

Flexible working- the realities of being Elastigirl

Sam Martin: Information Specialist
BMJ Publishing Group
England
Email: sam.martin@bmjgroup.com

Introduction

In the UK anyone can ask their employer for flexible work arrangements if you have worked continuously for 26 weeks before applying and if you have a child under 6 years old. This could be asking for part time work, flexitime (choosing hours to work), job sharing or working at home. Workers have the right to ask, but the final decision is up to the employer (1).

Official figures show that 91% of UK workplaces that received requests in the last year approved those requests and that employers largely have positive views on promoting a work-life balance. The UK government estimates that 14 million employees now work flexibly (2). The boundaries between home and work are becoming increasingly blurred for many UK workers. According to a recent UK survey (3), three million people in the UK are regular home-based workers. Of these 2.4 million are teleworkers i.e. use computers and telecommunications to work from home. These people could be doing anything from selling double glazing to being financial brokers. The media response to teleworking has been to highlight its benefits i.e. revitalising rural areas, cutting commuting, benefiting the environment, reducing pollution, improving work-life balance etc. According to the NGH report 'Working at Home' (4) the side effects have 'rarely been considered'. The report suggests these could be low rates of pay, no payment for overheads (heating, telephone etc), few employment rights, inadequate health and safety, isolation, lack of training, reduced promotion prospects.

Flexible working in the BMJ Publishing Group started as a pilot project in May 2003. Before then flexible working was done on an informal ad hoc basis. The group recognised the need to make it easier for staff to achieve and maintain a work-life balance. As well as having a 'happier' workforce, flexible working might allow the BMJ Group to use office space more productively. For the pilot project the definition of flexible working was someone working at home at least 3 days per week.

Currently official flexible workers are set up at home with a PC/laptop, broadband connection, printer, paper supplies, BMJ office phone. Non-official flexible workers have purchased their own equipment and pay for broadband/telephone connections. All home workers dial in to a server which allows use of a protected workspace which gives access to the usual shared office files on the network as well as various applications needed for their job.

Aims

To explore the experiences of home workers and their managers at BMJ Publishing Group and to identify the advantages and disadvantages of home working and managing home workers.

Methods

Online surveys (one for home workers and one for managers) were pilot tested and then sent out live in March/April 2008. The surveys were hosted by Survey Monkey software (5). The recipients of the survey were staff on the BMJ flexible working pilot project, unofficial home workers and managers of home workers. The surveys were open for 2 weeks.

Results- Home workers survey

The home workers response rate was 83% (25 out of 30 home workers completed the survey)

General

Most respondents did some form of editing work for BMJ products. The remainder comprised information specialists, marketing, sales and admin people. One third of respondents had a line manager who was also a home worker.

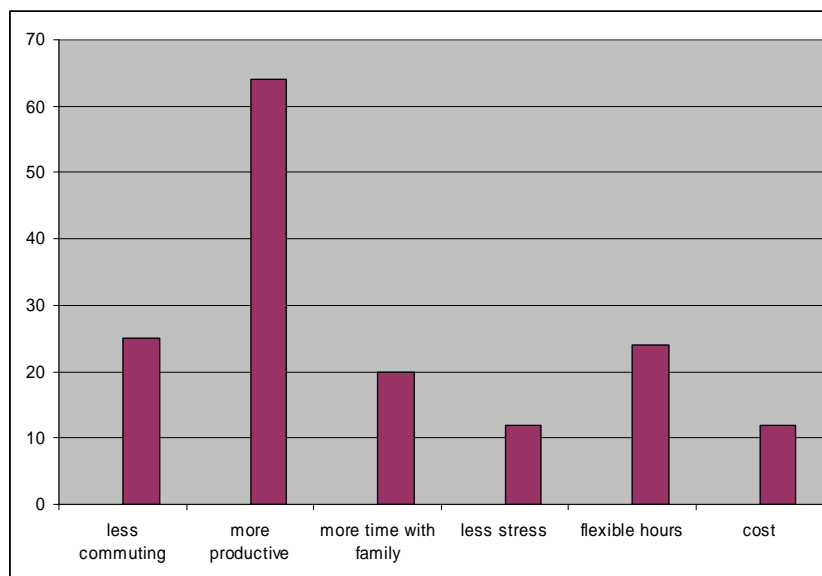
Not surprisingly all respondents said their job was suited to home working. A majority of respondents (72%) said that their predominantly PC/telecoms based work could be done at home, although certain areas of work such as meetings, brainstorming for ideas and managing people could be done better face-to-face in the office.

