



4 Visions of the future of the workplace

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In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused companies around the world to embrace remote work almost overnight. Employees mastered Zoom and Slack, obsessed over their home office setups, and grew accustomed to colleagues’ pets and family members making guest appearances during meetings.

Now, more than a year later, vaccinations are ramping up and restrictions are loosening. But rather than go back to the way things were or continue with the status quo, many companies — urged on by their employees — are preparing to take another leap forward. Some are embracing hybrid setups, in which employees split their week between the office and home. Others, a work from anywhere model, allowing their employees to spread out across the country.

These shifts are as monumental as the switch to remote work in 2020. What’s more, they have the potential to be far more long-lasting, and as a result will impact almost every aspect of the way we work.

In this paper, four workplace experts explore how the decisions companies are making today could affect our everyday lives in the years to come. Read on to discover their predictions on how these changes will shape everything from what the office itself looks like and how it functions to the technology we use daily and the very nature of work-life balance.

THE NEW WORLD OF WORK

Here’s how [some enterprise companies](#) are reimagining work.

Ford Motor Company is embracing a hybrid, flexible model in which focus work happens at home and collaboration in the office.

JP Morgan is exploring a rotational model; employees will alternate between working remotely and in-person.

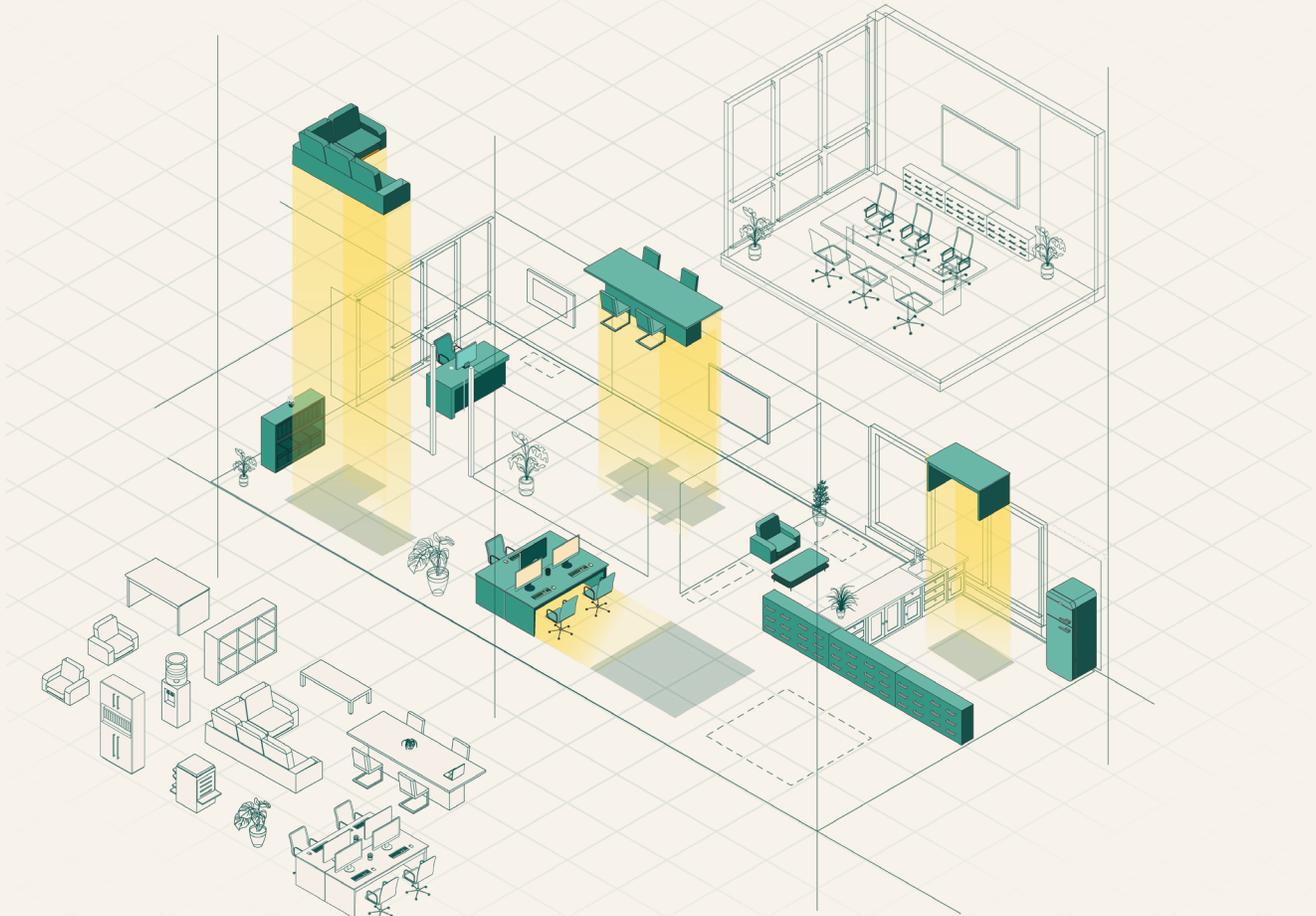
PwC is opening offices across the country for its team members, who will be able to work remotely part of the time depending on their role.

