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# Zooming in on Remote Work



**“As long as certain metrics are reached, we need to give employees a bit of flexibility and not police them.”**

—Professor Bruno Teboul

## How technology may make radical changes in the way we work and communicate

**H**ow we do our work has been shifting for decades as new technologies have made remote working not only possible, but also desirable from productivity, lifestyle and environmental perspectives. Such technologies have been crucial to keeping many businesses and employees going during the enforced isolation of the coronavirus pandemic. But is remote work really catching on? What is its long-term outlook?

During a Zoom interview, Associate Professor Bree McEwan remarks, “I don’t think we could have done this even five years ago. There was some videoconferencing technology, but it wasn’t very good, and there were a lot of digital access issues.”

Zoom had already made some inroads in educational settings, so when the pandemic hit, many people were already familiar with it. “The features—the boxes, the breakouts, the ability to mute people—helped Zoom. It’s a right place, right time thing,” she says.

In addition, research shows that once a technology comes into saturation use, people adapt it to the motivations and goals they have. “So we’re conducting our social life in the same platform, and it gives us that familiarity we need to move it into different contexts,” McEwan says.

But do Zoom and other technologies represent a sea change in how we communicate at work? Facebook, Twitter and Google are planning permanent remote working arrangements. Shopify, an e-commerce platform, recently declared itself a digital-by-default

company and closed its offices through 2021. CEO Tobi Lutke believes, “Office centrality is over.”

Professor Bruno Teboul, an expert in organizational communication, sees challenges from both managerial and employee perspectives with remote working arrangements. “One gap that managers need to address is the understanding gap,” he says. “You have to try to understand where your workforce is and develop solutions for different circumstances.” These might include a lack of child or adult day care, inadequate home office space and inexperience with remote work situations.

Managers also need to make a dramatic shift in their thinking that employee productivity depends on close surveillance. “A lot of companies are purchasing employee monitoring software,” Teboul says. “If you really want employee engagement, commitment and loyalty, probably the worst way to engender that is by monitoring their every keystroke and coffee break. As long as certain metrics are reached, we need to give employees a bit of flexibility and not police them.”

At the same time, there are pitfalls employees need to negotiate. “A person’s livelihood in an organization is largely determined by the quality of the relationships that they have,” he says.

Work relationships won’t just happen. “You have to make sure that you remain in touch with individuals who can give you choice assignments, challenging work, and feedback to help you grow and develop,” Teboul says. “That communication is part of the glue that holds an organization together.”