

# REMOTE WORKING

Freedom and flexibility for the self-employed



## About IPSE

IPSE is the largest association of independent professionals in the EU, representing over 74,000 freelancers, contractors and consultants from every sector of the economy. It's a not-for-profit organisation owned and run by its members. We believe that flexibility in the labour market is crucial to Britain's economic success, and dedicate our work to improving the landscape for the freelance way of working through our active and influential voice in Government and industry. IPSE aims to be the principal and definitive source of knowledge about freelancing and self-employment in the UK. We work with leading academic institutions and research agencies to provide empirical evidence about evolving market trends. This research supports our work with Government and industry and delivers key mark.

This report was produced in partnership with PeoplePerHour and written by Chloe Jepps, Deputy Head of Research at IPSE.

## About PeoplePerHour

PeoplePerHour is the UK's leading freelance marketplace. Founded in 2007 the site boasts over 2m users across 150+ countries, and has paid out in excess of £100m to freelancers since.

Since its inception PeoplePerHour has become an invaluable resource for small businesses in the UK and outside, allowing them hire expert talent as and when needed, 'on-demand' thereby staying lean and flexible while they grow.

The company's mission is to empower people worldwide to live their work dream, building their business from the ground up and becoming financially and professionally independent.

# Executive Summary

## 87%

87% of the self-employed have worked remotely in the last year

## 97%

The vast majority (97%) of remote working is done from home

## 41%

41% believe working remotely leads to a better work-life balance

## 78%

78% said reliable broadband is the most important tool to enable remote working

The biggest challenges of remote working:

Difficulty receiving client communications (28%)

Difficulty receiving client feedback (27%)

Not feeling part of the team (26%)

Loneliness (19%)

Disconnectedness (19%)

Remote working "carrying out work away from a client or employer's premises" is becoming much more popular right across the UK. One contributing factor seems to be companies trying to meet their employees' demands for more flexibility and a better work-life balance<sup>1</sup>. In fact, flexible or remote working is the third-most important factor for millennials when considering a job<sup>2</sup>, and a recent report by TotalJobs found that one in four UK employees would change job to be able to work remotely<sup>3</sup>.

Another factor behind the rise of remote working is the remarkable growth of self-employment in the UK. The UK's self-employed population has risen from 3.3 million in 2001 to approximately 4.8 million today<sup>4</sup>. Two of the biggest reasons people have been moving into self-employment are the flexibility and work-life balance it offers<sup>5</sup>. Previous research shows that while remote working allows this flexibility, it is not without its disadvantages – including prompting feelings of loneliness and blurring the boundary between work and home life<sup>6</sup>.

As remote working becomes more and more commonplace, there is a growing need to understand this way of working and make sure it works well for the self-employed and actually gives them the flexibility they crave. To do this, IPSE carried out a study of the UK's self-employed, exploring not only the benefits and challenges of remote working, but also how this way of working can be improved for them.

# Who is working remotely and how?

Our research shows the vast majority (87%) of self-employed people have worked remotely in the last 12 months. In fact, they work remotely for an average of 62 per cent of their typical week. This is much higher than for employees: a recent TUC analysis showed that only six per cent of UK employees regularly worked from home in 2017<sup>7</sup>.

Perhaps surprisingly, it's not just millennials who work remotely. Our research showed that respondents over 55 were actually more likely to have done so in the last 12 months (86%) than younger respondents (80%).

An overwhelming majority (97%) of those who reported working remotely in the last 12 months worked from home, at least occasionally. And for half of these (52%) it was in a place not specifically designed for work. This builds on previous research that indicates that remote working can play a large part in blurring work and home life<sup>8</sup>.

Remote working can mean a variety of different things for self-employed people and for most it is not fixed to one location. This flexibility to choose where and when they work is one of the key things that attracts people to self-employment. In fact, only 26 per cent of respondents stated that they always worked in one space. For others it was a mixture of locations, including working from home, in a public space (32%), at a workhub (13%), or while travelling (24%). In addition to working remotely, more than half of respondents (57%) also reported working from their client's premises at least occasionally with a third doing so most of the time.

