FROST INSIGHTS

Remote work – a legacy of COVID-19 and its impact on professionals

> 'COVID-19 highlights how truly interdependent we all are. How reliant we are on cooperation, communication, and compassion to successfully combat the virus.'
>
> - JACINDA ADERN

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New Zealand's former Prime Minister was talking about COVID-19. However, if you changed the words 'combat the virus' to 'build careers and serve clients well' then it would still be a perceptive observation for professionals. When COVID-19 eventuated, I dutifully collected press clippings and learned articles on all manner of pandemic related pivots, comings and goings, most of which are still gathering dust or clogging up my hard drive. That is the thing about an event as profound and as long running as a pandemic: it is hard for anyone to see all the implications, or even the important ones, while you are living through the changes.

Apart maybe from a few supercentenarians who can vaguely recall the Spanish Flu more than 100 years ago, nobody alive today has had to deal with a health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. From a workplace perspective, there was no rule book for employers, or employees, to follow and no experience to fall back on. Everyone just had to do the best they could and make stuff up on a day-to-day basis.

Even now as the COVID-19 dust settles, the comments in this Insight will probably seem laughably inaccurate and not especially perceptive when read a few years down the track. Anyway, this is my best shot, writing as I am while COVID-19 is still active in many parts of the world. Fingers crossed that some leading epidemiologists are wrong with predictions of more frequent pandemics in the years ahead, as humans continue to encroach on the natural world with its untold number of viruses, bacteria, and other nasties.
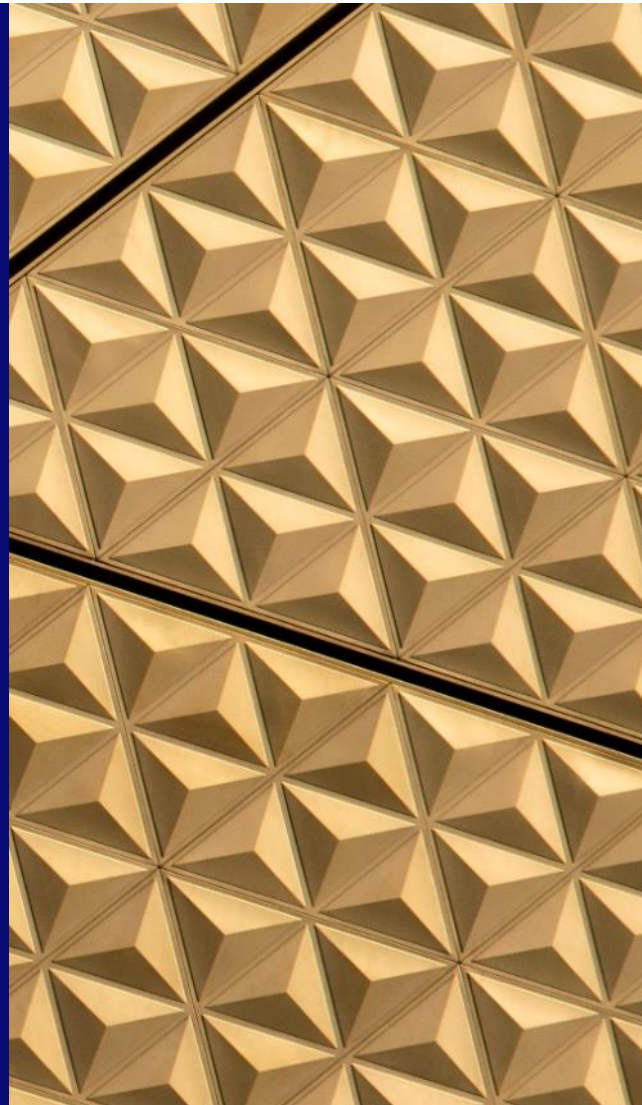
What pandemics do to humans

> *Unfortunately, pandemics kill and injure lots of people, but of course they do many other things as well. Before considering possible lessons for young professionals from COVID-19, we will take a quick look at some of the significant social and workplace-related changes that arose from two earlier pandemics in human history.*

The pandemic we call the Black Death, or the bubonic plague, appeared in China during the 1330s and arrived in Constantinople and Sicily in 1347, spreading to the rest of Europe soon after. The population of Europe declined by almost one-third until the end of the fourteenth century.

