

How It Started, How It's Going: Why Past Research Does Not Encompass Pandemic-Induced Remote Work Realities and What Leaders Can Do for More Inclusive Remote Work Practices

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In response to the increasing prevalence of remote work during and after the pandemic, industrial–organizational psychologists postulated a diverse set of recommendations on key actions based on what we already know about remote work complexities that are well captured in the literature. However, as most recent recommendations were made under light of past studies, which elaborated remote work as a voluntary perk rather than a reactive response under the crisis situation, most of the actual challenges that people experienced while working from home remained untouched. Therefore, with this piece, our aim is to present counterarguments to already published recommendations entailing the core difficulties linked to the forced nature of remote work during the pandemic. We believe that the unique pandemic conditions pose particular complexities that go beyond previously identified ones. Thus, there is a need to underline these unidentified obstacles to better equip leaders and employees working remotely during and after the pandemic conditions. We conclude our article by

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recommending leaders to evaluate the contextual differences in their organizational settings and take appropriate actions by taking a critical lens in evaluating the latest research.

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The forced migration to remote work caused by the COVID-19 pandemic remains a topic of concern as its unforeseen obstacles continue to challenge what we know about work environments. The abrupt nature of this transition carried disparaging effects worldwide, which are still felt today, with many businesses, on all industry levels, adopting reactive approaches to stay afloat in these trying times.

Scholars, particularly management researchers and organizational psychologists, have recently reminded us about key actions and critical success factors for remote work arrangements to combat the challenges caused by the pandemic. In addition to specialized field journals, flagship outlets have also attempted to alert leaders and employees about the particular complexities of working remotely and managing virtual teams. While these contributions recapitulate many key aspects, the parameters needed to fully capture the compounding effects of the pandemic fall short in some areas, as the majority of recommendations were made pursuant to the scope of past research published in the last decades. Unfortunately, however, such an approach might be somewhat misfit. Historically, remote work (also known as working from home, telecommuting, or flexwork) has been considered as a voluntary option that provided flexibility, so it has been presented to employees as a fringe benefit rather than an imperative in most global organizations (Gálvez et al., 2011; Major et al., 2008). As this flexibility is no longer the case, new barriers affecting the success of remote work and virtual teams continue to emerge. So, we begin to understand that the pandemic has presented an unprecedented set of new challenges that every individual experienced differently, which virtual team researchers could not imagine and past research could not account for. To this extent, true complexities in today's remote work shaped by the pandemic deserve further attention. We believe that leaders and employees will benefit from the careful evaluation of the complexities caused by the pandemic that was not elaborated on before.

The purpose of this communication is the following: We identify the neglected areas within the bodies of the latest research around remote work after the pandemic. We believe that, as most past studies cover practices and success factors from the Western world, there is a growing need for building awareness that is culturally sensitive and inclusive. To this extent, we touch on some points on how future practices could also cater to non-Western audiences, which are believed to be neglected in psychology research (Gelfand et al., 2008; IJzerman et al., 2021). Second, as a complement to these observations, the subsequent section further elaborates on those limitations by expanding on

points that deserve greater attention for remote work studies molded to fit the global health crisis. These points are critical elements that received no sufficient attention in recent works published in 2020 and 2021. As such, these points include emphasizing greater awareness of the direct and indirect impacts caused by the pandemic, expanding on the forced nature of remote work migration, involving factors surrounding living conditions, and adapting recommendations to fit cross-cultural, cross-national, and cross-societal differences. Context, therefore, becomes a key factor in our investigation when dissecting publications that fail to consider key pandemic struggles yet are quick to offer practical, at times generic, tools. For this reason, we would like to also add a critical perspective, complementing some of the recently published remote work and virtual team studies.

Setting the Scene

Over a year has passed since the COVID-19 virus shook the world. Almost overnight, most countries imposed various forms of restrictions, including curfews, stay-at-home orders, lockdowns, confinement measures, and travel restrictions, all in furtherance of enforcing social distancing and limiting the spread of the dreaded virus (Toscano & Zappalà, 2020). For businesses, lockdowns meant rapidly transitioning operations to a virtual format and fully switching employees to work from home full time. What makes this change-over to the virtual world different from the traditional work environment or even the *voluntary* remote work environment is its forced and abrupt adoption.

