.

Key Recommendations

- **Employers should trust employees to work flexible hours and make flexible use of office space as long as business requirements are met.** Any remaining stigma about WFH days somehow being less diligent should now be broken. 2-3 days remains the preferred number of days to be in the office each week post-covid and 85% of the under-35 demographic have a neutral to positive feeling towards the WFH experience.
- **Employers should work with employees to define what people come into the office for.** Our results suggest that time in the office should be prioritised for collaborative activities, integrating new starters and interaction with others - social isolation was seen as the main challenge of working from home. Conversely activities such as report writing can be more productively achieved working from home. There was almost a 50/50 split for meetings being most effective at home vs office.
- **Employers must ensure that they are encouraging people working remotely to switch off after a day of work.** This will help to ensure motivation and efficiency the following day and avoid burn out. The temptation to work longer but less productively has been a lamented issue in our respondents' lives.

Our offer

- The Young Advisory Committee will work with business leaders to help **articulate and define what constitute the “moments that matter”** that should be recognised as compelling reasons for office-based working, within a hybrid model.



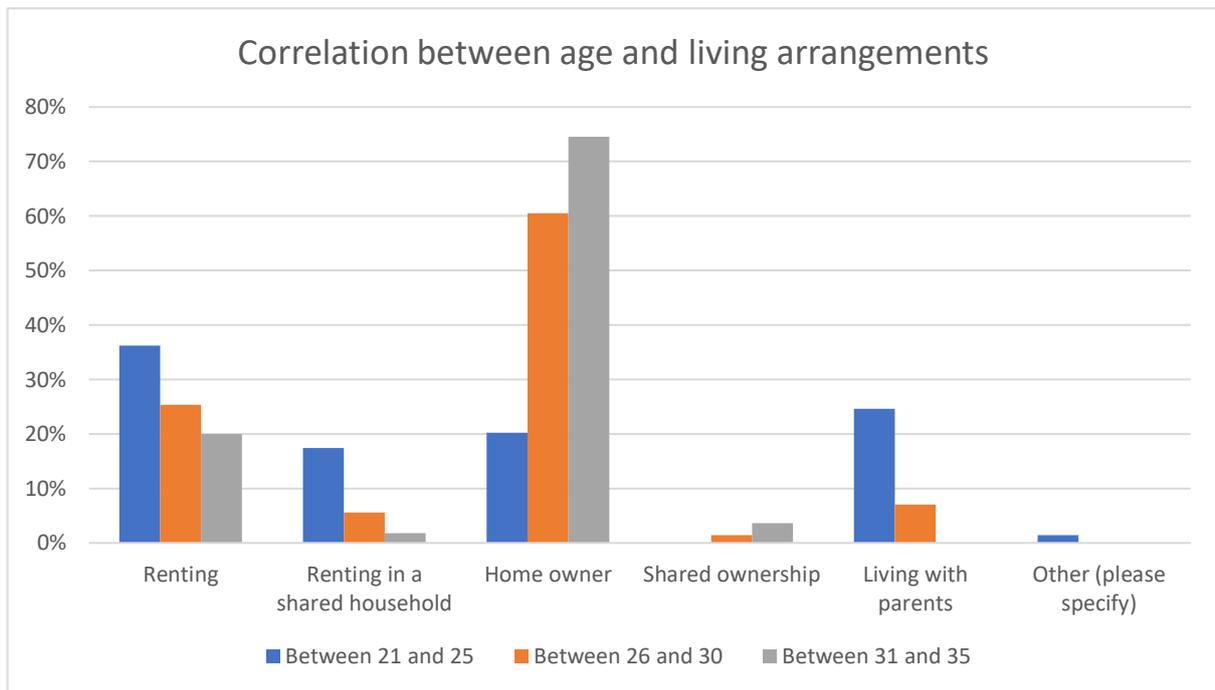
Introduction – Jacqueline Platt

More than a year ago all of our lives changed significantly with the Government-imposed lockdown coming into effect in the United Kingdom due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This change has prompted the YAC to closely monitor and analyse the effect of these changes on our lives to be able to form a view of how this recent event might impact and shape our futures.

During April 2021, we conducted the third in a series of surveys to gather data to support this work. Our aim is to inform and empower; inform the decision makers in our city and empower the under 35-year olds to give them a voice.

In this article you will read about our fact-based findings that represent the opinions of 200 employees of the Cambridge Ahead network covering a multitude of different industries.

