

# Workers' Response to Remote Work

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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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## **Workers' Response to Remote Work**

Due to the recent coronavirus pandemic, remote work has become much more common worldwide, including in the United States. The rise of remote work has had a profound impact on those working remotely, especially on software developers. Remote work affects all who engage it, though effects vary widely by individual; in the aggregate, effects also vary by job, race and sex. What have employees who work from home in the United States said about the effect of their working conditions on their mental health? These effects of remote work on mental health remain largely unknown; both increased depression and improved quality of life have been reported (Oakman et al., 2020). About 56 percent of employees report that they feel comfortable discussing their mental health with employers, but documentary research can reveal a more inclusive picture of the mental health implications of remote work (APA, 2021; Ho, 2018). Such methods can also shed light on vulnerable workers, such as those in the hospitality industry. Remote work has distinct implications for parents. While some workers welcome remote work for the freedom and flexibility it can offer, others report burnout and isolation, attributing it at least in part to working remotely. For some software developers, such conditions have contributed to job loss.

### **Review of Research**

Researchers have studied burnout and other mental health effects associated with remote work during the coronavirus pandemic. Elbogen et al. (2022) established a correlation between depression and "Zoom fatigue," a feeling of anxiety and emotional exhaustion due to insufficient social connection. They found greater Zoom fatigue among workers who are married, college educated, or nonwhite. Workers experiencing food insecurity or who had prior mental health

conditions were more susceptible to Zoom fatigue than others (Elbogen et al., 2022). While the mental health impact of remote work during the pandemic has been well researched, researchers have not determined if the pandemic or remote work itself caused negative mental health outcomes. Examining remote workers before the pandemic, including GitLab's software developers and Air Force drone operators, can show a link between remote work and negative mental health consequences. The consequences of post-pandemic remote work on the hospitality and big tech industries will also be discussed.

Psychologists found remote work has mental health benefits, lowering worker psychological and physical stress responses, but can lead to reductions in productivity (Shimura et al., 2021). Examining a variety of participants will determine if the positive impacts of remote work are limited to specific demographics. With conversations about mental health increasing, determining the impact remote work has on mental health and the stratification of this impact is necessary (Marie, 2019).

### **Remote Work on Mental Health before and after the Pandemic**

During the coronavirus pandemic, many people worked remotely for the first time. Many experienced a sense of freedom, but others experienced heightened burnout and isolation. In 2021, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) did an anonymous poll of a thousand individuals working remotely during the pandemic to determine the effects of remote work on their mental health and how their employers responded.

The poll found 67% of respondents felt they had a hard time getting away from work at the end of the day, with 65% of respondents feeling lonely or isolated as a result of working from home (APA, 2021). However, the poll found most employers recognized and responded to these

rising mental health issues; 54% of respondents said their employers had become more accommodating to their mental health needs due to the pandemic, and 28% said their workplace was now more supportive of those with mental health issues (APA, 2021). Discussion of mental health also increased, but as the height of the pandemic dropped, the emphasis on mental health in the workplace decreased as well. In 2020, 35% of respondents said their employers offered additional mental health resources as a result of the pandemic, compared to 21% in 2021 (APA, 2021). Many employees felt they were unable to take time off for their mental health, with about 50% of respondents worrying of retaliation if they did so (APA, 2021). Remote work is becoming more common, but mental health resources offered to employees are declining; if the negative impact in the mental health of remote workers is a result of remote work itself and not the pandemic, this could be a dangerous trend.

GitLab employee resources offer some insight into the cause of mental health decline. GitLab was founded as a fully remote company in 2011, well before the pandemic. In 2018, Clement Ho wrote an article for GitLab on a summit held by the company to respond to employee burnout. He notes, “Many [GitLab team members] had similar feelings of either being burned out or feeling like they are on their way towards it. Some even mentioned that they were starting to experience those physical signs of feeling burned out (e.g. frequent headaches).” (Ho, 2018) GitLab team members reported other signs of burnout such as tiredness, strained relationships, decreased happiness, and poor job performance. They recommended taking breaks and vacations, and having better work-life boundaries as a way of avoiding burnout (Ho, 2018). Ho also noted, “pacing yourself actually works out cheaper in the long run, as burning out takes extra time for recovery.” (2018)

Air Force drone operators, benefitted greatly from remote work, which reduced PTSD. Chappelle et al. found 4.3% of drone pilots who were not deployed suffered from PTSD; between 4-18% of all deployed soldiers suffer from PTSD (2014). The study found the most common PTSD symptoms among all non-deployed drone operators, not just those with clinical levels of PTSD, were “feeling distant or cut-off from others,” “having difficulty concentrating,” “trouble falling and staying asleep,” and “loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed.” Symptoms of PTSD related to a “stressful military experience” were less common among remote drone operators (Chappelle et al., 2014). These results suggest the remote drone operators were having an experience of worker burnout similar to GitLab employees rather than PTSD.

