

Thanks to Remote Work, Many in Gen Z May Never Work in an Office. Will It Matter?

Many younger people say they always want to work remotely. But researchers say their personal and professional lives may suffer.

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Shannon Chin went from working and learning remotely in college to working two jobs remotely while staying with family in the Toronto area. She didn't meet her colleagues face to face at one of those jobs, in user experience, until December—nearly a year and a half after signing on. In fact, she hadn't seen their faces at all.

“We had had cameras off for meetings, so I didn't even know what they looked like,” the 22-year-old says.

As for her colleagues at her other job, in social media: “I've never met anyone before. Not a single person,” she says.

A growing cohort of young employees have never worked from an office. They graduated during the pandemic or landed jobs just as offices began to shut down. And many of them—especially Generation Z—imagine they may never work in an office, as remote work becomes the default for many businesses.

In general, they are OK with that: Many of them like being remote and want to be able to work that way. But there are drawbacks. Surveys show that young remote workers also feel unmoored and anxious. And researchers argue that the young workers may harm their personal and professional lives in the future by missing office work and the traditional experiences that prior generations took for granted: learning from older colleagues, schmoozing with bosses, settling into the rhythms of an office workday—or even just being face to face with others. It is new territory, and the experience is likely to shape these workers in lasting ways.

Members of Gen Z—those born roughly beginning in 1997—are expected to account for nearly a third of the U.S. civilian labor force by 2030, according to projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And, for the most part, these digital natives don't want to go into the office full time. Among Gen Zers surveyed in the fall of 2020, several months into the Covid-19 pandemic, 69%

said they would like to work remotely at least half the time, according to professors Santor Nishizaki and James DellaNeve, who are writing a book about Gen Z and the future workforce.

Paradoxically, the professors' research also revealed that nearly half of respondents reported an increase of anxiety and depression ascribed to remote work.

Working from home can make anyone lonely and anxious, but experts say these effects are more pronounced for Gen Zers—who have spent a lot of time on screens from the start. “This is the cohort with the least amount of person-to-person interaction while growing up,” says Dr. Nishizaki, adjunct professor at California State University, Los Angeles. “There is a link there between depression and anxiety and how we constantly compare ourselves to other people, and then we are only seeing our best selves online and on social media.”

Compounding the problem, young adulthood, from ages 18 to 29, is a particularly lonely time of life for many, with or without screens, says Jeffrey Arnett, a professor of psychology at Clark University.

It is “the time when people spend the most time alone until you get to your 70s,” says Dr. Arnett. “You may not have a romantic partner, you may not see your parents so much anymore because you probably don’t live at home, and you change residences so much that that complicates having stable friendships.”

Working in an office, Dr. Arnett says, allows relationships with colleagues, from friendships to mentorships, to form more naturally.

That means young remote workers may miss out not only on professional relationships but also on friends and potential romantic partners, says Johnny C. Taylor Jr., president and chief executive of the Society for Human Resource Management.

“There’s something that happens when a group of us, say, ‘Hey, after work on Friday, we’re all going to X bar,’ and you go with a group, and there’s that dynamic,” he says.

For recent college graduate Elizabeth Mooneyham, 21, loneliness can creep in while she works from home in a three-bedroom trailer near the campus of her alma mater, Auburn University. She lives by herself about an hour’s drive away from her office at the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries in Montgomery.

“I haven’t been able to form relationships with the people I’m working with as easily,” she says. “I can become isolated really quickly if I let myself.”

Long-term harm

The potential problems aren’t just personal ones, of course. Working remotely presents Gen Z with significant challenges on the job.

Young workers often express concerns about the ability to build a professional network, says Mr. Taylor. This is a problem for any remote worker—but a bigger one for younger people who haven't established themselves professionally.

“One day, one of their classmates is going to be the CEO of something or the board member of some company, and you won't have that real authentic relationship with him or her,” says Mr. Taylor.

Remote work may also lead to career crises. Because young millennial and Gen Z workers generally have less experience and less power at work than other age groups, they often worry about whether they are on the right track. They are more likely to be affected by feeling out of the loop, say Drs. Nishizaki and DellaNeve.

Without consistent feedback, they can more easily start to wonder things like, “ ‘Is my boss mad at me? Am I doing OK?’ ” says Dr. Nishizaki. They are even more vulnerable to impostor syndrome, a psychological phenomenon that makes people doubt their hard-won success or worry about being exposed as a fraud.

“It can just feel like some weird videogame sometimes where it's all on your computer and none of these people exist,” says Francis Zierer, 27, who works in marketing at a software company in New York. At home, like many young workers who started new jobs remotely during the pandemic, he has experienced a degree of “FOMO,” or fear of missing out.

Mr. Zierer says he often worries about being out of sight, out of mind. “There's an impostor syndrome kind of thing like, ‘They're going to let me go because I have no idea what I'm doing.’”

The concern young workers share about being forgotten isn't unfounded, says Mr. Taylor of the Society for Human Resource Management. The organization conducted a survey in 2021 that revealed 42% of supervisors say they sometimes forget about remote workers when assigning tasks.

“If I'm the supervisor and I have a really juicy assignment, I give it to the person who I just passed in the hallway, because this concept of out of sight, out of mind applies in human nature,” says Mr. Taylor. “So you are missing out on some key opportunities to showcase your talent.”

Remote workers also may be more vulnerable to misunderstandings and bad feelings at work, in part because they are not able to form strong relationships or to build on existing relationships with people they have met. “In the absence of those relationships and in the absence of good quality communication, I think there's a greater tendency for there to be mistrust, and it's very hard to kind of work through those issues over a messaging platform or even over a telephone call,” says psychiatrist Grant Brenner, who coaches clients on subjects including the workplace.

