

State of the Art Review

Future trends in rural work: remote and hybrid working

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Non-technical abstract

New **digital ways of working create both opportunities and challenges for rural businesses**. Workers can experience increased autonomy and flexibility while working from home; however, **remote working** can also increase inequalities and create unequal access to benefits. Digitalisation is changing corporate cultures and moving communication online. Although this threatens workplace relationships, online communication networks offer several advantages. However, rural businesses do not currently take full advantage of these. Notably, poor **digital connectivity** in rural areas threatens the rise of remote and hybrid working.

Remote working also threatens **rural workers' mental health**. However, if rural business leaders implement appropriate strategies, home working could benefit rural workers' long-term well-being. Managers should implement various changes to minimise the harms of remote working and maximise its benefits. These may involve changing workplace practices, increasing engagement with external actors, and introducing new ways of supporting rural workers.

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has rapidly shaped the future of work in the UK, popularising remote and hybrid working practices. Hybrid work rose to 28% during the initial lockdown, and remote work spiked at 31.5%, stabilising at 16% by January 2023. Rural enterprises, a significant part of the UK economy, confront challenges in adopting digitalisation and remote working practices. These challenges include:

- Taking advantage of the **flexibility** remote and hybrid work offer, while ensuring **fairness** for staff and minimising impacts on existing inequalities in the workforce.
- Overcoming barriers to digital **connectivity** and embracing **online communication**.
- Enabling **work-life balance** and **supporting mental health and well-being** for remote workers.

This NICRE State of the Art Review explores evidence on future trends in remote and hybrid working for rural enterprises. Findings suggest that leaders should encourage work-life balance discussions, consider flexitime implementation, and support digital skill development to optimise remote work benefits for rural enterprise. They should foster informal communication networks for knowledge transfer, adapt business culture to new work models, and assess the value of co-working spaces. These strategies aim to address challenges, promote employee well-being, and enhance productivity in remote and hybrid working environments.

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused lasting changes to the nature of work. In the UK, national lockdowns forced many people to work online for the first time, causing a surge in **remote and hybrid working**. Data from the Understanding Society Survey shows that in February 2020, only 5.7% of the UK's population worked remotely; this rose to an average of 31.5% during the first national lockdown (Taylor et al., 2021). In January 2023, this number had fallen to 16%, but 28% of people now reported hybrid working (ONS, 2023).

Rural businesses are vital to the UK economy and, contrary to common notions of agriculture's dominance, rural sectors are equally as diverse as urban businesses. However, policy approaches to managing rural and urban economies vary significantly. Rural businesses face unique challenges; for example, they are more likely to face recruitment and taxation problems than urban businesses (Phillipson et al., 2019). Rural businesses also experience specific **challenges related to the digitalisation of work and new remote working practices**. There has been a historical lack of digital connectivity in rural areas and limited digital skills, resulting in rural digital exclusion (Warren, 2007). Indeed, rural firms are more likely than urban firms to face broadband problems as a major barrier to digitalisation (Wishart and Roper, 2021).

However, **digitalisation offers rural businesses new opportunities**, for example, in information flow, e-commerce, and knowledge transfer (Tiwasing et al., 2022). If successfully implemented, new digital working practices can help businesses to achieve

sustainable growth (Ferrari et al., 2022). Therefore, rural entrepreneurs must consider how to take advantage of new ways of working while mitigating the associated challenges and risks.

Evidence

Flexibility and Fairness

Working online **increases employee autonomy and trust between employees and managers** (Taylor et al., 2021). It also allows a more flexible approach to where employees live and work. However, many rural homes experience **limited digital connectivity**; nearly 60% do not have 4G (House of Commons Library, 2020). Furthermore, rural demographics pose challenges. Many rural areas have high populations of older people, who often have poor digital literacy and may struggle to use the technology necessary to work remotely (Currie et al., 2021).

