



Exploring the Future of Work : WFH or WFO

Is working from home the new normal ? Will the hybrid working model stay ?

A qualitative survey was conducted in April & May 2021 amongst 65 senior team leaders in Singapore & India. This report gives a summary of the study and some perspective from applied neuroscience, which may be counter to the popular narrative.

Read more to find out more !

Report prepared by Rhizome Learning, Singapore.

Survey Partners : ION Consulting, Momenta.biz & Un-covey, Singapore

Report Topics

1. Survey Findings

2. What does Applied Neuroscience say

3. Perspectives

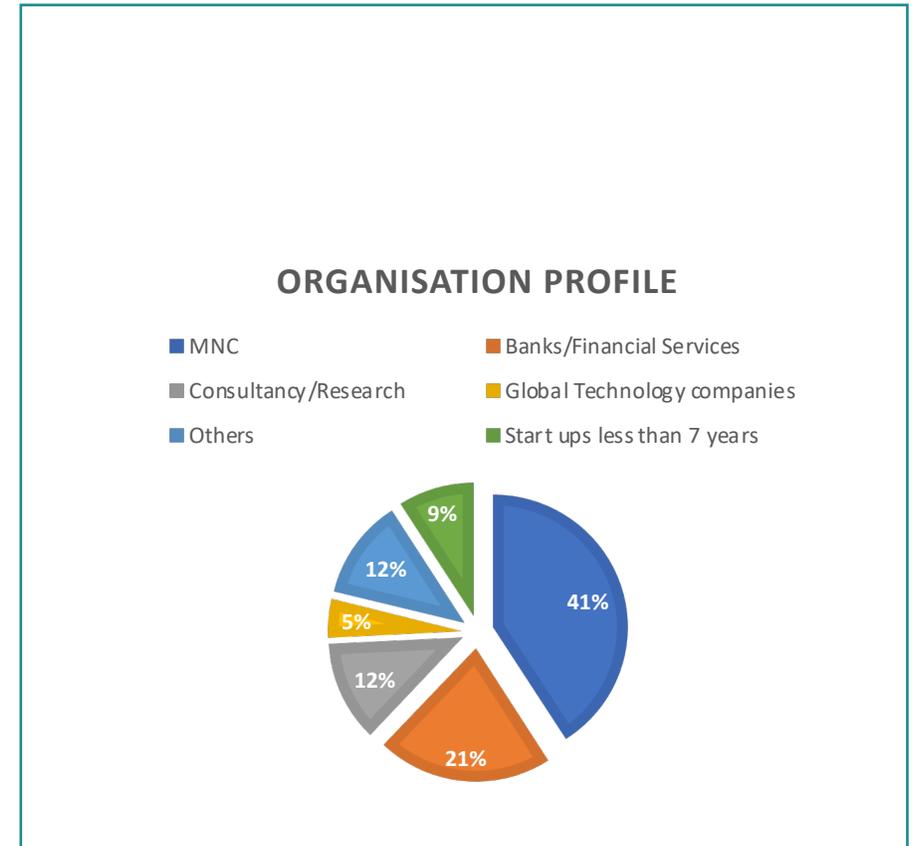
4. In conclusion

Introduction : Respondent Profile & Methodology

A qualitative survey was conducted amongst 65 team leaders across India & Singapore. Most of them had over 20 years or more of experience in the industry. The respondents had been experiencing work from home (WFH) since the beginning of 2020. 65% of the sample size was men and 35% were women. 82% were team leaders and 18% were individual contributors.

The mode of data collection was an open-ended questionnaire which invited leaders to share their perception on the top irritants of work from home, their learnings about the challenges of leading teams remotely and their views on returning to old ways of working. They were asked multiple choice as well as exploratory questions. On compiling their responses, we were able to get a highly nuanced understanding of what work from home really means for team leaders. We then asked ourselves whether WFH is sustainable from the Applied Neuroscience perspective. We hope you enjoy going through the findings, as much as we enjoyed compiling them for you.

