Remote But Not Forgotten? Exploring the Teleworker's Experience

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Abstract. As the COVID-19 pandemic disruption eased, surveys indicated many workers said they preferred to continue working from home at least part of the week (Alexander *et al.* 2021; Korn Ferry 2021; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2021). Likewise, many employers will consider flexible work arrangements to attract and retain the best talent (Robinson 2022, May 1). Given that a hybrid structure where employees work partly onsite and from home may be the new normal for many companies, it is important to consider what challenges this fundamental change in the workplace may present for employees and managers. For instance, how can teleworkers with less "face time" avoid being overlooked for career advancement? How can the social fabric of the work environment remain strong if coworkers are no longer in the office every day? In this classroom exercise, students are asked to consider the ramifications of remote work and generate ideas for enhancing its effectiveness.

Keywords: remote work, telework, virtual work, hybrid work structure.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic upended normal workplace operations, confronting organizations with many immediate challenges. Chief among these was the seemingly overnight transition in the first half of 2020 to remote work for many employees. Understandably, the primary focus was on task-oriented concerns, such as equipping home workspaces, acquiring virtual communication software like Zoom, and training employees in it and other e-technologies critical for sustaining business operations. While companies worked on addressing these immediate problems, less attention was given to the impact the dramatic increase in off-site work would have on people-oriented issues that affect employee attitudes, motivation, and retention in the long term (Birkinshaw *et al.* 2021; Carnevale & Hatak 2020; Delany 2021). Now, as we enter a post-pandemic 'new normal', many organizations are considering a relatively permanent hybrid work structure in which some or all employees have the opportunity to divide their time between working remotely and in the company's office (Alexander *et al.* 2021; De Smet *et al.* 2021; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2021). That being the case, what

are some of the emerging people concerns related to remote working, for example, its effect on work-life balance, career development, and social connectivity in the workplace? What can remote workers and their managers do to facilitate the best outcomes? This simple classroom exercise encourages students to critically think about these questions, the answers to which may directly impact their post-college work choices and experience.

2. Background

Remote work, sometimes labeled telework or virtual work, has existed for many years. For example, an estimated 11% of the U.S. workforce were teleworkers to some extent as of 2009 (Golden 2009). The adoption of remote work was spurred by many factors, such as addressing employees' work-family conflicts, reducing commutes and their associated environmental harm, and lowering firms' office-related costs (Cascio 2000; Delany 2021; Golden 2009). Advancements in communication technologies and cloud-based computing facilitated its growth, and the COVID-19 crisis pushed the implementation of remote work into overdrive (Birkinshaw *et al.* 2021; Lund *et al.* 2021). The International Labour Organization estimated 35% of U.S. employees were working virtually by mid-2020 (McDonald *et al.* 2022), and a recent projection indicated it may stabilize post-pandemic at 20 to 25% of employees working from home three to five days per week (Lund *et al.* 2021).

There is some evidence that workers may prefer to work from home; a recent survey found those who worked from home were 20% happier, on average, than those who did not have a remote work option (Alexander *et al.* 2021; Korn Ferry 2021; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2021; Robinson 2022, May 5). However, research on telework's impact on employees has found both benefits and drawbacks. For example, benefits include greater job autonomy, more flexibility in allotting hours between work, family, and recreational pursuits, and reduced commuting time, costs, and stress. Negative consequences associated with remote work include feelings of isolation and disconnection from the organization and its social milieu, difficulty 'unplugging', interruptions by family members and household tasks, lower communication richness in e-channels, and managerial bias in favor of in-office staff (Cappelli 2021; Carnevale & Hatak 2020; Golden 2009; Golden *et al.* 2006; Robinson 2022, May 5; Shellenbarger 2006). Additionally, some remote workers report concerns that those in the office will think they aren't working as hard (Charalampous *et al.* 2022), a perception recently echoed by Elon Musk, who wrote on Twitter that Tesla remote workers "should pretend to work somewhere else" (Rushe 2022). With respect to telework and job satisfaction, research indicates a curvilinear relationship. That is, satisfaction declines as the amount of time spent working away from the office increases beyond a certain point, estimated to be about two days per week, suggesting that the benefits are

