

Working from home: a double-edged sword?

By Auguste (Gusti) Coetzer

Few dispute the massive impact that Covid-19 has had on every aspect of our lives, including our work. Thousands of employees have switched to working from home, rather than spread the virus through shared workspaces in office buildings.

Whether this work-from-home trend will continue, and what its long-term impact on productivity will be, is, however, far from clear. One of the most interesting aspects to consider is the potential loss of a multi-generational workforce as a result of the work-from-home imperative. Today's workforce can include up to four generations working side by side - even a young 5th generation could be added. While this has its challenges, it also brings unique opportunities for symbiotic relationships from which all can benefit.

Each generation brings its unique set of values, attitudes and behaviours. In South Africa, these are defined as:

- The apartheid generation – born 1938 to 1964;
- The struggle generation – born 1965 to 1980;
- The transition generation – born 1981 to 1994; and
- The born free generation – born 1995 to 2000.

Age diversity in the workplace is seen in a positive light for both the organisation and the individual, according to a rather dated, but still relevant 2015 report by the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Its research found that there is "widespread appreciation that a workplace with only one generation is less effective and is not as enjoyable to work in". Key benefits identified were:

- Knowledge-sharing. Employees display an appreciation that colleagues across the mix of ages have different skills and knowledge sets which are valuable to each other and the organisation.

- Different generations have varied approaches to work, which bring about new perspectives.
- Building relationships with clients is key for many organisations. Making sure that an age mix exists in the organisation complements and enhances customer centricity.

How has Covid-19 changed this? Nicolas Bloom, a senior fellow at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, has previously supported working from home, saying that it leads to increased productivity and reduces resignations.

But now, four factors - children, space, privacy and choice – have changed this in Covid-19.

The new challenges, he argues, are:

- Managing children, with many working parents becoming full-time and/or part-time teachers for their children;
- Lack of space, with bedrooms or shared common rooms becoming offices;
- Loss of in-person collaboration, necessary for creativity and innovation;
- Loss of personal choice, leaving people feeling isolated, lonely and depressed.

As we are aware, in South Africa many people live in crowded spaces and lack the privacy required for optimal delivery.

Working from home also loses the benefits of an intergenerational mix. Large numbers of younger people need the input of an older generation to provide practical work experience, especially for those undergoing learnerships. South Africa is a social nation; the ubuntu value that underpins our society depends on socialisation in many contexts, including at work. Working from home disconnects people in a way that online meetings cannot compensate for.

Corporate culture is also impacted, and will no longer be shaped by our personal experiences at work; instead it could just become the paper statements common in many corporates!

The rituals of sharing in the delight of an achievement, or birthdays, have already changed to a WhatsApp or Facebook message, adding to the feeling of being dislodged from interpersonal stimulation.

There is no handbook to guide us in the Covid-19 era. We are learning as we go. Companies and organisations should bear in mind the cultural, social and professional aspects when planning for a future that may yet continue to be dominated by extremely taxing times due to uncertainty defining how the future will look.

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