

Research Report

**The Impact of Remote Working in Rural Wales on Employee
Well-being and Productivity**

A Study of BCCIT

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Abstract

Remote working is increasingly important in the business world with the Covid-19 pandemic speeding up a transition to remote work that was already underway pre-2020. Limited studies examine what this means for rural office-based companies. A small interview study was conducted with remote-working employees at BCCIT Ltd., a rural IT company in West Wales, with questions focusing on the impact of remote working on employee well-being and productivity. A thematic analysis of responses identified five main themes (flexibility, technology, social aspects, improved well-being, and commuting issues). From the interviews it was clear that remote working was perceived as having a positive impact on personal well-being, and at the same time most interviewees reported feeling either no impact or an improvement in productivity whilst working at home.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Remote Working, or “Working from home” was gaining popularity pre-pandemic, with individuals and organisations embracing technological advances (Ter Hoeven & Van Zoonen, 2015). Remote working is the term given to work that is conducted outside a traditional office base, with workers communicating virtually using ICT (Information and Communications Technology). Regardless of location, employees potentially can work from anywhere.

Working remotely increased significantly from March 2020 following the Covid-19 Pandemic, when subsequent restrictions challenged convention, forcing many organisations to embrace emergency adaptations to organisational practice as a matter of necessity. Two years after restrictions were lifted and “normal” activities resumed, some employees were relieved to return to social interactions and re-engagement back to the premises where they were employed. Others felt reluctant to resume pre-pandemic practices, favouring the autonomy, flexibility, and work-life balance enabled by remote working. Employees realised there were benefits to working outside of a traditional office-based environment.

From an employer perspective, many businesses struggled to survive this period and were forced to reduce overheads by limiting expenditure such as rent and associated running costs, such as heating and utilities, which alongside increasing inflation continue placing heavy financial burdens onto businesses. Many companies had already invested in remote working during the pandemic and by continuing this arrangement, organisations can potentially offset some of the traditional expenditure associated with leasing and running larger office spaces (Davies, 2021).

This dilemma is considered within the context of working in rural Welsh businesses, where population decline and skills shortages are limiting factors for businesses (Open University, 2021), and the impact of remote working is likely to be different to that felt by urban based companies.

This report looks at the opportunities and drawbacks of continuing and increasing this flexibility to work remotely in rural Wales. What are the effects on business productivity, staff well-being, and work-life balance?

1.2 Aim

This study aims to explore the impact of remote working for an office-based company (BCCIT Ltd.) in rural Wales, with a particular focus on employee well-being and productivity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview

The impact of remote working on a modern business is multi-faceted. It is important to consider what the effect will be on various aspects of employee performance, and this has been considered by many published studies. Many of these studies examined what happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, when businesses were forced to adopt remote working practices in order to continue functioning. However, even before the pandemic there was considerable interest in the benefits and disadvantages of remote working, with many experts advocating remote working as the future of the workplace (Kumari, 2023). This literature review focuses on two key impacts of remote working on businesses such as BCCIT. The first is the impact on employee well-being, something that is crucial for the overall effectiveness of a company. The second is the impact on employee productivity, a key area as remote working is often portrayed as a 'soft option' and remote workers are stereotyped as 'lazy gits' (Alan Sugar cited by Mukhopadhyay, 2022). The third focus of the literature review is the rural context of companies like BBCIT and how this may change the impact of remote working.

2.2 What is Remote Working?

It is important to define what remote working is and to make a small distinction between remote working and working from home. Remote working in its true sense is working from anywhere other than a company's main place of business. This could be anywhere which is reasonably quiet and has a decent internet connection. For example, an employee might remotely work from a coffee shop, a friend's house or even a hotel whilst travelling. Working from home is often seen as synonymous with remote working; however, it allows the employer to specify that the work is normally completed at home, something which may be important for an employer when the remote worker is dealing with confidential, sensitive, or legally protected information (Indeed, 2023). In this sense, working from home is a category of remote working.

The extent to which an employee works remotely is also important. An employer like BCCIT, might expect an employee to work remotely part of the time and 'in the office' the rest of the time - this is referred to as hybrid working (see Gitlab, 2023). This might be done by dividing the week up into remote and office days, or on a week-by-week basis, or on an event-based basis (e.g., for client face-to-face meetings). If attendance at the office is sometimes required, then some of the key advantages for a rurally located employer like BCCIT of remote working are lost, notably in terms of being able to recruit staff who could not commute to the office (LinkedIn, 2023).