Some of the implications of the Black Death were as follows:

- The large decreases in population and the labour force saw real wages double in most countries and cities during the century following the first occurrence of the plague.

- The labour-scarce environment created by the Black Death led to increased worker mobility, weakened the powers of employers and increased employment opportunities for urban women in north-western Europe.

- The labour scarcity and high-wage environment caused by the Black Death also led to significant changes and improvements in technology and sped the rise of the printing press and improvements in firearms.

- Urbanisation rates in north-western Europe began to catch up with those of southern Europe after the Black Death, and the shift in economic leadership from southern towards north-western Europe began in the era of the Black Death.

- The Black Death triggered a speedy decline in interest rates.[1]

The Spanish Flu (1918–1920), a worldwide pandemic caused by influenza, had a global death toll of between 40 million and 100 million people. The pandemic did not start in Spain, but the disease took its name from the Spanish press being the first to notify the world of its existence. In a well-researched book, *Pale Rider*[2], published in 2017 in the lead up to the pandemic's centenary, author Laura Spinney explains in detail how the Spanish Flu changed the course of history over ensuing decades. These are just some of her observations:

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1. Pamuk, S. (2007), The Black Death and the origins of the 'Great Divergence' across Europe, 1300–1600, *European Review of Economic History*, 11, 289–317.

2. Spinney, L. (2017) *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*, Jonathan Cape.

- The Spanish Flu hastened the end of World War I and had a bearing on the peace negotiations given that some people involved in the process died or were impacted by the disease.

- In the aftermath of the pandemic, many countries created or reorganised health ministries and the state of a nation's health came to be seen as a marker of its modernity and civilisation.

- Starting in the 1920s, governments around the world embraced the concept of socialised medicine, in some cases on a free-for-all basis and the reporting of health data became much more systematic.

- Medical research, especially into disease and vaccines, increased dramatically due to the pandemic.

Recent research[3], inspired by COVID-19, also found that the Spanish Flu and the associated social disruption had permanent consequences on individual behaviours in terms of lower social trust.

The COVID-19 story so far

At the time of writing, according to the World Health Organisation[4], COVID-19 has claimed more than 7 million lives world-wide from 775 million infections since the first cases emerged in Wuhan, China in late 2019. Many expert epidemiologists suspect that these official numbers are dramatically understated, and that more than 25 million deaths can be attributed to COVID-19. There have been more than 13 billion

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3. Aassve, A, Alfani, G, Gandolfi, F, and Le Moglie, M. (2021) Epidemics and trust: The case of the Spanish Flu, *Health Economics*, 30, 840–857.

4. World Health Organization COVID-19 Dashboard as of July 2024: https://covid19.who.int.

vaccine doses administered. In addition to death and impairment, and occasional shortages of toilet paper, human life all over the planet was impacted in untold ways. These ranged from personal protection and social distancing measures to global disruption of food supplies, production of goods and services, and supply chains. National and internal borders within countries were imposed, together with travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders. Businesses, schools, parliaments, courts, and all manner of other institutions went online with various degrees of rapidity and success. People died or were afflicted not just because of COVID-19, but from various related events including associated illnesses, mental health crises, and food shortages. Millions of people lost jobs or had their businesses devastated by the pandemic. Sadly, people in poor and less developed countries have generally borne higher deaths and hardships, and lower vaccination rates than those in Western countries.

> *Human ingenuity in the rapid development and deployment of highly effective vaccines and other medicines to target COVID-19 was remarkable and even surprised many seasoned epidemiologists.*

As with the aftermath of the Spanish Flu, research into pandemic-type diseases, vaccines and treatments was given a huge boost. COVID-19 also hastened many other positive developments. Writing in May 2020, only a few months into the pandemic, Australian Federal Court judge Nye Perram observed[5] that the Court had held its first trial by videoconferencing on 16 March 2020, the day that Australian State governments began the first COVID-19 lockdown. He went on to say that a shared sense of adversity had produced outcomes unimaginable only three months earlier and that what had been achieved in eight weeks in terms of technological

5. Perram, N. (2020) Video justice: 10 years of progress for courts in eight weeks, *Australian Financial Review*, 15 May 2020.

advancement could probably not have been achieved in 10 years in normal circumstances.

