Is Working From Home as the Norm Sustainable?

Shôn Ellerton, October 1, 2022

Post-pandemic, the question that is often raised if working from home as the norm is sustainable.

Back in 2016, I wrote an article entitled, *Has the Internet Really Brought Us Any Closer Together?* It points out that we have limitless access to information and the ability to communicate to others around the world in a way inconceivable not many decades ago. However, it comes at a cost. We may also be losing the ability to form strong interpersonal relationships; the lack of time often been given the excuse. Not subscribing to this notion, I quoted in that article,

> *"We are not becoming more time-poor, but rather, we have far more avenues of distractions at our beck and call"*

And, indeed, it is true. During my youth in the 1980s, we had the same amount of time. It's just that it was spent somewhat differently.

Roll on a few decades to the 2020s post the pandemic, many of those in the white-collar and IT-based service industries are now working in a markedly different world from those of yesteryear where Internet services were either non-existent, slow, or expensive. I remember my earlier career days when I had to beg for a laptop and remote access by writing out elaborate business cases to

explain why I, working as a mere technical guy in a telecommunications company writing code to track a national wireless LAN project, needed to have this resource. My manager, while tapping away on his Blackberry, a highly prized tool deemed fit only for senior managers and above, approached me and informed that my case wasn't strong enough. Not many days later, there was an emergency with an application I rolled out, and I was given a call on a Saturday if I could come in to fix the problem being incentivised to do so by being given extra time-in-lieu. Visiting my grandfather on a wet and windy winter's weekend, I explained, in the kindest possible way that jumping into a car and driving from Llwyngwril, a little village nestled on the shores of Snowdonia in Wales, to Hatfield near London, a three-hour journey, isn't likely to happen. As if by magic, on my return to the office on Monday morning, there was a form lying on my desk stating that my request had been approved.

Flexible working hours was hard to come by

Flexible working hours was also hard to come by during those days, which particularly irked me, and no doubt, for those with young children requiring to be picked up after school. Management expected all its staff to be 'bums on seats' in the office from 8:30 to 5 unless required elsewhere or by special dispensation. Early birds, as I was, would enter a tomb-like office around 7:30 in the morning but given the 'evil eye' when leaving at 4. Oddly, those who came in late and chose to work later were given less hassle on the grounds that, often, senior management tend to ruck up a little later, at least in my general experience, and meetings could take place after 4pm. An unfair disadvantage to the early birds insofar that meetings seldom began earlier than 9:30 in the morning. Another unwanted side effect of rigid set hours is the build-up of severe traffic on arterial routes going into and out of the city. Commuting down the A1 into Hatfield during peak hours was bad enough, but for those poor souls moving slower than tectonic plates on London's arterial M25 motorway had it particularly hard.

The pandemic helped to change it all

But thankfully, times have changed. Since the pandemic, if you got a slight sniffle, you *must* stay at home. And anyone else who was near you, *they* must stay at home at well. In reality, there has been a slow movement geared to providing more flexible working arrangements before the onset of the

pandemic. However, in some working situations, it has become the norm to work from home coupled with flexible working hours. It has been a godsend to those with other commitments such as ferrying around children to school and attending to other matters which require being present in the home. Our education system in the West has made it exasperatingly difficult to coordinate school drop offs and work which assume that most of us are still living the traditional system of the husband going to work and the wife staying at home attending to domestic matters, which is truly outdated thinking.

The ability to work remotely certainly has its advantages when seeking skills in the workplace which are hard to come by locally. The mass exodus to move to the cities for opportunity and employment has left many a rural town void of life, with many downtown businesses closing being replaced by cardboard cutout shopping malls scattered around the peripheries. With an increasing acceptance of working from home, many are now choosing to move back to regional or rural communities, which, in turn, helps them to revive. Furthermore, roads leading to the big cities became less congested with the bonus of air pollution reduction and motorists using less fuel. Many would remember some of the amazing images of large cities normally beset by bad air pollution become clear and pollution-free during some of the many lockdowns imposed during the pandemic. Mountains could be seen from New Delhi for the first time in years. It all seems too good to be true.

Herding cats

But how long will this new paradigm of being able to work from home as being the norm likely to last? It depends, of course, on the nature of the work. For example, proofreading someone's draft article for a science journal, working on a piece of code for next week's sprint, or taking calls for desktop support. Such activities can be performed remotely without loss of any productivity. But what of those which require collaboration with others in a team? For example, building processes and sketching out IT solutions using whiteboards while conversing together informally, chatting, and really understanding what others are doing in the room by gauging their body language. Despite the many video conferencing tools available to us, there is no substitute to physical presence in a group to work out a solution. Sure, if those members are geographically scattered, remote working has its part to play. However, it often pays dividends for a company to fly its employees interstate to meet with people in person. For

example, I once held the hat of a business analyst during my telco years and was regularly flown out to the other Australian capitals to gather requirements to build a system to track a major telco project. Those precious few days meeting people in the flesh shaved project time considerably and would, no doubt, have taken considerably longer if conducted over a series of Teams or Zoom online conferences. When leading a project which requires the resource of various skills by those who are unable to physically be present has enormous challenges. The phrase, '*herding cats*', comes to mind.