2.3 The Impact of Remote Working on Employee Well-Being

An extensive set of studies have evaluated how remote working benefits employee well-being, often also looking at the positive effects it has on work-life balance. For example, Ramos and Garcia-de-Diego (2022) used the EUROFOUND data set to study the effects of remote working and gender on well-being in 92,219 remote workers during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. They found improved well-being and life satisfaction for both male and female remote workers in their European wide sample.

This is not the only study that looked at what happened following remote working in the Covid-19 pandemic. Other studies reported a positive link between remote working

and well-being (Erro-Garces et al., 2022; Juchnowicz and Kinowska, 2021). The positive effects of remote working on well-being were also established in pre-pandemic studies (Felstead and Henseke, 2017; Flores, 2019; Grant et al., 2013), something of importance, since it explores what happens when companies adopt remote working as a choice. A pre-covid systematic review by Charalampous et al. (2019) supports these findings but also highlights possible negative issues, such as social isolation and the perceived disadvantages for career progression.

While these studies post a consistent and positive picture of the relationship between well-being and remote working, there are some issues and inconsistencies. For example, although one study reported well-being is improved by increased work-life balance for remote workers (Erro-Garces et al., 2022), another study reported no benefits to work-life balance from remote working (Campo et al., 2021). Not only this, but all the studies mentioned here, rely on self-reported measures of well-being, which may be subjective, and there is some debate about the reliability and validity of such measures (Hudson et al., 2020).

Perhaps most importantly for BCCIT, the studies examined above have not specifically explored the impact of remote working on well-being in a rural context.

2.4 The Impact of Remote Working on Productivity

Another key impact of remote working is on productivity, and this has been explored in studies both pre-covid and during the covid pandemic. For example, Galanti et al. (2021) surveyed 209 full-time employees of Italian organisations during the first summer of the Covid-19 pandemic. They explored what made an effective and productive remote worker. They found that personal characteristics, notable autonomy, and self-leadership predicted how productive remote workers would be.

This suggests that personal characteristics and perhaps other individual differences (e.g., accommodation) may be important for determining whether someone working from home will be productive. Wang et al. (2020), questioning a large sample of Chinese workers also found self-discipline was a key indicator of productive remote working, but also noted social support, job autonomy and work-home interference

were crucial elements to consider. Studies have suggested that work-life balance may also be a key determinant of remote working productivity (Galanti et al., 2021; Erro-Garces et al., 2022).

Statistically there is no simple positive relationship between remote working and productivity (Metselaar et al., 2022; Felstead and Henseke, 2017). This suggests, alongside the other studies mentioned, that it is important to assess how suited an individual is to remote working. For some individuals it will be very productive, for others less so. It is also important to note that well-being is linked to self-perceived performance (Metselaar et al., 2022), so someone who struggles to work from home will feel little benefit in terms of well-being from remote working.

While employee well-being is fairly easy to measure in a reliable way using self-assessment scales, employee productivity is considerably harder to accurately measure using self-assessment. Metselaar et al. (2022) noted that self-ratings were often biased, and this could lead to unreliable findings. This may mean that the effects of individual differences such as self-leadership may be either exaggerated or perhaps even non-existent. It is possible someone who rates their self-leadership highly will also rate their productivity highly, while a more modest individual might rate their productivity less highly. For this reason, it is important to treat conclusions from self-rated productivity with caution (the same issue does not apply to self-rated well-being according to Hudson et al., 2020).

As with the previous section it is important to note that the studies exploring remote working and productivity have not focused on rural settings.

2.5 Remote Working in the Rural Context

Increasing population decline and a shortage of skilled IT workers (who often migrate to urban areas) is a limiting factor for rural areas. Skilled workers are in demand, with recruiting and retaining workers a prominent issue for rural businesses (De Hoyos and Green, 2011). In the Welsh context, strategies seeking to support rural development typically address employment availability and lifestyle opportunities (Davies, 2021). In

this context remote working would appear to make sense for both employers and employees.

Previous studies have looked at issues facing rural businesses in the connected world. Findings from these studies confirm that rural businesses face different challenges when compared to businesses located in urban and suburban areas (Kahn and Burrell, 2021; Melvin and Bunt, 2012; Philip and Williams, 2019). This is consistent with the need to explore issues such as remote working specifically within a rural context, something not done by the studies mentioned in sections 2.3 and 2.4.

A small number of studies have reported largely positive impacts from remote working in rural settings (Melvin and Bunt, 2012; De Hoyos and Green, 2011; George et al., 2021). These studies have often been conducted in countries quite different from Wales, and cultural differences may affect the relevance of their findings (e.g., Melvin and Bunt, 2012, explored remote working in the vast and truly isolated areas of rural Canada). Even those studies conducted in the UK (e.g., De Hoyos and Green, 2011) have focused on traditional rural businesses, such as agriculture and tourism. In contrast, BCCIT is an IT services company whose clients and competitors are mainly in urban and suburban areas.

