

3 big issues with remote work - what research says

South African offices seem unlikely to return to pre-Covid occupancy levels as remote work and hybrid work become an accepted shift in the 'new normal'.



Image source: Tirma Mroshnichenko from [Pexels](#)

But if the work from anywhere experiment could arguably be successful for veteran employees in defined roles with trusted colleagues, for many employees and for certain objectives, remote work remains “a big problem to be solved” according to Linda Trim, director at Giant Leap, one of South Africa’s largest workplace design consultancies.

“Firstly, remote work is worse for new workers,” said Trim. “Many inexperienced employees joining a remote virtual company realise they haven’t joined much of a company at all. They have joined little more than a group video chat.”

Many of the perks of flexible work - like managing your own time - can work against younger employees in companies that entrenched mentorship programmes.

“This is partially true of South Africa where we have such a skills shortage and an urgent need to transfer skills to younger workers,” added Trim.



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Loss of social 'soft work'

Secondly, remote or hybrid work is much worse for building new teams to take on new tasks.

A 2021 survey by Microsoft with researchers at California's Berkeley University studied 60,000 anonymised employees' messages and chats. They found that the number of messages within teams grew significantly as workers tried to keep up with their colleagues - but information sharing actually plummeted.

"Remote working made people more likely to hunker down with their pre-existing teams and far less likely to have serendipitous conversations that could lead to knowledge sharing.

"The study showed that while people could still manage the 'hard work' of emailing and making spreadsheets from anywhere, the most important part of the office is the 'soft work' - the chat and informal interactions that build long term trust and is fundamental to company innovation."

Other studies have reached a similar conclusion.

Earlier this year, researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and UCLA used smartphone geolocation data and matched it to patent citations for individual firms.

"They concluded that the first with the most face to face interactions also had the most patent citations clearly showing that innovation happens in person," Trim said.



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Disrupting disruption

Thirdly, and closely related, remote work is much worse for generating disruptive new ideas.

Research by Columbia Business School and Stanford Graduate School of Management used 1500 engineers to analyse whether virtual teams could brainstorm as creatively as in-person teams.

Said Trim: "Engineers who worked virtually created fewer total ideas and external assessors ranked their ideas significantly less creative than those of in-person teams.

"Successful collaboration requires trust and a kind of intimacy that's hard to build on a Zoom call," Trim noted.

"The remote work debate has become deeply polarising between those who consider it a necessity beyond criticism and those who consider it a culture and innovation killer. But it certainly is worth noting what the research says," Trim concluded.

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