UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
MINISTER OF STATE FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE,
DIGITAL ECONOMY & REMOTE WORK APPLICATIONS OFFICE

pwc

عن بعد
REMOTE

Remote Working in the UAE

Best Practice Review and Future Policy Paper

WHITEPAPER

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FOREWORD

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when everyone started working from home, I was tasked to lead the Remote Work Applications ministerial mandate. This was a critical time. It demonstrated the UAE leadership's determination to not only ensure business continuity during the pandemic, but also to leverage the crisis as a catalyst for monumental economic growth.

Our journey since has been marked by strategic milestones, with the government enacting pivotal legislations to foster remote work across the UAE. These efforts have cemented our nation's status as a haven for people who want to work from anywhere, enabled by a digital and legislative infrastructure unparalleled in its support for the modern workforce. The Remote forum is a touchpoint in this journey for us to reflect, learn and explore.

I would like to thank everyone who took part in the Remote forum. This white paper captures the collective wisdom and innovative ideas that were presented at the forum and serves as a roadmap for public and private sector on enabling remote work for their teams.

Remote Work is here to stay, let us embrace it together.

His Excellency Omar Sultan Al Olama
Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, Digital Economy and Remote Work Applications

PREFACE

Remote working has become an established reality for public and private organisations around the world. The adoption of widespread remote working was necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this was only an acceleration of trends already visible over the past two decades. The real driver of remote working today is the skills shortage in a globalised economy, and many workers now prefer remote or 'hybrid' working options for employment.[1] Manpower's 2023 'Global Talent Report', for example, shows that 57% of companies plan to overcome talent shortages by offering more flexibility about when and where employees work.[2]

In that context, remote working is enabled by universally accessible technology, and the use of high-bandwidth digital communication, streaming live video, file sharing and interactive online working tools, which have increased substantially since the onset of COVID-19. With the usage going up dramatically, global revenues from the sector have increased too – from US$7bn in 2015 to US$19bn in 2021.[3]

> **'Mubadala had been implementing remote work practices before the COVID-19 pandemic. Existing infrastructure in the UAE helped speed the transition to full remote working and the transition did not have any negative impact on the performance of the organisation.'**
>
> **H.E. Homaid Al Shimmari**
> Deputy Group CEO and Chief Corporate
> and Human Capital Officer, Mubadala

However, remote working is still viewed with some contention. Surveys and independent research show that while it is popular with workforces and has extensive economic and workforce wellbeing advantages, a number of public and private employers still remain sceptical about remote working.

Yet the argument for a proactive policy that supports remote working is compelling: evidence shows that a hybrid work model that combines a traditional centralised workplace with a working-from-home option, as well as other forms of remote working, can increase productivity, inclusivity and workforce wellbeing.

It can also widen the available skills base to include, for example, more women and people with caring responsibilities at home, as well as widening the pool of candidates with more niche skills and qualifications, who are no longer constrained by physical proximity to a fixed office location. Other benefits may include cutting traffic congestion during peak times, something the Dubai Roads and Transport Authority is currently studying.[4]

Governments now have to formulate policy and regulatory frameworks that reflect existing remote working trends and shape future developments. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for example, figures from research company YouGov show that around 46% of the working population currently works remotely in some form.[5] At the Remote Forum in Dubai, His Excellency Omar Al Olama, Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, Digital Economy and Remote Work Applications, Director General of the Prime Minister's Office, said, 'Remote work is now a main way of work and not an option,' adding that we should move away from regarding remote working as a temporary trend and see it instead as a 'competitive advantage that improves the quality of life of residents and visitors of the UAE'.[6]

1. https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/research/hiddenworkers09032021.pdf
2. https://go.manpowergroup.com/hubfs/MPG_TS_2023_Infographic_FINAL.pdf
3. https://www.statista.com/statistics/590412/worldwide-collaboration-software-market/
4. https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/2023/10/20/dubai-study-explores-how-remote-working-could-cut-traffic-congestion/
5. https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/2023/10/20/dubai-study-explores-how-remotezzz-working-could-cut-traffic-congestion/
6. https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/03/15/uae-calls-for-flexible-work-practices-to-boost-productivity/

1.

INTRODUCTION:
REMOTE WORKING IN CONTEXT

Remote working is far from new. In the early modern era – before the rise of industrialisation in Europe – it is likely that much, if not most, work was carried out at home or close to it. Like the rest of the world, in the the middle east, home and work were wrapped together, and mobile in the case of nomadic groups. Although some early modern industries, such as mining, agriculture or pearl diving, required work to be done at a designated workplace, other foundational industries such as textile production were largely home-based enterprises.

'We are supporting entrepreneurs to benefit from remote working opportunities. In fact, it is our service recipients who are demanding solutions from us, and giving us the imperative to keep up with them in the drive to remain competitive.'

H.E. Abdul Rahman Bin Abdulmanan Al Awar
Minister of Human Resources and Emiratisation, Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE)

Over the following two centuries this pattern changed, giving way to large-scale manufacturing, which led to the creation of large-scale offices where the administrative work of the new industries took place. As this concentration of work in formal workplaces took hold and working hours increased dramatically, many of the advantages of remote or home working, such as personal autonomy, lower intensity of work and a higher rate of female participation in the workforce, were lost.[7]

The pattern of long working hours concentrated in the workplace rather than at home eventually began to reverse during the 20th century. For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), average working hours fell by 50% between 1830 and 2016, while output per worker rose 12 times over,[8] thanks to the increasing use of technology and industrial organisation.

Interview
Ameena Hussain Thabet
Ameena Hussain Thabet, Executive Director of Human Capital at Mubadala, says that cultural, behavioural and work-life challenges can all be expected in a transition to a remote working pattern, but such issues can be managed and productivity maintained.

Mubadala used remote working extensively during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic has reverted to a hybrid system where employees can work remotely up to eight days a month, irrespective of the reason for doing so, and more than eight days if approved.

