Remote work doesn't negatively affect productivity, study suggests

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A research team from the Texas A&M University School of Public Health found that employee and company resiliency may be enhanced through the opportunity for employees to work remotely during natural

disasters and other events that cause workplace displacement.

The team, which was comprised of Kamrie Sarnosky, Mark Benden, Garett Sansom, Leslie Cizmas and Annette Regan, worked with a large oil and gas company in Houston, Texas, to analyze ergonomic software data from 264 employees. During the study period, the company was forced to close its offices because of flooding from Hurricane Harvey, which required employees to work remotely for an extended period.

The researchers looked at employee technology data before, during and after Hurricane Harvey. They found that although total computer use declined during the hurricane, employees' work behaviors during the seven-month period of working remotely returned to pre-hurricane levels. This finding suggests that remote work does not negatively impact workplace productivity.

This study, which was published in *IOS Press* in February, offers important insights into information workers who have become increasingly used to and interested in working remotely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"In the future, there will be a greater percentage of the workforce who is involved in some sort of office-style technology work activities," said Benden, who is director of the school's Ergonomics Center. "Almost all of the study's employees were right back up to the same level of output as they were doing before Hurricane Harvey. This is a huge message right now for employers because we're having national debates about whether or not employees should be able to work remotely or in a hybrid schedule."

This study is part of a large effort by the Ergonomics Center that is looking at the health of information workers. Although seemingly less taxing than blue-collar work, information workers are prone to injury

such as carpal tunnel syndrome. "The research says that if you work a certain way at a certain pace over a certain duration, you're more likely to become injured from that work," Benden said. "But if you work a little less or a little less often or break up the duration or have certain other character traits—like posture—then you're less likely to develop a problem from doing your office work."

The Texas A&M researchers believe this information can be used to promote healthy behaviors for employees, including those working remotely, and to inform corporate policies. They also will be looking at tracking the ergonomic environment in employees' home offices. The team believes that tracking this type of data can help companies address remote employee health issues, including stress, depression and substance abuse.

"The question was whether we could track people and rather than letting them stay in a bad place, a bad habit or bad behavior, could we give them a healthful nudge over the computer to remind them that it was time to take a walk or a break," Benden said. "We as humans are not very good at keeping track of time, especially when we're in the zone. In order to keep us from physically hurting our bodies, we need to have nudges and reminders, which people respond to, and which work really well."

Benden noted that taking breaks does not hinder employees' quality of work.

"The people who took the recommended breaks were more productive overall. They got more done," he said. "We need to learn this about people, we need to teach people about it, and then we need to help people actually do it."

More information: Kamrie Sarnosky et al, Impact of workplace

displacement during a natural disaster on computer performance metrics: A 2-year interrupted time series analysis, *Work* (2022). DOI: 10.3233/WOR-210707

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