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# Life After COVID-19: What if We Never go Back to the Office?

**Research Article**

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a substantial increase in the use of remote work for occupations where this modality is feasible. This paper speculates on the likely outcome of this unplanned experiment by asking what might happen if we never go back to the office. I predict that: (1) managers will find an adjustment to permanent remote work difficult, (2) some tasks will become increasingly difficult to perform, (3)female employees will suffer, (4) many employees will respond positively to doing away with the office, but this response will be far from universal, and (5) organizations will thrive, particularly organizations that are already rich and powerful.

**Keywords:** *COVID, remote work, manager, leadership, gender.*

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Psychologists and organizational researchers have long been interested in alternative working arrangements, and there is a robust research literature dealing with the range of issues that arise when office workers and others whose physical presence at the office is not always necessary switch to remote work (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Gajendran & Harrision, 2007). There is evidence that remote work can lead to higher levels of job satisfaction, better performance and reduced levels of stress (Anderson, Kaplan & Vega, 2015; Gajendran & Harrision, 2007; Golden, 2007; Golden & Veiga, 2005). On the other hand, remote work can lead to social isolation and work-family conflict (Golden, Veiga & Simsek, 2006; Morganson, Major, Oborn, Verive & Heelan, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unplanned experiment, forcing many organizations to move to remote working arrangements. To be sure, the increased use of remote work is limited to a subset of the workforce; many essential occupations (e.g., airline pilots, Gardai, retail) offer limited opportunities for remote work. However, for a significant portion of the workforce, working from home or some other remote location has become a fact of life, and it is not clear when or if this will change. For example, 40-60% of the American workforce has been working remotely (usually from home) some or all of the time since the COVID-19 outbreak.[1] Up to a third of the Irish workforce (depending on the sector of the economy) is working remotely[2], and a substantial majority of the Irish workforce would prefer to work remotely, at least part of the time.[3]

There are hopeful signs on many fronts of progress in controlling the pandemic, and it is possible that many workers might return to the office in the foreseeable future, but it possible that our experience with remote work may lead to long-term and sustained changes in the way some types of work are organized. The purpose of this paper is to consider some of the possible outcomes if we never go back to the office, making remote work the norm in some

1 *https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/never-go-back-office/611830/ , https://news.gallup.com/poll/306695/workers-discovering-affinity-remote-work.aspx*

2 *https://www.esri.ie/news/working-from-home-has-not-been-a-common-feature-of-employment-in-ireland*

3 *https://www.irishtimes.com/business/work/survey-finds-huge-appetite-for-remote-working-1.4326445*

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occupations and industries.

There are substantive arguments for doing away with “the office”. Creating a central place for employees to come and perform jobs that could plausibly be performed remotely is expensive for organizations and employees. It is extremely expensive to purchase or rent commercial buildings, and their maintenance is an ongoing expense. An employer who brings employees to the office will usually have to provide them with the tools to do their work (e.g., computers, computer networks, phone networks). Employees must bear the costs of commuting (these costs can be physical, psychological and financial), maintaining a wardrobe of work clothing, sometimes maintaining a separate residence to be near the workplace, and the demands of their schedules that most workplaces are likely to impose. It is far from clear that the benefits of bringing remote employees back to the office will exceed this cost.

We do not know whether or when remote employees will have the opportunity to go back to the office, or whether we might adopt a hybrid work system where some work is done in the office and some is done remotely but suppose that a substantial portion of the workforce does not go back to the office or spends minimal time in the office with remote work being the norm. I predict five specific consequences. First, managers will find the adjustment to permanent remote work difficult. Second, some tasks will become increasingly difficult to perform. Third, female employees will suffer. Fourth, many employees will respond positively to doing away with the office, but this response will be far from universal. Finally, organizations will thrive, particularly organizations that are already rich and powerful.

