
Transition back to the altered state of normal

A thought-provoking discussion on the limitations and benefits of work from home in the post-pandemic world.

Dr. Liz R. Scott, PHD, MENG, MBA, MSC, BSC, RN, COHN-S, CRSP, CDMP

Principal / CEO

Organizational Solutions Inc., Burlington, Ontario



Transition back to the altered state of normal

A thought-provoking discussion on the limitations and benefits of work from home in the post-pandemic world.



Dr. Liz R. Scott is the CEO and Principal of Organizational Solutions Inc., a leading workplace absence management firm.

The impact of COVID-19 on the traditional workplace has created a pivotal point in irreversible change. Quarantines, lockdowns, government and self-imposed isolation, fear, anxiety, and many other yet-to-be-realized factors have pushed tens of millions worldwide to work from home.

The level of financial and personal impact has partially depended on the answer to one fundamental question: Can I work from home, or am I tethered to my workplace?

Prior to COVID-19, employers and employees were experimenting with work from home. The pandemic has been accelerating this workplace experiment that struggled to gain traction before COVID-19 hit. The

research surrounding work from home pre-pandemic was beginning to identify the pros and cons. As we slowly emerge from the pandemic or learn to live with it, the plus and minus will continue to develop. This article will provide a thought-provoking discussion on the limitations and benefits of work from home.

The pandemic has accelerated the pre-pandemic evidence-based research on remote work.¹ One crucial element that must be considered is that not all jobs can be work from home, and there are societal impacts of this work environment divide.

¹ Lund, Madgavkar, Manyika, & Smit, 2020

Lund et al. (2020) performed an analysis that identified that approximately 20 percent of the workforce could work remotely three to five days a week as effectively as they could if working from an office. If remote work took hold at that level, that would mean three to four times as many people working from home than before the pandemic and would profoundly impact urban economies, transportation, and consumer spending, among other things.

We need to remember that more than half the workforce has little or no opportunity for remote work. Jobs that require collaborating with others, specialized machinery, jobs that can only be conducted in person like CT scans, surgeries, hands-on healthcare, restaurants, warehouses, much manufacturing, and in-person shopping must be done on location. Deliveries and some sales roles are performed while out and about. Some of the jobs that mandate in-person participation are low wages. The availability of remote work for only a portion of society creates a risk of



accentuating inequalities at a social level.² Several of the analysis found that the potential for remote work is very concentrated among highly-skilled, highly educated workers in a handful of industries, occupations, and geographies.

Company executives have indicated in surveys that hybrid models of remote work for some employees may be here to stay. The virus has broken through cultural and technological barriers that prevented remote work in the past, setting in motion a structural shift in where work takes place, at least for some people. The question that looms is to what extent will remote work persist?

Kane et al. (2020) discuss the need for managers to envision the office that employees will return to after the COVID-19 pandemic. The world has experienced widespread disruption over the past year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and critical thought for the future state is required. Thompson (2021) suggests the COVID-19 pandemic put professionals in a box, a virtual one. Overnight, managers and their teams shifted from in-person brainstorming and ideation sessions to those taking place electronically via Zoom, WebEx, and other tools.



² Lund et al., 2020

Key Benefits and Challenges of Work from Home



Beyond the economic division challenge that work from home enhances, there are many other considerations of benefits and challenges. An individual's experience working from home is deeply personal and as diverse as individuals themselves. A study conducted in ten countries demonstrated a significant drop in engagement and productivity, particularly when dissatisfied with the work-from-home experience.³

The type of organizational culture in which remote work will flourish is a culture of trust, goal deliverable metrics, and flexibility from both managers and peers.⁴ The culture of management where individuals are measured by productivity

and results has been proven as more successful in remote work environments.⁵ An approach based on clear production quotas, task, and process, has been shown to be effective. The research on remote work that has been progressing for many years emphasizes that critical mass in the number or proportion of people within an organization or department working from home is needed to create an environment where remote work is considered acceptable.⁶

There is an underlying assumption that when it comes to advancement, being present in the office is still important and an indicator of success.⁷ In a National comparison in the European context, an article reflected upon the restriction of work from home acceptance in the UK population both at the individual and organizational level.⁸ The researchers elaborated that not only the culture surrounding acceptance of work from home for senior staff but also the type of roles was essential to consider.

Galanti et al. (2021) conducted a study that discovered family and work conflict, including some social isolation elements, leads to negative work from home experiences. Work from home removed the separation and break that going to the office provided. Let us break the important considerations into four key areas, identity, skills, role demands, and role outcomes.