From our population surveyed we noted a clear correlation between the increase in age and increase in home ownership. Of those surveyed, 75% in the age bracket 31 – 35 are homeowners, as opposed to only 20% in the 21 – 25 age bracket. A relatively balanced percentage was noted in those who are renting, being on average 27% of each age category. A very noticeable outcome was that 51% of those surveyed indicated that they are homeowners, of which only 2% own homes through the shared ownership scheme.



We have also noted that the average household income of our population is £45.5k per annum and that the living arrangements in this median group is balanced between renters and homeowners being 40% and 35% respectively.

Due to the impact commute has on the quality of life and on the desire for agile working, we analysed the correlation between living arrangement and distance to work (one way) commute. 37% of our respondents currently live in a 5-mile radius from work and 14% live further than 31 miles away.

We noticed that 40% of those living in the 5-mile radius are renters and 34% are homeowners. The spread of home ownership was particularly interesting with 26% living in the 5-mile radius and 33% in a radius of between 11 – 20 miles.

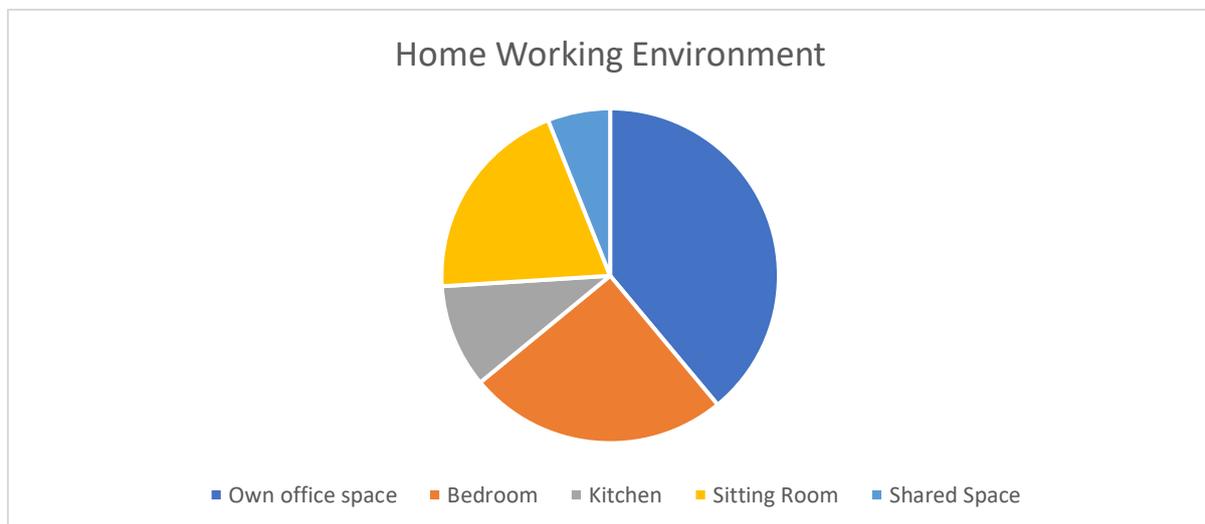
Best of both – Liam Ronan-Chlond

Coronavirus has triggered a rapid change to decades old work practices. This shift occurred with minimal notice, little over a year ago, causing over 92% of survey respondents to work from home. Forecasters have long prophesied a future increase in home working, but it is doubtful that many expected this sheer scale of change to happen within such a small timeframe. This clearly demonstrates the unprecedented nature of the coronavirus pandemic and the substantial impact it has had on people's lives, communities, and businesses around the world.

So, what did working from home look like for our survey respondents? The vast majority have embraced it, with 85% of respondents feeling neutral to positive about the experience. The survey explores in further detail why working from home has become so popular, despite it being effectively forced upon many in unplanned circumstances within the past year.

Just under 40% of respondents have been lucky enough to work from a home office. However, whether these rooms were always offices, or hastily constructed workspaces is another question. Furthermore, it will be interesting to understand how many respondents actually moved home during the pandemic, in the pursuit of space for the latest residential luxuries of a home office, gym and garden.

The majority of people, however, at almost 55%, have been forced to use less traditional workspace within their home, such as bedrooms, kitchens and sitting rooms. Whether working from these rooms have been a choice or a necessity remains to be seen. This survey also explores the pros and cons of working within these home living spaces.



