

Why mindsets matter for new ways of working

The Scientific View

Flexibility is often touted as one of the top perks that employees will want in the future of work. But does the opportunity to work remotely foster employee productivity and well-being? Recent research from the University of Zurich sheds a new light on this question. We find that the mindsets that employees hold about new ways of working – whether they view remote work as a skill that anyone can learn and develop, or rather view it as something that people are simply good at or not – relates to the emotions employees experience during remote work and how productive they feel. Remote work will not inevitably lead to improved well-being and productivity, but rather can depend on the beliefs employees hold about it. To work toward a brighter future of remote work, organizations and their leaders should consider how mindsets play a role in shaping employee experiences.

As COVID-19 regulations shift and companies across the globe debate whether and how to return to the office, flexibility is on everyone's minds. For example, a World Economic Forum survey of 12,500 workers from 29 countries across the globe showed that two-thirds want to work flexibly when the COVID-19 pandemic is over, and that almost a third would quit their job if they were required to go back into the office full time.¹

But is remote work part of the future of work? Recent examples cast some doubt on whether organizations will increasingly adopt remote work in the wake of the pandemic. Leaders across organizations differ starkly in their approach. Many see remote work as an opportunity to improve productivity, endorsing the idea that greater flexibility permits employees to work in the ways that are most productive for them personally. For example, Twitter CEO Parag Agrawal recently affirmed the position of the previous CEO Jack Dorsey that their employees can choose to work remotely forever if they want, saying: "As we open back up, our approach remains the same. Wherever you feel most productive and creative is where you will work and that includes working from home full-time forever. Office every day? That works too. Some days in office, some days from home? Of course."²





“Remote work will not inevitably lead to improved well-being and productivity”

However, other leaders are more skeptical. For instance, SpaceX and Tesla CEO Elon Musk recently made headlines when emails were leaked in which he stated that employees will be required to spend a minimum of 40 hours a week in the office – and that those who are unwilling to do so should leave. Musk stressed the importance of being visible for encouraging others to do their best at work, writing: “That is why I spent so much time in the factory — so that those on the line could see me working alongside them. If I had not done that, SpaceX would long ago have gone bankrupt.”³

Conversations such as these reveal the very different beliefs that corporate leaders have around whether remote work is a boon or a bane. The question of whether remote work helps or hinders productivity has long been of interest to researchers as well, and findings have been mixed. Some studies indicate that the ability to work whenever and wherever enhances employees’ productivity and performance^{4,5} while others find that it sometimes leads to struggles with procrastination and can even undermine productivity.^{6,7}

Our new research from the University of Zurich’s Center for Leadership in the Future of Work, which was recently published in the journal *Human-Computer Interaction* in a special issue on the future of remote work, adds a new understanding to this puzzle.⁸ We find that the level of productivity employees experienced in home office depended on the extent to which they held more of a *fixed mindset* about remote work – seeing it as something that people are either suited for or not and which can’t be changed – or more of a *growth mindset* about remote work – seeing it as a skill anyone can learn and improve upon. Specifically, we found that people who held a more fixed mindset about remote work experienced more

negative emotions like frustration, anxiety, and irritation in home office, which then related to feeling less productive the following week. This shows that whether remote work brings greater well-being and productivity depends on the fundamental beliefs people have about this new way of working.

“Fixed” and “growth” mindsets. As we saw and maybe also personally experienced as the pandemic unfolded, some people adjusted to remote work better than others, seeming to thrive while others struggled. News articles that appeared on remote work during the pandemic often raised the question of whether people might simply have characteristics that make them better at remote work than others. For instance, an article from the BBC posed the question of why some people are better at working from home than others, asking: “Does this productivity come naturally, or can you learn it?”⁹

This public dialogue reminded us of psychological research on fixed and growth mindsets.¹⁰ This research suggests that when considering a personal attribute, including attributes like intelligence, shyness, and math ability, people tend to endorse either a more fixed mindset about this attribute – that is, they believe that this attribute is stable and fixed and doesn’t change – or people tend to endorse a more growth mindset about this attribute – that is, that this attribute can change and be developed over time. These mindsets exist along a continuum, meaning that people generally fall somewhere from holding a more fixed mindset to a more growth mindset about a given attribute.