Over 50% of respondents were based in London or the South East. The rest being throughout the UK from Wiltshire in the South West to Scotland in the North and one person was based in Canada.

Advantages/disadvantages of home working

Respondents thought the main advantage of home working was greater productivity (64%). The fewer distractions and quieter environment that home life offered compared to the office allowed workers to focus and concentrate more on the task in hand. This was especially useful for complex tasks and project work.

Table1: Advantages of home working (replies in %)

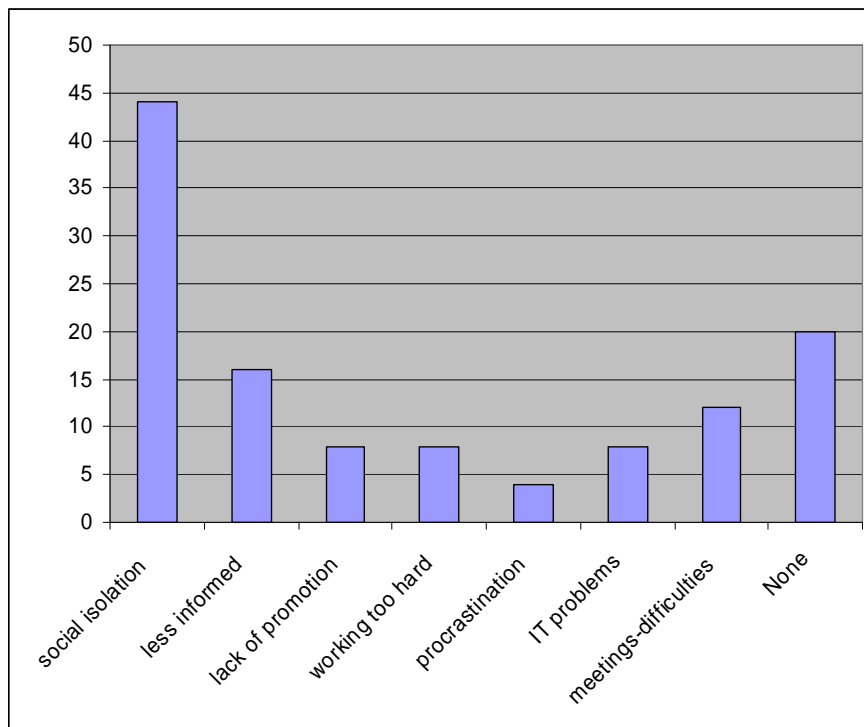


Reduction in commuting was the second main advantage in working from home (25%). Next came flexibility in working hours, the opportunity to not work a rigid 9-5 day but to work the same amount of hours but which fitted in with home life. Other advantages stated were more time with family and cheaper cost of living outside London

Reduced social contact with colleagues was a main disadvantage of home working. People missed office 'banter', going out to lunch and after work social events. Missing face-to-face meetings was also highlighted. Although meetings could be taken via phone respondents thought that face-to-face discussion was best, especially for intensive influential meetings or

meetings with large groups of people. Some respondents thought that a disadvantage was that if you were not physically in the office that people did not think you were actually at work or were overlooked when it came to new opportunities, whether that be project work or promotion. This is concerning as it may impact on promotional opportunities for home workers. Other respondents felt they were out of the office loop and informal office networking which might also impact on promotion opportunities. One fifth of respondents did not think there were any disadvantages.

