

# Redefining Workplace Norms: Employer-Employee Discrepancies in Remote Work Preferences

An STS Research Paper  
presented to the faculty of the  
School of Engineering and Applied Science  
University of Virginia

by

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May 8, 2023

On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Redefining Workplace Norms: Employer-Employee Discrepancies in Remote Work Preferences**

During the COVID-19 lockdown, remote work in the United States tripled in frequency from 5.7% in 2019 to 17.9% in 2021 (US Census Bureau, 2021). Companies and their employees have been negotiating over remote work policies ever since. As the pandemic subsided, some companies tactfully requested employees to return (Sorkin, 2022), while others mandated a full return-to-office (Goudreau, 2013; Mac, 2022). According to Deloitte (2022), one in five workers under age 40 reports that they chose their employer because it permits remote work (Deloitte, 2022). Workers and employers respond to remote work differently, and everyone argues for their preferred remote work policies.

The problem is not a simple management-employee divide. Some managers struggle in remote environments (Parker et al., 2020). Ingratiation (“boot-licking”) is less effective online than to face-to-face interactions (Al-Shatti & Ohana, 2021), and some sources of burnout are unique to remote work (Christian, 2022; Espada, 2022).

Employers and employees generally disagree about how to prevent and mitigate burnout and how to measure employee productivity, interfering with workplace productivity and solidarity.

Employers are divided over remote work. Some support their employees’ remote work preferences. Such employers generally hope to promote inclusivity without impairing intrateam relationships (Dell, 2022). Other employers take an “only if necessary” stance, usually to protect camaraderie and to ensure access to workplace amenities (Cheng, 2017).

Workers are also divided. According to Richardson and Antonello (2022), “64% of the workforce would consider looking for a new job if required to return to the office full-time.” However, many workers dread long-term remote work because it can impair work-life balance, induce video chat fatigue, and prevent spontaneous conversations (C. Thompson, 2020). The executive level employees should also be considered, as they often receive more consideration. For instance, when Tesla’s commuting policy was

released, the executive suite resisted the strict requirements for remote work (Berger, 2022).

## **Review of Research**

Feng and Savani (2020) investigated the differences between men and women (n=286) working full time from home. They found lower self-reported job satisfaction and productivity among women than men, attributing the difference to greater “housework and childcare beyond a threshold, thereby creating a gender gap in work productivity and job satisfaction.” The paper did not address the managerial trust implications of lower productivity among women working remotely, which must be considered for a holistic view of managerial trust in WFH employees.

Researchers have investigated managers’ responses to different impression management (IM) forms. While “boot-lickers,” or more formally, “actors who knowingly engage in ingratiation” are often distrusted, this only holds when the target believes the actor is doing so purposefully (Long, 2021). However, Long later suggests that when an employee authentically ingratiates their supervisor, “the target would see such behavior as a signal that the actor should be trusted.” Other research differentiates between face-to-face and online IM and direct or indirect IM (Al-Shatti & Ohana, 2021). Indeed, “66 percent of employers say they use search engines to conduct research on potential job candidates,” demonstrating indirect IM’s role in the modern era (CareerBuilder, 2018).

However, none of the reviewed research answers how an employee could compete with the pressures of a company when governing remote work policy. How can employees counteract the highly valued proximity bias with CEOs like Musk stating, “The more senior you are, the more visible must be your presence,” (Mac, 2022)?

## **Managing Remote Work Norms**

### **Motivation for companies to control remote work policies**

Managers distrust remote workers on the grounds of decreased productivity. More than half of 215 supervisors and managers surveyed expressed low confidence in their

remote employees to perform as well as their in-office employees (Parker et al., 2020). Howard Schultz, Starbucks CEO, represents the result of remote distrust. As he explained his attempts to encourage his workers to return to the office, he explained his dissatisfaction with a hybrid setup - “I think people will come back two to three days a week... that’s the way it is. But... I am evaluating... , what’s the level of productivity? And you know, it appears that people are working at home ” (as cited in Sorkin, 2022). He mentions setting an example through his 12-hour workdays, which suggests a belief in a positive correlation between productivity and hours worked, despite evidence suggesting that output rises at a decreasing rate as hours increase, citing reasons such as fatigue and stress-reducing productivity and increasing the probability of errors, accidents, and sickness (Pencavel, 2015). A plausible interpretation of Schultz’s restrained comments like “that’s the way it is” and “what’s the level of productivity?” is Schultz noncommittally dismissing the viability of remote work on the grounds of decreased productivity, which contradicts current sentiment (Choudhury et al., 2021). Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo, more transparently shares Schultz’s distrust in remote workers, saying, “Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home” (as cited in Goudreau, 2013).

