

REMOTE WORK - THE NEW NORMAL?

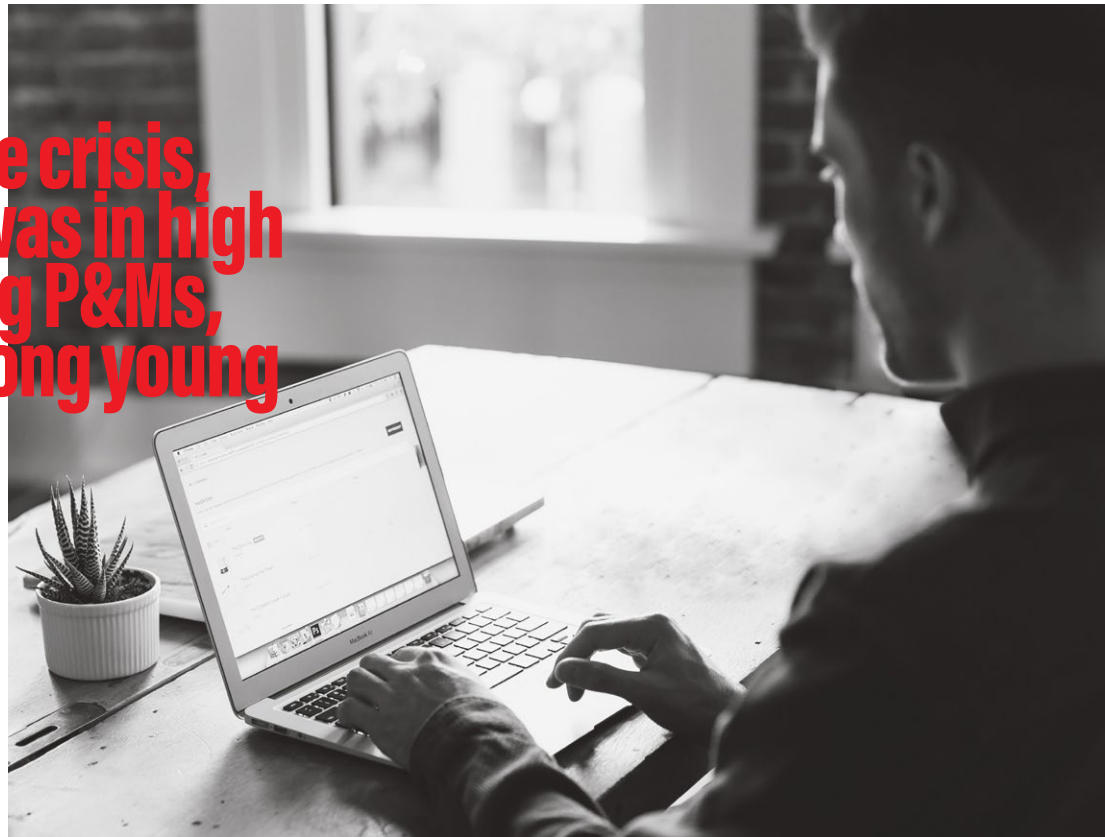
A DISCUSSION PAPER



UNI GLOBAL UNION
PROFESSIONALS
& MANAGERS



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The COVID-19 crisis has forced millions of professionals and managers (P&Ms) to work remotely, as workplaces were gradually or abruptly closed worldwide. While the crisis starts to subside in some parts of the world and employees return to their offices, it is worth reflecting on this mass remote working experience and the opportunities and threats that it provides for the future organization of the workplace.

Even before the crisis, remote work was in high demand among P&Ms, especially among young professionals. The benefits of remote work have been well documented and include an increased flexibility to balance work and family responsibilities, decreased stress and time savings due to the lack of a commute, improved motivation and job satisfaction, and overall productivity gains as people can choose how best to carry out their work. It should be noted, however, that these studies were carried out during normal circumstances and did not take into account the additional stress and anxiety caused by the COVID situation.

Many employers who had been slow to adapt to the increased demand for remote

work before the crisis – perhaps suspecting that work could not be done remotely or that employees would not work as hard if not monitored and supervised in an office environment – have now seen that remote working is indeed a viable solution in many cases. These employers can build upon their recent experiences and improve their work organization for the future.