Table 2: Disadvantages of home working (replies in %)



Comments were:

“Somewhat out of the office “loop” so you don’t always find out about new opportunities”

“Lack of social-contact. I have to make a conscious effort to remember to take breaks and leave my office at the end of the day”

“Missing out on social interaction with colleagues in the office, telephone meetings with colleagues not always satisfactory e.g., noise, miss out on body language etc Colleagues not knowing how hard I’m working--i.e., they can’t see that I’m completely snowed under. Waiting on e-mail communication when in the office it’s easy to have real-time communication face-to-face.”

Contact with colleagues

The majority of respondents contacted their line manager between 1-3 times per week, many had a weekly update meeting. Email (56%) was preferred as the main contact with 28% preferring phone, but this depended on who was being contacted and the reason. Most (96%)

felt that the contact they had with their line manager was sufficient. All felt that people in the office could contact them easily when they were working at home. If a home worker wanted to contact someone in the office urgently, 84% said they could do this easily. However there were a few reservations see quote below:

"If they [office based workers] are at their desk it is as easy to contact them from home as it is in the office. If they are not at their desk it is more difficult from home than in the office to know when they will be contactable - are they on leave, off sick, in a meeting, just popped away from their desk? These things it might be easier to tell if one was in the office"

Telephone conferences

Most (92%) respondents had attended telephone conferences from home. The number of conferences varied with each job but most (68%) attended a telephone conference at least once a month.

The main advantage in telephone conferences was not having to travel in to the office (44%), also 20% of respondents said that they could use their PC to bring up documents/web sites relevant to the meeting which people in a meeting room would not be able to do. This gave them a sense of sometimes being better informed during the meeting than the people in the office.

Respondents came up with more disadvantages than advantages for telephone conferences. The biggest problem was not being able to hear all that was said in the meeting clearly (44%) either due to technical difficulties of phones (being cut off or background interference on the line) or because people in the meeting did not speak clearly, or spoke all at once. Also not being able to see people, read faces, and judge body language (32%) meant that it could be difficult to gauge how a meeting was going and to speak without butting in. Some respondents also felt 'forgotten' when they were on the end of a phone line, especially if the meeting was badly chaired.

Comments included:

"People forget you're on the line or even forget to ring you. Poor conference call etiquette"

"Lots! They are fine on a one to one basis, but people forget you are there and all talk at once and you cant hear them. If the meetings are v important I go into the office - I really don't like group phone meetings"

Home Working environment

All home workers had their own separate office/room to work in at home.

Most (60%) said they had all they required to work at home. Extra equipment mentioned that might increase productivity were: phone with speaker and voicemail, document scanner, fax machine. Roughly half (52%) worked a standard 9-5pm working day, the remainder worked within 1-2 hours either side of this norm e.g. 8.30-4.30pm.

Most (92%) said that they did occasionally work abnormal working hours e.g. evenings/weekends. The reasons for this were mainly to achieve deadlines (76%). In addition, 20% said that children/family were the reason for working abnormal hours, for example if children were ill or on holiday they would make up the time. Sample comments were:

"if the work I have to complete cannot be completed in the time available in normal working hours I will sometimes work overtime. On the occasions this happens it will be evenings and/or weekends"

"Yes, I have been known to work early, late and at weekends if I have a lot of work to do or if the children are ill and need to stay home from school "

During lunch hours most (48%) did household chores or shopped. Other activities included gardening (16%), some form of exercise (gym, swimming, walking dogs) or reading. A couple of people worked through their lunch hour, finding it difficult to stop. Comments were as follows:

"Relax in the garden, or walk into the village for a pub lunch"

"household chores such as laundry, load dishwasher etc."

"Take the dog for a walk, do some food shopping or go to the gym. I don't take long lunch breaks as I nip out to pick the kids up at 3.15 before resuming work"

Most (77%) said that this was different from what they would normally do in the office. No-one said they were more productive in the office. 88% said they were more productive at home with the remainder feeling that there was no difference to their productivity at home or in the office.