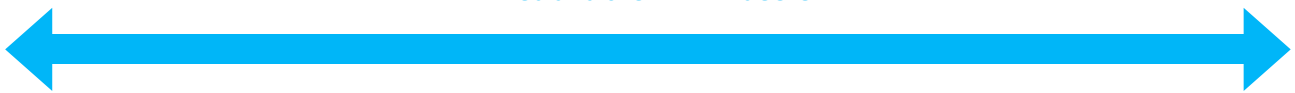
Importantly, in most cases, both a fixed and a growth mindset hold some truth to them. This seems to be the reality in the case of remote work. For example, evidence suggests that certain personality traits, such as higher conscientiousness, help people to perform better during remote work,^{11,12} but there are also many strategies that people can use to get better at working remotely.¹³ The mindset that a person holds selectively orients this person more toward one of these truths over the other, and thus shape how this person interprets and reacts to the world around them.¹⁴

Further, research demonstrates that mindsets are consequential. For instance, fixed mindsets lead people to persist less when challenges are encountered, because challenges are interpreted by this person as a sign that this person is not just good at something, while growth mindsets lead people to be willing to try out new strategies and persist. People with a fixed mindset also tend to react more defensively and to experience negative emotions like shame when a setback happens compared to people with growth mindsets, because for individuals with a fixed mindset setbacks are linked to something about who you are as a person, such as a stable characteristic a person lacks.¹⁵

Thus, we wondered: Might people differ in the extent to which they hold more fixed mindsets about remote work, viewing it as something that people are either naturally good at or not and which can't be changed – or more growth mindsets about remote work, viewing it as a skill that can be learned and developed? And if employees differ in their mindsets about remote work, could that relate to the extent to which they experience well-being and productivity in home office?

Mindsets about remote work. In our research, we expected that employees who hold a more fixed mindset about remote work might struggle more when it comes to adjusting to remote work. If a person believes that they are simply not the kind of person who is good at working remotely, when the inevitable challenges surface during remote work – such as struggling to stay focused, feeling distracted, and feeling isolated – this person might be more likely to think “I’m just not good at this” and become frustrated. Accordingly, people who hold a more fixed mindset about remote work might feel more negative emotion during home office than those who hold a more growth mindset. Further, given a large literature which links the emotions employees feel to their productivity – more positive emotion increases productivity, while more negative emotion undermines productivity¹⁶ – we anticipated that employees who held a more fixed mindset about remote work would feel less productive when working in home office because of the increased negative emotion and decreased positive emotion they experience.

Fixed and Growth Mindsets



More fixed mindset



Remote work is something that people are either naturally good at or not and can't be changed

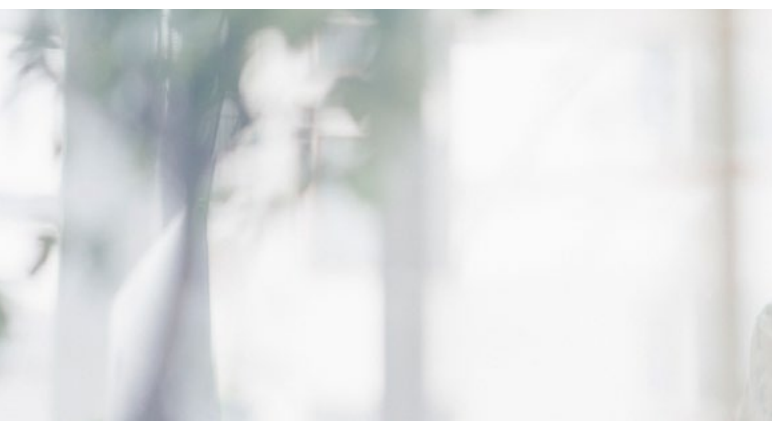
- More negative emotion during home office
- Lower productivity

More growth mindset



Remote work is a skill that people can learn and improve on and can be changed

- Less negative emotion during home office
- Higher productivity





“Mindsets about new ways of working are associated with how people adjust to new work modes”

We examined these questions in a longitudinal study of 113 employees working remotely in Switzerland because of COVID-19 lockdown, when employees unexpectedly needed adjust to working from home. In an initial survey, we measured employees’ mindsets about remote work using questions based on previous research on mindsets.¹⁷ Then over the course of the next three weeks, we asked employees to report how often they felt a set of positive and negative emotions while they were working, as well as how productive they felt.

We found that holding a more fixed mindset about remote work was associated with increased negative emotion during remote work, like feeling upset, anxious, and guilty, and decreased positive emotion during remote work, like feeling excited, interested, and determined. Further, negative emotions were associated with employees’ productivity during remote work the following week – that is, employees who had fixed mindsets felt more frustrated and guilty one week, and this was associated with feeling less productive the following week. Thus, mindsets about remote work were associated with emotional adjustment and productivity during remote work – suggesting that when it comes to new ways of working, it’s important to pay attention to people’s mindsets and how they affect people’s responses to changes in the nature and structure of work.