Working from home has traditionally been considered one of the most lucrative perks in the corporate world that provides autonomy and flexibility, contributing to work-life balance (Morganson et al., 2010; Nuwer, 2016). Several studies have reported positive attitudinal, behavioral, and work-related outcomes deriving from remote work, so many organizations have already implemented similar opportunities for their employees (see Maruyama et al., 2009). Even though organizations that were already familiarized with remote work management and successfully incorporated this virtual format (whether it be on a full or partial level) were more prepared at handling the sudden mandated transition (Kirkman & Stoverink, 2021; Maynard & Gilson, 2021), it was inevitable for many organizations to complete this transformation due to the crisis situation regardless of prior preparation. The rapid response under the pandemic landscape not only magnifies the existing challenges for remote workers and virtual teams, but also spurs new and unexpected hurdles for all experienced and inexperienced alike. It can be argued that the pandemic catapulted all organizations into this new era, whether they were ready or not. Parallel to these transitions, the remote work model is predicted to become permanent even after the global pandemic ends (Lund et al., 2020;

Willcocks, 2020). Some examples of this shift can be illustrated with major leading companies like Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Uber announcing to keep the virtual format for the coming years. Likewise, recent evidence also suggests that such arrangements are increasing in demand by the large proportion of employees who worked remotely during the pandemic (Taylor et al., 2021). Given the rapid rise of remote work, there is a need for understanding the new set of challenges in order to sustain effective work performance across organizations.

Challenging Existing Recommendations for Leaders of Remote Work and Virtual Teams

One of the most apparent commonalities in recently published studies is that recommendations made for virtual teams navigating through pandemic times are heavily based on lessons learned before the pandemic times. We believe that this constitutes a certain set of limitations for remote work effectiveness during the pandemic and underestimates the fundamental challenges employees truly experience. Undeniably, research conducted over the last 20 years has fundamentally shaped our understanding of virtual teamwork and remote work effectiveness (Dinh et al., 2021; Gilson et al., 2021; Lechner & Tobias Mortlock, 2021). However, the extent of their suitability to the current conditions might be more complicated than it appears on the surface. Consequently, the messages conveyed by scholars could be misleading and counterproductive if the core challenges are not accurately identified.

When researchers initially examined the criteria for success in virtual teams and remote work, technological infrastructure and technical skills became two essential elements needed to coordinate efforts and perform well in virtual tasks (Kirkman et al., 2002). By default, it is also evident that training is another mandatory component to excel in virtual team environments (Townsend et al., 1998). Therefore, under normal circumstances, it is assumed that those who could partake in remote work had both consented to work remotely and access to resources enabling the remote work (i.e., technological infrastructure, equipment, stable internet connection, etc.). With the pandemic, these criteria are no longer a given, as work from home became an obligation rather than a choice. The availability of technological infrastructure becomes affected by external factors that can be out of one's control (i.e., the availability of equipment, adequacy of equipment for work purposes, home conditions, etc.). Sometimes, the availability of space is a major problem if multiple people within a household use the internet simultaneously for school- or work-related activities or there are numerous meetings taking place at home among household members. By the same token, technological or environmental

interruptions, which are frequent in remote work conditions, can also be an obstacle to effective performance (Orhan et al., 2021). Therefore, it is imperative to be aware of whether employees have resources for working from home. Until the recent crisis, remote work preparedness, as a construct, was not the focus of the literature, but it appeared to be a crucial construct that made a significant difference in remote worker effectiveness. This pandemic illustrates that many factors that were taken for granted for remote employees in the past can no longer be secured during the pandemic. From health, safety, ergonomic, and environmental perspectives, researchers cannot compare the ongoing changes in mandated remote work to the traditional scope. Many of these contextual factors that contribute or hinder remote work are still unknown by the existing body of knowledge (Rudolph et al., 2021). Even though recent studies focused on soft and social perspectives of success factors, leaders are still responsible for the most basic needs of employees as physical, environmental, health, and safety-related conditions have appeared to be the most critical factors for remote work effectiveness during the pandemic.

Stated matter-of-factly, certain publications set these past works as the cornerstone for successful remote work management without properly accounting for broader pandemic implications. For managers, it is quite challenging to assume that past strategic maneuvers can calculably deliver optimum results in unprecedented times. Given the unforeseeable changes reshaping society today, we cannot expect the *experience* to be the key to our salvation when it is fair to say our generation has never experienced a cataclysmic change of this magnitude. As a result, we believe that it is still the role of managers to ensure that the most basic needs of employees are accommodated to allow smooth functioning in remote work under restricted conditions. Moreover, assuming that all workers have fair access to resources may be a crucial error that causes inaccurate assumptions and faulty conclusions about performance inputs and outcomes (Kniffin et al., 2021). From conceptual and practical perspectives, virtual teams and remote work may not be new, but remote work under pandemic conditions, with an array of situational and idiosyncratic factors that may impede remote workers from performing at their best, is a fresh new reality. Therefore, even when managers need to consult findings from past studies, they need to be aware and considerate of the entirely new set of complexities, even the most basic needs of their employees that are unevenly distributed (Bapuji et al., 2020).

