"REMOTE WORKING AT A GLANCE: EARLY INSIGHTS TO THE DATA EMERGING FROM REMOTE WORKING DURING COVID-19"

Research Paper

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Abstract

The experiences of Covid-19 as pandemic has challenged all workplaces globally. One of the most common challenges workplaces have encountered was the shift from the physical workplace into the virtual space which was done almost overnight. This has led to these experiences being anecdotally coined as the largest global experiment of our time. As a result of this, new data relating to the experiences of remote working through a pandemic has been emerging from multiple sources in the form of studies, surveys, and polling. This paper places a spotlight on these and summarises some of the key data that has been gathered by a number of organisations that examines the early data emerging from remote working. This paper is intended to inform its readers of the experiences of remote working of others, while helping inform decisions and conversations on what the post pandemic workplace may be.

Keywords: Pandemic, Remote Working, Teleworking, Covid-19.

1 Introduction

In March 2020, the Director General of the World Health Organisation, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced that the global Covid-19 epidemic had become so widespread that they constituted a pandemic (McNeil Jr, 2020). As a result, many organisations were required to adapt their workplace to ensure the safety of their staff and patrons while they remained open to the public as a result of providing a form of an essential service. The majority however were required to migrate their operations into a virtual workplace, with very little time to prepare their workforce for such an eventuality.

Workplace transformation is not an isolated phenonium as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout the 1900's the office workplace went through several changes based on influences from the Taylorism model, the Burolandschaft model and the Cubicle Farm approach. However, the significant difference between previous changes and the changes to the workplace experienced as a result Covid-19 is that in the majority of cases, the workplace shifted from a physical environment to a digital environment. This paper spotlights the early data that emerged from remote working throughout the pandemic.

2 Remote Working as a Practice

Remote working is defined as "a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, the worker has no personal contact with co-workers there, but is able to communicate with them using technology" (Di Martino & Wirth, 1990). Most of the research on remote working refers to this practice as "teleworking", and while there is no universal agreement on the practice (Alizadeh, 2013) it is generally described as a way to work "away from the office" by means of electronic connections (Bolisani, Scarso, Ipsen, & Kirchner, 2020). As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many office workplaces became virtual overnight and relied on remoting working to ensure there was business continuity. According to (Deloitte, 2020a) report *Workforce Strategies of Post-COVIS Recovery*, it was estimated that 2.7 billion people in the global workforce were affected by the stay-at-home measures. Although with considerable technologies available to organisations, prior to the pandemic, remote working was not a widely used practice (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017). The 2015 Sixth European Working Conditions Survey showed that in Europe, only around 2 percent of employees teleworked mainly from home in 2015 (Eurofound and the International Labour Office, 2017).

Where there has been research conducted in the area of remote working, much of the research's existing data and knowledge has been gathered and derived in the context where remote working was only occasionally or infrequently practiced, and was only considered by some, but not all or most, of the workers within an organization (Wang, Liu, Qian, & Parker, 2021). (Lapierre, Peeters, & van Steenbergen, 2016) found that because of the largely voluntary nature of prior remote working, in which people choose to work remotely at their own discretion, some of the previous findings on remote working have suffered from a selection bias.

3 Early Data Insights

Where data from studies on remote working already existed pre-pandemic, data specific to remoting working because of the pandemic is relatively new and a number of organisations have published their recent findings from their surveys and polling.

3.1 The road to the future

To gain insight into how human resource (HR) specialists managed remote working, Worldwide ERC and Deloitte launched a survey specifically aimed at HR specialists. The survey was open from December 2020 to January 2021 and the data was generated from a global panel of 122 corporate HR mobility professionals: 73 from North America, 2 from Latin America, 31 from Europe, 4 from Middle East and Africa, and 12 from Asia Pacific (Worldwide ERC and Deloitte, 2021). Along with the geographic diversity, many of the respondents serve medium to large-sized enterprises as shown in Figure 1.

