

Remote work is here to stay, but companies must balance the pros and cons

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Work stress is a hot topic, with many suggesting that getting out of the workplace could relieve that stress. After all, commuting, hanging out with annoying co-workers, dealing with the grief that goes with an office environment – all are sources of grief that could be relieved by remote working arrangements. But could remote work be more stressful than we think?

Although there continues to be hot debate in some companies as to whether remote work should be allowed, for the most part it has gone mainstream in North America. According to a 2018 study from job listings site Indeed, 62 per cent of Canadian employers offer their employees the option to work remotely. For companies who want to save on office space it makes sense, and it also makes it easier to recruit and keep workers.

And to be sure, many workers are happy with their work-anywhere-but-the-office arrangements. A survey by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr), commissioned by Citrix Systems Inc. and released earlier this year, found that 86 per cent of U.S. workers who had the option to work from anywhere were taking advantage of the option, and that 69 per cent of those who are out of the labour force (retired, home with children, caring for others) would be encouraged to start working if they could do so flexibly.

Still, there are other stresses that result when work and home are the same place. A 2017 study by the United Nations found that 41 per cent of remote workers reported high stress levels as compared with 25 per cent of on-site workers, with some of the differential coming from the “always on” nature of working from

home. The omnipresence of smartphones, laptops and other links with the outside world is not unique to remote workers, of course, but it does appear to be a particular problem for them.

There are also apparently downsides to not being able to chat around the photocopier or share stories of the weekend while waiting to microwave lunch. A survey published earlier this year by Buffer.com found that while remote workers were happy to be remote, 19 per cent cited loneliness as an issue and 17 per cent said their biggest problem was collaborating or communicating with their co-workers. The so-called “water cooler effect” is a real one, and removing it completely imposes measurable costs.

From a broader economic point of view, all of this matters simply because of the cost that stress imposes on businesses. According to Statistics Canada, 74 per cent of Canadians feel at least some stress daily, with 62 per cent of them citing their jobs as the primary cause of that stress. This translates into health issues that cause employees to miss work, which translates into huge bottom-line costs. The Conference Board of Canada tallied it up for a 2016 study, finding that depression and anxiety are costing Canada almost \$50-billion annually in lost productivity.

So is the answer to get rid of remote work and bring everyone back together to work harmoniously together? Well, no, for so many reasons. From having to build more office space to having more cars on the road every day, moving away from remote work could not happen without huge costs, many of them involving worker horror: As much as it may be lonely to work alone all the time, it is not clear

that many remote workers really do pine for the opportunity to be in the office kitchen every day. What they do want, however, is to still feel that they are connected to their colleagues and part of a team. Creative companies are succeeding at this, whether through virtual weekly meetings or retreats, or just encouraging people to call and talk to each other rather than e-mailing and texting.

Remote work is not just a cute new trend, it is a reality that is here to stay. One of the main reasons workplaces were created was that the tools for work were in a central place and workers needed to come to that place to access them, but that is no longer today's reality. We now have a much more complicated reality and imposing one-size-fits-all policies on it is going to come at a cost to everyone.