

Seat-hogging laptop warriors are a threat to British businesses



As post-Budget cost pressures peak, tolerance for entitled cafe dwellers will plummet

Coffee shop squatters beware: the unhappy boss of your local cafe is about to make their feelings plain.

If big American conglomerate Starbucks is now cracking down on stingy laptop users (buy something or leave, it told customers last week), then that family-run cafe on the cusp of closing this year is definitely going to put its foot down.

The hospitality industry is angry about a spike in hiring costs post-Budget – and as pressures rise, tolerance for entitled customers will lower.

The working-from-home crowd especially are about to feel the brunt. If you're not buying anything, stop hogging the table and spoiling the ambience with those dull corporate video calls.

Frustration about home workers spending all day in cafes was starting to simmer even before the Budget really got small businesses riled up.

The owners of Fringe and Ginge in Canterbury, Kent, last year banned laptops, after getting fed up with some people buying one coffee all day and then asking staff to be quiet or turn the music off during their lengthy Zoom calls.

In Berkshire, the Milk and Bean cafe in Newbury and The Collective in Caversham followed suit some months later, both introducing a laptop ban during certain hours.

As well as costing money, table hoggers hunched over laptops “bring the vibe of the place down”, Milk and Bean's boss, Chris Chaplin, explained at the time. Many will be fed up with serving a room full of people staring at screens, having once had dreams of opening a convivial neighbourhood cafe.

There's nothing like a £25bn tax raid to sharpen the mind. Businesses wondering how they will survive this year will be far less patient with customers who they believe are taking advantage over the coming months.

High-earning home workers treating the cafe as their personal office just because they bought one £3 pain au chocolat four hours earlier will be shown the door. The majority of people would understand owners' reasoning.

When a visitor to Paris last year posted an angry rant on X about a cafe banning laptops, asking why it's fair “when it's perfectly fine to read a book for eight hours drinking just an espresso”, people leapt to the cafe's defence.

“It doesn't take a genius to know the answer,” came one of the many responses. “Just pay for a damn office space if earning a salary,” argued another.

Others pointed out that readers “don't speak at high volume to their book” and are highly unlikely to sit there for eight hours, while laptops use up power and wifi. “Stop whinging” was the gist of it.

It's in everyone's interest that these places don't go bust.

First, there is the community impact – going to read a book in a neighbourhood cafe can be the highlight of someone's day, but table-hogging home workers ruin the atmosphere and risk putting the cafe out of business.

Second, there is a wider economic burden. Last week, we learnt that the meagre growth that was eked out in November, when GDP edged up 0.1pc, was driven by hospitality. Food and beverage services – made up of pubs, bars, cafes and restaurants – grew by 1.6pc.

Businesses are not about to turn on their own customers and nor will they want to alienate home workers – there is a balance to be struck here.

But the cost pressure that companies are under this year means that there is about to be a big shift in attitude. It's time for hospitality to push back. This is now a laptop-free zone.

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