

Remote working improves the lives of female managers, but at a cost

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The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a question that would have been unthinkable a few years ago: do we really need to be in the office all the time?

At the height of the pandemic, working remotely was viewed as a safeguard, protecting employees from the spread of infections. Over time a [consensus](#) has developed that working remotely has had benefits but has also raised health concerns.

To provide some answers to the question, I did [research](#) on the experience of working remotely from the perspective of 23 female middle managers working in the South African public service.

It was clear that [remote work](#) had positive and negative aspects.

On the positive side, working remotely offered flexibility. Employees could balance individual and work tasks. This gave them some freedom and autonomy. In essence, work-life balance was somewhat promoted.

One participant, a human resource manager, said, "During the height of the pandemic, I could spend more time connecting with other facets of my life outside work. I could read more at home. Do some gardening. Even connect more with the world around me. Yes I got to do some work but I also managed to do things I could not do previously. "

On the negative side, the women said they experienced a blurring of work boundaries and an extension of their office hours.

Based on the findings, I make three recommendations for managing the downside of working remotely. First, organizations may need to provide [employee](#) support; an important part of this is to trust their staff. Second, policy around remote working may need to be in place and reinforced. Such policy needs to strike a balance between getting the work done and respecting the individual rights of employees. Finally, a culture of open communication can be useful on both sides to achieve this. This includes setting goals and addressing misconceptions around working remotely.

The upside

The [female managers](#) in the study extolled the [work-life balance](#) that remote work can offer.

The managers praised remote working as cutting back unnecessary time spent in traffic while commuting to work. They could spend more time with family and pay attention to personal wellness activities such as going to the gym.

Remote working also had the potential to enhance the quality of relationships, thanks to the physical presence at home.

Another participant, an accounting manager, said, "I think remote working also saved my marriage. My partner and I are appreciative of being in professions where we can work remotely. This assisted both of us to work in the same room at home. Such time was just the bond we needed. Remember in a week we usually spent half of the week at the office before the pandemic. It was wonderful to work from home not just for the work aspect but also our relationship."

But the research also revealed that remote working posed some challenges.

The downside

Three main problems emerged. First, despite viewing remote working as a possibility, organizational will did not exist to see it through. There appeared to be mixed feelings in organizations, to support or not to support remote working.

Second, for some managers, managing people remotely was not a

feasible option. This was largely due to the perception that for one to be an effective manager some form of physical presence was needed. The [physical presence](#) factor for these managers served as a form of surveillance, an ability to monitor that work was actually being done. Such a management approach created levels of suspicion and rendered remote working ineffective.

Thirdly, the managers in my study expressed concern around the extension of the working hours. Remote working distorted the boundaries of work and forced employees to be available at any time. This included receiving work-related calls at odd hours. Some employees felt that going to the office protected them from being bothered after work hours.

A participant observed: "The organizational structure within the South Africa public service is still that one of command and control. This works well within physical spaces. With working from home that command and control manifests in the excessive calls. Someone can call you late at night. That was salient nightmare for remote working for me."

What should be done

The findings of this research show there is a need for nuanced organizational responses to remote working.

First, organizations should seek to support employees where remote working is in place. They may need policies to guide such modes of working.

Second, employees have a responsibility to speak out. While there is a need to be productive in organizations, this should not come through violation of individual rights. There can be no flexibility to the

expression of individual rights.

Third, the findings show the need for investment in training and [support services](#) around remote working. This may include psycho-social support for employees who may be struggling with dealing with aspects related to remote working. Further, organizations need to invest in hardware and software support that enhances the remote working experience.

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