IBM says that 80% of its workers will likely work a mix of in-office and remote.

Walmart is returning most of its national team to corporate headquarters. The company’s global technology team will continue to work remotely.

The Office of Tomorrow Doesn't Sit Still

Introducing the dynamic office



BY EIVIND KARLSEN

Like most one-size-fits-all solutions, the open office does a lot of things. It just doesn't do many of them well.

Turn your mind back to 2019 and remember the last time you were in an open office. You could do focus work — if you had a pair of noise-cancelling headphones. You could collaborate — at least, in theory. A [2018 study published by the Royal Society in the U.K.](#) found that rather than promote collaboration, open offices discouraged it. Employees spent

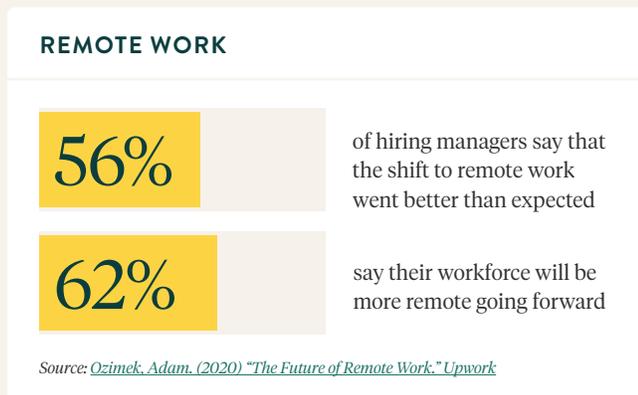
73% less time interacting face-to-face, while email and messaging use increased by 67%.

Yet despite their unpopularity pre-pandemic, open offices persisted. But today, everything has changed.

In 2019, the assumption for most white collar workers was that you're in the office eight hours a day, Monday through Friday. That assumption has been flipped on its head by a

year of predominantly remote work. Now, you don't ask your supervisor if you can work from home one day; she asks if you can head into the office.

This sea change is being facilitated by a shift in decision-making power. While pre-pandemic, where you worked was decided at the very top, post-pandemic employees and individual team managers have much more say because employees have shown that they can work remotely. What's more, many would like to continue working remotely at least some of the time, and employers are listening. In CBRE's 2020 "[Workforce Sentiment Survey](#)," 66% of employees reported wanting to split their week between home and the office while 91% of managers preferred or were fine with embracing a hybrid model.



The Rise of the Dynamic Office

While at first, fully-vaccinated white collar workers may come to the office to enjoy being around other people, as the novelty wears off, the office will need to offer employees something they can't get from their homes or local coffee shops.

At the same time, the pressure is still on the office to perform a variety of functions. Collaboration is the most obvious reason to come into the workplace, but you'll also see employees with families or roommates who need a place to focus away from the distractions at home. Meanwhile, younger employees may want to come into the office for the mentorship and professional development opportunities that arise from sharing a space. And as the open office has proven, meeting these demands well will require more intentional spaces. Mediocrity is not an option; if employees don't like being in the office, they'll just stay home.

Adding further complexity, you have the simple fact that employers don't know how many of their employees will be coming in on any given day — which makes space calculations increasingly difficult.

The answer? A dynamic office with the specificity and the multifunctionality of a Swiss Army Knife.

As occupancy rates rise over the summer and fall, more pressure will be placed on the office to accommodate in-person meetings for the whole team, since these are exactly the kind of experiences colleagues have missed out on over the past year. You can easily imagine a need for large conference rooms, lounges, and even auditoriums as companies gather in-person for the first time since early 2020.

