Many employees prefer to work from home, provided that they are equipped with digital technology.
Photo: *Tima Miroshnichenko, Pexels*

WORKING FROM ANYWHERE:
Is South Africa ready?

Lockdown Level 5, introduced in South Africa on 26 March 2020, forced institutions to migrate to remote working. It dramatically changed the way most of the country's institutions had to operate in an instant. A recent symposium, *'Working from anywhere: Views, evidence, experiences and recommendations'* hosted by the HSRC, provided insights and highlighted policy considerations for organisations on adapting to this new way of working. By *Krish Chetty* and *Shirin Motala*

Experts predict firms allowing work from anywhere will be better positioned to attract top global talent in the future.
Photo: *Ketut Subiyanto, Pexels*

Academics have long advocated for remote working, citing the flexibility benefits for workers and the cost savings for employers. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown requirements forced remote work upon South African employers and consequently accelerated our practice of, and thinking about, remote work. At the end of a difficult year, just when many institutions felt comfortable to start easing back into an office routine, a much worse second COVID-19 peak hit the country in December 2020.

The *Working from anywhere* symposium, hosted by the HSRC at the end of January 2021, attracted almost 90 participants who sought to understand what was gained, what was lost and who were most affected by the sudden pivot to remote working. The expected outcome of the symposium was for the insights gained to serve as a stimulus for providing lessons and recommendations on how firms would work now and in the future.

Working from home – Working from anywhere – What's the difference?

Prof Prithwiraj Choudhury of the Harvard Business School, a champion of the working-from-anywhere approach, wrote in the *Harvard Business Review* that remote working emerged in the 1970s, arising from the 1973 OPEC oil embargo. The price of oil rose nearly 300% within six months and had a knock-on effect on commuting costs. In the 2000s, greater accessibility to laptops, tablets and broadband connectivity further boosted the practice of remote working.

At the symposium, Choudhury highlighted the difference between work-from-home and work-from-anywhere practices. Normally, those who are allowed to work from home still need to live near their workplace, splitting their time between the office and home during a work week.
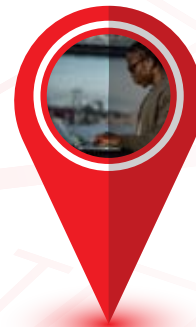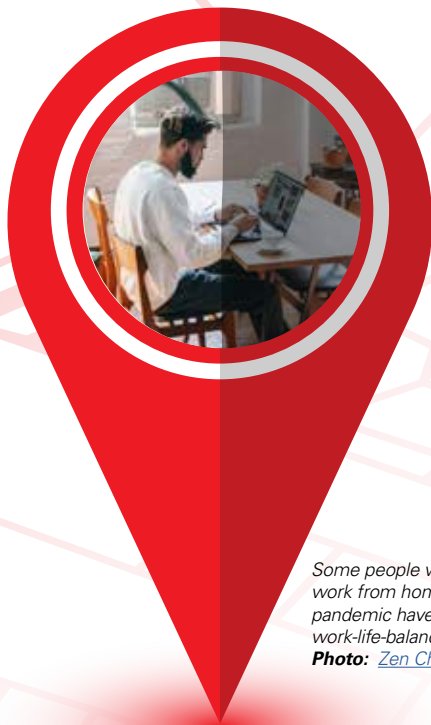
Some people who have been able to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic have experienced better work-life-balance.
Photo: *Zen Chung, Pexels*

In contrast, institutions with work-from-anywhere policies allow their employees to live in other cities, countries or even time zones.

Allowing work from anywhere enables firms to attract and retain top-tier global talent by offering employees the freedom to move to, or remain in, locations where they have family support or a better quality of life. According to Choudhury, it also means the decision to take a new job is no longer influenced by its potentially disruptive effect on families, such as school relocation, partners also having to find employment in the new location, or even being separated from family.

Digital infrastructure – Essential for migrating to remote working

Since digital infrastructure was essential for remote working, the lockdown presented a challenge to firms in this regard. Krish Chetty, a chief researcher in the HSRC's Inclusive Economic Development research division, shared findings from the World-Wide Worx (WWW) survey conducted among 400 firms in South Africa. It found that firms agreed on the necessity of developing digital transformation strategies, but that only 37% had produced such a strategy. Firms with such strategies in place before lockdown reported a 70% boost in productivity.

