



Things people miss most about working in the office

49%

miss seeing their colleagues and want to get out of the “bed-couch-shower-kitchen-desk” cycle.

44%

miss office banter with colleagues and team mates.

26%

miss in-person meetings.

20%

say they find it difficult to “unplug” when they work from home because there’s no clear separation between “home” and “work”.

14%

miss the water cooler chats; it’s easier to talk to colleagues in the office.

14%

miss the stimulation of the office environment and the chance to “run into” someone.

11%

feel lonely working at home and believe seeing people around you working boosts motivation.

— FlexJobs survey

we first started working from home, those who had wanted to make this change — but weren’t permitted to do so before — felt a sense of elation, which was intensified by a feeling of gratitude that they were still able to work at a time when so many people were losing their income and jobs.

“And then reality set in and we started facing the fact that those of us who’ve worked from home for a while understand — not everyone has the personality that’s suited to working from home,” says Landman.

Extroverts often struggle to work from home because they thrive on being surrounded by the energy of other people, while introverts often perform better in the domestic space because they can channel the energy they’d normally have had to expend on others into their work.

There are also nuances in the way people’s characters come into play. People who tend to prefer structure and need guidance struggle to work from home because the office presents a sense of safety. On the other hand, people who are more independent-minded and don’t enjoy being micro-managed can play to their strengths in the more flexible environment they have at home. On top of this, the kinds of distractions that interrupt your work concentration are different at home — it’s easy to tell a colleague that you need some time and space, more difficult to tell your child who needs help with home schooling or a domestic worker who needs something urgently from the store, to leave you alone. We’ve also given up the ability to ask for help or brainstorm on the spot by working from home.

“Everyone was forced into one mould and told ‘you work from home, that’s your space, be productive’. When you don’t have positive energy coming from that environment — whether it’s in the company of your husband or children, or whether you’re on your own — it impacts on you significantly. In this case, there’s an increase in emotional distress and a drop in production that overrides ability.”

A hybrid model

Judging by the number of people, both globally and locally, who want to continue working remotely, Van Blerk says this trend is here to stay — but not necessarily on a full-time basis. “A hybrid working arrangement is going to be the model of the future of work,” he says.

Landman agrees but says this is probably the hardest approach to follow. “It’s complex and I don’t think anyone has cracked it yet.”

But despite the difficulty of navigating a mix of traditional office life with the flexibility of working remotely, from a strategic point of view she thinks a full-time move back into the office would be unwise. “You’d lose the people who are flourishing from home — the ones who’ve realised that they can be digital nomads and still be effective.”

Not only is there a risk of losing key talent if you’re not going to be flexible, it’s also a smart move if you’re serious about attracting top talent outside of the 10km radius of the office.

A new set of challenges

Going forward, companies will start seeing a new set of

challenges: they need to redesign their work models from the perspective that this is a new reality that requires new strategies. Landman insists that you can’t rely on what worked before, but going completely virtual is also not the solution.

“The realisation that there’s a whole new way of approaching the workspace with new capabilities and new frameworks is placing pressure [on companies], even more than individual differences in personality between employees,” she says.

And through it all, those in leadership and management positions will feel another level of pressure. “There’s an interesting cultural and leadership element to consider where the workspace leaders of the future will need to be prepared for this model,” says Van Blerk, adding that this model will be based on trust and will be technologically driven.

Apart from navigating the logistics, there’s also managing employee’s experiences in a hybrid situation. For example, will those working from home feel threatened by the idea that those working in the office, and who are therefore more visible, may be given preference when it comes to promotions and raises?

As for what lies ahead, the wheels have been put in motion and the transformation has happened. Now it’s about figuring out what’s sustainable — from the perspective of both employees and employers.

“We’re all finding our way in this, so it’s going to involve experimentation, monitoring success and seeing how it goes,” says Van Blerk.

Remotely good at this

Rudy van Blerk’s four practical tips for managing a remote team

1 Establish the right daily routines. Consider agile work principles such as daily standups with your team, end-of-day check-ins to see how everyone fared, explicitly agreeing on deliverables and being very clear on the outputs required.

2 Be explicit about the team’s calendar. Calendar blockers are an important tool to ensure the wellbeing of employees. Agreeing on lunch times — and blocking out this time so as to not schedule any meetings — and the start and end of the day can be beneficial in managing your team’s day-to-day schedule.