How Frequently Do We Have to Meet Online?

Another emerging recommendation made for the specific pandemic context is the promotion of increased frequency of regular meetings to keep in contact with employees. Several publications tackling pandemic online work

management repeatedly advise virtual team managers to add meetings in the form of team-building meetings, one-on-one meetings, informal meetings, and regular check-ins to ensure communication and build trust within remote teams (Dinh et al., 2021; Kirkman & Stoverink, 2021; Klonek & Parker, 2021; Newman & Ford, 2021). While these meetings are meant to foster closer work bonds, they often encourage the discussion of personal or non-work-related topics, or “small talk,” in an effort to create more harmonious teams and boost productivity. We find this advice to be cumbersome, given the state in which societies at large now find themselves. Priorities have shifted and work-from-home individuals face unforeseen obstacles to managing everyday life, which can be strained by adding more time connected to work without measuring home-life activity and manageability. Ergo, we make a note of a missing link found in the literature and challenge these recommendations to uphold their value as a pertinent source. In support of our argument, several studies have also proven the inefficiency of more meetings highlighting their negative effects on employee motivation and engagement. Suggestions for informal meetings are repeatedly proposed as virtual “happy hours” and virtual “coffee breaks” to encourage non-work-related discussions where teams can connect in a relaxed environment (Dinh et al., 2021; Lechner & Tobias Mortlock, 2021). According to Dinh et al. (2021), organizing these meetings using video-conferencing technology helps teams build genuine connections outside of the work context and gain “affective trust.” Lechner and Tobias Mortlock (2021) offer a practical guide for virtual managers, which recommends regular check-in with team members, scheduling informal meetings, and hosting virtual team-building events, whereas Gilson et al.’s (2021) guidelines for leading virtual teams include promoting consistent and informal virtual social interactions to compensate for social distance regulations. Research unanimously suggests that one of the most essential components for successful functioning of virtual teams is trust (cf. e.g., Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013; Jarvenpaa et al., 2004; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Olson & Olson, 2012). Holding constant meetings during the pandemic, on the other hand, could lead to adverse implications on trust. For team members who work predominantly on remote basis, the lack of face-to-face contact creates a barrier for building trust, so that informal meetings at initial team-forming stage can foster it (Jarvenpaa et al., 2004). Nonetheless, for workers who already had contact with their team members but had to switch to remote settings, informal meetings can no longer carry the same value. Gálvez et al. (2011) identified that organizations that give more autonomy to workers score better in terms of trust and work–life balance than those that conduct meetings to track workers. If employees feel that meetings have tracking, monitoring, and surveillance purposes, this would lead to a breach of the psychological contract, which damages autonomy and deteriorates trust. Subsequently, these events could further boost stress levels that are already elevated by the health crisis.

Moreover, managers need to make sure that meetings have clear purposes that are relevant for each member. Studies conducted by [Mroz et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Luong and Rogelberg \(2005\)](#) examined the inefficiency of excessive work meetings even before the pandemic, in other words, without the added stress factors. In their study, [Mroz et al. \(2018\)](#) applied theories behind meeting science and summarized the four main purposes for team meetings: sharing information, solving problems and making decisions, developing and implementing organizational strategy, and debriefing after an event. When conducted properly, meetings would serve these purposes, but one of the key aspects of effective meeting execution relates to the number of meetings: “meetings can serve to derail individual and organizational effectiveness and well-being by demanding too much of employees’ time, sometimes for little or no benefit” ([Mroz et al., 2018](#)). [Luong and Rogelberg \(2005\)](#) expand on this by studying employee well-being. Their work concluded that there was a direct correlation between increased work meetings and increased levels of employee fatigue and workload perception. To expand, fatigue mentioned here is associated with frequency of meetings, meaning when interruption of a task leads to greater effort needed to restart the original task, which causes fatigue. This is also the basis behind the theory of activity regulation ([Zijlstra et al., 1999](#)) and action theory ([Zohar, 1999](#)). In the analysis of remote work during the COVID pandemic, [Bennett et al. \(2021\)](#) observed that as a result of increased meetings, workers experience videoconference fatigue, a notable obstacle for performance. Moreover, in terms of workload perception, [Kirmeyer’s \(1988\)](#) theory of attentional capacity explains how the frequency of meetings can lead to unfinished tasks throughout the day, which accumulates and results in the feeling of a greater workload.

