

Coronavirus could spark a revolution in working from home. Are we ready?

March 11 2020, by Libby Sander



Credit: Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels

Imagine your employer asking you to work from home until further notice.

As COVID-19 continues to spread, this seems an increasingly likely scenario. "Everyone who can work from [home](#) should work from home," said [Harvard epidemiologist William Hanage](#) this week.

In China and neighboring countries, millions are doing so [for the first time](#).

In the United States, companies readying staff to work remotely include [Twitter](#), [Apple](#), [Microsoft](#), [Amazon](#) and [JP Morgan](#).

This week, NASA's [Ames Research Center](#) in California joined them and declared a [mandatory telework policy](#) after an [employee](#) tested positive to COVID-19. NASA sites across the country have been testing their work-from-home capabilities.

In Dublin last week, Google sent 8,000 workers home for a day to trial an [extended remote-work scenario](#) after one employee came down with flu-like symptoms.

In Australia, Clayton Utz, Cisco and Vodafone temporarily closed offices last week as a precautionary measure.

The likelihood of extended workplace shutdowns seems increasingly likely. So what do we know about the pros and cons of working from home?

How common is working from home?

Perhaps not as common as you might think.

In Australia many companies now offer [flexible work arrangements](#), but that doesn't necessarily mean employees can work from home. Even those permitted to work from home may only be allowed to do so on a

limited basis.

As the list of tech companies mentioned may indicate, it is easier to do a job from home if you need only an internet connection and a telephone line.

In building a case for the [national broadband network](#) in 2010, Australia's Gillard government set a target of 10% of the workforce teleworking half the time. This was up from an estimated 6% of employed Australians having some form of regular teleworking arrangement.

Consultancy Access Economics predicted this could [save](#) A\$1.4 billion to A\$1.9 billion a year—about A\$1.27 billion of that being the time and cost savings of avoided travel.

Teleworking has many benefits

Governments since Gillard's have been less focused on the idea, to the extent we lack reliable contemporary statistics for telework in Australia.

But with increased commuting times, caring responsibilities and the [stress of modern workplaces](#), the research says most employees highly value being able to work from home. In fact, a 2017 US [study](#) found employees valued the option at about 8% of their wages.

Research has also highlighted benefits including increased productivity, rated by both the employees and supervisors. One [study](#) showed a 13% increase in performance for employees working from home.

Part of this may be due to an increased ability to focus and less distraction. My [research](#) shows employees who can't focus to complete

their work are less likely to perform well.

Working from home usually [means](#) employees have greater autonomy over how they do their work, including the hours and conditions of their work, and how they manage their lives and other responsibilities. These benefits of teleworking have been shown to lead to greater [job satisfaction](#), [lower absenteeism and turnover](#), increased [commitment](#) to the organization and, importantly, reductions in [stress](#) associated with work.

Work-from-home arrangements may also give organizations access to a greater [talent pool](#).

But there are downsides as well

That said, there are challenges associated with working from home that organizations and individuals often do not plan well for.

[Studies](#) have shown working from home for extended periods can leave employees feeling socially and professionally isolated.

When we work from home, we have fewer opportunities to interact and acquire information, which may [explain](#) why remote workers can feel less confident than their office-based counterparts.

This reduction in interaction and knowledge sharing is a key [barrier](#) to the take-up of working from home.

According to a meta-analysis of 46 studies involving more than 12,000 employees, working from home more than 2.5 days a week could [negatively affect](#) relationships with coworkers as well as knowledge transfer.

Further, [resentment](#) could arise if teleworking was not widely available.

Employees who work from home have also [perceived](#) negative consequences for their career. Out of sight can sometimes be out of mind. [Research](#) published last month, however, suggests telecommuters are promoted as much as office-based colleagues.

Another significant issue is maintaining [boundaries](#) with home life. It can be hard to [switch off](#), particularly when we don't have a dedicated home office. Telecommuters often work longer hours, with [48% of employees](#) increasing their work hours in one study.

How can we make it work?

organizations can increase the success of working from home. Regular communication, particularly using [video conferencing](#), can help ensure tasks are coordinated, knowledge is transferred, and social and professional isolation is reduced.

For organizations used to managing based on visibility and presence, [letting go of traditional ideas](#) of how to manage and focusing on outputs will be required.

If schools are also closed, employers will need to be sensitive to the challenges employees face working from home with children to care for and online schooling to incorporate.

Finally, employees need to establish boundaries between work and home life. Being able to switch off at the end of the day is important for both physical and mental health.

With no end in sight to COVID-19, many businesses are developing or implementing work-from-home policies to ensure business continuity. If

employees and employers can get the balance right and enjoy the benefits of well-planned telework, this coronavirus outbreak could prove to be the tipping point for remote work arrangements to become the norm.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Coronavirus could spark a revolution in working from home. Are we ready? (2020, March 11) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-03-coronavirus-revolution-home-ready.html>

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