Most said they had less days off sick since working at home. The tendency when working at home even if feeling ill was to continue to work as people were in a comfortable environment, could 'hop back to bed at lunchtime' and did not have to face an 'exhausting commute' to work. Comments included:

"easier to "struggle into work" when at bottom of the stairs! much easier to fit work around times when less than 100%, rather than a definite- not able for work"

"When not feeling 100% I think part of the problem is not wanting to leave the house when feeling rough. If you work from home, you don't have to physically exert yourself getting to work and you're within easy reach of painkillers and a bed to nap on during lunch."

Working and family/non-working life

Most (68%) had dependents (children), with 71% of parents believing that home working was beneficial for their children as they could spend more time with them and were there to pick children up from school. Children spending less time in after-school clubs was also thought to be beneficial. The remainder said that there was no difference as children were not around during working hours.

Yes - I am there for them much more - can pick them up from school rather than using childcare as I do when I am in the office. Also if they are ill at school I am 5 mins from school to pick them up"

"They prefer it. I can wave them off to school and say hello when they get back; give them the odd lift"

Of the people who had partners, most said that working at home had no effect on them as they were at work. However for some working at home meant less pressure on their partner

to pick children up from school, or more involvement in domestic duties and spending more time with their partner.

"The lack of commute means we can spend more time together. It also means that I can take a greater share of domestic duties than would otherwise be possible. In general, she views it positively "

"My partner works nights, so the only time we see each other is when he gets up in the afternoon. If I was in the office I would never see him!"

"Puts less pressure on him to come home early to pick kids up."

All home workers felt that they had a better quality of life working at home, in addition some commented that it was nice to have a mix of office/home working.

"I like mostly home and some office - you need both"

"At home I think its better. I do miss the social side, but working from here is more practical for my family."

"I think it would be hard for me and my family for me to work in London full time now, I wouldn't be able to do this job. It's a fantastic benefit and makes me feel grateful and loyal to the BMJ Group

Roughly half said they never felt lonely when working at home. Of those who did sometimes feel lonely, they combated this by phoning people (38%), or listening to the radio/music (31%). Other 'cures' were to meet up with friends (presumably at lunch time), go in to the office or in a Mr Bean like manner 'speak to teddy' .

Most (60%) did not feel isolated from work issues or out of the 'office loop' when working at home, although 40% did feel isolated. Comments included:

"yes, miss out on the subtleties, small snippets of info, minor changes in structure, news, people coming and going- all minor but they add up "

"Yes - I am a very social person and loved being in the office. I especially miss lunches with co-workers and after work drinks."

"No. I'm there two days a week at least. The BMJ has a strong culture geared towards home working, with good communication and systems"

The majority (76%) did not miss the office environment i.e. noise (external and internal office noise), mobile phones, other peoples conversations, frequent interruptions and the excessive heat levels. Office politics and putting up with moody colleagues were also mentioned.

"The noise, people being loud and sneezing Windows shut - and the HEAT "

"Noise of mobile phones going off, noise and chatter when you need quiet "

"Dense working environment, interruptions, dirty keyboards and desks, and never knowing where I will be able to sit."

IT issues

All used the IT help desk at the BMA to solve their IT problems and all had been without an internet connection at some point.

When workers were without an internet connection a variety of places were used to work. Most came in to the office (38%) or used another PC, either their own PC offline or a friend/relatives PC to stay online. Other places to access the internet were the local library and coffee shops/internet shops. All respondents commented that they had never been without an internet connection for long and could do paper work while the problem was being sorted.

All rated the IT help desk as excellent/very good.

Travelling to the office

Travelling to the BMA varied from 0-2 times per month to more than 10 times. Various combinations of modes of transport were listed to get to the office, Train and tube were the most used. Most journeys (57%) took 1-2 hours.

