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Open Research Case Studies: Faculty of Business

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Open Research in Leeds Business School: Adapting Offices for the Future of Work with Matthew Davis

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What does 'open research' mean to you?

It entails making our research open source - easy to share and make accessible to others, whether it is quantitative or qualitative-based. For instance, making our analysis and software codes we devised

available. There is also the strong emphasis on research transparency (particularly through the practice of preregistration), collaboration across disciplines, and opening up the peer review process.

What are attitudes like towards open research in LUBS?



There is a recognition for the need to open up our research processes and mechanisms more, where open research is perceived positively among us based in LUBS. But we are still developing in this area, where I think there needs to be both greater awareness and training/education of the numerous practices associated with it and how they can help with specific methodologies and researchers' focusses. Conversations so far have been mainly around open access journal policies, particularly in regard to the annual REF and funder requirements. But I believe more is needed on specifics like making our data open source, for instance.

Project: Adapting Offices for the Future of Work

(Description from <https://business.leeds.ac.uk/research-wbrc/dir-record/research-projects/1836/adapting-offices-for-the-future-of-work>)

COVID-19 changed where we work. In 2019, 5% of the UK workforce worked mainly from home. This reached 44% in May 2020 and remained at 27% in July 2020 when lockdown restrictions eased (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Homeworking offers flexibility and work-life balance, but most products and services result from collaboration and discussion - work completion and performance are inherently social processes. Organizations must design offices, technologies and working practices that facilitate this social fabric. Businesses are planning for a return to the office and are adapting office space and work practices to retain benefits of remote working and support hybrid working.

One-size office design will not fit all and we cannot assume what solutions “will work”. Businesses are questioning how best to return to the office, how much space and what type of space to retain. This multidisciplinary project supports economic recovery via identifying effective office design and adaptation of work practices to maximise gains and minimise downsides from remote and hybrid working.

Research overview:

In this project we apply a socio-technical approach to:

- 1) Establish exemplars for design and operation of offices adaptable to COVID-19 constraints, remote and hybrid working;
- 2) Investigate how different office and work arrangements (e.g., hybrid working) impact social networks, workflow and performance by studying employees in adapted offices (via interviews, high-frequency diary study, social network analysis, building data);
- 3) Offer recommendations for supporting the transition of workers back into offices;
- 4) Develop an evidence base to guide office requirement planning.

Our project partners (WorldCC, Atkins, Leeds City Council, Coreus, Walker Morris, OneMedical Group) help us reach a range of industries and contribute data, advice and networks

This project was funded by the ESRC, under the UKRI, through the Rapid Responses to COVID call. It was multidiscipline, involving psychologists, information systems and civil engineering specialists, and involved collaboration with industry partners. Overall, the project was based predominantly here in LUBS. We also had this external steering group, led by local government officials and stakeholders based in engineering and architecture that helped shape the priorities for the research design.

Our main aim was to explore how office design was being adapted to cope with COVID restrictions, and derive outcomes that could help build on the measures already being undertaken, and propose new ones. For example, adaptation to hybrid working, new ways of physical working and the post-COVID work patterns, etc. So, we're looking to see what was changing around the physical space, the technologies and then the management practices as well. We also had another component, which was looking at what the impact of that change was on individual employees and managers. For example, psychological outcomes, performance outcomes, and so on.



Concerning methods, due to the multidisciplinary backdrop we utilised several. We conducted interviews with relevant experts along with employee-based interviews. We also carried out focus groups, industry workshops, employee surveys (more at a national level). We also did diary studies with a number of specific case study organisations where we asked people to fill in logs on what they were doing, rating their mood, etc. in relation to our research subject, twice a day for two week periods. We mapped people's patterns of interactions, and related that to mapping the physical configuration of office space.

What open research practices has the project used?

Collaboration:

As I've cited above, there was a twofold dimension to the collaboration element. One, was the multidiscipline incorporation across the academic setting, and two was the interactions and steering with external stakeholders. Concerning the first, it's more interesting and more rewarding, to do research along these lines. I love the fact you are challenged much more to think about and to explain your assumptions and your ways of working, where you mix and work with others who come in with their own knowledge, skills and perspectives. Genuinely, I think it opens up a greater toolbox to explore problems or phenomena.

