Let's talk about the climate impact of remote work

US startup Watershed has developed an online calculator enabling companies to estimate if remote working will reduce or increase their emissions and by how much. The firm's model is based on New York City, San Francisco, Houston, Toronto and London, and offers a figure based on the number of staff, where they live, how they get to work and office size. Shopify and Stripe are among Watershed's client base.

COVID-19 vaccinations will drive a return to offices for many employees, but companies including _PwC_ and _Ford_ have already announced that remote working will remain a permanent policy change. This introduces a new challenge for companies as they manage energy consumption ahead of environmental targets. Will employers have a responsibility to supervise their workers' home energy setup, or could this approach only complicate the work/life balance?

Remote consumption

With employees all under one roof, businesses can procure renewable energy and manage its consumption. When working remotely, however, employees might not have access to renewable alternatives. Additionally, the inefficiency of home heating systems compared to office buildings could be especially problematic in the _winter months_ as the former are commonly designed to heat the entire house.

Addressing the problem

Companies will have to consider these issues as they work towards climate goals, sparking questions about whether employers can have a say over home energy consumption. Businesses have already begun installing monitoring software on remote devices to ensure _regulatory compliance_ – could it be extended to monitor energy usage? Zapier – a fully remote working firm – uses carbon offsets to manage its footprint but this approach could be seen as _lacking_ direct action in the long run.

What about the reduction in commuting

An employer's duty of care does not legally extend to commuting, however, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, responsibility has become more _apparent_ as managers are expected to protect staff and prevent the virus from spreading.

Tools are already being developed to assist businesses with this. Startup _Hip_, for example, has secured $12M for its commuting platform equipped with contact tracing and optimised travel routes. It is not too far-fetched to suggest sustainable travel options and alternatives could be integrated with platforms for when employees want to commute. Research conducted by _Mobilityways_ revealed that 42% of commuters could walk or cycle to work and another 92% could share journeys, though it's unlikely these figures will ever be reached in practice.

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