

# Liveable Lives

## OFFICE PUSH AND PULL: COMMON EMPLOYEE PREDICAMENTS

Addressing dysfunction in 21st century work

ZZA Responsive User Environments

March 2010

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## **Ziona Strelitz**

Educated in social anthropology, town planning and interior architecture, Ziona Strelitz has a distinctive vantage point connecting people, organisations, space and place. Her particular research focus is on people's experience of buildings and settings. Ziona's authority derives from her systematic research; over many years she has interviewed hundreds of people, generating relevant knowledge to inform policy, strategy and project concepts – from the building to the urban scale. Throughout she has pursued her interest in work-life alignment – from her collaboration and co-authorship of definitive works like *Fathers, Mothers and Others*, through her many interviews to shape briefs for new projects and test completed developments from the perspective of those who use them, to her numerous papers and presentations on the topic of work-life

harmony and sustainable development. In 1990 Ziona founded ZZA Responsive User Environments, to mediate spatial and cultural issues in the scoping, design and use of the built environment. Ziona also lectures, judges awards and presents internationally.

## **ZZA Responsive User Environments**

ZZA Responsive User Environments is a specialist research and advisory practice based on social science and built environment disciplines. It works with leading developers, occupiers, designers, government and public interest groups to shape efficient, effective and appealing settings. ZZA works at a range of spatial scales, from individual buildings to master-planned developments. All ZZA projects embody a strong commitment to sustainable development, living and working. [www.zza.co.uk](http://www.zza.co.uk)

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# ABOUT THIS REPORT

Over the course of many years' research on people's interests, needs and responses to the built environment, I have interviewed hundreds of individuals, learning how they negotiate the interfaces we all have to manage between work, family and our other commitments. This relates to the settings that we use, our scope to move between them, and the changing scenarios we face as we progress through the life cycle.

Much of this research has been with people whose workplace has been relocated, often as part of property consolidation strategies, or other corporate real estate initiatives to move offices to lower rent locations away from urban centres.

The time span has involved significant changes in conditions of work life, home life and the nature of offices. There are now more women at work, increased requirements for eldercare, ubiquitous technology and scope to work remotely, and a substantially redeveloped office stock – involving significant closure of 'branch offices' in favour of large new buildings, business parks and campuses, typically in one location. These trends are ongoing.

As a participant in and close observer of the development process, I recognise the benefits that office consolidation offers to corporate occupiers, with its significant economies of scale, the critical mass to offer a wide range of support facilities, and associated scope to confer a strong corporate image. The pull of large well-resourced offices can indeed appear magnetic, but for the employees who need to reach these facilities across large metropolitan areas, the journey to work can be extremely onerous. The negative impact is accentuated when family life commitments require people to be close to home to dovetail with the schedules of nurseries, schools, ill or elderly relatives, and so on, frequently generating stress and conflict. This reality doubtless plays some part in the low employee attendance or level of usage that audits of workspace commonly show. Indeed, workplace utilisation rates in the region of 40% are not atypical.

The advent of information and communications technology, enabling many work tasks to be undertaken remotely, has been hailed as a saving grace; and many people do welcome working at home, for some of the time at least. But for many this is not a viable alternative to working in the office, and home-working is not effective as a wholesale strategy to resolve the conflicting commitments of work and family – either for companies or their staff.

*Liveable Lives* reports typical strains that employees have shared with me as an independent researcher and attuned listener. Drawing on experiences and sentiments that people are uncomfortable to share inside their own organisations, it distils issues and admissions that need recognition to promote sustainable, productive performance. As research data of this nature is always confidential and non-attributable, the case-studies in *Liveable Lives* are necessarily forged from multiple voices and constructed as composites, with none representing the identity of any specific interviewee.

The aim of the report is to alert Human Resources and Corporate Real Estate professionals to the tensions employees face in managing their commitments to work and the rest of life – challenges that are magnified when long travel time is involved. On the face of it, centralised workplace 'palaces' might seem to cater for employees' every conceivable need, but the critical requirement that they often frustrate is easy travel between work and home. Importantly, the significant negatives of having all your workspace in one big building or campus, no matter how gleaming, also represent costs to employers, through their impacts on staff recruitment, retention and motivation – and hence on wellbeing and productivity.

# THE MYTH OF INFINITE BANDWIDTH: FACING UP TO EMPLOYEES'

## Work and personal lives: key social transformations

### The last two decades have seen an industrial revolution

Core changes to the fundamental structure of society and the economy have completely reshaped the way we live and work. The causes are many and interact with one another.

### There is a powerful cluster of demographic changes

In developed and emerging economies, trends in demography and household formation accentuate peoples' roles as individuals. Extended periods of education result in an older working population, and later entry to parenthood means that many people are in the throes of active childcare responsibilities whilst in the prime

of their careers. A decline in child-bearing reduces the pool of candidates available for economically productive roles, as well as enhancing children's value – for whom parents want the absolute best.

### In parallel, we have seen a significant extension of lifespan

Unprecedented longevity is generating two large population bands beyond retirement age: the 'young-old' – healthy, active silver-surfers who are past traditional retirement age, and the vastly expanded 'old-old' population – frail, with increasing symptoms of physical and mental decline, and unable to manage alone. Both categories represent a major challenge to the established social and economic frameworks for eldercare.

### Seniors – young-old and old-old – are affected by the fiscal crisis

The young-old are victims of the imploded pension pot. The survival of the old-olds, in both numbers and years, strains society's capacity to care for them.

