

Remote work can boost productivity and curb burnout

*Before the pandemic, many managers would laugh at the thought of allowing employees to work remotely. Now, as the future-of-work paradigm shift accelerates, organisations have seen how people working from home can be even more productive – and less prone to burnout. **Allyson Zimmermann** writes that remote work options that are sustainable, equitable, and humane are essential for organisations to weather the current and future disruptions.*

Years ago, when I was working with a group of leaders in London, there was a healthy amount of pushback (and some laughter) when we discussed the merits of allowing remote working and how it could benefit a broader group of employees. It was not that this organisation was unable to offer remote working due to the nature of the work, but rather it was valued less.

At one point, a leader said, “you can’t possibly reward the work of someone who is in the office most of the time [the same as] with someone who is working from home”. This comment was met with many nods. Clearly, there was more work to do.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic happened.

As someone who has worked remotely for the past 14 years, I realise that working from home during the global crisis has, of course, been challenging for many people, not least because of the stresses and strains of living through an emergency. Overnight, many workers were told to stay at home and found themselves trying to replicate their normal work patterns.

However, as the future-of-work paradigm shift continues to accelerate, remote work options that are sustainable, equitable, and humane are essential for organisations to weather the current and future disruptions. To guard against an ‘always-on’ culture, managers should be trained to prioritise empathy and inclusion.

[New research](#) from [Catalyst](#) reveals that remote working options have many benefits for businesses and workers, but only if they are done intentionally to promote inclusion.

The report, entitled [Remote-Work Options Can Boost Productivity and Curb Burnout](#), finds that employees with access to remote work had [lower rates of burnout](#) due to COVID-19 related workplace factors, workplace factors in general, and even from factors in their personal life—suggesting that remote-work access was a critical resource to cope with the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. When employees have access to remote-work options such as a flexible work location, distributed teams, and/or the option to work from home, burnout at work decreases by over a quarter (26%).

Overall, compared to those without remote-work access, access to remote work increases employee well-being, productivity, innovation, and inclusion. It increases innovation by 63%, work engagement by 75%, organisational commitment by 68%, and 93% of employees are more likely to report feeling included.

These findings are particularly important for women and mothers, who shouldered much of the care-giving responsibilities during the pandemic. [A Catalyst survey](#) found that 62% of women employees said that COVID-19 had negatively impacted their prospects for promotion, compared to 57% men. Women with childcare responsibilities who can work remotely are 32% less likely to leave their job in the next year compared to women with childcare responsibilities who are not able to work from home. In a [previous study](#), we found that women without access to flexible work arrangements downgraded their career aspirations by 29%.

[The report](#) also reveals the importance of empathy. When a manager demonstrates empathy and an employee has remote-work access, burnout is further decreased by 43%. A manager showing care, concern and an understanding of an employee’s life situation provides essential support for all employees, not least women with children.

Catalyst [recommends the following four steps](#) to create a remote working environment where all employees can thrive:

- Create remote-work policies that detail expectations for employees, managers, and teams;
- Upskill managers on empathy and managing remote teams inclusively;
- Invest in programmes for employees who need additional childcare options;
- Normalise empathic listening through regular check-ins and other opportunities to share life and work experiences.

Organisations should engage regularly with employees using pulse surveys to find the best fit for their organisation. It is about having a flexible approach and listening to employee feedback. As we learn to adapt post-COVID, there is a unique opportunity for organisations to move beyond office-based working and to reward team members for productivity and not presenteeism.

Flexible and remote work can expand an organisation's talent pool, ensure better work-life effectiveness, create empowering work environments, and ensure your business can function effectively even at times of crisis.

The pandemic turbo-charged working from home, successfully debunking many previously held myths about remote working. It demonstrated that collaboration and innovation continue to take place, even when not in-person, and people are not less committed to their work when they are not in the office—in fact, remote-work access increases organisational commitment. It also demonstrated that it is not just women who want access to remote work.

Some team members, of course, will be delighted to return to the office, away from their domestic sphere, while others will prefer to work remotely. Inclusive employers will allow this to be a choice, not a diktat. Today's connected, global society does not need workers to be office-bound, but rather to allow them options to decide how and where the work gets done. We know that when people can work in ways that best support their work-life effectiveness, this boosts productivity and reduces turnover.



Notes:

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