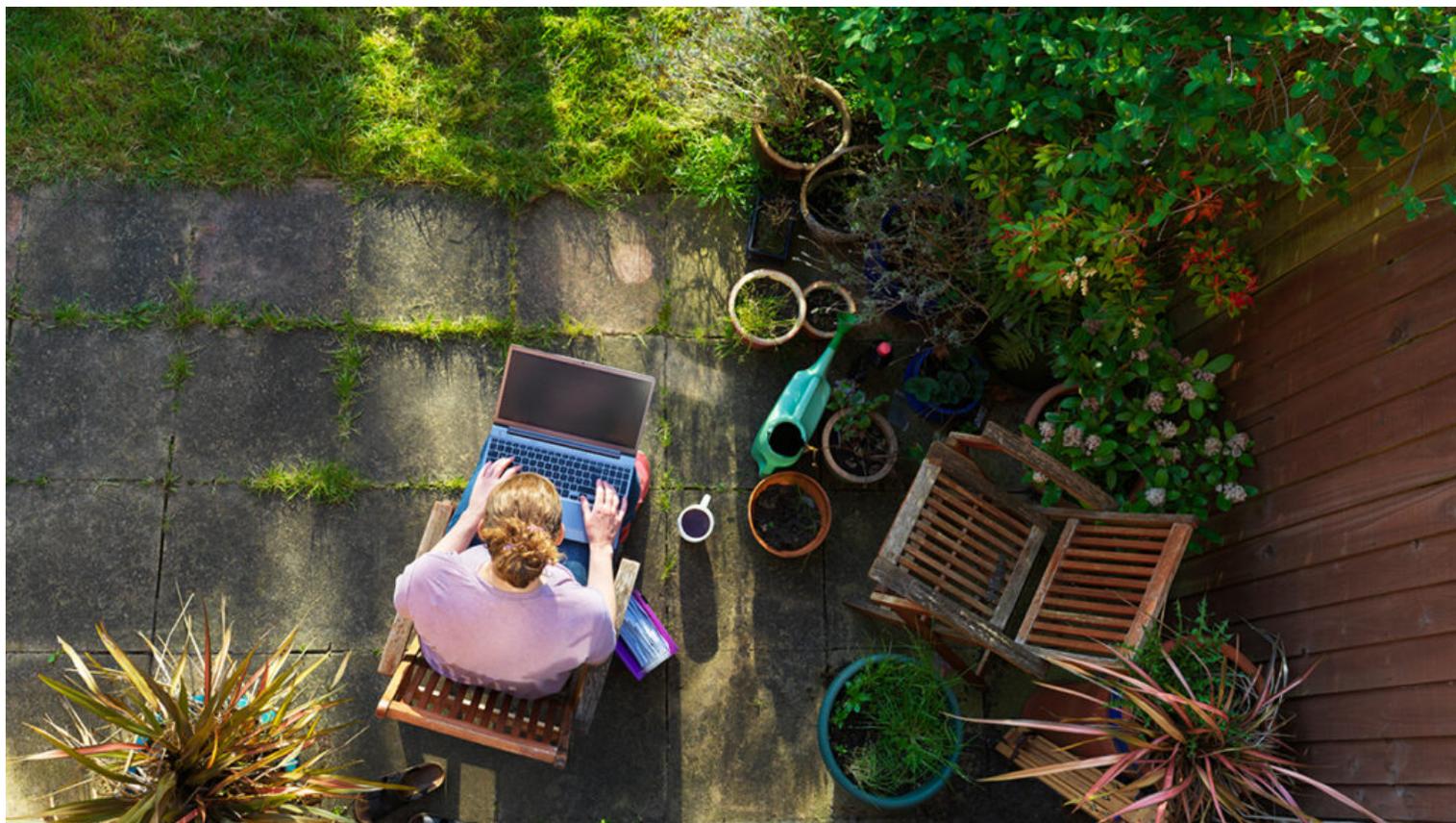# Why WFH Isn't Necessarily Good for Women

by Herminia Ibarra , Julia Gillard and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic

