

How will white-collar office jobs transform?

by Mark Pavilons

It's difficult to predict the future of our white-collar workforce, when every day has been 'casual Friday.'

More often than not, those working from home have adopted, shall we say, more leisurely attire.

Some have even been known to look fully presentable, in business attire from the waist up. But the bottom half, well, it's less than ideal.

In a recent survey, 50% of respondents say they wear business attire from the waist up and casual clothing from the waist down when they have a video interview.

Some on-camera correspondents have been literally caught with their pants down.

And a clothing company in Scandinavia is marketing boxers and matching socks, for those 'casual' at home work sessions.

Pants aside, I wonder just how many of our newfound habits will find their way into the work places of the near future.

A four-day work week is possible by 2030 without sacrificing income, living standards, according to another study by the Fraser Institute, an independent, non-partisan Canadian public policy think-tank.

'In light of the COVID lockdown, there's been a lot of talk about a possible four-day work week in Canada, but to achieve a four-day work week where we actually work fewer hours while at the same time maintaining our current living standards, we need to be more productive,' said Steven Globerman, a Fraser Institute senior fellow and author of *Reducing the Workweek Through Improved Productivity*.

The study finds that if worker productivity grew by two per cent per year to 2030, Canadians could work four days per week 'and not just longer work days' with no loss of living standards.

'If governments pursue policies that encourage entrepreneurship and innovation, worker productivity will rise and Canadians will be able to enjoy more leisure time,' Globerman said.

There's been talk of a reduced work week for many years. And many office workers do currently enjoy remote work days.

A Dutch law passed in 2000 (yes, 20 years ago) that said a worker can lower their hours to part-time, and keep their jobs, hourly pay and health benefits. Four-day work weeks are common in The Netherlands and Denmark.

Some experts say it's a great way to kick-start the economy in a post-COVID economy. The five-day work week arose during the Industrial Revolution and automotive assembly line work. There's never been a huge push to change that.

There's no doubt that many have found ways to adapt to working from home during the pandemic. Some may love it, while others may find it distracting.

Are we experiencing a 'great reset' in how we work? Some say the genie has already escaped.

Many analysts see working remotely will be the trend in the years to come, with large companies abandoning their expensive office towers.

While some long to return to the office for a sense of 'normalcy,' others have already gotten quite used to the short commute, from kitchen to home office. Some may be less anxious to head back to their cubicle or glass enclosed workspace.

Study after study, prior to the pandemic, revealed that a five-day, in-office work week was obsolete and employees underperformed in these conditions. Maintaining offices is expensive and it's something large employers may rethink.

Even in our company, some are working from home and it seems to be just fine. It was an almost seamless transition and there have been very few glitches. I can work from home if I choose, but I'm a creature of habit and prefer to come to work each day. I enjoy the interaction with coworkers and being surrounded by mounds of paper in a disorganized yet highly efficient workspace. I like wearing pants!

I can sympathize with those who endure long commutes, office politics and abrasive colleagues.

There's no doubt the whole landscape will change in the years to come. It was destined to, even without the pandemic.

We've seen the internet expand exponentially and service providers offering an incredibly fast, almost limitless service in terms of connectivity.

Self-driving cars will become a reality in the next decade. Working from the car, while en route to a meeting or the office, will become a reality.

Virtual conferences and meetings will also become the norm.

Banks have been encouraging online transactions for years and during this pandemic, a lot of people have come to embrace making payments and depositing cheques via their smart phones or computers. I also quite like the convenience of online transfers and payments, but I do miss the tellers at my local branch.

Even local councils like ours have held remote meetings and staff has been performing quite efficiently from home.

Of course, nothing will ever replace face-to-face interactions.

Council meetings will resume and I will once again get to smile, nod and shoot the breeze with our esteemed mayor, councillors and staff. We will once again gather in wide-open spaces to celebrate achievements and local milestones. We will come together, raise a glass and share a renewed sense of community.

We can supplement our living with a certain amount of remoteness, but we shouldn't replace a handshake, pat on the back or presentation with cold distancing.