eclipsed by the drawbacks for those who spend the most time working remotely (Golden 2006; Golden & Veiga 2005). As noted above, one of the primary downsides of remote work is the disruption in relationships with coworkers; this seems to be experienced both by teleworkers themselves as well as their peers who continue to work onsite. Specifically, research shows that as the prevalence of remote working in an organization increases, team-member exchange quality and non-teleworkers' job satisfaction declines. The latter finding has been attributed to onsite coworkers perceiving they have to take on additional work, as well as other frustrations associated with their peers' absence from the office (Golden 2006, 2007). Lastly, the drawbacks of remote work arrangements may be especially problematic for new hires, who do not have an established social network or a clear understanding of the company culture and norms (Cascio 2000; Jamal 2021).

Remote work takes different forms, and its positives and negatives may vary with location, for example, at home, a client setting, a firm's satellite office, or another field setting (Morganson *et al.* 2010) and also with the extent of telework (Golden 2006; Golden & Veiga 2005). In the classroom exercise described below, the focus is specifically on a hybrid work structure in which employees and their supervisors devise a fixed weekly schedule that is partly in-office and partly home-based (McDonald *et al.* 2022). As employers have learned how to accommodate remote work during the pandemic and as more see it as an effective recruitment and cost-saving strategy, this type of arrangement is becoming more popular (Alexander *et al.* 2021; De Smet *et al.* 2021; Delany 2021). Given that a significant number of new college graduates may be offered a hybrid work option, exploring this choice in a management class should help students make a more informed decision and successfully navigate its consequences. In reviewing the pedagogical literature related to this topic, there are some teaching exercises on the subject of virtual team meetings (e.g., Bull Schaefer & Erskine 2012; Ready *et al.* 2004), but there has not to date been any focused specifically on the employee's experience as a remote worker. In sum, the purpose of the classroom exercise described below is to encourage students to consider the advantages and disadvantages of working remotely, and what both employees and their managers can do to increase the likelihood it will be a satisfying and productive experience.

3. The Classroom Exercise

This straightforward exercise requires no special set-up by instructors or advance preparation by students. It is suitable for management, organizational behavior, and leadership classes. Instructors can adjust the time allotted to the discussion period according to their individual preference; the entire exercise fits within one 50- or 75-minute class period or less. It consists of a short vignette (Appendix A) followed by discussion questions (Appendix B). The questions can be assigned to

small groups for discussion or simply addressed in a plenary session. Based on an extensive review of the telework literature, below are some suggestions the instructor can contribute during the debrief, corresponding to the questions in Appendix B. The lists below could be made available to students after the exercise through a handout or posting to the course website. One or more of the discussion questions could be converted to essay questions for a later test or quiz that includes the remote work topic.

Benefits of Remote Work for Employees

- More schedule flexibility to balance work and family responsibilities, recreational pursuits, exercise time, etc. (Charalampous *et al.* 2022; Gajendran & Harrison 2007; Golden *et al.* 2006; Robinson 2022, May 1).

- Lower work-to-family conflict (Gajendran & Harrison 2007; Golden 2006; Golden *et al.* 2006).

- Reduced commuting time, costs, and stress (Baruch 2000; Robinson 2022, May 5; Shellenbarger 2006).

- Increased job autonomy re: timing and methods for completing work (Charalampous *et al.* 2022; Gajendran & Harrison 2007; Park *et al.* 2021).

- Fewer office- and coworker-related distractions and interruptions (Baruch 2000; Charalampous *et al.* 2022; Korn Ferry 2021).

Potential Downsides of Working from Home

- "Out of sight, out of mind": Being overlooked for the best assignments, reduced access to development opportunities and mentoring, impeded career advancement (Cappelli 2021; Golden & Eddleston 2020; Korn Ferry 2021; McDonald *et al.* 2022; Richardson & Kelliher 2015; Shellenbarger 2006).

- Social isolation, loneliness, feeling "out of the loop" with what is going on at work (Cascio 2000; Charalampous *et al.* 2022; Delany 2021; McDonald *et al.* 2022; Morganson *et al.* 2010; Yarberry & Sims 2021).

- Missing out on 'elevator talk': Informal, spontaneous communication, e.g., idea sharing, coaching, and feedback (Alexander *et al.* 2020, 2021; Delany 2021; Golden 2006; Richardson & Kelliher 2015).