Furthermore, managers also need to be aware of the immediate consequences of increased numbers of meetings on employee well-being. Proposed as a tool for effective communication and trust building, we repeatedly see these meetings pose as the anecdote for leading virtual teams but bypass the more pertinent issues surrounding life under the new pandemic constraints alongside their correlating psychosociological themes. Furthermore, online work has the freedom to become as results-oriented as needed to allow for greater work autonomy, especially under the scope of the health crisis and its additional stress factors. Hosting excessive amounts of team meetings can become cumbersome to those that find these unnecessary or “a waste of time,” especially when these meetings involve non-work-related discussions, which is explained further in the following section.

Hand in hand with the increased frequency of virtual meetings, the promotion of additional work meetings ties in with the promotion of involving non-work-related issues in virtual team discussions. We find repeated cases where managers are recommended to ask about personal matters as a way to build rapport and gain trust among members who perhaps

never met face-to-face. More specifically, we are referring to the practice of gaining *personal familiarity*, which discusses hobbies, interests, family, and likes and dislikes in an effort to build stronger team connections (Maynard & Gilson, 2021). Even though we know trust is a critical challenge for virtual teams, within the context of the pandemic, we argue that this recommendation falls short of its assumption that building trust continues to hold the same degree of importance when newly transitioned remote workers are still adjusting to new realities. In other words, we believe the health crisis spurred other greater challenges that would take precedence over gaining personal familiarity with team members considering all the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic. What's more, same as with the subject of increased meetings, we feel there are cases where involving personal subjects could do more harm than good.

To illustrate our point, Lechner and Tobias Mortlock (2021) explain, "sharing personal information can both be about work-related information such as strengths and weaknesses and non-work-related information such as hobbies and our living situation" (p. 4). In Feitosa and Salas's (2021) work, the attempt to bypass the face-to-face interaction needed for inclusivity and involvement resorts to building deeper personal connections via virtual means. By the same token, Gilson et al. (2021) recommend managers and leaders share their personal information, including their weaknesses, to promote psychological safety in teams.

Throughout these recommendations, *small talk* stands out as an enabler for deeper connectivity among team members in virtual formats, which has proven to show positive results in promoting inclusivity, ensuring psychological safety, and building and maintaining trust virtually. That is why online managers have often been encouraged to make time for these types of talks. Since the element of personal interaction that facilitates team cohesion is stripped away in the online world, we understand why personal familiarity (rather than professional familiarity) becomes a stronger driver for building this trust in remote teams (Maynard & Gilson, 2021).

However, the health crisis has certainly reshaped priorities, and while these efforts could be defended as pertinent solutions to the pandemic context for their innovative approaches to gain team familiarity and combat loneliness and isolation, these events could also impede genuine connectivity. While loneliness and isolation are certainly key repercussions of remote work (Orhan et al., 2016), some team members may not favor partaking in these personal talks on account of external responsibilities at home. For example, a study on time-use differences after telework productivity found that women, especially mothers, spent significantly more time on household chores and childcare than men during the pandemic and reported higher levels of unhappiness (Giurge et al., 2021). That being said, it's fair to assume that since the boundaries between work and home life became blurred with new work-from-home orders, time to disconnect from these

digital work platforms becomes equally beneficial, even constructive, to overall team productivity.

Moreover, it's important to note that not all cultures welcome this type of questioning of private life matters. For example, Japanese culture finds it inappropriate to discuss matters about family altogether and dispenses with the notion of small talk in professional business settings. Beyond cultural differences, personality differences can also make a difference in the preferences of personal information disclosures. These limitations not only identify instances where discussions of personal matters are inconducive to effectiveness, but they also showcase instances where the opposite could be true. The summary of recommendations and their limitations are presented in [Table 1](#).

How to Build More Inclusive Remote Work Practices

Several scholars have indicated problems with the disproportionate representation of Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic contexts in psychology research, and these discussions were also echoed in industrial and organizational psychology ([Gleibs & Alvarado, 2019](#); [Muthukrishna et al., 2020](#)). To that effect, recommendations that cater to Western audiences and developed countries have very clear shortcomings when inapplicable to global societies at large, which has become more evident during this pandemic.

We find it necessary to point out some of these relevant shortcomings to, once again, highlight the complexities of this pandemic's impacts and, even more so, consider these impacts in different geographical contexts alongside their respective cultural and societal makeup.

