

Point of view: "BACK TO THE OFFICE!"... but why?

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"You have to get back to the office, the city centres are suffering and they need your money to support the businesses there, the economy is going to collapse if you don't so you should do it because it's for the greater good... and ... THEY'RE GOING TO REPLACE YOUR JOBS! (but also let's not tax large tech companies)" - generic public messaging

So, first things first. I am completely open to debate on the subject. It is massively complex, and I wholeheartedly admit that I am no expert in this area. In fact, I *invite* knowledge, so have at it!

Here's how I see it: over the last three decades, we've seen the demise of the town centre high street, due in part to the rise of online purchasing, exacerbated by a reduction in time spent locally due to everyday Jane and Joe's commuting into the city hubs for work, increasing the need for convenience and mass adoption of online delivery services (after all nobody wants to travel on a commuter train with bags of shopping). We've seen a continual decrease in manufacturing, opting instead to buy cheaper abroad and then import and export those goods and we've seen more and more focus directed towards the stock markets as a view of our country's global value, leading to a decrease in high paying local jobs and a hyper focus on elitist city hubs with jobs that focus on finance and tech.

Then, BAM! A global pandemic changes the face of societies all over the world and we are forced to reflect not only on how to deal with it in the moment, but to address the realities of our current systems. For months, we have been bombarded with hyper-stressful messaging, conflicting strategies, and uncertainty in

addressing new ways of ensuring health and hygiene as we gradually return to some form of normality. Now though, we are being asked to U-turn and ignore the emotional trauma caused, in order to preserve and return to "the way things were".

Now I don't know about you but this new fear-mongering feels like the UK government is desperately trying to maintain a system that works for the few but continues to exploit lower paid workers, and lets down a wide proportion of the UK.

As I see it, the current system sees money and employment that *should* be spread around the country, instead funnelled into these bubbles of economic activity, which use low paid workers to prop up the value of stock market giants by *literally* funnelling people towards them. Millions of individuals spend hundreds of pounds a month to travel into the cities, to a job (that many can do remotely) in a posh and expensive office, only to spend their pocket change in the numerous chain cafes and restaurants, generating mass profit for CEO's and shareholders across the world; very rarely does this revenue return to our local economy because we have set up a tax system that allows companies of scale, to avoid paying their fair share.

The reality is that the increase in footfall doesn't benefit the many, it benefits the few. If you're a worker at a Costa, Byron, Starbucks, Cote or any other chain business, you get paid the same (often low) wage per hour, regardless of whether you serve 1 or 1000 people a day. This makes it very hard for those people to earn enough to contribute meaningfully to the local economy because all earned income usually pays for the travel to actually get to work or if they've opted to live nearby, for the extortionate rent needed to afford the roof over their heads (the property market is another beast that just doesn't make sense in today's model but maybe that's for a different time).

All the while, our towns and regions see less and less economic stimulus and employment opportunity, instead becoming themselves commuter links that again point towards the cities, despite the damage that this can do to individual and family expenses. The focus of our economy is built around the idea of perpetual global economic growth, at the expense of the individual's quality of life.

So, what's the fix?

Well, as companies have realised, a large proportion of their workforce is able to work remotely. This can have a wide range of benefits to both the individual but the local economy too. I myself spend £300 a month less purely by not travelling into London, freeing me up to spend that in local retail parks, towns and local businesses. It also saves me two hours a day on a train which frees up more *actual* time to spend in these places, increasing once again the footfall locally. This would see an increased revenue in local areas, boosting the ability to re-invest in our communities, re-open youth

centres, provide local amenities and support the NHS and social services.

At this point I hear my own contradictory brain shout "yes that's all well and good for those people who *already* have jobs in established companies that can afford to pay remote workers, but what about those that don't fit that description?".

Great point! I also think this is a good time to move focus away from city centres and rebuild regional economies by moving into renewable energy as a predominant employment industry. Not only do we know that global warming is one of the most pressing issues of our time, but from a purely pragmatic standpoint, that future would provide our energy needs. It sees the opportunity to re-train a population to service hundreds of thousands of more evenly spread high paying jobs around the country AND increases and supports our manufacturing and construction industries across the nation. There is a need to rebuild the infrastructure *everywhere*. This provides so many employment opportunities across the widest range of skill sets and is not restricted to the specialist roles of the city centre. It is also not something that completely requires us to stop being a financial powerhouse. It just means that the markets will have to adapt to our principles and priorities as a country (i.e., we look after the individual as well as the global picture), instead of adapting our principles to fit whatever will make it look like we have more money on a global scale.

What about some of the contrary arguments?

1. **What about those that don't want to work from home?** - well with the increase in shared-working spaces, "the office" can

become a flexible concept; teams could opt to travel fewer times to a booked location, fitted with the tech they need to host meetings and work, or choose to work as individuals themselves in communal environments, socialising with others from around the area. Remote working does not need to mean "home working". On top of that, digital tools are enabling teams to work together around the globe perfectly well... so maybe it's time to explore ways to adapt and to improve our access to technology and broadband.

2. **If you work remotely your company will outsource your role to a different, cheaper country** - will they? Since when does remote mean un-skilled? And is this not something that can be legislated against, so that UK companies hire UK based employees? If anything, it means that you as an individual could apply for relevant roles in areas that aren't normally accessible for you based on where you live. Work for a company in the North, spend your income locally in the West.
3. **What about those jobs that will be lost?** - change is always a challenge, but that doesn't mean it's not worth doing. As I've already pointed out, a change in focus can bring about a lot of opportunity for people to get new careers, jobs and education.
4. **But that's not how our economy works** - if we have seen anything over the last half decade, it's that economies are fluid and they are based purely on the priorities of those making decisions. If there was ever a natural time to explore new, reformed, potentially radical views on our economic

strategy, it would be now amongst the Covid/Brexit era of uncertainty.

There are also other benefits, it would also increase property and development potential around the rest of the country which would bring a better, more balanced quality of life for a larger proportion of the UK by reinvesting in local developments, local initiatives and bringing balance to a housing market by reinvigorating areas of the country that have seen a loss in employment and lacking modernisation over the years. Imagine seaside towns, reinvigorated by harnessing the coastal winds to reduce energy costs while increasing energy consumption, improving their access to high speed broadband and allowing property prices to increase as they get an all year round economic boost from becoming a popular choice for remote workers to live and spend their money - instead of solely relying on the seasonal rush to the beaches and shutting up shop for the rest of the year.

Tax the largest companies more, legislate to prevent UK companies from international outsourcing, increase manufacturing and development of renewable resource, allow our towns to become mini-economic hubs again by reducing the need for employees to travel and encourage local spending instead. This focus on the stock market puts more people at risk of returning to a system that doesn't work for all.

Are there things that I haven't considered? Oh, for certain; but this is the time to discuss and explore new ways of supporting society, and I welcome the views and solutions proposed by others.

I'll spare you the detail on my more radical thoughts on combining Universal Basic Income with seven day work weeks, combined also with

job sharing – it's basically non-stop 100% company output and productivity, where each job is shared by two people for 3.5 days a week, doubling the employment opportunities while freeing up 3.5 days a week per person to either work an additional "passion" career, or to actually enjoy their additional time with families and friends. Would it work?

As I said, I'm open to debate. The thing that's clear is that we need a way of life that focuses less on "the grind" and more on achieving an equitable balance for all.

Why should we go back to "the office"?