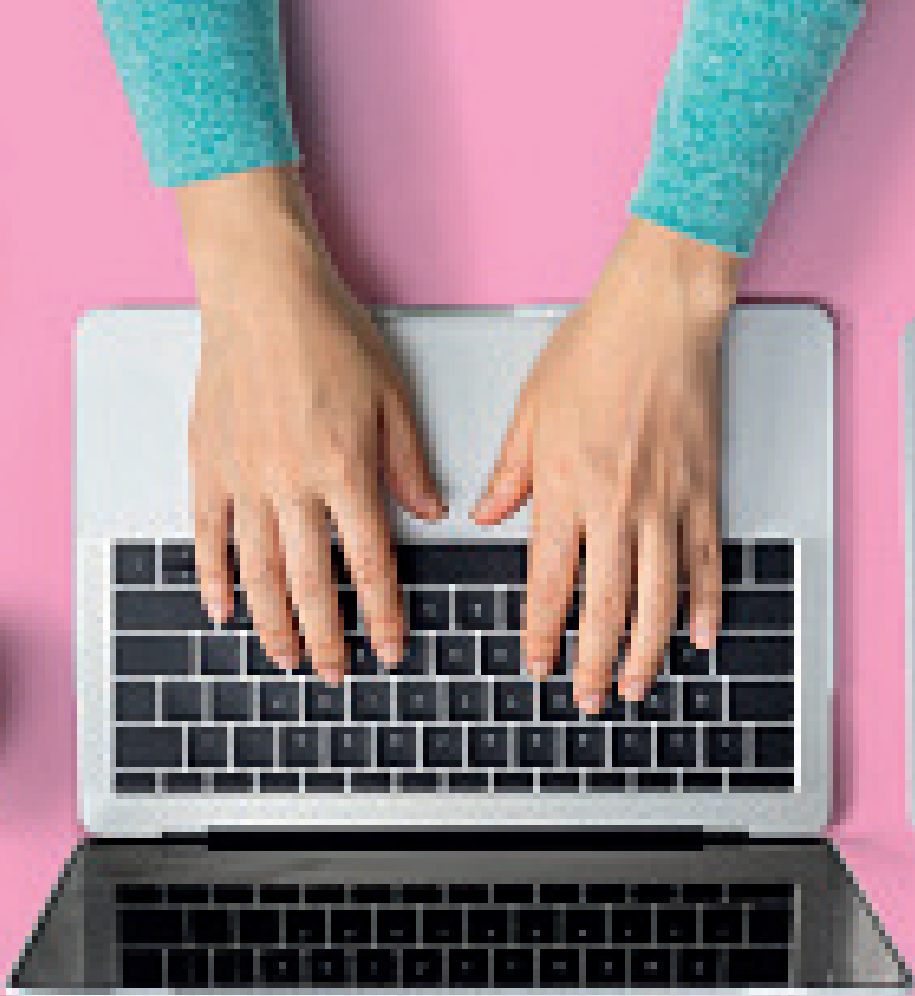


No. going back

Lockdown saw a wave of firms rushing to embrace home working as the only way to keep their business going. Now, though, many are contemplating whether this could be more than a temporary fix, as **Alex Wright** reports



REMOTE WORKING HAS become a way of life for many small businesses as a result of Covid-19. Companies have been forced to adapt and many have changed their whole business model and practices, with some even leaving their offices for good and going 100 per cent remote. It looks like remote working is here to stay, with 62 per cent of those who can work from home saying they would be happy to continue doing so if their office remained shut, according to a study by law firm Winckworth Sherwood. The UK had been behind the rest of Europe when it came to remote working, despite the technology being in place for some time. But what are the practical implications of long-term remote working? FSB research in 2019 found that small businesses which adopt remote working may see reduced staff absences, the creation of new business processes and additional business cost savings. It also found that providing staff with greater autonomy and the ability to make a

difference may lead to the creation or development of a new product. The number one priority for small businesses operating remotely is their staff. They need to ensure the health and safety of all employees; even though they are working remotely, the same duty of care must be provided. The first step is to carry out a thorough risk assessment of work spaces, identifying hazards and making the necessary changes. Areas to consider include access, lighting and work stations, including display screen equipment and furniture. “There comes a point when working from home is no longer temporary,” says Duncan Spencer, head of advice and practice at the Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. “If the work station at home is no longer regarded as temporary then the employer will have to go further with the equipment they provide, including desks, chairs and screens.”

Supporting staff

Another primary concern is staff wellbeing, with 24 per cent of businesses surveyed by Winckworth Sherwood believing that working from home long-term may have a negative effect on some employees’ mental health. Lack of human contact and interaction is the biggest contributor. FSB believes small business owners need to take the lead and talk about mental health with employees. It is also vital to keep in touch with staff and make sure work can be planned effectively in order to avoid stress and burnout. Talk to staff about their work and what you can do to make it more manageable – regular one-to-ones can be a great way to build trust. Managers also need to make themselves readily accessible to employees if they



