

How the pandemic will shape the workplace trends of 2021

January 8 2021, by Dave Cook



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The economist [John Maynard Keynes](#) predicted in 1930 that the amount we work would gradually shrink to as little as [15 hours a week](#) as technology made us more productive. Not only did this not happen, but

we also began to spend extra time away from home due to [commuting](#) and suburban living patterns, which we often forget are recent historical inventions.

However, 2020 has changed all that. In my new history of [remote work during COVID-19](#), I marvel at how much it has shaken up our lives and how much we took for granted. My research also points to a number of trends that will help shape working life in 2021.

Over "in time for Christmas"

At the start of 2020 remote work was a gradually rising long-term trend. Only [12% of workers](#) in the US worked remotely full time, [6% in the UK](#). Naturally the world was unprepared for mass remote work.

But COVID-19 instantly proved remote work was possible for many people. Workplace institutions and norms toppled like dominos. The office, in-person meetings and the daily commute fell first. Then the nine to five schedule, vacations and private home lives were threatened. Countries even started issuing remote work visas to encourage people to spend lockdown working in their territory.

As old norms vanished, a rapid procession of novel technologies marched uninvited into our homes. We had to master Zoom meeting etiquette, compassionate email practices, navigate surveillance, juggle caring responsibilities. The list goes on.

In the face of grim statistics—the UN predicted [195 million](#) job losses—only the tone deaf complained about working from home. Nonetheless, COVID-19 created the [biggest remote work experiment in human history](#).

In July, UK prime minister Boris Johnson—with Edwardian

optimism—daydreamed a sense of normality would return "in time for Christmas." Fast forward through summer to lockdown 2.0 and the fantasy of a 12-week experiment faded into sepia tinged memories. One interviewee joked: "I really thought we'd be back in the office by July, what fools we were!"

Are you disciplined?

Silicon Valley companies [Google](#), [Apple](#) and [Twitter](#) were among the first to announce employees could work from home. Ahead of the curve, they were well practiced. Predictably, they already had a fancy term for it: [distributed working](#). In 2021 concepts such as distributed and hybrid working will proliferate.

Most were less prepared than Silicon Valley. In March, I published findings from a [four-year research study tracking remote workers](#). I warned, to be a successful remote worker deep reserves of self-discipline were required, otherwise burnout followed.

We understand this now. But I spent the first lockdown patiently explaining to news outlets why working from home was so hard. When I suggested returning to the office might be considered a luxury—because it helped people structure their days—a news presenter laughed. For good or ill, conversations about disciplined routines will intensify in 2021.

By May 2020 many reported experiencing [Zoom fatigue](#). I naively predicted Zoom use would subside.

I'd have been right if we'd returned to the office. Instead necessity dictated we up our Zoom game—even if they were draining. Zoom simultaneously saved and ruined working from home, and it's not going away anytime soon.

The commuting paradox

Remote workers, grateful to still have jobs, also reported a gnawing sense of survivors' guilt. [Overwork](#) was one way of expressing this guilt. Many felt working extra hours might secure their job.

In April 2020, I joined other academics researching work-life balance on a project called [eWorkLife](#). The [research data](#) revealed increases in working hours when it wasn't obvious when the working day ended. Especially with no obvious signal to end the working day.

In my four-year remote study, I had noticed a strange pattern. Participants initially said "escaping the commute" was a key benefit of remote working. Yet months later these same workers started recreating mini commutes.

The [eWorkLife](#) project uncovered similar findings. People wanted to create "a clear division between work and home." Study lead Prof Anna Cox urged people to do [pretend commutes](#) so they could maintain a work-life balance. In 2021 [work-life balance](#) must become recognized as a public health issue and the [eWorkLife](#) project is [urging policymakers to act](#).

The right to disconnect

What's happened to the time previously lost to commuting? Many are [using it](#) to catch up on admin and email. This taps into a worrying trend.

Pre-pandemic warnings about an encroaching [24/7 work culture](#) were intensifying. Social scientists argued that contemporary workers were being turned into [worker-smartphone hybrids](#). In 2016, French workers were even given the legal [right to disconnect](#) from work emails outside

working hours.

A hopeful wish-list for 2021 includes continued increases in [workplace activism](#) and for companies and governments to reveal their remote working policies. Twitter and 17 other companies have already [announced](#) employees can work remotely indefinitely. At least [60%](#) of US companies still haven't shared their remote working policies with their employees. Remote workers tell me until bosses reveal their post-pandemic policies—planning for their future is impossible.

The late activist [David Graeber](#) described the failure to achieve Keynes's 15-hour work week as a missed opportunity, "[a scar across our collective soul](#)". COVID-19 may have started conversations about alternative futures where work and leisure are better balanced.

But it won't come easily. And we will have to fight for it.

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