Both fully-remote and hybrid remote schedules are correlated with higher burnout, leading to decreased productivity. Johnny C. Taylor Jr., President and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management, the world’s largest HR society, says remote work has caused severe burnout (as cited in Espada, 2022), which reflects a 1.7% productivity decrease and a 2.6% increase in hours worked among non-farm businesses (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023), which are telltale signs of burnout. However, Reddit user politelyreal (2023) argues that burnout is a result of the company you work at, not working remotely; “I just had to go to a better company. Burn out is burn out.” Other Reddit users attributed increased burnout to the pandemic. “7 years of remote work here, it ain’t the WFH part, it’s the pandemic, the economy, quarantine and the never knowing when shit will get better part” (PlaysWthSquirrels, 2020). Hybrid remote work introduces a unique

cause of burnout. Klara, an employee in the UK, was initially excited about remote work, but she quickly experienced fatigue from having to maintain and switch between two offices. 600 HR leaders and 100 employees reflected Klara's hybrid-specific burnout - hybrid/remote employees (80.9%/85%) were 12.0-16.1% higher compared to their in-person counterparts (68.9%). The latter quarter they studied had a higher rate of hybrid burnout compared to fully remote burnout by 2.9%, compared to the previous quarter, where remote had 4.1% higher burnout compared to the hybrid equivalent.

### **Employer-driven burnout prevention**

Managers attempt to decrease remote workers' burnout by replicating in-person office dynamics, commonly called "water cooler talk". Pro-WFH employees seem reluctant to use video meetings to socialize, but could potentially use them to build trust. While some WFH employees enjoy "water-cooler" talk (CoastalWitch, 2022), pro-WFH Reddit users on the "workingfromhome" subreddit qualitatively used WFH to escape socialization in a workplace (krissyface, 2021). Gartner (2021) further supports this in their survey of 2,400 knowledge workers, where they found that "employees who now spend more time in meetings are 1.24 times more likely to feel emotionally drained from their work," suggesting that using video meetings as the primary method of building trust has associated risk.

Managers attempt to reduce remote work burnout by encouraging (and sometimes enforcing) employees to maintain a healthier life balance. Gitlab, a fully remote company with over 2,000 employees across 65 countries as of 2023 (GitLab, 2023), describes the symptoms of burnout, recognizes the nearsightedness of a company allowing their employees to burn themselves out, and communicates your boundaries to other employees (GitLab, 2018). This is backed up by positive employee testimony. One self-reported GitLab employee details why they enjoy the remote culture: "I completely removed all work apps from my phone, never got a PTO turned down, I am more productive than ever because I am averaging 2hrs of meetings per week..." (eduardobonet, 2022). Another self-reported GitLab employee goes further, saying "I've been working remotely for the last

24 years across 6 companies... GitLab does remote better than any place else I've been" (bigsteevo, 2022).

### **Employee-driven burnout prevention**

Workers under managers who distrust their team often rely on "productivity theatre" to mimic in-person productivity measures. While this problem isn't specific to remote work, the lack of physical interaction creates a unique environment for managerial distrust. Microsoft (2022) found only 12% of remote managers say they have "full confidence their team is productive," compared to the 87% of employees who say "they are productive at work". 54% of remote managers compared to 38% of in-office managers report less visibility in their employees' work. The combination of the overwhelming amount of workers who feel productive and managers who feel blind to the work accomplished suggests a weak or misguided system for measuring productivity. This is further supported by Gartner (2021), who found that "69% of HR leaders report that managers have less visibility into employee work patterns in today's hybrid scenario."

