



THE PROBLEMS AND PROMISE OF WORKING FROM HOME

Charlie Warzel & Anne Helen Petersen

Whatever you were doing during the pandemic and its stilted aftermath, it was not working from home.

'Bullshit,' you might say, remembering all those times you sat in a makeshift office in your bedroom, haphazardly constructed so that it might look semi-professional over Zoom calls. If you're one of the roughly 42 percent of Americans who were able to work remotely during the pandemic, you likely spent most of the pandemic chained to a screen in your home clocking in each morning. You were, quite literally, doing your job from home.

But you weren't working from home. You were laboring in confinement and under duress. Others have described it as living at work. You were frantically tapping out an email while trying to make lunch and supervise distance learning. You were stuck alone in a cramped apartment for weeks, unable to see friends or family, exhausted and managing a level of stress you didn't know was possible. Work became life, and life became work. You weren't thriving. You were surviving.

Here's the nightmare scenario: this could be the "remote" future. Until recently, broad implementation of work from home seemed more like a thought experiment in the pages of *Harvard Business Review* than an idea that might work in practice. But the pandemic forced millions into remote work, and companies got curious. For a CFO, the prospect of getting that expensive downtown real estate off the balance sheet is enticing, especially if you factor in cost of living decreases when employees move out of high-cost cities. And then there's the efficiency: no more commutes means more time to answer emails! Some of the biggest companies in the world have already made remote work an option for the foreseeable future, which, as with almost any business decision, means they think it could be good for the bottom line. And their cost savings will be shouldered by you.

This is the dark truth of remote work as we know it now: it promises to liberate workers from the chains of the office, but in practice, it capitalizes on the total collapse of work-life balance.

Offices can be bullies. They force us to orient our days around commutes. They commandeer our attention with (sometimes enjoyable!) unscheduled, drive-by meetings. They elevate the feeling of productivity over being productive. They're a breeding ground for microaggressions and toxic loops of hierarchical behavior. It's no surprise that people who thrive in the office are almost always the same people who have accumulated or were raised with a lot of identity-related privilege outside of it.

Working from home can be a meaningful act of control and resistance. But it's also not a cure-all. It can't promise to fix the rot at the core of modern capitalism. All of the toxic dynamics listed above can be ported over to the remote work world. This is especially true if you or your company conceives of working from home as everything that used to happen at the office, only now you're the one paying the rent and utilities. The goal, then, is to think through how we can liberate ourselves from the most toxic, alienating, and frustrating aspects of office work. Not just by shifting the location where the work is completed, but rethinking the work we do and the time we allot to it.

There are multiple routes we can take from here. We can double back, reproducing the same soul-sucking, exploitative office dynamics as before—only doing it from home. Individuals can forge their own path off the main road, as they have for years, struggling to maintain balance in the face of corporate norms. Those with the confidence and privilege to go remote on their terms will reap the benefits, while others will become second-class office citizens. Or we can take a third route, in which the workday itself—and the expectations of workers—are reconceptualized. That doesn't just mean implementing Zoom Happy Hours, or making a company wide announcement that it's okay if your kids pop into your conference call to ask for a snack. That's the sort of incrementalism that fixes nothing and exhausts everyone.

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Reconceptualization means having honest conversations about how much people are working—and how they think they could work better. Not longer. Not by taking on more projects, or being better delegators, or having more meetings. Not by creating “more value” for their employer at the expense of their mental and physical health. Instead, it means acknowledging that better work is, in fact, oftentimes less work, over fewer hours, which makes people happier, more creative, more invested in the work they do and the people they do it for. It entails thinking through how online communication tools function as surveillance, and incentivize play-acting your job instead of actually doing it. It will require organization based on employees’ and managers’ preferred and most effective work times, and consideration of child and elder care responsibilities, volunteering schedules, and time zones.

There’s no easy end game. The process is difficult and, if we’re being honest, never-ending. But we are at a societal inflection point. Parts of our lives that were once quietly annoying have become intolerable; social institutions that have long felt broken are now actively breaking us. So many things we’ve accepted as norms, from public health practices to public school schedules, have the potential to change. In the absence of visionary governmental leadership, the impetus for change has increasingly fallen on the individual—but from individuals, we’re also watching movements set in motion rooted in fairness, equality, and in racial and economic justice.

The policy proposals guiding these movements are ambitious—and the particulars can feel complex. But the ideas behind them are elegant in their simplicity: when an institution is broken, it can’t be reformed with incremental fixes that touch the contours of the problem but don’t probe the heart. They must be reimagined. Not in some utopian fashion, but with a vigilant eye toward how power is accumulated and distributed.