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Gary Yeowell/Getty Images

By altering attitudes toward working from home (WFH), COVID-19 may have forever changed the way we work. According to a new MIT study, half of those who were employed before the pandemic are now working remotely. As company executives see for themselves that excellent work can be achieved, and productivity heightened, even in jobs that no one imagined could be done virtually, a growing number of companies, including Facebook and Twitter, are announcing that they will allow employees to work remotely on a permanent basis.

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It's tempting to think that such flexible work options will be a big equalizer for women. Many are daring to hope that by removing the stigma attached to WFH, and by cutting commuting time and the insidious "face time" norms that can add hours to the workday, women can maintain full-time jobs and avoid losing traction in their careers during their caregiving years. There is some evidence on which to base this dream of a better future — studies have shown that flexibility allows mothers to maintain their working hours after childbirth and to stay in relatively stressful yet well-paying occupations through times of high family demand. But before we declare victory, we need to consider three potential trip wires.

Work/family conflict. A wealth of research suggests that flexible working may actually increase work/family conflict, because it is likely to lead to an expansion of work and increase the domestic burden on employees. A recurring finding is that women are more likely to carry out more domestic responsibilities while working flexibly, whereas men are more likely to prioritize and expand their work spheres. For example, one study found that professional men with and without children, and professional women without children, seem to increase their unpaid overtime hours, especially when they have more control over their schedules, but professional women with children do not. Historically, company practices that increase flexibility with the aim of facilitating a better work/life balance have not necessarily resulted in increased advancement of women to senior levels. The benefit has simply been better retention of women at lower management levels.

Access to informal networks and critical assignments. We know that "likes attract" and that the "similarity principle" shapes informal networks. As a result, even in work environments that have no WFH component, women find it harder to get the career benefits that come with being in easy contact with mostly male decision makers. Will WFH accelerate this underlying inequality by further reducing opportunities for face-to-face networking?

If the answer is yes, it could have major effects on career trajectories. Those in the middle ranks of organizations are at the age and stage where advancement accelerates, plateaus, or sputters out. The stepping-stone assignments that often transform managers into

leaders, and the informal but essential coaching that might happen after a key meeting or a big pitch, are crucial for building a strong path forward. Virtual meetings on Zoom do not afford the same rapport-building and feedback mechanisms. Will constructive informal feedback, so essential to the learning process, become an even-more-gendered process?

Networks also play an important role in allocating work assignments, affecting the build-up of subsequent career capital and, therefore, later progression. Remote work holds the promise of unshackled, more-democratic access to talent in staffing the project teams that allow people to learn new skills and to leverage ones they already have. It is already accelerating the use of smart virtual platforms that link project opportunities to project seekers in internal marketplaces pioneered by companies such as Unilever, Ebay, Cisco, and Here Technologies. But these platforms rely on people putting their CVs forward at their own discretion and negotiating time for extracurricular projects with bosses who are still more apt to hoard than share talent. As Google learned when it was found that its women engineers were not nominating themselves for promotion at the same rate as men were, seemingly objective systems can produce unequal outcomes. We have not yet begun to understand how remote work might affect access to the opportunities that can make or break a career.

It also remains to be seen how remote work will affect the career paths of countless women who have had their upward movement curtailed by the inability to relocate geographically — up to now a requirement for advancement in most global organizations. Will the WFH ethos also democratize access to the big mission-critical assignments that so often entailed relocation and, as such, have remained the purview of men?

A new form of "presenteeism." While some companies may shift to 100% remote work, in most cases some people will be physically co-located while others work remotely. What happens when some team members are in the office or traveling for work while others are WFH? Will we see a gender skew, with men disproportionately in the office or on the road, very visibly contributing to the business, while women are out of sight and mind? Unless companies learn to evaluate output, rewarding people for what they actually

contribute rather than for the show they put on, a world of *mostly* remote work may increase organizations' bias for rewarding those who are present, disproportionately harming women.