Like the Black Death, but in different ways and on a different scale, COVID-19 has had profound effects on the type of work people do, where they do it, how they do it and when they do it. Very few workers would not have been impacted in one or more ways by the pandemic. People lost their jobs, had hours cut temporarily or permanently and sometimes gained employment because of changes wrought by COVID-19.

Many people had jobs that required them to attend a mine, a shop, a hospital, or some other place where they were needed to make or provide goods or services to people, in person. Not everything could be taken online. In some businesses this led to tensions and rivalries between workers who could work from home (**WFH**) and those who couldn't. People attending their employers' premises ran the gauntlet of COVID-19 infection from customers, co-workers and on public transport journeys. Unfortunately, not all customers or co-workers were always patient and sensitive to the logistical challenges, delays and hurdles caused by the pandemic, leading to stress and mental health challenges for large numbers of workers.

> *The focus of this Insight is on the exponential rise in remote work that was inspired by COVID-19. It is beyond the scope of this Insight to consider in any detail other profound effects that the pandemic has had on young professionals and humans generally including impacts on relationships, mental health, values, and life priorities.*

However, some brief facts and statistics from Asana's Anatomy of Work Global Index 2022[6], two years into the pandemic, and based on a survey of 10,624 global knowledge workers, make for sobering reading:

- The pandemic has made clear that workers are rethinking how they spend their time and the relationships they have with their organizations.

- The lines between work and life are blurrier than ever as they've shifted from one extreme to another. For some knowledge workers, home is the 'forever office'. For others, hybrid working arrangements mean occasional commutes for in-person meetings or even a full return of the five-day office workweek.

- Burnout and impostor syndrome are key challenges that workers face, with 42% suffering both at the same time. Lack of clarity, too many notifications, and hours of meetings all have real consequences beyond annoyance – they directly contribute to these occupational hazards.

- Burnout and impostor syndrome disproportionately affect younger workers, causing low morale, miscommunication, a lack of engagement at work, more mistakes, and attrition. Almost one in four workers experience burnout four or more times per year, while 40% think it's an inevitable part of success.

> *Hopefully your home is not your 'forever office', and 'setting boundaries' is an important thing to do when you start a new job. The pandemic extended that task to all employees working in new hybrid environments.*

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6. Asana, Anatomy of Work Global Index 2022: https://asana.com/resources/anatomy-of-work.

The conclusions of another study show that the pandemic led to an increase in workplace stress:

- About half of the respondents noted an increased workload since the pandemic began and there were noticeable trends in stress factors and COVID-19 related concerns correlating with increased stress.

- The increase in stress could be explained in part by the various ways the pandemic impacted workplaces of all types such as increased workloads, poor occupational autonomy, and the blurring of the line between work-life and home life.

- Research conducted prior to the pandemic had already shown that a noticeable concentration of workers considered their job very or extremely stressful (40%), were burnt out (26%), or were very stressed at work (29%). Since the onset of the pandemic, however, various reasons for stress and burnout materialized.

- Working irregular hours or night shift work was common in many industries, especially manual labour workers (87%), healthcare workers (84%), and business/office service workers (72%).

- Frequent use of video conferencing was found in all industries, and a third of all respondents felt time management was harder while WFH.[7]

If your work is causing you undue stress, then it is up to you to take some appropriate action.

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7. Gerding, T, Davis, KG, Wang, J. (2023) An Investigation into Occupational Related Stress of At-Risk Workers During COVID-19, *Annals of Work Exposures and Health*, 67(1), 118–128.

Remote work before COVID-19

Even before COVID-19, changes in both the nature of work and technology over the 100 years since the Spanish Flu meant that for many people, working from home or other remote locations was increasingly a viable alternative to being physically present in an office or other traditional worksites. That is, remote work practices had been building steadily, albeit off a low base, in the pre-pandemic years.

Before the pandemic, for many workers, being able to work from home one or two days a week was seen as a bit of a perk or a privilege and not something available as-of-right or necessarily available to one and all. Employers often harboured spoken or unspoken concerns and scepticism about worker productivity and engagement when employees were not physically present and under their gaze and immediate supervision in a traditional workplace. Computing and telecommunication developments from the 1980s onwards helped facilitate an uptick in the possibility of remote work being done on an efficient and effective basis. At the same time, many organisations were moving to reduce expensive CBD rents by abandoning individual offices, introducing open plan seating and hot-desking, and outsourcing or offshoring all manner of functions. Such developments also encouraged the rise of remote work.

