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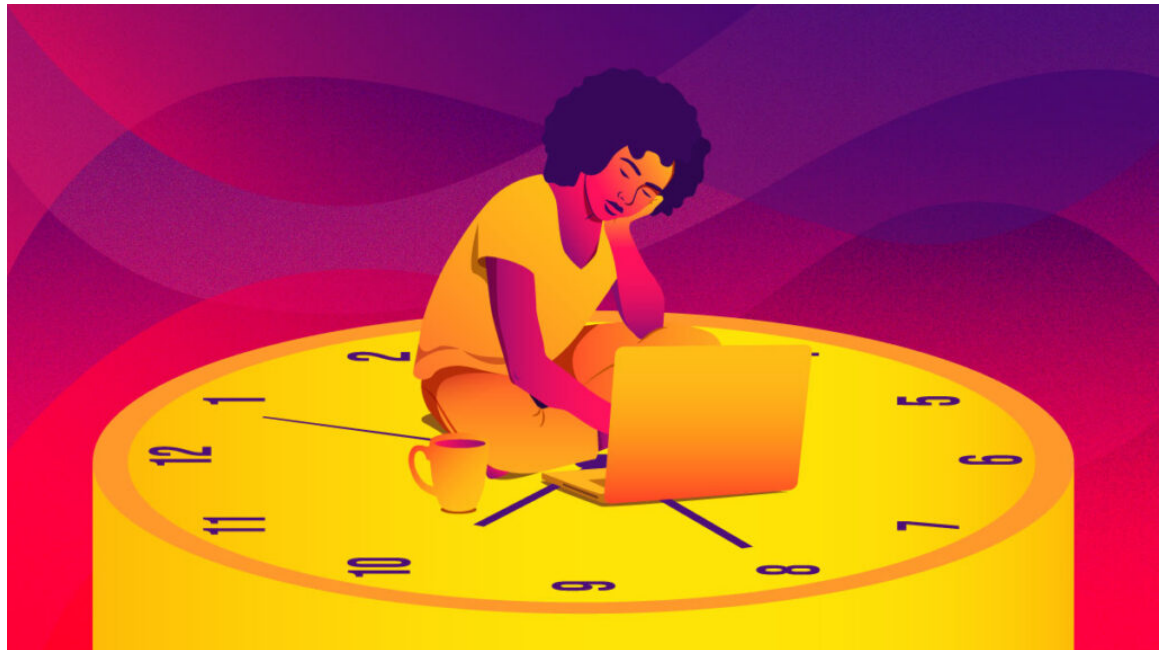


ILLUSTRATION BY SHANI PLEASANTS

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced a large fraction of the global workforce to work from home, which has led to an almost complete elimination of the daily commute to work. How have workers reallocated their commuting time? More generally, how has the forced transition to working from home (WFH) affected how people work and interact with one another? And are these effects different between managers and non-managers?

To answer these questions, we examined detailed time-use diaries of 1,300 U.S.-based knowledge workers, which we collected in the summers of 2019 and 2020 — a date range that gave us the

opportunity to document the extent to which daily schedules have changed since the Covid-19 pandemic hit. We focused in particular on when and how long people work, and what type of activities they engage in as they do.

Predictably, we found that the most visible effect of the shift to WFH is a large decline in time spent commuting (41 minutes/day). But different types of workers used that time very differently: Independent employees (i.e., those without managerial responsibilities) reallocated much of it to personal activities, whereas managers just worked longer hours and spent more time in meetings. For managers, the increase in work hours more than offset the loss in commuting time: Their work day increased on average by 56 minutes, and the time they spent replying to emails increased by 13 minutes. These changes were even larger for managers employed by large firms, who spent 22 minutes more per day in meetings, and 16 more minutes responding to emails.

These data suggest a significant post-Covid reorganization of work, especially for managers. Organizations and managers will need to understand the details of these changes if they hope to adapt successfully to our new work-from-home reality.

Survey Findings

We collected detailed information on the daily activities undertaken by large cross-sections of U.S.-based knowledge workers, sampled across three waves: August 2019 (615 participants), June 2020 (203 participants), and August 2020 (545 participants). The workers typically commuted to work before the Covid pandemic. Participants were asked to recall the most representative working day from their week and then document the main activities they engaged in during that day (type of activity, start time, and end time). These data allowed us to measure the start and end times, duration, and the detailed types of more than 20,000 activities across 1300 respondents.