Industry Experience	Upto 10 years	11-20 years	Above 20 years
Overall	12%	40%	48%
Male	50%	53%	81%
Female	50%	47%	19%
Grand total	100%	100%	100%



1. SURVEY FINDINGS

1

The biggest irritant of the work from home model was the lack of social engagement with team members. People said that it was not possible for them to meet in a physical way and this resultant lack of “nonverbal” communication was a huge block in building relationships, appreciating context and creating distance between team members. 70% of all team leaders in the survey said that they missed the informal, social engagements with their teams. 80% of those above 20 years work experience also cited this as their main irritant of work from home. *For men*, the social aspect of meeting and thriving in groups seems to be a big lack.

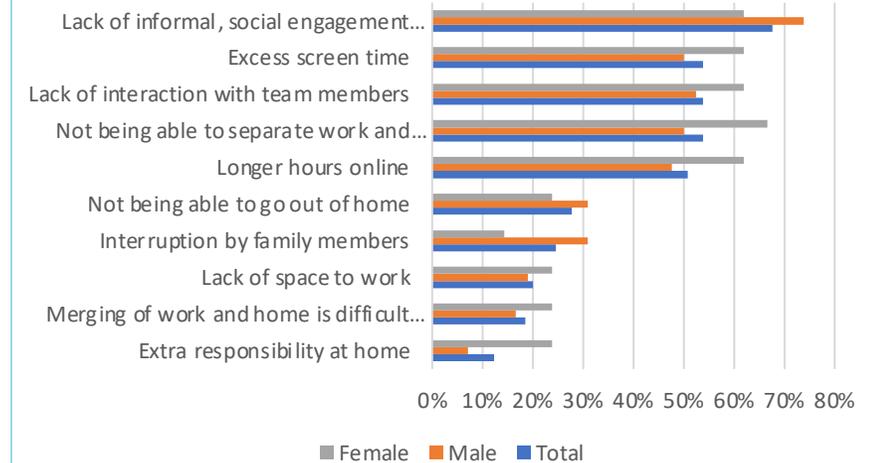
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A close second irritant was the inability to separate work from personal life. There was an expectation that they were now available to run home chores which was getting into the way of productivity. *For women*, this irritant about not being able to separate home responsibilities from office work is particularly heightened.

3

The third most significant irritant was the excess screen time, continuous zoom calls and longer hours online. Multi-screening and never-ending meetings were not helping with people.

Fig 1: Irritants of Work from Home



“In a physical environment a leader often senses the feelings and commitments from a team better. There is often a gap sensed in this area over a virtual environment”

- Team Leader, 20 years + experience.

Team leaders talk candidly about their experience of the challenges of creating that “connect” during work from home. The key themes.



*Connecting the dots –
Team leaders are craving for the physical element of work.*

Missing Group Energy & the inspiration that comes from jointly creating new ideas & solutions in person

Endless work and no play with work colleagues is detrimental to relationship building

Missing the physical sense or presence

Inability to read emotions & influence non-verbally

Difficult to connect with new joinees & the challenge of training them on the run.

Team leaders talk candidly about their experience of the challenges of creating that “connect” during work from home. Read some of the responses in their own words.



Missing Group Energy & the inspiration that comes from jointly creating new ideas & solutions in person

“Physicality of influence is completely lost (corridor conversations / body language etc)”

“In a physical environment a leader often senses the feelings and commitments from a team better. There is often a gap sensed in this area over a virtual environment”

“In a physical office space, it's much easier to get people together and agree on project deliverables and resolve/align any differences.”

Endless work and no play with work colleagues is detrimental to relationship building

“Feel more stretched even though we are doing the same amount of work. Work seems to go on endlessly. I feel exhausted perennially. Also, people (including me) seem touchier now - since we don't see each other f2f, that sense of camaraderie and connect while working together seems missing. More mechanical and cold now.”

“Lack of spontaneity and camaraderie.”

“They lack focus & motivation hence need constant pep talks & show the bigger picture of their personal goals & how it will be directly proportional with the organizational goals.”