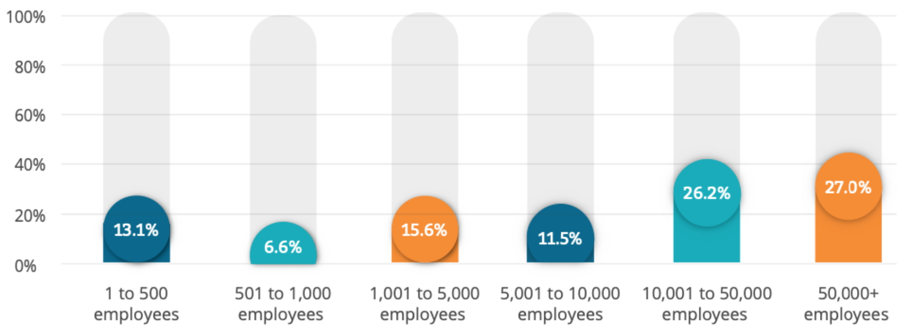

Figure 1. Worldwide ERC and Deloitte respondent organisation size

(Worldwide ERC and Deloitte, 2021)

In Table 1 we can see the grouped responses to the survey on the levels of remote working pre Covid-19 and future anticipations towards it. The data showed that pre Covid-19, the majority of almost 64% of the respondents identified that between 0 – 25% of their workforce to be able to work remotely. When asked the same question under the lens of looking to the future, the anticipation of remote working is now spread across the categories of 25 – 75% percent with the 0% category reducing to 3.3%. Interestingly, the only other category that dropped in percentage under future anticipations was the anticipate 100% of Workforce to be remote category. Unfortunately the survey design does not capture the reason for this reduction in particular.

Question	**Pre covid-19**	**Future Anticipation**
Anticipate **100% of Workforce** to be remote	7.4%	4.9%
Anticipate **75% of Workforce** to be remote	3.3%	13.9%
Anticipate **50% of Workforce** to be remote	2.5%	36.1%
Anticipate **25% of Workforce** to be remote	42.6%	22.1%
Anticipate **0% of Workforce** to be remote	21.3%	3.3%

Table 1. Pre Cov-19 and Future Anticipation of remote working

(Worldwide ERC and Deloitte, 2021)

It is worth mentioning that where there was a positive anticipation towards a future remote working workforce, more than 50% of those who did respond favourable with the clause that when an employee is not working remote, they are doing this on an already established site of work more than half (54.1%) of respondents will not permit employees to work in locations in which the company does not have permanent establishment. In other words, they permit employees to only work in places where the organization is already established for tax purposes, which therefore could allow tax reporting and withholding. (Worldwide ERC and Deloitte, 2021)

The report found that nearly three-quarters (71.7%) are working to determine the that best meet the circumstances of their business and explore the potential of each position to succeed for the foreseeable future outside of the traditional on-site workspace. The participants in the survey when asked ***Which factors are you using to determine which roles are best suited for on-premises work, remote work, or hybrid work?*** 60% identified that the employee's function was the top factor in determining the what the workplace needed to be. This was closely followed by the employee's responsibility which suggests that when determining the best fit for the workplace, the employee has remained a critical key factor.

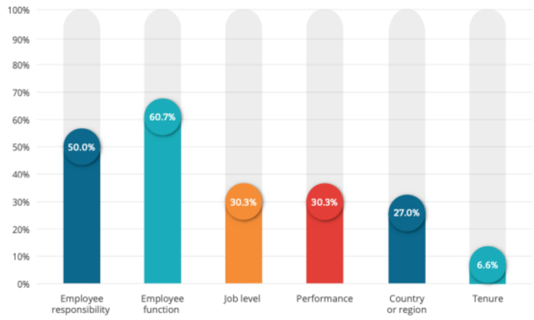

Figure 2. Demo's summation of opinions towards remote working

(Worldwide ERC and Deloitte, 2021)

3.2 A temporary bug becomes a permanent feature

(Deloitte, 2020b) has estimated that while the potential for remote work varies across geographies, sectors and occupations, a potential 50 million jobs could switch to remote work across the ASEAN-6 countries (see Figure 3 below). Singapore and Malaysia are expected to be leaders in terms of remote working with a potential remote workforce of up to 45% and 26% respectively due to the relative dominance of service industries.