A new way of working

When lockdown was enforced, accountancy firm Empowered by Cloud switched to 100 per cent remote working and hasn’t looked back since. It’s quite a turnaround considering that the company, which specialises in Xero accounting software and was previously based in Glenrothes, was on the verge of signing a lease to move into a 2,000-square foot office before the Covid-19 pandemic struck. However, with staff being asked to work from home by the Government, owner Laura Taylor embraced the chance to go fully remote after realising that she could service her clients better and more efficiently. The switchover was seamless, with Ms Taylor only having to make small tweaks, such as 8am online team huddles to discuss the daily work schedule. She also made sure that display screen assessments were carried out for all employees, as well as ensuring they felt safe and comfortable in their new working environment. Then there is the ongoing job of ensuring that the right anti-virus protections and cybersecurity training are in place. As a result of all these changes, Ms Taylor says that the firm has been able to pass on significant cost savings to its clients in the form of free Receipt Bank and Futrli cash-flow forecasting software offerings. “The team has really embraced the whole change,” says Ms Taylor. “We have also onboarded a new member of staff during lockdown, where I spent a full day with them online, making sure that she was comfortable with all our procedures and practices, and that went very well.”

want to share a problem or just talk. Online social platforms are an effective way to stay in contact with individuals and monitor their wellbeing, as well as recognise individual and team successes. “Regular contact is vital for smaller businesses, particularly to ensure good wellbeing and notice when things seem out of character for an individual, such as being unusually slow to respond to emails, or uncharacteristically disengaged in conversations,” says Christine Husbands, Managing Director at FSB Care (fsb.org.uk/care), which provides a medical and health service for FSB members struggling with health issues. “Video calls, rather than telephone, can give a much greater sense of connection, and ease isolation.”

62%
The proportion of employees who say they would be happy to work remotely permanently

When recruiting online, employers must ensure the process is fair and relevant to the role, says the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development’s senior resourcing and inclusion adviser Claire McCartney. That includes, for example, taking into account the fact that some people may be uncomfortable speaking in front of a camera, she says. “It’s really important that these processes are properly thought through from a diversity and inclusion perspective,” continues Ms McCartney. “Are you putting people off from applying by using online approaches? Are you limiting your pool of applicants? What about people who are more shy or introverted?” On the other

hand, it opens up the talent pool to those from a wider catchment area. This is particularly important for London-based firms, as many experienced workers are priced out of the housing market.

Technical support

Companies also need to consider their technology requirements, including cloud services, IT support, service providers, cybersecurity, regulations and cyber insurance.

Cybersecurity should be top of the list. According to internet service provider Beaming, cyber-attacks on UK businesses increased 13 per cent during the second quarter, to their highest level in five years. Furthermore, 86 per cent of companies expect cyber threats to rise in the next year, a survey commissioned by WatchGuard Technologies found.

The biggest challenge, says BullGuard CEO Paul Lipman, is the absence of a corporate network security system in which problems can be easily flagged. Then there are unsecure home routers and the use of work devices for other purposes, exposing companies to an array of threats, he says.

To overcome these issues, Mr Lipman says firms need to ensure workers have the right cybersecurity training and tools. That starts with awareness of data protection policies and knowledge of how to detect key threats.

"Firms need to run anti-malware protection on all devices that are connected to the corporate network," says Mr Lipman. "They also need to have a back-up strategy where they regularly back up all of their data securely offsite, use an up-to-date VPN (virtual private network) when connecting devices remotely, and a commercial grade hardened DNS (domain name system)

service to protect their server, all of which are relatively inexpensive."

Access to data should be restricted to just those who need to use it in their role, with strong passwords and two-factor authentication a must. All information should also be encrypted, with an action plan and point of contact in the event of an incident. FSB members are entitled to free cyber protection; visit fsb.org.uk/benefits for more information.

Tools for the job

Remote working has also resulted in greater uptake of collaborative tools, says Kieran Kelly, digital transformation specialist at Gen-sys. The key ones are Trello, Miro and Slack, all of which have free small business versions, he says. "Trello is a great way to break down tasks into bite-sized chunks so you can track progress and share that with your colleagues," says Mr Kelly. "Miro enables you to put your ideas down onto a virtual board, and both platforms integrate directly with Slack, which allows you to communicate and share information."

Jill Hughes, founder and CEO of Blueumbrella, a virtual assistant service, knows the value of remote working more than most. She started her business in 2001 with just "a landline and dial-up modem" and now has 50 clients.

"People's mindsets are changing because they

have been forced to work from home and have proven they can do it productively," says Ms Hughes. "The most important thing is being able to maintain that by setting clear boundaries so that you don't get distracted, or your work doesn't start to infringe on your personal life." 🗨️

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Counting the cost

The dangers of working remotely were laid bare when small business owner Ann Davies had more than £10,000 stolen by cyber-criminals. Ms Davies, who runs Manchester-based social media marketing agency BizWizUK, became a victim of cyber-fraud when her bookkeeper received an email, purportedly from Ms Davies' email address, requesting two separate BACS payments of more than £8,000 and £2,000.

Replying to the email, her bookkeeper questioned the request, and received another email back instructing her to go ahead and make the payments.

Unbeknown to her bookkeeper, though, Ms Davies' email account had been hacked, forcing her into a long, stressful and ultimately unsuccessful battle to reclaim the stolen funds.

Cyber-fraud costs businesses and individuals £130 billion per year, according to the 2019 Financial Cost of Fraud Report, produced by Crowe UK. And working remotely means that companies are more likely to rely on email conversations rather than ask a colleague in person.

"The key lesson I learned is not to think that something like this won't happen to you, because it did," says Ms Davies. "It's vital that you educate your staff to make them aware of these kinds of issue, so that they can detect them before they escalate."

"If you are unsure about the slightest thing, even if it's just to confirm the instructions on an email, pick up the phone and speak to your colleague directly. By sticking to simple protocols like this you can avoid a lot of these problems happening in the first place."