3 Create a space for informal connections. Until such time as it’s safe to meet in person once again, it’s important to schedule things like Zoom coffee catch-ups or a team lunch where everyone has lunch at their desk together.

4 Set out the right tools to ensure that your team can be productive — and make sure that your team uses these tools. Things like Slack or WhatsApp can ensure that there’s close communication besides e-mails and formal meetings.

WHAT WORKS FOR YOU

Office work changed in one fell swoop when the world locked down to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus in March 2020. Now we have to figure out what to keep and what to ditch of the new ways of working

TEXT: SANET OBERHOLZER
ILLUSTRATION: SIPHU GGWETHA

A few days ago, a colleague had become desperate. “I’m making burgers,” he declared. It was 10am on a Monday morning. Of course, his desperation to cook burgers for an early brunch was motivated less by a sudden craving and more by a desire to escape the everyday monotony that’s become our lives, working from home.

I commiserated, suddenly overwhelmed by the thought of spending another week confined to the spare-bedroom-turned-office where I work, day in and day out, speaking to my colleagues via the occasional Zoom call or WhatsApp message.

On any given day, the most variation I experience is in my choice of the YouTube stretch routines I’ve had to start doing to loosen up my muscles — stiff from too much inactivity.

But if you asked me, I’d say I prefer this working from home set-up, flaws and all. The nerves of steel I used to navigate the daily demands of traffic disintegrated during those initial, production-intense, pyjama-wearing days of lockdown and I don’t have the appetite for the daily commute anymore.

But it’s the flexibility that’s been the biggest game changer for many people who’ve adapted to working from home, though that comes with a loss of socialisation which can have an adverse mental effect on us. And flexibility doesn’t necessarily mean that working lives have become easier or better. Working from home makes it harder to draw boundaries and to separate work from the rest of the day. It’s also reinforced the gendered division of housework, the so-called “second-shift” required after primary work duties are done.

Current trends

According to a study conducted by management consulting firm Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and The Network, a global alliance of recruitment websites, the Covid-19 pandemic has “democratised” the ability to work from home.

“Working from home isn’t new, but before the pandemic many companies were treating it as an occasional practice allowed for certain employees,” reads the report released in March this year.

Analysing the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has changed work models, the researchers surveyed 209,000 participants in 190 countries. Of the 1,421 South African participants surveyed, 44% said they’d prefer working from home full time at the end of the pandemic. Of the total participants globally, 89% said they expect to

be able to work from home at least some of the time.

These numbers might seem insignificant, but it’s only one study that reinforces the idea that people are ready to leave behind the rigid demands of cubicle-ridden, full-time office life.

The nuances of working from home

If anything, working from home during the pandemic has shown us that remote work is possible — but it’s also highlighted the flaws.

A study conducted by the US National Bureau of Economic Research in July last year found that the average workday of 3.1-million employees in North America, Europe and the Middle East increased by 48 minutes during lockdown, in part due to more e-mails being sent after business hours.

It was not immediately clear, the authors wrote, whether this increase was a negative or a positive indication of employees’ wellbeing. “On one hand, the flexibility to choose one’s working hours to accommodate household demands may empower employees by affording them some freedom over their own schedule.

“On the other hand, the change in work schedule may be a consequence of a blurred distinction between work and personal life, in which it becomes easy to overwork due to the lack of clear delineation between the office and home.”

But a study released by the Becker Friedman Institute in May this year paints a bleaker picture. According to the authors, the personnel and analytics data of the more than 10,000 employees they considered at an Asian technology company suggests that the working day of the employees surveyed increased by 30%, with an 18% increase in work after business hours. However, their output didn’t change all that much. In short: most people are not more productive working from home.

Rudy van Blerk, principal and recruiting director at BCG South Africa, says: “Employees tend to feel that they’re more productive and more effective working from home, but in our discussions with companies and some other research we’ve done, the productivity of employees working from home is still a bit of a question mark.”

Not a ‘one-mould fits all’ situation

It didn’t take long to start seeing the blurring of the so-called work-life balance and a drop in production, but in addition, employees have also quickly developed Zoom fatigue and have become plagued by the “always on” syndrome that we love to complain about.

Rentia Landman, an industrial psychologist and transformative coach, refers to the initial phase of working from home as a “honeymoon period”. When