However, other employers are looking to take advantage of the situation to force employees to work remotely even after the COVID crisis ends, and to close offices and branches in the hunt for increased short-term gains. These employers must recognize that there are also risks involved in this approach, and that any move towards expanded remote working must be done on a voluntary basis, be accompanied by the necessary support and structures, and must be planned for the long run with employees' health and safety in mind.

Against this background, UNI P&M is proposing a list of items for trade unions to discuss and negotiate with employers around the world:

1 Continue to offer remote work...

As noted above, there are good reasons for providing remote work opportunities to employees. While not all employees will avail themselves of these opportunities as they may prefer to work in a traditional office environment, we are likely to see a stronger demand for remote working in the future. Employers must thus be competitive in their offering to retain and attract the best talent. In addition, employers who are willing to hire remote workers will also have access to a much larger talent pool than those who only recruit based on physical location.

2 ... but don't force it

Employers should not force their employees to work remotely, and remote work opportunities should not be used as an excuse to close offices in an attempt to save costs or undermine working conditions and without looking at the broader implications of such decisions. Not everyone is suited for remote work, and there are risks involved in excessive remote working, including isolation, depression, and lower levels of innovation and creativity as employees are separated from the spontaneity of human interactions that characterize a physical workplace.

3 Prepare for the long run

The COVID crisis caught many employers off guard and left them scrambling to produce remote work guidelines. There is no telling when the COVID virus will abate or if we will face a new virus in the future, so employers should take the time to develop best practices, improve their work processes and IT infrastructure, and further support and train their employees for sustainable and potentially long-term remote working. This could include the provision of home office equipment and furniture as well. Employers should also review their health insurance and sick day policies to ensure that their employees enjoy sufficient protection in similarly disruptive scenarios.

4 Recognize the difference

Remote working under normal circumstances is very different than the recent experience, and employers should be careful not to equate the two. One of the most important challenges during the COVID crisis has been that schools and kindergartens have also shut their doors, leaving parents with both work and childcare responsibilities to carry out simultaneously. Due to the instantaneity of many stay-at-home orders, many employees were not able to prepare proper and ergonomic workstations, which has had an important impact on their occupational safety and health. They were also confined to their homes, whereas normal remote working can be performed in other environments that may be better suited to the individual.

5 Create a new culture

In the past, whether an employer has offered remote working or not has to a large extent been due to the company culture and the emphasis it has put on office presence. Remote working has often been viewed negatively, and employees who have requested remote working have seen their future work prospects suffer as a result. This has particularly affected women and employees with family responsibilities. Companies should capitalize on the COVID experience to build a new, more inclusive work culture that values and respects different forms of working.

6 Rethink how to measure work

Many employers do not have the right tools in place to set goals and measure outcomes, but instead rely on office presence either as a proxy for productivity or as an indicator for individual success in the workplace. During the COVID crisis, these employers often replaced physical presence requirements with digital ones, scheduling endless video calls and chats. But presence and productivity are not the same thing, and much of remote workers' improved output comes from their ability to manage their time flexibly and in accordance with rhythms that are optimal for them. Their ability to focus on a task without the distractions and interruptions typically present in an office environment is also a contributing factor.

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7 Respect employees' privacy

The COVID crisis also caused an important increase in the use of surveillance software, whereby employers try to ensure that their employees are actually working when not in the office. These solutions include always-on video software, software that takes a screenshot and/or a photo of each employee every few minutes through their webcam, software that tracks every keystroke and analyzes every email and chat message employees send, etc. These invasive measures are problematic enough in a normal office environment but become even more so when employees are being monitored in their own, private homes.

8 Ensure the right to disconnect

Flexibility to work remotely must always be accompanied by a right for employees to disconnect from work to ensure that they can maintain a separation and a balance between their personal and professional lives. Employees who are constantly connected should not be rewarded, and employees who disconnect should not be penalized. UNI P&M has published a briefing on the right to disconnect during the COVID crisis as well as a guide to negotiating the right to disconnect during non-crisis times. These documents can be consulted for more information.



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