

The future of work: Everything you need to know

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The first few pages in the book *Azotus the Kingdom* by Shadreck Chikoti describe a world where people stay in their homes and do not go outside at all. Food and essentials are delivered to them and they get information on what is outside through an electronic device. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, this was all just a writer's wild imagination. However, the pandemic gave us a real experience into the world described by this book.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected people's livelihoods worldwide. Apart from being a health crisis, it is also an economic crisis. The lockdowns imposed by countries throughout the world resulted in closure of some businesses, people staying at home, reduced travel and huge losses for companies. This resulted in companies trying to cut costs, people losing their jobs and for those who managed to keep their jobs, they started working from home.

In some countries, this was not new as it was common for people to work from home. However, in Zimbabwe, this was new for most people. Personally, I have only encountered one person who worked from home before the Covid-19 pandemic. Most people knew about working from home, but also knew that companies would never allow it. The pandemic allowed companies to start embracing a new way of operating.

With the lockdown conditions being relaxed, an inevitable question is "*How is work going to be in future?*" Currently, most companies have started returning to the old ways of operating, where employees are required to work on-site. The pandemic is not over and precautions still have to be taken to protect against the virus. Some companies have been taking a step by step approach where they are calling back employees gradually according to department. Others have given employees a schedule, where there go to work according to set times.

An article by Howe D, et al (2020) forecasts that the return to normalcy will be driven by consumer behaviour and the demand for companies' provided services and not necessarily by the desire to return things to the way they were before. There are multiple theories of what the future will look like post-Covid. These are mostly based on what people think might happen, but the future is never certain. If there is one thing we have learnt this year, it is that no one knows tomorrow. It sounds cliché, but this year has been the most practical explanation of the phrase.

For people working in fields such as the medical field, the future definitely means less Covid-19 cases for them. It means less fear of transmission of the disease from patients to them, and therefore a safer work environment. But for people in entertainment, sport, restaurant services and travel industries, the future is uncertain. Supply of their services to customers has been reduced for months and this will affect future demand. It is highly likely that demand will not be the same, which will affect some jobs. Some people may never be called back to work.

Organizations have to decide if they are able to employ as before and also provide work-related benefits as before. If they are not able to, then that means loss of jobs. The deciding factor for this is whether consumers maintain pre-pandemic spending or not. For some industries, things are definitely going to change.

For the travel industry, the pandemic has pushed for the use of digital technologies for meetings and conferences. Organizations have also realized how this results in reduced costs and will likely continue to use these technologies in future. This means reduced travel activity after the pandemic. With the loss of jobs and reduced salaries for some people, it is likely that customer spending, especially for the entertainment sector, will be reduced.

The pandemic has increased possibilities for remote work. Companies such as Amazon have increased the number of internships they offer and they have included options for remote work. This has increased accessibility to such companies for people who would have never thought of obtaining such opportunities. This could mean that from now on, work

opportunities can be obtained anywhere in the world without worrying about the visa application process or the cost of relocating.

The general fear that used to come with working from home, especially for new employees who have a lot to learn has been reduced as companies have had to adjust their training processes to suit the new normal. This also means that employee organization and methods of managing employees have also been adapted to suit the situation.

People are now comfortable with working from home as it allows them to focus on their work and other personal matters. For those who do not have jobs that require them to be on-site, most will prefer working from home even after the pandemic. Some people even say that they are more productive when working from home.

If the future depended on people's preferences, we could carry out a survey and be able to predict what it could look like. I carried out a survey to find out people's opinions about working from home and working on-site and how it affects their performance. 37% said that they prefer physically going to work during the pandemic, citing the following as some of their reasons:

- Work environment is motivating, therefore they perform better on-site
- They prefer the human interaction
- They like to dress up daily, which is motivating for them
- Better resources, for example better internet connection
- Too many distractions at home
- For teachers, it is much easier to pass on knowledge through interaction.

Those that prefer working from home (63%) stated the following as their reasons:

- It is safe and comfortable

- Less distractions as there are no secondary duties
- It saves time and money
- Flexibility
- To be safe from the pandemic

70% of those who preferred working from home cited safety from the virus as the main reason.

The survey also aimed to find out people's preferences for the future. 26.67% would want to continue working from home, 43.33% would prefer a combination of both and 30% would prefer working on-site.

If organizations were to create working condition policies based on employees' preferences, a combination of working from home and being on-site would be the future of work. But we all know how traditional organizations work, it's difficult to tell what their decisions will be. Also, considering that change is inevitable and the future is always uncertain, we might be surprised to realize that organizations will continue allowing employees to work from home.

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