³ Baruch, 2000

⁴ Agrawal et al., 2020; Bowan, 2020; Fayard, 2021

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Perlow, 1995

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Korte & Wynne, 1996

Identity

Identity is tied into one's concept of self, and work has historically been closely tied to identity. The literature has discovered that remote work does not change the concept of oneself as an employee.⁹ However, it can have a dramatic impact on how one feels as part of a team. The ability to pursue purpose has become blurred with home obligations. The separation between work life and home life has become less clear. The challenges emerged when the work was not balanced, and other demands took over work time and focus.¹⁰ Alternatively, when work demands take over personal time, dissension is felt. Getting up and going to the office previously provided this separation of thought and space. Many people used to say going to the office gave them a place to forget about what was going on at home and vice-versa. This reprieve has been eliminated.

It has been demonstrated that in successful remote work arrangements, the individual must have the capability to separate work from personal and focus on the task at hand without distractions.



After spending months at home during a crisis, trying to balance multiple demands on their time, people have become more in touch with what they want from work and their circumstances.¹¹ Expectations of their employers, workplaces, and personal relationships have increased, as evidenced by the anticipated wave of job changes and divorce rates. Divorce rates during the pandemic are up by 34%.¹² There has been difficulty expressed in reconciling private and work commitments, lack of workplace social context, increased social isolation, and inadequate workspace has all hindered the work from home equation. The pandemic has given

⁹ Baruch, 2020; Travers et al., 2020

¹⁰ Baruch, 2020; Schieman et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2020

¹¹ Baruch, 2000

¹² Prime, Wade, & Browne, 2020

people to opportunity to soul search and become more internally focused. Goals have shifted and become more introspective than ever before.

Although self-leadership and autonomy are touted as positive aspects, these are only possible when one has experience in the job.¹³ In many recent situations, remote work was shown to impact the employee as a family member positively but a negative impact on career aspiration and future career perceptions.¹⁴ Then the job became the problem, not the focus, and some have begun to seek new jobs as the answer, whereas lack of focus or connection to the current job is the root cause. The entire issue of spending more time with family had some very interesting impacts as well. It has been demonstrated that turnover intentions are increasing, particularly in healthcare and customer-facing environments.¹⁵

At the society level, remote work has possible disadvantages and problems. One of them is the prospect of isolation and exclusion of remote work from other members of society. Peiperl and Baruch (1997) coined the term 'autistic society.' They suggest that phenomena such as the virtual organization and extending remote work might create an 'Autistic Society,' in which people are detached from each other and suffer from communication problems.¹⁶ The two main syndromes of autism are



extreme isolation from human contact and anxiety around the surrounding physical environment with a desire for it to remain unchanged.¹⁷ These characterize work from home as well—what is lacking in remote work is the human touch of relationships between people. A lot of information is delivered, but the vehicle used can deliver only part of the message. The body language, the gestures, all these ingredients of communication are not present. The feeling and sensing elements are missing.¹⁸

¹³ Galanti et al., 2021)

¹⁴ Travers et al., 2020

¹⁵ Bowen, 2020; Bufquin et al., 2021; Schieman et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2020

¹⁶ Peiperl & Baruch, 1997

¹⁷ Rutter, 1979; Holtzapfel, 1995

¹⁸ Peiperl & Baruch, 1997

Skills

The pandemic has highlighted the necessity for job knowledge, superior time management, and organizational skills. These are crucial for effective remote working. Technical skills are also a crucial factor.¹⁹ One of the challenges in the pandemic has been the transfer of knowledge and the building of skills. This has posed challenges for orientation and ongoing learning. Pre-pandemic, the supervisor would be ever-present to ensure positive work habits were being formed and followed, including organizing work. The supervisor was available for immediate



answers to questions – big or small.²⁰ Junior staff mirrored senior staff and learned ways of doing things via modelling in the social environment. The on the ground brainstorming through problems was ready and at hand. In the pandemic environment, this human transfer of knowledge has become more challenging.²¹ To provide some context from a senior-level perspective, there was a significant change of

communications method and use of time and space. Initially, most noticed a reduction of distractions and some increased productivity at the senior level. However, the value of distractions at the senior level, typical in the workplace, contributed to the learning perspective and, in fact, contributed to the Senior leaders' feelings of self-worth²² The need to feel needed and sought after for consultation and guidance is an important consideration.

Role demands

The pandemic did not create any specific indications for changed priorities, demands, and constraints in relation to elements of tasks. Nevertheless, the home proved to be better than the office environment from the relationships and support aspect.

Work from home as a new way of working has affected the well-being and productivity of employees with no prior remote work experience, and identifying specific work conditions during the COVID-19 crisis is very important. Self-leadership, internal motivation, self-control, self influence all boil down to the same item. The importance of behaving and performing by settings one's own goals is vital. The inability for those who have not developed the skills and do not have a sense of how to self monitor will negatively impact the work from home

¹⁹ Wang et al., 2021

²⁰ Kuntz, 2021; Wang et al., 2021

²¹ Galanti et al., 2021

²² Galanti et al., 2021

experience. It stands to reason those with self-leadership experience will do better with the switch to remote work.²³

Learning how to manage remote work can decrease the perception of family-work conflict. In addition, organizations should support employees' time management skills, enabling them to divide the two spheres and give each of them the right attention at the right time, with a view to the right to disconnection and physical and mental recovery.

