

Healthier at Home

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Months after COVID-19 forced millions of people to begin working from home, politicians and pundits worldwide began to speculate that the pandemic would forever change how and where we work. We certainly wondered ourselves. As psychologists with full-time jobs in academia, we shifted our research and teaching online and quickly began to experience many of the benefits of telecommuting that psychological science has revealed (Allen et al., 2015).

Despite the fact that one of us, Lynne, has two young children, we have found more time for healthy activities, saved money, taken greater advantage of continuing education, and been more available to our students and families alike.

A number of possibilities exist as to why telecommuting improves job satisfaction, but control and autonomy seem to be central.

Amid this unprecedented experience, we set out to conduct a review exploring literature related to the benefits we and many other professionals have experienced because of telecommuting. In the pages that follow, we review physiological, psychological, and motivational factors; creativity; emotion regulation; job satisfaction; and productivity—primarily from the perspective of employees.

Physiological uplift

Maslow's hierarchy of needs proposed that humans must meet certain physiological needs (including sleep) before they will be motivated to seek higher-order needs (Maslow, 1943). A key advantage of remote work is the ability to sleep in, thus allocating more time to rest and recuperate. When we no longer have to commute, we can benefit from additional sleep, which can improve well-being (Hirshkowitz et al., 2015).

Moreover, because commuting can cause stress, remote work can reduce stress (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). For instance, long periods of driving induce the release of cortisol—a stress response that has been linked to high blood pressure (Antoun et al., 2017; Hoehner et al., 2012). Reducing the financial burdens associated with commuting, such as not having to pay for parking or gas, can also reduce stress and boost physiological health (Sinclair & Cheung, 2016). Moreover, people who telecommute experience significantly lower work-related stress and work exhaustion (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Golden, 2006; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). Some have proposed that the increase in autonomy when working from home is at least partially responsible for this reduction in stress (Duxbury & Halinski, 2014; Pink, 2009), a topic we will address later.

In addition to reducing stress, the flexibility of remote work may encourage employees to engage in healthier habits, such as by spending more time walking (Chakrabarti, 2018) or eating healthier (Allen et al., 2008).



Psychological positivity

More sleep, less stress, more time to exercise, and fewer opportunities to eat out can all lead to more positive mental health outcomes. Moreover, better emotional well-being and physical health can result from spending more time with family and having more disposable income (Johnson & Krueger, 2006; Pantell et al., 2013). Additionally, it appears that we can experience physical and psychological benefits even when we obtain social support virtually (Gilmour et al., 2020).

Further, working from home can remove some barriers that may cause psychological distress. With remote work, women may be able to manage morning sickness, for example, without having to take time off or share personal information with an immediate supervisor. This benefit would also apply to workers who are caregivers for sick or elderly relatives. And since caregiving responsibilities primarily fall on women (Sayer, 2016), this could increase equity related to employment, including, potentially, reducing the wage gap, especially if flexible scheduling allows women to work the same hours and perform at the same level as men. Individuals who are primary caretakers may be able to enter or return to the workforce more easily. Virtual meetings may also level the playing field in another way: The dominant voice is no longer the only one heard, so everyone can contribute, including minorities who may not feel as comfortable speaking in groups (Global Workplace Analytics, n.d.; Phillips et al., 2018; Walls & Hall, 2018).

Finally, remote work can improve mental health by limiting our time with toxic coworkers. This can decrease incidents of workplace bullying and perceptions of a hostile work environment (Høgh et al., 2021), especially for people with marginalized identities. For instance, employees of color, who are more likely to report a hostile work environment and experience microaggressions (Pitcan et al., 2018), may choose to limit or even eliminate their interactions with prejudiced coworkers. A related benefit is increased equity for members of minority religious groups. Jewish and Muslim employees are more likely than Christian employees to experience prejudice and discrimination in the workplace (Cantone & Wiener, 2017). Christianity is often cast as the “default” religion; whereas workplaces often close during Christmas, employees of other religions must request time off to celebrate religious holidays. The increased flexibility of remote work can allow employees to set their own hours and adjust for religious holidays without needing to request accommodations.