When working in the office 86% of people worked 9-5pm or an hour either side of this. This was similar to working at home. Most (67%) came in to the office for specific meetings or to see colleagues. Another reason for coming in to the office was to complete work that could not easily be done at home e.g.: prepare copy; fulfil duty editor rota i.e. pass pages as they go to press; print subscription renewals/reminders. Some people came in to the office to satisfy their flexible working arrangement i.e. to work in the office one or 2 days per month, but there was no actual reason to be there

Overall opinion

All said that home working worked for them. Rating their better quality of life and achieving a better life-work balance. All thought that they worked as effectively as an office worker but there was a general consensus that it was difficult to maintain home/family boundaries.

No one mentioned doing less work because of family commitments or procrastination, in fact the majority seemed to find the problem was switching off from the office and stopping working. Many mentioned the importance of self-discipline, sticking to a set time e.g. 9-5pm, also having a separate room where you can close the door was a great help.

"I have a separate office. I close the door when at work. I work standard work-hours. During this time I am at work, and work as if I was in the office. I am not half-working, half at home. My family understand this. When the work day finishes I turn off the PC. After the working day finishes, I am at home, and unless I am working overtime, I do not do any further work into the evening."

"Try and keep focused on work during work hours. I occasionally put the washing on at lunchtime or have a quick tidy round but that's about it. The children also respect that I need to work when they are home from school and do their homework."

When respondents were asked if they would return to working full time in the office 46% said that they would not contemplate returning. The remainder (54%) said they would return but over half of these respondents said that they would only return if there was no other choice and would not be happy about it.

Advice to people thinking about working from home was split in to the following pertinent categories:

Personality – can you work alone? “Consider whether your social life revolves around work colleagues. If you HAVE to talk to colleagues every day and often socialise with them then home working might not be for you”

Focus and discipline: some mentioned...organised, self discipline, self motivation, good time management. “structure your day, maintain contact with others in the office and, plan the day so you get out of the house during the day, to exercise, get the paper, walk the dog- otherwise you could find yourself still working at 7pm, not having spoken to anyone and not having moved any further than from the kitchen to the office”

Do it gradually – one/2 days per week first “Try and negotiate a suck it and see interval. Maybe gear up gently - I did one day a week for several years, then two, and then (although it's not always easy to sustain) three”

Get the right set up: “Make sure that you have everything you need before you start. Make sure that all the processes are in place, i.e. office contacts, who will send what if needed etc.”

From a home workers point of view all thought that home working did work for the BMJ. The opportunity to employ the best people for the role regardless of where they are located was mentioned.

Results- Managers of home workers survey

Managers responses

Managers of home workers were contacted. Nine managers responded out of 15 contacted giving a response rate of 60%.

Their jobs were a mix of deputy editors, editorial directors, managing editors, managing information specialists, managing customer services. Only one respondent was also a home worker, all others were office based. Managers managed between 1-5 home workers. All respondents managed UK based home workers with some (22%) having additional home workers in US/Canada.

One third had attended a training session/meeting on managing home workers.

Contact

Many (44%) said that they scheduled update meetings once-twice per week. Then extra calls as and when needed. Managers commented that whether they used email or telephone depended on the nature of the conversation. One third stated that they preferred to phone people.

Most managers (77%) said they did not find it difficult to keep in touch with home workers. A couple of respondents commented it was sometimes difficult to contact home workers in other departments.

Over half (55%) said that they were happy with the amount of contact they had with home workers but the remainder said that they would like more contact and were concerned that home workers were out of the loop on discussions. One manager commented: *“I would value more input from my home worker in the serendipitous conversations that occur in the office - I feel that she would have a lot to offer that some-times we miss”*

Most (77%) said that they thought they would know if a home worker was having a hard time/having work difficulties. The remainder said that they would probably know but it wasn't as easy to tell as office workers.

