

Has the shine gone off remote working in the not-for-profit sector?

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Organisations across the country are considering and planning for a return to the workplace, with many weighing up the options of continuing with remote working. There has been media coverage recently about some of the bigger companies, particularly tech giants such as Facebook, allowing employees to work remotely once the pandemic is over and, in certain circumstances, letting employees move to offices in different global locations. *But what about smaller organisations, specifically those in the not-for-profit sector? Does remote working really work or has it lost some of its earlier shine?*

There's no doubt that given the speed at which the country locked down, there was an impressive pivot to remote working, and it worked well. Early signs across all sectors showed little negative impact on productivity, in some cases levels were up. Employment engagement worked reasonably well across various virtual platforms, such as Zoom and Teams. Signals pointed to remote working as being the future of working in many ways.

And for organisations in the not-for-profit and charity sectors, the initial fear that the pandemic would impact donations did not necessarily come true; albeit not for all. According to a report in the US, a record \$471 billion was donated to charities in 2020¹. Here in Ireland, donations from private and corporate donors almost doubled in 2020² but this does not take away from a plethora of organisations in the community, charity and not-for-profit sector who have experienced significant financial challenges and who will continue to experience these challenges where State support schemes will be withdrawn.

But now well over a year on, what role does remote working have in the sector?

There have been various employee surveys done that clearly highlight that flexible working arrangements and remote working are things that employees are seeking in an employer. Therefore, employers need to carefully consider these models in any retention or recruitment policies. We also know that organisations in the not-for-profit sector are not simply "commercial" entities; they thrive on collaboration and innovation. Clarity of purpose and vision are also crucially important to maintain enthusiasm and engagement and effective delivery of their objectives. Remote working in the long term doesn't offer a real solution to any of this. However, hybrid working models or the idea of regional remote working hubs could be looked at for employees in the sector – helping to retain talent, encourage peer-to-peer collaboration while also offering the benefit of flexibility.

Organisations in the not-for-profit sector need to take time to look at the positive learnings from their individual experiences of remote working, talk to and share with peer organisations in their sectors, establish their objectives in terms of working models and then decide what best fits their needs as well as employees' needs.

¹ "Americans gave a record \$471 billion to charity in 2020" Fortune, 15th June 2021

<https://fortune.com/2021/06/15/americans-gave-a-record-471-billion-to-charity-in-2020-pandemic/>

² "Philanthropic donations almost doubled in 2020 in response to Covid-19", Irish Times, 31st December 2020

There is no right or wrong approach and no one organisation will have a clear roadmap at this point. But if employers and employees work together in the best interests of their shared vision for their own organisation, then they will shape a working model that works for them.

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