Given the obvious limitations of working from one's kitchen or bedroom, it is probably no surprise that almost 90% of respondents selected a home office as their ideal way to work 'outside of the office'. That such a huge number would choose to work from a home office, and not a more communal space outside of work, such as a café or library, raises some interesting questions. Does this mean that people want to pursue a different kind of work away from the office? Our survey reveals that people increasingly see the offices as a space for collaboration but prefer to use their time away to concentrate on individual tasks, such as reviewing documents and writing reports, which for any is

best done from the comfort of home. This may well represent a new dichotomy; working from home to plug away on solo activities and heading into the office to collaborate.

As lockdown restrictions begin to ease and the world opens back-up, it seems highly unlikely we will return to the 9-5, Monday-Friday office culture that has been the norm for office workers for decades. The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have resulted in a recalibration, almost as swift as a geomagnetic reversal. We don't want to go back to the office five days a week, but neither do we want to stay at home. We want the best of both. Home working is here to stay, but the office is not dead. Flexibility is the future.

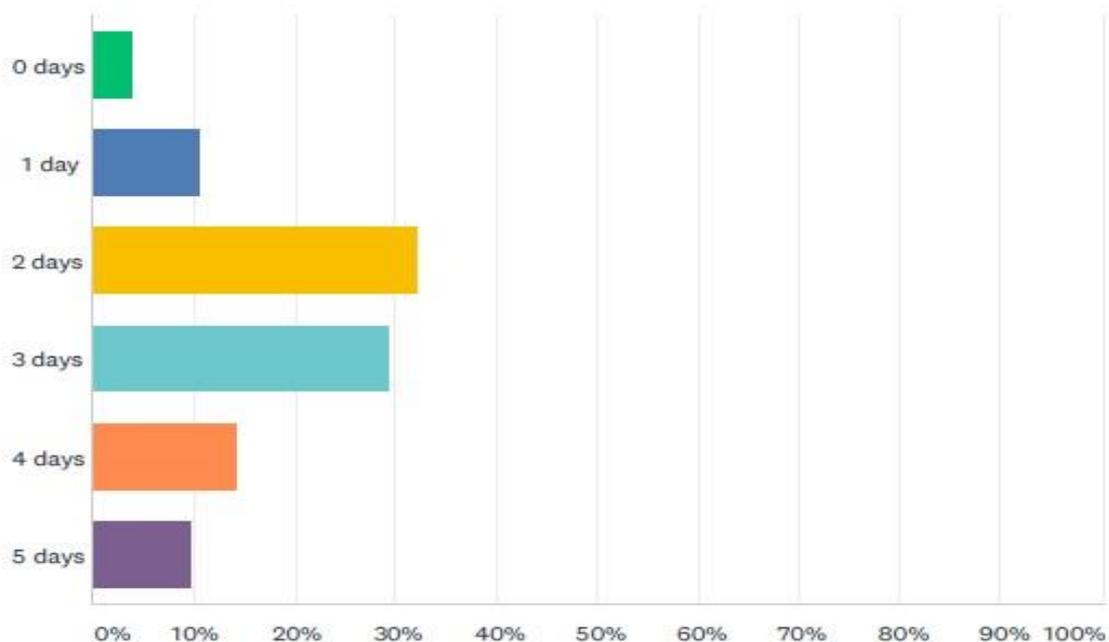
The return to office – Henry Stark

The survey questions went on to focus on the return to the office and how effectively individuals work in the home vs office environment.

Our survey showed that around one fifth of younger employees have felt some pressure to return to the office, suggesting that they would like to see their employers adopting a more cautious return to the normal working week.

When asked what the main barriers were that concerned individuals about the return to the office, there were three answers that particularly stood out in the results. 64% of respondents said that the commute to work was their greatest barrier, while 50% said the likelihood of a reduction in working from home days was a concern and 44% said that coronavirus exposure was still a worry. This sparks concern that this demographic still has a cautious approach to returning to the office and seem keen for some flexible options to be put in place to accommodate these concerns.

As was previously recorded in our last survey in 2020, we have seen consistent results for the number of days the 21-35 age demographic wish to work in office for the future. 2 or 3 days being the most popular answer once again as demonstrated in the below graph.





The least popular answers were 0 days and 5 days in office, suggesting that young people still need collaboration and access to an office environment where certain activities simply cannot be done from home.

This led on to the question surrounding best working practices from home vs the office. When asked which working practices were best utilised from home, we looked at four key areas that we believed contributed to all roles and industries. The options were **meetings, training, report writing** and **integrating new starters**.