But as we move into 2022 and people find a new hybrid rhythm, mixed presence meetings — in which some coworkers attend in-person and others remotely — will become increasingly common. These will require more and smaller meeting rooms with A/V equipment. Informal collaborative and social spaces which foster creative thinking and team bonding will also become increasingly critical as people become more comfortable sharing spaces. At the same time, having more and more differentiated collaborative spaces will reduce the pressure on open-plan desk areas to do double duty, making it easier for employees to do heads-down work between meetings. Focus rooms and phone booths may also face more demand from employees who come in specifically to concentrate.

Flash-forward further. Teams have settled into a hybrid routine ... and then the company grows. Work from anywhere means that employers will have to continually reassess their workplace needs. If the talent an employer wants isn't in its HQ city, it may decide to open a remote office. Or maybe the sales team is starting to expand — and as a result, an employer needs more soundproof, A/V-equipped spaces for individuals making video calls. All of these conditions require nimble yet intentional solutions, from the technology that's embedded in a space to the furniture that fills it.

Creating Intentional, Adaptable Spaces

So what do those solutions look like in practice? One route a company can take is to use modular units. [ROOM's](#) self-contained meeting pods, phone booths, and focus rooms can be easily rearranged, added, or subtracted from a space in

order to accommodate different needs.

Here's one way this might work: In the summer, when parents have more childcare responsibilities, employers can increase the number of focus room units so those employees have space to concentrate on the days they come into the office. Then in the fall, when children go back to school and parents' homes become more conducive to heads-down work, employers can trade out some of those focus rooms for meeting pods.

[M Moser Associates' active office](#) in New York's financial district takes another approach. Room dividers are placed on casters so that they can be quickly maneuvered to provide privacy or split up a space. Furnishings are designed to be easily reconfigured to accommodate different kinds of collaboration. For example, on one side of a room divider you might group tables and chairs for a small team session, while on the other side you might spread out desks for individual work. If the company needs to come together for a presentation, the room dividers can be tucked into alcoves and the seating moved into concentric semicircles around the presenter.

Similarly, [Orangebox](#) produces highly agile office furniture — including reconfigurable pods, mobile seating, and, soon, a honeycomb-like system of interlocking desks called [Coppice](#). Each one comes with five upholstered screens that can be adjusted for acoustic and visual privacy. For companies that want an even more custom solution, there's [Canoa](#), a platform for creating reconfigurable spaces that are both low-cost and low-carbon.

Looking Beyond Architecture

Switching to a dynamic office will not only impact what the workplace looks like and how it functions, but also how the space is managed. Employers will need to actively evaluate how the office is being used so that they know when and how to adapt it.

Regular workplace surveys will be key to understanding what is and isn't working for employees. Sensors can also be installed to measure office density and use of various space types. That way, if a company with a modular system is seeing meeting room usage dip while phone booths are regularly in demand, it can adjust its mix of spaces accordingly.

The dynamic office will also lead to a transformation in how companies approach real estate transactions. Previously, a company would work with a landlord or workplace provider to determine its office space needs, and for the large part only assess those needs at the end of a lengthy contract term. But as companies move to a dynamic office that requires constant re-evaluation and adjustment, they'll enter into ongoing relationships with their landlords or workplace providers. Contract lengths will shorten, to allow for more flexibility. Some employers may choose to outsource space monitoring and reconfiguration to workplace providers instead of establishing this expertise internally.

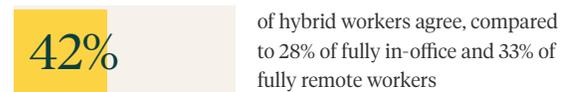
Switching from the one-size-fits-all approach of the open office to the specificity and maneuverability of the dynamic office will require more active workplace management. That's a trade off that's well worth it for a workplace that not only functions better, but also which employees actively want to be in.

THE FUTURE IS HYBRID

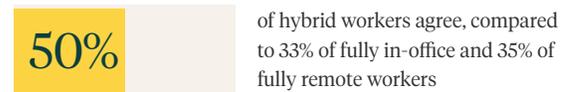
Hybrid will jumpstart the switch to a dynamic office. Here's how hybrid compares to fully remote and fully in-office workplaces, according to Gensler's "[U.S. Workplace Survey Summer/Fall 2020](#)."

Working this way has positively affected my ...

