GitLab

Out of the Office

How the world adapted to working remotely in 2020

Forget what you think you know about remote work.
Nine months into an unprecedented global pandemic,
we asked people to tell us what they *really* think—and how
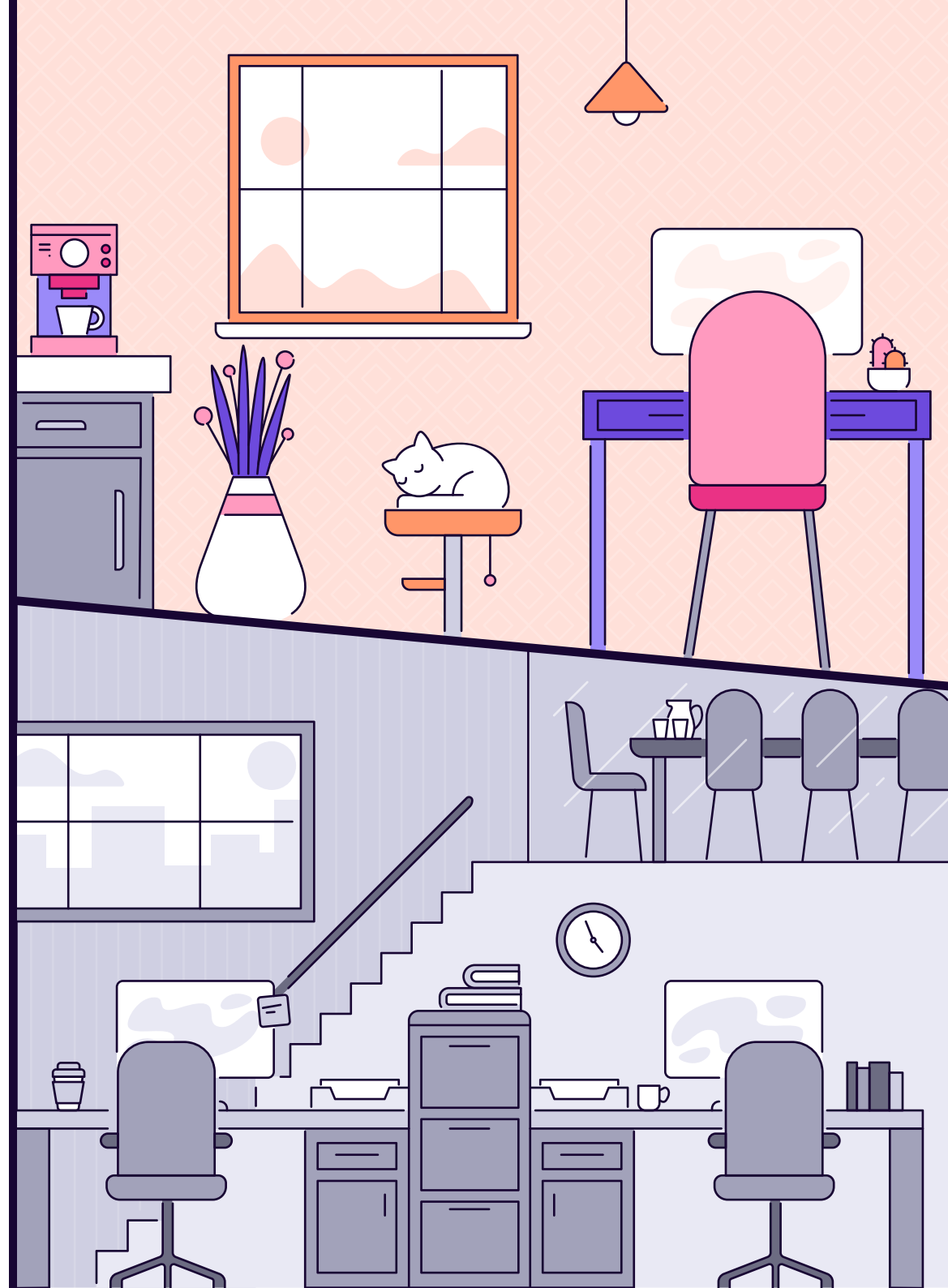working virtually will change their lives for good.

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Introduction:

A new horizon for the future of work

Forget what you think you know about remote work.
Nine months into an unprecedented global experiment, we asked people to tell us what they really think—and how working virtually will change their lives for good.

GitLab, an all-remote company with 1,300+ team members on six continents, wrote the definitive handbook on remote operations. While we knew the future of work was virtual and distributed, we wanted to understand more about what that might look like on the individual level, across a wide range of locations and experiences.

The pandemic of 2020 created an unforeseen and uninvited challenge, as it suddenly confined people around the world to their home desks and kitchen tables. In many instances, companies were required to move entire workforces from fixed-office locations to remote working practices almost overnight.

Months into the pandemic, we began interviewing long-term and newly-remote workers—and found them in the midst of assessing what's truly important in a balanced, professional life.