For some progressive employers, offering not just remote work but flexible working hours, was part of their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to attract certain types of employees including those with responsibilities for young children. Companies such as WeWork arose (and fell!) to provide shared workspaces and offices for start-ups, freelancers, and other remote workers.

Despite these relatively slow moving and incremental changes before COVID-19, for most businesses and workers, remote work was relatively peripheral and not the main game.

Nevertheless, the implications of the steady rise in remote work had caught the eye of researchers well before the pandemic took hold.

In a much-cited 2013 paper[8], Professor Nicholas Bloom from Stanford University and others reported on the results of a WFH experiment at CTrip, a 16,000 employee Chinese travel agency. Call centre employees who volunteered were randomly assigned to work from home or in the office for 9 months. Home working led to a 13% performance increase, of which about 9% was from working more minutes per shift (fewer breaks and sick days) and 4% from more calls per minute (attributed to a quieter working environment). Home workers also reported improved work satisfaction and experienced less turnover, but their promotion rate conditional on performance fell. In fact, the promotion rate of the WFH group dropped by nearly 50% over the ensuing two years.

COVID-19 changes the game

More than four years after the start of COVID-19 plenty of survey data and anecdotal observations show that the world of work has certainly changed and seemingly on a permanent basis. In the United States, which has the most comprehensive data[9], collected by Nicholas Bloom and others, as at July 2024 workers who could work from home wanted to do so 2.7 days a week on average, whilst their employers would prefer that it was only 2.2 days per week. Consequently, the average employer/employee 'expectation gap' is only 0.5 day a week – a considerable reduction from early in the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic,

8. Bloom, N, Liang, J, Roberts, J and Zhichun, JY. (2015) Does working from home work? Evidence from a Chinese experiment, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 130, no. 1, 165-218.

9. Data on the United States is from the monthly Survey of Working Arrangements and Attitudes produced by WFH Research: https://wfhresearch.com.

about 5% of US working days were done remotely, rising to 60% in May 2020 and falling to around 30% in 2022.

In Australia, before the pandemic around 8% of employees had a formal work-from-home arrangement and worked on average one day per week from home. Overall, around 2% of total hours were worked from home.[10] By June 2021, 67% of Australian workers were sometimes or always working from home.[11]

In many environments where remote work is feasible, some form of hybrid working pattern has emerged as a 'new normal' arrangement post the pandemic: two or three days per week work at home and two or three days a week in the office. Employees value the saved commuting time, greater flexibility and many feel they are more productive with fewer interruptions. However, there have been various downsides in remote work including those noted earlier. From an employer perspective, in the early stages of the pandemic with lockdowns and stay at home orders, they had no choice but to facilitate and encourage remote work. As COVID-19 subsided many employers (and not just Elon Musk at Tesla[12]) urged, demanded, cajoled, or begged their employees to return to offices, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Employers worried privately and sometimes openly that remote work was not as productive, organisational creativity and culture were impeded and

10. Productivity Commission, Australian Government. (2021) Working from home Research Paper: https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/working-from-home/working-from-home.pdf.

11. Australian Institute of Family Studies, Australian Government. (2021) Two Thirds of Australians are Working from Home: https://aifs.gov.au/media/two-thirds-australians-are-working-home.

12. Rushe, D. (2022) Elon Musk tells employees to return to office or 'pretend to work' elsewhere, The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jun/01/elon-musk-return-to-office-pretend-to-work-somewhere-else.

workers were missing out on learning and development opportunities by not being in the office.

