**The Shift to Work From Home in Company Culture**

Why It’s Important to Neurodivergent Employees

**Company Culture Has Changed in the Work From Home Era**

Before 2020, working remotely was the exception rather than the rule. Some companies allowed employees to work remotely when necessary. Others had well-established remote work positions. The majority of companies, however, provided office space for employees and expected them to be at work, on-site.

If you’re reading this, you probably already understand that, for many neurodivergent employees, working remotely is their preference. The fact is though, that remote work has become a preferred dynamic for many.

When COVID-19 forced us all into semi-isolation in March of 2020, many discovered the benefits of remote work. Companies discovered that productivity did not fall and, for many, the cost of supporting remote work is less than that of the traditional office.

Not only did neurodivergents enjoy remote work. Introverts, like my husband, celebrated the change. Prior to the pandemic, my husband worked from home only when the weather kept him from traveling safely to work. As we live in New England, this usually meant a few days here and there during the winter.

When he announced to me that he had no intention of *ever* going back into the office, I realized that life at home would never be the same. He has demonstrated to his company that he is as productive and, at times, *more productive* than when he worked on-site.

Employers moved to a remote work dynamic to keep their businesses running. To keep essential services working. And to keep their people safe.

Through all this, many companies have realized that the technology exists to make remote working not only possible, but successful. Most surprising to many, and possibly most important, was the realization that employees can be trusted to perform without overt supervision, in a remote environment.

The result? Many companies have chosen to either remain remote, or to continue to allow remote work for those who chose to do so.

The pre-COVID work culture of everyone traveling to the office every day is over.  The “9-5” water cooler culture has evolved into the culture of the home office.  The water cooler is now the messaging app or the Zoom call.

In just two short years, the traditional go-to-work culture of the last hundred years has been replaced with a work-from-home culture that, for many, is a better and more productive fit.

### **Wellness Benefits of These Changes in Company Culture**

**Mental Wellness**

One of the issues, and benefits, of COVID has been an increased awareness of the importance of wellness in our lives. The pandemic has created levels of stress, for some employees, that are definitely unhealthy. Given that, a company culture that supports mental wellness is crucial.

According to 2018 statistics, individuals working remotely at least once a month are said to be 24% happier and more productive as a result of a better work-life balance. Note that this study was done pre-COVID!

Another study, of those who worked from home during the pandemic, found that 70% of employees say virtual meetings are less stressful (Staff, 2021).

This is an important point when considering the concerns of neurodivergent employees. Meetings can be stressful for everyone, yet many neurodivergents find them torturous. This is especially true of many on the autism spectrum. They may find it difficult to speak up in meetings, have issues following subtle social cues, understanding jokes, or picking up on undertones. This makes in-person meetings difficult.

While online meetings have taken some time to get used to, they are more predictable because one can voice an opinion using chat or in the smaller group of a breakout room. The option to not activate one’s camera may exist, while still allowing the individual to be engaged in the flow of the meeting.

Additionally, meetings can be recorded and referenced later. This can be critical for neurodivergents who may become overwhelmed during a meeting.  Being able to replay at one’s own pace, can be critical for some.

The 2021 survey also states that 84% said they would be willing to cut their salary to be allowed to work remotely. That's telling. Many employees, including neurodivergent employees, are willing to make financial sacrifices in order to be happier and achieve a better balance in their lives.

The take-away here is that accommodations like remote working benefit all employees, especially the neurodivergent. Everyone benefits from an inclusive, human-centric workplace.

Finally, a study by Ergotron corroborates the 2021 survey, revealing that, as workers have become more acclimated to hybrid and remote office environments, they are experiencing better physical and mental well-being. (Robinson, n.d.)

**Physical Wellness**

Remote work for physical health became necessary across all sectors of business because of the pandemic. Neurodivergent employees who experience physical burnouts, sensory sensitivities, and other issues that occur when working on site benefited. Many neurodivergents finally found themselves with a work-space that allowed them to work more efficiently in an environment that did not trigger the physical responses that working on-site provoked.

### **Sensory Issues**

As mentioned above, sensory issues are common for neurodivergent individuals. Speaking up about these difficulties in the workplace can cause an employee to be labeled as whiny or needy. This just adds to their discomfort. Pre-pandemic, these individuals did their best in less than ideal circumstances. Being able to manage one's work environment is a necessity for many neurodivergent adults.

### **Time Management**

One objection companies used to avoid a remote work culture was the belief that productivity would be reduced. Current research shows that these fears are unfounded.

A survey of remote work in 2020 by Price-Waterhouse Cooper revealed that 83% of employees felt that they were more productive when working from home than in a traditional work space. (Staff, 2020) In the Owl Labs 2021 remote work report, 90% of individuals who worked from home indicated that they were more productive in their remote office. (Staff, 2021)

It is important to understand that neurodivergent employees often seek remote work because it helps them with time management.