Many would quit their jobs if unable to work from home

An Australian survey in September 2022 concluded that one out of every three employees said that, if they were told that they were no longer allowed to work from home, would either quit or work elsewhere. I remember having a chat with a colleague about the sustainability of working from home as being a sort of de facto standard in the workplace. He conjectured that there will be, in the near future, more intervention by government to bring people back into the city, where many small businesses have struggled to survive during the pandemic. Government may not be able to enforce this; however, it is more likely that deals will be struck by both big business and government to encourage the return of people to the office. Today's work at home environment positions a substantial amount of trust with the employee to do just that, work at home, rather than skiving off for hours at a time whilst checking the occasional email and respond to a Teams chat conversation on their mobile phones. However, for some, working at home can be very productive if they are not distracted by what's happening in the home.

For some, going to office is a break from home

There are some, myself included, who prefer *not* to work from home. Being an extrovert of sorts, I like to be in the office rather than being clammed up and isolated in the house. Moreover, I like to define my environment as being either 'home' or 'work' rather than that blurring of when work starts and leisure starts. During the pandemic, there was a period of time when only essential workers were allowed to work in the office. Being considered an essential worker during this time, I travelled on nearly empty trains and wandered around a ghost city. I was thankful that I wasn't forced to stay at home. However, a new trend seems to be emerging. The expectation for one's spouse to work from home rather

than 'taking a break' at the office to get away from the activities of home. I've experienced this from time to time as well as a few of my friends and colleagues in similar circumstances.

Virtual business breakfast my arse

We're social creatures but the great reliance on working at home has made some in the workplace lack confidence when donning on business wear, making the journey to work, and meeting up with people in the flesh. In other words, more of us are becoming introverts in an ever-increasing virtual and casual world. I've even come across an ad calling for action to *register now* for a so-called *virtual business breakfast* in which you make your own breakfast at home and join online for a chat with likeminded business people. Sorry, folks. For me, this is cringeworthy to the max! I will *never ever* take part in a virtual breakfast meeting unless someone points a gun to my head, and even then, that's questionable.

Not getting enough exercise

Another problem with working from home is disciplining one's self to take in enough physical exercise. On my phone, I have one of those apps which tells you each day how much you walked and was not surprised to learn that during those days from working at home, I was walking, on average, a half kilometre. For those days I worked in the office, I was averaging seven kilometres. Quite a significant difference. It's just all too easy to sit back at home and raid the fridge and snack throughout the day without taking any extra exercise. The cumulative effect of millions of people being locked away in the home during the pandemic must have had a massive hit on the general health of the nation.

Ways to entice people back to the office

Finally, we need to ask the question. How do we entice people back to the office? As mentioned above, a third of all employees would quit their jobs if they were told they can't work from home.

Let's discuss with what the business can do to encourage more working in the office.

For a start, pay heed to the hours spent on the journey to and from work. Most businesses do not consider this as part of working hours regardless if the employee takes business calls or works on a company laptop on public transportation. Secondly. Offer financial incentives to cover the cost of travelling to work. This could be done in an alternative or indirect fashion to avoid fringe benefits tax. And thirdly, make the office environment a great place to be. Hold regular social functions and food and drinks gatherings. Larger companies could do very well in having their own day care centres for young children.

Some companies have taken the working from home approach as a means to reduce the cost of having an office footprint. With the availability of fewer desks, most tending to be 'hot desks', and the provision of smaller communal facilities, means that overheads may be lower. For some businesses, the model works well enough; however, for those businesses which involve significant client-facing activities, this may not be the case.

One of the biggest hurdles in luring the workforce back to their desks, is the challenge of ensuring that our city infrastructure can meet the demands of the work commuter. Why dress up to the nines when you're going to be hot and sweaty and jam-packed on a metro train? Why sit in the car during a traffic jam while observing a pedestrian alongside walking faster than you can drive? Naturally, if the work can be done from home, what's the point of losing more than three hours of time travelling to and from work? Another hurdle, as pointed out earlier, is the problem with kids at school, or rather kids *not* being at school during the working week and having to be picked up in the early afternoon, long before the work day finishes. We do have afterschool day care centres in most school systems; however, it is an extra cost incurred by the parent. Again, why spend the extra hard-earned money when you can work at home and pick up your child?

Summing it up

As for sustainability of working from home, I think it's more about balance and common sense. I wouldn't want to return to the days where working from home or having flexible hours was frowned upon or difficult to get. However, I would like to see more effort made by society, in general, to make it easier to have that balance. For example, perhaps encourage the development of satellite hubs in outlying suburbs or regional areas rather than concentrating on the nucleus of

congested large cities. Make it easier for working couples with children by providing extended school hours which could also be used for completing schoolwork and taking part in extracurricular activities. And encourage businesses to incentivise their employees to work more frequently in the office.

Ultimately, if we continue the trend in which working from home is the norm, we will become a nation of introverted workers not having the necessary skills to form relationships and social bonds with others. Interestingly enough, Singapore announced late 2021 that working from home will no longer be the norm based on the pandemic. Perhaps, Singapore is waking up to the reality that human beings need to socially interact in person conducive to achieve results faster than if virtually connected. Given the competitive nature of Singapore as a major international financial and business hub, such decisions will, no doubt, trickle down to other cities and nations who will follow Singapore's example to remain competitive in the global market. Given a few years, we will probably keep a healthy balance of working from the office and working from home, but I am almost certain that ditching the working from home as the norm is going to happen.