

With No Commute, Americans Simply Worked More During Coronavirus

Employees spent over 22 million extra hours on their primary job each workday



Even as workers reported spending more than a third of their former commuting time on their primary jobs, they said they worked less.

Photo: Jovelle Tamayo for The Wall Street Journal

by Jo Craven McGinty

What would you do with an extra hour each day?

For many people, the answer is...work more.

From mid-March to mid-September, Americans spent 60 million fewer hours commuting to and from work each day, according to one estimate, as lockdown orders to curb the spread of Covid-19 [forced many employees to clock in from home](#).

But instead of pouring the reclaimed time into hobbies or happy hour, most funneled it into work and chores.

Primary jobs absorbed the largest chunk of the extra time—about 35.3%, or more than 22 million hours each workday, according to [an analysis of census and survey data published last month](#).

Another 15.5% (more than nine million hours) was spent on home improvements and chores; 11.1% (nearly seven million hours) was devoted to child care; and 8.4% (more than five million hours) went to second jobs.

Altogether, the additional labor soaked up 70.3% of the time, or more than 43 million hours each workday. The remaining 30% (around 18 million hours) was consumed by leisure activities such as exercise or watching TV.

Paradoxically, even as workers reported spending more than a third of their former commuting time on their primary jobs, they simultaneously said that, overall, [they worked less](#). They spent 36.4 hours a week working on average before the pandemic, compared with 32 hours during the pandemic.

One explanation for the apparent contradiction is that employees might be working during their traditional commuting time but taking more breaks during the day, perhaps because of responsibilities such as child care.

“I think people are overly hard on themselves,” said Nicholas Bloom, an economist at Stanford University, who collaborated on the study with Jose Maria Barrero, an assistant professor of finance at Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, and Steven J. Davis, an economist at the University of Chicago. “They say they’re not working when they talk to their spouse or their kid on a break between Zoom calls, but they may be no less productive than they are when they talk to a colleague about the football score.”

The researchers, whose study was published by the Becker Friedman Institute for Economics at the University of Chicago, calculated the time savings using Census Bureau data showing that 147.2 million Americans work for pay and, before the pandemic, spent 54 minutes on average each day commuting to and from work.

In addition, they conducted a survey of 10,000 Americans ages 20 to 64 who earned at least \$20,000 in 2019 and found that in the pandemic economy, just over half of paid employees worked from home. The survey, of an internet panel weighted with census data to resemble the entire U.S. workforce, also revealed how employees used the time they previously spent traveling to and from work.

To arrive at their estimate of time savings, the researchers subtracted the portion of [Americans who had worked from home](#) before the pandemic from the portion working from home during the pandemic and multiplied the result, representing the pandemic-induced shift, by the average commute time.

On a smaller scale, a back-of-the-envelope calculation by an analyst at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis [found something similar](#).

Diego Mendez-Carbajo, a senior economic-education specialist, calculated how much time working from home could potentially save in three counties with large urban areas: DuPage County, Ill., in the Chicago metropolitan area; Fairfax County, Va., a suburb of Washington, D.C.; and St. Louis County, Mo. His estimate suggested potential savings of one million to 1.5 million hours each week.

Attempting to assess productivity during the unusual circumstances of a pandemic is far from ideal, but other research has pointed to gains when employees are allowed to work from home.

In a study [published in the Quarterly Journal of Economics](#) in 2014, to which Dr. Bloom contributed, researchers followed employees of Ctrip, a large Chinese travel agency, for nine months to see whether employees would work from home or “shirk from home.”

In that experiment, 500 call-center employees were randomly assigned to work in the office, and another 500 were randomly assigned to work from home.

The performance of those working from home increased 13%.

“They were logged onto their computers longer,” Dr. Bloom said. “They processed calls quicker. Their success rates were nearly identical.”

Encouraged by the results, the travel agency offered the option to work from home to all its employees and saw performance increase more than 20%.

In the U.S., it isn’t clear to what extent working from home will persist, but in a follow-up study, Dr. Bloom and his colleagues estimated that after the pandemic, about 20% of workdays will be spent at home, compared with 5% before the pandemic.

“Will working from home stick?” he said, “Our view is yes. Not totally, but yes. Most firms want to get employees back.”

Even if a portion of the workforce remains remote, the option won’t be available to all employees

“There is a huge inequality issue,” Dr. Bloom said. “Higher earners will get to work from home. Low earners will want to, but won’t get to.”