### The challenge is heightened by concurrent cultural changes

There are strong foci on individualism and consumerism. Our contemporary expectations look to a high standard of living and having 'what we want'. This collides with the trend to longer life spans – we all want to live longer and to live well, but society can't easily support these ambitions.

### Pressures fall on the working population: the 'sandwich generation'

Occupying the middle layer of the generation stack, the economically active are responsible for their children beneath them, and, increasingly, for their parents above. They also have to produce value for their companies, maintain their families at the standard to which they aspire, and generate the GDP to support the wider society.

### A distinct characteristic of the contemporary workforce is its gender composition

The fabric of corporate life is more equal than ever before, generating far-reaching effects. With the skills of both men and women now embedded in economic activity, the care needs of young and old, and workers' own needs to nurture and play, are bearing the brunt.

### The inevitable juggling and stress involved are only partially recognised

But there is plenty evidence of dysfunction. Men and women 'unload' to their friends and spouses, a steady stream of newspaper confessionals showcases individuals who are willing to write about the struggle to 'have it all', and government and companies acknowledge the need for 'work-life balance'. Still, much of this skims the surface.

### **Expanded opportunity: increased strain**

We are all confined by existing structures, our employers' requirements and our own expectations. The constraints and limits are still largely influenced by old realities, when men were responsible for the world of work, and women for the domestic realm, their children and elderly relatives. Of course, some women have long been in the paid labour force, often with little choice. Today's realities offer unforeseen opportunities for personal advancement, but there are also downsides. Employees feel torn between commitments to their children, their parents and themselves on the one hand, and the demands and requirements of work on the other. The tensions challenge people's capacity, productivity and morale.

### **Housing costs: added pressure**

Employees are locked in by financial pressures. With the high cost of housing in particular, many people allocate more time to work than would be optimal from a work-life balance perspective. In this respect, both couples and single parents feel they have little real choice.

## **Technology as saviour**

### **Modernity seeks solutions to all predicaments, and digital technology has been heralded as the saving grace**

For much economic activity, especially in the knowledge industries, technology has broken the link with fixed time and place. Indeed, much work can be done

anywhere – in a coffee shop, library, business centre, airport or train. This gives rise to the new mantra: 'work is where you are'.

### **Promoting remote and virtual working has many potential benefits to both companies and workers**

If people can work from anywhere, the cost of providing workspace to accommodate them can be avoided. If employees don't have to travel to work, the time they would have spent commuting can be spent more productively, and additional benefits can be obtained – savings in travel cost and reduced environmental impact.

### **When work is 'where you are', home too can be a place to work**

If employees can work from home, the challenging conflicts between work and family can be overcome – or so it might seem. Technology to the rescue – a solution, as we expect from modernity.

### **Scope to work at home dovetails with contemporary notions of the office as a place for interaction and exchange**

If the work done on a solo or individual basis can be done at home – reading, analysis, report writing, and so on, the need to accommodate these tasks at the employers' premises can be dropped, and the overhead removed from the corporate budget. Home-working offers financial benefits to employers, alongside its promise of lifestyle benefits to employees.

The fulcrum on which this hinges is technology, with its scope for remote data access and communication. And based on this view, the office becomes redefined, primarily as a place for meeting and collaboration.

## **The promise of an easy 'fix' versus peoples' complex needs**

### **The theory is neat and simple, but productive, liveable lives are about people!**

Research and employee engagement have identified numerous reasons why people value 'going in to work' – even when they are free to work at home. There are strong reasons for workplace 'pull'. People like the sociability of an office, its contrast to home, the access to mentoring, the scope to bounce off ideas, the opportunities that flow from being seen, the resources on hand, the sense of belonging, the stimulus of a business milieu and the spark it gives to creativity and productivity.

### **Other reasons why people like going in to work relate to the 'push' of home**

These include a sense of isolation and loneliness when working at home, and over-reliance on one's own company and judgement. As a work setting, home can feel monotonous and lacking in energy. The absence of structure and protocol can feel too informal and unmotivating. And for employees with families or

shared households, interruptions from partners and children often detract from productive work, whilst restrictions on normal activity in the home can cause tension and resentment. Where home is shared with a family or household member whose main workplace is the residence, additional pressure on this space may be unsustainable. And for anyone, working at home may simply feel unprofessional, un-business like and uncondusive.

### **Working at home is not a panacea for employees or their companies**

Many people value the opportunity to work at home occasionally or for some of the time. But it is not a wholesale solution to demanding journeys to work, or employees' needs to meet childcare and other commitments. Whilst working close to home can help people in meeting these agenda, mixing care and work is problematic for both, leaving employees feeling frustrated that they are doing justice to neither set of commitments.

# INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT:

## LIVING AND WORKING

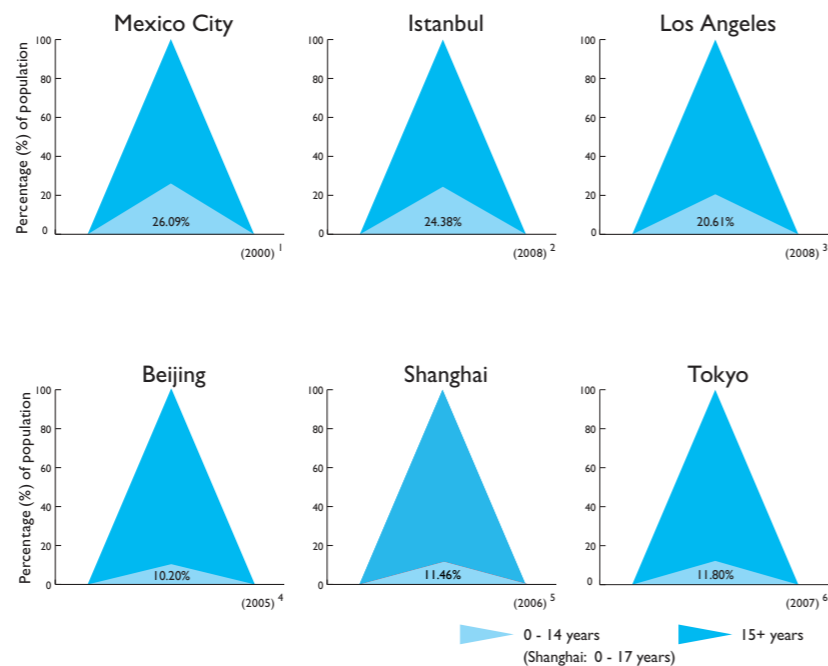
### Family demographics

#### Youth-dependency: proportion of young people reliant on adults

High youth population: increased responsibility and pressure on parents

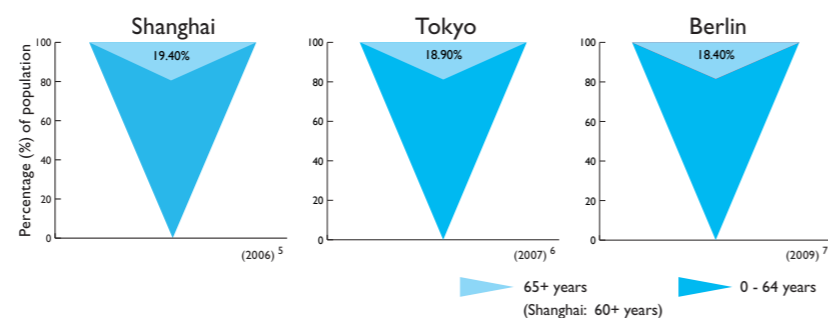
Low youth population: children are very precious

The reality is even more demanding than the data suggests. Young people in urban educated populations are educated well beyond the 14 to 17-band shown, placing additional loads and requirements for care and attention on their parents, often well into the children's 20s.



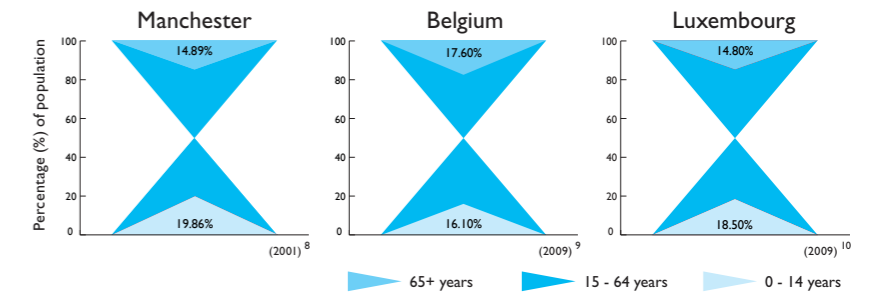
#### Global ageing population: increased responsibilities for eldercare

The dramatic increase in longevity and the scale of pension and social services requirements puts significant pressure on economically active adults to provide quality care for their elders.



### Caught in the sandwich: increasing dependency from both ends of the age spectrum

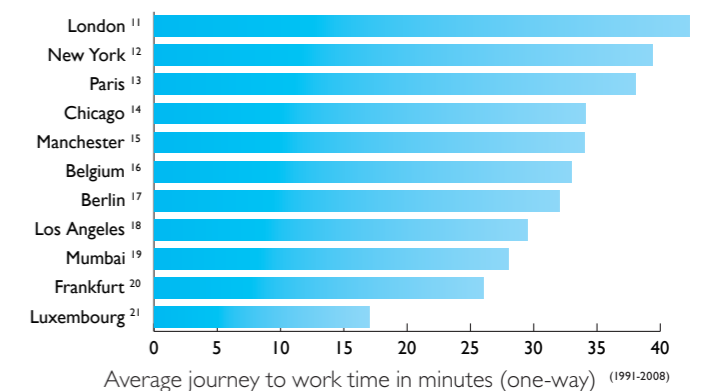
Workers who want the best for their children and their parents have multiple pulls on their time and responsibilities. Being physically located close to work and family minimises conflicts between these realms, reducing strain in employees' respective roles.



### Challenge to work and family alignment: the physical distance between zones

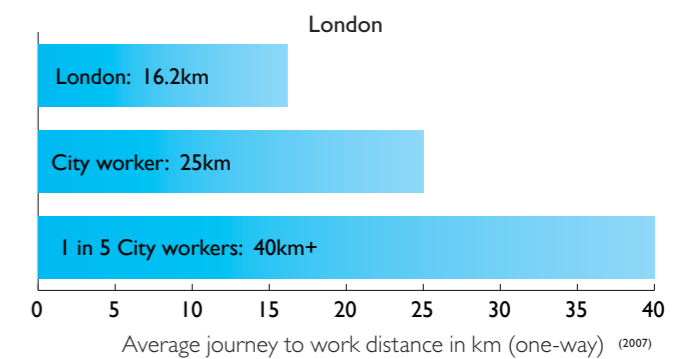
#### 'Travel to work' time

Employees' average travel time clearly varies across global cities. City size, metropolitan spread, and extent and quality of mass transit infrastructure are integral in every situation. Travel conditions will change in response to significant public transport investment. These are especially prone to improvement in emerging markets, as well as in cities posing themselves to host major international events.