From these, report writing scored 86% of the votes for being most effective when working from home with integrating new starters at just 3%. This is compared with working practices best utilised in the office, from which integrating new starters scored highest at 90% with training representing 57% of the votes and report writing with the least at 7%. There was a real split however with meetings, as 47% answered that these were best utilised from home versus 53% in the office. There is clearly still some deliberation as to how effective meetings are in either working environment.

We were also interested to know what time of the day that working from home has been most effective for this age group and a clear and resounding 70% of the votes were for the morning.

Recommendations and Our Offer

From these results, it feels that there is an opportunity for employers to work with employees to help define what people come into the office for. Should office time be prioritised for integrating new starters and meetings, instead of report writing which can be more productively achieved working from home?

We want to work with business leaders and decision-makers to help articulate and define further the “moments that matter” as part of this important next phase in hybrid working.

If the future of working is to be flexible, to get the best productivity out of employees, it could be suggested that flexible hours be encouraged as long as all deadlines are met. There is no doubt that looking at these results, there is not a clear or definitive argument to suggest that full-time office hours is the answer nor is the full-time working from home option. Finding something that meets these two options would certainly appeal to the masses and encourage the future of flexible working.

Flexibility is key - Thomas Bewes

Working from home has posed an array of challenges to the population. However, the negative aspect of social isolation (borne of working away from the office) has been an overwhelming trend, with over 70% of participants selecting it amongst their top three challenges faced in home working. It was therefore not surprising that the linked challenge of lack of communication with co-workers featured as the second most commonly raised issue with home working practices, with 63% selecting it. The physical workspace at home was the third most selected challenge of home working, with over 30% of respondents noting that their home-working set up has fostered difficulties.

Among other issues raised, distractions (27%), routine regularity (30%), childcare (2%) and uncertainty pertaining to job security (6%) all featured as problems with the home-working model for respondents. Other themes established in the survey were motivation, health and fitness, connectivity issues, and over working due to more meetings. Of these other themes, the issue of staying motivated and productive in a home working environment where there has been a lack of physical exercise

options, and the temptation to work longer but less productively has been a lamented issue in our respondents' lives.

In terms of what respondents felt could be done by businesses to retain the advantages of recent working practices and capitalise upon them, a number of themes emerged in the data. Most notably, 49 of the 86 participants who answered this question used the word 'flexible' or 'flexibility' explicitly in their answer, with many more alluding to this notion in the content of their response. The flexibility for an employee to do what though?

The majority of respondents referred to flexibility around working hours, stressing the point that working practice should entail diligence on the day's work until tasks and deadlines have been completed and met, not simply the practice of sitting at one's desk for a certain number of hours. Respondents saw it as advantageous to working efficiency if they could be trusted by their employers to enjoy exercise and regular breaks, go to a brief social catch up, or work remotely (but not necessarily at home) if these activities didn't coincide with or infringe on meetings. As long as employees are completing their work in a timely fashion to a good standard, such breaks in the day should be acceptable parts of modern working practice in order to energise and motivate employees, according to our findings. This notion of trust was a huge theme of the data, with people feeling that a key part of working practice going forwards will be directors trusting their team to work efficiently away from the office, and in turn the respondents noted that this trust from above is a key motivational factor.

Another key finding from this question is that respondents were largely keen to be able to choose the setting most conducive to them working efficiently and effectively in any given task. One respondent noted that employers should 'trust employees to use their best judgement when determining the best place to complete a task'. This was a theme in the answers, with a number of respondents feeling that it shouldn't be expected that the office is the most productive environment for every individual, and that people should be free to situate themselves in the optimal location for any given task.

The final theme, which nicely summarises some of the concepts behind the findings of this question, pertains to the perception of working from home. Respondents expressed a desire for 'WFH' days to have any stigma broken about these being somehow less diligent days, and instead to be seen as just as productive and serious as working days. This will involve managers recognising the maintainable output of home working and to grant home working days, where appropriate, without complaint or resistance.

Recommendations

Employers should have honest conversations with employees about their appetite for remote working going forward. Ask for transparency from employees about where they will be working and when, then trust them to get their work done from their desired locations. Have a roundtable discussion with employees about how to segment the office into areas conducive to different forms of working, both collaborative and individual, focused work.

Employers must also ensure that they are encouraging people working remotely to ensure they switch off after a day's work, rather than being tempted to return to their laptop late at night. This will help to ensure motivation and efficiency the following day and avoid burn out.

Cambridge Ahead should host a post-restriction conference for local business leaders. Speakers from the YAC to present findings and to engage discussions about young employee testimonials on the return to work issues. Potential to have idea sharing on company policies pertaining to forward-thinking working flexibility protocols.