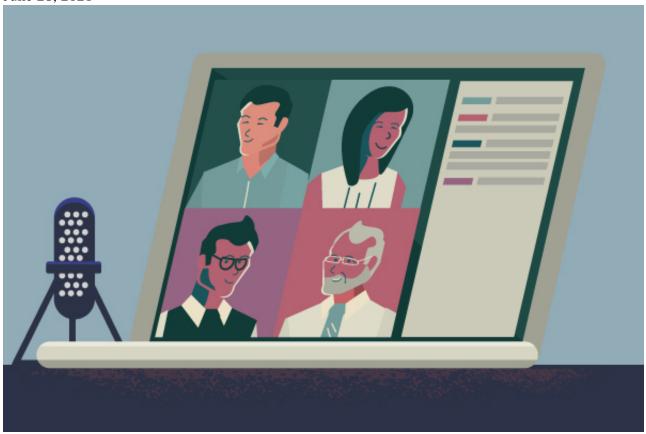# Reimagining Work After COVID

June 28, 2021

Let's face it, the past year of remote working—for those fortunate enough to be able to do so—hasn't always been all that #RemoteLife is hyped up to be. Unlike the merry bands of "digital nomads" known for cranking out code in sun-soaked tropical locations, the teleworker class of 2020 often found themselves hunched over kitchen tables or cradling infants on conference calls, with long stretches in which there was nowhere to go and no one to see safely outside of business hours.

These and other work-at-home realities caused symptoms of depression and anxiety to more than double compared to pre-pandemic levels in a sample of 178,885 Norwegian adults, according to new research published by Omid V. Ebrahimi and colleagues Asle Hoffart and Sverre Urnes Johnson (University of Oslo) in *Clinical Psychological Science*. Those who worked remotely and followed social distancing guidelines closely were harder hit psychologically than those who did not, either because they were required to work in person or simply chose not to follow recommendations, Ebrahimi and colleagues noted.

Learn about the 2021 APS Virtual Convention at psychologicalscience.org/convention

With vaccines increasingly available, however, parts of the world are starting to open up again, leaving employees and their employers to hash out what comes next. As the past year has laid bare, many office jobs can be done remotely. This "large-scale experiment" has brought about a shift in the narrative, said Ravi Gajendran, a professor of global leadership and management at Florida International University, turning remote work from an alternative arrangement or rare bonus benefit into a more mainstream offering. Gajendran spoke alongside a panel of industrial-organizational psychologists during "Reimagining Work After COVID," a discussion hosted as part of the 2021 APS Virtual Convention.

"The conversation seems to be shifting from 'Is remote work good or bad?' to 'How can we make remote work successful?" Gajendran said. "For the first time, employee preference for remote work and organizational preference for employees working remotely seem to be aligned—and that's good, because remote work offers many advantages."

Researching SMART work design

Just as the way we work is changing, the way researchers study work design needs to change too, said Sharon Parker, a professor of organizational behavior at Curtin University in Australia and another speaker on the APS Virtual Convention panel. Until recently, there have been two primary approaches to the way teleworking is studied.

Surveying surveillance

Through 2020 and into 2021, organizations have increased their use of surveillance software for tracking performance, even outside of conventional office settings. Surveillance methods can range from always-on webcams for remote office workers to GPS location tracking for Uber drivers and electronic proctoring of students during exams.

Another convention panelist, APS Fellow Tara Behrend, a professor of industrial-organizational psychology at Purdue University, addressed this topic. "Technology is changing the world of work. Specifically, the future will be characterized by omnipresent surveillance for many workers, especially for those with less control and power."

The effects of these potentially invasive practices can vary significantly, but people's perception of surveillance often depends on the methods used—that is, whether the tech aims to survey their behavior, body, or mind, Behrend said. Through a pair of pre and mid-pandemic surveys, Behrend and colleagues found that, on average, people thought surveillance of a person's body and mind—for example, measures of blood pressure or covert monitoring of emails between coworkers—was almost never acceptable (Ravid et al., 2020). Surveying individuals' behavior through audio or video recording was perceived as far more permissible, especially if it was done with informed consent.

