



## The Psychic Burden of Working During Lockdown

**Left literally to their own devices, home-bound employees reduce their community participation and experience higher emotional costs.**

Before COVID-19, remote working was usually optional – a perk used sparingly, and viewed as a secondary option by many companies. Now, it is compulsory for **as much as half the workforce** in developed economies such as the United States. For many, this may persist even after returning to the office becomes a possibility.

It would be wrong to construe the difference between pre-COVID and coronavirus-bound remote working as a matter of degrees. From a psychological perspective, there is a qualitative distinction between choosing to work from home *sometimes*, and being forced to do it all the time. Leaving aside the uncertainty and anxiety caused by the virus, the mandatory physical isolation and dissolution of boundaries between work and home raise serious mental health challenges – as well as business risks companies should be aware of.

### **Social contributions**

The best interests of companies and employees converge on the notion of *social contributions*. Loosely defined as engagement and information-sharing within a community, social contributions from employees create value for firms, especially during a crisis, **prior research shows**.

In the era of social distancing, it's even more

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important for employees to feel connected to others. During the lockdown, with in-person get-togethers impossible, staying in touch virtually is important for keeping employees mentally healthy and productive in their work.

However, mandatory home-bound working seems to run counter to employees' social and psychological needs. Our recent **working paper** (co-authored by Prithwiraj Choudhury of Harvard Business School) explores social contributions of a Chinese online forum where users can post questions on a wide range of topics and receive answers from the community (similar to the U.S.-based platform community **Quora**).

Starting on 3 February, with the encouragement of the Chinese government at the central and local levels, companies in certain industries (e.g. software development and e-commerce) started to adopt remote working arrangements. Over the following 10 days, most of China's provinces and cities imposed lockdowns. As in other countries, there was a sector-based split between employees who were able to work from home through the lockdown and those whose jobs required their physical presence (e.g. wait staff in restaurants, factory workers and construction workers).

Based on the self-reported occupation of the users

on the online forum, then, we could compare the contributions of a randomly selected set of employees who work from home (WFH) to those whose employment was on hold during the lockdown (whom we termed CWFH, or cannot work from home). In all, our dataset comprised 3.7 million answers submitted by 30,000 forum users – their entire user history. We focused our attention on activity from 24 January to 7 February. (Wuhan’s lockdown started on 23 January. Wuhan represented 10 percent of our sample set.)

On the whole, the WFH group posted around 19 percent fewer contributions to the forum than CWFH during the lockdown period we looked at. While CWFH users answered 0.25 questions per day on average, their WFH counterparts answered only 0.18. Across the forum’s entire user base of about 200 million registered members, this level of reduced activity among the WFH group would cause overall engagement to decline by 4.4 percent.

### Psychic costs

Moreover, the WFH group revealed distinct patterns of interaction that provided clues to their psychological state. Most of the reduced activity involved topics like arts, emotions and family. Their avoidance of these subjects suggests that areas related to mental health and work-life balance were particular sore spots. However, one topic elicited a relative gush of responses: work-from-home best practices. Questions on this topic received 148 percent more interaction from WFH than CWFH. (More on this later.)

Also, a sentiment analysis found 6.6 percent less positive affect – as measured by the prevalence of optimistic words such as “success” and cheerful phrases and proverbs such as “priceless treasure” – in the responses from WFH users, as opposed to the CWFH group.

### A vicious cycle

Hourly breakdowns of forum activity supplied a more rounded picture of what was going on with the remote workers in our sample. As you might expect, we saw steep reductions in activity during normal working hours. Interestingly, though, the WFH group flocked back to the forum from 8 pm to midnight. In this four-hour window, WFH and CWFH contributed roughly equally.

For the WFH group, the drop in social contributions appeared to be both a gauge and partial driver of the employees’ heightened psychic costs. The key issue could be time. Without the physical separation of home and office, the workday tends to spill beyond the usual confines of eight hours – as many professionals can attest based on recent first-hand

experience. Increased difficulty in achieving work-life balance presumably made matters worse. Stressed-out home employees then tried to cram in as much social activity as they could in the hours before bed, hence the spike in late-night forum posting. These time pressures, coupled with the lack of leisurely socialising, negatively affected the WFH group’s overall mental health.

### Promoting social contributions

Our working paper has important implications for companies concerned about fostering employees’ mental wellbeing during the crisis. First, it always helps to be cognisant of the time pressures most people experience when working from home. You may recall that physical offices are often rife with “presenteeism”, the belief that the time one spends at one’s desk is a direct reflection of one’s value as an employee. Something similar apparently occurs in remote working situations. People try to compensate for their bodily absence by cultivating a seemingly productive presence on email, Slack, Zoom, etc. Managers need to ensure this does not get out of hand by urging employees to set clear boundaries between personal and work time.

Managers might even consider inviting employees to carve out an hour here or there during the workday to touch base with friends, have a virtual coffee with a favourite colleague or chat online – however they like to stay socially engaged. Companies may also experiment with allowing employees to remotely socialise and self-actualise during work hours. For instance, they may share their best practices in using remote-work software with their colleagues, a topic which the WFH group in our study was especially keen on. Soliciting their thoughts in that arena may be a great place to start. Later, companies may set up check-in routines where employees share anecdotes about their daily lives and how they are coping with the crisis. That way, employees have the social interaction and attention they have been craving, while the company benefits from its employees’ collective expertise and improved mental state.

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