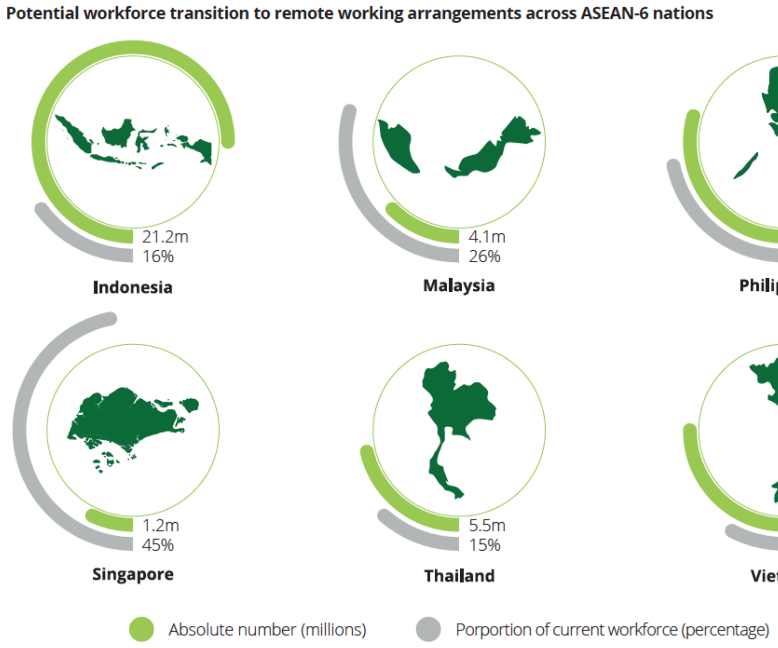

Figure 3. Deloitte's potential remote working transformation across the ASEAN-6 countries

(Deloitte, 2020b)

(Deloitte, 2020b) found that 'Due to the nature of the jobs to be done, the tertiary (services) industry will have the more significant shift to remote working arrangements' compared to the likes of the professional services, technology and telecommunications industries who demonstrate the greatest upside where there is virtually no ceiling for these industries with the potential to transition 90% of the workforce to remote working. Other services like administration and support, retail trade, healthcare, hospitality and transportation showed a more modest potential for remote transitions between 24 – 33%.

The *Remote work A temporary 'bug' becomes a permanent 'feature'* report is consistent with other studies by acknowledging that certain occupations are more suited to remote working arrangements than others where

> Back office support and enablement functions such as HR, Administration, Legal, IT and Security will make the largest wholesale transition to remote working. Customer facing occupations are likely to adjust slower as they adjust to new customer interaction expectations and technology requirements. Hybrid occupations, to be completed in specific locations, or requiring specialised equipment such as field operations, will see the least movement to remote working arrangements. (Deloitte, 2020b).

An interesting observation in this report was that even though the occupational analysis still suggests that are still constraints with industries that require large proportion of their staff to be on site, there is still a significant proportion of support, management and control roles that can make the transition, improving the overall cost structures of these sectors.

In Figure 4, Deloitte have summarised their predications for the top ten sectors that had the best potential to move to remote working. Their analysis does not mean that other sectors like manufacturing, utilities and agriculture are not in a position to move elements to remote working, it just means that for the like of the manufacturing sector, their occupation analysis suggests that a significant proportion of support, management and enablement roles can move to remote formats but will still be dominated by the necessary onsite functions of their industry.