Across the board, the message is clear: the increased flexibility of remote work offers people the chance to be healthier, more fulfilled, closer to nature and closer to their families. It also brings new challenges: when work happens at home, we often struggle to maintain healthy boundaries.

This report is the story of how people have adjusted to the realities of remote work, and how they are rethinking old assumptions about everything from teamwork to real estate. It's a revealing look into the individual transition away from the office mentality, and toward the individualization of the workplace.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study. We interviewed over 200 professionals throughout the world over the course of three months. Surveys were conducted via phone, video conference, or written questionnaire. Names and ages of respondents were not recorded unless they provided video footage. Results were tabulated and analyzed without knowledge of respondents' identities.

The interview questions were almost entirely open-ended, to avoid injecting bias. We reviewed and coded each response individually, and created this report to reflect respondents' statements. This brought us some surprising new insights, which we might not have found with a quantitative survey.

There is nonetheless some bias inherent in these responses: our participants' professions were well-suited to digital work. We sought out people who were working remotely during the pandemic, and so the overwhelming majority (**84%**) of respondents worked in professional services and technology.

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Who are the new remote workers?
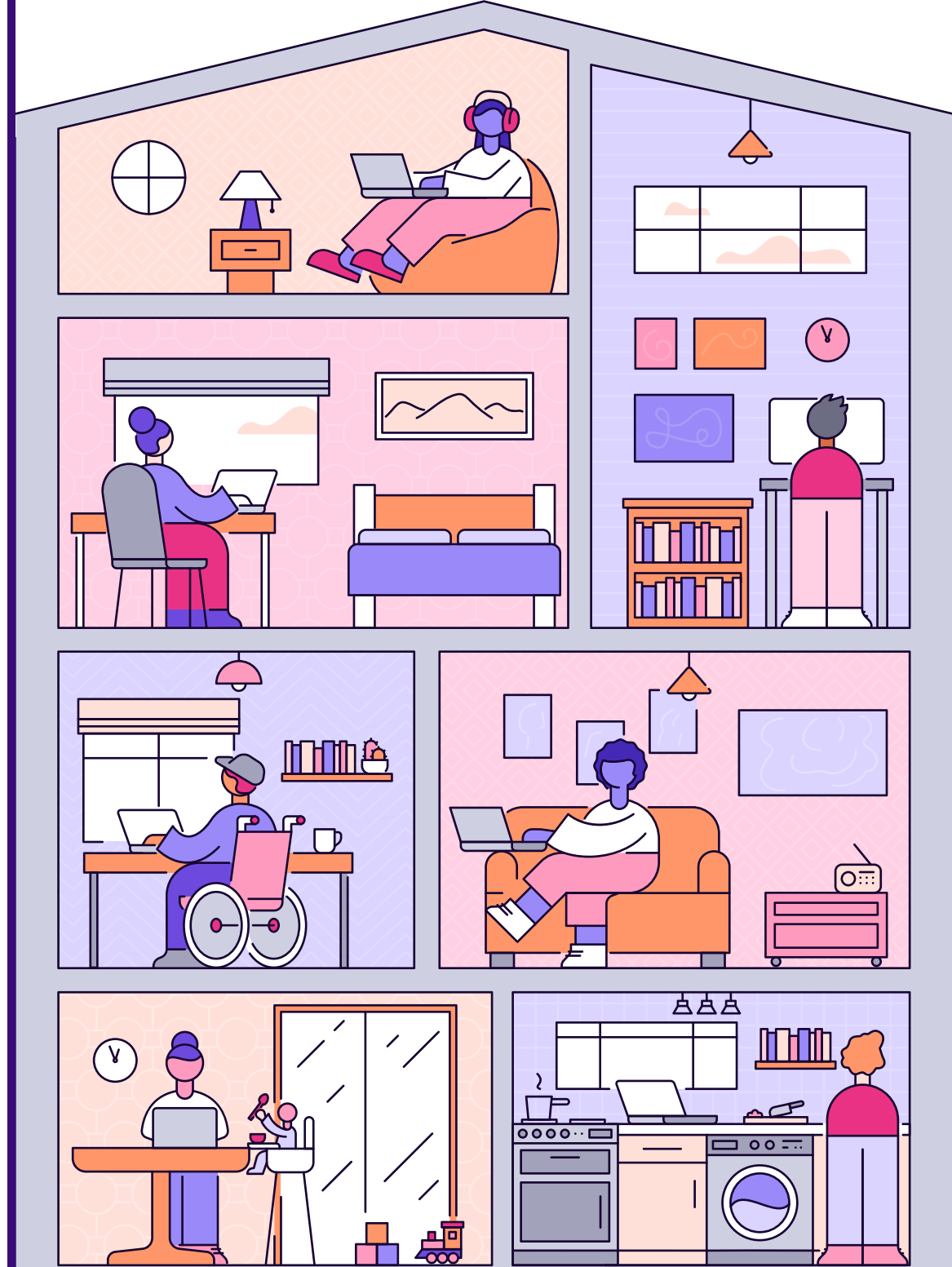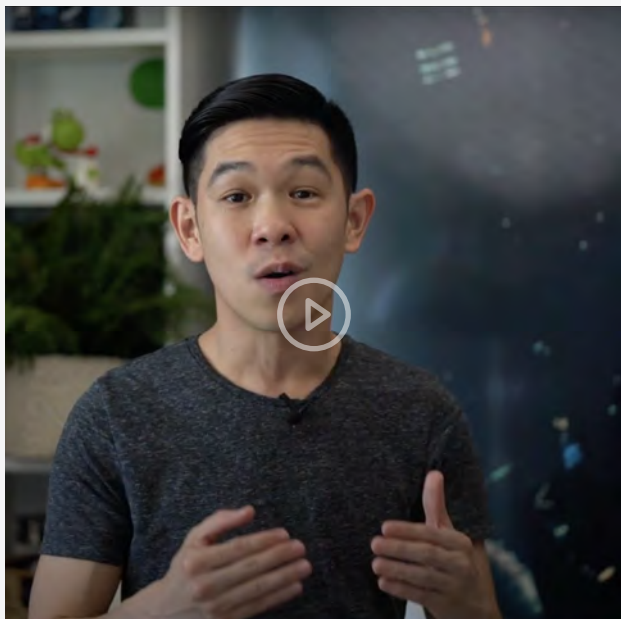
For this entrepreneur, remote work creates freedom to do more, better.