Role Outcomes

Remote work enabled managers and professionals to get better (perceived) performance due to their ability to work without interruptions. According to the research sample, the most prominent advantages of remote working were changes in attitudes and satisfaction, including consideration of material rewards/costs, greater satisfaction, perceived performance, and reduced stress characterized by the remote workers.

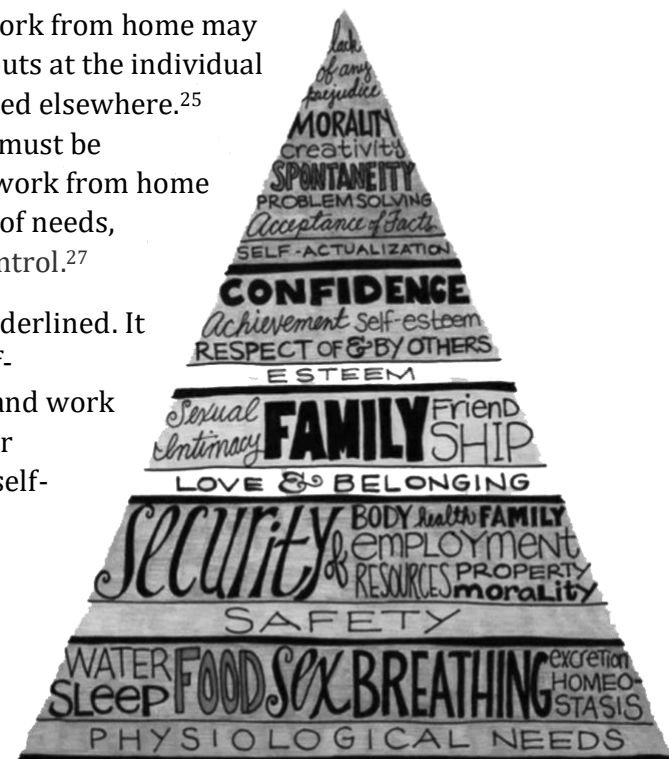
Meetings are essential, and of course, they can be conducted electronically. However, human moments from a relationship standpoint and not merely acts of collaboration are required to create trust between coworkers. Studies have long shown that frequent in-person interactions lead to commitment, support, and cooperation among people on teams. That is why many tech companies that boast about being 100% online still have an office. Even those with no physical space emphasize that teams should meet face-to-face regularly.²⁴

Another level of analysis is the national or society level. Work from home may generate very positive impacts on both the aggregate outputs at the individual and organizational levels and society in general, as indicated elsewhere.²⁵

Physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects must be considered.²⁶ As employers continue to grapple with the work from home or hybrid environment, we can flashback to the hierarchy of needs, including Safety, Belonging, Productivity, Comfort, and Control.²⁷

The importance of personal work management skills is underlined. It is clear the research findings show that autonomy and self-leadership have a positive relationship with productivity and work engagement. Consequently, organizations should empower employees through training courses aimed at developing self-leadership behaviours.

The impact of COVID-19 on the traditional workplace has created a pivotal point in irreversible change. As we continue to emerge from the pandemic and move toward



²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Fayard, 2021

²⁵ D'Souza & Gurin, 2016; Mokhtarian & Salomon, 1994

²⁶ Galanti et al., 2021

²⁷ Agrawal et al., 2020

hybrid workforces, managers, HR, and employees will need to consider family-work conflict, social isolation, and distracting work environments as potential obstacles. The newfound knowledge surrounding job autonomy and self-leadership skills will be a potential enabler of work from home engagements. The way in which work is designed will need to shift so production goals are more apparent and self-management skills will be vital. COVID-19 accelerated the work from home trend, and as we slowly emerge from the pandemic or learn to live with it, the plus and minus of work from home will need to continue to be examined, and gaps closed to maximize effectiveness.