> *However, as was the case with the Black Death in the fourteenth century, but for quite different reasons, COVID-19 caused a sudden and dramatic shift in power from employers to employees. The right to work from home became something that employees not only now expected and valued but would readily move jobs to attain in need.*

By and large most employers seem to have accepted this development and the challenge is now on a workplace by workplace, team by team, basis to come up with a practical hybrid arrangement that works most effectively for the greatest number of employees as well as the employer. According to Nicholas Bloom, companies shouldn't just allow each employee to decide which days they will work from home or in the office. Rather, to maintain team harmony and bonding, the hybrid days should be agreed at a team, but not necessarily a whole of organisation, level.[13] Consulting firm EY has produced a number of excellent research reports on the new world of work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their 2023 Work Reimagined Survey found that

13. Bloom, N. (2021) How to make WFH work for everyone: https://www.servicenow.com/workflow/employee-engagement/the-future-of-work-is-hybrid-bloom-qa/.

employers and employees have distinctly different perspectives in the 'next normal' of work.[14]

Culture matters with remote work

Many young professionals will know about Glassdoor.com where employees share all manner of good and not so good things about their current and past employers.

Some enterprising researchers collected more than 140,000 Glassdoor reviews from current employees at 52 large US 500 companies that allowed remote work from March 2019 to March 2021, which overlapped with COVID-19.[15] The research found that companies with a positive culture for remote work excelled in three main categories:

- **Interests**: Companies that empower employees to pursue their own goals, interests, and how they conduct their work were viewed more favourably.

- **Work values**: Companies that give their employees freedom to make their own decisions and work in a collaborative environment will have more satisfied employees.

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[14]. EY (2023) *How can a rebalance of power help re-energize your workforce?*: https://www.ey.com/en_au/workforce/work-reimagined-survey.

[15]. Georgia Institute of Technology. (2023) Flexible, supportive company culture makes for better remote work*, ScienceDaily*, 27 June 2023: www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/06/230627123005.htm.

- **Structured job characteristics**: Companies with flexible remote work and hours were more likely to entice employees.

The lead researcher on this project, Dr Munmun De Choudhury, an associate professor in the School of Interactive Computing at Georgia Institute of Technology, identified a difference in the way that certain generations valued the ability to work remotely:

"There are a lot of reports of quiet quitting and the great resignation because millennials or Gen Z value culture a lot, in contrast to previous generations like Baby Boomers, for whom job satisfaction was largely about compensation," said De Choudhury. *"Younger generations might say they're OK with an average salary if they can have that flexibility in work hours, and that's what makes these companies more favorable to remote work."*[16]

Regardless of your generation, if you work remotely, how does your employer stack up against the criteria noted above?

COVID-19 and young professionals

What does the pandemic and the shift to remote work mean for young professionals? Well, everyone will have their own perspectives but here are some general observations. The focus of this discussion is a 'new normal' hybrid world where most people will have some degree of choice whether to work from home, a local cafe or in the office on certain days of the week.

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[16]. Georgia Institute of Technology. (2023) Flexible, supportive company culture makes for better remote work*, ScienceDaily*, 27 June 2023: www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/06/230627123005.htm.

> *Given a choice, why would you go into the office for any more than the bare minimum time required? Unlike older and wealthier professionals with their own spacious homes, many young professionals living in shared, noisy, and cramped accommodation were only too keen to get back to the office. In practice, they didn't really have a choice. But what if you are a young professional who is lucky enough to have a pleasant, spacious, and quiet home and you can self-regulate, be productive and not become a workaholic? Why should you spend time commuting to the office?*

If I was a young professional today, I would use a two-part framework in weighing up the pros and cons of working from home versus trudging to the office.

First, I would ask myself these three questions, specifically in the context of this situation:

- How can I become my best possible professional?
- How can I add the most value in the age of automation and artificial intelligence?
- Does my work bring me enough joy and fun?

How does working from home or working in the office, and the mix of the two environments, impact the answer to these questions for *you*?

Secondly, I would reflect on how these energising eight motivational factors (which will be explored in more detail in a book I have written and am seeking to get published) are impacted for me: *purpose, autonomy, mastery, relatedness, status, certainty, fairness,* and *feedback*.

How does working from home or working in the office, and the mix of the two environments, alter the impact on each of these motivational factors for *you*?