Figure 4. *Deloitte's prediction of potential workforce transition*

(Deloitte, 2020b)

3.3 Build back stronger

In March 2021, Demos, one of Britain's leading cross-party think-tank published their findings as part of The Final Report of Renew Normal: The People's Commission on Life After Covid-19. The data underpinning the report draws on the contributions of 50,000 citizens' (Demos, 2021) making it one of the largest datasets that explores attitudes to remote work as a result of the pandemic. It is worth noting that the report does not solely focus on remote working but incorporates under the collective of areas including:

- Key workers and low pay
- Communities and volunteering
- Remote working
- Online life
- Misinformation
- Green spaces
- Trade and economic resilience
- Inequality

Demos. report showed that ‘among those who have worked from home during the pandemic, the majority (51%) want to continue doing so more in the future than they did pre-pandemic’ (Demos, 2021). where ultimately, it is the employer who has responsibilities for setting out the future landscape of the workplace, there is emerging data in other that would suggest employers too are thinking along these lines. For example, Price Waterhouse Cooper (PwC) surveyed more than 300 global employers on the future of remote working in which 80% of the employers anticipated that remote working would become the new working norm (PwC, 2020).

Where Demos’ report shows support for a continued remote working workplace, the report highlighted some challenges that are associated with this model, mainly in terms of equity. Younger and poorer people are less likely to have access to a quiet working environment or a good broadband connection. Employers that move to hybrid or remote-dominated working schedules will need to ensure they’re not just pushing costs onto staff, instead providing office facilities or covering the costs of a home office, to enable people to work well. This will require new thinking, and potentially new employment rights (Demos, 2021).

The report also illudes to the challenge of certain interactions such as collaborations that can be lost as result of remote working. Remote working can make it harder to collaborate, explore, or be creative with colleagues. It can reduce social connections with teams, affecting the social capital that can be part of employee retention. We can expect companies, over time, to find a range of models that work and enable them to attract and retain talent, but this won’t be simple or easy (Demos, 2021).

In an attempt to show the similarities and differences between respondents’ opinion on the future of remote working to the survey, Demo categorised the respondents into two groups. Group A being the remote working enthusiastic and Group B being the remote working moderates which resulted in Figure 5 being derived as a summation of the responses to the notion of the future of remote working.

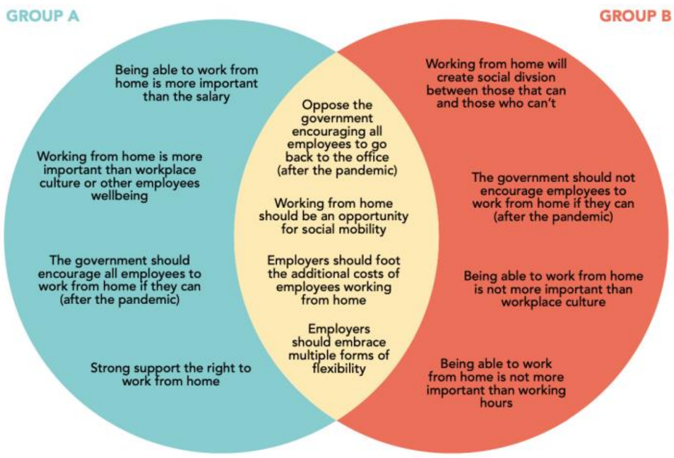

Figure 5. *Demo’s summation of opinions towards remote working*

(Demos, 2021)

3.4 Hopes and fears

In February 2021, PwC commissioned a survey which saw a response from 32,517 members of the general public. Respondents to the survey included workers, business owners, contract workers, students, unemployed people looking for work, and those who were temporarily laid off. The survey polled workers in 19 countries: Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Kuwait. Malaysia, Netherlands, Poland, Qatar. Saudi Arabia. Singapore, South Africa, Spain, UAE, UK, US.

(PwC, 2021). The survey yielded mixed responses, and where the data suggests that those who participated were happy to continue with some form of remote working, there were concerns about the future of certain positions as a result of the accelerating of automation to allow for business continuity as a result of the pandemic. (PwC, 2021) found that 72% of the respondents wanted a combination of remote and in person working with 50% excited or confident about the future. However, '39% of the respondents think it's likely that their job will be obsolete within five years' (PwC, 2021).

