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**Work from home –
Catch 22**

COVID-19 could permanently shift work patterns as companies forced to embrace remote working by the pandemic may find that their employees do not want to return to the office once the closures are lifted. With contagion risks and fears, this can be an issue as revealed in a survey by VERDE released in March, where 29.7% of employees mentioned that they intend to take leaves to stay indoors as much as possible, and 45.5% intending to request their employers to allow them to work from home (WFH).

The sudden increase in working from home is presenting opportunities as well as problems: on the one hand, solutions such as Slack and Zoom and established giants including Google and Microsoft are offering their tools for free, in the hope that people who start using them in a crisis may carry on once normality returns. On the other hand, employees who always hoped to be able to work on flexi time

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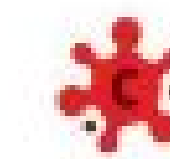
now have that liberty, even if their employers would not necessarily go down that route, did they have the choice. As it increasingly looks as if the situation will not go back to how it was before Covid-19 anytime soon (possibility of a phased de-confinement and to only

have most essential staff in the workplace), many employers face a catch 22 situation

Large technology firms were some of the first to make the switch to remote working for all their staff, building on pre-existing infrastructure such as office

chat groups, remote access to critical tools, and the fact that much knowledge work can be carried out remotely. For these companies, WFH does not change the day-to-day work; it just means that people will be doing it from a different environment. Companies which have established adequate structures and directives on WFH and have a well-oiled system most probably were already applying them for months and probably years.

A number of business leaders with whom we have been regularly speaking tell us that "this is not how I envisioned the WFH taking hold". While they believed that this change "might offer an opportunity for many companies to finally build a culture that allows long-overdue work flexibility which has been on the agenda of private companies and well as for the public sector. However, the issue which has been raised by many business leaders and which we are also encountering is productivity.



Many people have the chance to experience better concentration levels as they no longer are losing one hour or even more in commuting to their workplace in the morning or leaving in peak time to reach home again after possibly one hour or more. Likewise, people now have the possibility of being able to stay close to family members and work with flexibility, which was not there before. This, we thought, might be a chance for a great reset in terms of how we work and what could be adopted for the future and how a better work-life balance could be developed – per se, a win-win situation. However, for every company smoothly moving to the future of remote working, another one is facing problems.

What we observed to be happening today with the coronavirus crisis is principally because of two factors: children and choice. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of working at home for parents with younger children is managing their kids. The closure of schools and transition to "distance learning" for students has forced many working parents to take on the additional job of home teacher. One requirement for a successful WFH program for any business is the need that children are in school or day care. Working from home with your children is a productivity disaster.

The element of personal choice is a factor contributing to the success of WFH that is absent in the current situation. Many employees we spoke to prefer to work in the office, and we estimate this ratio to be quite significant at over 50%. With studies undertaken in organisations which gave the option to employees to WFH, it was observed that generally close to 50% of those very employees requested to return to the office after a few months.

The simple answer is social company. That is why extended period of WFH may not only affect productivity but also creativity and innovation. It has been demonstrated previously that face-to-face meetings are essential for developing new ideas and keeping staff motivated and focused.

Despite the drawbacks, we suggest a few things that can help stem the productivity decline which we have noted over the past couple of weeks.

1. Maintain schedules and video calls

Regular check-ins between managers and their teams; maintaining schedules that strive to separate work life from family life, and collaborating with colleagues on video calls rather than phone calls. "Phone calls make collaboration harder, mentioned a senior manager to us. "You don't know if anyone is really paying attention. While a video call could seem intrusive, it is essential for ensuring the attendees are paying as much attention as they would in a physical meeting."

2. Focus on your most important work without interruptions

Employees should be devoting their energy to top-priority issues. According to some estimates, an employee is only productive on average three hours every day, and these hours should be free of interruptions or multitasking. Even before Covid-19, employees found it difficult to carve out three continuous hours to focus on their core work tasks. With work and family boundaries being removed, employees' time has never been more fragmented.

3. Setting clear expectations in WFH weekly planning

Create a work-from-home plan with your

specific expectations of the program. The plan would include instructions for an employee's daily work schedule, instructions for reporting any time constraints and allocating time where employees feel they can be more productive (so instead of sticking to 9am to 5pm, some employees can prefer to work from 9pm to 11pm).

4. Assessing commitment of employees to maintain productivity from home

One of the most crucial

unprecedented times. They are trusting their employees to get their jobs done when they are not working onsite. However, with so many distractions in this forced WFH situation, this is not very easy, especially when the work mood is not vivid at home.

The lines between work and non-work are blurring in new and unusual ways, and many employees who are working remotely for the first time are likely to struggle to preserve healthy boundaries between their



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elements of WFH, as we discussed with businesses, is that they have observed a clear drop in commitment and output. Employees need to demonstrate more commitment, loyalty, and productivity to their employers as they are counting on them in these

professional and personal lives. The WFH movement intended to maintain output and efficiency during the COVID-19 pandemic could actually generate a worldwide productivity slump and threaten economic growth for many years. This risk remains substantial.