Remote workers reduce burnout by decreasing remote-onset diminished social interactions. "I have the opposite experience, remote work has allowed me to spend way more time around the people I want to spend time with. I don't feel lonely at all" (laurenhtexas, 2023). Others disagree: "Every tweet that equates remote work to being lonely reeks of 'I have no friends or family who like me so I must depend on the company of coworkers to satisfy my dependency issues' "(FirstName736928, 2023). One tweet garnered over 17,000 likes, saying "100% remote work combined with a no meeting culture is going to create a large group of lonely, isolated workers" (Alex Cohen [@anothercohen], 2023). A large number of likes could suggest that a large number of remote workers agree with Alex Cohen [@anothercohen]'s statement. Other workers experience increased isolation from inter-workplace friendships: "it was easy to go for lunch or coffee together in town, but now we have to drive to see each other and it's not as easy" (niftyshellsuit, 2021). One interpretation of these employees is the need for diversified social networks to

counteract isolation as a source of burnout for remote workers.

Many remote workers struggle to enforce working hour boundaries while working at home. “I upgraded to a 2 bedroom so I could have an office but it didn’t solve my [burnout] issue,” says one computer science knowledge worker (BertRenolds, 2021). Others respond by saying “Working from home isn’t for everybody...” (illithoid, 2021), and “To be fair, I’ve been wfh [working from home] for a few years now and covid wfh is way worse” (Lycid, 2021). With over 600 upvotes from other Reddit users, compared to the 1.5k upvotes the original post received, another remote worker said “I’ve been working remotely for 4 years now, but I rarely work from home anymore. I’ve done co-working space and am now renting an office” (MarcableFluke, 2021). Despite some remote workers’ efforts to create a dedicated workspace at home, simply allowing workers to work from home is not a viable solution. However, not all employees can afford a dedicated home workspace, and renting an office eliminates a primary benefit of remote working: reduced commute time.

### **Business prospect restriction**

An employee’s strongest tools to individually manage remote work norms are quietly applying to other remote work roles or threatening to quit. Owl Labs surveyed ( $n \geq 2,300$ ) full-time remote workers in the United States and found that 66% of workers would search for a new job, compared to 39% that would quit immediately if they weren’t allowed to work hybrid or fully remote Owl Labs (2022). Instead of negotiating with existing managers, a competitive market allows knowledge workers to expend less effort to reach their desired lifestyle. 46% of employees would consider staying in their role, but would instead complete the bare minimum required. While some refer to this as “quiet quitting”, many workers view this term as means for a company to guilt employees for establishing healthy work-life balances (Hiltzik, 2022; killingmequickly, 2022; Tayreads608, 2022; D. Thompson, 2022).

The decision to work remotely may not be by choice, especially among Gen Z and millennials. Deloitte’s Global Gen Z & Millennial Survey found that “the cost of living is

the top concern among Gen Zs [29%] and Millennials [36%], followed closely by climate change [24% for Gen Z and 25% for Millennials]" Deloitte (2022). If salaries aren't increased to match the cost of living, citizens are forced to move out of the city. Patricia Bolgiano, a Baltimore resident, talked about her decision about where to live (as cited in Palmer, 2012). "Yes, living in the city is fun and convenient, but there are costs and trade-offs" She mentioned city tax rates, food, homeowner, and car insurance payments as significant contributors beyond rent/mortgage payments. Patricia didn't comment on whether she worked remotely. Still, remote work could be a viable solution if her salary was not enough to cover the city's cost of living, and commuting was deemed too impractical. Reddit member ghoostimage (2022) supports how remote work can save both time and money. dedalus14 (2022) contested with a cycling commute experience resulting in reduced cost savings. The sentiment remains clear - if wages trail behind the cost of living, workers will be forced to seek alternative jobs or potentially less desirable housing solutions.

