



# The future of work: The pandemic has changed how we labor; where do we go from here?

By **JERRY HAAR**

NOV 12, 2021 AT 8:04 AM



Sonya Barlow, left, CEO of Like Minded Females Network, talks during a meeting at White Mulberries, a coffee shop in London, Thursday, Sep. 2, 2021. Many young workers around the world have entered the workforce and begun their careers during the pandemic working entirely remotely. Like Minded Females Network is a social enterprise that helps young women set up businesses and other ventures, without the use of a fixed office space. (AP Photo/Urooba Jamal) (Urooba Jamal/AP)

The continuing pandemic has dramatically altered the nature of work — where, when and how we labor. And within this environment, it is “remote” work that has brought the most significant change.

There has always been a wide range of jobs that are “remote-intense” (for want of a better description), such as customer service representative, writer, web developer, coder, data analyst and graphic designer. However, the pandemic has forced companies to reconfigure work arrangements so that as many jobs as possible can be performed remotely. In some cases, the entire workforce may perform their jobs remotely, such as at Salesforce and Shopify; but for the most part it is only a portion of company employees.

There are 128 million full-time employees in the U.S.; 45% of them work remotely to some degree (20% fully remote, and 25% partially). For many employees who did not perform their duties as remote workers previously but do so now, the impacts of this arrangement have clearly been beneficial. Results of a Gartner survey reveal that 70% of employees wish to continue some form of remote work. Unfortunately, however, nearly 60% of firms reportedly operate without a remote work policy.

And why not work from home? There are many important advantages of working remotely. These include avoiding the stress of commuting, saving on gas expenses and child care, empowerment in managing one’s time (flexibility of hours and ability to take frequent short breaks) and the absence of distractions from an office setting. In essence, working remotely can yield work-life balance and in many instances greater productivity.

Be that as it may, the upsides of remote working must be tempered by the many downsides. A thorough review of the literature on organizational psychology and work performance cites distraction (such as young children at home who may have remote learning issues of their own), anxiety, loneliness and loss of work-life balance as some of the main drawbacks of working remotely. All this can lead to an increase in stress, which, in turn, can cause poor sleep and significant weight gain/loss. Additionally, remote workers invariably feel excluded from the on-site workforce and, therefore, may feel hampered in their quest for advancement within the company. For the firm, remote working means needing to find an effective way to onboard new employees, train them in new project management software and ensure cybersecurity, especially when remote employees work outside the home where public Wi-Fi can facilitate hacking.

It is also important to point out that for creative work, design thinking and team collaboration, working remotely in most cases is less effective than working on site. To provide a personal example: Years ago, while a student in Harvard’s advanced management program in health finance, one of my classes entailed a team competition to solve several major problems in financing and managing a major hospital’s expansion. As a member of a team of five, all experienced health care executives (except me; I was the kid), we had to decide how to approach the challenge, organize ourselves based on our individual strengths and experience, and quickly implement an action plan. We then worked collaboratively, diligently and creatively from 6 p.m. until 4 a.m. the following morning. (There were lots of doughnuts and power bars consumed, along with pots of coffee). Our team placed second among the eight teams. But our intensity, excitement, debate, and camaraderie were unmatched, and we all maintained contact long after the program ended. This wonderful, memorable experience could *never* have taken place remotely.

Is the choice then, working on site or working remotely? Or is there another option? Actually, “hybrid work” offers the best of both worlds and in the near term may well turn out to be the

preferred mode over fully remote or in-person work. In a large survey of workers, PwC found that nearly 20% of all employees would like to be fully remote today, an equal number in office, and 21% say the nature of their work does not allow them to work remotely at all.

Companies and individual workers need to adjust, then, to a tripartite model of work: on site, remote and hybrid. In the meantime, advocates of remote work need to curb their enthusiasm and realize that human interaction, face to face, remains the coin of the realm. It is just not possible to do happy hour with your hard drive.

---

*Jerry Haar (jerry.haar@fiu.edu) is a professor of business at Florida International University, a global fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., and a board member of the Commonwealth Institute and the World Trade Center Miami.*