Zoom and telephonic calls are always about work. No thought-provoking conversations and genuine connect

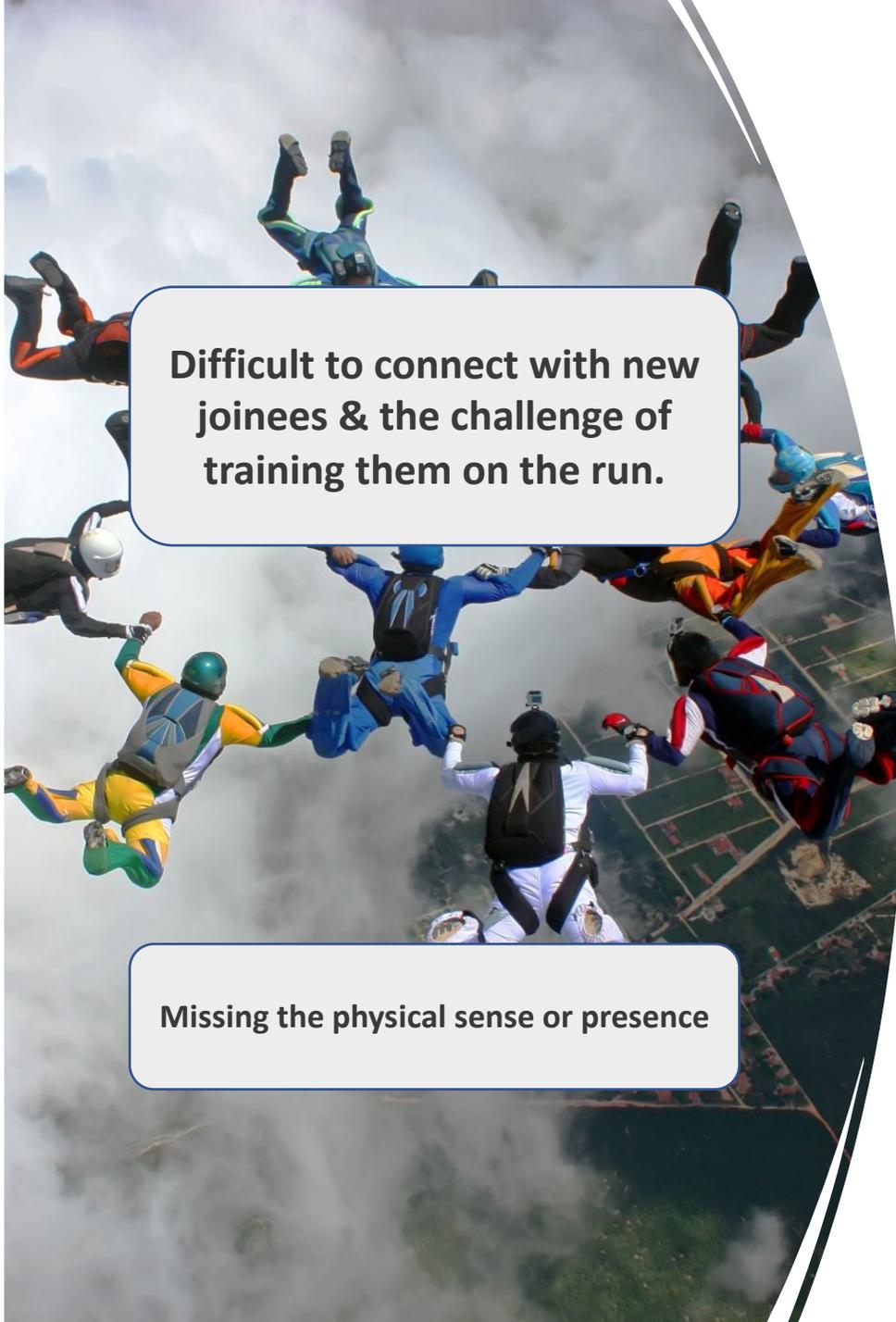
Inability to read emotions & influence non-verbally

“Difficult to understand emotions, context unless connected over zoom/screenshare.