'During the lockdown period, one problem that was very apparent was that it was difficult to maintain a work-life balance,' says Ms. Thabet. 'For example, we found that many employees were actually working more than

7. https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2020/12/16/home-working-had-its-advantages-even-in-the-18th-century
8. https://fredblog.stlouisfed.org/2021/10/a-short-history-of-working-hours/

their eight hours in a day, despite being out of the office, and this is an issue that we continue to face today.'

Remote working may be a challenge in terms of work-life balance, but it can also be a solution. 'For example, in addition to the eight days per month working from home, Mubadala also offers employees the opportunity to work remotely from another country for up to 30 days per year,' says Ms. Thabet. 'This flexibility has allowed many employees to spend time with family who returned to their home countries as a result of COVID-19. We have supported that by developing tax guides so employees working remotely from other countries can educate themselves on any tax implications.'

Companies should be aware that people behave differently in remote working contexts and that expectations change. 'There is a social element to working in the office and this can be lost in remote working,' says Ms. Thabet. 'At the same time, the home work environment is more casual and that may make people reluctant to appear on camera in virtual meetings. We make allowance for that, because we understand that women working at home may not want to be seen in a domestic setting or without their traditional abayas.'

'Guidelines are important, and monitoring is important, but in the end the key factor is trust,' adds Ms. Thabet. 'For example, the responsibility for monitoring working hours and KPIs falls with the line manager, but as long as employees are delivering and meeting their goals, and remote working is helping to achieve those targets, then I see no need to revert to working in the office on a full-time basis.'

During the latter half of the 20th century, technological changes enabled a significant increase in remote working. Although the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 7.9% of the total global workforce and 2.9% of employees worked primarily from home, the proportion of remote workers was markedly higher in more developed economies and has been growing consistently for several decades.[9] In the UK, for example, the proportion of workers mainly working remotely grew from around 7% in 1981 to 12.3% in 2015, and the proportion mainly or partly working remotely was even greater, at more than 17% in 2015.[10]

'All public shareholding companies held remote general assemblies during the pandemic and voting was done electronically. More than 50% of public shareholding companies had increased attendance as a result. Now a hybrid system has been adopted as some shareholders want to attend in person.'

Mohammed Junaid Essa
Head of Corporate Governance Section, Securities and Commodities Authority (SCA)

This growth in remote work has led to increased interest in the collection and analysis of data on work outside the workplace, and a proliferation of definitions of remote work. The ILO, for example, defines at least four main varieties of remote work, including 'teleworking', and three subcategories of 'working from home'.[11] For the purposes of this paper, we follow the broad ILO definition of remote work as 'work carried out in an alternative location to the default place of work'. This definition does not include home working where the home is the default place of work, such as professional work performed by self-employed contractors.

9. https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/working-home-estimating-worldwide-potential
10. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ntwe.12097
11. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms_747075.pdf

Remote working and the culture and economy of the UAE

The UAE economy and workforce has responded positively to the introduction of remote working and associated changes in work patterns. The reasons for this are to be found both in the relatively advanced economic infrastructure of the UAE and in the UAE workplace culture, where educational attainment and gender equality are high compared to other economies in the region.

Recent data shows that the global rise in remote working is mirrored in the UAE, with the country ranking 1st regionally and 4th globally among preferred destinations for remote work.[12] This is coupled with broadly positive employee attitudes to increased remote work. The Cisco Global Hybrid Work Study conducted in 2022 includes over 1,000 responses from UAE employees and shows that more than four out of five companies (84%) support hybrid work practices in some way and over 70% were prepared for a hybrid work future, and the Dubai Government Human Resources and RTA are actively encourageing the public and private sectors to increase remote working policies and flexible hours in a bid to reduce traffic congestion. In addition, more than 60% of respondents said their productivity and quality of work had improved due to remote working opportunities.[13]

The most recent research on the impact of working hours, including the recent reduction of the standard UAE working week to 4.5 days, shows that shorter working hours have wide-ranging and largely beneficial impacts on outputs and employee experiences.[14] A recent paper in the Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, based in part on the recent Abu Dhabi Quality of Life Survey, shows that shorter working weeks and flexible working arrangements have wide-ranging beneficial effects on perceptions of work-life balance and employee satisfaction in the UAE.[15]

The UAE is also recognised as a leader in gender parity in the workplace. Although the Middle East has the lowest regional rate

84%
companies support hybrid work practices

70%
companies prepared for a hybrid work future

#1
top destination for Remote Workers

of gender parity in the world, according to the World Economic Forum's latest Gender Gap Report, the UAE has the highest female participation rate in the region at more than 57%.[16] This is in part because women's skills and education levels in the UAE are high, with almost half of adult females either in or pursuing higher education.[17] The UAE also has one of the narrowest gender pay gaps in the world,[18] ahead of either the US or Finland. This high level of female participation and advancement in the workforce may have intensified the broad welcome that UAE companies and public institutions have given to increased remote working: a recent survey by the International Workplace Group[19] found that hybrid working promotes equality at work and helps women further their careers.

The adoption of remote and hybrid working has also been supported and accelerated by the emirates' high level of infrastructure development and 'future preparedness'. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report, the UAE ranked first in the Arab region and UAE came 1st globally in macroeconomic stability, 2nd in ICT adoption and 4th in product market.

According to the Savills Executive Nomad Index, Dubai has towered above global cities as the top destination for remote workers based on climate, quality of life, infrastructure, tax-free environment and world-class digital and transport connectivity.[20] Dubai also ranked 2nd best global city to work according to WorkMotion's latest study based on employment laws, cost and quality of living.[21]

This puts the UAE in the most advanced countries for infrastructure, including roads, air transport, access to electricity and mobile telephone access.[22] In terms of digital competitiveness – which is critical to successful and rapid adoption of remote and hybrid working – the latest global competitiveness survey from the International Institute for Management Development ranked the UAE 13th out of the 66 countries covered by the report, ahead of Germany, France, Japan and many other developed economies.[23]

12. https://visaguide.world/digital-nomad-visa/digital-nomad-index/
13. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-16/dubai-leapfrogs-lisbon-as-best-spot-for-globetrotting-executives
14. https://www.cnbc.com/2023/10/26/barcelona-dubai-prague-top-10-workcation-cities-for-remote-workers.html
15. https://www.cisco.com/c/dam/m/en_us/solutions/global-hybrid-work-study/reports/cisco-global-hybrid-work-study-2022.pdf
16. https://www.npr.org/2021/12/08/1062435944/uae-work-week-change-saturday-sunday-weekends-global-markets
17. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590291122000717
18. https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023
19. https://www.constructionweekonline.com/business/how-freelance-visas-are-transforming-the-job-market
20. https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/
21. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZJ1Z3NR8F8LkGOcWUNWVYasPnlZYIa3L/edit
22. https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/infrastructure/infrastructure-and-vision-2021
23. https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/infrastructure/infrastructure-and-vision-2021

2.

