

Conflict over 'return to office' policies in UK highlight tension

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The Public and Commercial Services Union in the UK is engaged in a number of disputes - some involving plans for industrial action – over 'return to the office' policies across a range of public sector employers.

The various disputes about attendance policies generally were featured recently in a BBC Panorama documentary, titled 'Should We Still Be Working from Home?'

The programme investigated homeworking arrangements by speaking to a range of stakeholders and comes after debate on the issue in Britain has heated up in recent months.

Several large private sector firms in the UK have instructed staff to come into the office more often with some abandoning hybrid working entirely, such as JP Morgan and Amazon, who now insist on 5-day a week in-person working. However, many continue to offer flexible working in order to keep staff and attract new intake.

At the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in Wales, members of the PCS union voted late last year to strike in protest at plans requiring them to be in the office for at least 40% of the working week.

Meanwhile, PCS members in the HM Land Registry were due to begin an "indefinite action short of a strike, in part over an insistence by the employer that staff must adhere to 60% office attendance".

The Land Registry members have told the union that the change has created a range of issues, including reduced flexibility, extended working days due to travel, financial impacts, and "a detriment to personal wellbeing".

PAY DEDUCTION THREAT

PCS members who work as civilian staff for the Metropolitan Police (MPS) are also in dispute over a return to offices.

The union's general secretary Fran Heathcote said that a "hardline approach" by Met Police managers – a threat to deduct a day's pay if working from home when obliged to be in the office - has been "completely counter-productive", effectively escalating the dispute.

Meanwhile, Stuart Rose, a former CEO of Marks & Spencer and Asda, now a Conservative peer in the House of Lords, claimed in the BBC programme that home-working led to lower productivity, creating a generation who are "not doing proper work".

But the Employment rights Minister, Justin Madders, told the programme there was a growing body of evidence that working from home was more productive.

"LOWER VISIBILITY"

Policy Advisor at the UK'S Work Foundation, Rebecca Florisson, said the pushback from some employers on hybrid, or remote working, could limit some people's ability to remain in work.

While she said there is no convincing evidence that remote and hybrid working is affecting companies' productivity or bottom line", there are risks to "lower visibility" and lower access to networks. "This could impact career progression in the long term and may exacerbate

inequalities for groups of workers who already struggled to progress to more senior roles prior to the pandemic”, she cautioned.

“ Remote working is not suitable for every job, nor for every worker, but there are a range of other forms of flexibility, such as compressed hours, flexitime or job share that can be used to support employees to thrive at work,” she said.

Some large international company comparisons:

- Allianz - allows employees to work remotely up to 40% of the time, with flexibility depending on local needs.
- Aviva - requires at least 2 days in the office for ‘Smart Workers’ if they’re full-time.
- The Bank of England - a minimum expectation of 40% onsite across the month.
- Goldman Sachs - requires employees to be in the office full-time, emphasizing an “office-first work culture”.
- Deloitte - follow a hybrid model, dependent on role.
- Unilever - a flexible hybrid working policy, both remote and in-office working (at 40%).

4-DAY WEEK

Separately, 200 UK firms have signed up to implement a permanent 4-day week for all employees at full pay, according to new data from the ‘4-Day Week Foundation’. They represent a broad range of organisations with charities, marketing and technology businesses best represented, and employ around 5,000 people in all.

The largest proportion of the companies are in London (59) with thirty of these in marketing, advertising and PR.

Two years ago, however, a 4-day week trial at South Cambridgeshire District Council attracted severe political criticism. This was despite several positive studies on the change. (See [*‘Tory Minister orders end of 4-day week’ in IRN 2823 - 20/07/2023*](#))