

Remote work: Drawing the line between home and office

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.

1. What are the pros and cons of working from home?
2. Do you prefer going into the office, working from home, or a bit of both?
3. When working from home, how should employees separate their personal and work activities?

2 Key words and expressions

a. Choose the key words and phrases that match the definitions. Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using them to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition. Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

admin	disclosure	domestic	intervene
overstep	monitor	resentful	simulate
slack	surge	surveillance	track

1. check and watch a situation carefully over a period of time _____
We are using a new app to _____ our petty cash use more closely.
2. relating to the home _____
How do you divide your _____ chores with your flatmates?
3. do something that looks real but isn't _____
This app _____ a loan to help you do your financial planning.
4. increase strongly and suddenly _____
Gold stocks _____ and hit a record high on Tuesday.
5. record the development or progress of something over a period of time _____
I'm a freelance designer and I need to _____ the hours I work on each of my clients' projects.
6. the careful watching of a person, especially when they have done something wrong or committed a crime _____
After the break-in, they want to increase _____ in and around the building.

7. the tasks you need to do to control your activities (short for administration) _____

I feel like I spend too much time on invoicing and other _____ tasks.

8. feeling angry because you were forced to accept something you do not like _____

The fact that some people got to work from home made other workers who were asked to go to the office feel _____.

9. become intentionally involved in a situation to prevent it from getting worse _____

Sean and Hillary need to resolve their own conflict, I don't think it's a good idea for you to _____.

10. go farther than what is acceptable or right _____

Many people believe that the sugar ban _____ the role of government.

11. the act of making something known _____

Full _____: I'm looking for another job!

12. work with less effort than usual _____

I have never seen him _____; he always finds some work to do.

Should employers monitor more than mouse clicks of remote staff?

Bosses are encouraged to help employees manage clash of domestic and work responsibilities

Anjli Raval

- 1 US bank Wells Fargo this month said it had fired more than a dozen staff after an internal investigation found employees were simulating keyboard activity to create the impression of “active work”.
- 2 It is unclear what these workers were doing exactly. But since the pandemic moved office-based work into homes, sales of so-called mouse jiggers and other devices aimed at emulating work have surged.
- 3 Part of this is in response to some large companies using their own tech tools to monitor employees’ work, such as tracking clicks on keyboards and searches on websites.
- 4 Such devices are usually deployed in workplaces where there is little trust between bosses and their employees and a tendency to think that only the things that can be measured can be managed. Tight surveillance of staff only encourages them to game the system.
- 5 But there are broader questions that still need to be asked on workplace etiquette outside of the office. For example, should staff be taking legally sensitive calls from a co-working space? How about taking a hands-free team call while driving to the post office? Would your employer be responsible if there was a crash? Another issue is whether employers should be concerned not just about staff productivity but also their ability to switch off.
- 6 UK housing company Aster Group commissioned a study to understand how employees felt about hybrid working. It found that while its staff liked to get life admin done during the working day, they felt endlessly torn between their domestic and work responsibilities. The pressure was often leading to overwhelmed, distracted and burnt out workers.
- 7 “People are attempting to ‘do it all’ due to the absence of socially embedded boundaries,” said the authors of the research by BiBO Studio, a consultancy that designs sustainable places. “Switching between activities comes at a cost – multitasking can seem efficient, but in fact this interrupts our ‘flow’, means we pay less attention to the task at hand, we are less productive, more distracted, and are not in complete control.”
- 8 Academics are now suggesting managers step in to help employees manage the cadence of their homeworking day. “If people are using their break to do the school run, are they actually having a break?” said Harriet Shortt, associate professor of organisation studies at Bristol Business School, who conducted the work for BiBO.
- 9 She suggests managers should encourage their teams to think about how they can appropriately separate work and personal responsibilities to avoid being derailed or distracted, or becoming resentful of their living rooms turning into office space. “Maybe managers can think about how they can encourage employees to record their behaviour in order that they can shift how they work,” she adds. The hope is that if staff write down exactly what they are doing and when, they may be better at self regulating and managers may be able to intervene when necessary.
- 10 Aster said its motive was to improve its employees’ wellbeing. Others might suggest that asking what domestic tasks are filling their working day is a type of surveillance. If a manager was to suggest when staff might do their laundry or weekly grocery shop, they would no doubt face accusations of overstepping the mark.