About the respondents: a new wave of remote workers

The majority of our respondents had **never worked remotely** before 2020.

56% of people said they had been working remotely less than a year. Another **21%** had up to five years' experience, and **21%** had more than five.

Less than a year	**56%**	
Less than 5 years	**21%**	
Less than 10 years	**14%**	
Over 10 years	**7%**	
Not applicable	**1%**	
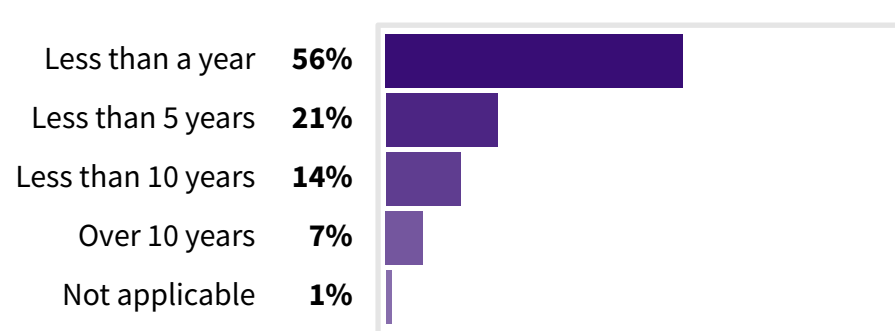
However, the extended nature of COVID-19 ensures that many of these employees now identify as remote workers.

Most respondents preferred working remotely, and when asked what they would change about the place they work, **only 1%** (2 respondents) indicated they would like to go back to the office.

This shift in self-identification represents a sea change: now that more of us can see ourselves as remote workers, we have new sources of motivation to improve our abilities and adopt more efficient workflows to strengthen our remote experiences.

We are implementing a flex work strategy and leadership training on managing remote teams. I expect that the leadership team will find ways to help employees stay connected and continue to offer development and advancement opportunities regardless of physical location.

– Designer, working remotely since April 2020

Field of work

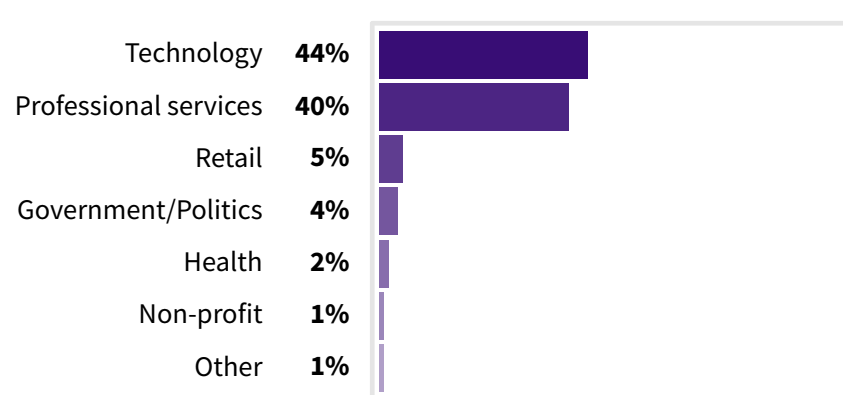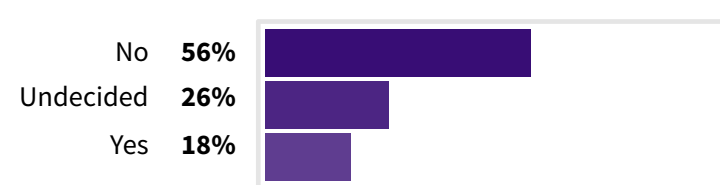An overwhelming majority of respondents worked in professional services or technology-related fields **(84%)**, and most indicated their field was amenable to remote work **(86%)**.