Relatedly, transgender employees often do not feel comfortable disclosing their gender identity at work, and many have reported experiences with prejudice at various stages of their career including the hiring process, navigating the workplace, and advancing through promotions (Fisher & Jónsdóttir, 2021). With remote work, transgender individuals can obtain greater autonomy in whether they disclose their gender identity to coworkers, including supervisors. Higher levels of autonomy, in turn, predict higher levels of job satisfaction (Liu et al., 2005).

Another benefit of remote work is associated with caring for children. When working at home, women may be able to nurse an infant or manage breast pumping more easily, for example. Further, working from home can reduce the amount of time children need to spend in childcare, reducing financial strain on parents. Because working from home may allow a more flexible workday (e.g., with one parent working from 5 a.m. – 1 p.m. and the other from 1 p.m. – 9 p.m.), it may be possible to reduce the number of days/hours that children spend in childcare settings, thus reducing the overall annual cost. Childcare can range from \$5,178 to \$20,125 annually in the United States (Child Care Aware of America, 2017). Easing that financial burden can decrease stress, giving employees more cognitive resources to focus on work and increase creativity/productivity. Further, having at least one parent

consistently present in the home can increase parent-child bonding and parental involvement, which predict healthier outcomes for children, such as healthier self-esteem, improved academic outcomes, higher empathy, and improved conflict resolution skills (Ahmad et al., 2018; Levine & Heller, 2011; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

Emotional calm

Kearns and colleagues (2000, 2012) found that most people derive psychosocial benefits from the home, such as having a sense of retreating from the world, being free to do what they want (autonomy/control), and being protected (security). Working from home means being able to control many aspects of where we work, from which room in the house to where we travel or live. Home can help us regulate emotions in three ways: Home is a flexible space that can easily be changed in ways that please all of our senses; the physical space or footprint of the home is stable and reliable because it doesn't change; and home is limited to a small number of people who can occupy that space (Graham et al., 2015).

Additionally, people like being in rooms with windows, which is often not possible in cubicle-filled office environments. Windows may provide micro-restorative opportunities throughout the day, especially if the views show natural elements rather than built structures, which can improve mood and well-being (Park et al., 2010; van den Berg et al., 2015). Seeing greenery is also associated with better memory performance and lower stress (Lega et al., 2021). And being in greenery has additional beneficial effects. For example, gardening can promote better mental health by improving our mood and reducing stress and cortisol levels (van den Berg & Custers, 2011). Arguably, the ability to open a window and take in some fresh air on nice days can also create a positive work environment, contributing to emotional well-being.



Job satisfaction

One well-documented advantage of telecommuting is that it improves job satisfaction (Bloom et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). A number of possibilities exist as to why, but control and autonomy seem to be central.

A meta-analysis of 485 studies indicated that poor job satisfaction predicted exhaustion tied to burnout, anxiety, depression, and poorer physical health outcomes (Faragher et al., 2013). Low work-related stress and high employee morale create a more positive working environment, increasing job satisfaction and decreasing sick days (Kaliski, 2007; Sudatta & Payal, 2016). Emotional well-being also plays a direct role in job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2020), which can increase motivation, productivity, and performance (Aziri, 2011).

Motivation and commitment

Telecommuters have higher levels of commitment to their organizations (Golden, 2006; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). Pink (2009) proposed that for employees to be intrinsically motivated, employers need to address three internal drives: autonomy (control), mastery (progress, or continual improvement), and purpose (feeling like a part of something bigger). Using tangible rewards and punishments does not increase intrinsic motivation (Ariely et al., 2009; Deci, 1971; Pink, 2009). But allowing employees to decide what they work on or where they work does. Autonomy and increased flexibility are both empowering and motivating. Working remotely can also lead to greater autonomy and flexibility, providing more freedom to choose how to approach problems without fear of being monitored or

micromanaged.

Remote working can also promote equity, which can increase motivation in marginalized groups. Employees of color have consistently reported lower job satisfaction and less favorable perceptions of equity in the workplace, both in academia and in applied fields (Ali, 2009; Dowler, 2005; Livingston, 2020). Greater equity could motivate employees to be more productive. Employees who perceive being treated more favorably than their co-workers tend to have higher levels of productivity, whereas those who perceive being treated less favorably are less productive, likely due to resentment (Bourdage et al., 2018). In contemporary North American culture, those who spend more time at the office are seen as more committed to their jobs and employers (Williams & Boushey, 2010). This benefits heterosexual men, as caretaking and household responsibilities fall more heavily on women (Sayer, 2016). Although time spent at work is used as a heuristic to estimate commitment, this does not take into account the actual amount of time spent working, quality of work, or productivity. With remote working, employees can be evaluated more on the quality of their work, increasing meritocracy and equity.