## MANAGERS WILL STRUGGLE

What is the job of a manager? There are many descriptions, but elements that are common to most include (1) planning and scheduling your subordinates’ work, (2) evaluating their performance and give them feedback, (3) provide the support and resources necessary for them to accomplish their key tasks, (4) coordinate the work of different individuals and groups, (5) coordinate and direct hiring, staffing and training. Some of these activities are likely to be challenging, if not entirely impossible (or irrelevant) if the workforce is remote. Remote work typically brings with it considerable flexibility in terms of planning and scheduling, and while there is value in giving someone the responsibility for making sure that tasks get accomplished in promptly, planning and scheduling is likely to be less important with a dispersed workforce. Other activities might continue to be important with an entirely remote workforce (e.g., hiring and staffing), but even in these cases, it is not clear that the manager of a particular department of workgroup will be the right person for the role.

Evaluating the performance of subordinates is traditionally a core task for managers, but evaluations may be more difficult with a remote workforce. First, managers are more likely to see products than processes, and the need for managerial evaluations of these products is not always completely clear. Most performance evaluation researchers advocate focusing on the behavior of employees rather than on the outcomes of these behaviors (e.g., Campbell, McCloy, Oppler & Sager, 1993; Campbell & Wiernik, 2015; Murphy, Cleveland & Hanscom, 2018 [i.e.)], in part because outcomes are often influenced by factors outside of the worker’s control. Performance Management systems in organizations typically call for frequent feedback (e.g., Aguinis, 2013; Pulakos, 2009), but if managers have few opportunities to observe or obtain useful information about what employees are doing (as opposed to what they deliver), there may be little basis for providing this feedback.

How might the behavior of employees change if it is not subject to evaluation? There are many possibilities, at least some of which may reflect office norms that are not part of task performance. Superficial norms, like dress codes may go by the wayside, but norms about helping others, taking on tasks that are not part of your job description may also change (i.e., Contextual Performance/Organizational Citizenship; Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Conway, 1996; Organ, 1988; Smith, Organ & Near, 1983). For example, there is evidence that organizational citizenship behaviors are most important when tasks are highly independent (Bachrach, Powell & Bendoly, 2006). These citizenship behaviors have often factored into performance evaluations (Werner, 1994; Whiting, Podsakoff & Pierce, 2008), but if these behaviors are not witnessed by or reported to supervisors, they may fall outside of the realm of evaluation. Suppose work changes so that it is more asynchronous. Will you be more or less willing to pitch in and help others if you have already completed your tasks and your co-worker is struggling? Will you even know when your co-workers are struggling?

A shift toward remote work is likely to change the nature of the employment relationship, in which employees become more like contractors, who are responsible for products, but not necessarily for processes. As employees become more autonomous, the basis for evaluating their performance and effectiveness is likely to change.

There is evidence that many companies are simplifying their performance appraisal and performance management systems.[4] It is likely to the elaborate systems that have been used for developing goals and evaluating progress toward their accomplishment will become less relevant, and sometimes impossible to implement, as the distance between the manager and the rest of the workforce becomes larger and more permanent.

Managers are not only there to coordinate and evaluate work. They are also charged with facilitating it. In a remote workforce, the resources that managers can bring to bear to facilitate work might be more limited than in a physical workplace. Elsewhere, I have argued that the end of the office might bring about the end of the boss.[5] Whether managers will go away entirely is an open question, but the permanent transition to a remote workforce is likely to change and diminish the manager's role, and this might be a difficult transition for people used to managing *in situ* workforces.

## SOME TASKS WILL GET HARDER

Over the last 40 years, it has become increasingly common for work to be performed in teams rather than by individuals (Salas, Goodwin & Burke, 2009). Traditionally, teams have worked together in face-to-face settings but in an organization where significant portions of the workforce are working remotely, virtual teams (often operating via software that allows for synchronous or asynchronous team meetings) are likely to replace these face-to-face teams.

Virtual teams have been the focus of a significant body of research (Gera, 2013; Sumita, Hill, Gibbs & Likoebe, 2019). These teams have several clear advantages to organizations and individuals, including enhanced flexibility and reduced cost. Nevertheless, it is often assumed that virtual teams are less likely to be effective than face-to-face teams, and there is evidence to support this assumption. Purvanova's (2014) analysis of the literature suggests face to face teams usually perform better and more efficiently than virtual teams, but that satisfaction with the team is sometimes higher in virtual than in more traditional teams. Purvanova (2014) has compiled evidence that virtual teams can be highly effective, citing notable examples such as the virtual team that created Boeing's SLICE rocket engine, but this analysis does not provide sufficient information to determine the circumstances under which virtual teams might be most effective.