References

- Agrawal, S., De Smet, A., Lacroix, S., & Reich, A. (2020). To emerge stronger from the COVID-19 crisis, companies should start reskilling their workforces now. *McKinsey Insights*.
- Baruch, Y. (2000). Teleworking: benefits and pitfalls as perceived by professionals and managers. *New technology, work and employment*, 15(1), 34-49.
- Bufquin, D., Park, J. Y., Back, R. M., de Souza Meira, J. V., & Hight, S. K. (2021). Employee work status, mental health, substance use, and career turnover intentions: An examination of restaurant employees during COVID-19. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 93, 102764.
- Bowen, J. (2020). Lesson learned from the pandemic: the need for sustainable employment. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*.
- D'Souza, J., & Gurin, M. (2016). The universal significance of Maslow's concept of self-actualization. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 44(2), 210-214.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000027>
- Fayard, A. L. (2021, March 16). Workplace Design: Post Pandemic. *Harvard Business Review*, Idea Cast Episode 784. <https://hbr.org/podcast/2021/03/workplace-design-post-pandemic>
- Galanti, T., Guidetti, G., Mazzei, E., Zappalà, S., & Toscano, F. (2021). Work From home during the COVID-19 outbreak: The impact on employees' remote work productivity, engagement, and stress. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 63(7), e426.
- Kane, G. C., Nanda, R., Phillips, A., & Copulsky, J. (2021). Redesigning the Post-Pandemic Workplace. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 62(3), 12-14.
- Korte, W.B. and Wynne, R. (1996). Telework: Penetration, Potential and Practice in Europe. *IOS Press*, Ohmsha.
- Kuntz, J. C. (2021). Resilience in times of global pandemic: Steering recovery and thriving trajectories. *Applied Psychology*, 70(1), 188-215.

- Lund, S., Madgavkar, A., Manyika, J., & Smit, S. (2020). What's next for remote work: An analysis of 2,000 tasks, 800 jobs, and nine countries. *McKinsey Global Institute*, 1-13.
- Mokhtarian, P. L. and I. Salomon (1994). Modelling the choice of telecommuting: Setting the context Environment and planning A 26, 749–766.
- Mueller, W. S. (1992), Flexible Working and New Technology, in J. F. Hartley & G. M. Stephenson (eds), *Employment Relations*, (Oxford: Blackwell), 314–331.
- Peiperl, M. and Y. Baruch (1997). Back to square zero: The post-corporate career. *Organizational Dynamics*, 25, 4, 7–22.
- Perlow LA. (1995). Putting the Work Back into Work/Family. *Group & Organization Management*. 20(2):227-239. doi:10.1177/1059601195202009
- Prime, H., Wade, M., & Browne, D. T. (2020). Risk and resilience in family well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. *American Psychologist*, 75(5), 631.
- Rutter, M., & Maughan, B. (2002). School effectiveness findings 1979–2002. *Journal of School Psychology*, 40(6), 451-475.
- Schieman, S., Badawy, P.J.A., Milkie, M., Bierman, A. (2021). Work-life conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Socius*, 7:237802312098285.
- Thompson, L. (2021). Virtual collaboration won't be the death of creativity. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 62(2), 42-46.
- Travers, C., Maher, K., Kinman, G., & Bateman, N. (2020). "We are not working at home, but are at home, during a pandemic, attempting to work": Exploring experiences of homeworking and work-life balance during the Covid-19 crisis. *A DOP Publication*, 4(1), pp.10-15.
- Wang, B., Liu, Y., Qian, J., Parker, S.K. (2021). Achieving effective remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic: a work design perspective. *Applied Psychology*, 70:16–59.

About the Author



Liz R. Scott PhD, is the Principal of Organizational Solutions (lscott@orgsoln.com) a successful disability management company that has been recognized for award-winning cost reduction results, “best practice” program designs, and ability to solve a complex variety of organizational health and disability concerns.

An internationally respected and consulted thought-leader, professor, public speaker and author in the field, Dr. Liz Scott has been honored several times as a finalist in the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year Awards. She is the co-author of a book called “Comprehensive Disability Management” and, as well as leading the successful Organizational Solutions Inc., teaches at McGill and Guelph Universities.

Contact Organizational Solutions Inc, to find out more about our services to bring employees back to work, swiftly, safely and sustainably after illness or injury. These include:

- short-term disability management services
- Workers’ Compensation Claims Management
- Leaves of Absence (LOA) Management
- Consultation and management of COVID-19 related workplace issues

How can we help you?

Don't guess how your team feels about return to work post-COVID



We can help *you* with a customized, completely anonymous survey that can point you in the right direction.

Call us today for a quote
1.866.674.7656

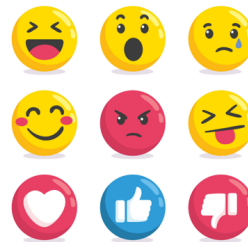


ORGANIZATIONAL SOLUTIONS INC.
SOLUTIONS ORGANISATIONNELLES INC.

Need to know how your team feels about return to work post-COVID?

We can help with a customized survey

Because we're arms length, your team can be comfortable that their privacy is protected



Call us today for a quote
1.866.674.7656



1-866-674-7656 | E: info@orgsoln.com
Or visit www.orgsoln.com

ORGANIZATIONAL SOLUTIONS INC.
SOLUTIONS ORGANISATIONNELLES INC.