Regarding external collaboration, these interactions were necessary in acquiring accurate knowledge on the subject we were exploring and in developing outcomes to enhance or improve office space efficiency. Without the relationships we established with industry partners, we wouldn't have that deeper data and the knowledge on current practices. Therefore, part-and-parcel of this was developing a high level of trust.

We did face some earlier challenges regarding data ownership from those partners contributing to the project, mainly from a legal, contractual perspective. We had to sift through and sort out detailed data ownership and sharing agreements. In the end we didn't have any real issues with our external partners, but we had to clearly outline/guarantee how we would

be storing the data, with whom we would share it, embargo provisions, and the dynamics in using it in publications from the project. Because trust was a huge part of this endeavour we made sure to carefully go through all the ethical aspects, so to be transparent and reassuring with partners. For instance, concerning interviewee data we clearly outlined we would anonymise the individuals and not identify the organisation they belonged to.

FAIR data (findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable):

We are currently still in the process of making the data collected open for others to access. Of course, certain areas have needed redacting given the ethical and anonymity provisions. We are creating deidentified and a cleaned version of our survey and diary data, where we intend to upload it to the Leeds repository. We had committed to looking into making the data FAIR in our original grant application; to share as much as we possibly could within the ethical scope of the project. Some of the data has been a struggle to anonymise and still make it viable to share with others, particularly the interview data. Because a lot of time and investment is needed for such (beyond the limited funding period) we took the choice to not share the more qualitative-procured data, but focus more on making those collected by quantitative means FAIR. It is a shame really, as we have some very valuable insights in the interview transcripts.

Open access and external engagement:

We published two interactive reports ([Report 1](#) and [Report 2](#)), that were very visual and designed for industry and manager audiences. Because they had played major roles in the project it was only right for us to share outcomes, and recommendations for practice(s). At a more fundamental level given the aim was the enhance office space usage, it is only natural we would share our findings and reports with these audiences. These reports are therefore open access, free for anyone to access, where we paid for the gold route open access. We also formatted them to make them more better-readable to others, for instance avoiding unnecessary academic jargon, in order to have that aspired impact.

On top of that we've been involved in public engagement dissemination, where we've done a quarterly public webinar (see seminar example below), to discuss the subject with those in industry, as well as other academics and policymakers, which were positively-received. We've also been involved with wider knowledge transfer network events to share outcomes, where recorded podcasts discussed emerging findings, themes we're seeing in the research, and also some discussions with industry stakeholders and project partners to share their [experiences](#).

We have been using panel sessions with industry members during the course of the project itself, trying to talk about how we translate the findings into practice, to test ideas and feed that back into the project. Last but not least we used blog posting as means of 'real time' research dissemination and discussion (example [here](#)). So, overall our approach has not been to complete the project and share our findings, but rather to have these discussions and try to create impact along the way. Generally, doing this helped the project immensely as it provided feedback as we went, allowing us to steer the project and try out new ideas, and helped us gauge more participants and build interest in what we were doing.



Experience with other open research practices

Social media

Twitter and LinkedIn have been major outlets for research dissemination. As mentioned above we have used webinars and online events during the course of the project, where we have made videos/recordings available on YouTube (see example below) Overall, in my experience LinkedIn is better compared to Twitter in terms of gaining academic-based feedback and discussion (see some examples [here](#)), whilst YouTube is good for wider exposure where people engage more in the comments sections on videos posted.

Open education

I've been involved in helping produce content for school visits to campus, like taster days. I was also involved in another research project (see YouTube video below) where we were gathering data within schools, so we're actively had school children involved in one of the participant groups.

There's another, ongoing project I'm involved in, linked to a funded [project](#) led by colleagues in the School of Design, where we're producing materials specifically for art galleries and museums like teacher packs to use with children. It's using various levels of online video resourcing and so on for public disseminations.