Managing home workers

Only 22% said there was little difference in managing home workers to office workers. The majority (77%) commented on a variety of differences which included: more of an effort to keep in touch and to ensure that home workers did not feel 'excluded', harder to monitor performance as they could not 'see how time was being spent'; It was "fine if performance is good but problematic if it is not"

Most (66%) said that there was no difference in the work that they assigned home workers compared to office workers. However, one manager gave more research type work to home workers. Another manager said they did not assign tasks that required a lot of attendance at office meetings as they knew from home workers that telephone conferences were a problem. Another commented that home workers could not help in office based tasks such as directing/entertaining visitors, checking papers in the office, helping with an office move.

There was uncertainty about promotion prospects with 44% assuming that home workers would be treated the same as office workers when it came to promotion. The remainder were unsure that this would be the case. Comments included:

"they do not really get to hear about all of the problems in the office/get a sense of where problems are so cannot be as proactive in volunteering to assist with problem solving. This leads to a lower profile. Telling people about issues is not the same as them seeing them for themselves, which in some home workers seems to lead to a lack of sense of urgency."

"If you need to be meeting and greeting visitors, or need to be in the office to train staff or to work on specific projects that are tied to the office, then that would be difficult unless you were prepared to come in"

Most (77%) thought that home workers were as informed as office workers. There were comments such as :

"The social side of life is really the only area they lose out on - but instructions, new work projects, developments in the workplace, work business things are passed on - if they don't know something neither will the team"

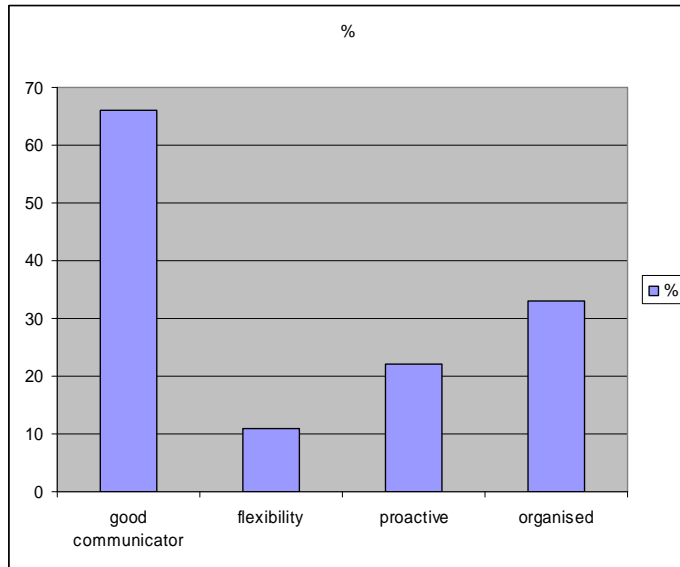
"Yes, definitely, possibly more so because I probably talk less in the office to those sitting at their desks than to those at home. I additionally feel that most of the team realise that they share the responsibility of keeping themselves informed."

Managers were asked about health and safety issues for home workers, 55% were not aware of any specific health and safety issues. Health and safety for home workers was not checked and some managers were concerned that there was no-one to monitor: posture suitability; hours of work; length of time on a PC/telephone; number of breaks taken.

Personal attributes

Managers were asked to list personal attributes that a manager would need to manage a home worker. The majority of managers (77%) mentioned good communication skills (written and verbal) as the most important attribute that a manager needs in the management of home workers.

Table 3: Personal attributes for managers (replies in %)



Other attributes mentioned were being organised; putting yourself in their shoes: awareness of possible problems/ being isolated; monitoring skills as you would do with office workers; flexibility.

Managers were also asked to list personal attributes that they thought home workers need to successfully work at home. There were varied responses, but those attributes mentioned most were: self sufficiency; self motivation; self-discipline; self-evaluation; organized; good time management skills; asking questions in order to be clear about task; honest/trustworthy; independence; self starters.

There was an emphasis on self management in various forms.

