

# **Work from Where?**

Nilima Paul

September 2022

## **Introduction**

Work from Home (WFH) or Work from Anywhere (WFA), although this has become more common or almost inevitable in the case of office workers during the COVID-19 surge, this is however not a new concept. 'Work' - when defined as undertaking an activity such as a job that a person uses physical or mental effort to do and usually for money (or equivalent) - has been going on for a long time. Along with this, when 'Home' is defined as the house or apartment, where we live with our family, then many aspects are involved when we call it Work from Home (WFH). For this article, I will also include formal learning, especially at tertiary institutions, as Work. So, prior to COVID-19, approximately 5% of workers utilised WFH - now it is more than 50% (MI, 2022).

## **WHS aspect of WFH**

By law, all workplaces have their own regulations, policies, principles and guidelines for Work Health and Safety (WH&S) compliance. This is due to the Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) regulations that are applicable to every workplace. Therefore, if I am WFH then the home or the remote workplace, or the alternative workplace in this instance, will have to be fit for purpose and must be WHS compliant. Not only will it have to be fit for purpose, but it must also be sound, safe for the worker and safe for the data/information. It must be a place where data, information and all these are secured and sound. If not, when somebody succumbed to an injury due to working from home, how will that be considered? Would that person/s be eligible for a compensatory or other replacements? When these issues and aspects are taken into consideration - then it will be almost impossible that the heightened percentage of people actually can work from home.

Nevertheless, to make it workable even at this rate, it may be possible if the policies and guidelines, or even the related legislation is re-set. If I may share here my husband's situation. He is a public servant in New South Wales. Prior to COVID-19, he was asked to review a draft WFH guideline. Whilst it was a detailed guideline - there was not a definition of 'Home'. Incidentally, that guideline has not come back to him for review, because by that time - COVID-19 has set in. The sector is revisiting the entire WHS aspect of WFH. Mind though, there is another variant of WFH. If I am a contractor, then I can deliver the deliverables perhaps by WFA. As a client, I would not be likely to be bothered by where exactly the works were undertaken and what the working condition was and the WHS liability is avoided.

## **Will this sustain?**

With COVID-19 passing and nearly over, the question is - how many people would still continue to work from home? Or from a place other than their primary workplace, what percentage of the employees will be allowed to WFH? To answer this question, one has to look at various aspects of the benefits and liabilities of this type of working arrangement.

Another aspect of WFH is the social capital issue. People working at a traditional workplace, where one meets colleagues both up the ladder or down the ladder, they physically meet and greet each other. Alongside with regular formal meetings they also have many micro meetings or exchanges of views and ideas. These often take place in the corridor, kitchen, hallway to the toilet block or other spaces within the formal workplace. In these micro-environments a lot of decisions, or fine tuning of the decisions or clarifications on an earlier decision do take place in those circumstances.

WFH or from a remote place would have all those missing. Not only that, by working with peers or others, one has a lot to learn other than just what they work on or deliver. What I am trying to say here is, the productivity of a place is not just about the formal work, it has a lot to do with informal communications – much of which work better when physical meetings are possible.

Another aspect is the building up of wisdom from the ambient. For that to be achieved, a co-worker in a physical environment is most effective. Think of a migrant professional. S/he must be good at her/his subject but since the person joins the new workforce in a new ambient and work culture, WFH can be disaster. For a new worker to be able to deliver effectively, s/he needs to be exposed to that work atmosphere or the ambience so that they understand that new dynamics of the workplace. A team consisting of people of different chemistries of the workforce need to be physically mixing with each other to fit into the new workplace. WFH has little opportunity for this to happen.

### **Interpersonal resolutions**

Another thing about WFH is interpersonal relationship between two colleagues – whether at the vertical hierarchy or the horizontal level. Since every workplace has its unique interpersonal issues and arrangements - many of which can be only resolved through physical meetings. Otherwise, this can become a serious problem if one does not happen to meet and greet the person frequently, if not daily. So, WFH means the person interacts either online or via computer or through telephones or other social media. Being physically in touch may mean that some micro issues cannot be around and may avoid triggering a bigger workplace issue. This is particularly important for teacher-student relationships. Teaching is not only just imparting knowledge – robot like. The very live or the liveliness aspect of teacher-student relationship is, in most part, hidden in the face-to-face communication. A student learns or takes a lot from a teacher by noticing, watching, walking-the-walk and talking-the-talk. WFH will not offer that.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there will always be a place for WFH in the workplace, but it is unlikely that the present rate will be sustainable. Hence, a hybrid model is necessary and the sooner this can be worked out, the better. For this to be achieved the government, institution and individual – all will have to work cooperatively and in a complementary manner.

MI, 2022. <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/news/news/australians-happy-working-from-home,-men-and-women-are-looking-to-upskill,-but-young-people-feeling-the-pinch>. Accessed in September 2022.