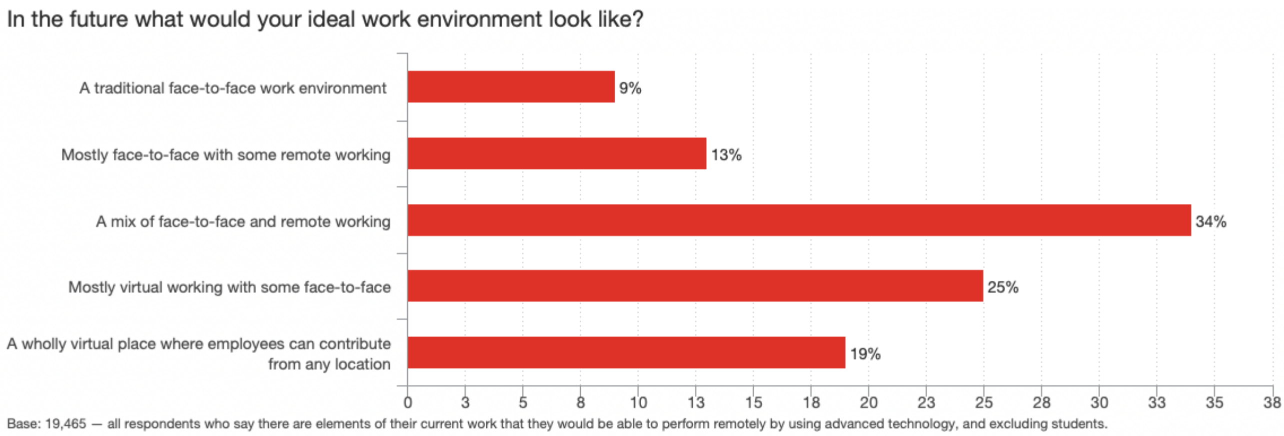

Figure 6. *PwC's survey responses to the question on what would your ideal work environment look like*

(PwC, 2021)

Where the study explores multiple areas such as upskilling, remote working, and discrimination there was a strong vein of data that with the level of ongoing investments in technology and virtual 'remote working is just going to be part of how we do business in the future. (PwC, 2021). Yet, the data shows, although at a low percentage of 9%, there are situations emerging where of those who can work remotely want to go back to a traditional commute and work environment full time. However, there is a strong preference that the future workplace will be a hybrid model whether it will be a mixture of face-to-face and remote or mostly virtual with some face to face. The survey found that '72% of respondents who can work remotely say they prefer a mixture of in-person and remote working' (PwC, 2021).

Regardless of the form the future model of the workplace takes, the PwC survey shows that there are early signs of concern globally in terms of the type of employment that will exist in the future. As companies accelerate their automation plans and many jobs continue to be remote, employees across every sector will need to acquire new skills that enable them to think and work in different ways (PwC, 2021).

Looking at Figure 7, it shows that 56% think few people will have stable, long-term employment in the future. If you drill down into the country specific data, we see the likes of India showing this concern increases to 81%. We can start to see other countries such as Mainland China reflect this concern with 60% of their respondents worrying about the negative impact automation will have on future jobs.