Emotions are conveyed properly when you are physically connected to your team apart from the virtual meets

Have no visibility what my colleagues are doing. Unaware of the happenings and unable to discuss the issues and problems real time.

When a person doesn't "buy in" to an objective, in a natural office environment you can see their body language and then talk to them one to one to solve it. But, now very difficult to gauge reactions apart from extremely expressive people.”



**Difficult to connect with new
joinees & the challenge of
training them on the run.**

Missing the physical sense or presence

“With experienced professionals the problem is lack of energy, but with new members, i get the sense that they are not as engaged. Could be the fact that they do not know anyone in person. They normally keep their cameras off in video calls.”

For a sales and structuring team the ability to just turn around in the office and discuss issues or brainstorm is critical. For the younger team members, they may not be able join every discussion but gain a lot from hearing these discussions and then asking questions and understanding how the seniors interact and handle various situations.”

“Takes longer to align and coordinate team members. Lack of on the job training and hence juniors take long time to complete their work.”

“Action on ground is by accompanying the team member and going on job course correction. The members are not confident to face any unprepared questions from the client, especially high value clients.”

“The challenge really is in maintaining threshold level connections with more junior members who I don't necessarily work with much daily.”

“Deadlines get extended, there's repetition of work as results are not as per requirement, due to lack of understanding.”

“We tend to over communicate to compensate for the lack of physical presence. While it is effective, can become tiring or monotonous.”

Why is HYBRID the new term of favour ? Is it feasible ?



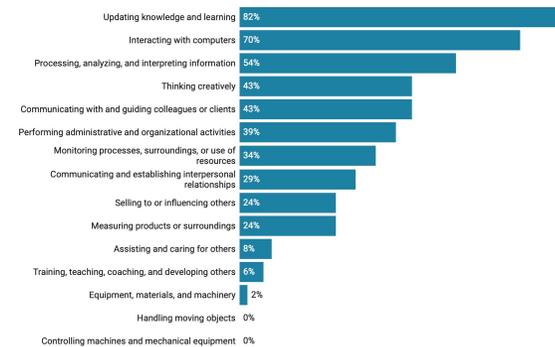
Tech Companies who have announced permanent work from home
Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, SAP, Shopify, Slack, Spotify

However, some industries cannot support work from home. Mckinsey Global Institute has done a survey on which industries are likely to work from home. Leaders in investment banking, law, manufacturing, creative fields want to get back to workplaces. Within organizations, the kind of job matters.

The common view now is that *while some jobs within a company might go partially or completely remote, others are less likely.* Hence, every organization is doing a gradation exercise within.

Many corporates have announced a HYBRID working model for the future and some have declared a permanent work from home model. However, all industries and jobs are not suitable for the HYBRID model.

Share of time spent on activities that could be done remotely without productivity loss, by category in the US

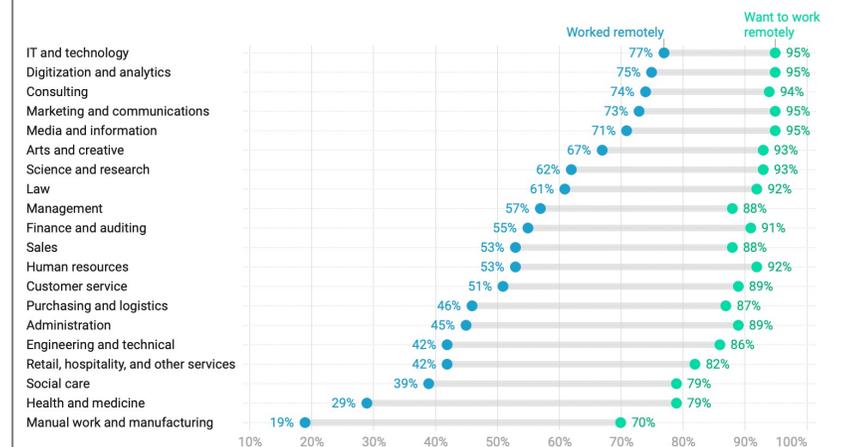


Source: McKinsey Global Institute

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The desire to work from home far outpaced reality

Share of workers by industry globally who worked partly or fully remotely in the pandemic vs. the share who want to work remotely



Data for remote work during the pandemic was collected in October and November 2020.