Similarly, working from home can weaken the “maternal wall” (Crosby et al., 2004), or the lower salaries and likelihood of promotion for mothers compared with women who do not have children. Women who are parents are also judged as less competent and less committed to work than men (regardless of parental status) or women with no children (Correll et al., 2007), reflecting assumptions that women who are parents prioritize family above career. Further, even women who are pregnant and not yet parents face prejudice and discrimination in the hiring process (Morgan et al., 2013) and in the workplace if they are already employed (Williams & Boushey, 2010). By helping women avoid disclosing their pregnant or parental status, working remotely can reduce biases in hiring, performance evaluations, and pay and promotion decisions.

Creativity and productivity

Remote work may foster creativity; autonomy is motivating and encourages more creative thinking (Pink, 2009).

Hunter (2018) proposed that even researchers in the life sciences have been able to work from home more and that, anecdotally, they are happier (due to better work-life balance) and that this greater flexibility in work arrangements has resulted in increased creativity at work. Positive moods foster greater creativity compared with negative moods, even if induced experimentally (Xiao et al., 2015).

Furthermore, working from home increases productivity (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Gajendran et al., 2015; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). Bloom (2014) reported that employees working from home answered 13.5% more phone calls than those who were in the office, demonstrating higher productivity in a measurable way. (Bloom and colleagues replicated this finding in 2015.) More recently, Choudhury and colleagues (2021) showed a 4% increase in productivity among U.S. Patent Office employees who worked from home. Barrero and colleagues (2020b) estimated that the pandemic significantly reduced U.S. commuting times and that at least one-third of this saved time has been allocated to work-related tasks.

In addition, two polls of remote workers during the pandemic showed that the vast majority (84.7% of

U.S. and 90% of Canadian workers) reported being equally or more productive than they had been before the pandemic, in their physical workplaces (Barrero et al., 2020a; Mehdi & Morissette, 2021). Of the Canadians reporting less productivity, 20% cited the additional burden of care responsibilities (for children or elderly parents) as the main reason (Mehdi & Morissette, 2021). This is primarily a pandemic effect, given that the children of working parents would typically be in school or daycare for at least part of the work week.

Additionally, remote work reduces absences, as many people who take a “sick day” are actually taking a day off to manage stress, care for sick children, or address other personal needs (Dionne & Dostie, 2007; Gibson et al., 2002; Global Workplace Analytics, n.d.; Stavrou, 2005). Further reducing absenteeism is the limited transmission of illnesses in workplaces and public transportation.

Conclusions

Having worked from home over the past year, we have personally experienced many of the benefits outlined in this paper. Lynne, as a mother to two young children, used asynchronous teaching to schedule her work around their needs, including online schooling schedules. Both of us have been able to schedule most of our work to match our availability, needing only to work around synchronous meetings.

The benefits of asynchronous work have also helped us prioritize self-care and mental health. We have been able to spend more time outdoors, get more exercise, find time to relax, and eat a healthier diet, thanks to more flexibility for meal planning. We have saved money and gained at least 2 hours each day by removing lengthy round-trip commutes. We have been far more productive and have attended more online professional development than we could have in person. Technological advancements allow for remote meetings, and we have found that the recording of these meetings also increases control, flexibility, and productivity. In some instances, online webinars, workshops, and meetings allow for multitasking such as cooking dinner and tuning in at the same time.

An additional benefit for academic instructors is greater availability for conversations with our students. We can schedule more virtual office hours than we could before the pandemic, when we were not on campus some days and lost time commuting.

Finally, we have found it psychologically calming to remain in the safety of our homes, especially in an increasingly unsure world.

We recognize that these benefits may not be available to everyone working from home, given wide variances in work requirements, personal dynamics, family responsibilities, and more. But as the pandemic recedes and life returns to “normal,” we believe that telecommuting and work-from-home arrangements should continue to be offered as long-term options to employees who can benefit—just as we have.

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