

Homework

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Abstract:

One can call it working at home or living at work; 2020 will be remembered for it. Here, the author offers a few data points associated with this recent lifestyle change based on recent survey results.

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Remote working is becoming mainstream (Figure 1).² Even after workplace conditions are deemed safer, a significant proportion of employees are likely to continue to work out of their homes.³ In a survey conducted by workforce solutions provider ManpowerGroup, most respondents expressed the desire to work no more than three days per week in their offices.⁴ Working remotely makes some feel that they are *living at work*.⁵

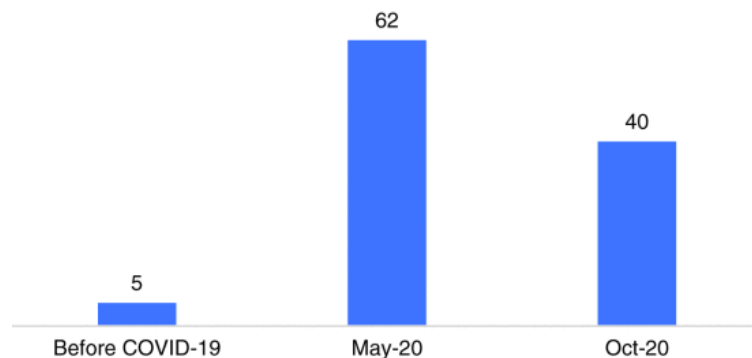


Figure 1. The percentage of the U.S. workforce that worked from home before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Data source: The Economist.²)

Survey results such as these may be encouraging companies to institutionalize remote working. A survey of 95 technology companies by T3 Advisors found that only 2% had a designated a person to oversee remote work in August 2020, which increased to 12% by November 2020.⁶ Companies such as Fujitsu and Twitter have announced plans to make remote working a permanent option.⁷ However, not all jobs can be performed remotely. In the United States, about

60% of workers cannot perform their jobs only by remote means. This proportion is more than 80–90% for lower-income economies.¹

In terms of productivity, employees who were forced into remote work are now working longer hours and performing more tasks.² A comparison of working patterns and working hours of 3.1 million workers in over 21,000 companies revealed that the average workday was 48.5 min longer during an eight-week period after the lockdowns in 2020 compared to an eight-week period before. Employees attended 13% more meetings and sent 1.4 more emails per day. The study, based on 16 cities in North America, Europe, and the Middle East, was published in a paper on the National Bureau of Economic Research website.⁸

In a survey conducted by Mercer, 94% of employers reported that productivity increased or at least remained unaffected by remote working.⁹ Factors that may have led productivity increases include 1) no commuting, 2) fewer distractions at home, 3) shorter lunch breaks, and 4) fewer sick days.⁷

Next, consider health and well-being. In a 2017 survey conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 41% of remote employees reported higher levels of stress compared with 25% working in the office.¹⁰ This finding has been confirmed in more recent studies. In a survey of 1,214 office remote workers conducted in April 2020 by Martec Group, the respondents reported declines in mental health, job motivation, and overall satisfaction with the job (and their employer). On a scale of 1–7, the proportions of workers who gave a rating of 6 or 7 (the highest two ratings) for mental health declined from the prepandemic level of 62% to 28% in April 2020. Likewise, compared to the prepandemic level, the proportion of workers giving the highest two ratings declined from 57% to 32% for job satisfaction, from 56% to 36% for job motivation, and from 55% to 22% for company satisfaction.¹¹

Even after workplace conditions are deemed safer, a significant proportion of employees are likely to continue to work out of their homes.

And finally, another negative effect is vanishing company culture.³ The lack of face-to-face interaction results in reduced employee collaboration, mentoring, and difficulty in employee performance evaluation. The final cost of this type of “homework” to workers, employers, and societies is to be determined.

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