> *Having said all this, I think that if I was a young professional today, I would be spending all, or the great majority, of my working hours in the office. I would want to be around my colleagues and the senior professionals in my organisation as much as possible.*

This would give me the best chance to develop deep, quality relationships, to be properly mentored and to pick up all sorts of skills, experiences and opportunities that arise much more readily in a face-to-face environment than on the end of a multiparty Zoom call. I very rarely worked from home in my first career and never wanted to do so. Call me sad, but I enjoyed the office environment and interacting with people face-to-face. I am quite sure that in my early years I picked up all manner of skills from observing more senior professionals in action. Looking back, I was lucky enough to receive quite a bit of formal and informal training, coaching, mentoring and feedback when I was a young professional. I can't imagine that I would have received the same benefits via videoconferences.

In some of the first post-COVID-19 research on the impact of hybrid working on the quantity and quality of feedback provided to employees, three economists studied engineers at a large technology company. Remote work improved the productivity of senior engineers, but it also reduced the amount of feedback that junior engineers received (in the form of comments on their code), and some of the junior engineers were more likely to quit the firm. The effects of remote work, in terms of declining feedback, were especially pronounced for female engineers.[17]

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17. Goldberg, E and Casselman, B. (2023) What Young Workers Miss Without the 'Power of Proximity', New York Times, 24 April 2023; and Emanuel, N, Harrington, E and Amanda Pallais, A. (2023) The Power Of Proximity To Coworkers: Training for Tomorrow

Any reduction in feedback (one of the energising eight motivational factors mentioned above) to employees should be of great concern to employees and employers. In recent years, there has been a huge debate internationally as to whether employee performance reviews are a good idea, and if so, how often they should be held and the best means to conduct them. It is beyond the scope of this Insight to wade into this murky area, other than to quote a key conclusion from recent (post COVID-19) and extensive research done jointly by the Australian Human Resource Institute and the University of Sydney Business School, on performance management practices in Australian organisations:[18]

> *"Except for ongoing feedback, no practice – traditional or new – was rated as being particularly effective in improving employee performance."*

Bullseye. Whether you are working at the office, remotely or some hybrid mix of the two, hopefully you are getting lots of good quality 'ongoing feedback' from more senior professionals in your organisation.

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or Productivity Today?:
https://nataliaemanuel.github.io/ne_website/EHP_Power_of_Proximity.pdf.

[18]. Kim, S, Shields, J and Chheti, A. (2021) Performance Management in Australian Organisations: Current Practices and Future Plans, A Report on the State of Play, a joint study by AHRI and the University of Sydney Business School: https://www.ahri.com.au/wp-content/uploads/performance-mgmt-report-2021-unisyd.pdf.

On the other hand, recent research[19] by Nicholas Bloom and others found that:

- Hybrid WFH two days a week had no impact on employee or firm performance. There was no effect on employee grading, promotions, innovation, development, leadership, lines of code or other business metrics.

- Hybrid WFH reduced resignation rates by one third. Given each resignation cost a firm about $20,000, this saved millions a year, making hybrid work very profitable.

- Quit rate *reduction*s were largest for female employees, non-managers and those with the longest commutes.

However, research published[20] in 2024 analysed how working from home affected workplace learning in terms of *theoretical* and *practical* knowledge during COVID-19. The results suggest that working from home has a significantly *negative* impact on practical knowledge, but not on theoretical knowledge, relative to frequenting the workplace. The results did not vary significantly between occupations in which working from home is relatively more or less prevalent, nor as regards the size of the company.

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[19]. Bloom, N, Han, R and James Liang, J. (2024) Hybrid working from home improves retention without damaging performance, *Nature*, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07500-2.

[20]. Morlet, GMA, and Thomas Bolli, T. (2024) Working from home is here to stay, but how does it affect workplace learning?, *Swiss Journal of Economics and Statistics (2024) 160:4,* https://doi.org/10.1186/s41937-024-00123-4.

> *Even if you are now having fewer physical meetings with clients, being in the same room as senior professionals and colleagues in your organisation will likely lead to enhanced relationships, better mentoring, and increased skills and opportunities as compared to sitting at home on Zoom calls. Building relationships via videoconferences is a very poor substitute for face-to-face interactions.*

One of the most important tasks that you have as a young professional is to develop a wide range of good quality relationships within your organisation, with your clients and in the wider world. Humans have evolved such that in-person rather than online conversations and interactions are the best way to foster relationships in both our private and work lives. This probably seems self-evident to most people, but there is now plenty of research to support the proposition.[21]