Using the examples mentioned in previous sections, if the implementation of informal meetings and talks about personal issues were to be applied to certain virtual contexts (in an appropriate manner that would be conducive to employee satisfaction), it would be under the assumption that the corresponding culture appreciates and values this type of close communication. This is not always the case when considering cultural values at play. Certain practices like personal familiarity are certainly not common for all cultures, and some may find these practices uncomfortable or even offensive.

Another example can be seen in recommendations that express that successful virtual work management can be achieved through implementing work-home boundaries. These tips are resourceful but solely apply to a specific category of living conditions. To briefly mention a few of these, in his list of best practices for teleworker work-home boundary management, Golden suggests teleworkers should "maintain a separate and dedicated workspace within the home." This workspace should "be away from the household activity, or erect physical barriers, if possible" and "ideally should be in a

Table 1
The Summary of Recommendations and Their Limitations Under the Pandemic

Sources	Recommendation	Intended purpose	Limitations
Dinh et al. (2021), Gilson et al. (2021), Klonck and Parker (2021), Kirkman and Stoverink (2021), Lechner and Tobias Mortlock (2021), Newman and Ford (2021).	Conducting formal and informal meetings, such as virtual happy hours and virtual coffee breaks, increases team, and management interaction to foster trust in an online setting where social interactions are no longer possible.	Increase frequency of meetings to increase virtual communication and trust.	• Informal meetings can elevate stress, as priorities have shifted. Family commitments and individual conditions may not be suitable for meetings. Increasing informal meetings to increase social interactions may not be an urgent need considering pandemic impacts. • Workers may find these informal meetings cumbersome or useless. • Worker fatigue may increase when these meetings take away from allotted task time as they struggle to adjust to the virtual format. • Excess meetings could create the feeling of surveillance and constant monitoring, adding to psychological pressure and stress.
Feitosa and Salas (2021), Gilson et al. (2021), Lechner and Tobias Mortlock (2021), Maynard and Gilson (2021)	Promoting the practice of involving non-work-related matters to increase trust.	Discussions involving sharing personal matters (i.e., family, hobbies, strengths, weaknesses, etc.) are a gateway to building good rapport, familiarity, inclusivity, and genuine connectivity among team members and managers to cultivate trust.	• Personal matters may be on the brink of a collapse because of pandemic difficulties (i.e., illnesses, COVID-19 infections, health-related matters, or even death in the family), and sharing these may not be suitable. • Involving excess amounts of “small talk” can leave workers drained and feeling the time spent was a waste considering pandemic complications. • Certain personalities or cultures do not feel comfortable sharing this type of personal information and may interpret these practices as rude or an invasion of privacy.

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Sources	Recommendation	Intended purpose	Limitations
Dinh et al. (2021), Gilson et al. (2021), Gleibs and Alvarado (2019), Golden (2021), Klonek and Parker (2021), Kirkman and Stoverink (2021), Lechner and Tobias Mortlock (2021), Newman and Ford (2021)	Implement best practices based on the past research.	Effective strategies for online work management proven to give positive results in Western or developed regions are offered as tools for international contexts.	• Lack of sufficient evidence from non-Western work contexts. • Measures and restrictions differ from country to country, so one's organization of work and life matters are subject to these conditions. • Differences in technological infrastructures, socioeconomic conditions, family and living conditions. • Involving personal matters at work does not apply to all international work contexts. • Transitioning to the work-from-home format already takes on a wide range of added stresses given the forced nature of the pandemic but these can be multiplied in different situations when home life vastly differs across different societal and regional contexts. • Cultural approaches and values shape work perception differently there what works within one culture may not be as efficient in another. • Gender roles within different societies are not taken into account in a strictly first-world perception. • Communication styles are not the same across cultures and virtual formats can add another layer of difficulty in communication widening the gap for misunderstandings.

separate room with a door that shuts” (Golden, 2021). We make note of the use of the terms *if possible* and *ideally*, and although these suggestions are referring to cases where these techniques are feasible, it leaves ample room to question how telework management can thrive if living conditions aren’t as applicable. Certain cities, such as Paris and New York, are known for small apartment spaces, whereas living in multigenerational homes is a common practice in certain cultures where family ties are quite strong.

Thus, we make a point to showcase these limitations to further support our argument of one-dimensionality found in the literature. Further investigation within these gaps would contribute to substantial and revolutionary finds through more inclusive research. In other words, we see the pandemic has shed light on opportunities for examination to encourage wholesome approaches that can fully encompass larger situational complexities involving society and culture since the migration to telework continues to be the global economy’s only lifeline. We expand on societal and cultural factors further in the next section.

