Help or harm? For women, working remotely does both

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For women’s career advancement, remote work is another double-edged sword.

For a brief period, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, we witnessed the largest experiment in working from home the world has ever seen. Men and women the world over abandoned their

commutes and experienced the challenges of video meetings with rowdy toddlers and cats. There were many drawbacks, but as these were similar for all workers, there was also increased understanding from colleagues and bosses.

As the pandemic recedes, however, and people return to the office *en masse*, many of the pre-pandemic stereotypes about virtual workers are creeping back in.

IESE's Isabel Villamor, with co-authors N. Sharon Hill, Ellen Ernst Kossek and Kira O. Foley, studied virtual working and its effects on women's careers over the last three decades. Some of what they learned has been definitively proven by 2020's outsized experiment in home working. Other findings have not been splashed across headlines, but they are also important if we're to avoid damaging attitudes on women's home working.

The authors unearthed three main tensions related to working from home, working away from the office and across time zones, and communication methods in virtual work. These dimensions can affect all people working virtually, but especially women, and particularly, mothers.

Tension 1. The blurred lines of work and non-work time

Harnessing the power of remote work unleashes unparalleled flexibility, and for many it elevates work-life balance. This boon is particularly impactful for women as they tend to shoulder more family duties. So, remote work can serve as a catalyst for enhanced well-being and job satisfaction. Increased flexibility not only revolutionizes how we approach work but also enriches our personal lives, creating a harmonious blend of career and home.

Yet, from 24/7 reachability to the unhealthy cycle of working in free time to make up for interruptions in work time, most of us have experienced boundary erosion while working from home.

The negative effects fall more heavily on women, particularly those with children. "Childcare can eat into mothers' working days; for example, it is well-known that nurseries are more likely to call the mother when a child is ill," says Villamor. Meanwhile, women's requests to work from home are viewed more negatively than male colleagues', career advancement can stall, and for mothers, more hours worked off-site are associated with lower pay.

Due to these perceptions, women are more likely to work extra to catch up and have more difficulty disengaging from work, with mothers specifically reporting lower happiness levels.

Tension 2. Flexibility of location can create but also limit job opportunities

Virtual work can, conversely, open up career opportunities that women might otherwise be unwilling or unable to take advantage of.

“Remote work has greatly increased opportunities for women to accept global assignments without having to relocate their families — an uptick in travel, but no need to move everyone full time,” says Villamor. Yet we should avoid rose-colored glasses as success in global work often requires after-hours availability, which is more challenging for those with more family demands.

Meanwhile, in teams that are highly dispersed geographically, a higher number of female members increases the likelihood of developing a shared leadership style, which has been shown to be effective for virtual team performance. Such globalized virtual teams also tend to require more collaboration, and this also plays to women’s strengths.

On the negative side, using flexible work arrangements is sometimes perceived as prioritizing family over work for women (but not for men), hurting their job prospects.

Tension 3. Lean communication works better for women

Women can be both stigmatized and empowered by the effect of virtuality on social cues and stereotypes.

Virtual communication that is “leaner” (such as email) can make gender less salient, which may benefit women — they are less likely to conform to gender stereotypes and less likely to agree in discussions or presentations; in short, they display more agency (which also allows them to negotiate better).

However, the leanness of virtual communication can also reduce opportunities to counter social stereotypes. With little else to go on, gender stereotypes are often relied on, to the point where women are assigned more administrative tasks while challenging roles go to male team members.

Meanwhile, social networks can open up spaces of inclusion and widen networks, especially for those who tend to have smaller networks in the workplace (such as women or junior

employees). Yet they can also exclude. After all, it's easier to leave someone out of a WhatsApp group than to deliberately exclude them in an office environment.

A continuing balancing act

Mandates to bring workers back to the office are welcomed by some, dreaded by others. What is important, as full-time virtual work fades into memory for many, is to avoid the lazy assumptions of the past.

For women, thriving in the workplace requires balance: flexible workplaces can help overcome the negatives of the virtual environment, as can hands-on spouses, digital collaboration tools that help women overcome barriers in face-to-face networks, and governmental support in childcare and in combating cultural norms about domestic labor.

About the research

The authors surveyed academic literature on women's career equality and virtuality at work to fill a gap in the research on women and virtual research generally.

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