> *I regularly suggest to senior professionals who I now coach and mentor that they spend plenty of time in their offices, and encourage their staff to do likewise, to maximise relationship building, coaching, mentoring and development opportunities for everyone.*

Of course, if you go into the office and nobody else is there, then that is probably rather pointless from networking and learning perspectives, let alone frustrating from

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21. One of the earliest research papers on this subject and published well before COVID-19, Okdie, BM, Guadagno, RE, Bernieri, FJ, Andrew L. Geers, AL, Mclarney-Vesotski, AR. (2011) Getting to know you: Face-to-face versus online interactions, *Computers in Human Behavior* 27, 153–159, had been cited in well over 200 subsequent papers by the time this Insight was posted.

a commute viewpoint. Adopting Nicholas Bloom's suggestion, noted earlier, of organising office workdays on a team basis in a hybrid environment will help with this problem.

The pandemic resulted in a whole slew of books on all manner of issues to do with hybrid work type arrangements. My favourite so far is *Out of Office*[22] by Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Petersen, written during the height of the pandemic. One section of the book is titled '*Don't Leave a Generation Behind*' and recounts some of the stories they heard from young professionals adapting to working from home, and the efforts (or lack thereof) that many employers went to, to make them feel valuable members of their organisations. The authors describe the lost benefits of in-person interactions including socialising, gossiping and after-work drinks, as well as the impacts on organisational culture. They conclude that:

*… many of the perks of truly flexible work - a self-directed schedule, distance from overly chatty co-workers, removed from office gossip and politics - could also work **against** younger employees. If companies don't create intentional, structured mentorship programs to help younger and remote colleagues with on-the-job learning, we risk leaving a generation behind.*

Out of Office is optimistic about the future of hybrid work, assuming employers and employees take the care and the time to figure out the best ways to make it truly effective for all concerned. Although the whole book is excellent, the final two chapters (*A Final Note to Bosses* and *Letters to Workers*) are especially worth reading.

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22. Warzel, C and Petersen AH. (2022) *Out of Office*, Scribe.

COVID-19 and lawyers

A 2023 survey[23] of members of the Victorian legal profession conducted by the Law Institute of Victoria revealed an appetite for developing new skills due to COVID-19. Seventy-seven percent of those surveyed agreed that they needed to develop more skills and knowledge as the result of the pandemic. Skill development rated as one of the biggest issues survey participants felt the need to respond to in their professional lives. It was rated as the third most important issue (15 percent), behind change in workload (18 percent) and change in working environment (17 percent).

Among the changes anticipated in members' professional lives is the increased use of technology. Seventy-two percent of respondents expect this to be a permanent feature moving forward. Sixty-two percent of respondents anticipated the option of working from home to be permanent. Overall, the majority of those surveyed welcomed the opportunity for a hybrid working model, while just 16 percent were not comfortable with this.

Even if you are not a Victorian lawyer, can you relate to the above survey results?

Personal reflections

All things considered, I had a pretty good pandemic. So far, I have had COVID-19 once, with the mildest of symptoms. I set up my second career business in

23. Law Institute Victoria. (2023) Three out of four lawyers feeling the need to develop new skills post-COVID, LIV survey reveals: https://www.liv.asn.au/Web/Advocacy___Media/Media_Releases/Web/Advocacy/Media_Releases/2023/Three_out_of_four_lawyers_feeling_the_need_to_develop_new_skills_post_COVID_LIV_survey_reveals.aspx.

January 2020 just as the pandemic was starting. As a one-man business, I had intended to work primarily from home and visit my coaching and mentoring clients in the city as required or maybe via videoconferencing. Pandemic induced lockdowns had me working from home in any event. As time went by, I got busier and would have many and often lengthy Zoom calls. I have quite a loud voice, and a wife I love. So, eventually, I set up a tax-deductible man cave (oops, sorry, an "office") in the city (Sydney). Now that pandemic lockdowns are a thing of the past, I come into my office most weekdays via the Manly ferry, which is one of the best commutes in the world. On the ferry I read a paper version of *The Australian Financial Review*, as I have done religiously for over 40 years now. Most days I am the only person on the ferry not staring at a mobile phone. Yes, I know, I am a dinosaur. I now do a mix of face-to-face and online coaching, mentoring, and training, to fit in with client preferences.

