COVID-19 Is Creating Telework Converts

By Kathy Gurchiek
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Telecommuting is the new reality for many U.S. employees. Many are saying they want to continuing working from home when the threat of COVID-19 has passed, even as companies grapple with how—and when—to safely return people to the workplace.

They may relish having no commute, like the flexibility that working from home offers or feel more productive.

A survey of 5,447 LinkedIn members conducted April 27 to May 3 found that 55 percent think their industry can be effective with people working remotely (https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/remote-work-sweeps-us-55-say-can-succeed-industry-george-anders/). That optimism is strongest in intensely digital fields—software, finance and the media. Resistance to telecommuting is higher in health care, manufacturing and retail. Workers' optimism about their own ability to be effective teleworkers is higher—65 percent, LinkedIn reported.

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Coronavirus and COVID-19 (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

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Some large companies already are extending options.

Twitter will allow some employees to continue doing so indefinitely if they choose, *USA Today* reported. Salesforce employees have the option of working from home the rest of 2020 regardless of when their local office opens; some of the offices of the global cloud computing provider are opening in late May.

Google and real estate site Zillow will extend telework to the end of 2020. Microsoft is giving employees the option to work remotely through October, and Amazon employees may work from home until at least early October. Capital One is extending its work-from-home policy through Labor Day weekend.

Prior to the pandemic, some workers did not want to work remotely for any length of time because they feared a lack of face time would harm their careers.

"[It was] a legitimate concern people have had for a long time, especially when most are not remote," said Andrew Savikas, chief strategy officer at getAbstract, a knowledge provider based in Luzern, Switzerland.

"The difference here is all of a sudden everyone is in the same boat, and we're discovering, just as companies have learned, if it's a level playing field those issues don't come to play as much. ... There is a lot less chance of unequal dynamics at play."

Employees now will "have to have a pretty good reason to show up in person—certainly for the next 12 to 18 months and maybe longer," Savikas said. "Like so many of the trends coming out of this [pandemic], we're going to have different new norms, new expectations and new models for work socialization, interacting with clients," and networking. "It's going to be fundamentally changed forever."

The pandemic is creating some converts to telework, according to getAbstract's findings (https://journal.getabstract.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ga_remote_survey_2020_compressed.pdf).

It surveyed more than 1,200 telecommuters in the U.S. on April 16 and 17, of whom 49 percent had worked from home before the pandemic. Now, after having experienced it, nearly 80 percent want to continue working from home, including 43 percent who want to telework more than they did before and 35 percent who want to return to their old telework schedule.

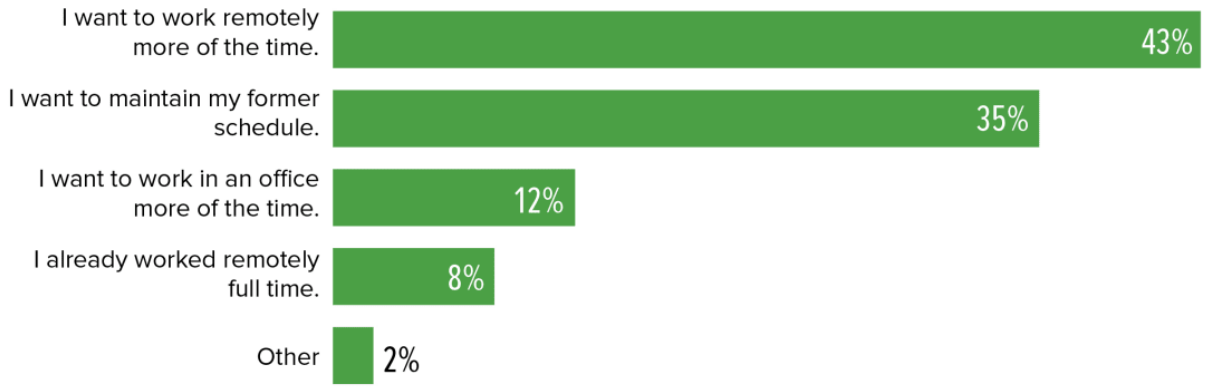
Additionally, 20 percent said their organization was discussing implementing a flexible telework policy, and 26 percent were optimistic they would be offered more flexibility.

The findings, Savikas said, signal "seismic, long-term changes."