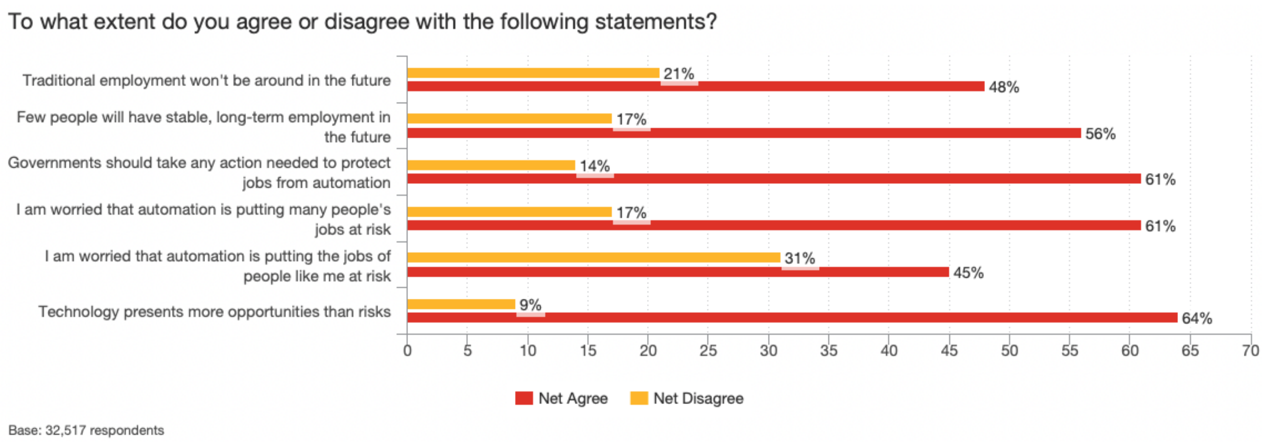

Figure 7. PwC's survey responses to the future of workforces

(PwC, 2021)

3.5 What's next for remote working

In November 2020, McKinsley Global Institute published the article "What's next for remote work: An analysis of 2000 tasks, 800 jobs and 9 countries". Their analysis found that the virus has broken through cultural and technological barriers that prevented remote work in the past, setting in motion a structural shift in where work takes place, at least for some people (McKinsley Global Institue, 2020).

From their research, the data shows that more than half the workforces they examined has little or no opportunity for remote work flexibilities. Certain jobs require people to be onsite, in person to operate specialised equipment or machinery or to support the public. It was found that 'many of such jobs are low wage and more at risk from broad trends such as automation and digitization' (McKinsley Global Institue, 2020). The article goes as far as stating that the potential for remote working is concentrated to only a limited number of sectors which is consistent to the findings in other studies. To determine the overall potential for remote work for jobs and sectors, we use the time spent on different activities within occupations. We find that remote work potential is concentrated in a few sectors. Finance and insurance has the highest potential, with three-quarters of time spent on activities that can be done remotely without a loss of productivity. Management, business services, and information technology have the next highest potential, all with more than half of employee time spent on activities that could effectively be done remotely (McKinsley Global Institue, 2020).