One important difference between face-to-face and virtual teams is members of virtual teams are likely to spend less time together than members of face-to-face teams. Virtual meetings usually require scheduling and communications, whereas, members of face-to-face teams often work in the same location, making is more likely that they will interact. Teams vary substantially in terms of the degree to which their tasks require a high degree of interdependence (Courtright, Thurgood, Stewart & Pierotti, 2015), and it is likely that virtual teams are most likely to be effective in tasks requiring less immediate communication and interdependence.

Lockdowns, travel restrictions, social distancing rules and remote working can create significant barriers to performing important tasks, even tasks that are completed individually rather than in teams. These barriers to task completion have been identified a significant source of stress (Chong, Huang & Chang, 2020), and while some of these might resolve themselves once the pandemic subsides, organizations may decide that travel and face-to-face meetings are no longer necessary or justifiable. Tasks that have traditionally required this type of in-person interaction may have to be redesigned if a significant portion of the workforce works remotely. This suggests that employees may need to learn new ways of doing some of their tasks, and that task effectiveness will be limited at the early part of the learning curve.

*4 https://www.washingtonpost.com/road-to-recovery/2020/10/19/performance-reviews-changes-pandemic/*
*5 https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/1012/1170916-office-working-from-home-boss-manager-superviser/*

## WOMEN WILL SUFFER

The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on female employees. Women have overwhelmingly taken up the burden of homeschooling, and large numbers have dropped out of the workforce. “The pandemic recession has been dubbed a “she-session” because it has hurt women far worse than men”.[6] Job losses have been particularly high in retail, restaurants and home care (Byrne, Coates, Keenan & McIndoe-Calder, 2020), all female-dominated fields. Closing of child-care centers and home schooling have placed substantial burdens on women; up to 1/3 of US women who are unemployed cite childcare as the main reason.[7]

Even if the pandemic is resolved soon, women are substantially more likely than men to have gaps in their employment history. There are longstanding worldwide male-female gaps in employment and in hours worked (Landivar, 2015) and the pandemic is likely to widen these gaps. Gaps in employment have negative consequences for job applicants and incumbents, even when there are mitigating circumstances that explain them. [8] While allowances might be made for the unusual circumstances associated with the pandemic, when similarly situated applicants are considered, a male with no employment gap and a female with one, things are likely to go poorly for the female.

The closure of schools and childcare facilities is unlikely to be permanent, but the damage done to female employment and career progress is likely to be long-lasting. A reduction in face time at the office is likely to result in fewer promotions and pay raises for workers who are remote from the organization’s center of power (Charalampous, Grant, Tramontano & Michailidis, 2019), and bosses who have few opportunities to observe their subordinates in action are likely to be reluctant to offer them promotions or rewards.[9] Thus, remote work could freeze in place existing inequalities in male and female pay are promotion rates.

Some researchers have claimed that remote work could help to break down stereotypes about male and female work and nonwork roles (March & Munsson, 2008), but our experience with the pandemic suggests the opposite effect. The fact that the burden of home schooling and caring for children during the pandemic has fallen squarely on the shoulders of women is likely to reinforce and strengthen gender stereotypes. It is worth noting that even well before the pandemic, women working remotely were substantially more likely to have their work interrupted by childcare and home responsibilities (Crosbie & Moore, 2004), and a permanent move to remote work would likely make this disadvantage permanent as well.

Finally, the pandemic has sharpened the distinction between good jobs and bad jobs (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). During the pandemic, women have disproportionately held jobs that expose them to health risks by requiring them to interact with the public (essential jobs). There has been some speculation that the pandemic has increased the perceived status of these jobs, but it is also possible that people will conclude that the people who hold these jobs are more disposable and less important than people who hold jobs that allow them to be shielded from these risks. A permanent move away from the office could have the effect of hardening the rift between high and low-status jobs.

