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Working from Home: A Neuroscientific Perspective

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A recent study by the multinational PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) shows that many companies want their employees back in the office faster than staff members would prefer. While 75% of the companies surveyed anticipate that most employees will be toiling in the office full time by July 2021, 61% of employees surveyed envisage spending only half their time at the workplace.

As we return to some semblance of our pre-Covid lives, conflicts are likely to arise between employers and employees. The past year has rewired our vision of work. Neuroscience can help provide insights into workers' feelings and behaviours in this area—and potentially provide answers to some of the prickly questions raised thereby.

The pandemic has spurred the use of remote work, which had already been made possible by new technologies, but which most managers had previously been reluctant to put in place. For a long time in western working culture, gathering people in offices during working hours had been seen as a necessity. It not only helps them socialise and collaborate, it also enables employers to more closely

oversee their workers' activities. The trend towards open-plan offices over the last couple of decades despite most workers' dislike of them—is a poignant example of how employers have sought to exercise increased control over their workforces: a trend in line with the desire for social control described by Michel Foucault.

After the pandemic hit in late 2019 and made our future more uncertain, many service workers had to desert their offices. The number of Zoom users skyrocketed, video calls became the norm and the boundary between work and private life was blurred. As they tried to navigate these topsy-turvy new circumstances, people were also deprived of their social lives. In some cases, work was the only thing they had left.

Neuroscience research suggests that this period of physical confinement and social isolation should have detrimental consequences for both individuals and groups. For example, brain mass shrinks after a period of environmental monotony and isolation. And, while the scale of Covid's psychological impact is still unclear, it appears to have sparked pathological levels of depression and anxiety.

Many expected that workers would be eager to go back to their offices after a long period of teleworking. Some research findings support this expectation, arguing that "in response to situations of social isolation or loneliness, individuals are motivated to re-establish social contact and pay greater attention to social stimuli." But the PWC study suggests just the opposite.

Most workers have not only adapted readily to remote work, they have also realised that it has many advantages—not least a reduced commute and more flexibility to schedule household chores. And, while some employees are looking forward to resuming in-person social connections in the office, others would prefer to maintain their remote work lifestyles.

Drawing on insights from neuroscience, I have elsewhere described human nature as emotional and egoistic. We are far more emotional than rational, as emotional processing in the brain plays a critical role in cognitive functions, memory formation and decision-making. We are also egoistic—a trait closely linked to our survival instincts. Both emotionality and egoism help explain people's attitudes towards remote work, and can push them either towards or away from it.

Emotionality can nudge employees to come into the office in quest of social interaction, but it can also motivate them to stay at home, from fear of being overwhelmed or showing weakness. Similarly, egoism can nudge sick employees to come in to the office, despite the risk of making colleagues ill, but it can also motivate them to self-isolate, because of their fatigue and discomfort, despite a desire to socialize and share a common culture. Preferences about remote work also depend on an individual's ambitions, career goals, need for privacy and convenience and access to appropriate technology. All these factors are driven by fears and desires inherent in human nature.

What, then, are the best solutions for both employers and employees? While remote work has clear advantages, embracing it wholeheartedly could have terrible human costs. According to Arthur C. Brooks, it could take us straight from the coronavirus pandemic into a loneliness pandemic and mental health crisis. Also, better technology doesn't necessarily mean better connectedness—and can often impede it. We remain social creatures and need to work collectively to feel motivated and to be productive and imaginative. Moreover, according to a McKinsey study, some work—such as brainstorming sessions, negotiations and onboarding of new employees—is best done in person.

While the pandemic has accelerated investment in automation and artificial intelligence—especially in warehouses, grocery stores and manufacturing plants—physical proximity remains important for

mental health and professional equilibrium. However, according to McKinsey, in advanced economies, 25% of the workforce could work from home three to five days a week without loss of productivity. For those 25%, employees, employers, unions and political decision makers must draw useful conclusions from the extraordinary work situation that we have collectively been through—and work together to strike a balance that benefits everyone.

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