



# SMARTER WORKING BOOSTED BY AN INJECTION OF INTEREST AND PACE

**To say that the past six months have been an interesting time for anyone involved in the Civil Service's smarter working programme would be an extreme understatement.**

Few would have opted for a prolonged period of enforced remote working as their preferred way of accelerating the adoption of certain smarter working practices. Yet here we are, with many civil servants having returned to their offices, some having been there throughout and others continuing to work from home, waiting to see how those same practices will translate into a new way of working.

"It would be a mistake to think we've cracked it; that having done remarkably well for six months, we've now changed how we work and that everything is fantastic," says Dom Brankin, Workplace Services Director at the Government Property Agency (GPA). "Covid-19 and enforced working from home have driven a change in behaviours but not necessarily a change in thinking. As a result, we've still got work to do in the leadership and culture space, encouraging people to think beyond the physical constraints of a workplace, recognising the value of working differently and putting a higher premium on managing by outcomes, rather than by presence."

"Smarter working can't ever just be about bricks or mortar or wires. It's about providing people with autonomy and choice, allowing them to gain more control over the impact work has on their lives. You do that by giving them access to a variety of places to work and ways of working, encouraging them to select the right one for them, for that piece of work, at that point in time."



## Choices, choices

Autonomy and choice are two words that come up a lot in conversations about smarter working. Enforced remote working has certainly given civil servants a taste of how it feels to work more autonomously. However, the element of choice has been almost completely absent during that time. As more choices now become available, the way they're perceived is clearly something that's preying on Dom's mind as office workers prepare to return.

"I do worry about this becoming a debate about working at home or in an office," he explains. "That could be really unhelpful as it's not a binary debate where people are expected to choose just one side. I've seen it previously with other elements of smarter working. Start introducing open plan spaces or office furniture designed to improve collaboration, for example, and people can interpret this as meaning they can never use a meeting room again. The introduction of one doesn't actually spell the end for the other."

"As more people return to the workplace, we have an opportunity to strike a different balance between working in an office, at home or in another remote location. That could potentially be a better balance than what we had before. But we do need to help people understand that this is not a case of the pendulum now swinging the other way entirely, moving us from one extreme to another."

## A mixed bag

In some ways, the smarter working programme has had a 'good' lockdown. Fears around productivity fell away, meetings became more inclusive and technology investments were accelerated. But, in other ways, it's been tough. GPA research shows that, for some, working from home has been a difficult and uncomfortable experience. Some leaders and managers also appear to have had a far less positive experience than their teams. There's a danger that these negative memories may permanently colour people's views of what smarter working is.

Naturally, as some challenges recede, others emerge. Think about recruitment, for example, and how tomorrow's leaders may need very different skills to get the most from a diverse and dispersed workforce that demands to work more flexibly. More immediately, there's also a growing need to help today's leaders as they try to performance manage and support increasingly remote teams.

Before these can be overcome though, there's the small matter of making sure that people involved in all aspects of public service can work in the environment best suited to them and their work.



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## Time to return

The recent GPA survey of 25,000 civil servants showed that – thinking about the future - the most popular preference was for a 3:2 split; either three days in the office and two remote or vice versa. Enabling more people to be able to return to a healthy and safe workplace will likely have been music to the ears of those who Dom knows have found enforced home working to be far from ideal.

“Pushing past the media noise and rhetoric,” he says, “what we have is a very considered approach to managing our transition to a new hybrid working model in a sustainable way, making sure we benefit from the lessons learned during lockdown. People typically don’t feel their productivity has suffered as a result of working remotely, so being away from the office may well be the best choice for focused, individual work. However, the office is emerging as people’s preferred location for connection, community, collaboration and creativity. This may well be how our future world of work begins to take shape.”

## Time to talk

Research and evidence play a big part in the GPA’s future plans, with Dom keen on “data-rich conversations”, particularly with leaders, about the benefits of working more flexibly. Insights are now available into what mattered most to people while working remotely, how supported they felt, the issues they encountered and what would have improved their experience. All of this is being rolled into more meaningful conversations about the value of working smarter and more flexibly and how to manage some of the major risks, such as feeling less connected to colleagues and teams.

Looking ahead, the importance of smarter working to the delivery of Civil Service reform remains undimmed, feeding into plans around regional growth, government hubs, the Whitehall Campus and the delivery of a Brilliant Civil Service. There’s little doubt though that lockdown has given it a boost, sparking more interest in what the workplace of the future might be.

Dom concludes, “If you think about it, the way in which we work hadn’t really changed much since Victorian times. People travelled to a location, did their job, turned around and went home again. Organisations are now looking for new ways to release people from that, helping them be as productive and flexible as possible. Covid-19 merely compressed what might otherwise have been a long period of chin-stroking and thinking about where to go next – so expect to see a lot more happening in this space off the back of what has been an injection of interest and pace.”

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Dom has been Workplace Services Director at the Government Property Agency since January 2019, having joined from the Department of Health and Social Care. His thirty year career as a civil servant has been dominated by large scale customer services and change management, mainly in welfare delivery.