

# Home office: Yay or nay?

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doi: 10.56012/IKTV8892

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## Abstract

In the first quarter of 2022, Bioforum performed an anonymous internal survey among its medical writers to understand if our employees would like to return to a physical office or prefer to stay in the home office despite the lifting of most of the COVID-19 restrictions. Bioforum's Medical Writing Team reported working from home as a positive experience overall and highlighted both an increase in work productivity and work-life balance. The possibility of working remotely spurred our team's growth by 366% during the pandemic. Stemming from our success with this business model, we will be working from home even following the pandemic.

## Home office – Yay or nay?

If the home office is your new reality, then you are not alone. Many people who require only a computer to complete their work tasks began working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even now, when things are slowly returning to their pre-pandemic state, some employers are willing to keep working from home. Airbnb has just announced its new work policy allowing its employees to decide for themselves whether to work from home or the office.<sup>1</sup>

The Remote Collaborative Worker Survey, conducted by ConnectSolutions (now CoSo Cloud), surveyed 353 US employees. Of those employees who were working from the home office at least a few times per month, 77% reported greater productivity while working offsite; 30% accomplished more in less time, and

24% accomplished more in the same amount of time.<sup>2</sup>

We, the medical writers (MW) at Bioforum, have embraced the work-from-home idea to the fullest by becoming a global team. During the pandemic, our team grew by 366%. We now have team members residing in Israel, South Africa, USA, Canada, Germany, Greece, and Bulgaria, all working remotely, and we are looking to expand further. To draft this article, a survey was sent out to all MW at Bioforum to better understand how our remote employees feel about certain aspects of remote work, especially regarding the home office and the near-total lack of non-virtual meetups. We analysed the results and report them here, as well as suggest some practical steps for remote teams to take so they can foster the feeling of being part of a team and to take care of the well-being of their employees.

## Methods and findings

To examine a microcosm of employees' experiences with remote work, we surveyed the entire MW team at Bioforum, a data-oriented clinical research organisation (CRO), using an anonymous computerised questionnaire; we sought feedback on employee personality type, advantages, disadvantages, and difficulties of remote work, as well as productivity, collaboration, support from managers and colleagues, personal connections, and professional development in a remote workplace.

### Remote work and employee personality

Based on our survey, 7.7% of our employees are extroverts who at times experience feelings of loneliness and isolation while working remotely. Of the employees interviewed, 61.5% identify with being introverts and often describe relief upon working in small teams, even alone, and being less exposed to large groups of people, since the interaction required to be part of a big team is stressful and uncomfortable for most of them. Finally, 30.8% of our employees describe themselves as ambiverts and are fine either way.

### Advantages of working from home

The most frequently reported advantage of working from home reported by survey respondents

was productivity. The majority (84.6%) of our MW team stated that they are more productive at home and are not eager to return to the office, while 15.4% of the team reported equal productivity between home and office work. Airtasker, an Australian company providing an online marketplace for outsourcing tasks/jobs, surveyed 1004 full-time employees across the US, of whom 505 work remotely. The study revealed that, on average, remote workers were more efficient than those who worked in an office with more distractions available.<sup>3</sup> Working from home cuts down on the time "wasted" during hallway and coffee-break chatter, gossip, or any kind of non-work-related conversation, leading to increased productivity and actual working time.<sup>4</sup> By avoiding commuting, workers save time and money and are often more rested and balanced due to lower stress levels. Work-from-home allows for more flexible work hours, making it easier to attend to other aspects of life, such as school meetings, going to a medical appointment, or just taking the dog for a walk.<sup>5</sup>