#### 'Extreme commuting'

Average commuting time data eclipses the very long journeys that some workers make routinely. For example, one in five City of London workers has a journey to work of 40km+, and almost half (47.0%) of New York workers spend 40+ minutes travelling to work, with 25.5% travelling for 60+ minutes.



# WHERE TO WORK?

## OFFICE PUSH AND PULL: COMMON EMPLOYEE PREDICAMENTS

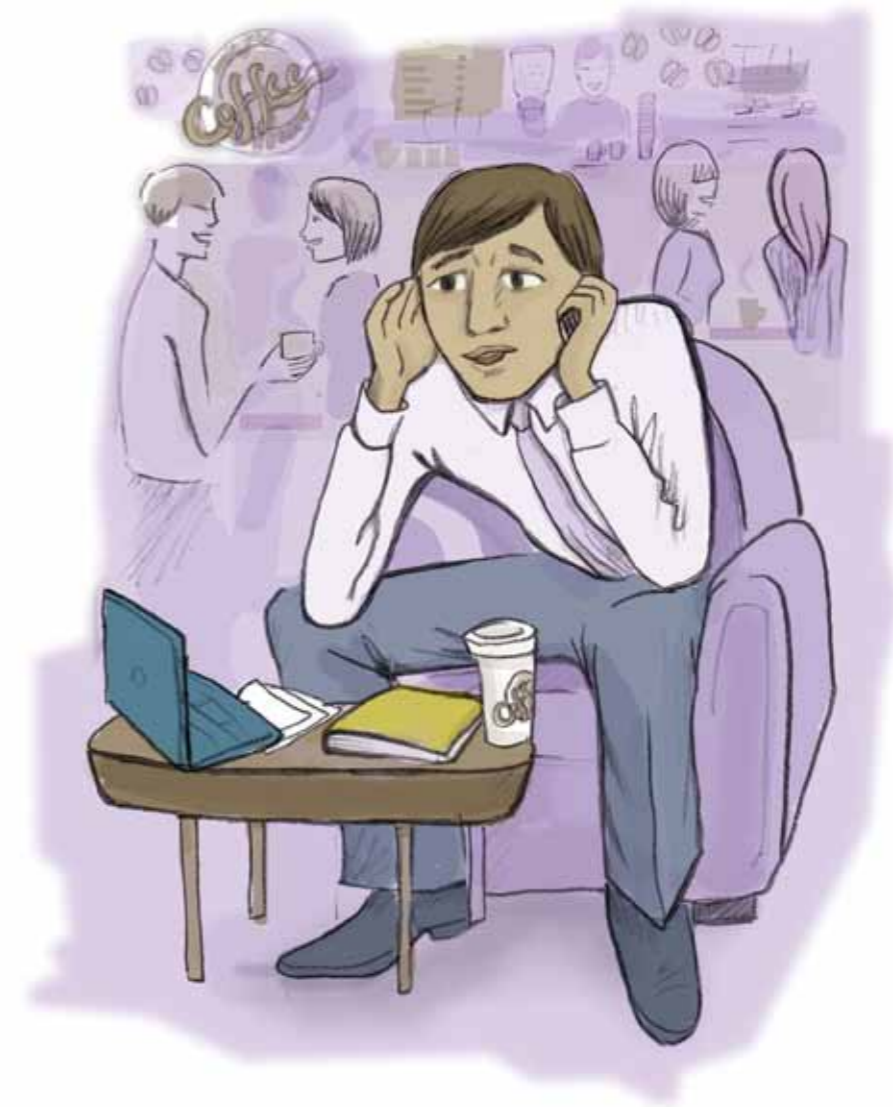
- 1. Home-work not an option: spouse's home-based business in full swing**  
Maurice – Management consultant, age 29
- 2. High stress interface: nursery-office-nursery**  
Liza – Corporate communications copywriter, age 31
- 3. It seems like win-win: but work's the loser**  
Joe – New market applications, global logistics, age 36
- 4. Commuting strain: fights biological clock**  
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- 5. Dread of 'home alone': worse than bad commute**  
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- 8. Torn between: office buzz and ailing spouse**  
Richard – Manager of a consumables company, age 53

# HOME-WORK NOT AN OPTION:

## SPOUSE'S HOME-BASED BUSINESS IN FULL SWING

### Maurice – Management consultant, age 29

A star at school and university, Maurice's career has moved from one red carpet to the next. After training in accountancy, he was recruited to an international consultancy firm. Some of his work involves international travel, but most of it is 'in-country'. He spends, on average, two or three nights a week in a different town or city, working at client sites and in a local hotel. For the rest, he is back at base. Maurice's challenge, however, is what 'base' means – to his employer and to him. Before he joined, his company had instituted a policy of 'agile working' – people whose work is not tied to the office don't have a desk. Instead, when they aren't away 'on the job', they're meant to work anywhere – at a coffee shop, library, home or wherever. They can come into the office to 'hotdesk', but this is crowded and too noisy to concentrate. On those days, Maurice would rather work at home, but he and his partner have a tiny apartment, and she's recently started a business there.



### In his own words:

“ Work's great! You deal with deeply important client issues, you have your antennae out to make relevant observations and ask the right questions. And the variety is fascinating – no job is the same as any other. Frankly, it's thrilling – the level of stimulation is very high, but so is the responsibility. I feel the weight of this for myself and the company. Everyone's heard of the management consultant who comes in and impresses, then leaves the client with recommendations that don't work. That's not who I am or want to be.