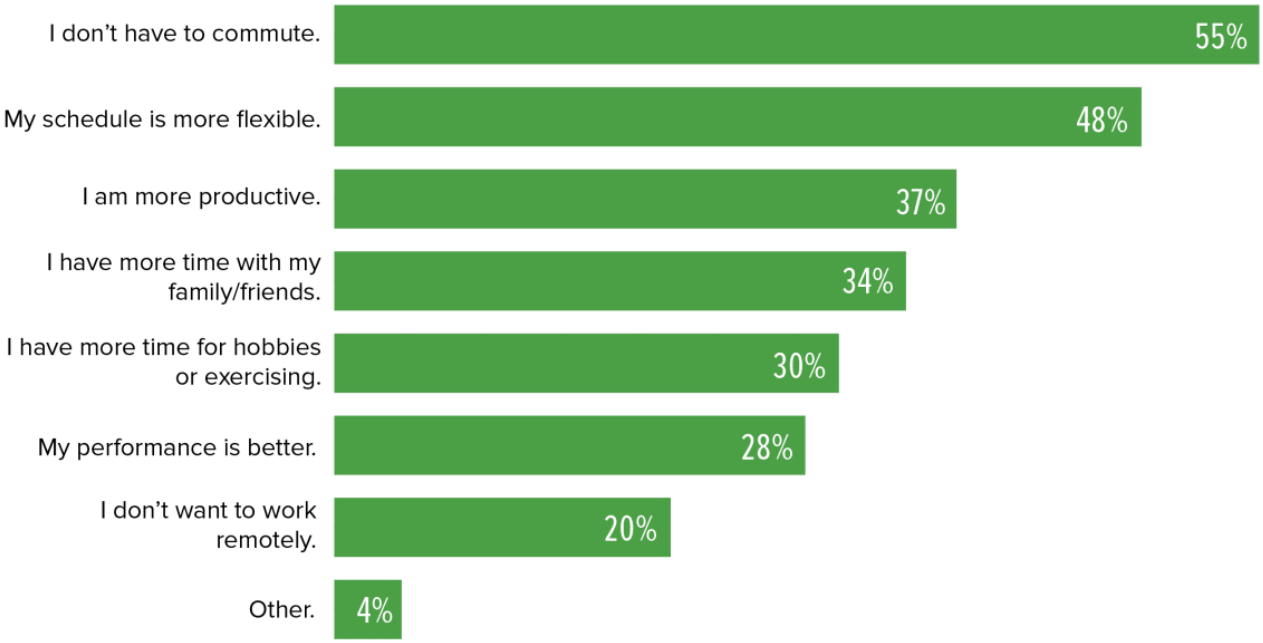
"The fact that significant numbers of employers are now considering remote work for their employees could bring societal changes that rival when large numbers of women first entered the workforce decades ago," Savikas said.

COVID-19 Creates Remote Work Converts

Compared to your schedule before COVID-19, do you want to change your schedule after COVID-19, when the threat of disease has passed and schools, offices and other institutions have reopened?



If you want to work remotely all or part of the time after COVID-19, why? (Multiple replies allowed.)



Source: getAbstract survey of 1,200 U.S. employees.

Feedback

Who Keeps Teleworking, Who Doesn't?

Some may never return to the office, noted Sarah Hamilton, senior HR director at Workhuman, a social recognition and continuous performance management platform headquartered in Framingham, Mass.

"We'll definitely see more companies moving toward expanding remote work policies," she said, "but implementing permanent [work from home] will depend on the life cycle of the company and whether or not it's possible to adopt working from home as a universal policy."

Paylocity, a provider of online payroll services and HR solutions in the greater Chicago area, has more than 3,000 employees, and more than half worked remotely prior to COVID-19, "so this transition has been very seamless for us," said Steve Beauchamp, CEO.

"For us and many other organizations, there is no urgency to go back into the office, and it's critical that leadership teams assess all scenarios to make sure returning is safe."

Part of that assessment for employers is learning how their employees are likely to view returning to the workplace.

"As an employer, you may have the right to ask employees to return to work, but the process will be much smoother when any plans you establish are based on an understanding of the concerns that matter most to your team," said Mark McKee, president and chief operating officer of OnPay, a cloud-based payroll and HR firm in Atlanta.

"Many businesses will have some employees who can effectively work from home, while others will need to be onsite to perform their normal job functions," he added. "If you require only some employees to return, you should be careful to treat everyone with a similar job function the same way. And if there are any exceptions, be sure to document them.

"When two employees with a similar role are treated differently, it could give rise to a discrimination claim if you're not able to show why."

Employees who are unable to telework and don't want to return to the office may take medical or family leave under some state laws and the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, he pointed out. Additionally, the new CARES Act allows employees of many small businesses to take paid leave (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/cares-act-summary-chart.aspx) to care for children whose day care centers or schools are closed because of COVID-19.

"If your local government clears the way for businesses like yours to reopen, you should have the right to require employees to return to work," McKee said. "More specifically, it means that if an employee refuses to return to work, employers can consider many options on how to handle the situation—up to and including termination."

However, consult an outside expert before resorting to termination to ensure your organization does not run afoul of leave laws or other employee protections.

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