The unspoken realities of remote and flexible work

Acknowledging the paradoxes of dislocation, disembodiment and disconnection.

For some of us, pre-COVID19, remote and flexible work had a romantic allure to it. We imagined that it would afford us autonomy regarding our time; autonomy regarding our work, family and personal life priorities; autonomy on how and where we work; and autonomy to create personalised spaces for being in the flow, being productive, and learning, all at the same time. However, as we settle into the realities of remote and flexible work, our experiences seem variegated and are not exactly as we imagined it. We are beginning to come to terms with these realities and the nuances and paradoxes thereof. For example, in various forums, HR practitioners are beginning to speak of the **psychological trials and tribulations** they and the teams in their organisations are experiencing with remote and flexible work that goes with their **digital toils and triumphs**. (That is, for those segments of the workforce who can and have the necessary resources, which brings to the fore the issue of digital inclusion.)

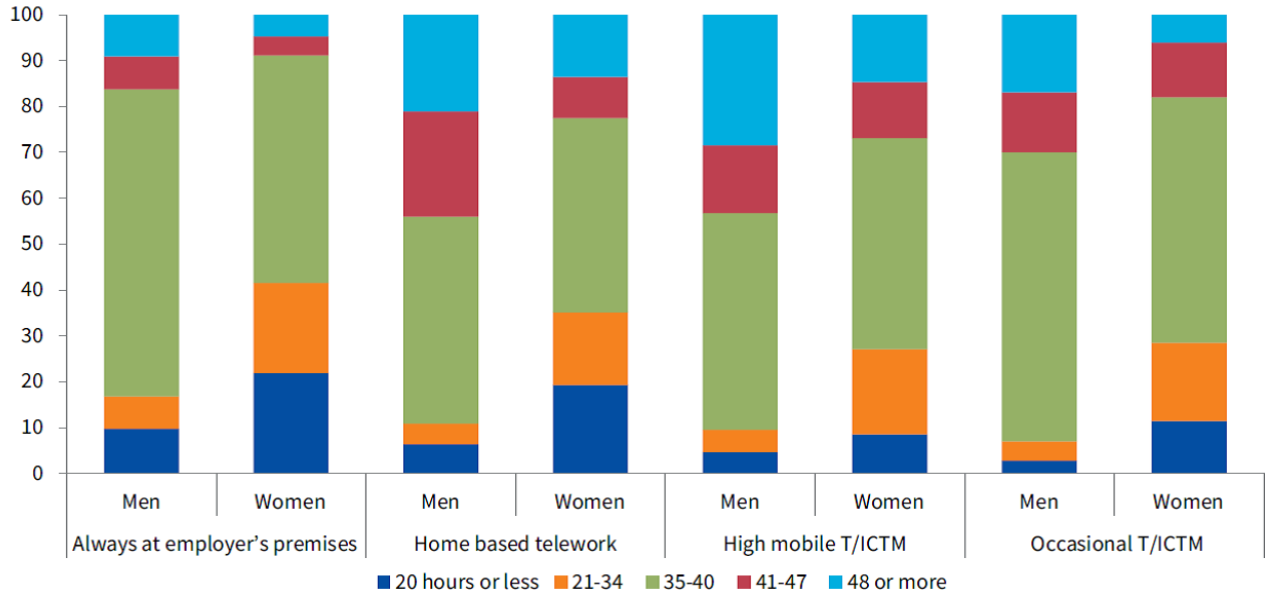
Many organisations and their teams have felt as if they have been thrown in the deep end, as the lockdown to address the COVID-19 pandemic has dislodged them and confronted them head-on with another form and medium of work: remote and flexible work. In this feeling of being thrown and the experience of 'thrownness', there is the initial anxiety, curiosity and willingness to experiment, but, in time, also the resurgence of the more familiar institutional practices, behavioural patterns, and culture. Thus, one finds teams experiencing the uncoupling of work from the space and confines of the office; uncoupling of work and how their value is framed and measured from the standard office hours; and

uncoupling of their output and outcomes from the quantity of working hours. At the same time, though, in these very teams the organisation's pre-lockdown institutional practices, behavioural patterns, and culture are creeping back. These are also now shaping our perception, management and measurement of remote and flexible work – where, for example, time-based measures of work, value and output in the form of hours at the office (now hours online) and hours worked (now hours at the computer and on applications) are returning. HR practitioners are sharing how some managers may react to the uncoupling, and their difficulty adjusting and adapting to it, by doubling down on traditional ways of managing. That is, increasing their tasking of their staff in the current operations, setting many targets in reaction to the uncertainty, and micro-managing staff's time and work.

