

# Telecommuting will likely continue long after the pandemic    Telework is usually rare, now a necessity

Katherine Guyot and Isabel V. Sawhill Monday, April 6, 2020

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic is, among other things, a massive experiment in telecommuting. Up to half of American workers are currently working from home, more than double the fraction who worked from home (at least occasionally) in 2017-18.

Of course, some jobs simply can't be done at home. But the outbreak is accelerating the trend toward telecommuting, possibly for the long term. Until now, telecommuting has been slower to take hold than many predicted when remote work technology first emerged. This inertia probably reflects sticky work cultures as well as a lack of interest from employers in investing in the technology and management practices necessary to operate a tele-workforce.

But the pandemic is forcing these investments in industries where telework is possible, with more people learning how to use remote technology. As a result, we may see a more permanent shift toward telecommuting. As the economist Susan Athey recently told the Washington Post, "People will change their habits, and some of these habits will stick. There's a lot of things where people are just slowly shifting, and this will accelerate that."

There are pros and cons to more telecommuting. On the plus side, workers tend to prefer working from home, it reduces emissions and office costs, and it helps people (especially women) balance work and family roles. It may even make us more productive. The downsides: managing a telecommuting staff can be difficult, professional isolation can have negative effects on well-being and career development, and the effects on productivity over the long run and in a scaled-up system are uncertain.

# The need for speed: more broadband

Technological limitations could be a barrier to the development of an American teleworkforce. Although Pew estimates that three-quarters of American adults now have high-speed broadband internet service at home, up dramatically from just 1% in 2000, many rural areas have been left out of the broadband revolution, and around 14% of households in urban areas are still digitally disconnected. If there is one piece of critical infrastructure that will provide jobs to those in left-behind places, it is high-speed broadband.

## ...and the cons

Productivity boosts aren't guaranteed, especially if employee performance is difficult to monitor

Professional isolation from telecommuting can have a negative impact on well-being. After the earthquakes in Christchurch, many employees reported that they combatted isolation by occasionally teleworking in the same location as co-workers. Co-working from home is obviously at odds with the current need for social distancing to slow the spread of the coronavirus, but under more normal circumstances, telework appears to be most successful when alternated with face-to-face contact. For instance, face-to-face groups perform better than virtual groups in creative teamwork tasks, but working away from the office can improve focus on individualized tasks.

COVID-19 may permanently change the way many of us work. At present, shifting as many people as possible to home-based telework is a necessary response to a terrible crisis. In the post-pandemic world, it may stay with us as a popular practice that, if done well, can improve job satisfaction, raise productivity, reduce emissions, and spread work to more remote regions.