There is also some variation in preferred working locations between gender groups, with women working from home more often than men. This fact might relate to the rise in the number of freelance working mums, the number of whom almost doubled between 2008 and 2018. In fact, the number of freelance mothers rose by ten per cent in the last year alone<sup>9</sup>. Freelancing allows mothers to pursue their career without stopping them spending time with their family. Through freelancing, they can therefore achieve a balance between their work and family life that simply was not possible half a century ago.

Those who work remotely reported spending an average of 62 per cent of their typical week doing so. A third of this group also worked remotely most of the time (more than 90% of the week). Despite this, almost half (45%) wanted to increase the amount of time they spend working remotely every week even more, with only 16 per cent wanting to do less.

Younger respondents (16–34 years old) were more likely to spend most of their time working remotely compared to those over 35. However, over half of those over 35 would like the opportunity to work remotely more often.



# Remote working improves personal circumstances and facilitates a better professional environment

Previous research among employees has shown that remote working is generally a positive phenomenon because it can increase productivity and improve work-life balance<sup>10</sup>.

The same seems to be the case among the self-employed, with remote working improving both their professional and their personal circumstances.

First and foremost, the survey showed that the greatest advantage of remote working for the self-employed is increased flexibility (55%). All groups surveyed said this was the top benefit of working remotely. Research has shown on more than one occasion that the self-employed

value the freedom and autonomy that goes with this lifestyle.

Remote working also seems to be a convenient option for many because it allows them to save time (43%) and money (27%) because of the reduced travel. It also improves their personal circumstances because it leads to a better work-life balance (41%), allowing them to spend more time with their family and loved ones (20%) and even reducing their stress levels (20%).

In addition, remote working can help create a better professional environment because it allows self-employed people to feel more productive (34%) and get access to a wider range of clients (25%).

# Remote working can lead to communication issues and disconnect

Encouragingly, one in five self-employed people (20%) have not experienced any disadvantages from working remotely. This figure rises to over one third when looking at respondents over 55.

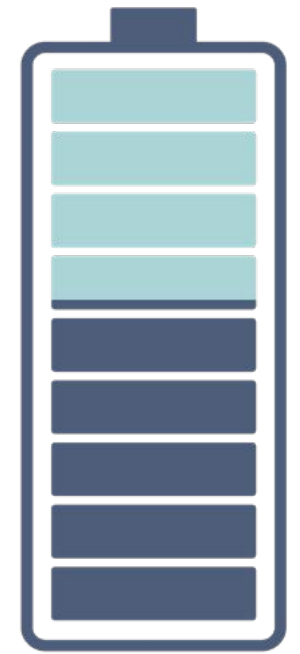
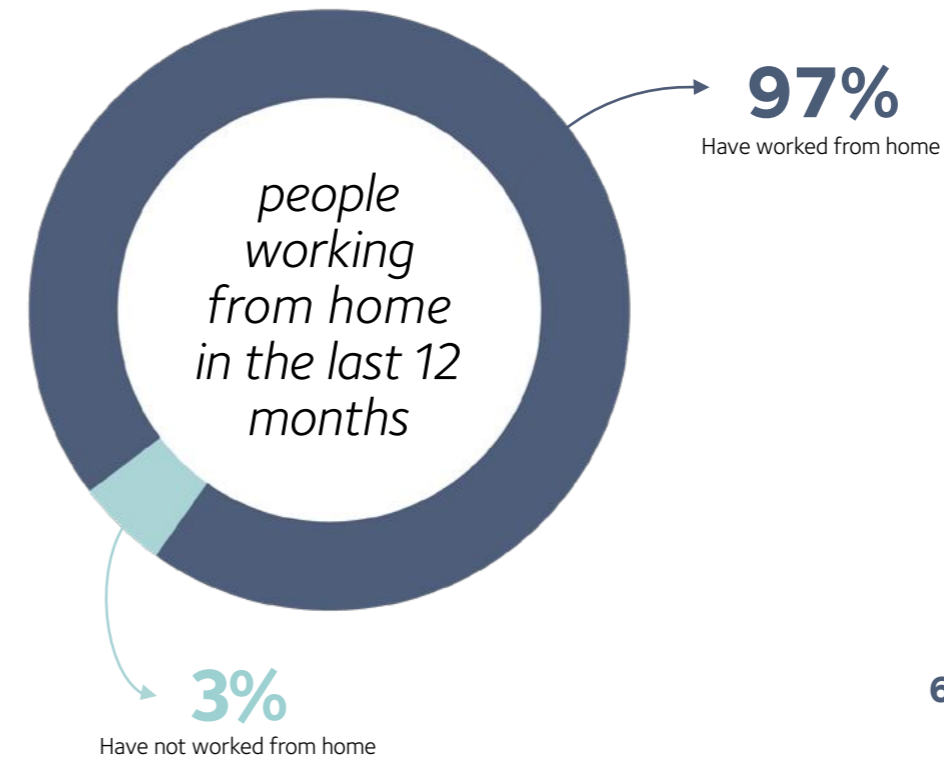
Those who reported disadvantages had two key concerns: on the one hand, remote working can affect the relationship with their client, making it very difficult to receive clear communications (28%) or regular feedback (27%). On the other hand, it may affect their