So it's not just when I'm face-to-face with clients that my performance matters – the analysis and reporting are vital. This is where the real value-add lies. When I'm working out of town, the hotel room is perfect for these tasks, but when I'm not travelling, finding suitable workspace is a real issue. To be honest, I've got nowhere where I can do this work. Coffee shops and libraries are out – they're too noisy, plus they

involve risks to confidentiality and restrictions on phone conversations. The office is impossible – it's dense, very distracting – more like a railway station! You couldn't do thoughtful work in that environment.

And home's out of the question. Since my partner Ginny began her internet sales business from our place, she's taken it over. Phones ringing, products spread out everywhere, couriers coming and going. She's got off to a brilliant start – I'm proud of her and it's great for us both. But it's like I'm living in her office – I eat and sleep there, but quality thinking and high-level report-writing just aren't feasible. I'm struggling to meet my standards.

But I'm beginning to think that I care more than the company does. If quality matters, they should provide the framework and resources to deliver it. I'm starting to feel that they don't really value us or what we do – a bit disconnected. ”



# HIGH STRESS INTERFACE: NURSERY-OFFICE-NURSERY

## Liza – Corporate communications copywriter, age 31

With her language degree and skills in verbal communication, Liza has developed a strong capability in corporate communication. Following two positions in advertising agencies after university, she has worked for a utility company for the past six years. The increased profile of the green agenda has generated particular pressures and opportunities for utility operators, and Liza's professional ability has grown with this added scope. She has thoroughly absorbed the company's culture, promoted by the fact that for the first five years – whenever she wasn't at conferences, press briefings or industry events – she worked at the HQ. The big change came when Liza had a baby. Now she gets highly stressed about getting to work on time, and reaching the nursery in time to collect her child in the evening.

### In her own words:

“ I love my job and do it very well. This isn't just self-praise; every evaluation I've had has been positive. The aspect that I especially like is copywriting – I have a knack for getting the message right.

*I also love the company. Working at the HQ all the time, I really understand our corporate DNA. It's so important. There are sensitive reputational challenges that our sector faces these days, with the spotlight on every move that a utility company makes. By this stage I can anticipate a PR flurry before it hits the fan, and I am able to head off potential negative publicity as well as capture opportunities for positive press cover.*

*But now there's Timmy! He's 11 months old and I love him more than I could have imagined. I don't like work any less, but getting the two in synch is proving very stressful.*

*There are three issues. One is leaving Tim the whole day. If the office weren't so far, I could pop into the nursery at lunchtime like some other parents do. Even if I didn't actually do this, it would be a psychological relief to know*



*that I could get there quickly if he were ill or fretting. OK, I accept that I may get more used to leaving him as time goes by, but in the five months since I returned to work from maternity leave, the daily wrench and the anxiety I feel haven't diminished.*

*In any event, the other issues won't go away. Both relate to the length of my journey to work – an hour-plus door-to-door from Timmy's nursery to the office. This has two awful impacts. First is the morning panic – getting him ready and at nursery so I can get to work on time. Sometimes he's niggly or messes after he's already dressed, and the delay is just so stressful. But worse is getting back in time to fetch him. You're meant to be there by 6pm, and if you come after 6.30pm they make you leave the nursery – three strikes and you're out. I accept that the nursery workers need a life too, but leaving the office is a nightmare – being organised about stopping what you're doing in time is one thing, it's the colleagues who approach you on your way out, and those who have an attitude about you leaving earlier than they do.*

*I just can't handle this. If Timmy were at a nursery near the office it would make a big difference, but who would choose to take a tiny child on a crowded train for two hours a day? And though my manager wouldn't mind me working at home a couple of days a week, home's just not conducive to work. That's where I zone out. That's my family space. I need a professional arena to function as a pro!* ”

# IT SEEMS LIKE WIN-WIN: BUT WORK'S THE LOSER

## Joe – New market applications, global logistics, age 36

Working for a blue chip company through its highs and lows, Joe has evolved his responsibilities from internal resourcing to developing external applications for the company's products and services. During the boom periods, he took all the training opportunities he could get, and by now he is fully conversant with 'organisational speak' and nimble in presenting a case. His partner also works for a blue chip – in IT. The couple have recently started a family, and both of them are using the scope their employers offer to be home-based workers on two days a week. While they fulfil the reporting requirements defined by this remote work-style, Joe privately acknowledges that his baby-minding impacts on his work.



## In his own words:

“As a logistics company, our organisation promotes home-working as an option. Not everyone can qualify, but there's a business bias in favour of it to show our customers that effective organisation and deployment of IT can bring benefits.

Face-to-face contact is useful – when I'm with my colleagues, we pick up much more on who's connected with various possibilities, and we're often able to give and get the missing nugget of information to advance a prospect, but you can get similar results from posting questions or news on leads on our electronic bulletin board. So I don't need to be on site to develop business.

Though, there's a twist – things changed when we became parents. The truth is that childcare is so expensive, Tina and I would have to downscale our standard of living to pay for it. But my manager has agreed for me to be home-based two days a week, and Tina's agreed the

same with her employer. My company supports the arrangement because it demonstrates what we're about and promotes our corporate message that intelligent organisation reduces environmental waste. Her company supports it to 'walk the talk' that IT enables remote working. The upshot is that we only have to pay for childcare on one day a week, which makes a huge difference to our family balance sheet.

