DESIGN BRIEF

VISION STATEMENT

Introduction

The shift to remote work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the ramifications of capitalism, from increasing racial wealth inequality to global unemployment crises. The digital transition has allowed many demographics to thrive from a revised work schedule, while simultaneously disadvantaging marginalised peoples. Drawing upon our primary research, we aim to focus on two insights to achieve our vision statement of breaking down systemic barriers toward an equitable workplace. Our first goal is to address the way the intersection between financial, technological, healthcare, and housing privileges determines how advantageous working from home or the office is for an individual. The second objective is to confront the capitalistic 24/7 working pattern reinforced by telework, which universally leads to the dissolution of work-life boundaries and disproportionately impacts marginalised people.

Vision

Our vision is to break down systemic, financial, technological, and housing barriers obstructing telework convenience and productivity, consequently generating a world where everyone has systemically equitable access to the workplace. Based on insights from our primary research, we can conclude that those most impacted by the transition to telework are low-to-middle income workers in Sydney, who are between the ages of 18 to 30. This is a suitable age demographic as younger people experience the brunt of economic pressures such as low wage growth and the housing crisis, which in turn leads to technological inaccessibility (Wood & Griffiths, 2019). The daily obstacles they face concerning telework include home environment distractions, internet resources and connectivity, and mental health issues that arise from the dissolution of work-life boundaries.

Mission

To introduce an equitable telework experience for this demographic, we have structured a three-pronged mission statement that aims to tackle work-life boundary dissolution, as well as financial, technological, and housing barriers.

1 . Reinforce work-life boundaries

Since the transition to telework, many employees have been working in their home environment, which weakens mental and physical compartmentalisation between life and work. This leads to the prioritisation of work over personal well-being, and consequently perpetuates mental health and productivity issues (Oakman, Kinsman, Stuckey, Graham, & Weale, 2020). Our solution aims to define and enforce clear work-life boundaries, allocating time for personal leisure and maximising productivity within their workplace.

2. Define an equitable home environment

The home environment is not designed as a workplace, so the telework transition has consequently introduced a superfluity of distractions that affect productivity and mental health. These issues are particularly salient for young people living in low-income housing or with housemates, which increases the likelihood of disturbances such as noise levels and lack of privacy (Francis & Weller, 2021). By re-evaluating the definition of a home environment, our solution will critically minimise at-home distractions and increase employee productivity and satisfaction.

3. Compensate for financial and technological barriers
Financial and technological access is a key factor that enables the productivity and ease-of-access of home work. To ensure equity, our solution must develop custom tools and resources to identify and address these barriers, to allow disadvantaged groups equal benefits working from home as their privileged counterparts.

JUSTIFICATION

In the face of increasing wealth inequality, with the richest one percent owning almost half of the world's wealth, this highlights the necessity of a radical and systemically focused vision that allows marginalised people to have equitable access to the workplace (Credit Suisse, 2022). Based on our primary and secondary research, we found that despite remote jobs being predominantly white-collar occupations, many people still face systemic barriers such as financial, technological, healthcare, and housing disadvantages (Lund, Madgavkar, Manyika, & Smit, 2020). As lower-income levels lead to poorer housing quality and stability, this increases the likelihood of distractions that inhibit individuals from carrying out remote work. For example, many younger people live in small shared spaces which creates disturbances such as higher noise levels and lack of physical privacy (Francis & Weller, 2021). This was confirmed during our context-mapping sessions, with a participant highlighting that "it was so cramped and loud working from home, I couldn't get any work done." Additionally, our primary data showed that a lack of financial privileges can lead to lower levels of digital literacy and access to the technological infrastructure needed to work from home, such as expensive devices, high internet speeds, and good cameras for meetings. This is further sustained by literature, where despite the global rise of digital dependence, 1 in 4 Australians — particularly minority groups — are digitally excluded, putting them at risk of unemployment and exacerbating wealth inequality as they are unable to telework (ADII, 2021; Budnitz & Tranos, 2021).

In light of these systemic barriers, marginalised people may be disproportionately affected by the way remote work promotes the 24/7 working pattern and blurring of work-life boundaries, leading to a threefold impact. Firstly, productivity issues arise as lower to middle-income level people often live in smaller houses for affordability, preventing them from accessing the large physical space necessary to mentally compartmentalise work and leisure (Shirmohammadi, Chan Au, & Beige, 2022). This notion was substantiated by our generative research, with participants highlighting that they preferred the way office work provided a physical and therefore mental separation of work and personal life. Those of higher income were able to replicate this distinction at home as they could create a designated work office, rather than working in a space typically associated with leisure

which often increased distractions. Secondly, these productivity issues may be exacerbated by mental health issues arising from work colonising the private sphere, thereby alienating people from their own homes (Manokha, 2020). While telework ostensibly provides more flexibility and time for loved ones, participants from our primary research articulated their stress from the pressure of being available outside of work hours, leading to a loss of personal identity and loneliness as they increasingly became mere workers. One person stated that "the prospect of having nothing outside of work and then 'going home' but already being home was so depressing, I just felt I lost myself." Thirdly, the dissolution of work-life boundaries is reinforced by the workplace surveillance demanded by telework under capitalism, as employers seek to maximise worker productivity (Manokha, 2020). This was demonstrated by our generative research, where people expressed their discomfort in the way remote work led to employers using invasive methods to monitor their employees, stating that "I felt like I was constantly being watched, like we had to submit productivity reports and sometimes there was camera surveillance." This issue is particularly salient for oppressed working-class people within a wage-labour relationship, as the employees' time becomes the property of those above them to control (Manokha, 2020).

CONCLUSION

While many groups of people have had access to the resources necessary to flourish during the transition to telework, there is a large demographic that has been negatively impacted by a variety of socioeconomic circumstances. Some of these factors include financial, technological, and housing barriers, as well as an undefined work-life balance, all of which antagonise worker productivity, personal responsibilities, and well-being. By redefining the home environment with equity as an end goal, we can bridge the division between these two demographics and secure the foundation for a just, post-pandemic workplace.

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