These articles sheds light on the material interests of companies; employees are more productive when they are not burned out, benefitting companies. Hopefully, this spurs employers to treat mental health as a priority, especially for remote employees. If companies continue to prioritize the mental health of their remote workers, increased burnout in remote workers will not be an issue; this depends on corporate willingness to prioritize workers.

### **Remote Work on the Mental Health of Women, Families, and Minorities**

Benefits to working remotely vary based on the participants. Mothers often prefer remote work or hybrid schedules, but men generally experience more positive mental health effects of remote work than women do. Oakman et al. found men experienced higher feelings of autonomy working from home, while women had no significant increase in autonomy. Men working remotely reported lower levels of stress, pain and tiredness, while there was no change for women (Oakman et al., 2020). Women working from home reported increased levels of exhaustion at home compared to their female colleagues in the office (Oakman et al., 2020).

Studies also found parents experienced greater stress working from home than childless individuals, with remote mothers being unable to disengage from work and remote fathers having difficulty integrating work and family life (Oakman et al., 2020). This speaks to the tradition of men being expected to work while women are expected to raise a family. Working from home may lead to the breakdown of these gender stereotypes, but it also leads to greater stress for those balancing family and work obligations.

According to Tiny Beans, a parenting advocacy, 79% of mothers prefer remote work to ease the logistics of childcare (Wood, 2022). The Mom Project is an advocacy for working mothers that highlights some of the pros and cons of remote work for its members. Mothers who work remotely often have the benefit of flexible scheduling around their children, and the ability to do housework during the day, while mothers who chose to work in person prefer time away from their house, and a clearer work-life balance, as well as the opportunity to interact with adults (Ziegler, 2021). When it comes to parenting, working from home remains a personal choice. Some parents struggle to balance work and family when working remotely, while others prefer the flexibility remote work brings to their work-life balance.

Remote work impacts in person workers as well. Within the service industries, hotel workers in particular have been hurt economically by the rising prevalence of remote work. Unite Here, a North American hospitality and food services labor union had 98% of its members laid off during the pandemic. Many of them relied on union aid to feed their families, and economic and racial disparities put them at greater risk for catching the virus. As remote work increased, many Unite Here hotel housekeepers had their hours reduced as fewer business trips occurred (Unite Here, 2022). This financial stress had a significant impact on the mental health of these participants. Since the pandemic, many hotels have stopped daily room cleanings due to

staff layoffs and decreased demand for hotels. Unite Here studies found this would eliminate 39% of all housekeeping jobs, costing mainly women of color \$4.8 billion annually in the US (2022).

The food service industry has also been impacted. Total Food Service, a restaurant industry advocacy found remote workers were eating out less and relying on delivery services more frequently, which can be expensive for restaurants. Chain restaurants and coffee shops have been hurt by remote work; Dunkin's sales were down 15% and Starbucks's sales by 35% in 2021 (Partida, 2021). 49% of food service employees are minorities, compared to 38% in the total US labor force, and 54% are women, compared to 48% in the total US labor force (National Restaurant Association, 2022). Since more women and minorities are employed in the service industries, these demographics will be disproportionately harmed by the rise of remote work.

### **Remote Work and Employers**

Based on the responses of many prominent CEOs, employer reaction to remote work varies greatly. Some see remote work as the future; Tim Ryan, the chairman of PwC, an accounting and consulting firm, said, "Preferences are changing during this pandemic... We knew that there's a segment of our people who would like not just to work flexibly, which we already had in place, but to work completely virtually." (Gelles, 2021) PwC was one of the first companies to make remote work a permanent option for its employees, comparable to the office work environment.

Hayden Brown, the CEO of Upwork, a freelancing platform, feels employees have more power in the debate about remote work, saying, "Companies are listening to their employees more than ever before, and I think that's partly because the war for talent is greater than ever." (Gelles, 2021) She is continuing remote work based on employee preference, adding, "We

basically just listened to the work force, and everybody said remote work was working really well.” (Gelles, 2021) Executives who advocate for remote work feel company policy should be tailored around employee preference and productivity, and are flexible changing their work environment for these values. They believe it increases the employee happiness, which adds value to the company. Employers who advocate for remote work link employee well-being to profitability, making them more willing to prioritize options such as remote work.