But anyone who's had small children and is realistic about it would recognise that mixing childcare with work is wishful thinking. To be truthful, our son's not yet at infant school, and now that our daughter's on the way, it will be years before I do as much work as I could and should. Home's just not a business environment, and small children need attention. Of course, my manager and colleagues know that I'm a dad, but no one has asked what that means when I work at home. Fortunately, the indices to measure my output are so vague and open-ended, that both our kids will be at school before the company has cracked it.”

# COMMUTING STRAIN: FIGHTS BIOLOGICAL CLOCK

## Martine – Conveyancing lawyer, age 33

On a successful career path – Martine has geared her input to successive promotions. She is now facing the next big push towards director status, but starting a family has moved onto her agenda and her focus is floundering. She knows her biological clock is ticking and the daily hour-plus commute on crowded trains exhausts her, but she feels that her career will lose its edge if she works at home. Martine needs a business milieu as a framework to be effective and achieve.



## In her own words:

“ I’ve known what I wanted and where I was heading ever since I started work, but recently I’ve been losing this sense of purpose. It’s the baby issue. I’ve always wanted to be a mum, but you keep saying ‘not yet’. The pace and excitement and rewards of successful work make you delay, and you push motherhood into the future. Then the permanent postponement creeps up on you, and you can’t escape the fact that time is ticking away.

If I didn’t have this commute every day – more than two debilitating hours on the train – there’d be far less stress, but I’m not someone who can work at home. I need a business environment to perform well, and I can’t think of giving up my promotion prospects now. I’ve invested too much in my career to squander it. If I lost the edge at this stage, it would make no sense of all my effort to date. Anyway, what with our house and mortgage payments, we’re heavily committed financially. I wish there were a solution – it shouldn’t have to be so hard. ”

But to be honest, I don’t know how I could even hope to get pregnant – I often arrive back home at 8pm or later, grab something from the freezer, stick it in the microwave, and crash out in front of the TV. I’m even beyond having a pleasant dinner and conversation with my husband. And by the time the weekend comes, I’m just a wreck!

# DREAD OF 'HOME ALONE': WORSE THAN BAD COMMUTE

## Flora – Company reporting, age 35

Employed by a large listed consumables company, and following her initial role as an auditor, Flora has developed specialist technical expertise in corporate reporting. With the current strong emphasis on compliance, her contribution is highly valued. While her role is essentially an HQ function, Flora does her work largely on her own. After a thorough review of drafts and checking data on the company server, she makes follow-up queries to colleagues by email or phone. Recently Flora has moved home to an outlying town to be near her partner's new medical practice, and she now faces a long, arduous commute to the office. She hates the journey, and given the nature of her job, her company has suggested that she does most of her work at home, dispensing with the trip except on days when the tasks require her to be in the office. But Flora gets lonely and phobic working at home, and she feels exposed by having to reveal this.



## In her own words:

“ This is so embarrassing – I feel really silly and deficient. My company is a great employer and absolutely appreciates me and what I do. While my work's critical from an organisational point of view, it's surprising how much of it I undertake on my own – for a lot of the time I work like a one-man-band, going over sensitive company information with a fine toothcomb.

I like working like that – more engaged with inanimate text and numbers than with people. Except there's a big 'but' – I don't like being on my own. I need people and activity around me. Even though I'm not sociable, I get very downbeat and anxious when I'm by myself. So work's an important channel for me – it's somewhere to go and to be in company five days a week when Rob, my husband, is working.

But now we've had to move – Rob's become a partner in this new clinic. It's a great opportunity for him, but it's so far away! It's really too demanding on me going back and forth to work each day. The company recognises the problem and couldn't be nicer or more supportive in suggesting that I work at home most days. It's completely feasible in terms of what I do and it makes perfect sense.

Except that I'm such a loser – I can't cope being alone all day. I've tried it a couple of times and got very distressed, phoning Rob all the time, in tears. So I'm still doing this ridiculous journey, and it's costing a fortune in fares, let alone the personal wear and tear. But I don't see an alternative, apart from maybe quitting and finding a job locally. I'm just someone who can't function on her own – I need a setting with other people. ”

# COMPANY PROPERTY SAVINGS: IMPACT ON HOME-LIFE

## Fred – IT sales, age 42

Hard-working Fred pulls his weight in IT sales, with a performance record that has stood him in good stead through boom and downturn. Marrying in his mid-thirties, he and his wife Yen bought an apartment, despite the high cost of housing in the congested city in which they live. Now they are gratified and continually delighted by their five year old son.

Recently, with the overall decline in market conditions, Fred's company has been looking to save on real estate. As his team's function is to be out and about selling – the more the better, they have all been declared 'home-workers', and no longer given workspace in the office. Instead, they're expected to do all their desk-work from home. But this impacts on Fred and Yen's home norms, and they see the basis on which their family life is structured as under threat.

## In his own words:

**“** I'm pretty pleased with how things have evolved. I've worked hard and been lucky – good job, supportive wife, and a comfortable apartment. But number one is Johnny, our son. His presence makes our family complete and endorses everything I've worked for. It's such a fulfilment knowing that we've produced the next generation. We're like a model family, with a harmonious home life and success in my job – at least we were until recently.

