What's the future of work from home?

September 2 2022, by Kyle Shaner

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

With rapidly evolving technology, the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting priorities, there have been major changes in recent years in how employers and employees think about work.

Three professors from the University of Cincinnati's Carl H. Lindner College of Business discuss the state of hybrid and remote work, the challenges and opportunities they present and how an expanded remote workforce will affect the future of work.

The professors are:

- Rhett Brymer, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Management
- Suzanne Masterson, Ph.D., associate dean, Faculty, Research & Lindner Culture, Department of Management
- Jaime Windeler, Ph.D., associate dean, Undergraduate Programs and Student Experience, Department of Operations, Business Analytics and Information Systems

During the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid work or remote work became common for many employees. Will companies make their workers return to the office or is remote work going to become the norm?

Windeler: I don't know that it's really an option for most knowledge work (white-collar) companies to require every person to be in the workplace. I think you would have to be at the level of Apple or Google, but even those organizations aren't likely to do that. It's too much of a norm now that if you don't allow remote, you're going to have a really hard time attracting people. There are too many competitors doing it.

Brymer: I think what we'll see is a lot more variance in what companies do. There are companies that have said, "Enough of remote work, let's get everybody back in the office." And there's companies that have been the opposite extreme and say, "You know what, this office in-person work really wasn't doing it for us. We'll just let people live where they

want to live." What I suspect is most places will end up somewhere in between.

Masterson: The death of in-person work—the people who were really raising that as a possibility—I think that's overstated. But it will be very hard for many organizations to go back to the old model of dictating, "We work 8 to 5, five days a week, in-person, in the office and that's what we do." I really do think there's a growing wave of employees demanding, "This has to work for both parties, and there's more to life than work, so I'm expecting you to help me figure out that balance and to trust me to do my work and make a really good contribution here."

Windeler: The bottom line is that most employers recognize hybrid is here to stay, and there are relatively few jobs that are a good fit for 100% remote.

How has the pandemic changed thoughts about hybrid and remote work?

Masterson: Pre-pandemic there were certainly industries where remote work or hybrid work was acceptable, but in others, a lot of supervisors had fears about what it would mean to not have that line-of-sight to employees. They worried that people wouldn't be as motivated, that people wouldn't work as hard. I think the pandemic flipped everything, and we learned a lot about both what works as well as some things that are more difficult. I think organizations have found that people can work remotely, and they can be pretty efficient working remotely.

Windeler: The pandemic caused people to shift their thinking. You had a lot of managers who wanted to see people in the office to know that they were working, and the pandemic helped them realize things could still get done without that level of access to their employees. There were

technical advancements in software and a lot of organizational learning that happened to get the enterprise comfortable with these tools very, very quickly. That broke down a lot of barriers that were in place before the pandemic.

Brymer: I think companies in large part are run by people who have grown up in an era where the manager has seen who their employees are, in a somewhat social environment. And the idea is that if I, the manager, see you in the office, I know you're working. I think there was a lot of discomfort early on in the pandemic because there was a loss of control, at least apparent loss of control, by managers. I think that it has forced companies to rethink that. The pandemic, when a lot of people had to go remote for a time, forced the issue of remote work. We didn't have a choice. Without the pandemic, I think a lot of companies would still be doing the exact same thing as they did before.

Masterson: Right when we made the switch, organizations were trying to mimic the in-person environment in a remote kind of way, such as having happy hour at the end of the day remotely. There also was an increase in online surveillance such as through keystroke monitoring, as well as frequent check-ins, and if an employee didn't respond to a prompt in a certain amount of time, then the belief was that the employee was shirking their work. I think hybrid and remote works best when you have a culture of trust. Some organizations already had it, and for those that didn't have it, it made that transition even harder.

What are some of the advantages for employers with remote and hybrid work?

Windeler: They're going to have more job applicants, and that's going to drive up the quality potential of the applicant pool with access to more diverse expertise. That's especially critical to highly specialized jobs. In

the technology sector, it's really noticeable.

Masterson: I think one pro for organizations right now is being able to say, "We're going to look for the best person with the best skills, and we don't care where they live," although those organizations are potentially losing out on building relationships. But for those organizations that want to build that in-person workforce, or a more in-person workforce, it's going to affect the model in terms of compensating people for coming in, for commuting, for parking, for those in-person types of things. So there can be a cost savings as well as a skill-set gain if you go farther out and hire remote workers, but those organizations risk ending up with employees who are more like independent contractors.