For Themba Mnisi, an IT infrastructure manager at the HSRC, the sudden lockdown meant conducting a rapid vulnerability assessment, which revealed that several employees lacked access to laptops, licensed software tools for collaboration, as well as concerns about risks to security systems and privacy rights. In response and through restructuring budgets, the HSRC procured laptops and software packages, enhanced privacy and security capabilities and provided data bundles for staff.
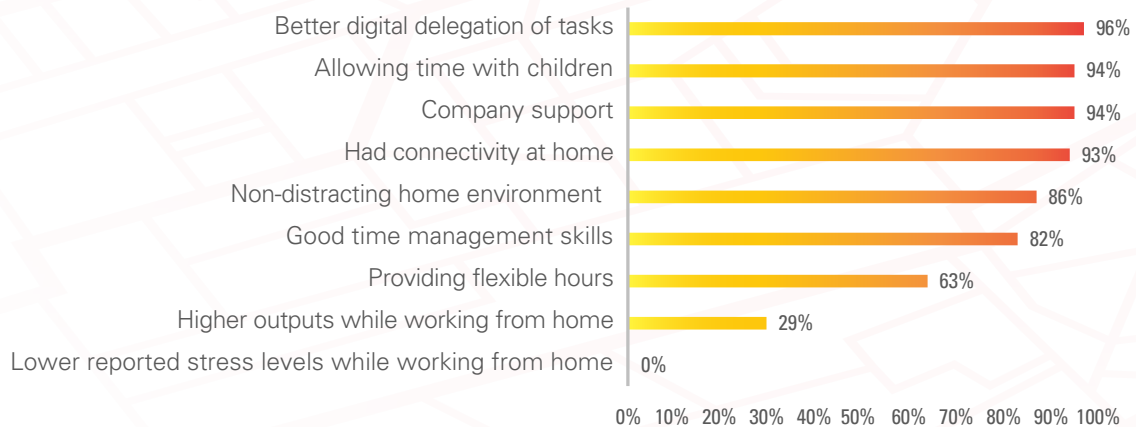
Such responses were necessary, given that 65% of SA households did not have Internet access, according to Statistics South Africa's 2018 General Household Survey. Despite the attractiveness of a working-from-anywhere policy, according to the WWW study, 61% of firms did not wish for their employees to continue working remotely once the pandemic ended, although they believed that 40% of their workers would prefer to work from home.

Benefits and success factors of working remotely

The WWW study reported that the benefits for employees working remotely included greater flexibility, more time to spend with children, higher productivity and commuter cost savings. Factors that enabled employees to work remotely included company support, access to the Internet and a non-distracting home environment. A significant benefit for firms was a reduced need for office space and therefore less expenditure on the associated costs of running an office.

Figure 1: Success factors and benefits of remote working

Better digital delegation of tasks	96%
Allowing time with children	94%
Company support	94%
Had connectivity at home	93%
Non-distracting home environment	86%
Good time management skills	82%
Providing flexible hours	63%
Higher outputs while working from home	29%
Lower reported stress levels while working from home	0%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Source: WWW

Remote working challenges for employees

Working remotely comes with its own set of challenges, including longer working hours, long hours spent staring at a screen, lack of a work-life balance and increased stress levels, compounded for those who experienced digital connectivity challenges. METACO's Danny Tuckwood highlighted the *'fatigue from frequency of change'*, which workers experienced alongside limited interpersonal contact and constraints on accessing workspace at home. While some of this stress has rapidly dissipated, it has been replaced by feelings of anxiety in balancing one's productivity and lack of self-care.

Protecting employee rights and promoting well-being

Working from anywhere has legal compliance liabilities and occupational health and safety implications for the employer, as Anton Boswel, from Anton Boswel & Associates, reminded participants, and which employers need to be aware of and address. The legal definition of a 'workplace' is not determined by one's location, and thus employers have to be mindful of and take necessary measures to protect against workplace injuries and harm, even if this occurs while working from home. The pace of change has caught employers on the proverbial back foot, requiring agile measures to protect workers and reduce firm liability.

Developing remote working frameworks and strategies

Developing a Remote Working Framework has been a core priority for the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), and Andile Mabindisa shared the journey and approach adopted towards this accomplishment. Central to the process have been agile worker engagements across all levels and the adoption of a blended approach, comprising remote and onsite working with worker well-being prioritised. Importantly, an assessment of the effectiveness of virtual collaboration tools was required together with an audit of appropriate tools and technologies available to employees. For the effective implementation of the framework, there is a need to produce leaders who understand remote work, imparting these views and behaviours to their staff, the CSIR suggests.

Conclusion

Waiting for the COVID-19 crisis to pass before South African employers decide whether to adopt remote working as a policy, may run the risk of falling productivity levels and investment losses. The lockdown brought into sharp focus the inherent inequalities that workers experienced with remote working, particularly women, workers in elementary occupations, and those in low-income employment. A multi-pronged and well-conceived strategy that recognises workers' unique care needs and embraces digitisation may prepare the employer for the world of working from anywhere and in doing so mitigate inequality.

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