*My employer is a global company, and with the depressed market that everyone's facing, they've started to look at ways to cut costs. That's normal – we shouldn't be wasteful, and I respect their position. But there are reasonable savings and things that should be off limits, and in my view they've gone way too far.*

*The new company line is this: as the sales people are with customers a lot, they say that our space in the office isn't used enough, so they've removed desks from everyone in our team except the secretary. We're meant to do all our order documentation and processing, as well as calling,*



*from home. From the company's perspective it makes perfect sense – at least in theory. They save on real estate, they give sales people the strongest possible message that our job is out there to sell, and they tell us how supportive they're being by enabling us to avoid the travel into and out of the office. But who're they kidding and who's paying for what?*

*My apartment is as good as I could hope to have, given my position and the expensive city we live in. But it's hardly spacious. So while it's been the perfect haven for my family up till now, this new work regime is changing everything. It intrudes on our home world. We have to tell our son he can't play or do puzzles or draw at the table when I'm working at home. He has to be quiet. And my wife can't invite her friends to tea or other children to play. It's just not right or fair, and it's not what I've worked for.*

*I understand that this sort of policy started in Europe and the US. But from conversations I've had with colleagues over the years, I don't*

*think that employees with young families are that different wherever they live, whether their homes are bigger or smaller. As far as I'm concerned, expecting me to work at home is an unreasonable imposition.*

*The irony is that my brother is envious of my situation. With his son being 16 years old, he would welcome it if he had to work at home, so he could use it as an opportunity to oversee my nephew's school-work and help ensure that he gets the best grades to secure a university place.*

*But that's just another angle to prove my point. Family life is so important and we want the best for our children – at every stage. Right now Yen and I want our child to continue to live in a happy home, with the freedom to talk and play when he wants to.* **”**

# LARGE, CONSOLIDATED OFFICE:

## MAGNIFIES DISTANCE FROM HOME

### Charlotte – Insurance, age 46

Charlotte works for an insurance company with a strong sales focus on employee wellbeing. It encourages its corporate clients to take proactive steps in reducing workplace stress. Her role is to identify management measures for clients to offer their staff in order to optimise work performance. Most of Charlotte's work involves reviewing company HR data, recommending appropriate strategies and sourcing potential programmes. Ironically, since her own father has become ill and frail, Charlotte finds herself in the precise position she aims to avoid for her clients' employees – a sense of impossible conflict between her professional role and her role as a daughter.

### In her own words:

“ My situation is so ironic, you couldn't make it up if you tried. There I am spending my weekdays trying to help companies ensure that their people manage the respective demands of work and family, while in my own life I'm shovelling water out of the boat almost as fast as it's sinking.

*At the heart of it is my dad. He's been a great father and we've always got on really well. He was very active till his late 70s, doing volunteer work in our local hospital, but things started unravelling a few years ago. Now that he's frail, weak and essentially housebound, he's also isolated socially.*

*But he's feisty at heart, and still very independent-minded – the very last thing he wants is to enter a care home. Nor should he. As long as the day is broken up, he can get by acceptably until the evening. I live close by, so popping in after work isn't a problem, and the weekends are easy – I'm very available then. I'm not suggesting that he's demanding. He just needs some contact during the day – to see that he has his medication without muddling*



*it up, to have a fresh hot drink, and a little chat to punctuate the long stretch between morning and evening. And I think I should do this; in my family, there's still a strong ethos that the senior generation is important, that elders should be cherished.*

*So what's the problem? Everyone has a lunch hour and my company is good about that – it doesn't just pay lip service to people's employment contracts. It's considered fine to take a break and do your errands or whatever. But the office is just too far from where we live. Like many 'back offices' of insurance companies, it's based out of town, and though we live at roughly equal distance between the office and the city, it's in another direction from where we live – the wrong spoke of the wheel! So my journey between home and work is orbital. I drive, and even though there are fewer hold-ups at midday than in the morning or evening peaks, it would take me more than my lunch hour to drive there and back, without counting time with dad.*

*If only I could go to work closer to where we live, but of course the business doesn't revolve round me. Before the company consolidated all its operations on one big site, there used to be local or branch offices, and you could work in a different one if the main office was problematic for you.*

*There are big disadvantages from the staff point of view that they don't consider when they create these mega-offices. It makes for long journeys to work for so many people – I know that I'm not the only person with issues at home. At the same time, being at work is so important to me – the contrast that the work environment offers me from home and my dad. It gives me the energy and support I need to meet my other responsibilities well, let alone the self-esteem and money. I can't face the thought of having to quit, but it may be forced on me if I have to choose between my work and putting my dad into a home. He'll come first. I owe it to him.* ”

# TORN BETWEEN:

## OFFICE BUZZ AND AILING SPOUSE

### Richard – Manager of a consumables company, age 53

Richard has talent and valuable experience in product positioning. His colleagues respect his skill and frequently use him as a sounding board and mentor. Richard's company supports remote working, mostly for its people in sales, although experienced employees in other functions can also work at home if they're trusted to be productive. Richard blossoms in the workplace environment, but his wife has a degenerative condition, and they have moved to a village because it offers a gentler environment than the inner city setting where they lived before. Travel to the office is manageable, but it's far, and since his wife lost her local friends when they moved, she copes better when Richard is in easy reach.



### In his own words:

“Work’s a major part of my life – the stimulus and the sense I get that colleagues value me. The satisfaction is huge. My background has given me a different way of looking at things, and this often sparks a useful angle for our team, suggesting a point of entry into a market situation or a way of developing it. I guess it’s also my experience that counts – something the younger people in the company just don’t have. So I have this guru-like role – and I make a positive difference to lots of business pitches.