THE COVID19-
EFFECT IN THE UAE

The COVID-19 effect in the UAE

Companies had begun to turn to remote working to solve some of their employee-related challenges well before the COVID-19 pandemic. Such challenges include skill shortages, high in-office costs, the financial and worktime costs of commuting and the high cost of urban housing. These are significant factors in many advanced economies and the UAE is no exception. For many companies, the surge in working from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic showed the alternatives to the high costs of conventional work patterns, giving companies and governments an insight into a different future for work, including a more effective path to the Emiratisation of the workforce through opening new job opportunities to citizens across the territory and abroad.

However, the effect of remote working on employee job satisfaction, perceived work-life balance and employee productivity remains a hotly debated topic. Recent research on the impact of remote working on all these variables among employees of UAE companies has suggested that, on balance, both employee satisfaction and productivity rose when companies in the region adopted remote working.[24]

Interview
Dr. Ebrahim Hasan Al Khajeh

Dr. Ebrahim Hasan Al Khajeh, Division Director of Human Capital, Abu Dhabi Customs, says that remote working has significantly enhanced the productivity of the organisation.

Abu Dhabi Customs initially explored the transition to remote working before the COVID-19 pandemic, where employees encountered resistance to this change, according to Dr. Al Khajeh. However, when the pandemic struck, remote working rapidly gained traction and employees recognised its benefits. 'The closure of offices had no adverse effect on business continuity,' he remarks. 'Employees experienced a significant increase in productivity since they were able to work without disruptions.'

The effective monitoring and evaluation of employees working remotely is critical to the organisation's success, adds Dr. Al Khajeh. 'Employees should have visibility into the evaluation criteria and the system needs to be transparent,' he says. 'Employees should have access to the data and be clear about the expectations. For us, we use algorithms to autonomously assess individuals and clearly set a well-defined framework for rewards and incentives.'

'The goal is to create a win-win situation for both employees and the employer, eliminating uncertainties and incentivising employees to fulfil their duties to the best of their capabilities, with the assurance that they are judged in a fair and unbiased manner.'

Dr. Al Khajeh emphasises that integrating remote work is a crucial element of being a responsible employer. When organisations adopt responsible employer practices, talent

24. https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JBSED-09-2022-0104/full/html
https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=123075

will inevitably get drawn towards them, even in a talent-deficient market. 'If you build an exceptional working environment, you won't have to make substantial investments in marketing yourself or require extensive headhunting. Talent will naturally gravitate and want to be a part of the organisation. It's like the Burj Khalifa – if you construct it, enhance it and make it a desirable place to be, then people will want to come and live there.'

Looking ahead, Dr. Al Khajeh envisions remote work as a stepping stone towards a future of work where virtualisation revolutionises the way organisations work. 'The way forward is to use virtualisation to establish an enterprise metaverse, not limited to training but encompassing all interactions such as meetings or smart inspections. In addition, this will reduce our office space requirements – we have already downsized from occupying three floors to two and I anticipate that we will soon be operating from just one floor.'

'You have to build while keeping the future generation in mind,' he concludes. 'You must create a foundation that resonates with the upcoming generation since this is more effective than just inheriting the old conventional way of thinking. It is highly probable that the traditional mindset will be entirely dismantled and reconstructed from scratch.'

A research paper was recently jointly published by the British University in Dubai and the University of Kuala Lumpur Business School, based on data from 110 employees in public and private employment in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The paper showed that positive work-life balance and job satisfaction scores increase productivity and that these two factors improved in the UAE as a result of increased remote working.[25] In particu-

lar, the study found that employees take on greater workloads in the context of remote working, directly improving productivity.

The study notes that the UAE has one of the most advanced workplace infrastructures in the Arab world and that the conclusions of the study are not necessarily relevant to other regional economies where the communications infrastructure to support remote working may be lacking.

Does remote working promote better mental health?

The impact of remote working on mental health continues to be hotly debated. Although the evidence from companies and other organisations in this report suggests that remote working has been beneficial in terms of work satisfaction and work-life balance, there remains a lack of firm research evidence on remote working and mental health in the UAE and elsewhere.

A systematic review of the current academic literature on remote working and mental health was recently published in the leading peer-reviewed journal BMC Psychology.[26] A total of 27 academic studies were reviewed and no clear consensus was found as to whether the mental health impact of remote working was positive or negative, although there were indications that those who already suffer poor mental health do not thrive in a home working environment and that mental health outcomes were worse for people who only started working remotely during the pandemic.

These conclusions were echoed in a poll conducted by the UK's Royal Society for Public Health, which found that 45% of people thought that remote working was beneficial to mental health compared to 29% who thought it not beneficial, but that among people who switched to remote working as

25. https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JBSED-09-2022-0104/full/html
26. https://bmcpsychology.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40359-023-01221-3

a result of the pandemic, mental health outcomes were worse.[27]

Evidence from the Middle East gathered in the State of the Global Workplace 2023 report from Gallup, which included extensive random samples of populations in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Germany and the US, suggests that hybrid working is the most favourable work pattern for mental health outcomes.[28] Employees in the UAE already report the highest level of workplace engagement in the region and among the lowest levels of daily stress; stress levels are reported to be lowest in hybrid working settings, but somewhat higher in work that is exclusively on-site or exclusively remote.