- 11 In any case, how many employees would be truly honest in any disclosures? More importantly, would bosses – many of whom already have expanded roles and are increasingly managing the mental wellbeing of staff – be willing to add more to their plate?
- 12 The latest news from Wells Fargo will have triggered managers who already feared that staff working from home were slacking. And there are times when managers do need to step in, for example if they believe staff are “quiet vacationing” – or taking time off without telling their boss.
- 13 But what is more likely is that employees are making the most of the “in-between moments” of the working day, while getting their work done.
- 14 Most companies have been clear about basic remote working guidelines, laying out expected working hours; how staff should collaborate, communicate or record their decision-making; how they should store data and what their legal rights are should they choose to work from home.
- 15 But with hybrid work here to stay, it is becoming more likely that managers will need to get more involved in the personal lives of their employees, willingly or unwillingly.

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Anjli Raval, 23 June, 2024.

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3 Understanding the article

a. Choose the best way to complete the sentences.

- A bank fired over a dozen workers after they found that they ...
 - had pretended to work.
 - had refused to go into the office.
- It is not uncommon for large companies to track their staff's website searches or ...
 - keyboard clicks.
 - personal phone calls.
- The writer thinks that tight surveillance makes workers ... likely to find ways to cheat.
 - more
 - less
- The Aster Group study found that remote work ... the pressure experienced by its workers.
 - decreased
 - increased
- Academics think it is ... responsibility to help employees find their work–life balance.
 - managers'
 - not managers'
- Harriet Shortt recommends that managers support teams to become more aware of their own behaviour to help them change their habits and improve their...
 - resentment.
 - self regulation.
- The writer thinks that most companies have ... about remote working.
 - clear guidelines
 - unrealistic expectations

4 Business language – phrases

a. Match the phrases and their definitions.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1. game the system | a. find it difficult to choose between two things |
| 2. switch off | b. become involved in a difficult situation in order to help find a solution |
| 3. be torn between | c. increase the amount of work or things you have to deal with |
| 4. be burnt out | d. use the rules of a system for your own desired outcome |
| 5. step in | e. behave in a totally unacceptable way |
| 6. overstep the mark | f. be very tired or ill from too much work |
| 7. add more to your plate | g. stop working and stop thinking about work |

b. Use the phrases from the previous activity to complete the sentences.

- I _____ the two job offers: I think I would enjoy the challenges a small consulting firm offers, but then I think about the growth opportunities that I'd have working for a large corporation.
- It's important to recharge and take breaks because you don't want to _____.
- I know you're already very busy. Sorry to _____.
- I don't want to _____, but I don't think your dress is appropriate for a working environment.
- Some workers _____ to get signed off for more sick days.
- I think it's time for HR to _____ and help us create some healthier boundaries.
- Even on my days off I find it very difficult to _____ – I think about work all the time!

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements. Give reasons to justify your opinions.

- Is it ethical for companies to track workers' website searches or keyboard clicks?
- Does surveillance improve staff productivity?
- How can companies help workers prevent burnout and promote work–life balance?

6 Wider business theme – addressing work-life balance

a. Discuss the pros and cons of working from home/a hybrid model and going into the office. Note down your main ideas.

Remote / Hybrid model	Full-time office
Pros:	Pros:
Cons:	

b. You will be assigned a working arrangement. You are going to make a case for this way of working. Select your strongest ideas and think of how you will structure your argument. Write your ideas in the first and third columns below.

c. What counterarguments do you anticipate will be made against your main ideas? How could you respond to them? What might your opponents' main ideas be? How can you counter them? Add ideas to the rest of the chart.

Your arguments:	Possible counter arguments:
Possible opponents' arguments:	Possible counter arguments