

Work is something you do; it is not a place



The Covid-19 pandemic has modernised thinking about the workplace. The notion that “work” is something you do and not a place you go to, is a major mindshift that is setting in.

In his book, *Maverick*, Ricardo Semler describes an unusual workplace which, in 1993, was far ahead of its time. Now, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, *that* workplace suddenly makes sense.

Semler, a Brazilian businessman, transformed a small family-owned manufacturing company, Semco, into one of Brazil’s largest conglomerates thanks to his unorthodox approach to the workplace.

Among other things, Semco encouraged employees to work from home, where possible; fully-fledged flexi-time was introduced without any working hours being prescribed – it was flexible to the extent that even production teams could determine their own working hours; annual leave of 30 days was compulsory to enhance health and increase productivity; and factory workers were allowed to introduce adjusted production targets to increase their income.

To counterbalance all these freedoms a zero-tolerance approach was followed as far as dishonesty was concerned, salaries ranged from between 75 and 125% of a basic salary, depending on the company’s profitability, and there was no guarantee of job security.

Covid-19 and the new normal

Although the current practice of working from home came about as the result of health concerns, this commonality with the Semco approach will become part of the new normal at many workplaces after

Covid-19, but also because we are entering the era of the virtual workplace with Generation Z as the new employees.

In this new workplace reality, increased productivity, among other things, will be vital for a sustainable business. Leading cell phone and pension fund companies, as well as banks have already indicated that their sales performance and customer satisfaction have increased since remote working was implemented, and this can be attributed to the fact that employees have been working from home. While burn-out is a risk when working from home, the employees involved may have been motivated to work harder to justify the practice of working from home and possibly also because workplace-related disruptions and time spent on travel could be converted into productive time. Local companies such as Capitec and Vodacom have already informed their employees that a flexible work environment is part of their future planning, while Facebook and Twitter have already introduced remote working on a permanent basis worldwide.

Remote working has advantages and disadvantages for employer and employee alike which must be considered though.

Advantages and disadvantages

Abuse of the freedom to work from home, a weakening of workplace dynamics and team cohesion, and conflict arising over employees who can benefit from the advantage of flexibility over against those who cannot, are common concerns.

As far as abuse is concerned, most workplaces would have learnt by now, after a few months of lockdown, how to measure employee output and extend staff policies to cover working from home. If there are employees who cannot be trusted it raises the question why those individuals had not been taken to task long before lockdown.

Secondly, regular online and mandatory physical contact sessions can ensure that colleagues stay in touch with each other and do not become alienated from each other. For example, a leading banking group is considering a weekly split of two days in the office and three days working from home.

Ironically, thanks to the use of virtual media more interaction is taking place between colleagues in many instances.

Thirdly, the tensions between workplace-based employees and those who can work from home can be counteracted by implementing Semler's practices that benefit production workers. Although not ideal, amended conditions of service could also be considered for those who are working mostly from home. A rise in remote working brings a further mix of economic pros and cons which, unfortunately, may lead to job losses downstream. Workplaces that experienced office space challenges before the lockdown period, may have found a solution by having employees work from home and by applying the hot desk principle for times of compulsory office work. However, this will have a negative impact on the commercial property market.

At the same time, travel expenses incurred for the attendance of routine meetings will start to come down as meetings are now virtual. As a result, aviation and the hospitality industry will be negatively impacted. Moreover, a decline in commuting between home and work could also mean a drop in the demand for all services related to vehicle repairs.

Times of compulsory or voluntary remote work could prompt employees to do more research and deepen their theoretical knowledge which would be to the benefit of the employer. In March this year, *The Washington Post* reminded employers of the fact that in 1665, during The Great Plague of London, Trinity College (Cambridge), as is the practice now, sent Isaac Newton home and it was during this period of working from home that he developed his theory of gravity and motion.

Working from home will be part of the new normal. The employer of choice will be the one who is going to embrace this flexibility. Many employees are likely to forfeit compensation for an opportunity to reduce the stress that comes with commuting and to improve work-life balance, while employers could benefit from increased productivity and a more contented workforce.