Remote working is also impacting **inequalities within the workforce**. Fathers have been able to spend more time with their children, improving many mothers' work-life balance (Taylor et al., 2021). However, hybrid working can also reinforce traditional gender roles by forcing mothers to spend time on housework and childcare while working (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). Furthermore, some workers may have more access to remote and hybrid working than others – some jobs cannot be done from home, and some workers do not have the space or technology at home to work remotely. This can cause unequal access to benefits and tensions between employees.

Culture and Communications

Communication is vital for rural enterprises and increasingly occurs through digital channels such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. However, **digital connectivity problems** threaten the rise of remote and hybrid working in rural areas. Despite significant investments in advanced broadband and technology, 42% of rural firms, compared to 31% of urban firms, state that broadband problems prevent them from adopting digital technologies (Wishart and Roper, 2021). Alongside exacerbating inequalities, this makes communication between employees, collaborators and customers more difficult and can harm business success. Indeed, the quality of telecommunications infrastructure is correlated with economic performance in many rural areas (Frontier Economics, 2014).

Digital working has changed **corporate culture** and reduced informal communications between colleagues, which can be especially important for trainees, interns, and junior colleagues (Taylor et al., 2021). Remote working can also cause managers to be overbearing and micromanage their subordinates (Wheatley, 2017). However, rural businesses are often unaware of the many advantages of **online communication**. For example, social networks such as LinkedIn allow businesses to overcome geographical remoteness and connect with customers, suppliers, trade associations, and government entities. They also allow colleagues to connect in new virtual ways, changing, but not necessarily harming, workplace social relationships. Social media networks have been shown to positively impact small rural businesses' sales performances in the US (Jones et al., 2015). Despite this, rural businesses engage less with social networking sites than urban businesses (Tiwasing, 2021).

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Online working creates opportunities for a better **work-life balance** by reducing commuting times and costs and allowing workers to spend more time with their families (Taylor et al., 2021). However, working from home has made it hard for many workers to switch off, leading to work encroaching on their home lives, termed 'work extensification' (Hassard and Morris, 2021).

Furthermore, new ways of working have reduced socialisation among workers, which can increase isolation – already a risk factor for **poor mental health** in rural areas (Kelly et al., 2019). 40% of respondents to a survey by Taylor et al. (2021) stated that their mental health had deteriorated after working from home. 37% also said their physical health had suffered, possibly due to the sedentary lifestyle associated with home working. Employees were also more likely to work when unwell. Despite these challenges, rural firms deliver less mental health support than urban businesses and are less likely to have a mental health plan or a mental health and well-being lead at the board level (Wishart and Roper, 2022).

Final overview

Evidence suggests that to address challenges while maximising remote working's benefits, rural enterprise leaders should:

- Help employees manage their **work-life balance** by discussing working hours and technology use.
- Consider implementing **flexitime** alongside remote working. Flexitime has been shown to enable a more egalitarian division of labour, especially among lower-paid occupations, possibly because it maximises households' income and working hours (Chung and Booker, 2022).
- Support **digital skill development** through peer learning and targeted courses on digital literacy (Hill et al., 2021). Managers could also work with non-governmental actors who provide rural digital support; for example, Google Garage and Amazon Academy have supported digital development in small rural Welsh enterprises (Henderson, 2020).
- Develop informal communication networks to foster knowledge transfer, such as **buddy systems** and **mentoring schemes** for new employees. Managers should carefully consider the value of in-person and online activities when onboarding new employees (Taylor et al., 2021).
- Allow their **business culture** to evolve and reflect new ways of working. Effectively managing flexible working may require jobs to be redesigned to focus on outputs rather than inputs or the specific timing of work (Wheatley, 2017).
- Consider the value of **co-working spaces** for remote workers. They can reduce the isolated nature of working from home, create a sense of community, and increase social proximity (Merrell et al., 2022).

Moving forward, researchers should assess the impact of remote working practices on marginalised groups in rural areas, who may face specific barriers and challenges. Studies should also investigate how to support the mental health of rural enterprise workers;



delivering adequate mental health services is increasingly vital as new ways of working lead to 'work extensification'.

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