The jury is still out on the question of whether remote working contributes to or detracts from mental health – but the evidence is clear that for employees in all forms of work, mental health is better in the UAE than in most regional economies.

> '**Now when anyone needs to start a company, they can submit the application online, an evaluation team reviews the application and there is no need for a physical visit. Progress on the application can be seen in an online app. This is all thanks to the shift to remote working.'**
>
> **Manal Almarzooqi**
> Head of Proactive Monitoring Section,
> Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation

The research concludes that on the grounds of worker productivity alone, UAE employers should offer staff flexible working arrangements, including remote working, and should seek to create a hybrid work environment to allow both in-workplace and remote working

according to need.

This growth in productivity will create a higher demand for skilled employees in certain occupations, such as collaboration application development, cybersecurity, cloud computing and network systems. At the same time, enabling employees to perform their tasks effectively will require a good level of digital skills and strong online soft skills, such as communication, adaptability, collaboration and emotional intelligence. Employers who aspire to enable remote work as a permanent policy would need to invest in the people capability development required for working remotely.[29]

Is remote working always appropriate?
The case of UAE construction

Remote working is often associated with businesses with large administrative, professional or intellectual property dimensions to their operations. Companies with infrastructure or resources businesses, such as construction and mining, are often assumed not to be candidates for, or beneficiaries of, remote working.

A recent study published in the Journal of Service Science and Management on the impact of COVID-19 on the UAE construction industry suggests that this assumption may be wrong. The study was based on interviews with three UAE companies[30] that rapidly adopted remote working during the pandemic and was supplemented by data from three more construction companies that had already implemented remote working patterns prior to the pandemic.[31] The study found that even companies in businesses such as construction can shift a large proportion of their work to a remote working pattern. In recent years, this has been facil-

27. https://www.rsph.org.uk/about-us/news/survey-reveals-the-mental-and-physical-health-impacts-of-home-working-during-COVID-19.html
28. https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx
29. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_765806.pdf
30. Arabian Construction Company, Civil Engineering & Contracting Co (CIVILCO), and United Engineering Construction Company (UNEC)
31. https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=123075

itated, in part, by the emergence of online tools for managing project design, project planning and supplier management, such as NetPoint, which the study reports is used extensively by construction companies, including the UAE companies in the study.[32] The study reports that during the COVID-19 pandemic, companies without previous experience of remote working needed to engage in extensive employee training to adapt to remote working technology, and in particular to develop strategies to cope with a dual work strategy of remote working combined with on-site work.

The study concludes that the benefits of remote working in the UAE construction industry outweighed the costs and challenges of implementation, with significant long-term cost and risk reductions reported.

1. H.E. Omar Sultan Al Olama, Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, Digital Economy, and Remote Work Applications
2. H.E. Dr. Ahmad Belhoul Al Falasi, Minister of Education
3. H.E. Zaki Anwar Nusseibeh, Cultural Advisor to HH the President of the UAE, and the Chancellor of the UAE University and H.E. Noura Bint Mohammed Al Kaabi Minister of State, President of Zayed University
4. H.E. Abdulla bin Sultan bin Awad Al Nuaimi, Minister of Justice
5. H.E. Dr Abdulrahman Bin Abdulmanan Al Awar, Minister of Human Resources and Emiratisation

32. https://pmatechnologies.com/netpoint/

3.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES: REMOTE WORKING IN PRACTICE

International perspectives: Remote working in practice

Recent studies of public and private employment outside the UAE have also provided insights into the economic and wellbeing effects of increased remote working during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the evidence for expected positive environmental benefits and reductions in carbon emissions through fewer commuting hours remains inconclusive.

A recent survey by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) of US workers suggests that 20% of full workdays will be carried out from home post-pandemic, compared with just 5% before it.[33] The LSE analysis predicts that employees will enjoy large benefits from greater remote work, especially those with higher earnings.

The LSE study – 'Why working from home will stick' – is one of the largest studies conducted during and following COVID-19.[34] It is based on monthly surveys of working-age US residents since May 2020, eliciting more than 30,000 responses. It is also based on numerous interviews with senior corporate executives on the experiences of adapt-
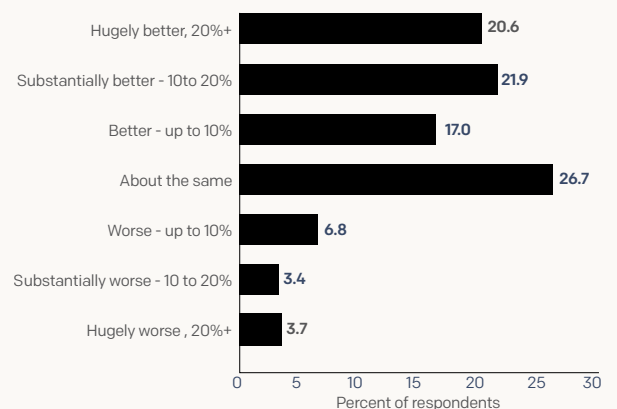
ing to remote work during the pandemic, and on their plans for the future. The study concludes that the likely permanent shift to remote working, accounting for around four times more work days when compared to pre-pandemic arrangements, will have significant beneficial impacts on the overall economy.

The key findings include:

- Remote working is likely to boost overall productivity by 4.6% relative to the pre-pandemic situation, largely through reduced commuting time.

Productivity Gains Exceed Expectations

Relative to expectations, how has remote working turned out?

Category	Percent
Hugely better, 20%+	20.6
Substantially better - 10to 20%	21.9
Better - up to 10%	17.0
About the same	26.7
Worse - up to 10%	6.8
Substantially worse - 10 to 20%	3.4
Hugely worse , 20%+	3.7

Percent of respondents

Source: 'Why working from home will stick', London School of Economics

- Most economic benefits of remote working will accrue to more highly educated and better-paid workers. The propensity for employees to choose remote working and employers to offer remote work increases in direct correlation to the income and education levels of workers – higher-paid workers usually tend to have longer commuting times. When implementing remote working policies, governments must consider the possible

33. https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1790.pdf
34. https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1790.pdf

impacts on low-skilled workers, who will also be affected by the increasing automation in the workplace.

