

Working from home in 2020 – Lessons learned to leverage these learnings going forward as emerging leaders and a remote office workforce

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Abstract

This paper summarises some of the data that has been collected and presented in various contemporary articles on the challenges organisations and office workers have faced while working from home (WFH). What Bernstein, Blunden, Brodsky, Sohn and Waber call the largest experiment in history has already produced initial sets of data about how productive the workforce was in their home offices, and how happy or unhappy employees were while working from home. Productivity and employee happiness have always been focal points in the discussion about working from home. Before the pandemic hit, one of the biggest fears in many organisations was that WFH would negatively impact employee productivity, and employees were likewise sceptical about how one could separate private and working life in a healthy manner while working from home. The scope of this paper is about how working from home or anywhere has impacted employees and organizations. The data collected to-date indicates a decline in wellbeing and engagement and highlights a need for leaders and office workers to become more adept in managing their needs to continue to thrive in the workplace. Coaching can be one means to support and enhance this learning and development process and help ease the transition into the workplace of the future.

Keywords: communication, leading, motivation, relationships, working-from-home, wellbeing, engagement, productivity

1. The working-from-home challenge in 2020

The 2020 working-from-home challenge, which was a consequence of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, will enter corporate history books as the most successful change initiative ever in the business world. Change in general is a daunting process, requires considerable communication and convincing, and still is often not carried out successfully or to the satisfaction of the change initiators (Musselwhite & Plouffe, 2011; Zhexembayeva, 2020). Furthermore, the loss of productivity and engagement are often reported as undesired, and yet not to be avoided, side effects of every change initiative (Kanter, 2009). In 2020 it was different in so many ways. The changes Covid-19 brought to our professional lives were unplanned, not communicated and explained by management in advance – it all simply happened and affected all of us significantly.

The **necessity** of the measures taken by management, namely, to ask staff to work from home wherever this was possible, were very rarely questioned—contrary to past experiences in the corporate world, where both staff and management had reservations around working from home scenarios for different reasons (Bartik et al., 2020; Desilver, 2020).

Readiness, as another important driver for every change initiative was fulfilled nearly instantly. The sceptics among staff and management budged under the huge economic pressure, paired with the need to ‘survive’, and so left no doubts about the **urgency** of the measures. It helped sceptics become, what might be described as Experi-Mentors of an experiment that is unprecedented.

Readiness, urgency, and the openness to the experiment – the impact of failure could not be worse than keeping the status quo – were perfect prerequisites for the launch of a successful change project. And yet, how successful has it been when looking at the long-term impact working-from home is making on both the workforce, management, and companies? How sustainable will the model of working-from-home become going forward? What have employees and companies learned and how would they like to continue in the future?

The first published research data from companies collected both early, mid, and late 2020 show mixed results (Bernstein et al., 2020; Velush, Sherman & Anderson, 2020; Campbell & Gretchen, 2021). On the one side, there was a lot of praise around how well workers and management were coping with the new ways of working. There was surprise among the sceptics how little productivity was lost, and how effective businesses remained with their every-day tasks. The toll that was paid for such high and smooth performance under challenging situations became visible only later in the year, when Campbell’s and Gretchen’s (2021) study found a reported 89 % decline in **workplace wellbeing**. The workforce was suffering in their home offices with feelings of disconnect, unsustainable workloads, **disengagement**, and a feeling of loss of control when it comes to their business and personal lives.

2. What happened to workplace wellbeing and engagement through the lens of staff?

Research data collected so far is drawing different pictures of how well the workforce coped with the working-from-home experience. On the one hand, there are employees who really enjoy the new status quo and fear the day when they are asked to return to their offices (Bernstein et al., 2020). Those employees who benefitted from the new “normal”, were able to swiftly self-regulate and self-manage in such a way that they were able to design a new structure for their working day at home. It allowed for both: Focused time to work on project tasks – productive advancements in whatever way their jobs would involve – as well as meetings with project and team members in order to stay connected and aligned. The connections that were kept in those times, according to Bernstein et al. (2020), were primarily those that served an immediate purpose and were connection with a task at hand. What Bernstein et al. (2020) calls ‘weak ties’, were the ones that suffered and were neglected, such as informal encounters which were nearly completely eliminated during the pandemic.