Source: Boston Consulting Group/ The Network

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However, there is another perspective that has been discovered – the importance of FLEXIBILITY and REST and its impact on the Self and domestic environment.



Time that is saved in commute and travel

Being in control of my own time

Not having to explain myself to anyone.

Remote management of tasks

Time for health activities like yoga, Zumba

No formal attire, can sleep after lunch !

Time with family & extended family

Working from different time zones because of technology

“ While being available to family all the time every day is annoying at times but for me it has been a blessing in disguise as with a 7.00 AM - 7.00 PM work schedule I am more a weekend father and their 1 Year has given me Quality Time with Family and is a once in a lifetime opportunity (which I see is a silver lining in this Covid Times).

Covid situation has taught us a lot on how to do the same things in a different way using technology platforms, lesser office space, having more family time, using work life balance, learn new habits and skills. So would wish to maintain the good things learnt during lockdown.

There are many positives to be taken out of working from home. I think going back to a fully pre-COVID model would be regressive. The sweet spot lies somewhere in between and likely varies by individuals and teams.

I already am as I have more control now of my working from home, as there was a negative perception to this previously, both personal and external.... Both I and others can see the benefits.

More time (to sleep, work out) as a result of commute time removed; Money saved from not having to eat out when working from the office ; The flexibility to run personal errands for the home when needed ; The freedom to adjust the working hours to suit my needs best

The flexibility to work from home when needed. To take time off in the middle of the day for important personal activities without having to explain

For hard and boring work, doing it away from distractions, in an office-like environment helps. For creative work, it is better to do from home. In an office-like environment, you are kind of forced to work by the physical environment and also the peer pressure of having colleagues around you who are working too.



How have LEADERS managed the crisis so far ? What are some of the learnings along the way ?



Creating one on one rapport & fostering an environment of compassion, concern, beyond just work and targets.

Overcommunicating, establishing norms, making the implicit explicit.

Informal chats, meetings without agenda, lightheartedness

Re-prioritizing, taking account of family responsibilities

Using technology effectively for better communication

“ Apart from the online meetings, I have personal chats with team members and talk to understand their psychological well being. Talk about family, mental pressures, how to share feelings. We have also started an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), by engaging the services of an external agency, where any employee or his/her family can call a toll-free no. 24x7 and give vent to their feelings on what is bothering them. This is done with utmost confidentiality.

I think these times need compassion. So as far as I can I always spend the first few minutes talking about how things were at home....sharing what I was going through. Given the personal situations we figure out how we deliver what the client needs.

Shared a 'secret' personal note of appreciation by post to every team member during the lockdown phase, as a gesture that 'each of you is special, hang in there'.

I have a huddle twice a week with my team to align on objectives and tasks. We spend time looking at the most important priority to be done, capacity to handle as well as speak on our mental and emotional wellbeing given our families are affected by the pandemic

By continually connecting and also consciously telling them to switch off and not work weekends unnecessarily.

I think a good way to keep teams in sync is to schedule regular in-person meetings, whether they are formal or informal.

One way is to make expectations explicit through a list of formal team working agreements that specify guidelines for positive collaboration (reply to messages within 24 hours, listen with an open mind etc.). Because you've already calibrated your expectations, you're less likely to jump to conclusions and assumptions

Good to have a coffee meeting. Casual chats with the team for 10-15 min without any agenda. Allows people to have a break.



How have LEADERS managed the crisis so far ? What are some of the learnings along the way ?Some more stories



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My boss implemented a Happy Hour from 5-6PM on Fridays. It was an informal catch-up session wherein we vented about our week and caught up with each other's personal life. It was a way to augment the lack of personal social interactions that we had been missing out on. It did wonders in increasing team morale, and helping us feel more connected to one another and the team.