- Perceptions of the value of remote working have shifted dramatically since the onset of COVID-19 and become markedly more positive, with around 60% of workers considering working remotely 2-3 days a week equivalent to a significant pay raise.

- Enforced remote working caused a surge in innovation in the field of remote working technologies, and a surge in spending, with the value of spending on such technologies equivalent to 0.7% of GDP.

- The shift to remote working will have uneven geographic effects, with spending on meals, entertainment and services falling between 5% and 10% in major cities.

- Organisations will feel the economic benefits of a remote working productivity boost, but only about one-fifth of the expected 4.6% productivity increase will be visible in conventional productivity measures since they will not capture the effects of reduced commuting.

The results of the LSE study on the likely downturn in economic activity in larger cities have more recently been confirmed by a late-2023 research study from economists at Georgetown University and the University of Chicago. Using data from smartphones and house price trends, the 'Remote Work and City Structure' report finds that larger cities in the US (defined as being home to at least 1.5m employees) have regained only 60% of their pre-pandemic economy, while central business districts in smaller cities have largely returned to their pre-pandemic levels of activity.[35] The likely explanation, as per the authors, is that workers find the 'critical mass' advantages of working in large cities, such as employment and knowledge-sharing opportunities, which previously were enough to outweigh the higher living, commuting and personal stress costs, are no longer there.

Digital skills are critical to remote working

Remote and hybrid working depend on a digital skillset, say contributors to this policy paper. Organisations that have appropriate technology in place and are ready to provide their staff with the skills to leverage that technology are likely to maximise the productivity and employee satisfaction that remote working promises.

'The crisis taught us all the value of technology and productivity was transformed,' says Dr. Ebrahim Hasan Al Khajeh, Division Director of Human Capital, Abu Dhabi Customs.

Meitha Kolthoum, Director of Strategy and Future Department at the Federal Authority for Government Human Resources (FAHR) – UAE, agrees and says that preparation is everything.

'Upskilling was already a priority for the FAHR before COVID-19 and we already had strategic objectives that focused on how to develop and upskill the federal government workforce, especially in alignment with trends in technology,' says Ms. Kolthoum.

But continual skills development is just as important, she adds. 'During the pandemic, upskilling became one of our key objectives and we launched 'Jahiz', a talent development initiative geared at boosting the preparedness of federal government employees for the future, with courses and tests available for federal entity employees in digital, artificial intelligence (AI), new economy and '10X' skills designed to improve output or productivity by 10 times,' says Ms. Kolthoum.

The building of skills is a leadership responsibility, believes Marwan El Nemr, Head of Aca-

35. https://rossihansberg.economics.uchicago.edu/RWCS.pdf

demia and Government – MENA at LinkedIn. 'The skills landscape in the UAE is changing,' he says. 'An adaptive leadership approach is needed, alongside maintaining connection, trust and focusing on skills development.'

In addition to the LSE study, several other large-scale studies have furnished additional insights into the likely effects of a permanently higher proportion of work being done remotely. For example, the global survey 'Time Savings When Working From Home' by the US National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) of 35,000 workers in 15 countries confirms that employers are the beneficiaries of remote working.[36] The survey shows that when employees are allowed to work remotely, they usually use the time they would have spent commuting to work instead.

As per the survey, on average, employees save 72 minutes in commute time per day when they work from home rather than in the office. The survey also claims that on average, employees allocate 40% of the time

saved to their jobs and 11% to their homes. The research calculates that post-pandemic, remote working will save about one hour per week for every worker in the economy, including those who do not work remotely, amounting to 2.2% of a 46-hour working week. The research concludes, 'the time savings flow back to employers and children, while other caregiving recipients also benefit.'

The environmental impacts of remote working may be neutral

A recent study funded by the UK's Research and Innovation initiative finds that the environmental benefit of remote working may not be as significant as some have claimed. The review 'A systematic review of the energy and climate impacts of teleworking' published in Environmental Research Letters is a synthesis of 39 published studies on the environmental impact of remote working and finds that although it is likely to reduce commuting time, increases in non-work travel and home energy use may offset the reduced environmental impacts and reduction in carbon emissions from less commuting.[37]

The review concludes that 'the available evidence suggests that economy-wide energy savings are typically modest and in many circumstances could be negative or non-existent,' suggesting that governments should be cautious about building assumptions of a net environmental gain from remote working into their policy-making.

36. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w30866/w30866.pdf
37. https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab8a84

4.
FORUM OUTCOMES:
UAE RESPONSES AND POLICY

Forum results: UAE responses and policy

In 2023, the UAE held a forum titled 'Remote' to discuss experiences and organisational responses through the COVID-19 pandemic and how to plan for a future where remote work plays a larger role in the UAE economy. Public and private sector leaders contributed to the sessions, bringing a wealth of real-world and future-oriented experiences to the forum.

João Seabra, President and Head of Global Enterprise Services Siemens Healthineers

Government-sector/ digital economy innovation

According to **H.E. Omar Sultan Al Olama**, Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, Digital Economy and Remote Work Applications, the UAE seeks to be a proactive government in the field of remote work, leading change as opposed to merely waiting for change. The government sees remote work as a source of comparative advantage for the UAE and a driver for improvement in the quality of life of citizens, and seeks to make remote work one of the primary ways of working in the UAE. He said, 'We need to make more use of remote working as a way of reducing commuting and making daily work easier. Remote working offers the advantage of helping people focus on work without distraction.'

Government-sector/human resources innovation

The UAE labour market is growing at more than 10% annually and structurally prepared to adopt any new cultural and workplace innovation, said **H.E. Dr Abdulrahman Bin Abdulmanan Al Awar**, Minister of Human

Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE). He said that investment in digital and legal infrastructures, as well as a leadership culture that is open to new productivity models, has led the UAE to perceive remote working as an opportunity rather than a challenge. Productivity and profitability should be the prime determinants of the work pattern. The tourism and financial sectors are already demonstrating the advantages of the rapid adoption of remote working. The Human Resources Ministry itself is an example of remote work adoption with around 200 UAE citizens working remotely for MOHRE. H.E. Abdul Rahman Bin Abdulmanan Al Awar adds, 'For all employees, the UAE will ensure that equal rights and protection are extended to remote workers, just as if they were working in-person, and this will be supported by our strong legal infrastructure.'