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Open Research in Business: The Archival Methods in Work and Employment project and Digital Futures at Work Research Centre (Digit) with Chris Forde

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What does open research mean to you?

The immediate thoughts I have is making research more widely and freely available, especially when it comes to publications and data open access. My interests and research experiences historically have been mostly around using secondary data - data that someone else has gathered and made available. For example, with my PhD research on work and employment, I extensively used secondary datasets, which had been deposited in the [UK Data Archive](#). Therefore, the needs and incentives for researchers making their data FAIR (findable, attainable, interoperable, reusable) have been invaluable for me. Coming from an economics, business and management research background, it's vital datasets like those relating to employment and work experiences are made available. Last but not least, and related to FAIR data, is the importance of reproducibility for open research.

“If you're adhering to open research ideas then these [publications and data] will be accessible to as wide an audience as possible, and any barriers like paywalls, etc., will be removed.”

Chris' open research experiences: The Archival Methods in work and employment research project

I am conducting a case study on archival research related to looking at the relationship between government and business, particularly employment agencies. With this there were key questions including how government(s) interact with big business and how does big business try to lobby and influence governments, particularly around changing regulations.

The source material has been freely available and open to research, where I've been using National Archives. There is a limit though, as the Archives have a 30-year limit restriction, so much of the material from the 1990s up to today are still off-limits to me, but there is a still a wide breadth of valuable information from before then.

Most of the material is not digitised, where I have to go and visit these sources in-person, where I am able to take pictures using phones or iPads - indeed, digitising this data so to make it more accessible and available to wider audiences and the research community is something I have been looking into.

From the Archives I've collated over 1100 photos of individual pages, covering government records, memos, reports, etc. between government departments about the relationship between those and private employment agency industries. I've done some coding and analysis myself to make sense of them, which I've provided in the paper produced so others can understand what I have done and how I reached the conclusions I did.

Open research practices used

I have not made the code or compiled datasets/overviews available, but these are things I would very much like to do. A key question is whether it would be worth making those 1100 samples and documents from the Archives available (through digitalising them). On the one hand, it would be easier to just provide the codebook(s) I've devised so to help interpret and pick through the data, as the data is already openly accessible at the Archives to anyone. However, as I mentioned most of the sources are not digitised, where people have to go and look at them in person, where doing such would make them much easier to get to access.

The corresponding article I mentioned earlier is also open access, published in the Labour and Industry journal: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10301763.2022.2158436>

There is also this blog, which I've created to detail the objectives and purpose of the project, as well to disseminate my findings: <https://business.leeds.ac.uk/research-ceric/direct-record/research-blog/2087/four-ways-that-archival-research-can-help-you-understand-the-past-present-and-future-of-work>

With this project and others there has been significant engagement with external stakeholders, particularly those related to employment agencies and employee representative bodies, where we gauge experiences and perspectives on the subjects we are addressing in research. Examples include the Trade Union Congress, Recruitment and Employment Confederation, and Acas. I've also interacted with the Department of Trade and Industry, so government agencies as well. These interactions are crucial for us to gain insights into relationships between government and businesses. Areas have included impacts of government policies on industry and businesses' lobbying on numerous governments in policymaking. We have also had extensive external collaborations and interactions as part of the Digital Futures.



Digital Futures at Work Research Centre (Digit)

“Our ESRC-funded research aims to increase understanding of how digital technologies are changing work and the implications for employers, workers, job seekers and governments.” - Digital Futures at Work Research Centre [website](#)

[Our research](#) aims to generate new knowledge about the benefits, opportunities, risks and challenges of these changes that is theoretically informed, empirically evidenced and policy relevant.

Through our research, events, publications and engagement with policymakers, commercial and third sector organisations, we aim to inform current debates about the future of work and develop a compelling, empirical basis for effective policy-making.

