

2022 Primeau Law Future of Feminism Award:

Women and Working from Home

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Quotation from a Maclean's interview with former Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Abella:

“...Equality to me is not sameness. Civil liberties are sameness....But that's different than human rights, **when you are treated a certain way because of the groups you belong to.** So, if you are a woman,..Muslim...Jewish...disabled, **people treat you based on your identity.** And so I thought, you can't say, 'Treat everyone the same'. If you treat everyone the same, the person in a wheelchair is treated like the person who's able-bodied, **and there's no need for a ramp..”**

“So it occurred to me that what equality really was, was acknowledging and accommodating differences. So people could be treated as an equal and not excluded arbitrarily for things that had nothing to do with whether or not they could contribute to the mainstream.” (Abella 21)



Statistics



“At the beginning of 2021, 32% of Canadian employees aged 15 to 69 worked most of their hours from home, compared with 4% in 2016.”
(Statistics Canada, 2021)

“72% of Canadian employees say their companies are planning to be hybrid or remote going forward”
(Cisco Canada Survey, 2021)

“Regardless of marital status and whether they had children or not, men worked from home to a lesser extent than women... Overall, 27% of men worked from home, while 35% of women did so.” (Statistics Canada, 2021)

“In 2015, women in Canada spent an average of 3.9 hours per day on unpaid work as a primary activity—1.5 hours more than did men (2.4 hours)”
(Statistics Canada, 2018)



The Barrier

“90 percent of success is just showing up.”



Stigma

- Pre-pandemic, working from home was seen as an accommodation for workers who needed more flexibility: often women with children, or caregivers.
- Home office workers who do not work during conventional office hours may be assumed to be accomplishing less.

- Harvard Business Review investigated the in-person worker vs WFH worker dynamic in a report released in 2020,

*“One...organization...decreed that only a small percentage of its employees could be physically in the office. **The senior women observed that it was mostly men coming in, as they were more likely to have enclosed offices, which caused the women to wonder if they were being left out of crucial conversations as they worked from home. If going to the office becomes a status symbol,...[the] concern is that men will be gifted more-exclusive or privileged access to it than women.**”*

Because of their isolation, home office workers are at risk of losing career-advancing connections. These career perceptions impair the decades-long success of women striving to climb the ladder.



Interview #1

My cousin Laura is a civil servant working from home for the Canadian federal government. She returned from a maternity leave during the pandemic. Her partner is a teacher and cannot work from home.

She identified the two issues on the following slide.



Mental Health

- “Work life balance is a constant struggle. It's so easy to keep working past logout time. I'm home, the computer is there, there is so much work to do.... so easy to keep working.”
- “Watch out for employees working more hours than they should. Overtime needs to happen sometimes, but women's mental loads will increase with working long hours and being unable to attend to household things (especially when they are surrounded by those household things, but feel they can't get to them)”
(Laura)

Child Care

- Here is a brief synopsis of Laura's day:

“To avoid paying for aftercare this year, I start work early (6:30), take a break at 8 to drop off kids, work to 2:30 to go pick up my older kid, then play outside with her for a while, then make up time when we come back home. Sometimes my work day will end close to 6 - which is a long day.”

That's 11 and a half hours....



Domestic Abuse

WFH has been terrible for those in hostile home environments, and typically women and children bear the brunt of such environments.



Interview #2

My neighbour and her partner began working from home when the pandemic started.

She will begin working in a hybrid model shortly.

She identified the two issues on the following slide.



Ergonomics

“I have heard that many ergonomic injuries are now being diagnosed from [early lockdown]. I myself suffered injuries early on. This issue continues with the move to remote and hybrid work arrangements. Ergonomics/equipment is dependent on company policy. As a soon to be hybrid worker I am only allocated one set of equipment, so the second location will be a shared space and not necessarily ergonomically set-up.” (Neighbour)

Ergonomics are especially important for those who work long days. Remember Laura and her work day?

Cost Reimbursement

“Remote workers have absorbed internet, heating/cooling, cell phone, and wear and tear on furniture costs. This will become very pronounced where electricity rates have risen drastically (sic). This has been viewed as being offset by gas/commuting savings but that is not always the case.” (Neighbour)



What Can Employers Do?

If 90 percent of success is just showing up, what does “just showing up” mean for remote workers?



1. Mitigate Stigma

If working from home is the future, we must first accept it in workplace culture.

- Performance reviews should focus on outcomes of projects rather than a worker's office hours.
- Employers should ensure that going in to the office does not become a status symbol.



- Set clear expectations for tasks and outcomes.
- Provide prompt feedback to employees
- Celebrate success
- Hold regular team meetings at consistent times with a consistent agenda so that everyone knows what everyone else is doing.



2. Create a Flexible Work Schedule

What do I want my employees to do while working from home?

- Write documents?
 - The employee will not be very responsive throughout their day
 - Hours are irrelevant
- Attend remote meetings?
 - The employee will be responsive throughout their day
 - Hours are prescribed
- Make phone calls and send emails?
 - The employee will be responsive throughout their day
 - Hours are flexible

Why do I want my employees in the office?

- To facilitate a group discussion?
 - All employees must be contacted and agree on the date
- To use resources that are not found at home?
 - The employee can assess their own schedule



3. Set Expectations for Contact

A flexible work arrangement does not mean being responsive all the time. Employers should set employee contact parameters. This includes:

Avoiding contact over cell phones, landlines and emails when workers are not on-call

Setting “Prime Time” hours, where online/in-person meetings can be held

Observing vacation time: an employee should not be asked to log on for a few minutes/hours to help when they are not on-call.



4. Provide Support

Mental Health Support

Managers should:

- Provide information for mental health resources
- Make intentional check-ins with individual employees
- Be trained to spot burnout
- Develop signaling techniques to flag domestic abuse and train staff to use and spot them.

Ergonomics and Cost Reimbursement

Companies should:

- Properly and ergonomically equip home offices.
- Advocate for tax breaks that include internet, central home heating/cooling, and electrical costs.
- Provide comprehensive IT support not only for the equipment provided by the company, but also for general internet connectivity



Conclusion

“If you treat everyone the same, the person in a wheelchair is treated like the person who’s able-bodied, and there’s no need for a ramp...” (Abella 21)

If 90 percent of success is just showing up then this plan is the ramp.

- Mitigating stigma surrounding WFH;
- Creating a flexible work schedule;
- Setting expectations for contact;
- and providing support.

These measures can benefit any remote or hybrid worker. On balance, however, they will benefit women more than men.



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