

Why the office will conquer WFH in the end

There has been much speculation that Covid has put a permanent end to the centuries-old office commute, where workers would put in an eight-hour day.



Image source: Getty Images

“But talk of the demise of the office has been greatly exaggerated,” said Linda Trim, Director at Giant Leap, one of South Africa’s largest workplace design specialists.

“Of course we keep asking ourselves whether we still need offices, even after the virus is no longer a threat. But we believe they may actually be even more important than ever in the future.

“The office will ultimately triumph over work from home (WFH).”

Cutting costs

Trim noted that advocates of getting rid of offices, or at least scaling them way back, cited the cost savings of not having to pay expensive rentals or bond repayments. The maintenance and running costs of offices are also a substantial cost to any company.

"Another argument is that if people relocate away from expensive areas like Sandton in Johannesburg or the Waterfront in Cape Town as just two examples, to work remotely, companies can pay them less.

"But there is also confusion about just how remote work would function. The idea that employers can pay people less if they move to less expensive areas to work remotely is a non-starter. The average middle age worker for example has already typically worked for 10 different employers. The idea that they should move their family permanently from a Sandton to a Salt Rock on the promise that their current job will continue indefinitely is fanciful.



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"People live in pricier locations because that is where they can get their next job. The high pay is because lots of employers want those skills, not to compensate for cost of living," Trim added.

More to the point as the argument goes, is that employees seem to like working from home - and the work is mostly getting done.

But even though remote work is preferred to the alternative of commuting into crowded office spaces during a pandemic, it does not necessarily mean work and home life are better than before the pandemic.

This is especially true for younger people and those without children as no office means a reduced social life. Over half of people have dated someone at work, for example.

"That's really hard to do on Teams," said Trim.

The circle of (office) life

There are also the constant swings in the working zeitgeist and at this stage, no one knows what the world will look like after the pandemic.

Said Trim: "It was only a few years back that having a 'cool' office with slides, ping pong tables and rain forests was seen with envy by those outside the big tech world that did everything it could to keep people at the office for longer and longer hours.

"Now the thinking is the opposite - big tech and many other of the world's leading companies are suggesting people should never come back. The mood and the thinking may well come full circle again."



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Even though they may be expensive and come with more restrictions than people would perhaps like, offices matter.

The personal interactions they provide contribute to getting work done, especially project work and tasks that require collaboration. The coffee breaks, the friendships, (the banter, sometimes) and social connections we make there matter as offices help keep us engaged and close to business purpose and company culture.

"It is hard to keep all that going via occasional video calls," Trim concluded.

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