Windeler: There's always been a promise of paying less for real estate if a company does more hybrid and remote work, but I haven't seen that materialize. I think it's possible companies could move to less expensive areas if their workforce is more hybrid, remote. Another advantage is that there are collaboration capabilities you gain holding meetings remotely because you can share screens much more easily, you can record those meetings in a way that doesn't feel as intrusive.

What are some of the advantages for employees with remote and hybrid work?

Windeler: One of the biggest advantages is convenience for workers. You don't have to make the commute, you can take care of life stuff, so there's work-life balance benefits. I think there's big benefits for managing one's energy levels. When you're in the office, there're lots of interruptions, and there are lots and lots of ad hoc meetings, and you can have little control over some of those things. Many people feel more energized at home and have better tools for recharging during the day.

I think a lot of people feel like they're much more productive at home for that reason. But I say "feel" because productivity is hard to measure, especially in knowledge workers. There's plenty of studies that show remote workers spend more time online on their computers. So they're spending more time working and a lot of times they're appropriating time they would spend on a commute to their employer, which sounds great. Whether or not that additional time is more productive is a good question; I think you can spend more time without necessarily getting a lot more done because work expands to fill the time we give it.

Brymer: There's less commuting, there's more flexibility in work time, you can live where you want. There's also a lot of downsides. A lot of people just don't like working from home because of the obvious distractions and lack of focus some people experience when they can't get away from a screaming kid, or it's hard not to take a break and watch sports in the other room. An office focuses them.

What are some of the disadvantages of remote work?

Windeler: If you have a remote workforce and you're not constrained by geography, you're going to have to deal with time zone differences if you have employees who are scattered all over the U.S. Best practices for remote workforces include periodic face-to-face interaction, and that's expensive for organizations with a large remote workforce.

Masterson: I think what organizations have really started to discover is that there are things that we lose when we go hybrid or remote. Organizations need to figure out the right balance of creating the value-added opportunities of in-person work and reminding employees of the benefits of collaboration and the water cooler conversations that happen when you just run into someone, versus having to be very intentional about collaboration and relationship-building in a remote or hybrid workplace. Employees, as much as they really like the benefits of

working at home, are trying to find the balance of working remote while still getting some of the in-person benefits they got from the workplace before.

Windeler: Another disadvantage of remote work is loss to company culture, cohesion or relationships. Those things can all be built online, but it takes a lot more intention and effort, and it doesn't feel very natural to most people. The more remote that you work, the less engaged or embedded you feel in the organization so turnover is going to be higher. And that's due to both people's willingness to leave an organization because they don't feel really attached to it and a manager's willingness to let people go because they have weaker relationships.

Brymer: What you miss is just connecting with people. That's really critically important at the beginning of any kind of employment with an organization—getting to know the people you're working with. Once you have a rapport with somebody, it's a lot easier to work remotely with them because you know their personality, you know if they write an email you can hear them saying it and know how to interpret it because you've met them in-person.

Masterson: When you're working hybrid with a big portion of your time remote or working completely remotely, it's hard to meet people and feel connected to your coworkers unless there's a real intentionality to it. It's easy to feel isolated. Even though the technology might be really easy and employees can use [Microsoft] Teams and Zoom to connect remotely, it doesn't take away the fact that they don't know who to go to informally if they're having an issue. They can't just pop over to the coworker in the adjacent office or cubicle and ask, "Do you know how to approach this client' or 'Do you know how to approach this problem?" And instead, the main contact is the supervisor, who they often don't want to admit to not knowing something.

Windeler: Remote work is especially challenging for newcomers. It's hard to get your arms around who's who and what's important when all your conversations are mediated through technology. Mentoring doesn't usually happen very well the more remote a workforce is. I think it's hard to make a strong impression through virtual interviewing and onboarding. I've had students who have told me they've been given the option to interview in-person or online, and I would always recommend in-person because you have more control over the impression you make.

Brymer: Some employees, particularly recent graduates of UC or other colleges, started online and remote, and they had very little socialization. Socialization generally happens in-person. Not that it can't happen online; it's just more difficult for it to work online. I think that is a scalable issue. You could probably socialize people in small groups if you're working intently with video chat and what have you, but if you're talking about an office of 150 people, it's very hard to build company culture. I think that some of that has been lost with remote work. I think that's what companies are grappling with. How can we have both? How can we have a little bit of the best of both worlds?