The exploration of remote working at a rural office-based company is thus novel.

2.6 Conclusion

There is compelling evidence for positive impacts on employee well-being from remote working and some evidence of positive impacts on productivity from remote working. There is some doubt about how this might generalise to a rurally located IT company such as BCCIT, which suggests the need to further explore the impact of remote working on BCCIT employees, and employees in rural Wales generally.

2.7 Approach

This study used a qualitative interview-based approach to explore the impact of remote working for BCCIT on employee well-being and productivity.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy, Approach and Strategy

The project is a case study of remote working at BCCIT using qualitative data collected from interviews with employees. A Grounded Theory (Walker and Myrick, 2006) approach is adopted, this is inductive, and in this study involved developing theory from interview data using Thematic Analysis, rather than theory driving the data collection (Bell et al., 2019). The case study was organisation (BCCIT), and process (remote working) focused, and allowed for in-depth exploration - a strength of case studies (Wilson, 2022). A weakness of both case studies and qualitative approaches is that it is harder to generalise the findings to other companies and situations (Bell et al., 2019). However, it was judged to be appropriate to adopt an exploratory approach given the lack of findings on rural remote working. In contrast to the qualitative approach used here, alternative quantitative approaches are less useful for exploring new topics (Wilson, 2022) and for working with small samples. It should also be noted that the author has worked for the company for four years and occasionally works remotely. As a result, the study employed background elements of ethnography, an approach allowing insider insight but risking insider bias (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.2 Sampling

A small sample ($n = 3$) of BCCIT employees were interviewed. The small sample included a selection of employees across various roles within the company [more detail on the sample is withheld for reasons of anonymity]. All these employees work remotely at least part of the week. The study employed a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. The interviewees were selected partly based on researcher judgement (purposive) and partly on availability/willingness (convenience). Purposive sampling allows researcher knowledge to guide selection of the sample and is useful for exploratory work (Wilson, 2022). However, both purposive and convenience sampling may produce biased samples that are hard to generalise from (Wilson, 2022).

3.3 The Interviews

The interviews were conducted either in person on the premises of BCCIT (n = 1) or via video calling in Teams at home (n =2). All interviews were recorded and initially transcribed using the *Otter* app on an Android mobile phone (Otter.ai, 2023). The initial transcriptions were then corrected by the author using the audio recordings. Examples of the questions included in the interview schedule are: *"What do you do? What does remote work involve you doing?"* and *"How do you think the ability to work remotely impacts your general Well-being?"*. The full interview schedule is shown in Appendix 1.

The study used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that focused on the impact of remote working on well-being and productivity. The interview schedule also included questions on the rural context. Semi-structured interviews are an ideal method for collecting data for qualitative studies using a Grounded Theory approach, allowing the researcher to respond flexibly to the interviewee while also providing a systematic structure that ensures key topics are covered (Wilson, 2022).

3.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed together using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis is a relatively straightforward method of analysing qualitative data that is suited to analysis of interview data and allows the development of theory. The data analysis used the six-stage process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

Phase 1: Data familiarisation (transcripts are read)

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes (finding key quotes)

Phase 3: Searching for Themes (grouping quotes into themes)

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes (regrouping themes if needed)

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes (creating final theme map)

Phase 6: Reporting Themes

3.5 Ethics

The recordings of interviews were deleted once transcribed. The transcripts themselves were anonymised and will not be available to the company or employees, to protect participants from harm (Wilson, 2022). Participants either signed consent forms (see Appendix 2) or provided digital consent via email prior to taking part in the study and understood that they were free to withdraw their data up until the point of analysis. BBCIT was not directly involved with the collection or handling of the data, though they will receive a copy of this report. The report itself only provides broad details of participants and does not identify the source of quotes used in the results section in order to help ensure the anonymity of the participants. There was no deception used in the study and the author refrained from offering any advice to the participants. A full project proposal with an ethics declaration outlining the study and ethical considerations was approved by the module leader (see Appendix 3 for Ethics Declaration).

4. Findings

The thematic analysis, conducted using the method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), resulted in the emergence of five main themes. These are shown with example quotes in Table 1.

Table 1: Table of Themes from the Thematic Analysis of Interviews with BCCIT Remote Workers

Theme	Example Quote
Flexibility	“Flexibility gives people a very strong motivation to prove that they are reliable and dependable.”
Technology	“I come into the office occasionally, but I don’t need to. We have the technology, the people, and the ability, plus we’re fortunate being in the IT industry that we’re cutting edge.”