One of the things I enjoy doing in my second career is to lecture in the MBA program at the University of New South Wales's Australian Graduate School of Management (**AGSM**), which is physically located in Sydney. I became a casual academic and started teaching a class on a face-to-face basis in February 2020. That mode of teaching lasted for a whole three weeks, at which stage I 'pivoted' seamlessly to online teaching in week four and for the rest of the term as the pandemic and associated lockdowns took hold. The reason that the switch to online learning was so seamless was due to the impressive nature of the information technology at UNSW and certainly not due to any IT skills of mine. In 2021, pretty much the whole MBA program was taught online due to the pandemic including my subject. Initially I was not a fan of teaching online. I like a live audience. However, students seemed to enjoy the experience and over time I came to see that online learning, done in a thoughtful manner, could be effective for students and academics alike.

In 2022, my course was offered three times and we asked students whether they wanted to study online or face-to-face. The overwhelming majority were happy with the online option, to the point that we couldn't get enough students to fill even one in-person class. As one of the leading business schools in Australia, the UNSW AGSM MBA program attracts post-graduate students from all over Australia as well as from overseas. In 2022, less than half of my students were living in Sydney and were very grateful that UNSW had developed a good quality online MBA.

Key Takeaways

- **What pandemics do to humans:** as well as killing lots of people, earlier pandemics such as the medieval Black Death and the twentieth century Spanish Flu led to significant and long-lasting social changes. The same thing happened, and is continuing to happen, with COVID-19.

- **The COVID-19 story so far:** COVID-19 certainly has not gone away and has already claimed at least 7 million lives according to official figures, but probably a whole lot more. For many workers, the pandemic has had significant and lasting changes on their jobs. As well as benefits from remote working, other implications include:

- Workers are rethinking how they spend their time and the relationships they have with their organizations.

    - The lines between work and life are blurrier than ever as they've shifted from one extreme to another and maybe (or maybe not) back to the middle.

    - Burnout and imposter syndrome are key challenges that workers face, with 42% suffering both at the same time, and with younger workers disproportionately affected, causing low morale, miscommunication, a lack of engagement at work, more mistakes, and attrition.

- **COVID-19 and remote work:** most employers seem to accept the dramatic increase of remote work, where it is feasible for employees. Best practice is that companies shouldn't just allow each employee to decide which days they will work from home or in the office. Rather, to maintain team harmony and bonding, the hybrid days should be agreed at a team but not necessarily a whole of organisation level.

- **Culture matters with remote work:** companies with a positive culture for remote work excel in three main categories:

  - **Interests:** Companies that empower employees to pursue their own goals, interests, and how they conduct their work are viewed more favourably.

  - **Work values:** Companies that give their employees freedom to make their own decisions and work in a collaborative environment will have more satisfied employees.

  - **Structured job characteristics:** Companies with flexible remote work and hours are more likely to entice and retain employees.

- **COVID-19 and young professionals:** before deciding to work from home as much as you can, ask yourself these three questions, specifically in the context of this situation:

  - How can I become my best possible professional?
  - How can I add the most value in the age of automation and artificial intelligence?
  - Does my work bring me enough joy and fun?

- How does working from home or working in the office, and the mix of the two environments, impact the answers to these questions for *you*?

- Also reflect on how these energising eight motivational factors are impacted for you: *purpose, autonomy, mastery, relatedness, status, certainty, fairness,* and *feedback*. How does working from home or working in the office, and the mix of the two environments, alter the impact on each of these motivational factors for *you*?

- Consider these observations:
  - Being in the same room as senior professionals and colleagues in your organisation will likely lead to enhanced relationships, better feedback and mentoring, and increased skills and opportunities as compared to sitting at home on Zoom calls.

  - Building relationships via videoconferences is a very poor substitute for face-to-face interactions.

  - One of the most important tasks that you have as a young professional is to develop a wide range of good quality relationships within your organisation, with your clients and in the wider world.

  - Humans have evolved such that in-person, rather than online, conversations and interactions are the best way to foster relationships in both our private and work lives.

- Senior professionals should spend plenty of time in their offices, and encourage their staff to do likewise, to maximise relationship building, coaching, mentoring and development opportunities for everyone.

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