Advantages/disadvantages of managing home workers

Managers were asked to comment on the advantages of managing home workers. There were varied responses which included: home workers were happy/less stressed; motivated; task focussed.

Comments included:

“They don't suffer from office based problems and distractions and can work the hours that suit them. So don't have to deal with stresses around transport problems, office noise, having to leave early. So can be a more productive environment to work in”

“Happier than being forced to travel into office, so better motivated”

“If they've volunteered, it often allows them to manage their work life balance better and they really like that - so they are committed They are less likely to get distracted from their tasks”

“Throughput of work can be very high as fewer interruptions Can assign dedicated self-directed projects that need to be done quickly but do not need a lot of interaction with others”

“Can manage them in more structured way They are happier and have more leisure time”

“Communication is more focused”

The disadvantages of managing home workers responses were also varied and included: difficulties in communicating; monitoring workload; home workers being more self-centred; the quality of work being difficult to improve if people are not office based; lack of face to face meetings. Comments were:

“ I spend more time managing home workers”

“communication is harder; can forget to inform them of informal issues happening in the office”

“harder to monitor workload”;

“not being available for informal discussions”

“if home workers don’t come in much you miss opportunities for team building”

“some home workers can seem disconnected from the end goals of the department”

“there can be a little bit too much on a focus on their own workload rather than the overall picture, maybe because they do not see what is going on every day”

“If quality of work was low before working at home began, low quality work continues”

Advice to managers of home workers

The advice by managers all covered the same theme of communication and contact with the home worker as the most important issue. Comments were:

“Make communication a top priority”

“allow time to chat to them about general non-work related things to build up a relationship”

“keep them as fully informed and involved as office workers”

“keep in contact even if there is no specific reason so that they do not feel socially excluded”

“make sure the home worker is trustworthy in not shirking”

Opinion of home working

All managers questioned thought home working could work well. Comments included:

“it can work very well, but it depends on the individual and they have to be able to adapt to it and be proactive when needed”

“it works very well and allows flexibility for BMJ staff”

“Works well if the home worker visits the office regularly.”

“I would certainly rather have my worker working from home than not have her on the team. I find managing poor performance much harder in home workers though.”

"I think it works well for some areas of working e.g. information specialists critically appraising abstracts. I am less convinced of its efficacy where face to face communication / interactive working is more necessary."

Managers thought that in general home working did work for the BMJ to a certain extent. No one said that it did not. There were a few reservations noted:

"I think most of the bad press that home working gets in the BMJ is not down to formal home workers but to people who are formally based in the office but in practice spend some time working at home"

"Main problems are if only 1-2 members of the team are home workers - tend to get forgotten about. Works better if large proportion of team are home workers. But they miss out on informal chat in the office, which is part of the bonding and keeping up to date process."

Conclusions

The overall opinion of home working was a positive one for home workers, managers and the BMJ Group. All home workers enjoyed the freedom of working from home and thought they could do most tasks efficiently. Managers agreed with this but both home workers and managers commented on the difficulties in communication. For home workers it was the missing out on social and informal work related conversations in the office. For managers the issue seemed to be making time to be proactive and communicate regularly, keeping home workers involved and informed, this is easier when workers are office based as they benefit from informal discussions and ad-hoc face to face meetings.

Home workers enjoyed the flexibility of working at home and their quality of life, more leisure time, and more time with their children. Home workers rated themselves as effective at their job as office workers but on the whole did not say they were better (or worse) than office workers. Most would not be happy to return to commuting to the office.

Managers thought that home workers were committed, motivated and focussed people. However it is important to note that this is not in comparison to office workers. Time allocated to keep home workers informed was a main issue.

This study was limited to BMJ Group staff. Other home workers and their managers may have different experiences. For information workers/librarians home based working could be viable if the nature of the job is mainly PC work e.g. Literature searching, current awareness services, telephone/internet enquiry services, indexing, abstracting, cataloguing. The majority of home workers for this survey did regularly come in to the office and felt that it was good to have an office/home balance.

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