In sum, we find that mindsets about new ways of working are associated with how people adjust to new work modes. This suggests that to help employees adapt to new ways of working, it is important to consider the mindsets they may hold and their effects. Critically, research suggests that mindsets can be changed.¹⁸ Organizations

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- ¹ Broom, D. (2021, July 21). Home or office? Survey shows opinions about work after COVID-19. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/07/back-to-office-or-work-from-home-survey/>.
 - ² Kelly, J. (2022, March 5). Twitter Employees Can Work From Home ‘Forever’ Or ‘Wherever You Feel Most Productive and Creative.’ Forbes. Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2022/03/05/twitter-employees-can-work-from-home-forever-or-wherever-you-feel-most-productive-and-creative/>
 - ³ Mac, R. (2022, June 1). Elon Musk to Workers: Spend 40 Hours in the Office, Or Else. The New York Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/01/technology/elon-musk-tesla-spacex-office.html?smid=li-share>.
 - ⁴ Choudhury, P., Foroughi, C., & Larson, B. (2021). Work-from-anywhere: The productivity effects of geographic flexibility. *Strategic Management Journal*, 42(4), 655-683.
 - ⁵ Bloom, N., Liang, J., Roberts, J., & Ying, Z. J. (2015). Does working from home work? Evidence from a Chinese experiment. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 130(1), 165-218.
 - ⁶ Frakes, M. D., & Wasserman, M. F. (2016). Procrastination in the workplace: Evidence from the U.S. patent office. Working Paper No. 22987. Cambridge, MA: NBER Working Papers.
 - ⁷ Bartik, A. W., Cullen, Z. B., Glaeser, E. L., Luca, M., & Stanton, C. T. (2020). What jobs are being done at home during the Covid-19 crisis? Evidence from firm-level surveys. Working Paper No. 27422. Cambridge, MA: NBER Working Papers.
 - ⁸ Howe, L. C., & Menges, J. I. (2021). Remote work mindsets predict emotions and productivity in home office: A longitudinal study of knowledge workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Human Computer Interaction*. Advance online publication.
 - ⁹ Turits, M. (2020). Why are some people better at working from home than others? BBC. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200506-why-are-some-people-better-at-working-from-home-than-others>
 - ¹⁰ Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.
 - ¹¹ O’Neill, T. A., Hambley, L. A., Chatellier, G. S. (2014). Cyberslacking, engagement, and personality in distributed work environment. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 40, 152-160.
 - ¹² Venkatesh, V., Ganster, D. C., Schuetz, S. W., & Sykes, T. A. (2021). Risks and rewards of conscientiousness during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 106(5), 643-656.
 - ¹³ Howe, L. C., Whillans, A., & Menges, J. I. (2020). How to (actually) save time when you’re working remotely. *Harvard Business Review* (digital edition). Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2020/08/how-to-actually-save-time-when-youre-working-remotely>
 - ¹⁴ Howe, L. C., et al. (2019). Changing patient mindsets about non-life-threatening symptoms during oral immunotherapy: A randomized clinical trial. *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology: In Practice*, 7(5), 1550-1559.
 - ¹⁵ Howe, L. C., & Dweck, C. S. (2016). Changes in self-definition impede recovery from rejection. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 42(1), 54-71.
 - ¹⁶ Ashkanasy, N. M., & Dorris, A. D. (2017). Emotions in the workplace. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 4(1), 67-90.
 - ¹⁷ Dweck, C. S. (1999). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development*. Psychology Press.
 - ¹⁸ Murphy, M. C., & Reeves, S. L. (2019). Personal and organizational mindsets at work. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 39, 100121.

might take steps to encourage more growth mindsets about remote work, such as offering employees tips for how to improve at remote work to communicate that it is a skill that can be developed or asking employees to reflect on and share with others the strategies they've learned that have helped them to work better when working remotely. Leaders can also consider how mindsets about remote work may shape which employees are eager to work remotely and view it as a perk, versus those that might in fact be averse to such opportunities.



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Conclusion. As technology and other forces change the world of work, affording – and sometimes, as in the case of the pandemic, necessitating – new possibilities for where and when to work, organizations and the people in them will need to adapt. But whether people believe that new ways of working are skills that can be learned – or rather something that people are simply good at or not – may be key in shaping whether and how people embrace these challenges. To ensure that remote work lives up to the promise of greater well-being and productivity, organizations and their leaders should consider how the mindsets of employees play a role in remote work. And as leaders consider what policies and practices should be adopted regarding flexibility in the workplace, they might consider their own mindsets about remote work and their influence on decision-making.

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Prof. Dr. Lauren Howe is Head of Research at the University of Zurich Center for Leadership in the Future of Work, which is a go-to place for leaders looking to tackle the people challenges inherent in the future of work. We work in three mutually reinforcing areas: Discover – Inspire – Shape. Together with our partners, we incubate the Global HR Valley®, www.leadthefuture.org/hr-valley, an innovation ecosystem purposely built to develop the solutions needed for a people-centric future of work.

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