Emphasizing Greater Awareness of the Direct and Indirect Impacts Caused by the Pandemic

It would be unrealistic to say we truly understand all the complex ways the pandemic has taken a toll on people’s lives. On the surface, we know this global health crisis has compounding effects that continue to raise unexpected circumstances affecting physical, psychological, financial, societal, political, and health-related issues. Yet, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Societies at large were disproportionately affected in unimaginable ways and to different extents. Thus, it would be unwise to oversimplify these direct and indirect impacts.

On a very basic level, we know the pandemic stripped physical human contact and restricted physical mobility triggering major lifestyle changes. As we continue to study the impact of these changes, recent studies reveal the complex ways humanity was affected under this new threshold. Social distancing measures can be directly linked to social isolation and loneliness, leading to stress, anxiety, and depression, whereas continuous confinement conditions have also been known to affect physical and mental well-being. According to Apple’s Mobility Trend Reports (Apple, 2020), April 2020 saw an extremely steep decline in people’s mobility. Evidenced by this study, walking habits within certain cities declined by over 95% reducing physical movement. Parallel to this, the American Psychological Association (2021) reported that over 60% of individuals expressed undesired weight changes since the start of the pandemic. In terms of habits, changes in sleep quality and increased alcohol consumption to cope with stress were also recorded among

unwanted changes (American Psychological Association, 2021; Naughton et al., 2021). In addition, studies show increased screen time during daylight hours had a detrimental effect on the quality of sleep as well as work performance (Guarana et al., 2021). As a result, these peripheral factors propel a snowball effect, creating greater implications and carrying spillover effects into work life.

These findings indicate that the current pandemic has challenged employees more physiologically and psychologically compared to any other kinds of conditions in remote working arrangements. Changes in value perceptions are bound to arise as societies continue to experience these life-altering conditions. Moreover, it goes without saying that these conditions vary from country to country and even city to city. Therefore, our call to action is to view this crisis through a wider lens when concerning telework—not just those factors concerning technology and productivity. Though it may seem obvious, this critical point is fundamental to our initial argument on the problematic reliance on past research, which stresses the need to stray away from conventional thinking, as if relying on past strategies for remote work management will be conducive to success within these new parameters.

Involving Factors Surrounding Living Conditions

During this global health crisis, we've seen living spaces become homes, offices, daycares, entertainment venues, movie theaters, fitness centers, and even, at times, prisons. Some of the more critical disparities involving online work pertain to the merging of work and home life. As these two spheres morphed into one physical location, living conditions now play a vital role in workflow management and, by extension, level of productivity. Factors surrounding living conditions include but are not limited to the type of household, the size of the household, the number of people per household, the presence of family such as elderly and/or children, internet accessibility, availability of separate working spaces from living spaces, availability of home resources, and equipment adequacy for smooth operational continuity of remote work. Also, it would even be wise to make note of those extenuating circumstances affecting telework that are beyond one's control (i.e., internet connectivity failures, disruptive construction work, school closures requiring children to stay at home, opening–closing hours of groceries regulated under curfew measures, etc.). Recognizing these vast differences in living conditions has an important seat at the table when discussing virtual work. Hence, in light of the crisis, recommendations for productivity in virtual teams should include more aspects relating to living conditions, taking into account their diverse circumstances as a primary success factor during these trying times.

Again, this may seem obvious, but we repeatedly find instances where certain approaches recognize the new strains in living conditions without properly applying them to theory. As mentioned throughout this piece, publications continue to offer “tips to success” that fail to include these key underlying factors. In retrospect, if these new living conditions were adequately taken into account, we wouldn’t find recommendations suggesting increased online work meetings that take away from work-infested homelife or tips that offer separation of work and living spaces as a key success driver in navigating telework where boundaries aren’t possible.

Adapting Recommendations to Fit Cross-Cultural, Cross-National, and Cross-Societal Differences

Managers still may find it imperative to recognize the individual conditions of their workers. However, it should be noted that not every culture is open to express their own socioeconomic, geographic, and other personal conditions, and even others may not possess the same comfort level in revealing such information. In a world where socioeconomic disparities are growing, unequal access to resources within and between cultures may create more complex challenges to manage (Bapuji et al., 2020). From nutrition to vaccination accessibility, from access to health care to access to education, from employee remuneration to differences in legal systems, any sort of inequality might create significant barriers to fair and effective management of remote workers.