How have changes to work structure affected workers?

Brymer: Flexibility of time schedule but also flexibility of arrangement. What we're seeing more of today is contracting, a lot more gig work and other work relationships of that nature where people can choose the amount of contribution they want to make to companies. This idea that all workers need to be 40-plus hours a week I think is increasingly tenuous. I think you'll see more contracting, more part-time, more gig work, more consulting on a part-time basis. With people that are married, I think you'll probably see a lot more situations where one person works full-time and has the health benefits and one person has

more flexibility and might not have to worry about health care coverage. I do think you'll also see more people piece together several part-time jobs based on the need of flexibility. People can often make more money as contractors, but they generally have fewer benefits.

Masterson: There are some people who really like the security of finding a place where they are going to work long-term and have meaningful work and clearly build something. There are other people who prefer working for an organization for a while, working on a project, feeling good about that and then moving on to the next thing at another organization.

There is some older research that differentiates between locals and cosmopolitans. Locals are the people who want to identify with their employing organization and want to build a career there, versus cosmopolitans who identify more with their job or industry and who are going to work at the place that's most interesting for now and then move on to the most interesting thing at the next place. When I'm teaching this concept to students, I always talk about it as the difference between a cosmopolitan professor saying, "I'm a professor, and I'm currently at the University of Cincinnati," and the local professor saying, "I'm at the University of Cincinnati; I'm a professor there."

The question is what do you identify with? Do you identify with the work that you do and it doesn't matter what organization that you do it in? Or do you identify with the organization that you work in and then what you do there is part of that? It's a different identification focus. And I think right now, the economy, the pandemic, the change in the nature of work has really benefited those people who are cosmopolitans and are willing to say, "I'll work wherever."

Brymer: Money is always going to be an important factor, clearly, but what the latest generation is thinking more about is lifestyle: What am I

getting out of work? Is there meaning in my work or am I just working to get a paycheck?

My generation, Generation X, is the leave-me-alone generation. For us, it was, "Just tell me what I need to do, I'll come into the office, I'll do it and go home." There wasn't a whole lot of questioning for us about meaningfulness in work. What I think is happening with millennials and Gen Z is a lot more emphasis on why am I working. What's the point of this company? Do I believe in its mission, do I believe in what they're doing, do I believe in this industry?

We've seen that with a shift in CEO rhetoric and focus of companies, and COVID and the pandemic have also forced the issue [of their own mortality]. People were faced with the possibility of, "I could die in this pandemic." People think about their lives a little bit differently when reminded of this reality. Younger workers think about a bigger picture and maybe are less concerned with the paycheck and getting marginally more money at one company versus another. So, I think you'll see companies that have good, authentic missions that are doing good in the world and that are places that people believe in, particularly the younger generations, will be able to attract more people, retain more people and probably pay people less, interestingly enough.

Are there generational differences in how people have adapted to new working conditions?

Brymer: Young people pick up technology and get very used to the media of the day. I think it's a lot harder for the older generation who've been accustomed to coming into work and having that routine.

Windeler: Comfort with technology is one of the things the pandemic was helpful with—in getting us past that point of, "I don't know how this

works and I won't try because I don't have to use it." I think there may still be greater fluidity for people who are used to technology when it comes to juggling all the different tools that you can use. But I think older generations of people have gotten comfortable with the technology that enables remote [work] pretty quickly.

Brymer: When you have digital notifications all the time and computers barking every time an email comes in, it's just constant. Younger people are used to that and are a little bit more comfortable with that reality. And paradoxically I think it's to their disadvantage because they haven't been socialized into organizations the way that older generations have. What technology has done is made that the constant impersonal barrage of digital notifications as primary task setters the default operating MO for employees.

I have to be very deliberate with all my digital tethers to cut them off if and when I want to separate and do more thoughtful work. That's a change that has happened, and you can see people putting up stricter boundaries with technology. I for one began to be more deliberate about the time with notifications, when I had my phone on me, when I put my phone in the other room, when I work, when I don't work. I think the onus has become more and more on the employee to work the way they want to work rather than the employer telling the employee how, when and where to work.

How do employers socialize their employees and build trust in an environment in which remote work is so prevalent?

Masterson: The more an organization has standard work hours—9 to 5, whatever those hours are—the more supervisors can check in on someone and have confidence that they're working. Acknowledging that

people have lives outside of work, that they might have different things to balance and having the trust built that that person is going to do the work in a way that benefits both parties—it takes some trust to build it, but I think that's the next step to flexibility. Not just flex in location but flex in time and design.

