Harvard Business Review

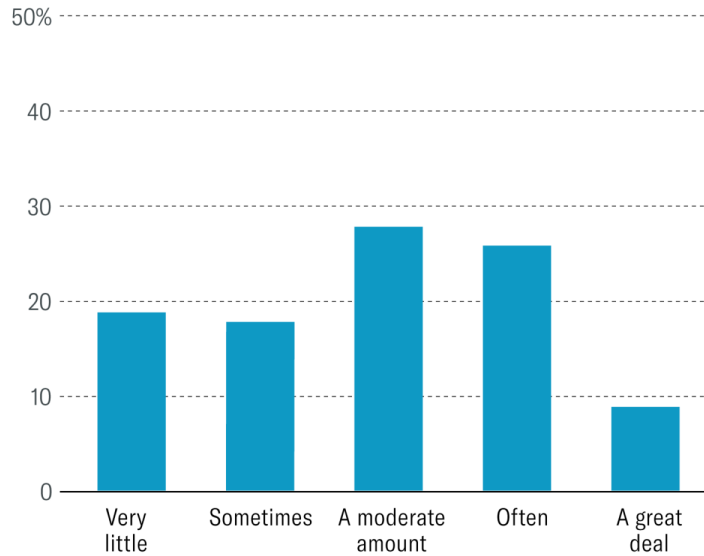# The Realities of Remote Work

by Laura Amico

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The Covid-19 pandemic sparked what economist Nicholas Bloom calls the "working-from-home economy." While some workers may have had flexibility to work remotely before the pandemic, this unprecedented shift to remote work looks like it could be here to stay in some form.

Using the charts below, a team can discuss the realities of remote work — what's good, what's bad, and what might get left unsaid. To begin, think about the varied demands of working remotely and how they differ from an in-office experience. The first chart, from " Remote Managers Are Having Trust Issues," shows how often employees in one study feel they must be constantly available to colleagues and managers.

How Remote Workers Experience Being Managed at Home

Percentage of workers who agree/disagree with the statement: "Over the past week, I was expected to respond to electronic/telephone messages immediately."
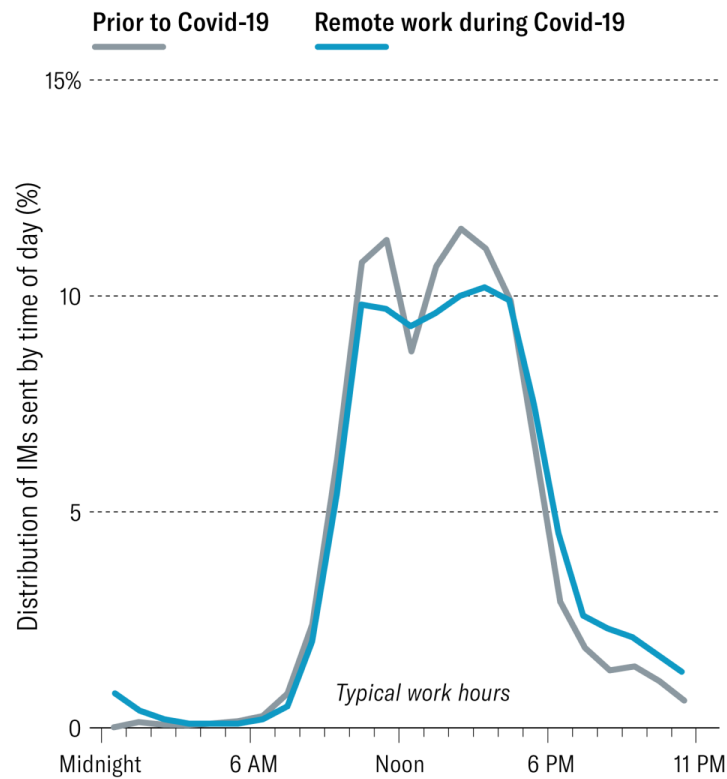

Source: Centre for Transformative Work Design survey of 617 global workers between April 21, 2020, and May 5, 2020

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Availability doesn't just extend to work hours, either, as a team of researchers at Microsoft found. When the researchers there analyzed how workers were experiencing remote work, they found that even employees who had previously developed strong work-life boundaries found them blurring during the pandemic transition.

Lunchtime and Evenings Aren't a Break from Screens

Prior to Covid-19, IMs sent by Microsoft employees during their lunch hours dipped. These numbers flattened after WFH became the norm.
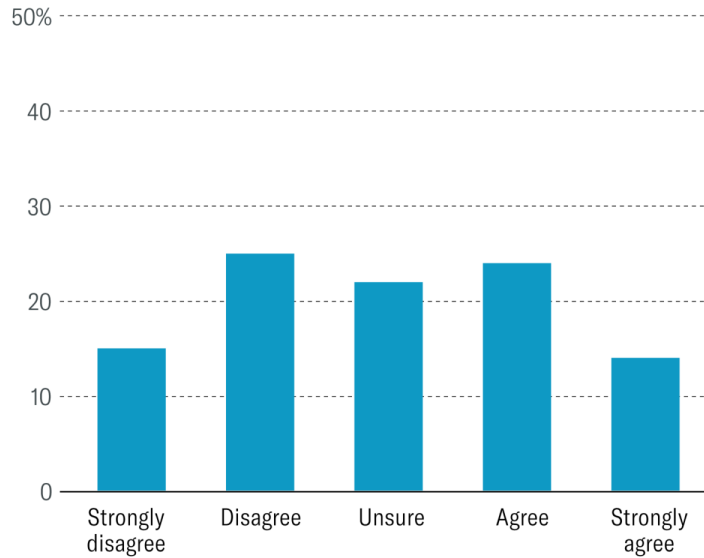
Prior to Covid-19   **Remote work during Covid-19**

Distribution of IMs sent by time of day (%)

15%

10

5

0

Typical work hours

Midnight   6 AM   Noon   6 PM   11 PM

Source: Microsoft Workplace Analytics

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Despite these findings, other research shows that managers worry that employees still aren't as productive at home as they are in the office.

What Managers Believe About Remote Worker Performance

Percentage of managers who agree/disagree with the statement: "The performance of remote workers is usually lower than that of people who work in an office setting."

Source: Centre for Transformative Work Design survey of 215 global supervisors between April 21, 2020, and May 5, 2020

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Taken together, these charts yield an important point of conversation for remote and hybrid teams: If employees are sacrificing work-life boundaries, and managers think productivity is declining, what's the disconnect?

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Discuss with your team: How has the pandemic changed how you think about work-from-home opportunities? Have your work-life boundaries shifted in ways that you are happy (or unhappy) with? Does "always on" mean that you are more productive? What team standards or norms can you use to bridge the gap between workers' experiences and managers' perceptions?

This chart collection is part of **Data & Visuals**, HBR's home for charts.

Laura Amico is a senior editor at Harvard Business Review.