## EMPLOYEES WILL LOVE IT, EXCEPT WHEN THEY DON’T

Many people advocate never going back to the office[10] , and there is evidence that office workers generally prefer working at home, at least part of the time.[11] Academic researchers have documented higher levels of job satisfaction and job-related well-being among remote employees, but caution that remote work can make managing work-nonwork more difficult by making it harder to switch off (Felstead & Henseke, 2017).

While many workers have positive attitudes toward remote work, the impact of a permanent switch to remote work is likely to be different for younger vs. older and more experienced workers.[12] Workers who are nearing the end of their careers have less to worry about if remote work makes pay raised and promotions less likely; for younger

*6 https://www.washingtonpost.com/road-to-recovery/2020/11/06/women-workforce-jobs-report/*

*7 https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/11/18/business/us-economy-coronavirus?type=styln-live-updates&label=economy&index=1&action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage#for-women-the-economic-repercussions-from-the-pandemic-will-be-long-term*

*8 https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/how-to-evaluate-resume-employment-gaps.aspx*

*9 https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/05/20/telecommuting-is-not-future/*

*10 https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/never-go-back-office/611830/*

*11 https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-17/office-workers-want-to-keep-working-at-home-just-not-every-day*

*12 https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/10/career-costs-working-from-home/615472/*

workers, these trends could have very serious long-term implications.

To date, there have been few rigorous examinations of gender differences in attitudes toward remote work. On the whole, remote work has the potential to increase work-nonwork conflict for women, in large part because the boundaries between work and nonwork are increasingly unclear (Ibarra, Gillard & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020). There is every reason to believe that the pandemic has made a bad situation worse, and it is far from clear how women's attitudes toward work will be affected by their experiences during the last few months. It is at least plausible that even when schools and childcare facilities fully re-open, their sustained negative experience with remote work will influence some women's attitude toward the remote workplace.

## THE RICH WILL GET RICHER

The safest prediction in any crisis is that the rich will get richer, and organizations will probably benefit substantially from a large-scale shift toward remote work. First, they might be able to shed many of the costs of obtaining and maintaining a large office building or campus. Second, some employers may seek to reduce the pay of remote employees. For example, Facebook has its offices in Menlo Park, CA., a notoriously expensive locale. It has announced that employees who work remotely from less expensive areas can expect to see reductions in their pay, essentially canceling out the premium Facebook has been compelled to pay for employees to move to or near to Menlo Park.[13] As I have noted elsewhere [14], this policy has the insidious effect of penalizing employees every time they move to a less desirable neighborhood or city, which is hardly a foolproof method of building loyalty and commitment. Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, has even announced that employees who move to less expensive locales without notifying Facebook (and thereby receiving a salary reduction) will face stiff penalties.

One of the arguments in favor of bringing your workforce to an office is that both individuals and organizations benefit from interpersonal interactions and unplanned exchanges of ideas and information. The evidence for this proposition is far from compelling. Physical proximity does increase the probability of interacting with others (Waber, Magnolfi & Lindsay, 2014), but the evidence that unplanned interactions in the workplace lead to improved performance or to more effective organizations is spotty at best (Bernstein & Waber, 2019). Even if there is a benefit to organizations when employees are bought to a central location to work together, the cost-benefit ratio is unlikely to be favorable. Organizations that switch to remote work might expect higher levels of productivity and efficiency (Abrams, 2019), lower overhead costs, *and* lower labor costs. There may be some downsides, especially for employees who have to learn new ways to work or new ways to supervise the work of others, but it is the employees and managers who will experience these traumas, not the organization. Our ongoing month experiment with remote work may convince many employers that "the office" is a losing proposition, and that they can accomplish their strategic goals more easily and more cheaply with a remote workforce than a workforce where everyone returns to the office.

The pandemic has had a devasting effect on many businesses in Ireland, particularly small businesses.[15] Pubs are particularly likely to suffer[16], and the smaller one may never reopen. The businesses most likely to survive and even thrive in the current environment will probably have deep pockets, as well as the ability to provide needed services during lockdowns; Amazon will probably survive, but your local bookstore might not. It is reasonable to expect that the long process of consolidation in several sectors of the economy will accelerate, removing at least some of the competition with the well-heeled giants.