This may be because these behaviors are viewed as occurring in a more public domain, regardless of where the work actually takes place.

"People are fairly sophisticated in thinking about when these things are acceptable and when they might not be," Behrend said. "It tells us that these fuzzy work and nonwork boundaries are really prominent in people's minds, and there isn't a distinction. Worker privacy will become a luxury unless it is regulated and protected."

The first approach tends to focus on work design as a moderator of performance. A study in this vein might examine how the intensity of remote work—how many days or hours of the work week are spent outside of the office—interacts with a job's characteristics to lead to certain outcomes. Examples of this kind of research would be studies concluding that remote work is successful only when the role of social support in a job is less relevant to performance.

The second traditional approach positions teleworking as mediator of performance. Examples of this kind of research would be studies concluding that more intense teleworking causes employees to perceive decreased social support, leading them to become emotionally exhausted with their work.

"Both of these perspectives make sense when remote working is for the chosen few, and mostly part-time," Parker said. "But of course during COVID, things changed completely, and we really had a very different situation where just about everybody who could was working from home, irrespective of personal choice or suitability of the task, and often under unusual conditions, without proper time to set up."

In terms of research on work design, this change led teleworking to become the context of labor rather than a variable associated with labor, shifting the focus from the question of which people or jobs are best suited to teleworking to how a job itself can become better suited to a remote environment.

In line with this trend, Parker and colleagues created a work design framework dubbed SMART, in which work that is Stimulating and encourages Mastery, Agency, and Relational contact while promoting Tolerable demands brings out the best in employees, both personally and professionally

(Parker et al., 2017). In a study of people working from home, Parker and colleagues found that low Agency due to increased employee monitoring, a lack of Stimulation in the form of work underload, and some demands that were not Tolerable (high work/home conflict, excessive workload) predicted increased distress among employees over a 12-week period (Knight, Parker, & Keller, 2021).

In another study of remote workers in China at the start of the pandemic, social support—a Relational aspect of work—was especially important in alleviating the challenges of home work and promoting better employee outcomes (Wang et al., 2021).

This research shows that the way work is designed when at home has a strong influence on employee well-being and job fulfillment.

"We've got to move away from this question of 'Should we have remote work or not?" and instead ask 'How do we design smart work in the office and at home?'" Parker said.

Who is good at remote working?

As APS Fellow Tammy Allen (University of South Florida), Timothy D. Golden (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), and Kristen Shockley (City University of New York) outlined in a 2015 study in _Psychological Science in the Public Interest_, working remotely can offer a range of benefits for employees. Telecommuting has been found to increase organizational commitment, productivity, and supervisor-rated task performance while decreasing absenteeism and work-related stress.

> _"The traditional office affords or supplies segregation between work and nonwork, while working from home places workers in a context of complete integration."_
>
> APS Fellow Tammy Allen (University of South Florida)

The most effective remote workers tend to be good at self-regulation, Allen and colleagues noted, which allows them to work efficiently without supervision and overcome the temptations of procrastination and cyberslacking.

"The traditional office affords or supplies segregation between work and nonwork, while working from home places workers in a context of complete integration," Allen, a professor of industrial-organizational psychology, said during the convention panel. "Neither of these are necessarily good or bad; it's more about the fit between individual preferences and what the context supplies."

Fortunately, Allen and colleagues noted in their article, existing research suggests that individuals tend to be pretty good at judging which work context works best for them.

In a 2015 study of 249 call center employees in China by Nicholas Bloom (Stanford University) and colleagues, for example, workers randomly assigned to telecommute were found to be 13% more productive, more satisfied with their work, and less likely to leave an organization than those in the office. After the experiment, only half of the home-based workers and one-third of the office workers elected to continue working remotely, but that self-selected sample was found to be twice as productive

when telecommuting was compared to the group of employees who had been randomly assigned to work from home.