But that’s just part of the picture: there’s also my wife. She’s got this cruel illness, which is why we moved from the bustle of the city. She’s wonderful and tries to cope, but there’s no question that she flags when I leave for the office. The difficulty is that while the team’s

buzz buoys me up when I am there, another part of me feels guilty that I am out of range for her. It all worked better before, when she knew I could pop back home if she needed me, without full scale disruption to my work. But now we’ve moved, this isn’t feasible. The situation drags us both down. When I go into the office, she puts on a brave face, but I know that she suffers, and my own mood and focus become clouded by guilt and concern.

So I stay home some days, on the understanding that I’m working. But working at home just isn’t the same. I see the things she struggles to do, and so I do them for her. In the end, what I’m really doing is keeping my BlackBerry on so people can find me if they get in touch, but I’m not really engaging proactively or developing ideas. In fact, I’m hardly working, and I feel like a fraud. If only the office weren’t so far from home! ”

# MORE LIVEABLE LIVES:

## MORE PRODUCTIVE OPERATIONS

### Can life be more sustainable?

The extensive geographic scale of global cities and metropolitan areas is at the heart of many people's struggle to align their work and home commitments. Against this backdrop, what can employers do to make employees' lives more sustainable and productive?

#### Embrace the use of technology

Technology's contribution to work-life alignment lies in its scope to uncouple work from fixed place and time. There are benefits from enabling people to work without travelling in to their workplace when appropriate, and to work outside the core business day.

Where this is not an accepted workstyle already, introducing and promoting remote working is likely to require HR

and management support – developing strategies, processes and protocols to manage staff who are not always in sight, and formulating performance objectives and targets instead of relying on on-site presence – itself no measure of employees' output in any event.

#### Promote the business benefits of collegiality

At the same time, company synergy matters. There are many corporate benefits that flow from employee interaction in a workplace – easy transfer of knowledge and information, mentorship, solidarity, sense-checking, corporate identity and esprit. A total *laissez faire* approach to remote working can frustrate these benefits, especially where people are working in isolation at any venue at their disposal or of their individual choice. Ensuring that workers are easily available for, and exposed to, engagement with business colleagues offers business value.

#### Recognise workers' needs for a workplace context

Many people have strong reasons to work at a workplace, even when their tasks could be accomplished elsewhere. They want a workplace for its stimulus, its implicit messages of professionalism and being 'at work', for the resources it offers, for face-to-

face contact with a range of other people, talents and skills, for sociability and the change of scene from home.

Many people also need a workplace because their homes are not suited to working – they may be physically constrained, appropriated by other members of the household, and / or prone to distraction.

Working at home suits many people for occasional or limited periods, with the emphasis on 'sometimes', while for some working at home will never be the answer. Large numbers of employees want and need a workplace to go to.

#### Addressing work-family harmony

Peoples' need for workplaces – and workers' needs to meet family commitments without undue stress – highlight key issues at the heart of work-life harmony. The starting point is recognising that work and care responsibilities don't mix. Anyone who has tried to do both at once – attending to a child on the odd day because of illness or because childcare arrangements have fallen through – knows that work and care are distinct. The conflicts between the two should not be brushed aside by the contemporary view that working at home is a simply a matter of 'trust'. Turning a blind eye does not resolve the incompatibility.



### **Promoting liveable lives**

A key to sustainable living and working is narrowing the physical distance between the workplace and employees' domestic and family realms. Current distances are challenging – because of the scale of global cities, with their magnetic pull as employment bases that reach far into their metropolitan hinterlands. Real estate trends are another factor, especially the consolidation of local offices in large single buildings and campuses, often in lower rental locations away from the city core. The inevitable result for many workers is a long commute. The problem isn't work versus home – rather it is getting to the office and home again in reasonable time.

### **Property versus people considerations: rethinking costs**

The corporate real estate drive to unify and consolidate in large HQ-type facilities has many merits. Relocation and streamlining corporate services can offer big financial savings, whilst the scale of large office complexes justifies the provision of attractive support facilities, and the overall package projects a strong and visible corporate image. But these apparent property successes also involve big burdens for many staff, and these impacts tend to be suppressed.

They are eclipsed in business case evaluations, and they are especially hidden following the implementation of major property projects, when everyone who has participated in delivering them seeks to focus on their success. Yet the negative impact of long distances between home and work take their toll, day in and day out.

This is particularly significant because staff costs far outweigh property costs over a building's accounting period. It is therefore short-sighted not to recognise the burdensome 'people issues' involved in lengthy commuting, the associated role strain, and the resultant negative impacts on employee wellbeing and productivity.

### **AN office versus THE office: reducing distance, expanding choice**

Recognising common employee predicaments puts the focus on the HR aspects of corporate real estate. It points to a more distributed network of work venues – professional workplace environments, more local to people's homes – that employees can use for some of the time at least. A network of office environments at local scale, to complement THE office, and with scope to connect to the corporate hub, offers a strategic response.

### **Leveraging technology**

Technology is at the heart of contemporary business transformation, facilitating new alignments between work modes and lifestyles. However, the factors that impinge on living and working, wellbeing and productivity give rise to conditions that cannot be addressed by technology alone, nor by an 'either-or' approach to the office and home as workplace alternatives.

### **Reducing distance: more sustainable, productive lives**

There is real value to be achieved from strategies that ease the transition between employees' work and personal spheres, whilst recognising their distinction. A shift to more distributed work venues, in parallel with corporate centres, will facilitate employee performance, promote more sustainable operations and lifestyles, and position organisations effectively relative to their competitors and peers.

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