
INNOVATION, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES, AND POST-COVID-19 WORK AND STUDY TRENDS IN THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION

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ABSTRACT

Working from anywhere (telework, remote work, work from home) has been an area of research and discussion for decades. During COVID-19, the worldwide health mandates for working from home refocused the debate about the future of work, particularly the location of work. Some benefits include more flexibility and autonomy, less commuting time and better work/life balance. The challenges include social and professional isolation, limitations for collaboration and increasingly invasive use of technology to monitor workers. COVID-19-mandated work from home has shown that workers can be productive working remotely. It has also reignited the discussion about the location of work and the future of work. There is no consensus. However, hybrid work, where workers work some of the time at home, is becoming more common. The higher education sector is an example of a workplace where a key stakeholder, the student, is driving how they want to interact, for example, not attending in-person classes. Collaboration and social connections are more important than ever to foster innovation and a sense of belonging, referred to as the hybrid paradox. The future of work is uncertain; however, workers will likely demand more flexibility about where they work.

Keywords: Anywhere Working; Collaboration; Hybrid Work; Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Working from anywhere also referred to as telework, work from home, or remote work has a long history (Blount 2015). Jack Nilles (credited with coining telecommuting) envisaged workers working closer to their homes rather than commuting considerable distances to a central workplace (Nilles 1975, Nilles 1998). The academic literature and industry commentary have debated the benefits and limitations of working anywhere since Nille's original work (Blount 2015, Blount and Gloet 2021). Across the world, COVID-19 forced governments to stop the spread of the disease by issuing health directives that forced workers to work from home regardless of the preferences of employers or workers. The mandated work-from-home refocused the debate on how anywhere working will evolve as the world transitions out of COVID-19 restrictions (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2021, Taylor 2022).

The challenge for managers is how to find, recruit, onboard, connect and reward new and existing employees because there is a preference from employees to continue to work more flexibly. Managers' essential role is ensuring employee wellbeing and engaging with and encouraging greater cultural and gender diversity. Management skills include managing remote workers and fostering a sense of belonging and purpose.

Some employees who had experienced less commuting time and more autonomy over their work felt that they had a better work/life balance and flexibility. This flexibility helped workers manage their personal and family responsibilities and reduce carbon emissions from less commuting. This finding is similar to previous research before COVID-19 (Messenger and Gschwind 2016). However, these benefits were not universal, and for some employees during COVID-19 work-from-home arrangements led to more stress, social isolation and detachment from team members, the organisation and customers. Many workers working from home full time during the COVID-19 lockdowns did not have the equipment or an ideal place to work. Another disadvantage was the exacerbation of gender inequalities and challenges for women who predominantly had to deal with childcare and homeschooling simultaneously (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2021).

INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY TRENDS

Collaborative and communication technologies facilitated work from home, for example, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack and others. These tools provided ways for managers and employees to communicate and collaborate with varying levels of success.

For example, organisations adopted surveillance software to monitor how often employees were online, the number of keystrokes, websites visited, and other metrics to measure productivity. Software metrics in place of results-based management were standard during COVID-19 as managers monitored employees and demanded that they be reachable (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2021, Aloisi and De Stefano 2022).

During COVID-19, working hours increased, and this trend was consistent worldwide. In the European Union, 27 member states reported longer working hours in around 35% of teleworkers. In the United States, a study found that teleworkers reduced commuting time but used this extra time for working time (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2021).

WORK TRENDS: HYBRID WORKING

There are benefits and challenges to working from home (or other remote locations) and in person. There is a loss of routine and a sense of connection to colleagues and the organization with remote or hybrid work (Myers 2021).

A study conducted by MIT during COVID-19 lockdowns showed that types of work relationships that encourage innovation tend to be hard hit. The study collected data from email communications from different research units and found that workers only communicated with people they knew well. Remote workers did not form new relationships with colleagues they did not know well, and the relationships stagnated over time. The researchers called these relationships' weak ties' where new ideas are formed that foster innovation. Physical proximity is the key to developing new relationships and collaborations (Jarvis 2022). Workers who work remotely miss a sense of belonging and a purpose for work (Myers 2021).

ASIA PACIFIC REGION

Telework in Australia and New Zealand before COVID-19 was not business as usual, with resistance from management for more flexible work, insufficient digital infrastructure and government regulation (Blount 2015). Post-COVID-19, some employees are reluctant to return to the office five days a week, and some are not going to the office.

In Japan, working from home during the pandemic was lowest compared to other OECD countries, including the number of organisations that offered telework, despite the adequacy of the technology infrastructure (Ono 2022).

South Korea's strong hierarchical corporate culture was an obstacle to telework before COVID-19. Although during COVID-19, Koreans were encouraged to work from home, many have returned to working in the office. There is some evidence that millennials are challenging the status quo, which may change the culture to one that is more flexible for work location (Southerton 2020).

In India, telework was perceived as a privilege in a predominantly large IT sector. Managers expect workers to be always available, and teleworkers work longer hours than their office colleagues. Workers felt pressured to work longer hours (work intensification) because they were concerned about the privilege of telework being revoked (Bathini and Kandathil 2020).

Before the pandemic, Indonesian public sector employees did not have the option to telework. However, to contain the spread of COVID-19, the Indonesian government imposed mandated lockdowns and telework to stop people from travelling and gathering in one place (Novianti, and Roz, 2020). However, a survey of employees reported that employees experienced greater stress as a result of teleworking and reduced job satisfaction (Novianti, and Roz, 2020).

HIGHER EDUCATION

The mandated work-from-home forced higher education institutions worldwide to move teaching, research and administrative work from campus to homes. Students had to attend lectures and tutorials remotely using technologies such as Zoom.

Macquarie University commissioned a research project to examine the future of work at the university post-pandemic. The key findings showed that trust and reciprocity between managers and staff and manager capability in managing remote workers were important. Findings included consideration of Increased productivity versus work intensification in an environment where work and home boundaries blurred and a shift from managing attendance to managing outcomes. Ultimately, the complexity of the University, understanding the different needs and diversity inclusion considerations, and avoiding a one size fits all solution were vital to success (Taksa, Deranty et al. 2021).

Although students are now back on campus, many choose not to attend or cannot (for example, international students unable to finalise visas). Work satisfaction for educators is problematic when students are not attending lectures and the lecturer is talking to empty chairs (Thorpe 2022).

In Australia, each year students are surveyed to gauge their higher education experiences. The Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), a suite of national higher education surveys endorsed by the Department of Education, surveyed 264,660 students in 2021 and found that just 42 per cent of students felt they belonged to their higher education institutions, down 10 points from 2019 (Thorpe 2022).

Students and staff must develop relationships for teaching and research necessary for sharing ideas and collaboration opportunities. Online assessments and exams can disengage students and potentially lead to cheating. The use of contract cheating and essay mills is increasing, which diminishes the degree's value and the institution's reputation. Without the on-campus experience, particularly for undergraduates, students will not have the theoretical, ethical and professional underpinnings to make informed judgements and decisions relating to their discipline.

CONCLUSION

Workers want more flexibility and, at the same time, more in-person collaboration, the hybrid paradox. Collaboration and social connections are more important than ever to foster innovation and a sense of belonging. These factors are essential for all workers in organizations, including the higher education sector. The future of work is unclear and difficult to predict, but it is likely to be more flexible than before the pandemic.

The technology infrastructure and workers' digital skills are necessary for flexible work, such as hybrid work. Management should address workplace culture to ensure that workers and students do not feel socially and professionally isolated and have a sense of belonging. Technology should be used for collaboration and communication, not for inappropriate surveillance that can lead to burnout, work intensification and additional stress.

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