



Engagement in the Work-From-Home Era

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In the wake of COVID-19, remote work has become a necessity for companies across industries—and instead of being a burden, it has created opportunities, both at William Blair and across the investment landscape.

From Perk to Norm

The ability to work remotely used to be a flexibility perk offered mostly to employees in select jobs or sectors, such as information technology, but this has changed in recent months with the spread of the COVID-19 virus and efforts to contain it. Remote work has become a necessity for companies across industries.

This shift has blown away any stigma attached to working from home, coming at a time when technology has advanced enough to support it.

Five years ago, it was difficult to have a high-quality live video call with 75 people in different locations, let alone one where participants were also typing chat messages and sharing presentations. Today that is possible thanks to advances in networks, software, computing power, and the cloud—and the release of related communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Slack.

William Blair's Experience

At the outset of the COVID-19 outbreak in China, William Blair's leadership team began planning for all possible contingencies. In February, employees were given the flexibility to work from home to test their remote work capabilities. At the same time, our information technology team ramped up the rollout of planned remote-work

technologies. This included ensuring the Microsoft Teams platform was accessible to all employees for collaborating via video calling, chat, and document sharing.

Remote work has created different efficiencies and opportunities for the Global Equity team. We use Microsoft Teams for more than just group and one-on-one meetings and text chats. It's also our go-to tool for workflow and project management; document and information sharing; and debates.

Working from home has not stopped us from engaging with companies; if anything, our familiarity with remote-work technology has helped us continue such meetings amid the cancellation of conferences and travel.

Our corporate access team has helped facilitate meetings with corporate executives who are working from home and thus available more hours of the day—just like us.

In March, we had 126 corporate management interactions with companies from 35 countries and 11 different industries. This was despite the cancellation of at least 50 of the conferences and events in which we had expressed interest. Overall, remote work has been a good thing for our team. Our productivity is up.

Of course, we still value on-the-ground research meetings and will continue to travel when safe. But we also expect to leverage virtual meetings more than we have in the past as they have become more mainstream.

Investing Opportunities

From a broader perspective, the spread of at-home work could have significant investment implications.

Companies that may see an increase in demand include information technology (IT) service providers that help other firms implement and scale remote-work platforms, and firms that offer remote-work platforms with the features that enterprises want and need (like security and file sharing).

IT spending in certain countries could accelerate too. Japan's IT infrastructure, for instance, is still about five to 10 years behind that of the United States and Europe, so IT spending may be needed there to support remote work.

A sustained shift has implications for existing businesses outside IT too. For example, we could see changes in demand for services that support employment-based working, transportation, and commuting.

We are also seeing the acceleration of new business models that support remote work, with increased demand lowering the barriers to entry. If a meaningful long-term shift toward working from home occurs, we could see more such innovation, with new business models using technology to increase efficiency.

We are paying close attention to how this innovation could play out globally, especially around telehealth and distance learning.

Our Outlook

Today's environment has made working from home more acceptable, proving that it is possible to remain connected while remote. After stay-at-home orders are lifted, we expect that remote work will become a larger

percentage of total hours worked. In addition, companies are likely to further replace lower-return business travel with video meetings.

However, we do not foresee the majority of jobs becoming fully work-from-home. The creativity that can flourish when people are in the same room—or spontaneously run into each other in the office—still seems hard to recreate on a screen. Plus, people are probably pretty keen to see each other again in person. We know we are.

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