So, someone who wants to put their kids on the bus every morning might get up early, do some work for a while and then have that breakfast time with their kids and the pre-school time, get them off to school, then start working again. Or they might stop working at 3 when the kids get home from school and then pick work back up between 8 and 10 that night because that really works for them, and they're catching up on all their emails that came in during that time and setting things up for people to start on the next day. But you need a baseline of trust to be able to do that. And that, I think, is the hardest part to establish if you haven't had some face-to-face time or at least some structured online time where you're developing that relationship where you can be honest and transparent about what your needs are and how things can work.

Windeler: The longer you've been at an organization, the easier it is to work from home and the more appropriate. But there are many factors that affect whether remote works for someone: their industry, their experience, job tenure, the nature of the job, the season of the job.

Masterson: It all comes back to intentionality. Any time we're talking about remote or hybrid, there's got to be some intentionality about how we think about the social side of it. The work can get done, but how do you build that social side of it? If you're not intentional about building relationships, it really is just going to be that economic exchange relationship. You pay me, and I'll do what you have listed in my job description. Work gets done that way, but it's not always the most meaningful, and it's not always the most fulfilling for either side in that relationship.

If it's harder for employees to make a connection while working remote, will we see more worker turnover?

Brymer: I think that's the prevailing theory. We haven't seen as many studies about that. But what COVID has done is: it's been a natural experiment. My hypothesis is that, yes, you will see more mobility because of the lowered barriers to switching from one online place to another versus switching jobs where you have to come into the office.

The counter argument to that is the places that do remote management of their organization really well might be able to retain people rather than people that are coming into the office and saying, "Why am I doing this? Why am I spending an hour and a half of my day on the road back and forth and spending all this time to get dressed and look nice where I don't really need to do that?" Or, people who want to live farther away from the company. These are all compelling new ways of thinking about employee mobility that have emerged over the last few years.

Masterson: We know from research that when people feel a sense of belonging and mattering and need fulfillment—that sense of citizenship in the organization—that's when you're going to see people deliver extraordinary performance. They often do extra things, not in a way that's manipulative on the part of the organization, but because employees feel, "This organization is my organization; its successes are my successes; I identify with the organization."

That's what I think you lose when you develop the kind of working relationships where it is just a job, where employees don't feel a sense of belonging with anyone else. It's really easy to quit a job; it's hard to quit people. It's really easy to quit a supervisor; it's hard to quit coworkers because you know who you're leaving in a lurch. And so it sounds kind

of manipulative, suggesting that organizations build relationships because people will be more likely to stay, but it's also more fulfilling for people to have those relationships at work and to be a part of something, as opposed to that economic exchange: "I do the work; I get the pay; I'm done."

How can employers overcome some of the challenges of remote work?

Masterson: With new employees, you may want to start with some in-person experiences or at least some virtual team-building activities, so it's not just, "Here's your HR rep and here's your supervisor, off you go." There are ways to make those relationships work virtually, such as giving employees mentors and informal contacts and building that network. In a hybrid environment, you might have teams come in on a shared day to engage in events that build relationships. If it's a totally remote workplace, you will have to be even more intentional in terms of how you get people talking online in small groups and sharing personal information to build trust.

Brymer: Some of the interesting ideas that I've seen recently is sort of this hybrid option where you have the option to come into work but using office spaces largely as social spaces rather than workspaces. Companies transform cubicle areas and make it a place where people can come and meet in comfort and have coffee together or have beers together or whatever. Those events happen as prescribed socializing, which is a little bit different. You have that oftentimes with a happy hour or everybody goes to lunch together. It's kind of making up for that space in this interesting, flexible way.

Windeler: In the future, augmented reality could be quite powerful in helping to fill in the missing pieces, fill in what we lose when we take an

in-person interaction and put it online. AR is going to make it feel like it's more in-person. I think we still have a long way to go in terms of the technology, especially the hardware; it has to be completely frictionless. You could have a device that gives you the perception that people are sitting around a table with you; you're sitting at a table, but then there's a projection of their presence in a way that makes them feel more embodied and makes you feel like you're more immersed in that.

Right now we just see people from the neck up, so you're missing a lot of body language. You're missing gaze because it's in two dimensions on a screen; you can't tell who someone is looking at when you're looking at a screen. Something like augmented reality would give you body language, proximity, gaze and those are microcues that the human brain is attuned to and is missing from current remote meeting technologies.