inherent need for human interaction by making them feel lonely (19%), disconnected (19%) and not part of the team (26%).

Both the need for more regular client feedback and feelings of loneliness were especially prominent among millennials, with almost a third saying they felt lonely because of remote working. This suggests many of them are yet to build up their confidence or adopt techniques to help them connect with people.

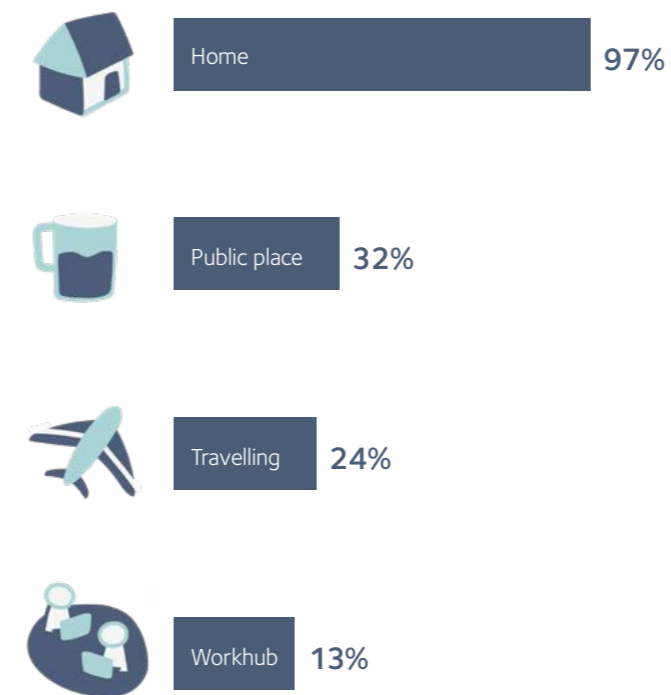


## How many self-employed people work from home?



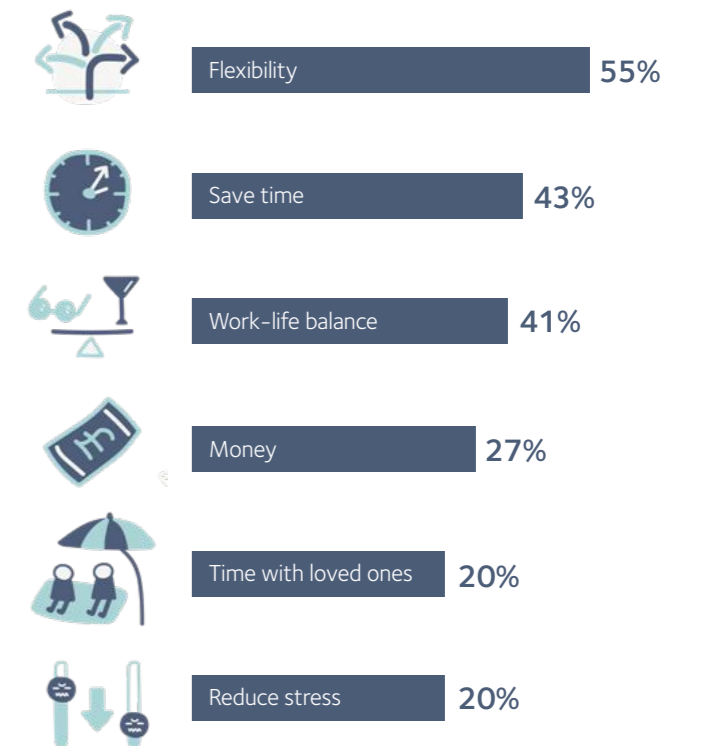
62% of typical working week spent working remotely

## Where do people prefer to work?



Percentages do not sum to 100% as respondents could choose multiple options

## Why do people prefer remote working?



Percentages do not sum to 100% as respondents could choose multiple options



## The key to effective remote working

Technology has changed the way we work, communicate and live in the 21st Century. A case in point is remote working, with 99 per cent of survey respondents saying technology is a key factor for successful remote working.