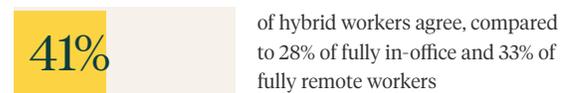
... personal creativity



... ability to manage my colleagues



... ability to solve problems



Work From Anywhere is the End of Work-Life Balance

And that's a good thing.



BY VALERIE JAFFEE

Here's the truth about work-life balance: It's been mostly dead for decades now. Work from anywhere is just the final nail in the coffin. And the same inventions that have made work from anywhere practical will allow us to finally shed the last semblances of work-life balance so we can embrace a new strategy: work-life empowerment.

Today, most of the conversation around work-life balance revolves around using time management to create divisions

between work and home. Even the language we use — like “leaving work at work” or “switching off” — is all about strengthening those boundaries. In contrast, work-life empowerment doesn't depend on unraveling the ties between employees' personal and professional lives. Instead, it's the very lack of boundaries that enables them to put their personal responsibilities on equal footing with their professional ones.

That's not to say that work-life balance isn't a great concept.

And it might even have existed for white collar professionals at some point, in the days when bringing work home meant filling up a briefcase. Back then, communication was largely synchronous. If you wanted to talk to a colleague, you had to do so in person or hop on the phone. Even the asynchronous forms of communication that eventually popped up — like *Office Space*'s infamous interoffice memo on TPS Reports — still required you to be in the office to send or receive messages.

The internet and the personal computer had two very big impacts on the boundaries between work and home: They made it a breeze to work remotely to a degree that simply wasn't possible before their invention and they unlocked the Pandora's Box of [asynchronous digital communication](#).

When COVID-19 struck last spring and companies switched from mostly in-person to mostly-remote, accessing files was the easy part. Employees also had little difficulty with advancing projects remotely because they were already used to communicating asynchronously thanks to tools like email and Slack.

These inventions are also part of the reason why the boundaries between work and home have gotten so thin. For years, white collar professionals have largely existed in a liminal space that infringes on their personal life from all sides. On the one hand, you need to be in HQ for eight hours a day, Monday through Friday. On the other hand, work can find you anywhere. How often have you answered an email while sitting in the waiting room of a doctor's office or making breakfast before your workday begins?

You're not alone. Pre-pandemic, [presenteeism was on the rise](#), with 89% of respondents saying they've witnessed colleagues clock-in when unwell and 27% that the trend had increased over the past 12 months, according to CIPD's March 2020 "[Health and Well-Being at Work](#)" survey. In the same study, 73% of respondents also said they had noticed colleagues working during PTO or beyond their contracted hours.

The result couldn't be more predictable. Fifty-two percent of people reported being burned out in a [March 2021](#) survey by Indeed. Even before the pandemic, Indeed found that 43% of respondents were burned out in January of 2020. In response, a whole genre of [lifehacks](#) has sprung up urging people to establish a better work-life balance by [removing their work email from their phones](#) or [carving out an hour each day for personal time](#).

But these solutions are all about introducing separation between work and home at a time when that boundary has never been more porous. A year of remote work disintegrated the personal/professional divide even further — yet the majority of workers don't want to give up working from home. According to CBRE's most recent "[Workforce Sentiment Survey](#)," 67% of employees want to split their week between the office and home, an arrangement that 54% of company leaders are ready to embrace.

By celebrating the fact that employees can now work effectively in a variety of places, we can replace work-life balance with work-life empowerment. Employees can think big. Say you have family in another part of the country you want to see more of. Instead of planning a few days of dedicated family time, why not visit for a week or two? You can work remotely while your family members are at the office or school, then spend quality time together in the evenings and over a long weekend.

Then there are the little things. Employees who split their week between the office and home can use their remote days to get their laundry done between meetings or prep dinner during their lunch break — freeing them up to spend more meaningful time with their loved ones outside of work. On the days they come into HQ, they can still make those critical connections with their colleagues and get the time away they need to avoid feeling like their home has become their office.

What this all adds up to is a system that accepts the integration of the professional and the personal parts of our lives. In return, employees gain much more control over where and how they spend their time. That's a scenario that's better for everyone — and critically, one that's much more sustainable.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN THE U.S.