Companies can restrict the prospects of employees by restricting worker organization. Howard Schultz responded to Sorkin (2022)'s question on public perception of Starbucks' anti-union sentiment:

If a company as progressive as Starbucks, which has done so much... can be threatened by a third party that means that any company in America can. Now, I've said publicly I'm not anti-union, but the history of unions is based on the fact that companies in the '40s, '50s, and '60s abused their people. We're not in a coal mining business; we're not abusing our people (paras. 7).

Schultz could be interpreted as using scare tactics and straw-manning as means of preventing organized advocacy. By mentioning that a third party could threaten "any company in America", Schultz appeals to business owners' fears of unionization. By comparing Starbucks to harsher conditions and implying employee abuse can only take the form of a coal mining business's abuse, Schultz could be attempting to define the necessary conditions for a union and minimize any need for a Starbucks union. Finally, by refuting



comparisons to coal mining companies, Schultz could be attempting to appeal to a steelman argument.

Advocates against remote work believe its acceptance could imply outsourcing, weakening all employee prospects. While some argue it could lead to outsourcing jobs and weakening employment prospects for workers, others believe that it provides new opportunities for those who may have been limited by their location. Reddit user takenorinvalid created a post titled “Remote work is going to be bad for us within 5 years or so ” in the “datascience” Reddit community, with replies ranging from “What year is this? Companies have been doing this for a long time (suddenarbrialsstops, 2022),” to “Learn how to differentiate yourself and be better than commoditized talent. That’s always been the job of the knowledge worker (quantpsychguy, 2022).” However, concerns remain about the potential impact of remote work on communication and collaboration, particularly when working with offshore teams. “A lot of offshore employees I work with have a really hard time communicating with US stakeholders (SgtSlice, 2022).” Others on the post refute the notion of “us” being restricted to workers in the U.S., and remote work benefits those with geographically-constricted opportunities (artemivchatov, 2022; icemelter4K, 2022; jackass93269, 2022; MrBatfleck, 2022).

Some managers express discontent with remote work because of timezone synchronization issues. “I have a staff member that is in a timezone 4 hours out of sync. I’ll be honest, as a manager, I’m not super enthused by the situation. . .like any of these things, it’s a matter of trust” (tarzanboy76, 2022). Other Reddit users (apeters89, 2022) agree with Tarzanboy76, stating that there are limits to the geographical spread of an effective remote work team.

Other advocates against remote work argue for a longer transition time due to weak digital infrastructure. One accountant for a small local government recounted their experience of attempting an office-wide transition to WFH, only to realize it wasn’t feasible until the “paper, manual signatures, and physical storage of records” were more accessible

remotely (2r1t, 2022). “We can’t just stop services to the community to pay for this. All of this takes time. And I definitely am not going to go back to full time teleworking with our makeshift solution to wait out a replacement that could take well over a year to implement. I’ll welcome it when it arrives, but I’ll do so from the office.” Another user had a similar experience, stating that “Full time is not realistic due to business needs” in their Information Technology (IT) role for a school in a small rural community (Divio42, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

The decision to work remotely may be out of necessity or preference. Still, either way, it comes with potential risks to both participant groups - namely, weak benefit packages for younger prospective employees and burnout, resulting in lower productivity. Motivation may vary, but employers and employees should create burnout safeguards to sustain remote work productivity and engagement. Further research should study enforced work-life balance routine efficacy, measuring based on managerial distrust of remote workers and job satisfaction of anti-remote-work employees who advocate on the grounds of an unhealthy work-life balance. The COVID-19 pandemic’s effect on burnout, especially regarding the inability to take a vacation, should be considered in future research.

The main challenge of balancing remote work policy between employers and employees is creating an environment that encourages productivity and healthy work-life balance without sacrificing employee prospects. Companies similar to GitLab may benefit from supporting and maintaining remote work. Other companies may avoid addressing the root causes of burnout by enforcing a return-to-office policy and continuing to enable employee work-life unbalance. Either way, employers must adjust to changing needs and expectations of their employees or lose prospective employees in support of remote work. As barriers to accessing a work environment continue to dwindle, with offices mere feet from an employee’s bedroom, companies must choose between long-term decreased productivity and a healthy work-life balance for their employees. Further research should explore best practices for remote work policies and optimal means for enforcing work-life balance.

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