



Telecommuting is not the future

Thanks to the novel coronavirus, telecommuting is having a moment. Very suddenly, millions of American workers are rolling out of bed and into makeshift offices in their living rooms. Sometimes they aren't getting out of bed at all.

As a result, many observers believe huge numbers of us will continue telecommuting long after the pandemic passes. A number of companies are already taking action: Both Twitter and Nationwide Insurance are telling many workers they can remain at home permanently. In a recent poll of more than 500 start-up founders backed by venture money, 70 percent said that their employees would be allowed to continue working at home if they wish, even after their offices are allowed to reopen. "Return to the office now? That's crazy talk," the

Atlantic proclaimed earlier this week. Permit me a moment of skepticism. I know it seems hard to believe right now, but I predict that the vast majority of cubicle slaves will return to the office when this is over. Teleworking has been on the bubble for years. I first wrote about it for the now-defunct *Working Woman* magazine in the mid-1990s, when a mere 1 percent of workers were offered the option. Over the past 2½ decades, the practice expanded from that low base. According to the Pew Research Center, 7 percent of workers had access to flexible work scheduling in 2019 — mostly an upper-income group.

But now an estimated half of all workers are telecommuting, and according to reports, for the most part it's going well. So why not continue the practice, the thinking goes. A company could even save a few bucks on office space!

In behavioral psychology, there's a concept called the recency bias — we recall with most immediacy the recent past. Right now, keeping workers safe from the coronavirus and other illnesses is a primary consideration for employers. And if you read articles predicting the future of telework, you'll see that people are assuming it will be the same going forward.

But mercifully, this is unlikely to be true. And this is when the employer will likely remember that money spent on real estate is often money well spent.

Online communications can lead to misunderstandings and bad feelings — anyone who has spent much time on social media knows that humor and tone are easy things to misinterpret. There are serendipitous benefits to in-person collaboration that no number of Zoom meetings or Slack channels can replicate. A number of companies — Yahoo and Bank of America come to mind — rescinded telecommuting privileges in the recent past, claiming the practice was detrimental to corporate teamwork.

There is also the psychological pull of keeping workers in the same places as the boss. Employers frequently see themselves as better able to monitor and control their employees when they are actually on the premises. In fact, even as mass telecommuting seemed just about to take off, Silicon Valley companies competed to offer up ever more lavish onpremise perks — gourmet breakfast, lunch and dinner, permission to bring a dog to the office — in an effort to up employee face time.

And from the workers' side, we might want to be careful what we wish for. The workplace can be a time and emotion succubus but, as sociologist Arlie Hochschild observed decades ago, it can also serve as a valuable buffer and escape from household tensions. A study by economists YOUNGHWAN SONG and JIA GAO published last year in the *Journal of Happiness Studies* made the counterintuitive discovery that employees who telecommuted were more stressed out than those who left their work at the office. That's likely because telecommuting, which would seem to reduce work-family conflicts, often does no such thing.