### Overcoming disadvantages and difficulties of working from home

Based on our internal survey, 38.5% of MWs never miss face-to-face interaction, while 38.5% sometimes miss face-to-face interaction, and only 23.1% generally miss face-to-face interaction. Remote work may create a somewhat isolated working environment, physically and emotionally. Therefore, measures should be taken to avoid feelings of loneliness, isolation, and to improve team cohesiveness. Bioforum has implemented activities such as outings and team events to encourage socialisation. Over the last year, we have had wine-tasting and breakfast events, as well as remote team meetings to bring the team closer together by providing meaningful interactions. All of this aims to keep the employees happy in the long run. Remote team-building games and activities can be implemented easily and immediately. They are fun, and an easy way to spark conversation, get to know one another and create a casual atmosphere. Our team organised a game of having to guess colleagues' favourite foods; others included a Bucket List Challenge or even a simple remote get-together where everyone brings coffee/tea and colleagues just chat away.<sup>6</sup> Team-building activities should be adjusted to the team and not be "off-the-shelf",

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herself.<sup>9</sup> At Bioforum, we remain in close communication by holding meetings at least every week. These meetings help with prioritising projects, discussing deadlines, and, most importantly, being in tune with the existing workload. As mentioned earlier, project management tools are a useful source for time planning, workload expectation management, and synchronising multiple deadlines.

#### Personal connections within the remote team

Our MW colleagues know each other on a personal level; however, as in the office, strong friendships are formed between some colleagues and less with others. Managers should ensure that team-working tasks are not always assigned to the same group of people but expose colleagues to new or other employees who have never worked together before. This can be a good starting point to get to know colleagues, even the quiet ones. The onboarding process is generally a stressful time for a new employee, perhaps even more so for remote workers. Based on our experience, a good remote onboarding process should not deviate too much from in-office onboarding. Employees should meet the entire team, get an introduction to the organisational structure, company culture, and policies, and receive access to important resources like standard operating procedures (SOPs) and additional tools or software that are used by the team. Switching on the camera during video conferences might feel strange in the beginning, but seeing colleagues' faces and expressions during a meeting reinforces the feeling of connectedness and generally invites a more dynamic and friendly interaction. Virtual "happy hours" to ring in the weekend may be a great way for employees to bond while being mindful of employees' preferences.

At Bioforum MW and in other companies, e.g., Encepta, it is common practice to hold virtual workout sessions, like 'deskercise' stretching sessions, via an online meeting platform, that are fun and viable options to relieve muscle strain from the hours of working in a seated position, all while increasing team connectedness.<sup>10,11</sup> On-site health and wellness programs like Jaxfit, organised by The Jackson Laboratory for its employees, can now easily take place virtually.<sup>12</sup> Virtual training apps available on Android or Mac platforms have the same goal as on-site health and wellness programs, but their usage could be organised in a bigger setting, allowing for more flexible workout schedules.



#### Professional development in a remote work environment

In times of online university and online further education programmes, inviting speakers or organising online professional development courses on topics such as statistics or regulatory affairs can be organised both within the company and by engaging professional development schools. Investing in ongoing professional development allows for continued growth and staying up to date on industry knowledge, providing multiple benefits to both employee and employer. Professional development expands employees' current knowledge and boosts their confidence. Furthering an employee's education effectively trains and/or reskills employees to meet the company's own workforce needs. Employers gain from their employees being up to current standards by having more knowledge on hand without necessarily having to do new hiring. Another major benefit of continued education for personal enhancement is increased employee retention. Fulfilled employees are less likely to leave a company if they feel challenged, appreciated, and an asset to the company.<sup>13,14</sup>

#### Conclusion

This article provides a short glimpse into remote working, focusing on its advantages, disadvantages, and employees' feelings regarding this newly acquired work culture at Bioforum, which began to hire globally with the start of the pandemic. The results of our anonymous survey show that we, the medical writers at Bioforum,

believe that having a positive remote work experience is in no way inferior to on-site work. We found that most employees are happy and satisfied to have the option of remote work, are more productive at home than in the office, and feel well supported by managers and colleagues on their projects. From a strategic management perspective, the overall conclusion is that our experiences with remote work support further expansion of our remote team.

#### Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own and are not necessarily shared by EMWA.

#### Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The authors declare no disclosures or conflicts of interest.

#### Data availability statement

For inquiries about data and other supplemental information, please contact the corresponding author.

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