These are leading to various paradoxes regarding time, work, and quality of life and wellbeing. For example, individuals may experience the dilemma of how to take ownership of and use flexible hours when there is also the expectation of being always online and available. It is important to note that this has been a global phenomenon with remote work even before the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. An example is the below graphical representation from a Eurofound and International Labour Organisation (ILO) 2017 report that synthesises research conducted in Asia, Europe and the Americas[1]. The graph illustrates the different categories of remote work and the ratings on number of hours worked across these categories in contrast to non-remote work. The graph also illustrates gender differences.

[1] The report defines remote work as telework and ICT-mobile work, meaning the "use of ICT – such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers – for the purposes of work outside the employer's premises" (2017, p1). The report classifies "T/ICTM employees in relation to their place of work (home, office or another location) and the intensity and frequency of their work using ICT outside the employer's premises. The following groups were identified: regular home-based teleworkers; occasional T/ICTM workers, with mid-to-low mobility and frequency of work outside the employer's premises; and high mobile T/ICTM, with high frequency of working in various places, including working from home´(ibid).

Figure 5: Percentage of employees by type of T/ICTM, gender and working hours, EU28



Source: *EWCS 2015.*

Source: Eurofound and ILO (2017)

Employees may feel pressured to be always 'present', albeit in a new form with remote labour and especially where they are being micro tasked, monitored, measured, and managed digitally. This pressure increases when there are multiple taskings by different line functions, managers, and stakeholders which are not co-ordinated and prioritised. Here, the use of digital-based team dashboards or planning applications can assist, but these could also paradoxically create more pressure as it 'rationalises' and makes unrealistic taskings and targets appear sound and doable without due consideration for the employee. In particular, the digital presenteeism and the intensification of work is resulting in extended working hours and prolonged screen and virtual time (which was also a finding in the previously cited report and illustrated in the above graph). This can compromise employees' wellbeing, productivity, and the balance between, and possible enrichment of, family and work (see the article on sustaining ourselves and thriving during the lockdown). It could marginalise concerns for employees' safety, ergonomics, motivation, engagement and mental health.

There are three wellbeing and productivity paradoxes related to remote and flexible work that are emerging. These are the paradoxes of dislocation, disembodiment, and disconnection in a digitally connected world.

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Dislocation

Being thrown into remote and flexible work, we have been unmoored in terms of our familiar space, tempo and routines. While working remotely and virtually and attending virtual meetings we feel that intellectually we are in one space, emotionally in another, and physically in a different space where family, personal memories and memorabilia, office equipment and the proximity of our private spaces converge. That is, we feel as if our minds, emotions and bodies are in different spaces and at different tempos. Thus, we feel present and we feel others are present in virtual meetings, but not quite as present as normally in social or face-to-face meetings. We may also feel that there are clear boundaries, but also blurring of boundaries as we feel different parts of us are in different spaces. This may explain in part the feeling of depletion and digital fatigue some of us experience after lengthy video conferences. We are primarily embodied and social beings, and we are, therefore, needing to work harder to process, make sense and navigate the virtual work and world. We are also working hard to figure out our needs, emotional and bodily cues and triggers, and how to meet our needs in the virtual work and world.

"[..] we are fooled into believing we have more and stronger social connections in the online world, but they don't trigger all the positive biological responses that real social engagement brings" (Mortensen, 2020)