### **The Stress of the Commute**

Even under the best conditions, the work commute is a significant source of stress for many of us. The same factors and issues that affect the neurodivergent population at work also exist during their commute. Removing the need for a commute contributes to greater job satisfaction for all employees. Additionally, remote employees report saving around 40 minutes daily when they no longer need to commute to work.

Upwork reports that remote employees save an average of 51 minutes a day (Ozimek, 2022). Both the time lost, and the general stress, of the commute strengthen the case for remote work as more of a norm and less of an exception.

## **Company Cultures That Support Work from Home**

According to a 2021 study, the industries that did best with remote work were(Strack et al., 2021):

* Information and other technology (77%)
* Digitization and analytics (75%)
* Consulting (74%)

While some businesses cannot transition physical and hands-on jobs to a remote model, many can, thanks to technology and the impetus provided by the pandemic. The remote work culture shift has created a new talent pool for neurodivergent individuals. Many would transition to a remote or hybrid model and be invested in making it succeed because they see the benefit to their career success. Employers looking to diversify their talent pool would do well to consider which employee roles may be transitioned to remote work. All employees can benefit - as will the bottom line.

## **Company Culture and the Remote Work Model**

An interesting statistic from the Owl Labs 2021 survey states that 1-in-3 employees said they would consider changing jobs if the remote work provision was no longer allowed. This is a push in the opposite direction from the pre-COVID norm. In the past, management decided how one would work and employees either fell in line or moved on. The pandemic triggered a surprising role reversal in this dynamic. Employees are now exerting their power and taking their preferences into account. Even when it challenges the status quo.

The move toward remote work since March 2020 was driven, from the start, by human need. The need for physical safety during a pandemic while still maintaining financial security. The need to care for family, etc.. Companies, because of their need to survive, were required to support remote work. They had to support remote work to ensure the survival of the company.

In that drive to survive, the definition of work, productivity, creativity, diligence, and work ethics all changed.

The neurodivergent employment experience has hardly been a happy and productive one. Due, in large part, to the difficulties of working in a traditional corporate environment. For the neurodivergent, working from home is the dream. Not because they can waste time and work in sweatpants, but because the home environment brings out their best job performance.

The Owl Labs 2021 survey shows that most people do not slack in their work. On the contrary, many work longer hours and get more done in the time they should be working.

All this supports the work from home dynamic. Employers *can* trust people to work from home and deliver. This new company culture defines what "work" means by measuring outcomes, not who shows up at the office first and leaves last.

This new culture requires employers to consider the humanity of people. Working parents. Those with health issues that made them more at risk to the virus. Introverts who need quiet to focus. And the neurodivergent with sensory issues. They have all benefited from the remote work culture. The pandemic has proven that shiny offices mean much less for the bottom line than employee happiness and empowerment.

This shift in company culture can, and should, be applied to every neurodivergent inclusion initiative. There is vast, untapped, potential out there that traditional workplace expectations may limit. The pandemic proved that many of these expectations are not necessarily conducive to better work outcomes.

The neurodivergent have long waited for their unique humanity to be acknowledged and embraced in the workplace. Yes, some needs may appear to be outside the norm, but the last two years have proven that norms may be challenged for the greater good.

## **How to Embrace This New Culture, Post Pandemic**

A culture shift like this is a huge deal. But it can, and has, be done. What's great about all this is that it stands to benefit ALL employees, whether neurodivergent and neurotypical.

* Look at the numbers associated with maintaining an entirely onsite workforce versus a hybrid or fully remote workforce. Many employers have found that renting and maintaining as much office space as they had been doing is no longer necessary.
* Create and execute clear policies that govern remote work. Define which jobs and roles work best remotely and which don't. This isn't a black and white question, which leads to the next point.
* Remote work policies should be viewed as evolving entities. Roles may change and technology that supports remote work is constantly evolving. These factors should be periodically reviewed and accounted for in any company policy.
* Investigate technology options to enable successful remote work, like security and monetary stipends for technology related to remote work.
* Consider remote work best practices and convey these to remote workers periodically.

In the past, neurodivergents were forced to seek remote work or, at least, hybrid work arrangements. They did not typically have the luxury of leaving if workspace arrangements didn't work for them. Remote work jobs were once exceedingly rare. They may have liked to be part of that 33% who could choose to leave a job that didn't allow them to work remotely.

When thinking about remote work, realize that the definition of "normal" has changed. That means that company cultures must change as well. There is now a huge potential benefit for a diverse workforce and, of course, for employers as well.

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