Research confirms that self-determination, job satisfaction, and meaningful relationships have positive impacts on engagement and workplace wellbeing. People, who feel engaged, feel good about the work they do, and vice versa, the job satisfaction they experience, makes them feel good as an individual (Manganelli et al., 2018). Self-determination and autonomy, however, also require the ability and capability to self-organize and self-structure. Are these skills taken for granted across all functions and hierarchies?

What if not everyone in the workplace has those capabilities and skillsets? Self-management and self-organization are not a given for everyone – especially those that had been micro-

managed until Covid-19 hit. Regardless of the pandemic, how self-organized staff can work and proceed, depends on their work contexts, jobs, experiences, supervisors, and personality among others. Additionally, even for the very experienced workers in the workplace, the unprecedented circumstances in 2020 were more challenging than before the pandemic.

What if there are managers who have an issue with so much self-determination and have a feeling, they would like to claim back what used to be attached – in their opinion – to their role, status, and job description? What if they fall back into their habit to ‘manage’ and ‘organize’ their subordinates?

What if employees do not have the infrastructure at home to allow for this best-case scenario of a working-from-home environment?

Sharing a house or an apartment with family members, kids being home-schooled during the pandemic, spouses also working from home – factors which influence how easy or difficult it is to work from home. The lack of high-speed internet or the lack of a quiet room to work from – any of these can be stressors for those whose wellbeing suffered more during the pandemic and who are longing for the day when they can return to their offices. **What if** companies won’t offer that possibility anymore going forward? **What if** companies demand everyone back, also those that have settled in and organized their new way of working and living in a way that their wellbeing and engagement has increased?

3. What happened to wellbeing and engagement through the lens of companies?

Companies have observed with a huge relief how well and smoothly the transition from working in the office to working from home went – not in all areas and functions of their businesses of course, but at least in the majority of the direct and formerly known as white-collar work areas. Manufacturing and similar areas, such as prototyping, sample building, material handling and logistics will most likely remain classic on-site jobs, and employees in those areas will very likely have to return or have already returned to work on-site, whereas office jobs might sooner or later be replaced by co-working spaces, “hot-desking” arrangements and working-from-home, working-from-anywhere employment contracts (Bernstein et al., 2020). For companies and organizations there seem to be a potential for considerable savings when it comes to real estate costs and office space. “Hot-desking” and other “shift” models, where staff take turns coming into the office and working from home, have already been put into place for the transition period of moving some staff back to the office and will probably continue after the pandemic as well Bernstein et al. (2020); Velush et al. (2020).

What does this mean for staff? Especially for those who were suffering and are longing to return to their workplaces, either because they need the connection with their co-workers, or they do not have the perfect work situation at home? Who is going to decide where employees are going to work after the pandemic? Are these decisions company decisions and taken autocratically – neglecting the needs of their staff and risking a drop in engagement and wellbeing and thus in performance and identification (affiliation) with the company? Or are companies maximising this opportunity to co-create models around organizational and staff needs?

What is certain, is that after the pandemic, it will not be the same as before the pandemic, and changes are on the horizon when it comes to models of new or future work. Hence, human resources (HR) policies, processes, and work contracts will need to be adapted, as will training and upskilling for both those, who are working from home, managing from home, and

managing in and working with a hybrid workforce (Rothbard, 2020). Governments will be invited to re-consider tax regulations (Graupner, 2020). Multi-nationals will need to investigate what these new ways of working mean also when it comes to working across geographical borders and intercultural differences.

The difficulties companies, governments, and societies are facing with ‘policy’, ‘taxation’ and ‘contracts’ lie in the complexity and the individuality of the issues at hand. Blue collar workers have less of a choice than white collar workers in terms of equality and equity, when it comes to who can choose from where to work. For example, there is a diversity of options for the different employees in their different life situations and circumstances, such as: with family and without family; with good infrastructure such as internet bandwidth and a private room or office at home to work from, or not. These options will offer considerable room for discussions and conversations between the different stakeholders.

