**The Work From Home Movement:**

**A Look at the Technological and Cultural Factors Behind the Great Resignation**

Carlo Santos

Information Systems, Olympic College

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Prof. Richard Becker

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**A group of people sitting at a table with laptops

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**Abstract**

The COVID-19 Corona virus pandemic put the world in an unfamiliar situation. According to the CDC, the last pandemic was the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak (CDC). While this was a serious disease, the world operated as it normally did. The effects of COVID-19 were so severe that the world began shutting down. People were told to stay home for months in order to stop the spread of the virus. The lockdown forced people, who were able, to work from home. Working from home is not a new concept, but having an entire workforce operate from home is something not common to most companies. The lockdown in the United States began lifting around September of 2020 depending on where you live. But curiously, people were deciding not to come back. This has led to an almost unprecedented period of occupational abandonment called the Great Resignation (Parker, Horowitz 2022). In this paper I will explore why this phenomenon is occurring and how it has disproportionately affected the tech industry, the technologies that have allowed employees to do their job from home effectively and the pros and cons of a decentralized work environment.

**History of the workplace**

The workplace was very different in the days before personal computers. Indoor smoking was common. A sea of typewriters clanging away would assault eardrums. Libraries of encyclopedias, research materials, manuals and phone books were needed in the office for quick reference. Programmers wrote code on large pieces of graph paper called coding sheets. These were then given to a team, normally of women, to manually input into punch card machines that would produce cards that were fed into large computers. Appointments were treated with more concern as there wasn’t an easy way to cancel or to reschedule. In these times, people always carried coins in order to have money to use pay phones. Payroll was done manually using carbon paper. An employee would manually create every paycheck using a carbon punch machine (Pastore, 2013). Most aspects of office work at this time was manual with little automation.

**Evolution**

By the mid 1970’s personal computers began to emerge as a revolutionary tool in the office. Word processors allowed for worry free typing compared to traditional typewriters. Computers allowed for the creation of software that handled word processing, scheduling and programming using a Graphical User Interface (GUI). In 1995 the internet became a popular means of communication and data sourcing (Science and Media Museum, 2020). By 2001 72.3 million people used computers at work. This totaled about 53.5 percent of total employment. 2 out every 5 employees used email and the internet for work by this time (Hippie, Kosanovich 2003). The landscape of what an office consisted of had changed dramatically thanks to the introduction of powerful new hardware and a global communication network. In the early 2000’s, the internet was just beginning to show the world the potential of what was possible in an online future. The internet and personal computers combined to make a tool that could be many things at the same time. This is known as Media Convergence (Team Leverage Edu, 2021).

Diagram

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**Convergence**

Technologically, a computer can be a word processor, calendar, phone and encyclopedia. Most everything a person needed to do office work was now neatly housed in a machine at an employee’s desk. This Technological Convergence also came with Economic Convergence. This is when companies intermingle new and old technologies to sell products. Online storefronts were introduced to go alongside traditional brick and mortar shops. A company’s online store became a means for print, radio and television advertising. Technology quickly evolved to leverage this new eCommerce future.

Technological convergence didn’t stop with personal computers. As time went on, the computing power of a PC was able to be turned mobile in the form of laptop computers. Workers were no longer tethered to a cubicle or the office. The laptop was able to be taken anywhere and gave greater mobility to employees. Laptops began to get smaller and thinner while possessing computing power comparable to their PC cousins. In 1995 the IBM Simon was introduced as the first smartphone (Tweedie, 2015). It was a phone with the capability to check emails, send faxes and featured a calendar and world clock. About 15 years later, Apple would introduce the first iPhone. The iPhone represented the next evolution in technological convergence. It was a phone that was capable of laptop functionality and Apple introduced an application store for developers to make new and diverse software experiences. The iPhones built in camera also made it possible to take pictures, shoot videos and turn a cellphone into a video conferencing tool. Google introduced the Android operating system around this time as a competitor to iPhones and the two platforms helped shift the online experience to be mobile first. This meant that developers of internet experience began to tailor their websites and applications to run optimally on smartphones before laptops and desktops. That is because mobile internet usage surpassed desktop usage in 2016 (Xia, 2017). Technology has evolved to the point that we can do most our computing needs on a device that is smaller than a bar of soap. The tools that once required an office to house were now accessible in the pockets of employees.

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**Telecommuting**

Telecommuting, or Work from Home, can be traced back as far as the 1970’s and saw significant movement in the 1980’s. Sharon Sandle recounts her fathers experience working from home in her paper Zooming Forward: Technology’s Impact on Work During a Pandemic. “He had very few of the resources available today” (Sandle, 2020). Telecommuting was very limited before the internet. Sandle’s father was able to work from home because he could do his work with a phone and a typewriter. That would not be sufficient enough resources for most workers to do their jobs from home. It wasn’t until the late 1990s that companies began to invest heavily in information technology. According to Chris Forman’s study, the amount of money companies spent on IT grew from $142 billion in 1993 to $233 billion by 1998 (Forman, 2002). The internet at this point was still in its infancy, but bigger companies pushed integration of online experiences to revolutionize their business, and this forced hesitant companies to follow shorty after. By the mid 2000’s eCommerce had become the number one activity done online. The maturing of network organizations and globalization was possible because of improved cyber infrastructure (Winter, 2011).

