COVID-19 – Creating a New Reality as to What Constitutes the Workplace

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As the Covid-19 cases continue spiking, especially south of the border, we know the pandemic is not over. Scientific progress is being made, but definite answers are still lacking. Organizations have settled into adaptive work situations but these will require modifications for permanency. While occupations as in the construction, health and law enforcement industries are being affected in yet to be determined ways, our interest today is with the issues affecting the work that has been brought to the homes of previously office-bound workers.

Home workers are commonly living with personal pressures like the unknowns about Covid-19, how long it will last and how bad the pandemic might get, let alone being concerned with contracting the virus itself. No doubt the time lost and discomfort associated with the daily commute to distant offices is not being missed, but many are feeling the personal loss of human contact generated in offices. We are social animals after all, genetically programmed to be together and now that need may be hindered by the present and may be exacerbated by the unknown future. Gone, for the time being are the social acknowledgments, validations and spontaneous work sharing that can only be caught with hallway conversations. Anyone who has retired from work will usually tell you the greatest loss is the

built-in connectivity of personal workplace relationships and they do drop off very quickly after leaving the workplace.

The employer needs to monitor the productivity of her staff and one of the best ways is to rely on visual monitoring and personal follow-up. Monitoring productivity off-site is different of course and not impossible, but it currently presents various challenges. Computer time can be tracked for home workers with various software applications, but these measures can be falsified if a worker logs in before going out to the golf course and logging off after doing nine holes. S/he can still be reached by phone and unless a cry of "Four!" crowds the call, the ruse remains undetected. There appears to be a need for more measurable work planning with goals to be achieved by the individual. Tracking systems to monitor goal achievements can be automated to the satisfaction of the employer and employee, but formulating, monitoring and revising plans take time on their own and not all persons are comfortable with this approach to work. Recording and measuring quality is more complex than measuring quantity and the more minute details required for quality measurement might well be considered as too intrusive by some employees. And if that is the case, morale could well suffer.

New patterns and expectations have emerged, but these are still unmapped territory. New rules are required to capture and standardize these emerging patterns and expectations. Legislation and regulations require attention at all government levels and no one can predict what these will be, when they will come into effect and how the individual organizations will implement the required changes. Policies and procedures will have to change, from the perspectives of

front-line worker to board directors, who are re-thinking how the board will continue its governance role. These changes, of course include the flurry of forms and job descriptions that help standardize work practices.

Despite the desire for most to be productive, personal impediments could possibly undermine productivity in the home-office setting. Babies and young children demand constant attention that does not abide by work deadlines, let alone the trials and tribulations that teenage kids bring to the table. Multi-tasking has taken on a new meaning for those living with families and these challenges are intensified with a work space that may not be adequate in the long run. While the kitchen table and the comfy couch served for a while, these can counter one's efforts to be productive, particularly if one's abode is in a noisy apartment complex with inadequate air conditioning. Home workers are compensating for the task juggling by working more hours, but extended hours that become unlimited do not always increase productivity and extensive, uninterrupted "computer time" can be detrimental to one's long term health. Home work requires self-discipline and not everyone is adequately equipped with this ability. Exacerbate that shortcoming with poor time-management skills and we can safely predict a shortfall in productivity.

There has been a massive shift and exponential rates of change to telecommunications spurred by IT sector, some of it orderly and some, not so. The "new normal" still carries unresolved problems. Security is an issue with the leagues of free-lance and paid hackers who have already been picking through cyberspace for interesting bits of confidential information. We have unfortunately witnessed a growing trend in the cybercrime industry. We do not know how robust the internet systems will be and if any of them plunge or crash with the ever-increasing usage rates. This could conceivably create abrupt and unanticipated disruptions to e-communications across many sectors that have come to depend on it. Despite their vexations, most IT systems present regular problems that can be fixed, but only if supported adequately by the required IT specialists. Not everyone has a dedicated "office" computer at home and it is often shared among other family members working at home and/or children relying on the computer for on-line education or for their own entertainment. Telecommunication meetings still have a way to go to be seamless. We all recall how difficult person-to-person meetings could be and we might be hard-pressed to recall good ones. As always, telecommunication meetings can be positive and productive, provided that the person running the meeting knows how to run a meeting. If not, telecommunications will not make things better.

Unknowns still abound. How will the unions function with these new conditions? How will the employer orient a new employee to the workplace? And the list goes on and on. Once the pandemic is brought under control and economic recovery reaches past indicators, the future will not be the same. It will not be a brave new world because too many influences will pull us all back to the old ways. Let's hope the residual changes are helpful to all.