- (1) Gave the team a heads up early on on critical periods so they can beef up resources (i.e. being proactive vs. reactive)
- (2) To help keep track of what was done/needed to be done, daily emails in the morning detailed everything that needed to be done that day with priorities set. This was their basis for planning out their day and our basis for managing client's expectation.
- (3) Setting up daily quick-calls (15 mins) to talk through the day's deliverables

Spending time talking to the team member and in some cases with their partner / child helped build the commitment. Allowed team members to structure their work hours. Sometimes simple gestures like asking them to log off helped create a very positive environment.

Effective use of online collaborative tools like creating teams, group chats, trello and live documents - this aids with instant communication with a wider working group, full transparency and real time alerts as the task progresses thereby encouraging people to take on their parts and deliver based on commitments and/or align on commitments as a project evolves.

I started a Core Team Group on What's App which is supposed to be a QRT (Quick Response Team) for the organization and anyone in

Distress can ping in that group and we get into a SOS Call.

Also we have regular Team Meetings on Google Meet where all my direct reports are there and is fixed for Every Monday Morning (MOM).

One of the things that I think has helped is taking feedback from the teams on what they would like to see in some of the regular weekly/monthly meetings and so that they are more meaningful when working remotely.

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Women team leaders are more willing to keep it HYBRID



Overall, women leaders were more inconvenienced due to no separation of work and home.

A larger proportion of them were hassled about longer screen time.

They expressed concern about merging of home and office leading to extra responsibilities at home.

However, men leaders complained more about not "feeling" engaged online. Women leaders were more comfortable with this aspect.

Inspite of the above inconveniences, women leaders were more reluctant to go back to pre-COVID working style. More men leaders said "yes" to returning to 2019 style working.

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There was proper demarcation of work at home and office work before. We had proper work life balance. There was team connectivity and work was properly planned and executed.

In the future, a hybrid - some days from home, some days from office work life. Nothing else honestly.

I enjoy the flexibility. 9 to 6 every day won't work.

Another executive agrees that for hard and boring work, doing it away from distractions, in an office-like environment helps. For creative work, it is better to do from home. In an office-like environment, you are kind of forced to work by the physical environment and also the peer pressure of having colleagues around you who are working too.

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Summarizing



Work from home has its biggest drawback in preventing the meet up in large groups. The physicality of the meet up energizes and motivates people. In the long absence of this condition, there was distress amongst team heads. All jobs cannot be done remotely, even though a lot more have migrated to remote working than ever before.

Some leaders have learnt the fine art of managing their teams. **Establishing trust** by taking feedback regularly from the team and expressing compassion and sympathy has helped them manage the energy of remote workers.

Inspite of all the irritants, team leaders want to retain **flexibility**. They have enjoyed defining their own time.





2. Some learnings from Applied Neuroscience.

THE DOPAMINE SUPPRESSION

There is something significant that has happened in the neurobiology of senior executives.

As per Prof Paul Brown, acclaimed Applied Neuroscience professor at the Monarch & Henley Business Schools, there has been a mass suppression of an important neurotransmitter called dopamine.

Dopamine has been christened the “Molecule of More” in a book by the same name by authors Daniel Z Lieberman & Michael E. Long.

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter in the brain, discovered in 1957 by Kathleen Montagu, a researcher at that time in the Runwell Hospital near London. Only 0.0005% of brain cells produce dopamine and yet these cells seem to have an outsized influence on behaviour.

The pursuit of pleasure is related to dopamine. The pathway that dopamine-producing cells take through the brain is called the reward circuit. Our brains are programmed to crave the unexpected and look out for exciting possibilities. This in turn generates energy in the system. And when the excitement fades away, so does the dopamine and subsequently the rush or thrill.

Dopamine has a very specific role and that is of maximizing what we need in the future. Or what we perceive we need in the future. It does not care about the present, the here and now. It only makes the brain wants to go in the direction of more. It is responsible therefore for the thousands of years of evolution,

inventions and discoveries. It is the essential ingredient of moving forward in the human mind.