How the U.S. compares to some of the world's largest economies, according to the [OECD's Better Life Index](#)

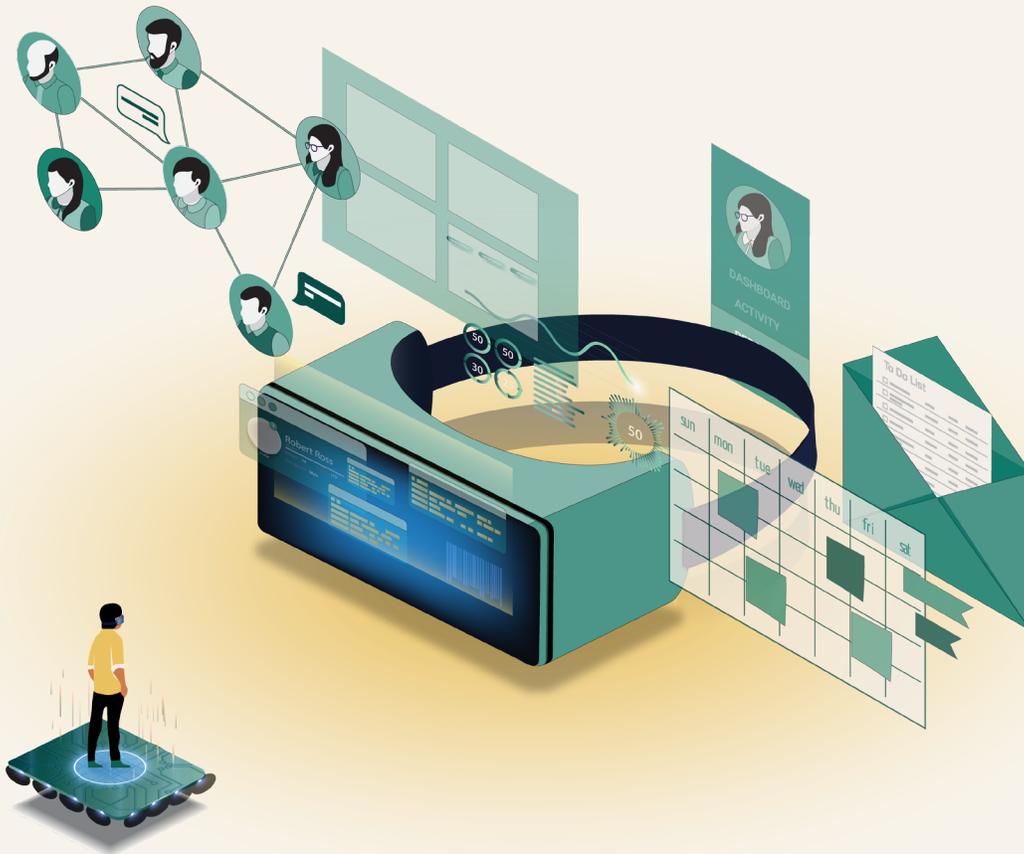
11% The percentage of U.S. employees who work 50 hours or more per week.

29/40 Where the U.S. ranks in terms of work-life balance compared to other OECD countries.

1/50 The U.S. is the only country in the OECD without a national paid leave policy for parents.

Technology Will Bring Us Together

VR, video games, and the rise of hybrid meetings



BY PETER FEYTSE

Last year, meetings underwent a big change as colleagues grew accustomed to huddling around their laptops instead of a table. But while Zoom works well enough for an all-remote workforce, it doesn't solve a central problem posed by the shift to hybrid: How do you ensure that the presence of people who are working from home or across the country is as felt as that of coworkers sharing a space?

Hybrid has the potential to transform the office into a

collaboration hub. Now that employees have the ability to work from home, one of the main motivations for coming into the office is to connect with their colleagues in-person. As a result, it's easy to envision a future in which the office dedicates less space to heads down work and more to specialized meeting areas, each one designed to promote a different kind of collaboration: lounges for team bonding, conference rooms for client pitches, huddle rooms for small group gatherings, auditoriums for all-hands calls, and more.

But in order to create truly effective collaboration spaces for hybrid teams, companies are also going to have to solve for how to manage mixed-presence meetings with both virtual and in-person attendees.

Some organizations are already beginning to grapple with this problem. Google is creating [a new kind of meeting room called Campfire](#), a circular set-up in which in-person attendees sit side-by-side with large monitors that show the faces of their remote colleagues. This positioning helps give virtual attendees more visual weight and individuality than simply throwing a gallery view up a conference room monitor would.

The Campfire arrangement has the potential to work well in small group meetings for companies that can easily retrofit their spaces, turning rectangular rooms into circular ones. But we're also going to need solutions that work for companies that don't have that luxury, as well as for different kinds of meetings. A Campfire setup might be fine for half a dozen people, but what do you do when a group of 12 gathers? Of 30? That's an awfully big circle.