Technology	**44%**
Professional services	**40%**
Retail	**5%**
Government/Politics	**4%**
Health	**2%**
Non-profit	**1%**
Other	**1%**

Do you plan on moving now that work and geography are decoupled?

No	**56%**
Undecided	**26%**
Yes	**18%**

Most workers surveyed **(55%)** didn't plan on moving right away. However, nearly half **(46%)** were at least considering a move. For many, it depended on whether they would be required to go back to the office, and whether their companies would support relocation.

I think that, in the current environment, supported by the fact that things have gone well in a remote environment and that I have nearly 20 years of experience with my present employer, leadership would support a relocation.

– Architect support provider, working remotely 8 years

I would move to a larger home about 1 hour away that has green space, forest, and beach, and a strong community aspect. That is missing in my current city.

– Organizational change manager, electrical engineering/construction, working remotely 6 months

Remote realities:
Universal but unique

The new business casual: pants not required.

Remote isn't the future of work; it's the future of living

Remote work is proving to be the world's most inclusive perk: it is universally useful, but individually applied. Not only will people choose whether (and where) to relocate, but they also have unique approaches to designing a home-based workspace. When we asked how people have optimized their lives, they shared hundreds of responses: from small tweaks (helping the kids get ready for school each day), to major life changes (relocating to a new continent).

This sheds light on a nuanced reality: remote work is more about the future of living. Workers appreciate the flexibility to fit work into their life schedule as opposed to vice-versa, with many not needing to move in order to appreciate that optionality. The key is that remote work makes the day-to-day more manageable, with a series of minor quality of life adjustments amounting to a significant net improvement.

Where do you work most of the time?

> **New York – apartment – my couch. I used to work at my studio as well… so I didn't set aside a desk at the apartment because I wanted to relax at home. Now, I will shoot at the park, DUMBO, etc. Not great to work in the same place for too long.**
>
> *– Photographer*

What are people prioritizing?

While it's still very much in flux, workers are starting to optimize their lives in new ways, rapidly reshaping expectations on what should be possible through all future employers.

37% of respondents have optimized their lives to spend more time with their family or community. **30%** are prioritizing the outdoors or exercise and health. And **26%** are streamlining their schedules to reclaim more time in their days.
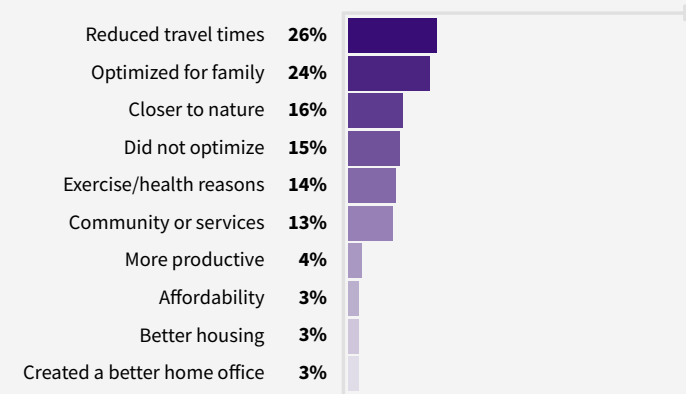
Very few people have optimized their living situation to save money **(3%)**, for better housing **(3%)**, or to be more productive **(4%)**, suggesting these aren't serious concerns around teleworking.

> **Working from home provides me with the flexibility that I didn't have when commuting for other opportunities. At past jobs I typically had anywhere from a 1.5 - 2 hour commute each way. As a result, I wasn't able to spend time with my family as much as I'd like during the week—I'd miss softball games, school events and in some cases I wouldn't see my youngest for a few days because she'd be asleep when I left and in bed when I got home. So it's nice to be able to spend some time with them in the morning and the evening after my work day wraps up.**
>
> **The other major consideration is just personal well being... Spending that much time in the car each day was draining. Because of the commute time I'd only have a few hours each night to relax before going to bed, so that was a bit draining mentally. Physically, I developed some back problems because of sitting in the car for that long, so the commute took its toll.**
>
> *– Communications director, working remotely 4.5 years*

How have you optimized your life for commutable distance to a workplace or for other factors such as childcare, air quality, community, eldercare, access to nature, etc.?

Reduced travel times	26%
Optimized for family	24%
Closer to nature	16%
Did not optimize	15%
Exercise/health reasons	14%
Community or services	13%
More productive	4%
Affordability	3%
Better housing	3%
Created a better home office	3%

What matters most isn't available in an office

Now that people have experienced remote work on a wide scale, we wanted to find out what matters most in choosing a location. We expected from past research that respondents would prioritize their families—and that held true. **25%** of respondents said that connection with family is an important factor.

