

Is working from home the future?

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Now that Lockdown Level 2 is well underway in South Africa, with the boozers getting back to boozing and the smokers getting back to not having to buy *'there's only a small amount of arsenic in it, honest'* smokes, as agency folk we've had the opportunity to experience a long period of working from home - a concept previously relegated to freelancers and those who work with remote/overseas companies and thought to be impossible on an agency-wide scale.



Image credit: Djurdjica Boskovic

For the most part, this is a transition that has been coming for some time (particularly overseas where widespread changes are being adopted), and Covid-19 has not only accelerated this change but helped shift mindsets into being more willing and ready to completely shift ways of working.

The transition has certainly come with a number of challenges – varying degrees of access to the internet, load-shedding, rowdy kids, remote server access and the ever present cries of *"let me know when you can see my screen"* or *"sorry I had the mute button on"*.

By now, many people in the industry have now reached some degree of comfort in this revised way of working, and as we start to see the end of the Covid tunnel (but for now, keep wearing those masks and washing those hands), the question is whether we should fully return to work or remain at home if you are able.

There's likely no clear answer, as it will depend on how your agency is set up, ease of access at home and so on – but it's worth looking at some pros and cons:

Virtual meetings

Pros:

- Saves on travel time
- Easier for more people to attend (don't need to find a boardroom)
- Include people from different cities/countries

- Can be arranged at short notice

Cons:

- Reduced social interaction (the pre-meeting chats) and face-to-face contact
- Potentially less focus (need to be disciplined to avoid distractions such as checking emails)

How to counter the cons: *Introduce virtual meeting etiquette such as inviting attendees to switch on their cameras - more inclined to be present in the moment when they cannot visibly multi-task or be distracted (a virtual version of saying 'phones off the table' in a meeting). Other tools such as the raised hand button neatly ensures that all voices are heard, and all opinions shared.*

Working from Home

Pros:

- Improved productivity (many have found they have fewer distractions, take more necessary breaks when needed, and can get more done in a day)
- Time-saver (travelling to/from work and getting yourself 'people-ready' in the morning)
- A more relaxed environment (screaming kids or noisy neighbours aside)
- Flexible hours and the opportunity to work and live anywhere

Cons:

- Access to facilities (screens, coffee machines, printers and scanners etc.)
- Less interaction with colleagues and team building as well as getting to know new people
- Cost of internet (if you've had to increase this to have sufficient access)
- Ability to 'switch off' (some folks struggle to close their laptops and call it a day, after hours)
- Effects of load-shedding more prominent (most won't have home generators so either end up cut off or need to switch to mobile, while many offices have access to emergency power)

How to counter the cons: *Encourage teams to schedule regular virtual social events or 'water cooler chats', a regular slot where people can drop in just to chat, catch up and vent. Set up a workspace at home (even just a tiny desk area) and use that as a demarcated work zone, stepping away for a break as needed. Don't let load shedding become an excuse not to get work done – if you have office access and times of scheduled outages then you can plan to be at work making use of back-up power.*

Ultimately, a **hybrid approach** may be the best bet for the future – where you either work some days in the office and others at home, or shift the working hours to avoid 'drive-time' with some element of working at home to start/finish the day.

Aside from the personal benefits of time-saving and so on, it can also allow companies to save on costs by downscaling premises (if you don't have everyone in the office at once then some element of desk-sharing or hot-desks could be introduced), reducing parking rentals (shared parking), reduced need for large-scale social events (can be done remotely e.g. pub quiz nights).

Agencies will also find that their talent pool expands, as clients become more used to the idea of remote working, and they can look outside of only hiring local talent.

About the author

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12 years. Blurring the lines between digital and traditional, he has worked on both media and creative agency side and has won a number of digital-driven media awards including Roger Garlick, Assegai and Bookmarks (and one short-film award for the PPC Imaginarium).



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