Companies, who will unilaterally decide for their workforce what they will offer, might face the loss of talented employees and a fluctuation in their workforce. Not everyone, asked to return to the office, will be open to do so. Other companies might offer more flexibility than their current employer. Companies are even thinking about adapting their payment schemes depending on whether the workplace is an “at home” or “in the office” workplace, and if it is at home the payment might even depend on the local costs of living. With it comes the danger of introducing new inequality and the devaluation of highly skilled workers (Bernstein et al., 2020).

For executives, managers, and staff alike it will be challenging to navigate and work with a hybrid work force. The most likely scenario of a hybrid is also the most challenging (Bernstein et al., 2020). Informal feedback loops, visibility of staff, recognition of accomplishments, talent and career management will all need to be re-thought and adapted to suit the new ways of working (Rothbard, 2020). Processes that had been well-established before the Covid-19 pandemic will need to be re-evaluated and adapted (Velush et al., 2020).

4. Models to measure and monitor wellbeing and engagement in the workplace

There are various models in the field of wellbeing and engagement. None are more respected than the other, according to Christian and Slaughter as cited in an integrative literature review by Shuck (2011).

Martin Seligman, who is well-known for his work in “Positive Psychology” uses the Acronym PERMA

1. **Positive Emotions**
2. **Engagement**
3. **Relationships**
4. **Meaning**
5. **Accomplishment**

to refer to, what he calls, the elements that contribute to wellbeing. A study by Goodman et al. (2017) confirms that people who have at least one of the elements of the PERMA model have the other elements to a similar degree as well (Seligman, 2018). One element of the PERMA Model for wellbeing is engagement, and hence I would argue that that is an indicator for the

strong link between the two independent concepts of wellbeing and engagement. When there is engagement in the workplace, it is very likely that employees feel well about what they do at work as well; and vice versa, if they feel well because of one of the other dimensions of the PERMA model, e.g. relationships or accomplishment, it is likely that they also experience higher levels of engagement.

Shuck (2011) provides an overview of the well-researched **engagement** models such as Kahn's (1990) need-satisfying approach, Maslach et al.'s (2001) burnout-antithesis approach, Harter et al.'s (2002) satisfaction-engagement approach, and Saks's (2006) multidimensional approach (cognitive, emotional and behavioral elements) in his integrative literature review.

The areas in which wellbeing and engagement seem to overlap in the previously mentioned models are:

- a) Self-determination (having control over one's life and work) also referred to as job and task autonomy; and
- b) Relationship and connection, or affiliation.

For HR and Management to allow for conversations to happen about these topics in organizations – away from purely task-based conversations to conversations that humanize the workplace, and at the same time will have positive effects and will bring gains on the task side – is an area that needs more attention and skill development going forward.

Oades et al. (2021) highlight in their research the importance of becoming 'fluent' in the language of wellbeing. Concrete actions in how team leaders and management can create wellbeing experiences for their staff if literacy in the field of wellbeing is a given. Manganelli et al. (2018) suggest that managers structure the work environment in such a way that the job design, interpersonal relationships/leadership and compensation as elements to workplace wellbeing facilitate what they call need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, relatedness) and those could be linked to Kahn's needs satisfying approach in the realm of the engagement models. Bernstein et al. (2020) recommend that leaders substantially increase their communication effort and provide more clarity and less ambiguity for their staff. As they see it, the focus of management will shift towards more communicative actions and supportive actions than 'operational' and 'managerial activities around tasks'. Hence the skillset of a manager will morph even more towards leading than managing—more people-oriented than task-related.

What Kowalski and Loretto (2017) suggest by allowing more contextual approaches than 'best-practice' approaches to foster wellbeing in the workplace sounds like a very valid request. The differences in needs, both on the individual side of the employees as well on the side of the organizations and companies, demand a more distinguished and customized dialogue. How can such a dialogue be initiated?