Social Aspects	<p>“There are social aspects as well, such as having a general chat. It’s nice to see different faces and get out of the house. You learn, by overhearing conversations when you’re in the office, and you get to know what’s going on.”</p>
Commuting Issues	<p>“You don’t have to worry about avoiding people driving like idiots. It can be quite dangerous.”</p> <p>“I used to find driving to and from work stressful. My stress levels were higher at those times of the day. You’re hoping you won’t run into anything and be late. Then there are issues with parking, because there’s a limited number of spaces.”</p>
Improved Well-being	<p>“During the summer on a nice sunny day, if it’s been a busy morning that’s been stressful, you can’t really relax during your lunchtime (working from the office). You can sit in your car, which is a bit isolated, and look at your phone, but I’d be counting the minutes until I could go back to my desk. Whereas at home I can sit in the garden, do some house chores, anything. You can take your mind off work and those things that have elevated your stress levels. You can de-stress and start again more relaxed.”</p>

4.1 Flexibility

Everyone interviewed worked remotely/from home by choice. They all acknowledged that it suited their ability to self-manage, that they had a suitable location to work from, and they had personal or lifestyle factors that made it preferable. Everyone interviewed did have a distinct area set up for working from home, with workstations and mostly a set routine to work by. Interviewees cited their ability to manage their work environment as a key advantage of working from home.

Interviewees also cited the flexibility inherent in not having to keep office hours as strictly, which was seen as having advantages both for the individual (in terms of personal and domestic needs) and the business (the ability to work out of normal hours). For example:

“If I was working at the office, at 5.30 (pm), I would generally pack up my desk and then head home. Prior to having my desk set up here (at home), I didn’t have a workspace area suitable to support working out of hours. To be honest with you, I wouldn’t have the impetus after having packed up and headed home. Whereas working remotely, once 5.30 comes, and the phone calls stop coming in, if I have anything that still needs to be done...that requires me off the phones, I have the ability to continue working.”

Interviewees also appreciated the flexibility inherent in not having to always be in the same place. One cited the ability to work from a villa in Europe with a laptop if they chose to.

4.2 Technology

Everyone interviewed agreed that BCCIT is ideally placed to set up and support employees to work remotely as an IT business with access to specialist technical staff. Obstacles to remote working were considered to be mostly “external,” for example power and internet outages that can be relatively common in rural settings. The interviewees felt reassured that BCC IT had an excellent internal infrastructure that is well-placed to support technical issues.

For example, one interviewee said, *“Our industry is an enabler – not just for our own staff, but for other organisations. It can assist them with technology and also offer support.”*

Interviewees noted that their roles within BCCIT had a high electronic presence, rather than physical (customer-facing) presence, with client interactions able to take place remotely even in the office. Where interviewees noted the disadvantages of remote working, it was clear these were mostly present early on in their remote working

experience and became less of an issue as remote working became more established.

Reasons noted for this improvement were:

1. Better technology was introduced to improve connections and communication between colleagues.
2. Employees are getting used to the new way of working and communicating remotely.

The use of technology to monitor productivity remotely was discussed, and it was acknowledged that this was especially important from an employer perspective. As one interviewee put it:

“If you can’t measure what people are doing, how can you manage it?”

Interviewees noted that maintaining effective communication whilst remote working is critical, both in terms of productivity, and mental and social well-being.

4.3 Social Aspects

In the interviews the ability to be present for family and pets at home featured highly as one of the main advantages of working from home. Interestingly, it was also cited as a potential disadvantage in terms of being a possible distraction, although most interviewees felt better able to manage noise distractions in the home, compared to being in the office. A concern expressed was about a lack of social interaction with colleagues whilst remote working, and how that might impact productivity in the long term. The interviewees’ concerns focused on the lack of opportunity for in-person communication – both formal and informal, to gain knowledge. Interviewees referred to the lack of shadowing/mentoring and learning by observation. They also noted possible negative impacts on team-working.

(In the office) “If I have a problem, I can’t just walk up to someone’s desk, or have a group conversation. Development as well can be an issue.” (Working from home)

Interviewees remained positive about remote working though, and noted how the introduction of web-based chats and shared digital files had helped improve this aspect of remote working.

It was mentioned by one interviewee that many people, themselves included, had found friendships and even relationships at work.

4.4 Commuting Issues

Many of the interviewees mentioned the benefits of not having to commute to work. For BCCIT employees, commuting typically means car travel which was considered costly and stressful.

