

Working from Anywhere – A concept whose time has come

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In this article I will be discussing the social and technical factors that have all aligned to fuel the 'working from anywhere' and 'working from home' trend. The pandemic may have accelerated this trend but there were, in my opinion, three major factors already in play - social changes; advancement in IT; and rising property values.

Social changes

Many older readers of this contribution will likely agree that we have seen huge social changes over the last 50 years. Who would have thought 50 Years ago that the United States would have a Black American President? How about couples living together without marrying, gay marriage and the like.

One big social change is the rise of the two income families but even more significant in the last 30 years is the interchanging between husband and wife on lifestyle balance, that is working versus looking after the kids, domestic duties etc. This huge social change has been putting pressure on the income earner to be more at home. There has been a hidden desire just waiting for a catalyst like the COVID-19 Pandemic for it be activated.

Changes to working patterns have been happening for some time with the growth of part time and casual work. Some part time work was "tolerated" so that the worker - usually female - could do other things such as shopping or "the school pick-up"

Where I worked, the CEO disliked part timers. He wanted the employee to be available whenever he needed them. I remember him growling that "Mary" was on her day off. I wonder how today he would have coped with staff working from home. He expected staff to work long hours at the office and there was an unwritten expectation for senior staff to work on Saturdays. I used to joke that staff went in on a Saturday to get "appearance money". That old generational attitude has the built-in implication that if you are not seen to be working then you are not working.

My CEO would have really struggled with the WFH/WFA changes caused by the Pandemic. I am sure he would have adapted as all clever business people do. Many recent surveys indicate that staff now want to stay with these changes. A survey of nearly 1200 companies, conducted by the Australian HR Institute in July 2022, found just 4 per cent required employees to work in the office full-time. Of those surveyed, 7 per cent of organisations allowed employees to work from home continuously, while 34 per cent had no set number of days required in the office but did encourage it. The average proportion of employees working continuously from home has increased from 5 per cent before the Pandemic to 18 per cent. Almost 30 per cent of companies are requiring a minimum of three days a week in the office and 16 per cent require two days.

<https://www.news.com.au/finance/work/at-work/australian-employers-defeated-in-battle-to-keep-staff-in-the-office/news-story/d2416db50ab3066b94f6956dda8e688d>

The changes goes even further than this. Many of the younger generation workers are refusing to work in the old-style way. They are happy not to work at all unless it suits them. For employers to attract good staff they will need to work with whatever technology is available to entice them in.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-15/generation-z-millennials-quitting-jobs-financial-struggles/101304758>

IT changes

We have had significant technology improvements, particularly in IT, with the dramatic increase in computer power over time. Then there is the biggest disruptor of them all – the Internet. Up until only a few years ago we saw many people using the Internet (for business) by simply catching up on their work from home, checking emails, basic banking, and maybe preparing the odd document. And then the Pandemic arrived. Without the technological advances in recent years, including the various Microsoft applications - file sharing, Wi-Fi, online meetings - businesses would not have coped with the Pandemic inducing the huge shift to working from home. Will this be temporary?

I know many of the contributors to this book will talk about how they use their IT applications wherever they are, the hardware and software applications that they can use to conduct their work. I am not up to date with much of the advanced hardware and software of my associates. I only have one computer at home which was a Windows 7 that I have upgraded to a Windows 10. However, I am not a total IT ignoramus. I do use backups to the Cloud and an external hard drive. I do have a large screen and run all the Microsoft applications, my tax software (I am a CPA accountant who provides professional taxation advice and lodgement services) and Zoom on the computer.

However, even without all that equipment, everyone has in their hand an extremely powerful tool - their mobile phone. The average mobile phone is said to be one million times more powerful than the Apollo 11 guidance computer.

Recently I joined my friends for a game of golf. While waiting to play I checked my emails and responded to most of them. I made a few calls and sent some text messages and then attached a couple of photos of some products to an associate. No one I connected with would have known where I was. However, 20 years ago, I would have needed to be in my office to do all of this. But now I can do so from the golf course - and nobody would even know!

Property values

Commercial property values have risen over the years as well. Shopping centre owners such as Westfield and AMP require property values to increase to provide strong returns for their shareholders. There has been a short term reality check with the effects of the Pandemic, but will this last?

The result of this is that retailers need to earn higher gross margin percentage to make a profit, and indeed to survive. In my time as Director and Company Secretary of a

manufacturer with many retail shops in shopping centres I have seen retail gross profit margin percentages rise from 30% to well over 50% to ensure survival. This has fuelled the increase in cheap imports.

Commercial office rentals have grown in a similar way placing many businesses and professionals under significant rental pressure. So suddenly because of WFH/WFA they see an opportunity to reduce their rent - a major cost. A senior Telstra manager advised that they have reduced office space and he now has to book in if he wants to come into the office. I asked him how the Telstra staff are accountable, and he said they have so many meetings and reporting requirements that this is not an issue. What is happening to this excess in office areas? Many are being converted to apartments to cater to the unaffordable residential housing market.

Conclusion

The network of change is thus catered for by a combination of underlying social drivers, economic drivers and all facilitated by IT.

References

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