5. Build literacy and develop skills for the future workplace

Coaches and consultants, who work closely with employees from various backgrounds and across hierarchical levels, can confirm that a contextual approach – as also suggested by Oades et al. (2021) – would offer many benefits for staff and companies, and yet could also be seen as the opening of Pandora's box with the plurality and individuality of such complex constructs. When, however, a framework or a model can be used that guides the different stakeholders

through the process, reflecting together on learnings and best practices for their particular context, and then having HR and Management design the necessary policies and contracts around those, could help to re-establish wellbeing and engagement for this new remote or hybrid work environment.

6. The PPAS Maturity Model®

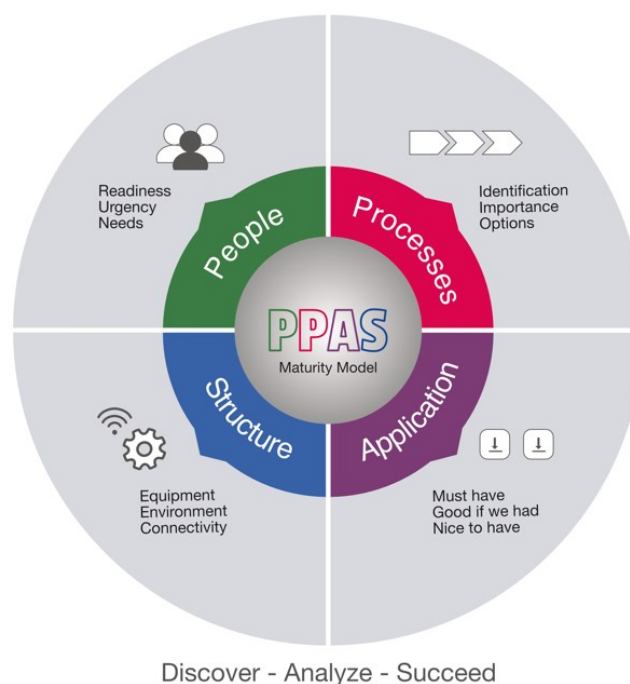
To support that process, the PPAS Maturity Model®, which looks at the dimensions of:

1. **People**
2. **Processes**
3. **Applications**
4. **Structure**

helps employees and managers alike to gain clarity around those dimensions both from a personal as well as from an organizational point of view (Figure 1). The PPAS Maturity Model® can be used at any stage of any change initiative to discover more about the status quo, plan next steps, and do a retrospective on the lessons learned. The model creates awareness and is fully customizable to best suit the context of the individual or the company.

By a coach-led and facilitated conversation on what has been working well in each dimension of the PPAS Maturity Model®; where there is room for improvement, and also acknowledging that maybe not each and every dimension requires the same level of sophistication and maturity in the company-specific or employee-specific context, may be a way to a healthier work culture, in which wellbeing and engagement is not taken as a given but revisited as needed, and re-adapted as the circumstances and the context for companies and employees change - in a remote as well as in an on-site work environment or in a hybrid constellation.

FIGURE 1. THE PPAS MATURITY MODEL®



Source: created by the author

The PPAS Maturity Model® supports the contextual approach suggested by Kowalski and Loretto (2017) - away from generalizations and one-size-fits all solutions to what works in a more specific manner in a very specific environment.

7. Conclusion

The plurality of interests—both for employees and companies – and the stakes in this field – the wellbeing and engagement levels of the workforce – demand a thorough and structured approach to these new workplace challenges if wellbeing and engagement levels are to be maintained and sustained. According to Kolb (1984), reflections around new learnings and new experiences are best done in a structured manner. Individuals and companies alike are invited to begin this dialogue now if they haven't already started it. According to Kowalski and Loretto (2017), literacy needs to be established in work settings to allow both managers and employees to have conversations around wellbeing and engagement—not only because of the new developments in our future work environment, but even more so because of them. There is no time to procrastinate these very important conversations.

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