Government-sector/legal practice innovation

In the Remote forum session on UAE legal services, the UAE Minister of Justice **H.E. Abdulla bin Sultan bin Awad Al Nuaimi** explained that automation and data strategy were keys to enabling remote working in the legal sector. He said that 90% of all services provided by the Ministry are now automated, with the remaining 10% to be automated during 2024. The average length of a legal procedure was reduced from 94 days to 65 days (compared to an international average of 120 days) and training in remote court sessions was provided to 240 law students in 2021 and 2022. These improvements have been enabled by the increasing availability of online legal services through the Ministry

of Justice portal, including filing of documents, notary services and marriage contracts.[38] H.E. Abdulla bin Sultan bin Awad Al Nuaimi adds, 'There was initially resistance from judges to the introduction of remote court sessions and at first these sessions were limited. But they have increased from 84% in 2021 to 93% now, including remote marriages too.'

Government-sector/ workplace innovation

In a session on transforming the public-sector workplace through remote work innovations, **H.E. Mohammad Al Kitbi**, Deputy Director General for the Support Services Sector at the Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority (TDRA), said that the authority had established a virtual platform and activated online services in education, communication and procurement, but there remained challenges in defining a system for measuring the productivity of employees in remote work.

H.E. Laila Al Suwaidi, Acting Director General, Federal Authority for Government Human Resources, took up the theme of productivity targets and measurement in a remote work context, saying that in her organisation, performance could be measured using existing digital infrastructure and that productivity is currently measured by the number of transactions undertaken and the speed of implementation.

Dr. Ebrahim Hasan Al Khajeh, Director of Human Capital, Abu Dhabi Customs, said that the customs authority had already built cloud applications for remote working prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 and piloted remote working in certain departments. In 2020, the process was relaunched in response to the COVID-19 regulations, with tools provided to employees to work productively at remote locations, and surveys were undertaken to measure the happiness of employees and to identify challenges.

H.E. Youssef Hassan Al Mutawa, Assistant Attorney General, Public Prosecution Dubai, noted that advanced digital infrastructure and telecommunication systems in the UAE offered opportunities to capitalise on increased remote working. For example, the public prosecutor's office had already launched an application in 2013 to improve communication with the police, and within 48 hours of launch all police stations were ready to deploy the application. He added that remote work had improved the incidence of absence from work.

Interview
Meitha Kolthoum
Successful adoption of remote working is a matter of preparation, skills and infrastructure, says Meitha Kolthoum, Director of Strategy and Future Department at the Federal Authority for Government Human Resources (FAHR) – UAE.

It may not be widely known, but the UAE began preparing for a world of remote working before the COVID-19 pandemic. Work began on a strategic roadmap for the future in 2017, which was approved and known as an official system in 2020. 'It quickly became clear that thanks to this preparation, remote working could be seen as an opportunity, not just a COVID-19 challenge,' says Ms. Kolthoum. 'Education shifted completely to remote working, and that didn't stop education. Doctors did not stop treating patients and the government did not stop delivering services, everything was performing remotely and smoothly in the federal government.'

Ms. Kolthoum adds that the option of remote working attracts skilled people. She says, 'Remote work has now become recognised

38, https://www.moj.gov.ae/en/home.aspx

as a formal work pattern, which has helped in attracting and retaining talent as it provides the flexibility and freedom for employees to work from anywhere, based on the approvals required from the entity's leadership.'

Rolling out appropriate infrastructure is the other key element in successful adoption of remote working, says Ms. Kolthoum. 'The Government ensures that everyone is equipped with advanced infrastructure, and an important dimension of this is that all entities adhere to the same standards and follow the same technical requirements. Federal government entities use the human resources management information system known as 'Bayanati' for collective reports and human resources procedures related to documentation and data gathering purposes.'

She adds that leadership is essential to making these systems work:

'If the leadership had not trusted their employees, remote work would not have been a success. It is leadership that has the power to provide employees with a greater sense of empowerment, provide greater flexibility and instil a culture of trust, which we all felt and lived during and after the pandemic when it comes to remote work implementation.'

Cyber security and Privacy

It is widely recognised that remote working can increase cybersecurity risks and potentially compromise privacy in ways that do not apply to on-site working. This should be of particular concern to organisations in the Middle East, where the evidence is that the costs of cybersecurity breaches are higher than average.

According to research by Proxyrack, a US-based digital services company, the average cost of a data breach in the Middle East is US$6.9m, higher than in many other locations including Europe, Canada and South Korea. Only the US has a higher average data breach cost at US$9.05m.[39] The research also correlated data breach costs with remote working and found that the higher the proportion of employees who were working remotely, the higher the cost of the data breach.

Accordingly, many national security agencies and cybersecurity specialists have evolved specific cybersecurity and privacy recommendations for organisations with employees who work remotely. For example, the cybersecurity specialist Kaspersky has issued a list of key security requirements for organisations using any form of remote working. They include developing a documented home security policy for securing home internet access and Wi-Fi, having a documented bring-your-own-device policy, providing formal cybersecurity training to employees, only using video-conferencing services with end-to-end encryption, updating password policies and using two-factor identification, and preferring centralised data storage.

The UAE is already rated highly against global peers for cybersecurity policy, ranked as fifth in the world for cybersecurity infrastructure in the latest Global Cybersecurity Index[40] prepared by the International Telecommunications Union. In 2022, the UAE implemented an overarching legal framework[41] designed to regulate online technologies including those used in remote working contexts. The UAE has also created a number of cybersecurity resources designed to provide practical assistance and advice for organisations and individuals using any technologies that may have cybersecurity or personal safety and privacy dimensions.

