

COVID-19, workplace and changing behaviour

Women Economic Network, October 2020
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In partnership with



Cabinet Office





A bit about myself and this short talk

- Senior Research Advisor at the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT)
- Two core principles of BIT



Using behavioral science to improve policy making - putting individuals and their behaviours at the centre of policy design



Robustly evaluate interventions using randomised controlled trials



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Are you currently working from home?

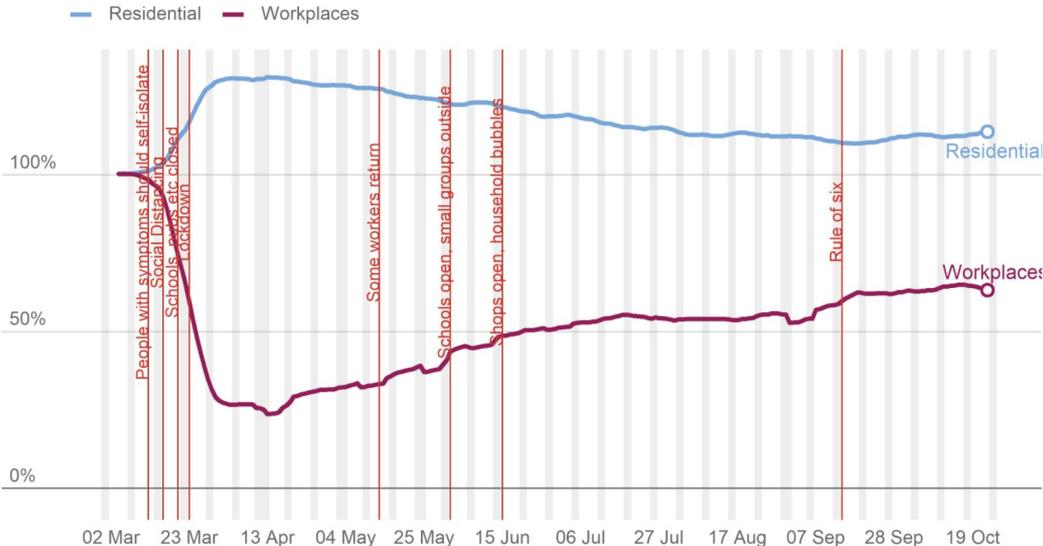
Coronavirus has changed the dynamics of the world of work



- Suddenly introduced new health risks and job insecurity for many
- Pushed firms and workers to facilitate remote working en masse

Working from home in London

Google activity metrics compared to baseline (7 day rolling mean average)



Compared to last year, overall the UK:

Movements in residential areas is still +12%

Movements in workplace areas is still -35%

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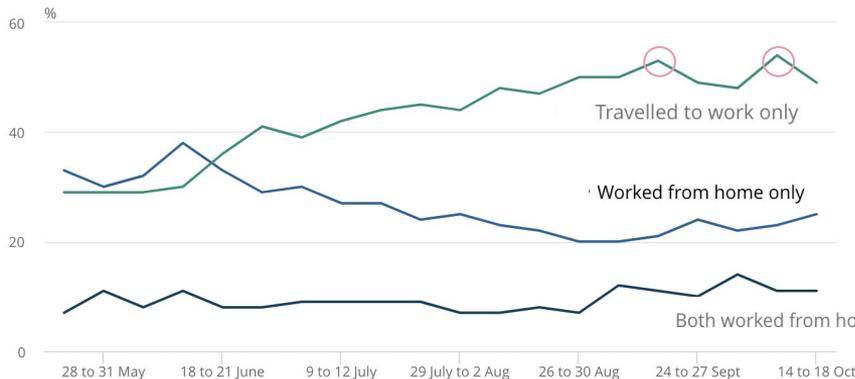
- Suddenly introduced new health risks and job insecurity for many
- Pushed firms and workers to facilitate remote working en masse
- Generated a raft of challenges (communication, wellbeing), but also potential benefits such as wider acceptance of flexible working
- Will these changes be permanent?





Will these patterns hold in a post-COVID-19 world?

- In the post-lockdown phase can give us some insights
- Employers were willing to embrace new norms
 - ~7 out of 10 CEOs said they will **downsize their office space** and that they will continue to build on their use of digital collaboration and communication tools (KPMG, August 2020)
 - Office attendance in the UK in August was around **18% of pre-lockdown measures** (HUQ, August 2020)

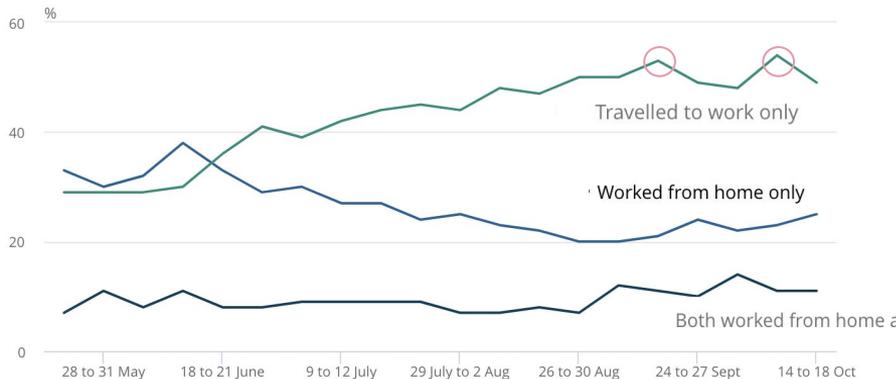


○ Peaks in % employed people travelling to work are not higher than 55% (ONS)



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Did you resume the same old commuting to work patterns?