Pandemic factors are certainly multiplied when considering different countries. For context, when France imposed lockdown measures, people with a government-deemed valid reason to be out required a signed declaration stating their reason and time of outing. On the other side of the world, some Latin American countries, like Peru, imposed alternating gender lockdowns where men were allowed to be out Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and women were allowed Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, with no one allowed out on Sundays. Yet, in other developing countries, enforcing a strict lockdown couldn’t be afforded as entire populations revolted, expressing that shutdowns simply weren’t an option. In such cases, the dominant discourse, especially in the Global South, was “either we die of hunger, or we die of coronavirus.”

Our main remark consists of recognizing when recommendations for virtual team management cater to Western or developed nations, making them unfeasible in other contexts. Moreover, if we revert to the first section, this article once again finds the literature’s tantalizing dependency on “experience” inappropriate given that there is no predictable way any of these restrictions and their corresponding effects worldwide could’ve ever been imagined.

Where We Are Today/What We Know So Far

This element of mandated online work is one that cannot be undervalued as it pertains to greater overlapping implications (Kniffin et al., 2021). There are a lot of reasons why comparing past traditional online work environments to today's online work environment is cumbersome and trivial. First, there is a vastly different undertone when the personal choice is taken away. During the pandemic, remote workers were forced to combine their work and home lives. With certain lockdowns, closures, and restrictions in place, working remotely today doesn't have the same perks as it did in pre-COVID times. Considering the idiosyncratic conditions, and personal and family-related commitments, the boundaries between work and personal lives are extremely blurred (Rudolph et al., 2021). Recent evidence suggests that remote employees could still maintain the previous levels of performance due to the rapid adaptability to these new conditions (Lund et al., 2020).

On the other hand, there are also some conflicting views on productivity. One of the first experimental studies on remote work by Bloom et al. (2015) recorded productivity increases due to work recoveries caused by the time lost in commuting. However, this was far from reality within the pandemic context. In a more recent study conducted during the COVID-19 times, Gibbs et al. (2021) studied the effects of productivity and work-from-home hours in a large Asian IT services company forced to switch to remote work because of pandemic restrictions. Against the increase in the work-from-home hours by 30%, on average, this increase had minor impacts on average output. This became of the areas of interest for the study in order to analyze the trifold relationship among time saved on commuting to work, increase in work hours, and low productivity. They observed that lockdown restrictions and closures of leisure activities played a role in the decision to increase work hours, making this evidence-based observation another supporting reason for further analysis and unique treatment of the COVID-19 work environment. Additionally, work-family conflict and physical isolation were found to be detrimental to performance (Galanti et al., 2021; Orhan et al., 2016).

As confinement measures, social distancing, and mask mandates rule our lives (aptly defined as the "new normal"), it's clear why people could suddenly feel imprisoned in their own home. For this reason, there needs to be an overarching awareness that lifestyle changes suffered on every level because of the pandemic, including the decision to opt-out of online work. These circumstances may inevitably cause discontent to spread to employee dissatisfaction. Therefore, adapting managerial strategies under the assumption that these unforeseeable changes are not always favorable would be a strategic resource for monitoring employee satisfaction and turnover in virtual teams.

Though we find this point on including the nature of forced migration to online work obvious to the times, the reliance on past research that seeks to treat voluntary virtual work in the same way as today's virtual work speaks volumes on where the literature stands in practice. Again, given what we know about the compounding effects of the pandemic, the boundaries of remote work are much different than our initial assumptions before COVID-19 took over.

Even today, over 2 years since the start of the pandemic, COVID continues to reshape the modern work environment. Arguments postulating a foreseeable end to this crisis usually tend to evoke an eerily optimistic predisposition alluding to the idea that society will soon return to "normal," or as things were before the crisis. The fact is that this revolutionary trigger point for virtual work benchmarked future developments in the field, as we've continued to see businesses capitalize off of these positive impacts on effectiveness and productivity. In fact, it is through these ongoing changes set forth by the health crisis that we can study some of the reactive approaches that have led to today's favorability toward the remote work format, a growing hesitation toward returning to the traditional work model, and a strategic inclination in support of the hybrid virtual and in-person format. While these new discoveries may not apply to all industries, these interesting findings highlight that we are certainly still part of an ongoing learning process. New research should capture the complexities caused by hybrid working conditions that are trending globally.