It is important to note that the rich getting richer is not always a zero-sum game. Employers, especially large ones, many see substantial savings in overhead and travel expenses as they shift to remote work, but employees also benefit in many ways. There are, for example, health, safety and economic benefits when you switch from commuting to work to working at home. In addition, employees may find that with fewer meetings and fewer distractions, they no longer need to spend as much time working to accomplish their key tasks.

*13 https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2020/05/22/could-paid-less-working-home-becomes-norm/*
*14 https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0527/1142847-lower-wages-no-promotions-working-from-home/*
*15 https://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/over-half-of-ireland-s-businesses-in-decline-following-covid-19-lockdowns-1.4319966*
*16 https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/most-pubs-will-close-for-good-if-lockdown-lasts-to-2021-vintners-say-1.4232877*

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Woody Allen once said, “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him about your plans”. The other way to make God laugh is to predict the future. Some of these predictions seem relatively safe: the smart money is usually bet on the rich and powerful to come out of crises well. Others are risker. It is possible for example, that the end of the office could also mean the end of the boss[17], but managers might prove resilient and might invent or develop new roles.

The large-scale adoption of remote work is likely to spur research on its effects. Three streams of research seem important. First, we need to look at organization-level effects of the shift to remote work. It is likely that some organizations thrive in this new environment and others struggle, but we at this point we know little about the organization-level effects of a shift to remote work or about the moderators of these effects. Do some organizations do well simply because their competitors go under or because the pandemic itself increases demand for their services (e.g., Amazon has done especially well during the pandemic because it makes it easier for people to shop without contact). Do the changes that remote work create contribute to or detract from an organization’s success. For example, organizations might be able to reduce overhead costs, but might suffer losses as a result of decreased creativity or unplanned interactions. How should we assess the mix of costs and benefits to organizations, especially costs that are speculative (e.g., presumed costs and losses incurred because employees are not interacting and exchanging idea and information). How should we evaluate the cost-benefit tradeoff for organizations, and how can we best estimate organization-level costs and benefits associated with remote work?

Second, there is a pressing need for research on organizational processes. How has the shift to remote work affected the way people and units within an organization interact? Does this shift have a meaningful impact on leadership and supervision? Which traditional organizational processes emerge from this change as truly necessary (e.g., interactions within interdependent groups) vs. disposable (business travel, meetings)? Most important, what can we learn from our experience with the pandemic about alternate ways of working, and will be willing and able to use that learning in rethinking how we organize work once the pandemic has subsided?

Third, how do these changes affect employees, their families and their communities, and what factors determine whether these changes are beneficial or harmful? For example, remote workers spend less time and money on commuting, which could yield benefits to health and safety as well as financial benefits. Even the shift away from business attire could have psychological benefits (e.g., increased comfort, less time and effort devoted to dressing for the office) as well as financial ones. In addition, many workers may often get more done in less time. On the other hand, the barriers between work and nonwork are likely to become increasingly permeable. Parents whose school-aged children now require supervision during the day may experience unique and serious forms of work-life imbalance. For many workers, the social isolation of working from home may be stressful. What is the mix of costs and benefits for workers who make the shift to more permanent remote work?

Finally, as noted earlier, dividing the world of work into traditional offices vs. remote work is an oversimplification. Schoolchildren in many countries are moving toward hybrid education, with some face-to face teaching and some remote learning, and many organizations might gravitate to similar hybrid models, with some time spent in the office and some spent working remotely. What determines the optimal mix of face-to-face vs. remote work, and optimal for whom?

The pandemic has created large-scale, unplanned field experiments in many organizations. There have been many challenges in responding to this pandemic, but this experience also offers a unique opportunity to ask fundamental questions about the way we structure and conceptualize work. Let’s hope we manage the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities these changes present.

*17 https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/1012/1170916-office-working-from-home-boss-manager-superviser/*

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