What jobs are better for remote work?

Before the pandemic, teleworking was mainly reserved for highly educated "knowledge workers" in professional settings like banking and IT—but now, most people who can work from home have gotten a taste of teleworking, and many want to continue, Gajendran said.

Gajendran and Golden found in a 2018 study of 273 employees that the extent of time spent working remotely was linked to higher performance, especially among employees who rated their jobs as high in complexity and among those whose jobs could be performed largely independently of coworkers.

> **Automation and job security**
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> COVID-19 has highlighted numerous aspects of workplace culture that will continue to shape the way we work in the future—including the use of robots and other forms of automation, according to Kai Chi Sam Yam, a professor of management and organization at the National University of Singapore and recipient of an [APS Rising Star award](.).
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> "Automation has been the discussion for many years over the past decade, and COVID-19 has definitely accelerated this impact," said Yam, another convention panelist.
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> In a series of studies under revision of 185 U.S. metro areas, Yam and colleagues found that a rise in robot use within an urban region was associated with an increased perception of job insecurity, as reflected by greater activity on job-search websites without an uptick in unemployment in that area. In a related study of 118 engineers in India, Yam found that employees who reported higher robot adoption within their workplaces also reported more feelings of job insecurity and burnout.
>
> This suggests that concerns about automation can result in more negative workplace behaviors even when people's jobs aren't necessarily at risk.
>
> The media paint a pessimistic picture of automation, Yam said, but in reality, the challenges involved in making the requisite technological advances—developing a road-ready autonomous vehicle, for example—suggest it will be some time before the full effects of robotics are felt by workforces globally.
>
> "Use of robots is of course a hot topic, but I would say most workers don't need to be too worried about it over the next 5 or 10 years," he said. "This is not necessarily about advancement of technologies, but the neglect of other jobs that are created as a result of the advancement of technologies."

Not everyone enjoys working from home, of course. A quiet office can serve as a workday respite for employees with a hectic homelife; others have a strong preference for connecting with coworkers face-to-face. Even for individuals who can work from home effectively, the prospect of managing a hybrid

office raises new questions about how to strike the right balance between autonomy and coordination within an organization, Gajendran added. Beyond the question of who gets to (or has to) work remotely and how often, mainstream teleworking presents an opportunity to redefine what the office is for.

It's possible that the office could remain just another space for working, with no formal distinction between a workday spent at home or in the office, Gajendran explained. Alternatively, an organization that allows employees to work from home 2 or 3 days a week might designate office days for meetings, networking, and group work while reserving more independent tasks for deep-focus days at home.

Organizations that use a hybrid model may also have to consider how to counteract "face-time bias," which can lead in-office employees to be favored over equally productive remote workers for raises and promotions, in addition to finding new ways to structure processes like meetings so that all employees can participate.

How should we work remotely?

As the pandemic has proven, there are a number of tactics that anyone can use to help manage distractions while working from home, regardless of personal preference or job fit.

Establishing a routine that mimics the physical boundaries of a traditional workday, for example, can help remote workers maintain work/life boundaries while giving more structure to their day, Allen said. This might include getting dressed in office wear, working in a home office with a door (or at a desk or other area devoted to work), or even going for a walk as a kind of "fake commute"—in addition to going offline at the same time you would otherwise leave the office.

The social features of the home are also important: In a teleworking world, household members are the new coworkers, Allen noted, but although they may make for good company, they can also be a source of distractions throughout the workday.

In addition, the more people there are at home, the more there will be noise, interruptions, and other distractions throughout the day, all of which are associated with reduced productivity. And caretaking responsibilities present employees, and working women in particular, with the pressure to be constantly available to their children, aging parents, or other household members.

Working mothers have been hit especially hard by the pandemic, Allen said, which has highlighted the gender inequities associated with dependent care. Moving into the future, it is important to get serious about national-level supports for working families such as paid family and medical leave, paid sick leave, and affordable childcare that can benefit both remote and office workers.

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