And then there's the problem of body language. For months, the lack of nonverbal communication during video calls hasn't been as much of an issue, since everyone's been on a relatively even playing field. But as mixed-presence scenarios ramp up, in-person colleagues will have a marked advantage over remote ones. For example, when someone is speaking during a meeting, there are a number of ways you can indicate you'd like to chime in without interjecting if you're sharing a space, such as leaning forward, moving your hands, nodding, or even taking a slightly deeper breath, as if about to speak. Over video, you have to take much more direct action: Chiming in on chat, raising a virtual hand, or interrupting a colleague.

Technology is going to be tasked with finding ways to express more of those essential, indirect physical cues. Expect to see a lot of experimentation — some of which could appear straight out of a sitcom. Think tablet screens attached to what look like animated car crash dummies, in order to provide an outlet for some of those nonverbal cues.

There will also be subtler shifts as video call technology and desk setups become more specialized. Currently, attendees can select one of two primary views during video calls: gallery mode or speaker mode. Going forward, view modes

might be selected by meeting hosts, who will choose from a wider variety of options designed specifically for training sessions, brainstorm, presentations, or one-on-ones.

Each of these modes might interact differently with attendees' workplace setups to support different kinds of meetings. For example, today there's no good video call facsimile for non-verbal cues like eye contact, to confirm that attendees are paying attention instead of multitasking. Cameras embedded with sensors that can track eye movement could be used to simulate eye contact, either by pairing that motion with a skeuomorphic design or some type of indicator, such as a green dot. While this would be useful for smaller meetings, simulated eye contact wouldn't make much sense if you were presenting to a large group; after all, you wouldn't expect to make that kind of eye contact with a large in-person audience. In a classroom setting, you'd want eye contact sometimes — when working one-on-one or answering a question — but not all the time.

VIDEO GAMES AT WORK

These studies suggest there's untapped potential in gamifying the workplace.

Newly-formed teams — made up of novices and gamers alike — were 20% more productive after playing video games together for 45 minutes according to a 2018 study at Brigham Young University, "[Team Video Gaming for Team Building: Effects on Team Performance.](#)"

World of Warcraft gamers demonstrated qualities that have also been linked to success in virtual workplaces, suggesting that those skills might transfer, according to [a study by the Missouri University of Science and Technology.](#)

Another possibility? Moving everyone into a more virtual setting. Augmented and virtual reality platforms like [Arthur](#), which launched in 2020, are being built to help distributed teams collaborate better. You can access Arthur through a laptop or VR headset then meet with the avatar versions of your colleagues in a virtual office. Once you're in, you can move through various 3D environments, including hangout areas, ideation rooms, and scrum rooms. The setup you select to white board together, for instance, functions differently than the one you would use to conduct a Q&A.

The result may make meetings feel a bit more like a video game — which isn't necessarily a bad thing. Workplace technologists may want to take more cues from MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online games) like World of Warcraft, which have successfully enabled millions of people around the world to collaborate remotely and complete tasks for almost two decades now. This isn't as out there as it sounds: Amazon has been exploring gamifying warehouse work since 2017, and has shared [plans to expand the program, known as FC Games, this year](#).

What if instead of setting up an agenda and walking through a deck, meeting hosts created what looked more like video game quests, but built around objectives like decision-making, brainstorming, or problem-solving? These quests could also be asynchronous — colleagues could be given a

week, for example, to complete a feedback-gathering session. Gamifying meetings also has the advantage of creating more mental separation between work and home for remote colleagues, since instead of taking meetings in their living rooms, they're taking them in a simulated environment.

While some of these solutions may seem gimmicky first, remember that so do most new technologies before they're standardized and widely adopted. Take [Amazon's Echo](#) and [Google Assistant](#), both inspired by *Star Trek's* talking computers. At first, voice technology was a somewhat awkward novelty, but it's become increasingly frictionless in recent years. What seems out straight out of science fiction today — like building a professional avatar or navigating meetings with a video game console — could one day become as ubiquitous as asking Alexa about the weather.

THE CHANGING DIGITAL TOOLKIT

Here are some of the ways technology is already changing to help distributed teams be more productive.



Asynchronous Video:

You now record video updates within Asana. Updates are also automatically transcribed so that they can be searched for and read by your teammates.