However, what we didn't expect was that nearly half **(47%)** of respondents would identify nature/outdoor space as a priority. **34%** also mentioned the value of having a pleasant environment to work in.
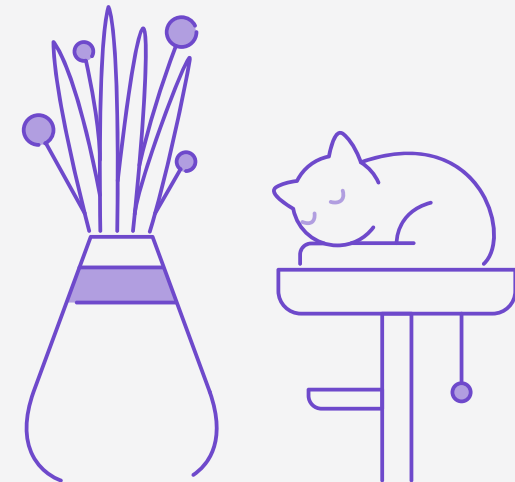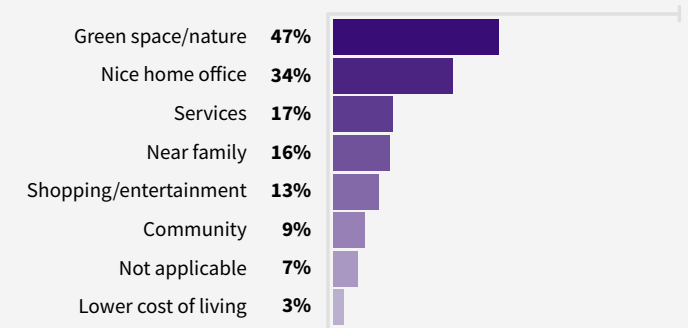
22% of people surveyed took advantage of remote status to move around and work from different locations. When asked what they loved most about where they worked, **31%** of them again cited the proximity to nature. **28%** said they would relocate to be closer to nature, warmer weather, or a better community.

Ironically, in a world where so many companies have spent a lot of money on office perks like snacks and gyms, only **5%** said they missed those perks.

> **I chose my apartment because of its proximity to nature (including beautiful parks and beaches) and quiet atmosphere. Since it's a 40 minute commute to downtown, I've really enjoyed working from home to have better work-life balance and being able to explore my neighborhood more.**
>
> *– PR director, working remotely since March 2020*

What do you love about the location where you work?

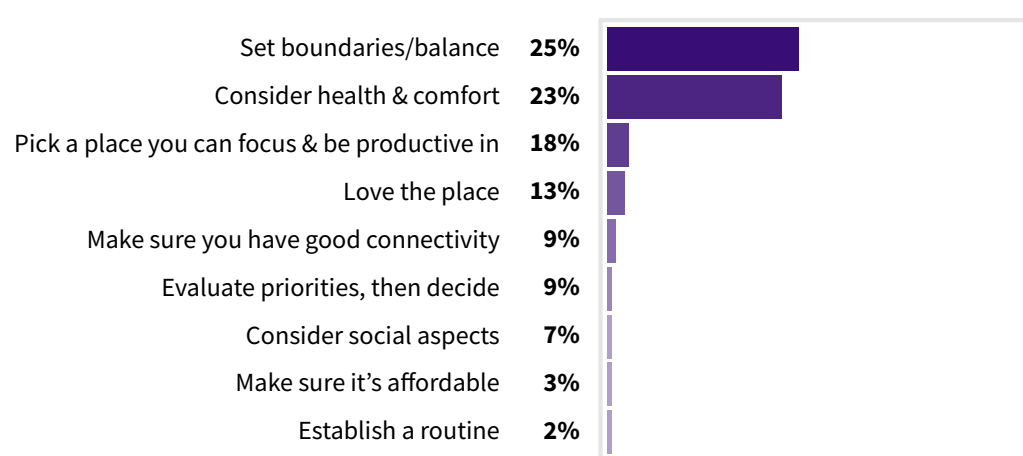| Category	%
Green space/nature	47%
Nice home office	34%
Services	17%
Near family	16%
Shopping/entertainment	13%
Community	9%
Not applicable	7%
Lower cost of living	3%

Work/life boundaries are a complicated challenge

When asked what advice they would offer to anyone selecting a remote work location, a stunning **77%** of responses centered around four key areas: setting boundaries **(25%)**, staying focused and productive **(20%)**, protecting your mental and physical health **(23%)**, and putting personal priorities first **(9%)**.

Given what we're learning about the accelerating rate of burnout across industries and with a growing center in remote workers, this could indicate that one of the biggest challenges we still face is to create healthy boundaries. Indeed, **22%** of respondents stated that they have no dedicated home office space.