WFH also has implications for who gets pulled in to quick or informal decision-making discussions. Will the new environment exacerbate existing disparities, with women likely to be only in the formal, official channels of communication and left out of the myriad subsets of conversations that shape decisions? One financial services organization, for example, decreed that only a small percentage of its employees could be physically in the office. The senior women observed that it was mostly men coming in, as they were more likely to have enclosed offices, which caused the women to wonder if they were being left out of crucial conversations as they worked from home. If going to the office becomes a status symbol, at least among knowledge workers, our concern is that men will be gifted more-exclusive or privileged access to it than women.

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What can leaders do to make remote work successful for all? In business, risks always need to be identified, managed, and mitigated. Leaders are always forced to choose between two or more imperfect alternatives, minimizing drawbacks and maximizing gains, balancing the short and the long term. This certainly holds true for WFH. With leadership and rigor, the promise of WFH *can* be realized. But for that to happen, leaders must address the key challenges we have highlighted. The following guidelines can serve as a starting point.

1. *Instead of making assumptions, collect and analyze data.* Look at the effects of remote working by level: Does it provide the same career benefits to the entry-level, mid-career, and executive strata? As in any other area of diversity, data is the key to revealing gaps, and we are confident that advances in analytics, and the drive of organizations to become more evidence-based in their HR practices, will enable some progress.

2. *Change* with *rather than* against *your culture.* Analyze and survey to develop an understanding of how your unique organizational culture might affect the way remote working is used and by whom. Remember that everyone can use Zoom or Microsoft Teams, but that doesn't necessarily mean you can truly embrace a culture of WFH. Technology is undoubtedly enabling key gains in flexibility, but those gains will be transformative only if you can integrate them with, or even fuse them to, your culture. Simply put, if culture is "How we do things around here," then the main question organizations must address is "How should we do WFH around here?" — and answering it should include paying attention to gender equality and other dimensions of diversity.

3. *Understand that remote working does not occur in a vacuum*. Take active steps to challenge any embedded assumptions about the gender-normative roles of mothers and fathers so that those norms do not drive the way managers and colleagues perceive remote working by men and women and what they expect of them.

4. *Avoid the development of two tiers of employees.* If most but not all people are WFH, don't turn the office into the VIP area of a club or the first-class section of a business lounge. It is inherently human to seek status and attempt to stand out from the crowd, but the only way to get an organization to function as an effective system is to temper the individual drive for status through a culture of fairness and collaboration. Striving for this balance will require organizations to examine the gender distribution at home and in the less-crowded office, ensuring an equal amount of flexibility and "hybrid" access for everyone.

5. *Educate managers about the new rules.* Culture is always changing, and the biggest catalyst of change is how managers behave and make their decisions every day, as experienced by their teams. If you want to make WFH work for everyone, you must ensure that line managers understand their colleagues' WFH arrangements and receive training on burnout, work stress, work/life balance, and inclusion. This involves briefing them about what they should and shouldn't know about their employees when they are WFH and encouraging them to think harder about the elusive boundaries between private and personal space.

6. *Focus on output.* Upgrade your performance evaluation processes and metrics to ensure a focus on outputs and, crucially, do not include assessments from periods of lockdown

when childcare was unavailable.

For leaders under strain from the health and economic crises, these guidelines may seem like an unrealistic burden. However, given that a wave of change from this era is inevitable, leaders have just two choices: to actively shape the outcome, or to just see what happens, with all the attendant risks of unacceptable results and increased likelihood of business failure. Acting now to secure the prize of a more productive, engaged, loyal, and diverse workforce has to be worth the effort.

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Well articulated guidelines. Would be of great help in creating winning WFH culture.

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