With powerful and portable convergent hardware, improved cyber infrastructure and the rise of eCommerce, all the necessary pieces were put in place to disrupt industry norms. A workforce consisting of technically skilled employees is needed for companies to build and maintain their online presence and having portable hardware capable of doing the work means these employees can do their work from the comfort of their own home. Working from home has been an option depending on employers, but the Corona virus pandemic created a scenario where employees were forced to work from home. The government lockdowns in March of 2020 required people to stay at home. This situation caused workers to either be furloughed or do their jobs at home. The lockdown lasted as late as June of 2021 depending on peoples State mandates. After staying at home for so long, a phenomenon started to occur. People were not willing to give up working from home.

**The Great Resignation**

We are currently living through a period of mass voluntary exit of employees from their employment obligations (Phipps, 2022). The Corona virus pandemic lockdown presented numerous consequences. Non-essential workers had no way to work and were not all given job security in a post lockdown job market. Essential workers had to endure disrespect, long hours and risk their lives working in healthcare or low paying jobs in food service. According to the Bureau of US Labor Statistics, more than 4.3 million people resigned their current roles in January of 2022 (Sevilla, 2022). In the tech industry 72% of workers are thinking about leaving their current positions (Cuadra, 2021). Numerous reasons are attributed to this trend. Low pay for high workloads, lack of recognition, work-life balance, inflexibility on work procedures, physical and emotional exhausting (Elgan, 2021). The tech industry historically has put more emphasis on hiring new people rather than nurturing the teams they already have. A gap in the talent pool and job opportunities already existed, but with 31% of tech workers seeking new jobs and an estimated 80% of the total workforce not seeking new careers, the problem is only getting worse (Carnegie, 2022). This widened gap in the talent pool has emboldened tech workers to seek opportunities that preserve the mobility they experienced during the lockdown.

**Returning to the office**

In May of 2022, companies started making the decision of what to do about their remote workforce. Companies like Apple and Expedia decided to implement return-to-office strategies (RTO). Other companies like Microsoft and Airbnb decided to allow their employees to work remotely indefinitely. There have already been huge ramifications for each decision. CEO Brian Chesky of Airbnb considers the traditional office a dead concept. He states, “…for somebody whose job is on a laptop, the question is, well, what is an office meant to do?” (Jackson, 2022). For Chesky an office will still exist, but it will fill in the gaps of what working at home can’t do, like providing a facility for periodic group collaboration. Under Airbnb’s model, the most Chesky expects his workers to be at the office is 1 week per quarter. After making the announcement of this plan Airbnb saw their job listings page receive over 800,000 views.

*Hybrid plan*

Apple decided to take a different approach and require their remote workers to return to the office. Under their RTO employees are required to go to the office a minimum of three days a week with two days to work from home. Apple cited the “serendipity” of seeing your fellow colleagues in the office as reason to return, but critics of the plan stated that Apples siloed workspace structure made that a difficult prospect (Dent, 2022). Apple has also suffered the loss of Ian Goodfellow, their director of machine learning. Goodfellow is highly regarded in the field of artificial intelligence and blamed Apples rigid RTO plan for his departure from the company. In a note to his staff, he wrote “I believe strongly that more flexibility would have been the best policy for my team.” (Dent, 2022). Apple staffers do not see the need to be in the office three times a week because in person collaboration isn’t needed that often because of collaboration software like Slack and Microsoft Teams. They also see the commute as a waste of time and energy. This growing discontent among its employees has Apple rethinking their RTO strategy.

*Case for the office*

There is a lean towards employees returning to the office from management, but why? Jamie Dimon, CEO of JP Morgan Chase, believes that working remote doesn’t facilitate the generation of spontaneous ideas and erodes work culture (Sherman, 2022). Work culture preservation is an idea also shared by Apple. Management sees employee interaction in the workplace as valuable. Having everyone in the office allows for white boarding sessions where employees can collaborate to come up with solutions and new ideas. Vivien Lim theorizes that social interactions between employees and employer is not confined to monetary values. These interactions also reap social goods like respect and status (Lim, 2002).

*Cultural disconnect*

There is a disconnect in ideology regarding the value of office interactions between employees and management. This could be due to the fundamentally different experience employees have in the workplace compared to management. The benefits of working from the office are largely to the company’s advantage, whereas working from home is a benefit for the employee (Markman, 2021). The white board sessions are not seen as common enough to warrant mandating employees to commute to the office. Some also see these sessions as less constructive and more opportunity to engage in group think (Sherman, 2022). Group think is when employees go with decision because they are popular among the group rather than thinking critically about the idea or problem being discussed. According to Amy Zimmerman, chief people officer of Relay Payments, Water cooler moments and elevator chats are seen as more beneficial for executives who use those means as a way to gauge what is happening in the organization. It is also a way for executives to keep tabs on employees (Sherman, 2022).

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**Conclusion**

The workplace has greatly evolved with the introduction of advanced and new technologies. Workers needed to be in the office to access heavy equipment, libraries and phones. All of these separate tools were able to be combined with the introduction of computers. Technology has advance so far that a cellphone has become powerful enough to be the number one technological convergent tool. Whether it is a laptop or a cellphone, employees now have enough computing power and resource access to do their jobs from home and the pandemic lockdown helped employees realize this. Companies are having to make difficult decisions on whether to bring their employees back to the office or let them continue working from home. The current tech worker is enjoying a period of extreme mobility. The current gap in open positions and qualified workers has widened after the lockdown. If tech employers do not allow their staff to work from home, tech workers have decided that they can seek opportunities with a company that will. The traditional office work culture is being challenged because current technology has shown employees that they don’t need to spend time and money commuting to the office regularly when all the tools they need can be taken home. There are pros and cons between working in the office and at home, but until the talent pool catches up, employers must be more flexible or risk losing the employees they currently have.

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