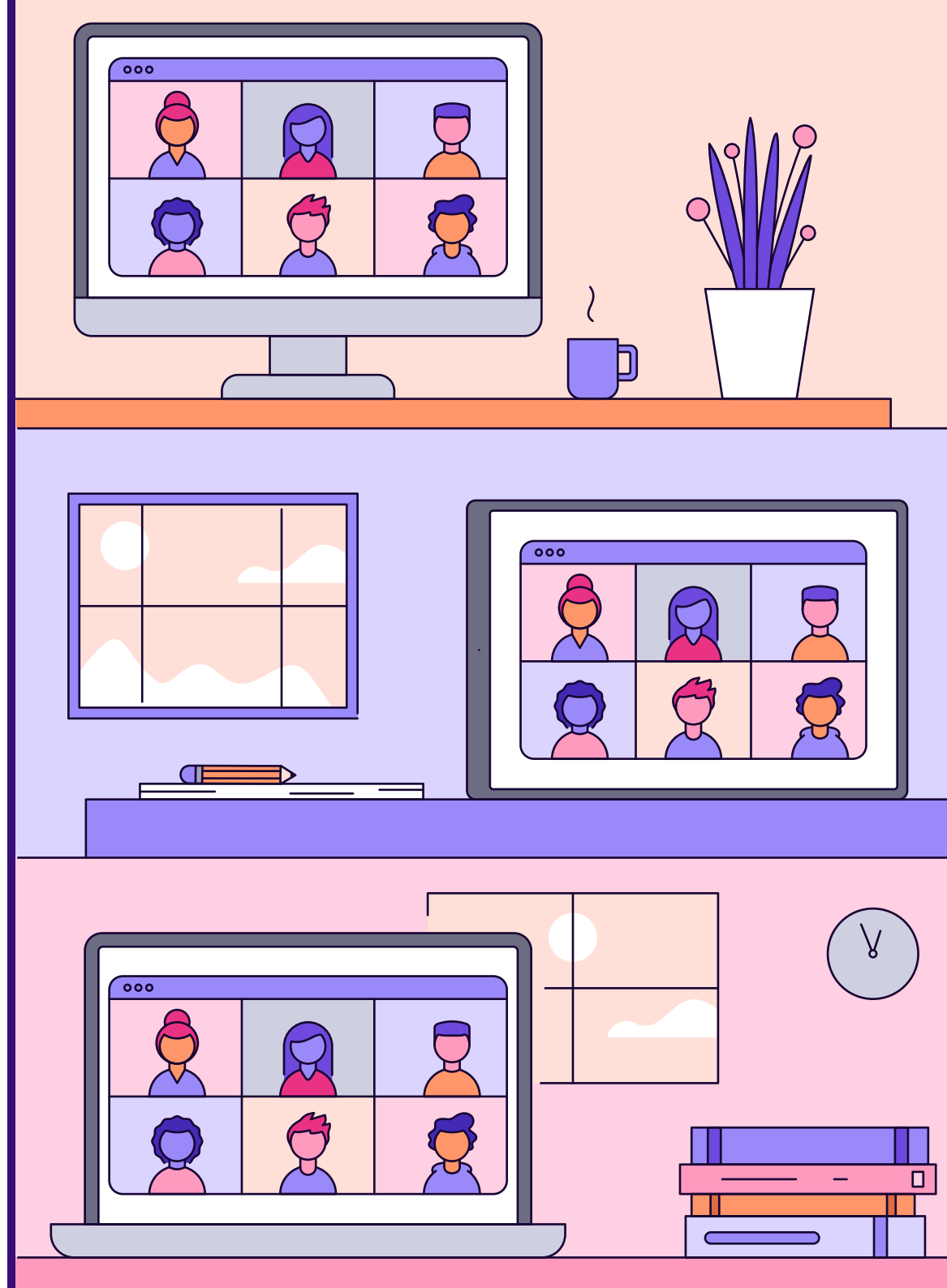> **Think about the things OUTSIDE of work that matter to you. You work to live, not the other way around.**
>
> *– Merchandise planner, eCommerce, working remotely 6 months*

Set boundaries/balance	**25%**
Consider health & comfort	**23%**
Pick a place you can focus & be productive in	**18%**
Love the place	**13%**
Make sure you have good connectivity	**9%**
Evaluate priorities, then decide	**9%**
Consider social aspects	**7%**
Make sure it's affordable	**3%**
Establish a routine	**2%**

Changing your location can also change your attitude toward work.

Employer
outlook

For employers, there is a lot of good news: remote work seems to positively impact productivity, teamwork, and company loyalty.

59% of survey respondents indicated that working remotely improved their output, while just **12%** said it was harder to be productive. **29%** reported no change at all.

Teams are also working well together, despite physical separation. **65%** of respondents said that working remotely has either not impacted or positively impacted their teamwork. This indicates that while many had to adjust to a new normal of remote work, the systems and networks were either in place, or quickly put in place, to ensure that teams continued to function.
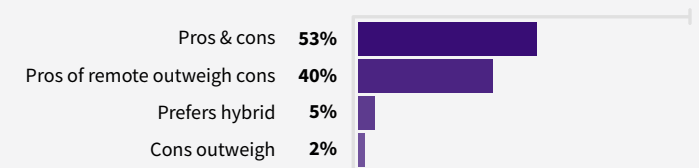
Remote work: better or worse than the office?

The sentiment toward remote work is generally positive. **39%** of respondents reported feeling mostly positive, while just **5%** were mostly negative. However, over half (**55%**) admitted that there are both upsides and downsides.