39. https://www.proxyrack.com/blog/cost-of-a-data-breach/
40. https://www.itu.int/hub/?s=index
41. https://laws.uaecabinet.ae/ar/group/1011

These include FedNet,[42] an Emirates-wide pool of cybersecurity computing resources for all government entities, an open-access Digital Wellbeing Support Line[43] and Cyber-Pulse,[44] a cybersecurity awareness campaign initially aimed at women and families.

Government-sector/ federal remote working policy

In a session on broad UAE remote working policy, **Shatha Al Hajji**, from the Office of the Minister of State for AI, Digital Economy and Remote Work Applications, said that key enablers for successful remote working adoption were specialisation and technology, adding that 'remote work is a competitive advantage for employers who can access more and better qualified resources'.

Meitha Kolthoum added that the Federal Authority for Human Resources had concluded that the occupations most suitable for remote work are legal, financial, healthcare and safety, and that the authority was striving for legislative flexibility to make the legal environment adapt to both full-time and limited-time remote working, while developing digital tools to measure productivity on an individual and collective level.

Private-sector/ embracing remote work

In a session on private-sector responses to enforced remote working practices, **Jasim Al-Awadi**, Chief ICT Officer of Du, the Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company and the leading phone and internet provider in the UAE, said that Du had built its remote work environment based on trust. He added that Du saw record profit growth in

2022 and that remote work did not impact the company's financial performance. **Dena Almansoori**, Group Chief HR Officer of Etisalat, the Asia-focused mobile network operator, said that thanks to remote working, the productivity of Etisalat improved and that it also helped the company cut costs and improve its ESG impact. Finally, **Marwan Abu Nawas**, Chief HR Officer of Emirates Islamic Bank, commented that remote working had enabled the bank to access a more diverse talent market.

Private-sector/ Microsoft & Careem
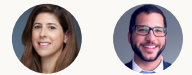
According to **Zaina Fakhry**, HR Director UAE & Saudi Arabia at Microsoft, most Microsoft employees are transitioning to remote work. For example, all meetings have a remote working option and employees can choose whether to attend remotely or in person. Microsoft is also putting resources into longer-term planning for more remote work. But Ms. Fakhry added that it remains important for companies to maintain the right employee experience if they do choose to work from the office and not remotely. **Mazen Farouki**, Senior Director, Organisational Development, at Dubai-based 'super-app' Careem, said that the company had learned significant lessons through remote working during the pandemic. One was that remote work is attractive to staff, giving the company better access to global talent. Another was that it was important to set goals and monitor progress against those goals as a way of assessing productivity. The company had also learned that the barriers to switching jobs were reduced when people worked remotely, particularly for tech talent. And finally, Careem believes that all the company's operations should now be designed with remote working in mind.

42. https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/g2g-services/fednet
43. https://wam.ae/ar/details/1395302823342 (Arabic only)
44. https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303060191

Remote working impact on commercial property

The use of remote working around the world has had significant impacts on the commercial property sector, depressing rentals and sale values as demand for office space has fallen. In the UAE, urban and suburban areas have been strongly affected by remote working. Historically, cities have thrived because they are both residential and commercial centres, but the ability to work remotely has begun to undermine this advantage. Remote work locations frequently offer workers greater space, comfort and sometimes a lower cost of living. This has led to the growth of remote real-estate markets and developers have turned their attention to creating attractive housing communities that are equipped with state-of-the-art remote working facilities.

In many markets globally, demand for urban workspaces has fallen. In the US, for example, research by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) shows that commercial property values are now below their 2019 levels, and forecasts that values will remain depressed to the end of the decade.[45] The NBER says that prior to the COVID pandemic, around 250m sq. ft. of office leases were being signed annually, while the latest data shows that this has fallen to around 100m sq. ft.

Other research from the Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction at University College London confirms this, forecasting that in economies such as the US, commercial property values in 2029 will be around 40% lower than their 2019 values.[46] The Bartlett School also adds that there has been a 'flight to quality' in commercial property markets, with more recent higher-quality properties maintaining value better.

However, what some have called the 'real estate apocalypse' does not appear to have come to pass in the UAE. The property specialist JLL forecasts that there will be considerable commercial space added to the UAE market as demand continues to rise, especially for 'flexible' office space, which currently accounts for less than 1% of the total office stock in Dubai, compared to around 5% in London.[47]

Many believe that liberalisation of employment laws and government-driven investment in the UAE is driving demand and offsetting the effect of remote working on the commercial property market.

H.E. Amna AlDahak Al Shamsi
Assistant Undersecretary, Care & Capacity Building Sector, Ministry of Education

Dr. Jorge Guzman, CEO,
Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi

H.E. Dr. Mohammed Al Kuwaiti
Head of Cybersecurity, UAE Government

45. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w30662/w30662.pdf
46. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/construction/real-estate-breidge/working-home-and-office-real-estate-apocalypse
47. https://www.jll-mena.com/en/trends-and-insights/workplace/the-trend-of-co-working-spaces-in-dubai

5.
GLOBAL POLICY AND
BEST PRACTICES

CHAPTER 5
Global policy and best practices

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, government policy towards remote working in many large economies has undergone significant changes. An initial embrace of remote working as a necessary measure against infection and a potential economic good has been replaced with more mixed messages. Although pro-remote working policies remain in place in many economies, some governments have become increasingly concerned about the effect of remote working on city economies, with fewer office workers meaning fewer people visiting shops, restaurants and other types of business. As described above, there are also concerns about the commercial property market, which is already under stress as a result of higher interest rates across the world. However, for countries such as the UAE who have adapted quickly to these remote and hybrid-working trends, spearheading initiatives like the virtual work residence visa,[48] and attracting new businesses and investment in its economy, the commercial occupancy story is far more positive.[49]

'At E&, technology and systems support the knowledge economy where the outputs matter more than inputs. Hybrid ways of working are encouraged. There is a possibility of policies being misused sometimes, but the costs are negligible compared to the benefits.'