The most important tool for remote working is a fast and reliable broadband connection (78%). Despite its importance, IPSE research has found that one in five self-employed people in Scotland and Wales have problems running their business because of broadband issues<sup>11</sup>. In addition, Ofcom research has shown that 42 per cent of UK microbusinesses don't

have superfast broadband – rising to 85 per cent in rural areas<sup>12</sup>.

Access to key office equipment is also essential for remote working, with over half of respondents (52%) saying mobile devices are highly important and another 38 per cent saying the same for personal office equipment such as a monitor and printer.

With client communication one of the main difficulties for freelancers, many may also benefit from having access to a client's Virtual Private Network (VPN), as well as online meeting software.

Good communication, such as clients being easy to contact (36%), having access to the right tools (35%) and being set clear deadlines and expectations (33%), is the top thing self-employed people say helps them maintain good relationships with their clients.

There is, however, some variation between different age groups. For millennials, having regular feedback from the client, as well as clear deadlines and expectations are key to a positive relationship. For those over 55, on the other hand, the autonomy to make work-related decisions is more important for maintaining good relationships.

## Is remote working here to stay?

Most self-employed people (93%) are united in the belief that remote working enhances their freelancing experience.

However, they are divided in their vision for the future of remote working, with only

35 per cent predicting that all work will be done remotely in the future and 46 per cent claiming that many companies will never adopt remote working practices. Millennials are more optimistic about the future of remote working than their older counterparts. They are more

likely to believe that all work will be done remotely in the future and less likely to agree that many companies will never adopt remote working.





# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Remote working is prevalent across the whole of the self-employed sector. It can, however, mean different things to different people, with very few always working from the same physical location.

It is also widely seen as an extremely positive way of working, with most saying that remote working enhances their experience of work. Not only does remote working enable self-employed workers to be more flexible with their time and enjoy a better work-life balance; it can also play a part in reducing stress.

Despite the clear benefits, remote working is not without its problems, with many complaining that it often entails poor communication, loneliness and disconnectedness.

So far, this report has highlighted some of the key benefits and challenges of working remotely. Now, with remote working clearly here to stay, we also set several recommendations to address the challenges and make remote-working work for the self-employed:

## 01 Roll out superfast broadband across the UK

Access to a fast and stable internet connection is essential for effective remote working. However, Ofcom and others have shown that many parts of the UK still do not have access to super-fast broadband. IPSE's own research also shows this has caused disruption to self-employed people's businesses, especially in more remote areas.

The Government should continue to commit to 100 per cent access to broadband by 2020 and ensure that all parts of the UK – including hard-to-reach areas – have access to super-fast broadband.

## 02 Promote co-working spaces

A total of 76 per cent of respondents reported that they had never used a co-working space or work hub. Previous research has shown that co-working spaces can play a significant part in combating isolation and loneliness. This can also lead to increased co-operation among self-employed people and encourage the sharing of ideas and resources.

The Government should promote co-working opportunities and explore ways to incentivise the establishment of new co-working spaces. For example, the business rate relief that already exists for small businesses should be extended to workhubs. Government should also widely publicise abandoned or empty buildings that could be transformed into workhubs.

## 03 Ensure further support from clients

The results have shown that the self-employed struggle with a number of aspects of remote working, including getting effective communication and support from their clients and accessing their clients' VPNs.

Clients should make sure the self-employed people they take on have access to the networks and communications channels they need to work effectively off-site. They should also ensure they fully understand the needs of self-employed people and are flexible enough to accommodate them.

## Methodology

This report is based on the responses of 1,265 self-employed IPSE and PeoplePerHour members who replied to an online survey between 17 September and 1 October 2018. The composition of the survey's respondents was: 32 per cent female and 66 per cent male, with an average age of 43. They have been freelancing for an average of 9 years and working across a range of occupations.

## References

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