These behaviours are likely to sticky

- Disruptions, shocks to the usual way of doing things can result in step changes in behaviour





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- This capitalises on pre-existing taste (and demand) for working from home

Would you like to work more from home, compared to pre-covid, if you had the chance to do it?





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- Disruptions, shocks to the usual way of doing things can result in step changes in behaviour
- Covid has seen us hardwiring in a new normal: hardware and practice is likely to help
- This capitalises on pre-existing taste (and demand) for working from home
 - Pre-crisis, moving towards a 2-day a week norm would have felt quite radical
 - Now, that seems like a minor shift
 - Moving the point of comparison might help us anchor on a new normal.



However, flexibility carries some risks

- Before the crisis, women were carrying out the majority of unpaid care work at home
- Studies found that both men and women have been working more flexibly, but according to IFS study, mothers were working fewer paid hours than fathers during lockdown
- Women were also much more likely to be interrupted during their working hours than men since the COVID-19 measures
- Illustration of this in recent reports in academia of women's' submissions to journals plummeting and those from men going up by 50%

This matters - and so it is important to design sustainable flexibility into organisations



- A large share of the gender pay gap is explained by the disproportionate uptake of flexible/ part-time working among women

And so it is important to design sustainable flexibility into organisations:

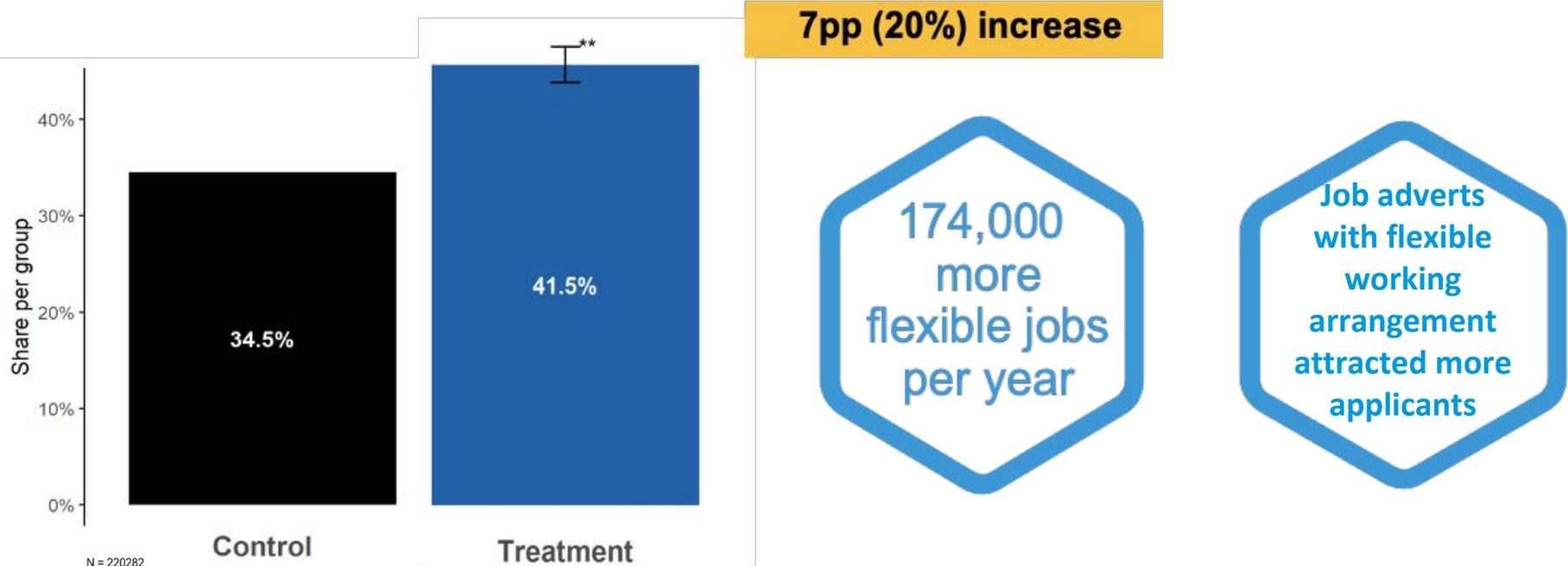
- Decouples flexible working from associations with ‘just something mums do’
- Reduces stigmas related to being ‘less committed’ or ‘unusual’
- Gives individuals autonomy/control over flex - on their terms too
- The more we normalise it for everyone, the easier it will be for men and women to benefit from flex work
- Doesn’t confuse flex work with ‘working all the time’ - because of impacts on mental health and family life

Using behavioural nudges to design sustainable flexibility into organisations

- **BIT and Government Equalities Office:** the Gender & Behavioural Insights Programme (GABI)

Using behavioural nudges to design sustainable flexibility into organisations

- We run an experiment with a major UK job site nudging employers to offer more flexible working



N = 220282

** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1



Humans are bad at making predictions

- Behavioural science can give us some insights on human behaviour that can help us thinking about what the future may look like
- However, it also reminds us that humans are bad at making predictions:
 - We pay more attention to threats than treats (negativity bias)
 - We are often overconfident and pay more attention to evidence that favours our views (confirmation bias)
 - We overweight the likelihood of a rare event when it is described to us in the news (for example), but we underweight the likelihood of a rare event once we have experienced it
 - We guess the likelihood of events based on examples immediately available to us (availability heuristics)