> **Downside? With our family home during Covid, it can be hard with two parents that work full time. The pros still outweigh the cons.**
>
> *– Digital CX Support Provider, Remote for 5 Months*

What downsides do you recognize about remote work, and do the pros outweigh the cons overall?

Pros & cons	53%
Pros of remote outweigh cons	40%
Prefers hybrid	5%
Cons outweigh	2%

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In-person engagements are vital to building culture

Over half of people **(57%)** miss the social interactions that come with an in-person workplace. In addition, there are challenges that get in the way of working together as a team.

Travel will shift from a dreaded necessity to a celebrated perk. People leaders would be wise to support employees working from coworking offices and other third spaces, and strategically budget for travel in order to bring people together for bonding and planning.

57%

miss social interactions

> **The downside for me is social interaction and connection, however emphasizing connections remotely makes up for this, as does the ability to spend more time with friends and family.**
>
> – *Regional Field Director, working remotely 6 months*

# How remote work impacts productivity and teamwork

> **Since everyone is working remotely, there is a sense of equality, and an increased sense of empathy/compassion to teammates since everyone has challenges.**
>
> – *Digital sales representative, working remotely for one year*

Smart scheduling is an important part of staying productive.

Has working remotely had any effect on your ability to work within or with a team?

Has no effect on teamwork	**47%**
Makes teamwork more difficult	**34%**
Improves teamwork	**19%**
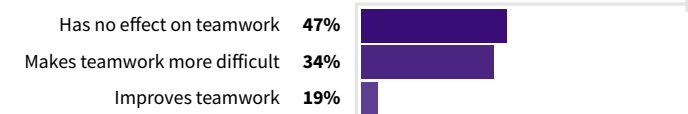
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What employees want

When asked what they expected from employers, remote workers value many of the same things traditional workers value: **24%** are looking for strong processes, **17%** are looking for support with technology and office supplies, and **14%** want to be able to trust their employer. But there are some signs of change: **16%** of respondents would expect an employer to support different time zones or flexible schedules.

Supporting remote work is a boon for retention

In a world of variables, our data show an overwhelming link between company loyalty and support for remote work. **74%** of respondents say they are "somewhat" to "very" likely to remain with their current employer because of its support of remote work.

> **It's crucial for leadership to not only verbally/in policy support remote work and relocation, but to also model this behavior themselves. This means not just "talking the talk" about supporting remote, and not just allowing these benefits for certain roles or tenures, but truly embracing the idea that all team members will do their best work and be more engaged if they're able to live and work in a place that works best for their lives.**
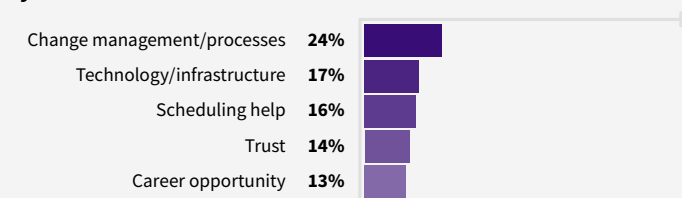>
> *– Regional Field Director, working remotely 6 months*

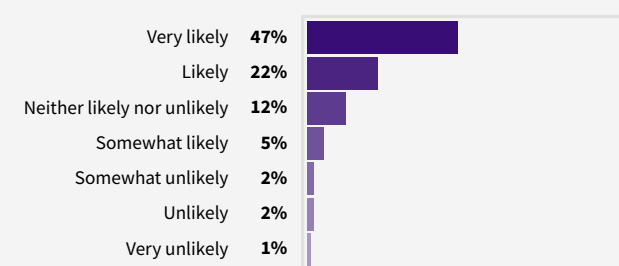## Remote leadership requires more pragmatism, fewer politics

Remote workers expect flexibility, solid communication, and trust that they'll be responsible for achieving their objectives.

With in-person politics playing less of a role in praise and promotion, clock-in and clock-out times are less relevant. Rather, workers will demand that they be judged solely on their outputs, which will help leadership remove bias from the evaluation process.

What do you expect from leadership to support you as a remote worker in order to feel confident that you could relocate without significant negative impact to your career?

Change management/processes	**24%**
Technology/infrastructure	**17%**
Scheduling help	**16%**
Trust	**14%**
Career opportunity	**13%**

Are you more or less likely to remain with your current employer due to support of remote work?

Very likely	**47%**
Likely	**22%**
Neither likely nor unlikely	**12%**
Somewhat likely	**5%**
Somewhat unlikely	**2%**
Unlikely	**2%**
Very unlikely	**1%**

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Make sure you aren't losing people through the cracks

65% of respondents say that remote work has had a positive or neutral impact on their teamwork, but **25%** have experienced a negative impact.

Leaders should consider what infrastructure is required to ensure everyone is equally supported. One major opportunity is to leverage mentor-style relationships for team members to coach and empower their peers who may be new to distributed teamwork.