Masterson: We need to consider how we help people design their jobs, and the particular tasks they do, in ways that make sense. For example, tasks that require deep thinking and individual work may work really well from home while tasks that are collaborative may require opportunities for people to run into each other in person.

If you frame jobs that way—if you help people craft their jobs that way—then employees are better able to see the value of putting on work clothes and going to the office two to three days a week. They are likely to get energy from it and have better outcomes for the collaborative tasks they structure for those in-person days. They also have the balance of working at home on the days where they need the deep thinking and can't do it when coworkers keep popping into the office and disrupting their work flow. Instead, they can do that work at home in their comfy PJs and save the commute time.

Are companies that want their employees to return to

the office full time going to have a harder time attracting employees?

Brymer: We've seen a lot of companies that have struggled finding workers; there's a huge talent shortage out there right now. I think the companies that are going to do well are going to be the ones that either have a compelling reason to join them—you pay a lot of money, you're a GE or Procter & Gamble type of a company that has some weight on a resume. Those companies will still be able to attract people coming in. Other companies, they're less well known small- to medium-sized businesses, they're going to have either a really strong culture that compels people to join and stay with them or have more flexibility than employers have offered in the past.

Masterson: I think it can be harder if you're in a very expensive area. It can be harder if you don't demonstrate a value added to coming into the office.

Brymer: If you think about the talent pool that you have to draw on, geography and brand are the two things. I think you need to have one or the other to really pull people into the office.

There's been a lot of talk about a possible recession. How would a recession affect the relationship between employers and employees?

Windeler: The balance of power between employees and employers is changing; it's been a very friendly labor market lately. Our grads have had no problem getting jobs and at very good salaries, especially in tech; they can just take their pick. But a recession impacts the labor market. It also makes organizations more cost conscious. I think remote work can make it easier to control costs and keep costs down and do things like

reduce your footprint of real estate. I could see remote work not really changing if we go through a recession for that reason, but I think it will present an opportunity for some companies to make changes.

Even within companies, some jobs can be done remotely while others can't. How will companies balance that and could it cause tension among employees?

Masterson: Not all jobs are created equal. It's a hard conversation for organizations and supervisors to have as to why they trust X person to work at home but not Y person. So, issues of fairness do come up whenever you're talking about this because people expect to be treated equally and to all have the same chance to work at home. However, when you think about performance, trust and relationships, organizations and supervisors are going to have to have some of those tough conversations.

Windeler: One of the biggest challenges with remote is going to be the increase in visibility of differences between people's jobs and the challenges that creates for fairness, perceptions of fairness—that somebody else gets to work from home but I don't or somebody else gets to work from home three days a week and I only get to do it one day a week. You're going to see a lot more job crafting where [human resource] managers and leaders will need to get creative about compensating for limitations to the flexibility of somebody's work schedule.

Brymer: I don't know how different that is than the past. Maybe it's exacerbated it a little bit. A lot of what you're talking about is blue collar versus white collar stereotypical division. There are more blue-collar jobs that you've got to do in-person. They require physical tasks,

building a building or the like. Of course, there are white-collar jobs in construction, too. So was there tension between the people that had to lay the bricks versus the people that did the construction planning before? Yes. Is it exasperated with COVID? Probably. If the predominant force in the industry is showing up in-person, I think it's going to be harder for that industry to get away from in-person for jobs that could be done remotely.

Masterson: Equality is treating everyone the same, while equity is treating people in proportion to a particular characteristic, such as performance. When you talk about fairness in this environment, you have to determine which of those types of fairness you are applying. Is it the case that everyone can work as well at home as in-person, so we can offer the opportunity equally to all? Or are there some performance differences, or even job characteristic differences, such that we need to use an equity-based rule to decide the prioritization of who gets to work remotely?

Windeler: A lot of the conversation around working from home makes it sound as if the workforce and jobs are homogeneous, but there is so much variety in jobs and among people. When we talk about working from home, we almost never acknowledge retail jobs or service jobs or manual labor jobs. That's a huge chunk of the economy, the U.S. workforce, that's missing from these conversations. And even if you're talking about what I refer to as knowledge workers—people who are sitting at desks—there's still a lot of variety.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

Citation: What's the future of work from home? (2022, September 2) retrieved 24 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2022-09-future-home.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.