Other CEOs fear remote work will damage their employees’ mental health and networking opportunities. Chris Merrill, co-founder of Harrison Street, a real estate firm, noted, “Being in the office makes sense. It’s very, very important for the younger people to be together. That is where they learn. That is where they grow. That is where you’re going to create upward mobility.” (Gelles, 2021) Executives who prioritize working in person cite networking, professional development, and communication as reasons for returning to the office. Mr. Merrill adds, “Personal interactions are what this is all about. Being empathetic, being able to look someone in the eye and shake someone’s hand, just listening and sitting in people’s offices and bumping into somebody in the lunchroom and sharing an idea — that just doesn’t happen over Zoom.” (Gelles, 2021)

Andi Owen, the CEO of MillerKnoll, a furniture company, fears working from home will put her remote employees at a disadvantage, saying, “One of my biggest worries is that we’re going to have remote orphans. Walking down the hall to somebody’s office and knocking on the door, or doing a drive-by versus setting up a video appointment, these things are easier to do in person.” (Gelles, 2021) She is concerned about the mental health and work-life balance of her employees, stating, “I don’t necessarily buy into the mythology of people who are just working part time and hanging out in their beds, doing nothing. I think people are working harder.”



(Gelles, 2021) Executives who advocate for traditional offices believe they promote professional success, networking, and worker well-being. Office spaces allow managers to monitor their employees more closely, allowing employees to be more easily molded by the company's values. To some degree, their concerns are justified; remote hires are 34% less likely to recognize their peers than people they meet in person, and 20% less likely to adhere to company values (Hyken, 2021).

Executive acceptance of remote work varies based on industry. The consulting and software development industries, including companies like PwC and Upwork, used remote work before the pandemic, whereas industries like real estate and furniture manufacturing, including companies like Harrison Street and MillerKnoll, explored remote work because of the pandemic (Coate, 2021). Executives who see remote work as an option could be more comfortable with it because it has been used more frequently in their industries. Employer response to remote work varies greatly based on both industry and employees' input. Employer response differs based on what they believe will promote worker well-being and profitability.

### **Remote Work and Big Tech Layoffs**

In 2021, Google CEO Sundar Pichai saw remote work as a disadvantage to his employees, saying going without in person interactions was "getting old," noting, "We are working on some borrowed time, in terms of working on memories of the relationships you have and the connections you have. It's taking a toll." (Gelles, 2021) Google, like many other big tech companies, went on a hiring spree during the pandemic, but many of these same tech companies have laid off hundreds of employees in 2023. In his memo about the layoffs, Mr. Pichai said, "We hired for a different economic reality than the one we face today... These are important

moments to sharpen our focus, re-engineer our cost base and direct our talent and capital to our highest priorities. Being constrained in some areas allows us to bet big on others.” (Grant & Satariano, 2023)

Google employees who were fired were informed in the middle of the night, with many of them waking up to find they no longer had a job; some realized this only after they were unable to log in to Google’s corporate systems. Many employees were frustrated by the speed of the layoffs; Chewy Shaw, a YouTube site reliability engineer commented, “The authorities on high can come down at any surprising moment and just snap their finger and you’re gone.” (Grant & Satariano, 2023) This is consistent with a wider trend of recent big tech layoffs; Rena Starr missed a short and unexpected Zoom meeting in 2021, then texted her boss to learn she and more than 900 of her colleagues had been fired during it (Goldberg, 2023).

This string of remote layoffs has led to negative mental health effects for those impacted. Beth Anstandig, a psychotherapist in Silicon Valley noted, “I hear that people are not sleeping, or sleeping two hours at a time on their couches. They’re in tears during our meetings together.” (Goldberg, 2023) The negative mental health effects of layoffs are well documented; Fan and Nie found layoffs create financial stress but also deprive recently fired workers of a work-related social network, further decreasing their mental well-being (Fan et al., 2020). Stress-related illnesses are 50% higher among remaining employees in companies that have recently downsized their workforce, and these employees are twice as likely to report burnout as well (Cappelli et al., 1997).

Mass layoffs are easier due to technology, including remote work. Sandra Sucher, a Harvard professor studying layoffs observed, “They’re immediately cutting you off from your technological connection. I’ve been hearing of a number of companies where people were in the

middle of things and couldn't continue and didn't know who to address." (Goldberg, 2023)

Laying off remote workers may be easier for psychological reasons; remote workers are less likely to know their peers and adhere to company values, so executives may see them as less invested in the company (Hyken, 2021). These unexpected layoffs are not only devastating but also unjust. The Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act passed in 1998 states companies with 100 or more full time employees must provide employees who will be terminated with a written notice 60 days before the layoff takes place. If employers violate the WARN Act, employees can seek legal compensation for damages up to 60 days of pay (WARN Act...). Big tech companies who violate the WARN Act are operating unethically, but since employees have to seek damages themselves, they often receive no punishment for violating the WARN Act. Recent unjust mass layoffs in the big tech industry harmed the mental health of those fired remotely, as well as their former coworkers.

## **Conclusion**

While remote workers benefit from increased freedom and flexibility, they often suffer from increased burnout and isolation. More research should be conducted to determine if the negative mental health effects observed during the pandemic are a result of the stressful environment of the pandemic or of remote work itself. With remote work increasing, it is crucial to determine the extent of these negative mental health impacts, and examine the impact of remote work on the hospitality industry and on the ease with which corporations can execute mass layoffs.

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