Always-Available Audio

Slack is working on an audio feature that will let you quickly connect with colleagues in real-time while avoiding video-fatigue.



Smart Calendar Assistants:

Apps like Clockwise can automatically resolve meeting conflicts and help you create more dedicated focus-time.

Help a Mom Out: Abolish the 8-Hour Workday

Changes to the workweek could help more
parents stay in the workforce



BY DAVID MENIS

The COVID-19 pandemic may have single-handedly reversed a six-year trend of increasing female representation in corporate America.

One in four women are considering downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce entirely, according to McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org's 2020 "[Women in the Workplace](#)" report — the largest study of its kind. These women are burned out by the increased pressure the pandemic placed on them in

their personal and professional lives. Last March, many became full-time moms and teachers as well as full-time employees during what was a make-or-break year for many companies.

The study went on to find that mothers were more likely than fathers to worry that taking care of their kids would negatively affect how their work performance was judged. That gender gap isn't just a perception, in part because [many of the industries hit hardest by the pandemic are also dominated by](#)

women. From March to December 2020, women lost a net 5.4 million net jobs compared to 4.4 million lost by men, according to the [Center for American Progress](#).

It's true that the pandemic seems to be coming to an end. Vaccination rates are on the rise, companies are hiring, and children are heading to school and summer camps — at last alleviating some of the heightened stressors placed on parents this past year.

But that doesn't mean that the underlying issues are going away. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the pressure parents — and mothers in particular — face when juggling work and childcare. There are a number of reforms that could help working parents if taken together, such as making childcare more affordable and encouraging longer maternity and paternity leave. Another is to rethink how we structure work.

The eight hour workday is hard on parents, who need greater flexibility so that they can, for instance, pick up a sick child from school or bond with their kid by helping out during a field trip. What's more, the standard nine-to-five schedule doesn't line up with the typical school day in the U.S., which lets out around 3 pm and leaves parents scrambling to come up with an activity or childcare option that can fill the gap until they're available to pick up their kids.

In the “Women in the Workplace” study, participants who noted a lack of flexibility at work were more likely to consider downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce altogether — and the report goes on to suggest companies reset norms around flexibility. Even before the pandemic, [a 2019 study of STEM professionals](#) found that 43 percent of women and 23 percent of men left their full-time jobs within seven years of having or adopting a child. Many of these parents switched to part-time jobs while others left the workforce.

So here's a radical idea: What if we get rid of the eight-hour workday altogether? Instead of hiring salaried employees to work a certain number of hours per week, what if employers simply assign them a certain number of tasks? In this system, employees would be paid for their accomplishments, not their time.

Task-based work could make it much easier for parents to balance their job with their childcare responsibilities, especially time-sensitive ones like carpool duty. To further help new

parents stay in the workforce, companies could give them fewer (or less time-intensive) tasks when they first return from maternity or paternity leave.

When McKinsey Award-winning author Tamara J. Erickson outlined the concept of task-based work in the [Harvard Business Review](#) more than a decade ago, she argued that companies were already participating in this model when they allowed employees to telecommute because they were trusting that their employees would do the work they had been asked to do without having them come into an office on a regular basis.

Sound familiar? Companies that went remote during the pandemic have already experimented with a task-based model — but without getting rid of the old nine-to-five schedule. During this period, many white collar workers were expected to clock-in their usual hours, even though their performance was judged almost wholly on the work they were able to accomplish, regardless of whether or not they did that work within a nine-to-five window.

Now, companies embracing hybrid have the opportunity to make the switch to task-based work official. Instead of establishing workday hours, why not set meeting hours? For example, ask employees to be available for meetings from ten to noon, Monday through Friday. Otherwise, let employees work the hours that make the most sense for them, whether or not they're working from home.

The main challenge is making sure that employees don't have too much on their plate, since managers can't tell who's working long hours by seeing who's in the office the most. This is one of the trade-offs of switching to hybrid; managers and reports will need to be more active about discussing workloads. In a time when you can work from your smartphone, that's probably a good thing. Especially if embracing a more flexible schedule helps working moms (and dads) have it all.

FLEXIBILITY AND FAIR PAY

Having flexible hours reduced the motherhood wage gap by 68%, while the ability to work from home reduced it by 58%, according to a 2018 study at the University of British Columbia, “[Family-Friendly Jobs and Motherhood Pay Penalties: The Impact of Flexible Work Arrangements Across the Education Spectrum](#).”

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