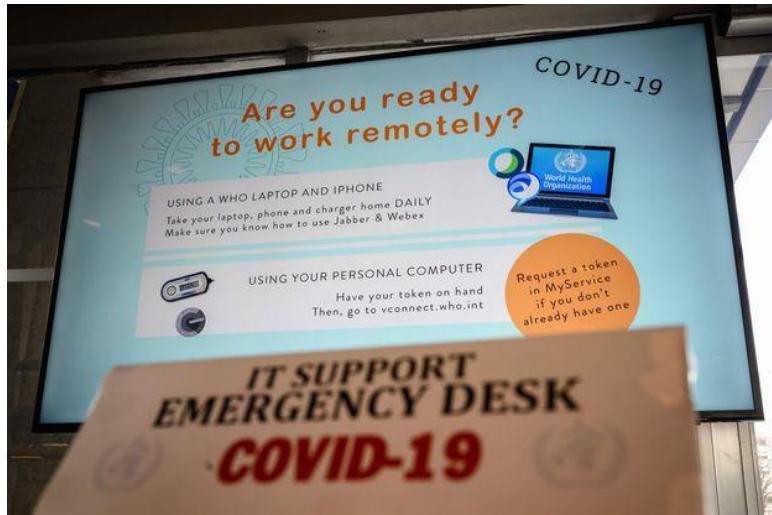


Opinion | Coronavirus Will Permanently Change How We Work

by Matt Burr and Becca Endicott



A screen promoting remote-working readiness at the World Health Organization headquarters in Geneva, March 11.
Photo: fabrice coffrini/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Americans have spent a lot of time wondering when things will go back to normal. But what if normal isn't coming back?

Let's do a thought experiment: It is day 173 of the coronavirus epidemic in the U.S. in July. Your office never reopened and you do your client calls online. Your spouse is tutoring SAT students from the desktop in the living room. Your kids are in the backyard, making tie-dye T-shirts at virtual summer camp. The coronavirus didn't fade, but you're used to it now. This is normal.

OK, virtual summer camp might be a stretch, but the rest of it is pretty plausible. It's very likely that the way we work—at least for some of us—isn't going to snap back to what it used to be.

Chaotic times have a way of reordering reality and, in the process, opening doors to new opportunities and mind-sets. In the past month Americans broke a habit of almost a century's standing: The office lost top billing as the place where white-collar work gets done. Hundreds of thousands of newly remote employees will soon begin to see that productivity, innovation and creativity remain as strong, if not stronger, under new conditions.

Here's another scenario: The coronavirus goes on hiatus in late spring, and cases begin to drop. Social distancing eases. But many onetime office workers realize they have little interest in going back to the way things were. The age of the office as we know it is probably over, and the bell can't be unrung.

And there's really no need to try. The traditional office was already fading into obsolescence. The coronavirus pandemic radically sped up the timeline.

Give people the leeway and trust to schedule their work lives around their personal lives (not the other way around), and they will discover that they tend to be more productive, more driven and happier. Organizations will learn that they benefit tremendously from losing the limitations that come with traditional office settings. An office-based team in Boston can hire from a self-selecting group of other Bostonians and people willing to move to Boston. That is how echo chambers are made. A remote team can hire anyone with an internet connection.

For five years our company has taught major corporations such as [IBM](#), [Citigroup](#) and [Unilever](#) how to scale their remote-work culture. Long experience indicates that a Rubicon in how we work has now been crossed.

We are collectively undertaking a great experiment in the nature of work—not because we want to but because circumstances have forced our hand. It will take a lot of conscious effort and rapid calibration to make this transition as smooth as it can be.

In a world we anticipate, a world where work never really returns to the office, the most important factors for success will be ample trust, mutually agreed-upon norms, good communication and a strong and validating work culture.

Technical collaboration tools are important too, but not nearly as vital as a good foundation. It might seem daunting to build that foundation on the fly, as we are (sometimes literally) changing the way we work overnight. But a great deal of it is transferable. Every office, physical or otherwise, runs more smoothly when lines of communication are open, when guidelines and rules are clear. Now, we will need to be that much more explicit about articulating those norms.

We also have to normalize the choice we’re making. Organizationally, it’s difficult to let go of the illusion of control an office provides. It’s easy to feel that the work will get done only if we’re all together in one place. It’s not true. When we trust one another and rely on one another to get the work done—the work usually gets done.

This is a radical adjustment. It is alarming, it is happening fast, but it could also be the start of something revolutionary. We live in a tumultuous moment, but there is a world, perhaps 173 days in the future, where this won’t feel scary anymore. It will just feel . . . normal.

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