This work will be difficult, and different for each company. It might, at least in the beginning, feel radical. But capitalism is inherently exploitative. It is also—at least for the immediate future—our guiding economic system. If we’re going to live under it, how can we bend it to make that experience involve less suffering? For “office” workers, but also for our immediate families, the societies we share, and the rest of the working world?

Remote work—not remote work during a pandemic, not remote work under duress—can change your life. It can remove you from the wheel of constant productivity. It can make *you* happier and healthier, but it can also make your community happier and healthier. It can make the labor in your home more equitable, and can help you be a better friend, and parent, and partner. It can, somewhat ironically, actually increase worker solidarity. It can allow you to actually live the sort of life you pretend to live in your Instagram posts, liberating you to explore the non-work corners of your life, from actual hobbies to civic involvement.

And it doesn’t have to be full-time remote work either: no one is suggesting that we’re completely done with offices. As JPMorgan’s chief operating officer put it in February 2021, “going back to the office with 100 percent of the time, I think there is zero chance of that. As for everyone working from all the time, there is also zero chance of that.” For most people, traditional office space will commingle, in some form, with coworking spaces, coffee shops, our friends’ kitchen tables, and our own home set-ups. Whatever your isolating, claustrophobic set-up was during the pandemic, that is not what the future of work looks like.

We see a real chance to repair our relationship to work—something that’s deeply broken, particularly here in America, but increasingly in other countries as well. Work, which has long been a source of inspiration, dignity and the cherished prospect of upward mobility has stagnated and trapped us. We don’t mean to sound revisionist; work has always been exploitative. But for so many so-called “knowledge” workers, it’s become an identity above all else, slowly eroding the other parts that make a rich, well-rounded human existence.

The good news is that we can change that—but only if we commit ourselves to refiguring the placement of work in our lives. Right now, our priorities are backward. Instead of changing our lives to make ourselves better workers, we have to change our work to make our lives better.

Knowledge work—the primary type of work that’s done remotely—is, ultimately, privileged work. And the problems therein are, at times, gilded ones: few people struggling with working from home are also struggling to get food on the table. If the pandemic has shown us anything, it’s that the compass that guides our ability to identify and reward essential work has been uncalibrated.

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Our obsession with productivity has distracted us from systemic inequalities, swallowing the sort of time and energy necessary to advocate for change. One of the refrains of the current moment is I don't know how to make you care about other people. And one of the most straightforward solutions could be: giving people the time and mental freedom to actually care about things that aren't themselves and their immediate families.

And then there's the secondary possibility of a wholesale shift in what and who we value. If we shift our focus from relentless productivity, we may collectively rethink our societal metrics for success. A society obsessed with shareholder value, G.D.P., and corporate wealth creation will value and reward those who drive those metrics upward: bankers, venture capitalists, day traders. A society obsessed with quality of life, care, and societal health values and rewards a very different set of people. Before and during the pandemic, our most "essential" workers have struggled to receive equitable pay and adequate protections, precisely because their work isn't valued. But what if it was? And what if one of the key steps to getting there was for non-essential workers (like us!) to change the way we see ourselves?

For years, many of us have behaved as if our jobs trump everything else in our lives. We're loath to say it aloud, but our actions tell the true story: we value our work performance over our families, over personal growth and health, and over our communities. Part of that commitment is rooted in fear of instability. But part of it, too, stems from the ways in which we've convinced ourselves of our work is important in order to justify how much of ourselves, how many years and hours, we've devoted to it.

That sort of emotional devotion makes it harder to think of work as what it is: not a savior, not “a family,” but a job. It also makes it harder to organize or demand better conditions for other employees, in your workplace and in others. It’s paradoxical, but the ability to decenter work in your life—and separate it, however slightly, from your identity—actually makes you a better advocate for other workers.

Done wrong, flexible work will only exacerbate the class divide, further separating the actual essential workers from those who can labor from the safety of their homes. That’s where we’re headed if we don’t make meaningful changes in the way we conceive of our labor and the way we advocate for others. But a deliberately conceived flexible future could also do something remarkable: it can liberate us, in meaningful and lasting ways, from work. **We don’t work from home because work is what matters most. We work from home to free ourselves to focus on what actually does.** 📖

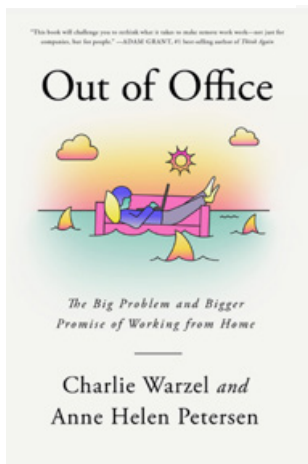
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