A Transformation

For some young workers who have rarely, if ever, gone to the office, a visit to the office has given them a glimpse of what they might be missing. Recently, Mr. Zierer had the chance to meet face-to-face with his colleagues at a rented co-working space in Manhattan. Filled with anticipation, he arrived early, took a selfie in the bathroom, settled into a seat in one of the office's ergonomic chairs and took part in the meeting.

"It was bringing back some of that tactile, collaborative nature of work, like in a kitchen," he says, recalling his days working at a restaurant. "If I'm writing a blog post, it's probably better if I'm, like, alone in my home office doing that, but for some of the other things I wish I had the energy of other people."

But other young workers aren't sold on the office experience. Despite her loneliness, Ms. Mooneyham appreciates the benefits of working from home, she says, including flexibility to work from anywhere, which allows her to visit her family in northern Alabama more often than she would otherwise be able to. Having spent hours on Zoom during remote learning in college, she is very comfortable with videoconferencing and often has productive check-ins with her supervisor and other team members virtually.

She is considering moving closer to the office so she can more easily build new relationships with colleagues, but can't envision herself working from an office full time. "For so long, work was, you go into the office and you wear a pencil skirt and high-heeled shoes and pink lipstick and you sit at a desk all day and then you go home, and that doesn't have to be the definition of work anymore," says Ms. Mooneyham. "Millennials and Gen Z probably both have more of a work-to-live, not live-to-work mentality."

Necessary Strategies

Tsedal Neeley, a Harvard Business School professor and author of a book on remote work, believes companies should take on the responsibility of engaging their younger employees, especially in remote-work environments.

"Young people who are building their careers and who are less established in their careers are longing for some form of immersion," she says.

Without a sense of connection and belonging, they are less likely to feel attached to their employers, she says. "They are going to be quick to want to leave if they don't feel fully connected and if they don't like the culture they see." More than half of Americans planned to look for a new job within the year, according to a Bankrate survey of more than 2,000 workers in July 2021. Among those surveyed, twice as many Gen Z workers as baby boomers and Gen X workers said they were likely to start the search.

The occasional in-person meeting or optional office day can help assuage some employees by creating a space for more direct conversations (including easier-to-read body language) and fewer awkward Zoom interruptions. Employees that spend most or all of their time working remotely, however, might require some more deliberate help.

Dr. Neeley is particularly impressed by companies with onboarding strategies that allow new remote employees to spend their first month in scheduled meetings, learning events and completing collaborative tasks. “If you’re an organization, you’d better put together a program that ensures people know how to lead in this environment as part of the retention strategy,” she says.

Ms. Chin, the remote worker with two jobs, says she sometimes struggles to get her points across on video calls, opting to stay quiet rather than risk interrupting someone else, and often works from 10 a.m. to 2 a.m. because of the blurred line between her work life and home life. Still, she appreciates the moments she gets to spend with her family and the time she gets back from scrapping her commute. Ms. Chin has high hopes for the future of work that her generation is helping to usher in.

“Giving that choice to employees on whether they want to come into work or not, is very beneficial,” she says. “Sometimes people just aren’t feeling it and they just want to stay at home and do their work, which is fine, as long as the work is done.”



Ms. Chin went from finishing college remotely to working two jobs remotely.

PHOTO: LUCY LU FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



A selfie taken by Francis Zierer during his first day working in person with his colleagues.

PHOTO: FRANCIS ZIERER

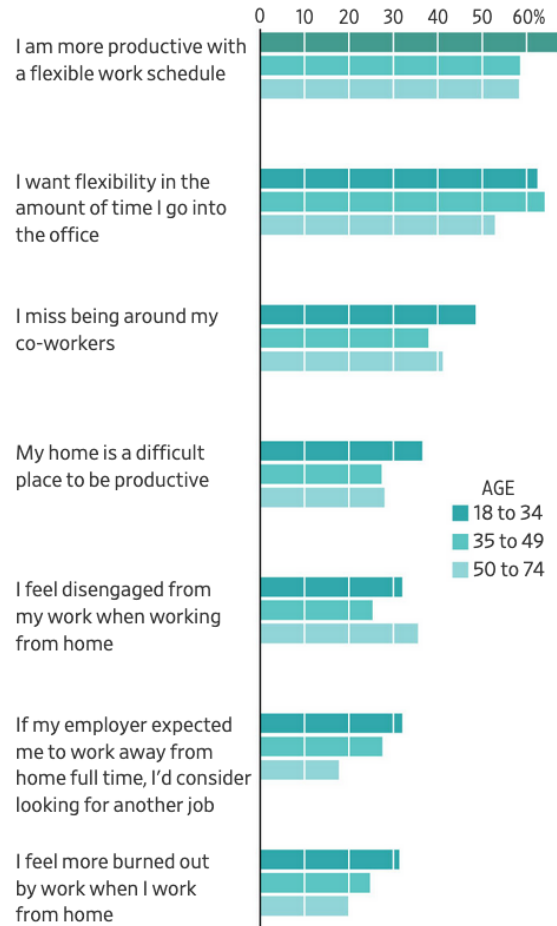


Ms. Chin (left) and her sister Rachel with their father while working remotely.

PHOTO: LUCY LU FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Home and Office Views

The percentage of employees, by age, who agree with the following statements when thinking of a time after pandemic restrictions are lifted



Source: Ipsos Return to the Workplace 2021 online survey of 489 employed U.S. adults, May-June 2021