One interviewee cited the dangers of driving on rural roads. Employees had reduced travel costs, notably fuel, lower vehicle insurance rates, and BCCIT benefited by saving on office costs like desk space, heating, and lighting. It was also noted that less money was spent on lunches, beverages, and snacks.

Everyone working remotely cited time as an advantage of working from home. Working from home, rather than commuting into the office gave back the interviewees between 40 minutes and several hours each working day.

“At half past five, you’re already home and can continue your day without the added commute time. I have animals, and a family needing care a lot of the time, and it helps me to be closer to those responsibilities. And if it’s a nice day, I can hang the washing out on the line ... I get that with the convenience of working from home.”

Everyone interviewed had the opinion that physical presence in an office is no longer required for many roles but appreciated the ability to have a choice between remote (home), office, and hybrid working. They appreciated the social and development opportunities of occasionally showing physical presence in the office. That said most of those who volunteered to be interviewed indicated they would find it difficult to return to commuting and working in a commercial office environment daily and were happier with hybrid/remote working.

“I’ve enjoyed working remotely so much over the last two years, that I know I would find it hard to go back to work in the office.”

4.5 Improved Well-being

A common observation in the interviews was the positive effect that working remotely has had on interviewees’ emotional stress. Several people cited better stress management because of the ability to have time for reflection. Interviewees noted reduced outbursts of stress and even anger, and this was believed to have a positive impact, not only on the interviewee's overall well-being but also on that of their colleagues. Those who brought up this subject also felt remote working allowed them the ability to 'vent' frustration if they felt they needed to but without the ill effects of doing so within an office environment.

“It’s beneficial because I was Mr.Grumpy, and it (working from home) gives me the chance to get that grumpiness out. That affects not just my well-being, but my colleague’s well-being as well.”

Most interviewees shared the belief that stressful situations were much more easily calmed whilst working remotely, for example by spending their lunch break relaxing in the garden. Interestingly, everyone interviewed considered that due to reduced distractions, and less stress, remote working resulted in greater productivity.

One interviewee reflected:

“I’ve worked in office environments all my life, and I’ve had to travel anywhere between an hour to an hour and a half to get to work. Yet I personally think and feel that I have been happier working remotely in the last couple of years, than I have at any point in my working life.”

Isolation was cited as a potential disadvantage by two interviewees (particularly when remote working initially started). However, it was still the preferred choice for overall well-being due to lower levels of stress.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This small qualitative study provided insight into the impact of remote working for BCCIT, a rural IT company based in West Wales. Those interviewed had an overwhelmingly positive view of their remote working experience, with the beneficial impact on personal well-being and other aspects of home life mentioned prominently. Interviewees generally felt their productivity was improved by remote working, noting how it was easier to manage their working environment. The importance of occasional face-to-face contact with colleagues was also referred to, with some concerns expressed about losing the work-related benefits of informal contact with colleagues in the office. A note of caution is that existing literature suggests some individuals may be more suited to remote working than others (see section 2.4).

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

- 1. Employees should wherever possible be offered a choice between remote working, hybrid working and office working.*
- 2. Employees should be offered all the resources necessary to facilitate successful remote working.*
- 3. To provide remote workers with opportunities to come into the office or otherwise interact with colleagues face-to-face (e.g., team building exercises).*
- 4. To monitor and regularly review remote working productivity - identifying any issues that employees face whilst remote working.*
- 5. To prioritise the recruitment and retention of people suited to remote working (high autonomy and self-leadership).*

6. Limitations

The study used a smaller than ideal sample of three people, meaning that care is needed in drawing conclusions from the findings. A larger sample may have highlighted issues missed here and perhaps have led to a less positive conclusion

about the impact of remote working. The author was conducting her first interview-based study, meaning there was a learning process involved in terms of getting good answers from the participants. The sample was a convenience sample, who volunteered to take part knowing the topic of the study. This may have biased the sample toward those who enjoy remote working. The author was also working alone and with limited resources (as an undergraduate student). Finally, the restrictive time limit placed on the project meant elements of the project had to be completed quickly.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

1. How far do you have to travel to your office building of employment?
2. How often do you work from the site / office of your employment building?
3. Where do you work when you are working remotely?
4. What do you do? What does remote work involve you doing?
5. What do you consider to be the Advantages of working remotely?
6. What do you consider to be the Disadvantages of working remotely?
7. How do you think remote working impacts your Productivity?
8. How do you think the ability to work remotely impacts your general Well-being?
9. Do you think that BCC IT, being a Rural Company, and an IT Company specifically, impacts the effectiveness (or otherwise) of being able to work remotely? How / Why?