

Coronavirus thrusting workforce 'into a grand experiment' with social distancing

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Stephen Colbert recently quipped that no country is more prepared to take on the coronavirus than the United States.

"Turns out Americans weren't lazy couch potatoes this whole time," he said. "All that sitting on our asses and watching TV was actually training to save the world."

While the late-night talk-show host was joking, it's true that this is a time when socially distancing yourself is easier than ever.

Nine in 10 American adults have access to the internet, and many businesses already have employees who telecommute a few days a week.

"Telecommuting' refers to any type of alternative or flexible work arrangement where work happens at an off-site location and employees use technology to connect to the workplace," said S. Douglas Pugh, Ph.D., professor and chair of the Department of Management & Entrepreneurship at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Technology makes it easier than ever to work remotely while staying in near-constant contact with coworkers and employers. But regardless of how easy or convenient telecommuting is, Pugh anticipates that many people will feel less job satisfaction the longer this new arrangement goes on. He shared his thoughts on teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic in an interview with VCU News.

As more organizations ask their employees to work from home, how will this affect productivity?

This is a complex issue. Overall, the [research evidence](#) suggests that there can be modest productivity gains associated with telecommuting. A common finding is that telecommuters report being less distracted and having fewer interruptions when they work from home, which can lead to a greater ability to focus. Somewhat surprising, a couple of studies have found that telecommuters actually work more hours than traditional

office workers, which could be one reason they're more productive.

But here's the caveat: most of the existing research has been on companies that have willingly undertaken telecommuting. If well-managed, they probably selected the [jobs](#) and workers who were a good fit for this flexible work arrangement, and provided training and guidelines to help with the process. In our present situation, all workers, even those in jobs less suited to remote work, are having to work off-site. It is unclear if the modest positive increases in productivity found in existing research will replicate in the current situation.

With regard to job satisfaction, research suggests that the highest levels of satisfaction come with a moderate degree of telework, around two days a week. The relationship looks like an inverted U, with satisfaction at the highest level with the moderate amount of telecommuting, but decreasing as it goes toward 100%. As we are in a 100% situation for the immediate future, I anticipate that many people will feel less job satisfaction the longer this new arrangement goes on.

Finally, several studies have linked face-to-face contact to collaboration and innovation. Geographic diversity and reliance on [electronic communication](#) have been shown to be negatively related to innovation. So working apart and in isolation may have a negative impact on innovation.

When things start to return to normal, and employees return to the office, will there be any ripple effects?

We are, albeit unwillingly, being thrust into a grand experiment. I don't know what the outcome will be, but I suspect we will learn something about the nature of our work. It may be that we discover that some aspects of our work that we thought required being on-site do not. If

successful, people who had never telecommuted before may find that they are both willing and able to do so. On the other hand, I suspect it will be the opposite for other jobs—we will learn that some work just requires an on-site presence. Similar with [individual differences](#), some will discover they are happy and productive working from home, and others will be ready to be done and get back into the office where they work the best.

What sectors do you think will be most affected?

Jobs that are highly complex, and that require a high degree of interdependence and decision-making with other workers, are going to face challenges when telecommuting. So one organization may have some positions that do just fine and others that struggle. It's probably more within organizations that cross sectors. Obviously those jobs that are not possible to do remotely—[health care](#), construction, many services—are going to struggle because the jobs do not lend themselves to telework.

What can managers do to ensure their teleworkers are the most productive?

Communicate and clearly explain the details and expectations about telecommuting. Provide advice about how to structure a remote work area. If the home allows it, having a separate area for work—a home office—is usually recommended. Also, feelings of isolation and loss of identification with the organization are real threats. Overcommunicate. Remember, all channels of communication with the organization are being severed except for electronic ones, so managers need to make strong efforts to keep everyone "in the loop."

Some employees are going to feel lonely, and are going to struggle to

communicate and collaborate. Use technology to have virtual meetings—both audio and video; audio-only are probably the most challenging types of meeting to run. But these [virtual meetings](#) still lose some of the most important sources of communication: feedback. These meetings need to be well-facilitated, run with efficiency and productivity, and maintain the attendees' interest and involvement.

What else do we need to know?

Everything we think of as good management just needs to be doubled or tripled during challenging times. Increase your communications. Be vigilant to your employee's needs. Stay in touch. Manage with empathy. And be flexible. Keep in mind that your employee's home responsibilities—finding child care, for example—may have also been turned on their heads, so adjust your expectations accordingly.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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