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Baer Necessities

Cogito ergo Zoom: time for home-office to go home

The television series *Selling Sunset* follows the lives of real estate agents selling some of the biggest and most luxurious mansions in Los Angeles, where the weather has crystallized in a perennially warm and sunny summer.

Employees currently working from home may easily picture themselves and their families moving into one of these splendid villas and work remotely from California, away from their workplaces and colleagues easily reachable by video call or email.

Most of us managed to keep the daily work separated from personal lives, at least until the first lockdowns, mindful that where and how we work influences who we are.

As the pandemic forced a wide transition from traditional workplaces to home office, should we look forward to work-from-home or even work-from-anywhere after the pandemic?

Work-from-home: benefits...

Remote working offers clear upsides for some individuals and companies, especially in knowledge-driven sectors such as banking and tech industries¹.

Some individuals may prefer to work remotely, as they could choose where to live, eliminate commuting, be closer to their families and overall reach a better work-life balance.

It is hard to assess whether home working or office working is more efficient, despite evidence showing that employees tend to work longer hours at home, at least as experienced during the initial phases of the lockdown.

Companies may obviously benefit from less workers at the office, including profiting from reduced real estate costs and from the possibility of tapping into a larger pool of workers although mainly for computer-related activities.

...and challenges

Challenges from remote working are perhaps less obvious, as the transformations to our ways of life will raise central questions about the efficiency and the fairness of these new working arrangements, as they imply a social choice over individuals' and companies' views and interests.

In fact, some employees may prefer to go back to their workplaces, as they are more productive at the office desks, they value socialization, in-person meetings and knowledge-sharing from tapping on the shoulder of the other colleagues. Second, even highly skilled and higher-earning employees may lack the facilities to effectively working from home, including enough physical space or online connectivity. Finally, working from their home offices, employees may also feel increasingly detached from the company culture and mission.

Crucially, these employees may want to keep the worlds of home and office physically separated, keeping home for comfort, privacy and leisure and keeping office for work. This is understandable, as work and personal lives are increasingly intertwined and, especially since the first lockdowns were imposed, the boundary between home and office became blurred, making difficult to disconnect from work also over the weekends or during holidays.

Office and the virtues of serious leisure

Before the pandemic, the office gave structure to our lives, with the daily rhythm of morning working hours, coffee and lunch breaks and then the afternoon working hours before the end-of-day shutdown routine. The office hours added meaning to our work and also pleasure to leisure, culminating in the raising expectation of the spontaneous TGIF signals on Friday afternoons. Then weekends outside the workplaces started.

Leisure is a universal activity, as old as humanity².

Economists' think of leisure as a residual activity, as 'time spent not working' and therefore not remunerated. This concept does not capture the positive state of mind (expectations, fun, memories) and the broad range of activities (sport, learning, hobbies, eating) that people do in a satisfying or fulfilling way when not working.

The ancient Roman philosopher Seneca developed a theory of leisure time (*otium*), defining it not as antithesis and opposite of work (*negotium*), but as its highest manifestation, as *negotium maximum*. Seneca's *otium* is the time spent learning, contemplating and debating the moral and religious principles that are at the core of our societies and therefore essential for social development and growth. Hence, the affluent Roman classes embraced *otium* as a way of life and moved to the classic Roman *villas* in the countryside, reserving the days *in Urbe* for public affairs, administration and business.

Office is inescapable when working from home, at the expense of free time and active leisure, which is a powerful engine of personal development and mental balance.

Even without appealing to Seneca's Stoicism or admiring the Romans' *ars vivendi*, companies should consider the impact of various remote working arrangements (from fully remote to hybrid-remote to fully on-site) on the employees' way of life and the crucial benefits of working from office.

The high-end residential properties portrayed in *Selling Sunset* would certainly qualify for *otium*, I doubt for *negotium*.

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¹ P. Choudhury, Harvard Business Review (2020), [Our Work-from-Anywhere Future](#)

² Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/leisure>