> **Prior to COVID-19, my company was anti-remote working. Now that everyone is remote, there is realization that most people are no less, and in many cases more productive. I would want them to continue that mindset even if employees and teams are working in a hybrid in-office and remote situation. It would be better if there was some formal policy stating that remote associates performance would not be rated any less than an in-office associate.**
>
> *– Technology VP, working remotely for 6 months*
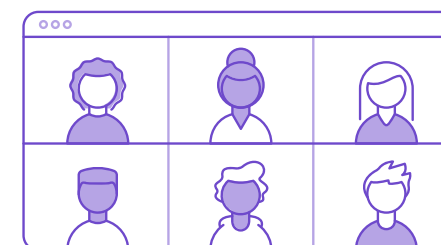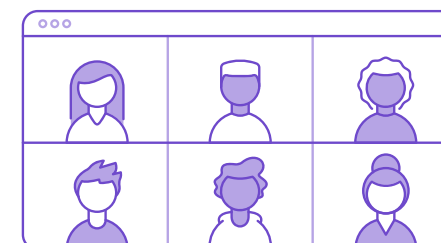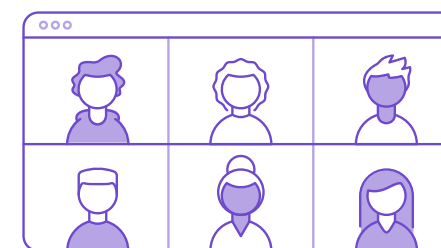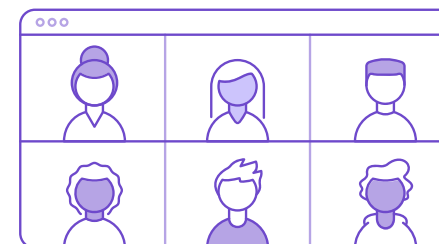
Diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion are improving somewhat, with **26%** seeing remote work as increasing awareness of diversity in a positive way. Some have indicated that remote positions enable companies to recruit from much broader geographic and demographic populations. **23%** of respondents also indicated that remote work was good for inclusion, many saying that it evens the playing field for everyone. However, there is more work to be done: **40%** said inclusion remained unchanged by remote work while **11%** observed a negative impact.

Summary: Taking action
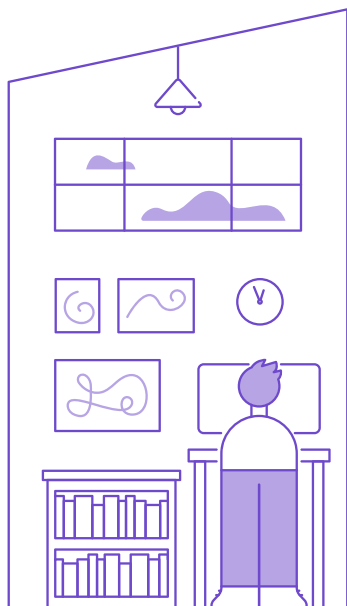
While unintentional and uninvited, the COVID crisis has given many a glimpse at the realities of remote work and empowered us to think differently about what constitutes a team. It's very possible that we're seeing the end of the office mentality and the dawn of the asynchronous workplace. The question now is how to act on this shift to be part of the next generation of innovation and productivity.

Companies that have embraced the rapid shift to remote have found some surprising results—employees are happier, more loyal and more productive. For individuals that have been remote—either recently or for many years—the pros outweigh the cons: freedom and flexibility to meet their lifestyles; being closer to nature; having more time to engage with their friends and families; and having more opportunity for growth. Still, challenges remain. Most notable is the ongoing struggle to integrate work and life, followed closely by our need for social connection with our colleagues.

Making the leap from office mentality to a thriving remote culture starts at allremote.info, GitLab's resource center for remote work knowledge. There, you'll learn what all-remote really means, how it works, and how you can make an all-remote transition successful and productive. For GitLab's global team, all-remote means that each individual in an organization is empowered to work and live where they are most fulfilled. We've compiled everything we've learned from years of working, living, and thriving outside of the office—freely available to inform your team.

About GitLab

GitLab is a DevOps platform built from the ground up as a single application for all stages of the DevOps lifecycle enabling Product, Development, QA, Security, and Operations teams to work concurrently on the same project. GitLab provides a single data store, one user interface, and one permission model across the DevOps lifecycle. This allows teams to significantly reduce cycle times through more efficient collaboration and enhanced focus.

Built on Open Source, GitLab works alongside its growing community, which is composed of thousands of developers and millions of users, to continuously deliver new DevOps innovations. More than 100,000 organizations from startups to global enterprises, including Ticketmaster, Jaguar Land Rover, NASDAQ, Dish Network, and Comcast trust GitLab to deliver great software faster. All-remote since 2014, GitLab has more than 1,300 team members in 68 countries.

Ready to give it a try?

Try GitLab free for 30 days

Download the Remote Playbook

GitLab's complete guide to all-remote.
Learn more about asynchronous workflows, meetings, informal communication, and management, to create a more stable work-from-home team.

Download the Remote Playbook now