

INTERACTION VOICE



The Future of Work

By **PETER COSGROVE**

WE are living during the biggest ever work experiment which has pushed us 10 years into the future in the span of just one. It is incredible what can be done when we have no choice. Many of those who doubted people could work from home have eaten their words as we all have gotten used to zoom calls, set up home offices, and worked out how to balance work and personal time. If we examine what this may look like in the short and long term, it is interesting to see some of the opportunities and challenges that lie before us.

Before 2020, we never really thought about how work has always been. We simply accepted everyone had to arrive to work at the same time and that we could end up sitting beside the same person for five years without any knowledge of who they might be. We shared a restroom, accepted the room temperature even if it did

not suit us personally, few got a corner office or even a room with a view and many might even have had to accept pets in the office whether they wanted to or not. In March 2020, the shift happened, and overnight it was expected of everyone to work from home and the initial mood was overwhelmingly positive. No more commutes, more time with the family, and a belief that we would be much more productive, but how much did this align with reality?

The positives associated with remote working was the feeling that we suddenly had more time freed up; ample proof that things could be run without everyone having to be physically present in the office; a decrease in bureaucracy with even the most stubborn luddites accepting email over snail mail. It gave us a rare glimpse into people's homes which helped us see our colleagues more as a person in their entirety and not just their work persona. It has certainly helped those with lives that just did not suit rigid clocking-in environments and that glower from the manager should one arrive

even three minutes late.

China illustrates the extent of the technological revolution: it established its first Internet connection in 1994, and over the past decade alone the online population has more than doubled, with Internet usage reaching 60 percent in 2018. Due to its large population, China has the largest number of Internet users in the world. And the Chinese have used their mobile devices to achieve the highest mobile payments penetration in the world.

Stanford University has highlighted that by 2030 we will have over 500 billion connected devices, which include not just computers and phones but almost all home appliances. With this incredible connectedness, what will be the longer-term challenges with this new work model? We will begin to crave social contact and understand that remote work can be very isolating. Few people when they give a farewell speech talk about how great the job itself was, they talk about the friends they have made, the comradery, and fun times they enjoyed. Remote work does not suit everyone; many people have been working on their bed or in a cramped apartment and do not have the luxury of having a separate home office. Many people are starting to suffer from burnout as they feel guilty as to whether they are working hard enough and are not switching off and are struggling with the blurred work/home boundary. Managers and leaders are also being challenged as they have not been trained on how to manage effectively when they cannot physically interact with their team.

So, what does the future of work look like? Well, this is only the beginning and there will be a lot of growing pains, but the reality is we will need a blend of working in offices and from home. We fail sometimes to see the work that happens when we connect with others. We come up with ideas, we understand people better when we meet them, we can influence, persuade, and communicate better when they see us in person and not just a face on a video call. We also must be careful of the ramifications if we sign up to becoming a full-time remote worker. Whether we like it or not there is a lot of unconscious bias that exists in business and many managers may feel it is easier to pass someone over for promotion or worse let them go when they don't see them face to face.

It is not just the employees who are struggling with this future; employers have to make big decisions about real estate as well as a very tricky next six to 12 months of job losses when we see the long-term economic ram-

ifications. They have also just begun to see the benefits of technology and remote working. We have to realize that machines, robots, and artificial intelligence will be coming for many blue collar and white collar jobs over the next 10 years. How do we compete against a machine that works seven days a week 24 hours a day and never gets sick, never wants holidays, and never aspires for a promotion?!

The biggest opportunity however for employers is to build more trust in their employees. This idea that you cannot trust employees if you cannot see them ignores the fact that there have been countless employees in offices surfing the net, attending meetings they did not need to and not contributing much to the business, but because we could see they were in the office we presumed they were working. We need to move from this presenteeism performance model to a focus on productivity and outputs. Most managers would agree that if an employee is delivering an excellent standard of work all of the time, there is no need to worry as to where they are working from or how many hours they use to get the job done.

As regards jobs, we may begin to see many jobs that are advertised as "remote only." As more people work from home there will need to be a change to how we approach work when our home and workplace are the same place, and how to ensure we avoid burnout from over-work which we have started to see in some remote workers.

How do we plan for this uncertain future? We see that the genie is out of the bottle and we will never move back to the work model we had, but we will find an equilibrium post-COVID-19. For employees out there, I would be worrying less about where you will work and much more about the work you do, whether you are enjoying your work, and whether you are learning and feel challenged. You have to realize that it will be rare to stay in one job for the rest of one's life; therefore be ready for change, as well as building skills and networking. It is these relationships that we rely on the most when we need support, and in this new future we are all going to need support. Given the size of China and the importance of its economy, the future of work at the global level is likely to be greatly influenced by the future of work in China. ■

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