

## Microsoft told employees to work from home. One consequence was brutal

Many people think they have a good idea of what working from home now means. At Microsoft, however, they've studied it. And it makes for sobering reading.

By Chris Matyszczyk for Technically Incorrect | July 26, 2020 -- 12:00 GMT (05:00 PDT) | Topic: Working from home: The future of business is remote

Many people are now far more familiar with their walls than they thought they would be. The walls in their homes, that is.

Every day, they stare at them, hoping for an idea -- or, perhaps a miracle -- to come through those walls and return them to (a better) normal.

Working from home (<https://www.zdnet.com/topic/working-from-home-the-future-of-business-is-remote/>) is something many weren't prepared for. It was sprung upon them by circumstance.

Microsoft (<https://www.zdnet.com/topic/microsoft/>) was proactive in sending many of its employees home. It's also been proactive in studying the consequences. The results of this study were recently published (<https://hbr.org/2020/07/microsoft-analyzed-data-on-its-newly-remote-workforce>) in the Harvard Business Review and, as if it were possible, they've elevated my concerns for the future of humankind.

We're supposed to believe that tech makes us more efficient and makes our lives easier and better. In some areas, that's surely true.

Yet one overarching result of being stuck at home -- at work -- is that the working day has become longer. "People were 'on' four more hours a week, on average," say the researchers. Please let me pose the question: Do you prefer to be Work You for four more hours a week? Or do you prefer to be the Fun-Loving, Family-Adoring, Beer-Sipping, Ballet-Practicing You who is a little different from Work You?

The researchers tried to discover why working from home led to more time at the home office. They suggested that people were taking time out during the day for other domestic essentials such as walking their dog and teaching their child. So employees began work earlier and finished later.

Perhaps, you might say, no one's really working any harder then. Yet when you're in an office, don't you also take time out to go for a walk (and scream at your boss), have a peaceful lunch (and scream at your boss), call your cable provider (and scream at customer service) or merely stare into space (and scream at the absurdity of existence) humans are at their best earlier than they're used to or later than they'd prefer to?

Please, I'll get to the happier elements of this research shortly. But when working from home Microsoft's employees apparently spent 10 percent more time in meetings.

So, let's see, your work hours have expanded and you're spending more time in meetings. Where's the hope?

Well, the researchers muse that there needed to be more meetings because there wasn't the opportunity for chance encounters. You know, in corridors and restrooms. And they believe hope lies in the fact that individual meeting times were shorter.

I really do want to mention the happier things, but first, let's talk about Instant Messaging. The researchers noticed that, while at the office IMs slow down by 25% during lunchtime, working from home merely reduced them by 10%.

And when did the share of IMs increase by 52%? Why, between 6pm and midnight.

This is a kind of madness, one brought on by the suddenness and severity of a pandemic and the increasing reliance on technology not merely for work, but for the whole of our lives.

Alright. Enough. What about the positives?

Well, it seems managers are trying much harder to make sure employees are OK. One way they do it, however, is apparently by sending a lot of IMs. Which is understandable, but, in its way, painful.

The researchers were moved by employees' ingenuity in creating Virtual Pajama days, Meet My Pet days and How Do I Leave My Spouse days. (I'm sorry, that last one isn't actually true.)

Also indicated as a positive was employees' increased effort to maintain connections with their co-workers by, yes, setting up more meetings than usual.

You can understand the social impulse. How else are you going to gossip one-on-one about all the things that annoy you and all the rumors you've heard in other one-to-one meetings? I'm sorry, I meant help -- should things go awry.

It's immensely courageous and forthright of Microsoft to put forward these findings without trying to kumbaya them into a memorable ditty. The researchers believe that optimizing the inevitability of change should mean tackling a few aspects well, rather than attempting to wave the wand of all-encompassing remote genius.

Thankfully, employee well-being is a priority. A Microsoft product engineering team has actually instituted something called Recharge Fridays. This is not an all-day drinking session. At least as far as I'm aware. Instead, it's a day free of meetings.

I wonder how many IMs it took to get everyone to agree on that.