

# The Work-From-Home Shift Shocked Companies—Now They're Learning Its Lessons

Tens of millions of Americans are working from home and many will never go back; employers scramble to figure out what tools they'll need to stay productive

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A shift potentially as monumental as the movement of workers into factories during the Industrial Revolution has swept the globe, only this transition happened in months, and moved people in the opposite direction—back home. [Despite its speed](#), we're still in the earliest stages of the Work-From-Home Revolution, and it could take years or even decades of trial and error to get right.

The number of Americans working solely from home has at least doubled, and possibly tripled, since [before the pandemic](#). At its peak in early May, 52% of employed Americans reported always working from home, and another 18% reported sometimes working from home, for a total of 70%, according to a survey by polling firm Gallup. That represents more than 100 million people in the U.S. alone. In the week ending July 12, the total declined to 53%. Even that is significantly higher than the 43% of workers who reported working from home [at least part time](#) in 2016, the last time Gallup asked Americans about their work-from-home habits.

Many of those workers aren't going back anytime soon. A [survey](#) of corporate leaders conducted by [Gartner](#) on June 5 found that in the future, 82% plan to allow remote working at least some of the time; 47% said they intend to allow full-time remote work going forward. A recent [Microsoft survey](#) of managers yielded the same result: 82% said they will have more flexible work-from-home policies after the pandemic.



Sidekick offers an always-on tablet aimed at startups and other small teams that want constant communication among co-workers. Photo: Sidekick

This shift has yielded an avalanche of data and insights into the habits and technology workers are using to stay productive. They paint a portrait of firms scrambling to use the equipment and software on hand—laptops, phones, internet connections and cloud services—while also rapidly discovering and adopting new technology. [Zoom Video Communications](#) had 10 million daily meeting participants in December; four months later, it had 300 million.

Companies are quickly learning lessons about the varied necessities of remote work, from appropriate tools to new styles of management. Fortunes may be won or lost as innovators and upstarts bet on what best suits a homebound workforce. Perhaps the biggest lesson is that we're in the middle of a gigantic, unplanned experiment, and companies need to continue to try new things while rapidly discarding what doesn't work.

### **Lesson 1: Use the tech you have**

Global IT spending patterns reveal two apparently contradictory trends. April and May saw an uptick in consumer spending on laptops and related work-from-home gear. However, the overall 2020 sales forecast for laptops is gloomy—down 14% since 2019, says John-David Lovelock, a vice president and chief forecaster at Gartner, Inc. Despite that immediate post-pandemic bump in spending, “sales are going to be dead for the rest of the year,” he says. Whatever people bought for their home offices doesn't make up for what businesses didn't buy this year, amid huge drops in demand in many industries, from airlines and hospitality to heavy industry, manufacturing and retail.

Many companies that were reluctant to spend on their workers opted for a previously obscure subset of the cloud computing market: “desktop as a service.” This technology means employers can give their workers whatever laptops are on hand, then have them connect to a more powerful remote computer to run necessary software. Microsoft Corp., [Citrix Systems](#) Inc. and [Amazon.com](#) Inc.'s Amazon Web Services all offer desktop as a service, and the category will [double](#) in sales between 2019 and 2020, to \$1.2 billion, says Mr. Lovelock.

### **Lesson 2: People crave contact**

One thing that makes going remote so challenging is that personalities and job functions are so diverse, and the tools people use need to reflect that. But companies might not immediately know what those tools should be, or how to stitch them into workflows.

In pair programming, a practice gaining in popularity, coders sit together at a single computer to bring more intellectual firepower to challenging problems. During the pandemic, many have turned to Tuple, a screen-sharing app originally developed by three coders who wanted to solve their own remote-work problems. Even those who have returned to the office continue to use it, says Tuple's chief executive.

Although many remote communication tools were in wide adoption before the pandemic, purpose-built hardware to facilitate this style of work is fairly new. Zoom, for instance, just announced its first dedicated at-home videoconferencing system, [a 27-inch monitor with microphones and wide-angle cameras](#).

Sidekick, a startup fresh out of the Silicon Valley incubator Y Combinator, offers an always-on tablet aimed at startups and other small teams that want constant and spontaneous communication among co-workers, as if they were sitting together all day long.

Once workers have found their individual work-from-home rhythms, managing them requires different sorts of communication, says Julien Codorniou, vice president of Workplace from [Facebook](#) Inc., which is used by [Walmart](#), [Starbucks](#), [Chevron](#) and many other multinationals.

His customers have discovered that over-communicating is important when everyone is remote, because online communication only conveys [a fraction](#) of what people pick up in person. “Before Covid, I’d say they were doing one big live all-hands meeting every month, and it became every week or every day,” he adds.

### **Lesson 3: The workday is changing**

Most employers surveyed haven’t seen any drop in productivity during this period in mass work from home, says Elisabeth Joyce, a vice president in the Gartner HR practice. This makes sense when you consider that one benefit of skipping the commute is that those drive-time hours are now more available for calls and meetings.

The nature of meetings has also changed, since they’re now happening on software like Zoom, Slack and Microsoft Teams, which saw daily active users rise from 32 million in early March to 75 million in April. Data from within these services provides a unique view of how work is changing.

Jared Spataro, corporate vice president of Microsoft 365, a division that includes Teams and Office, says Microsoft Teams saw a 15% to 23% increase in usage between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. A similar rise occurred between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. The number of chats happening on weekends increased more than 200%, he adds.

### **Lesson 4: To attract talent, you might need some new perks**

Some companies are spending big to equip workers stuck at home, especially knowledge workers. Firstbase is a startup that charges companies a flat monthly fee—on average, about \$120—per employee to equip newly homebound workers with an ergonomic chair and desk, microphone, laptop and second monitor. Before March, there were 600 companies on Firstbase’s waiting list, now there are more than 4,000, says company founder and chief executive Chris Herd.

Firstbase’s clients range from early-stage startups to publicly traded companies, some with particular (and at times extreme) requests intended to retain employees and keep them as productive as possible. Some clients opt for sending each employee their own coffee machine and coffee-bean subscription, but one client asked about the possibility of providing employees with Peloton bicycles. Another, an exchange-listed tech company, “supplies a specific item to all their employees that was strange to us,” says Mr. Herd. He declined to elaborate.

## Lesson 5: Take it slow

Almost overnight, work morphed from a place people go to a thing people do. The mobile and cloud-based technologies that made our jobs bleed into our nights and weekends also eased the transition to full-time work from home. But for many, the shift has been too abrupt.

“I think we are just going way too fast,” says Mark W. Johnson, co-founder and senior partner of the strategy consulting firm Innosight. Many companies are moving quickly to adopt individual technologies, without considering the interdependencies between employees, managers and those tools, he adds. “Companies will have to pivot their workforce system a few times before they get it right.”

As states and countries reopen for business, most companies are settling into a hybrid mode of work, where at least some people come to the office some of the time, says Gartner’s Ms. Joyce. This is even harder to manage, because employers have to figure out how everyone can communicate at the same level, whether they’re home or at the office, she adds.

Evidence that hybrid work is a new norm can be seen in the use of conference-room videoconferencing systems that had been abandoned during the early stages of the pandemic. Microsoft says it sees workers using them again, indicating that people are back in the office, communicating not just with other offices but also, presumably, with colleagues who remain at home.

The mass shift to remote office work presents opportunities for innovation and rethinking the nature of work the likes of which we haven’t seen in a generation. But this terrifically big hairball of a challenge to productivity and work-life balance is one that companies will be untangling for decades to come.

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