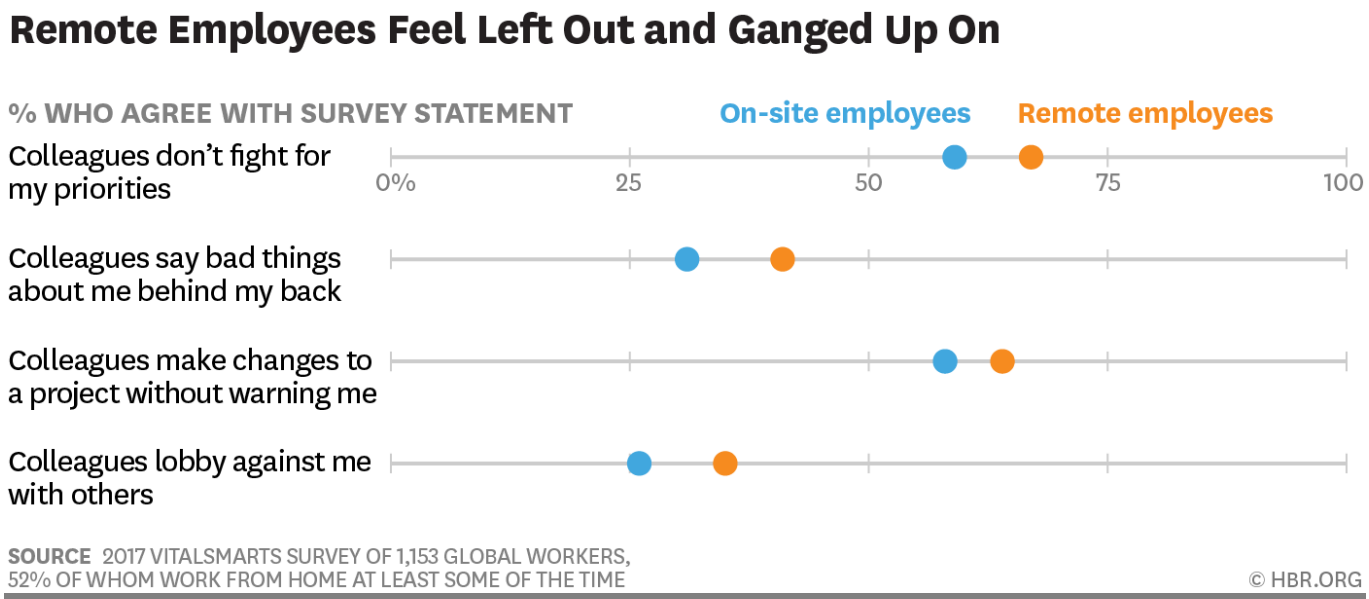
Disembodiment

Virtual working and worlds may lead to the illusion that we can separate out our thinking, feeling and physical being. This is more so when using team collaboration platforms and digital avatars or other digital rendering/representations of ourselves. However, our brain and bodies and our cognition, emotion and physicality are integrated. This means that our agency is embodied and relational in nature (Jivan, 2017). This is understood, implicitly or explicitly, in design thinking and holistic understandings of leadership, teams, motivation and engagement. It is explicitly articulated in the focus on embodiment and how we are socially embodied and embedded in the various social science theories and research – these are referred to as the 'turn to the body' and the 'performativity turn'.

To sustain our sense of agency and thrive in virtual work and worlds we need to first understand ourselves as embodied beings, with emotional and bodily cues and triggers. This means emotional intelligence and care towards oneself and others are as important in the virtual world as in the real world (see the articles on understanding our emotional reactions and the neuroscience of managing our emotional reactions for a more detailed discussion on triggers and how we cannot separate cognition, emotion and physicality). It also means that the tendency to be task-focused in virtual meetings and engagements can come at the expense of relationship development and management. These are issues of leadership, trust and motivation, which can negatively impact our own and others' productivity over time.

Disconnection

The paradox then of virtual working and worlds is that being digitally connected does not translate into embodied and social connection. It may lead to the opposite, meaning it may engender increased feelings of isolation, thoughts of being left out, a mindset that you are 'left to your own devices', and not being able to identify with the team and organisation. This can be seen in the survey by Green and Maxfield (2017), as in the graphical illustration below.



Source: HBR/Grenny and Maxfield (2017)

The challenge is to create a productive space and mindset while also ensuring that we create spaces and times for social, embodied connections (see the article on spaces and mindsets). However, with the physical distancing required to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, the simple acts of connection such as handshakes is not possible. However, we can still connect by voice and use digital platforms in a more human-centric manner. That is, shaping technologies for our use and needs rather than allowing technologies to shape us and our needs, emotions and ways of connecting. We are not emojis or memes, even if at times it does feel like it. We are much more complex beings and we require and can use various forms of nourishment, emotions, tools, mental models, connections, and relationships as we navigate and interact with the world.

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