Moreover, it would also be wise to recognize even today's landscape as yet another phase within the health crisis, where, though it may not seem as drastic as the initial shockwave, it is still one that includes its own set of unprecedented challenges. Today's reality includes discussions on booster vaccine requirements, antivaccination movements, and revised isolation orders to name a few. Yet, while this may be the case for some countries, to say we have surpassed this crisis would be to gravely undermine those countries that are still experiencing contrasting levels of disparity and are following steadily behind—playing "catch up," if you will. While some countries have eased lockdowns or completely dispensed with mask mandates, others in the developing world are still struggling to cover second vaccine doses, COVID testing accessibility, and the growing rate of unemployment. With this example, we are certainly making reference again to the direct and indirect impacts of this pandemic, which are sensitive to country-specific struggles, and we'd like to use this "COVID-ending" ideology to once again highlight the importance of straying away from discussions that and tend to be one-sided and only take into account those struggles primarily pertaining to developed nations.

The Bottom Line

The discoveries exposed within this investigation substantiate our main takeaway for managers and leaders: to direct telework adaptation efforts to fit a more introspective approach adapted to include an individualistic framework that is fitting to the times. Using a criterion centered around employees' individual situation that takes into account cultural dynamics, gender struggles, political implications, internal corporate culture, and health-related impacts caused by the pandemic, managers can gauge what works best for their online team. In this metric, these determinants hold critical implications for managers to judge how well certain tips or recommendations may or may not apply to their specific workforce. Simply put, we believe a case-by-case perception is needed to make remote work practices more inclusive. Transparency and communication, therefore, become two key pillars that should also be implemented appropriately according to team dynamics to find the most suitable adaptation strategies for the respective organization.

While this may seem arduous, we believe this can be achieved through humane and responsible management by safeguarding their workers' health and dignity. In fact, this approach certainly holds more warranty than assuming all proven-effective online adaptation strategies would apply to all online work environments globally. We would even take it one step further and argue that it's about falling back on those basic leadership interpersonal soft skills and taking them to a deeper level. By extension, this approach simultaneously considers the current and future stages of the pandemic as we continue to pass through uncharted territories. Even in 2022, we are still facing unprecedented phases within this pandemic, such as emerging COVID mutations, newly lifted or implemented lockdown restrictions, mandated booster vaccines, political strains between vaccination and antivaccination movements, increased hybrid working preferences, and home office trends impacting office space real estate. Also, on an industry level, while we've seen some businesses financially flourish during the health crisis, other industries like travel, leisure, dining, and small mom-and-pop businesses are still on the fence. Therefore, it would be unwise to believe the pandemic is reaching the end of its course when, on an international scale, countries are still battling these various aftershocks to different extents. Even in a future where the COVID-19 virus has been eradicated, it isn't fair to assume that things will go back to as they were before the pandemic as far as modern work environments go. Monitoring these trends and how they impact specific virtual teams continues to be a crucial piece of this puzzle. For now, we are still not completely in the clear, and remaining mindful of how much we have yet to learn about the power of virtual work environments is evidently the key to unlocking its full potential.

Conclusion

Above all, the very essence of this piece is to highlight the severity of the ongoing global health crisis. By exposing the overarching themes of oversimplification found within some of the most recent academic and scientific publications pertaining to remote work management, we stress that this crisis caused critical and unforeseen changes to work environments and challenged what we knew about the online work format. Many work-related dynamics that we took for granted were threatened in various ways. The contingencies under the pandemic context are so unique that neither past learnings nor generalizations could address the extreme circumstances each individual faces.

This pandemic has demonstrated the quintessential need for improving employees' physiological and psychological well-being regardless of under which contexts and conditions remote workers operate. As eloquently noted by Bal (2020), well-being is beyond individuals' control, but organizations have no right to deplete their employees' well-being. Organizations cannot function without human factors and without securing the very basic needs, the proper functioning of organizations is highly unfeasible. Thus, under extreme circumstances, which influence each individual and each region differently, one-size-fits-all approaches would eventually collapse, and many recommendations inapplicable at their core. In this regard, managers need to carefully evaluate the individual circumstances of their employees. It should be noted that one-size-fits-all approaches in remote work management may elicit negative consequences that can potentially cause stress and tension. To offer our own set of recommendations would be to contradict the premise of our original argument: That the pandemic's multidimensionality and compounding direct and indirect effects make addressing work from home a completely different playing field.

In closing, the current agenda requires unconventionally critical thinking and scientifically sound, rigorous approaches that account for the underlying factors and conditions set by the current crisis. In our quest for answers, expecting the same strategies to deliver the same results could gravely misconstrue the more pertinent and more dire needs of the pandemic dimension, which demand more human-oriented approaches. Therefore, when evaluating the past research for effective functioning of remote teams, leaders need to be aware of the differences in contexts so that they could customize their strategies under the light of conditions that are dramatically changed by the external shock of the pandemic.

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