Research objectives:

1. Generate new knowledge to inform the development of an analytical framework around the concept of the ‘connected worker’ and the ‘connected economy’.
2. Maximise knowledge exchange and co-produced research with relevant communities.
3. Establish a new [Data Observatory](#) as a one-platform library of national and international resources for decision-makers connecting with UK Industrial Strategy and welfare policy.
4. Initiate an [Innovation Fund](#) providing financial support for new research initiatives and methodological approaches, enabling international exchanges and extensive dissemination.
5. Provide a strong career development programme for mid and early career researchers through mentoring and staff development, internships and summer schools.
6. Ensure the long-term sustainability of the centre by developing an MSc in People Analytics informed by Digit research.

Digit is a five-year project, which began in 2020, funded by the ESRC, and involves principally Leeds and Sussex universities, as well as a couple others. We are now starting to look into further funding from the ESRC to keep the centre functioning beyond 2025 and hopefully expand it. I am currently the deputy director for it, while we also have an advisory board that I sit on, which meets regularly to discuss work and the courses Digit is taking, and includes stakeholders from the ESRC and their data infrastructure team in particular. They are involved in ongoing conversations and webinars that we have around the research that’s being done as part of the centre. We also produce blogs and short commentaries about the various research projects going on here.

In terms of the webinars, we offer helpful insights for researchers here and those interested in out work. For instance, we had someone from the UK Data Services conducting a Q&A session where they talked about depositing data and some of the challenges it may present, like confidentiality and anonymity obligations.



Introducing the Digital Futures at Work Research Centre

screenshot from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNAzsze9iGY>

External collaboration and engagement

We work with loads of government departments, individual businesses and legal firms, drawing up case studies about how work is changing and how digital technologies are impacting work. We have also worked with the UK Data Service in exploring how all the information generated can be archived and made accessible to wider audiences. There are probably around 150 research projects which are ongoing as part of Digit, with many academic papers, policy briefings, reports and other documents being produced.

There is also the Digit Data Observatory, where we place some of the methodologies these projects use, the aforementioned blogs and short commentaries, and helpful links to various aspects of Digit. Making data and research open and FAIR is a vital component of Digit, after all we are funded by the ESRC with public money. Therefore, these interactions are not just to gauge accurate information as part of our research, but to also connect better with those with whom the research is studying, to feed back findings and recommendations, and try to help where we can. I consider it an ethical obligation on our part.

Often there is a tendency to just think about the academic audiences and to think about the sort of academic papers that might come out of a given project. But here at Digit we try to give more of an impetus on the longer, further-reaching policy impacts of the research and also trying to keep on top of developments which happened during the time of the centre as well. For example, there has been greater attention lately into exploring artificial intelligence

proliferation, like ChatGPT, where we have been exploring more the impacts and possible implications for businesses, engaging with stakeholders along the way to have conversations on such.

We have had a great deal of interest and engagement. In particular there, is a lot of interest in how technological developments, including AI, will impact the future of work. Naturally, the concerns and implications are many where industries and the government want to know more.

Naturally, there has also been a great deal of political interest, where we have presented various aspects of the research we have done to the UK Parliament. Workers' rights and employment trends are highly-politicised, especially in the run-up to elections, which will very much likely be the case in 2024 as we head into the general election.

Depositing data

When we started Digit nearly four years ago there wasn't a widespread recognition of many detailed requirements to deposit data, both quantitative and qualitative. The expectation would be that the data would be deposited from each of the projects in one central hub: the UK Data Service. I think as we've evolved, that's gradually become more widely-accepted, where we have been able to overcome challenges, where now a majority of data created under Digit is hosted there.

We are still tackling various issues in making the data open and FAIR including embargos, consent forms and statements, but we're working on a data management manual which we have shared with all those working under Digit. The purpose of this is to create consistency, by informing all researchers of the protocols. This has been supplemented with us discussing the manual, as well as generally questions and debates on data management in our webinars at the centre.

Impacts from the Covid-19 Pandemic

We had a launch meeting for the centre in January 2020, right before the pandemic hit. The pandemic itself has enhanced our research as it led to conversations and subsequent research into remote and hybrid working, with projects looking into arrangement experiences and how new post-Covid work patterns can be optimised.

More businesses have been trialling four-day working weeks, where there has been a lot of research by the centre examining productivity levels from such. We've also been looking more at online-based work, so using platforms like Teams and the overall impacts that has on productivity