When we compared pre- and post-Covid patterns, we made the following findings:

- 1) An overall decrease in commuting time of 41 minutes, and a 37-minute increase in personal activities, especially in the morning. Many respondents extended their hours beyond 5:00 pm.
- 2) No increase in total time spent working, but an increase in work-day spans. Among all of our 2020 respondents, the total time between the start of the first work activity and the end of the last one increased by 36.3 minutes.
- 3) Significant variation in how daily schedules changed for managers and independent employees:
 - Managers were able to recoup only 23 minutes of personal time, whereas independent employees gained more than an hour.
 - The work-day span increased by 56 minutes for managers but did not change for independent employees.

4) Significant changes in how managers' workdays were organized, but none for independent employees:

- Managers were 12% more likely to engage in any type of interactive activity (e.g., in-person and virtual meetings, workshops, work-related phone calls).
- Managers were 6% more likely to spend focused time reading and replying to emails.
- Managers were 8% less likely to engage in work-related lunches or leisure activities.

These findings were especially strong for managers employed in large firms (250 employees or more), where the needs for coordination are presumably greater.

Our survey could not capture all the interactions that take place daily via [email](#) or such messaging platforms as Slack and Teams. The increases in meeting times we document may thus represent a lower bound for the increase in the time spent interacting and communicating during the pandemic.

Impact on Employees

What are the effects of these changes on employees' wellbeing? And are new work schedules changing preferences for WFH?

Surprisingly, given the grim reality many of us are confronting at the moment, we found that respondents don't feel that the pandemic has changed their overall sense of wellbeing or the share of time they are in a positive mood. Why would that be? Perhaps it's that many workers — managers and independent employees alike — have started to see new benefits of WFH arrangements. Some 58% of respondents from the 2020 survey waves viewed those arrangements more positively than before the pandemic, whereas only 13% viewed them more negatively.

None of this represents a dramatic shift in preferences, however. In 2020, 45% of our respondents told us they wished they could spend 3 days or more working from home, but even before the pandemic, 37% of them already felt that way.

While it is too early to know whether the changes documented in this study will persist in a post-pandemic world, there are clear indications that at least some of them will — after all, almost half of our respondents told us they would prefer to continue primarily working from home. So what can organizations do to best adapt to this reality?

This study reinforces the notion that the benefits of WFH arrangements are likely to be heterogeneous across workers and firms. As such, it is imperative for organizations to understand the subtle ways in which the shift to WFH affects the quantity, type, and quality of interactions across their workforces. It's probably not a good idea to increase coordination through top-down approaches — for example, by introducing centrally planned online forums or virtual watercoolers.

Such an approach could well overload workers who have already adjusted to the new WFH reality through additional virtual meetings.

Rather than focusing on the quantity of interactions, organizations may be better served by improving their quality. This is an area where [technology can really help](#). For example, emerging human-computer interaction technologies — such as augmented and virtual reality — hold promise for improving the quality of remote interactions among team members who are distributed across different locations (some at home, some in the office), and could provide access to shared tools such as whiteboards, simulations, and shared social spaces. Similarly, it will be important to support workers as they adjust to the different rhythms and distractions of their WFH settings.

Technology can help workers organize their tasks in a way that allows them to cope resiliently with interruptions. For example, Shamsi Iqbal at Microsoft Research, along with her colleagues, has been exploring how technology can help workers break down large tasks into smaller ones, and how completing these so-called microtasks can allow them make consistent progress toward their productivity goals. Organizations may also want to consider providing additional organizational supports, such as AI digital assistants, which might soon achieve a level of sophistication close to that of human assistants. Such digital assistants would be able to help managers working from home (who do not have immediate access to a human assistant, and experience heightened demands for coordination) to increase their productivity by handling coordination tasks such as scheduling meetings, locating information, and sharing access to resources. Microsoft's [Cortana](#) and Google's [Duplex](#) are advanced examples of such digital assistants.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly: In our new WFH reality, no matter what shape it ultimately takes, organizations will need to actively help workers maintain a healthy separation between their work and their personal lives. This might mean reminding workers to avoid undue overtime or to measure with more precision what they do. Curiously, this may involve virtually recreating the forced breaks between work and life that came with the now-bygone commute. In other words: The commute is dead! Long live the commute!

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