

# The Rise of Remote Work Can Be Unexpectedly Liberating

What if you are better off without the office?



By Jessica Powell

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In the initial months of the pandemic, remote work seemed full of upsides: more flexibility for employees and an expectation of greater profits, productivity and retention for their employers. But what if the long-studied benefits of remote work look different in a post-pandemic world? In particular, what if employee loyalty and engagement decrease once remote work is no longer an exception but rather the norm? And what if that's not a bad thing? What if a more disconnected work force leads to changes that could make employees happier and companies more compassionate?

I'm a fan of remote work, but it presents unique challenges in helping staffs feel connected to their teammates and the company.

In my previous job as an executive at a large technology company, I managed teams across some 40 satellite and home offices. We relied on email, video conferences and chat services to help keep our employees around the world connected. But if a remote employee complained about a lack of support from co-workers at headquarters or felt disconnected from the larger team, a manager's advice often had nothing to do with technology. Instead, it was utterly human: Come spend a week meeting your colleagues.

Since March, millions of white-collar workers have been living the disconnected experience of the remote worker for the first time.

Early reports from the corporate world were rosy, as employees swapped suits for sweatpants and found new flexibility in their work and home lives. Many companies reported higher productivity than ever before, not analyzing whether that productivity was tied to employee flexibility or the fact that people were locked inside, terrified of losing their jobs.

We're now seeing the cracks, as employers and employees start to voice their concerns about the long-term, isolating impact of remote work.

Managers have tried creative ways to bring their staffs together. My friends' calendars are filled with video conference happy hours and trivia nights. An acquaintance told me he leaves a group video chat open all day so that the employees at his start-up can work together as they did in their open office. I know another boss who has short but more frequent catch-ups so that she can maintain a bit of banter with her management team.

But it just isn't the same. The once-weekly video conference happy hours held by one friend's San Francisco start-up have become monthly. Even then, attendance falls with each passing month.

At Facebook, which has said it expects to make as much as half of its full-time jobs remote over the next 10 years, people miss the mini-kitchens and team lunches. One executive there told me, it's not so much the perks themselves as it is the connection they provided. "It's hard to reproduce the magic," he told me. "People don't want to spend any more time connecting over video chat than they have to."

If this continues, it could result in a permanent change in the employee-employer relationship. Employees could become increasingly mercenary, no longer swayed by the strong social bonds and physical-world perks of the office of the past.

For their part, employers could increasingly view their staffs as little more than interchangeable work units. As a manager, no matter how objective I think I may be, I would probably find it easier to fire an employee with whom I had little personal connection. That difficult conversation would be reduced to a few minutes on a screen, with no chance of running into the person later in the coffee room.

All of this may sound dismal, but this change in employee psychology and loyalty may come with an unexpected liberation, encouraging workers to look beyond the workplace to build friendships and identity.

In our previous office lives, some of us had access to free food, coffee rooms or other on-site perks. We might have enjoyed them, but they also helped keep us in the office for long hours. Likewise, the presence of co-workers and bosses made us more compliant, less likely to take a proper lunch hour or make the effort to attend a child's school event.

With our offices gone, our days have now opened up. Why *not* make that doctor's appointment for 4 p.m.? Why *not* pick the kids up at day care rather than find a babysitter? Why not try something entirely new, like going for a walk in the middle of the day, or participating in social activism or a protest during typical work hours, as millions of Americans have done this summer? I know I split my day

differently now, sometimes having lunch with my husband and kids at noon, or starting work much earlier or later depending on what I need to get done that day.

In spite of early optimism, what's great for some employees may not be so great for a company's bottom line, which is why I'm sure many employers will ultimately adopt a hybrid approach, requiring employees to spend some days each week in the office. But for those who choose to keep employees at home permanently, there are opportunities to treat them as more than just paychecks.

Companies could focus on employee well-being from afar, offering perks that would help workers thrive at home. Do those in hot climates have access to air-conditioning? Does everyone have the equipment they need? How can companies support an employee's mental health now that most interactions are mediated through a screen? Would some employees prefer co-working hubs — a lighter version of the traditional office? And perhaps companies will finally consider, do parents have adequate child care?

These are questions most employers have never had to ask before. Their care for their employees started and ended at the entry and exit to the office building.

The fall of the physical office could cause working life to become even more isolated. But it could also spur companies and employees to think differently about their relationship with the workplace and life beyond it.

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