If it is dopamine which makes us crave this sense of the unexpected, then not experiencing this sense of anticipation for prolonged periods is bound to lead to discomfort. And then comes the question – what will happen if people are experiencing a dopamine suppression for a prolonged period? Is it affecting behaviour and our psychology? If so, how?

Motivation, Physiology and Energy

Physiologically, dopamine is responsible for memory, motor performance and learning. Dopamine plays an important role in executive function, motor control, motivation, arousal, reinforcement, and reward through signalling cascades that are exerted via binding to dopaminergic receptors at the projections found in the substantia nigra, ventral tegmental area, and arcuate nucleus of the hypothalamus of the human brain. **A most logical inference of this would be that if, in the long run, dopamine suppression was to continue, it would hamper people’s mental and physical well-being. Cases of depression, lethargy, loss of memory, motor control, anxiety, obesity will continue to rise and affect people.**

3. Perspectives

A) Work from home is harder to manage unless you have the resources at home to create a productive workspace. There was a CNBC survey in Q4,2020 which shows that as income levels rise work from home is more feasible(1). At lower income levels, sub USD 50,000 pa, working from home is a not a very feasible option. In our survey, one of the respondents articulates thus “ Find it difficult to create a productive workspace at home.”

B) Prolonged isolation and perceived social isolation has a deleterious impact on the brain. In fact, it physically changes the brain. It interferes with the neuroimmunology of people.(3) This period of physical confinement and social isolation will have detrimental consequences for both individuals and groups. The brain mass shrinks after a period of environmental monotony and isolation. And, while the scale of Covid’s psychological impact is still being studied, it appears to have sparked pathological levels of depression and anxiety. (2) In fact a study of 4503 people across Wuhan published in the Journal of Affective Disorders clearly shows that adults in Wuhan experienced a very high level of Generalized Anxiety Disorder during the quarantine, compared to children.

C) Income, available space at home, age of children and home responsibilities, and conditions of work determine how easy or difficult it is for people to create productive work environments in their residences. Additionally, the nature of work matters. Prolonged perceived isolation and not belonging to an affiliate group are also detrimental to one’s mental health.

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1. For Better or Worse, Working from Home is Here to Stay : Mar 11, 2021, Jessica Dickler, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/11/one-year-into-covid-working-from-home-is-here-to-stay.html>
 2. Working from Home : A Neuroscientific Perspective : <https://areomagazine.com/2021/05/06/working-from-home-a-neuroscientific-perspective/>
 3. Endocrine and immunomodulatory effects of social isolation and loneliness across adulthood ; <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0306453021000688>
 4. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0165032721006534>

4. In conclusion

This qualitative survey is mostly representative of the views of team leaders who have been over 15 years in the workspace. Interestingly, it established that while there were irritants about work from home for this section of corporatizens, there was a period of rest and recovery with family which was largely appreciated.

A discovery of flexibility and control over one's own time was made. The respondents also expressed a high desire for retaining that flexibility. Almost all surveyed offered that the HYBRID model was here to stay.

Neuroscientific and psychological evidence suggests that man is essential a social animal who thrives in the physicality of contact. Deprivation from contact for a prolonged period is deeply uncomfortable to humans and deleterious for mental health, inspiration, creativity. Dopamine activation which leads to discovery of motivation, new ideas, inventions and progress. Dopamine is also responsible for the feeling of well being physiologically.

Humanity is itching to be on the racetrack again, to go out there and explore new frontiers in an unfettered way. Perhaps this time, they will do it with more mastery. With acknowledgement of the “here and now” chemicals in our brain (serotonin, oxytocin and endorphin) – which trigger during “rest and revive”. Undoubtedly, the only way is to go back to the tribes – where all the action really happens.

In the long run, the sense of working with an external world and the sense of discovery is critical for motivation. As the world opens up slowly, inch by inch and without knowing, human beings will find ways to congregate around the fire, the coffee machine, the village square and the board room table – not just virtual.



Thank you for your interest.

Please drop a message for any thoughts, comments, queries or reflections.

We would love to hear from you.

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