What the Work-From-Home Boom Means for Your Future

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While major corporations furloughing workers and declaring bankruptcy tends to get the biggest headlines, our culture's dramatic shift to working from home is the true breakout business story from this pandemic. The transition has certainly had its share of ups and downs, but rapidly growing acceptance indicates this is a trend that is almost certainly going to shape the future of work.

The transition began before 2020

While Covid-19 restrictions caused an abrupt shift, working from home was already accelerating. Research from FlexJobs found that the number of people in the United States who worked from home grew by an astounding 159 percent between 2005 and 2017.

Much of this growth can be attributed to freelancing. Upwork's Freelancing in America 2019 survey found that the number of Americans who did freelance work grew from 53 million to 57 million between 2014 and 2019. Younger generations were especially likely to participate, with 40 percent of millennials and 53 percent of Generation Z contributing to the gig economy.

Technology that enabled remote work certainly played a major role, but so did attitudes toward the workplace in general. Flexibility in hours and location, in particular, are viewed

as a major benefit that was already driving this transition.

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The pandemic's impact

Still, the pandemic brought about a transformation that had never been seen before. A survey by Global Workplace Analytics found that 97 percent of North American office employees worked from home for more than one day per week, even though 67 percent had not participated in remote work previously.

While news stories have had a tendency to focus on parents struggling while sharing a space with kids who were home from school, the survey data paints a different picture. Eighty-six percent of respondents said they were fully productive while working from home, actually experiencing fewer interruptions than they did at the office.

This is a positive sign, since economic uncertainty – as well as a continued need for social distancing – has caused many businesses to maintain a remote workforce for much longer than originally anticipated. Facebook notably extended remote work for all employees through July 2021, with the expectation that many will continue to work remotely on a permanent basis.

Most businesses are stressing adaptability during these transitions. As Kara Hamilton, chief people and culture officer of Smartsheet explained in an interview with SHRM, "It's also vitally important to allow for personal choice, whenever possible. The pandemic is impacting every individual differently, so offering ways to meet employees at their comfort level – for example, by providing the continued ability to work from home – provides meaningful support amidst the uncertainty."

What does this mean for the future?

The accelerating demand for work-from-home opportunities could lead to a dramatic shift in where, when and how people work.

In a recent email conversation, Liran Rosenfeld, founder of Costa Rican co-working community YoKo Village, explained, "With the pandemic and the associated economic uncertainty forcing so many people to work from home, we're seeing a mass exodus from big cities. People are realizing they can keep their job or seek new entrepreneurial opportunities, while living in a place that is less stressful and where they can be more productive. They can live anywhere and have the lifestyle they want."

Increased demand for remote work could even affect what we prioritize in our homes. As just one example, a report from *USA Today* noted that interest in backyard sheds has increased 400 percent since the start of the pandemic, with an emphasis on "premium" sheds that can be converted into a home-office space.

All signs indicate that while working from home may be a temporary move for some, many hope to make it a permanent part of their work life. The previously cited Global Workplace Analytics study found that 76 percent of American workers want to work at least a few days from home each week after restrictions are lifted.

In addition, a survey of business executives from PwC found that 89 percent expect "many" or "most" employees to work remotely one or more days per week post-pandemic. This will create new challenges in the workplace as businesses adapt their offices to a hybrid model that can accommodate these changing preferences.

Working from home doesn't mean that employees won't be able to communicate or collaborate. Business-communication tools like

Slack and Zoom have enabled employees to continue working together on projects, as well as engage in the normal social interactions one would find in a traditional office setting. While the future will be different, it won't necessarily be isolating.

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Whether you're an employer or a would-be entrepreneur, the increased potential for remote work holds significant promise. From being better positioned to live the lifestyle you want to cutting out a variety of office- and commuting-related costs, remote work could ultimately lead to a happier, more financially prosperous professional future.

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