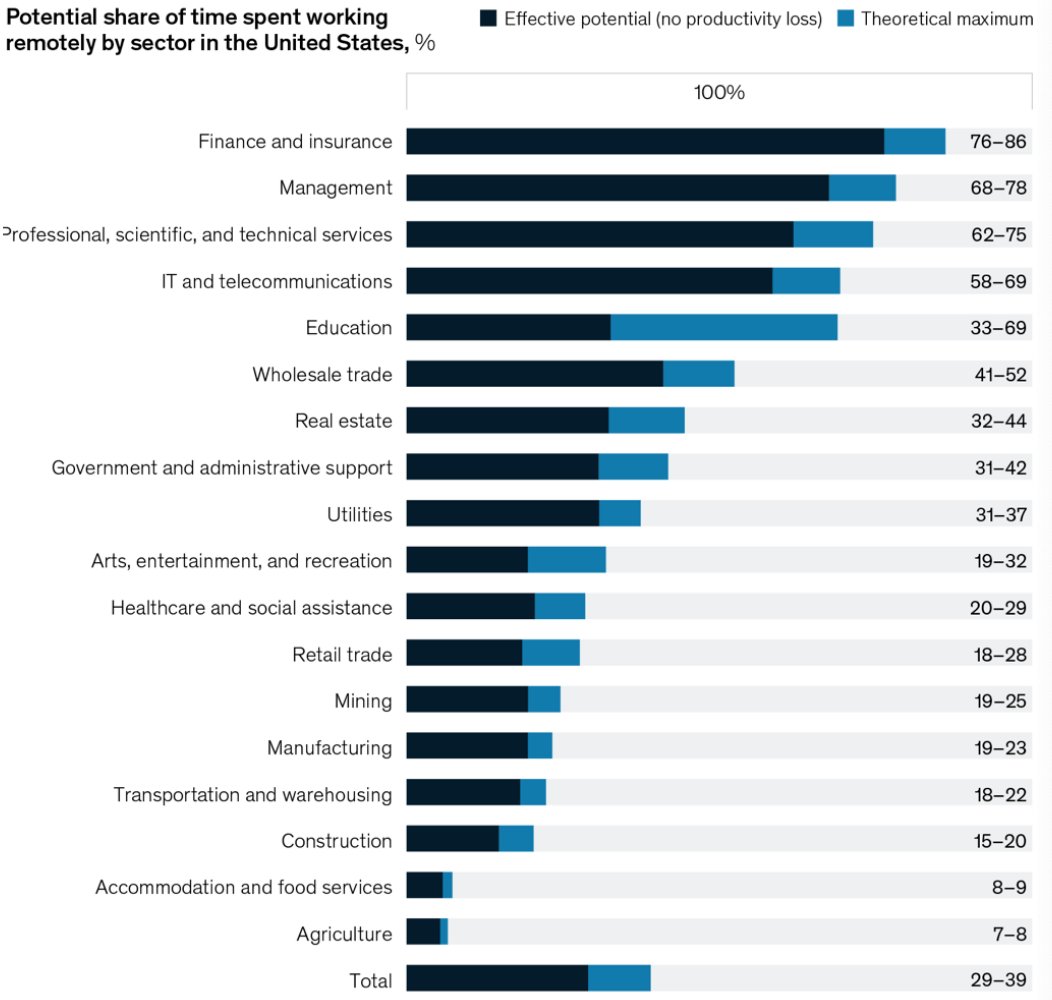

Figure 8. *Demo's summation of opinions towards remote working*

(McKinsley Global Institue, 2020)

McKinsley Global Institute's article makes the suggestion that remote working can have significant impacts on urban economies. Basing their assumption that typically between 5 and 7 percent of workforces in advance economies worked from home pre Covid-19, with a potential shift to 15 to 20 of workers post Covid-19 working from home it could mean fewer people commuting between home and work every day or traveling to different locations for work. This could have significant economic consequences, including on transportation, gasoline and auto sales, restaurants and retail in urban centres, demand for office real estate, and other consumption patterns (McKinsley Global Institue, 2020).

The analysis within this study is consistent with others and acknowledges that some forms of remote working are likely to persist after Covid-19. The move to a hybrid model will further investment in digital infrastructure and employee upskilling. The report states that "in emerging economies, employment is skewed toward occupations that require physical and manual activities in sectors like agriculture and manufacturing" (McKinsley Global Institue, 2020). As expected, the potential for time spent on remote work drops to 12 to 26 percent in the emerging economies that were assessed as part of this study.

4 Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced many organisations to transition to remote working as an emergency measure rather than a desired operational transition. Studies emerging suggest that organisations will have to take a holistic overview of their learnings from their period of remote working not only to review their practices, but also to address the growing desire from employees to retain working from home elements. The abrupt transition into remote working has not been an easy process with the challenges of technology infrastructure, home space and cybersecurity. Yet, with these aside, organisations have shown a high level of resilience to allow for business continuity throughout the pandemic.

Much of the data that is emerging is consistently showing that the ability to remote work is heavily based on the industry. Yet, there are potential for almost all industries to achieve some elements of remote working. With the world beginning to reset and recover from the pandemic, the future of the workplaces is almost certain to reset too. As part of this reset, employers are now faced with the task of redefining their workplaces to ensure it aligns with their operational needed along with the extra challenge of addressing the expectation of the employees that is showing as consistent across a number of the studies for the desire to retain elements of remote working moving forward. It can be expected that remote working will becomes more prominent in industries and organisations will shape their next chapters having learned from the greatest unplanned experiment of our time.

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