Dena Almansoori
Group Chief HR Officer, E&

In the US, there was an initial government-supported move to make remote working the default working mode in the federal government. The Biden administration imposed a 25% occupancy limit in federal offices, and an internal report from the US Office of Personnel Management found that in 2020, 59% of public officials worked remotely, compared to just 3% before the pandemic.[50] By 2022, such policies had begun to shape employee expectations; last year, a poll from Gallup, a global analytics and advisory firm, found that 80% of workers who could work remotely were doing so, and that almost 60% of those working exclusively remotely would be 'extremely likely' to leave the company if their employer did not offer some opportunity for remote working.[51]

However, in 2023, government policies towards remote working changed markedly. The administrations of both New York City[52] and Washington DC[53] announced plans to require many more federal workers to return to their offices, although the New York policy was later partly retracted. While in January 2023, the House of Representatives passed a measure calling for remote working poli-

48. https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/visa-and-emirates-id/residence-visas/residence-visa-for-working-outside-the-uae
49. https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/property/2023/08/02/tecom-first-half-profit-rises-13-on-strong-occupancy-levels/
50. https://www.opm.gov/fevs/reports/governmentwide-reports/governmentwide-management-report/governmentwide-report/2020/2020-governmentwide-management-report.pdf
51. https://www.gallup.com/workplace/397751/returning-office-current-preferred-future-state-remote-work.aspx
52. https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/nyc-remote-work-eric-adams-softens-stance-on-working-from-home-for-city-employees/4106612/
53. https://www.govexec.com/management/2023/01/dc-mayor-wants-decisive-action-federal-governments-return-office-plans/381445/

cies to return to their pre-pandemic status[54] and in August 2023, the White House chief of staff called on federal agencies to increase in-office working across the federal government network.[55]

Such policy changes have been mirrored elsewhere – for example, as early as in 2020, the UK government began calling for civil servants to return to the workplace as soon as possible[56] and has repeated such calls since.[57] However, despite mixed messages from governments, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has left many countries with enhanced remote working rights and protections. We consider some examples in brief below:

EU/Spain passed a new remote working law in July 2021 applicable to work where at least 30% of total hours are worked remotely in any three-month period. Remote work has to be voluntary and governed by a written agreement. Remote employees are entitled to the same rights as on-site workers and employers are required to carry out a risk assessment of remote workspaces, including psychological, ergonomic and accessibility factors.[58]

EU/Portugal's recent labour legislation covers remote working where employers have more than 10 employees. Employers have to pay remote working costs, including electricity and internet fees, and are required to meet in-person with employees at least every two months. Employees with children under the age of eight years have an automatic right to work remotely and employers are prohibited from contacting employees out of office hours.[59]

Norway's amended working from home legislation from July 2022 covers working hours and employer responsibility for management of the home working environment. New work from home supervisory responsibilities were introduced for the Labour Inspection Authority, together with requirements for employees to create documentation on compliance.[60]

Taiwan passed a work from home regulation in June 2021 requiring employers to provide employees with approved tools, including ergonomic work equipment and updated software. Employers must also offer education and training on mental and physical health in the remote workspace.[61]

Turkey passed new remote framework legislation in March 2021. It introduced an obligation for employers to offer a written remote work contract, including location, hours, communication channels and compensation, and for them to pay specific remote working expenses to their employees. The framework requires employee consent in most cases if on-site work contracts are converted to remote work.[62]

54. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/house-of-representatives-vote-ending-telework-for-federal-employees/
55. https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2023/08/white-house-calls-telework-reductions-agencies-fall/389173/
56. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-54035770
57. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-58804607
58. https://cms.law/en/int/expert-guides/cms-expert-guide-to-remote-working/spain
59. https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=9eeed958-5791-4d6a-89cf-0fd7b3c2d836
60. https://industrialrelationsnews.ioe-emp.org/industrial-relations-and-labour-law-september-2022/news/article/norway-amendments-to-regulations-on-working-from-home#:~:text=Effective%20from%201%20July%202022,employees%20who%20work%20from%20home.
61. https://www.globalcompliancenews.com/2021/08/23/taiwan-government-issues-first-guidelines-on-work-from-home-what-employers-need-to-know06082021/
62. https://cms-lawnow.com/en/ealerts/2021/05/turkey-introduces-remote-working-scheme#:~:text=On%2010%20March%202021%2C%20Turkey,4857.

6.

MAIN CHALLENGES AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Main challenges and policy development recommendations

The UAE and international experience to date suggests that there remains policy work to be done in several areas related to remote working, particularly:

1   **Culture and policy approach**
2   **Detailed legislative planning**

1. Culture and policy approach

- With some organisations still sceptical of the value of remote working, the role of private and public organisation leaders in promoting and facilitating remote work will be critical; government policy should be to encourage positive remote working leadership.

- The economic, inclusivity and wellbeing benefits of increased remote working are already visible in objective data; government policy should be able to collate and disseminate data to catalyse action on remote working facilitation.

- Remote working potentially widens the skills pool in an era of professional skills shortage; policy should be able to review whether visa and work-permit arrangements are supportive.

- Privacy remains a key employee concern and a potential barrier to remote working adoption; policy-makers should review whether existing privacy frameworks and regulations are adequate to protect employee privacy in the remote working era.

- Opportunities for training and development in the workplace may be reduced in a remote working environment; policy-makers have an important role in prioritising continued training and skills development so that training opportunities in remote working at least match those in on-site working.

- Health and safety, including mental health, is impacted by remote working; governments must identify the specific health and safety implications of remote working and form policy and legislation accordingly.

Interview
Iman Bin Khatem

Iman Bin Khatem, CEO – Policies & Programs Sector, Dubai Government Human Resources Department (DGHRD), says that employee feedback and effective communication are critical to the success of remote working initiatives.

Ever since remote working became a Dubai norm in 2020, organisations have maintained productivity, improved their agility and helped create a better work-life balance for employees, according to Ms. Iman Bin Khatem. However, she emphasises that these benefits can only be solidified through a systematic approach involving employee surveys, feedback and clear communication from the leadership.

Ms. Iman Bin Khatem states that actively seeking input about any policy from the end users refines policy-making. Hence, DGHRD has recently conducted exhaustive research to understand current remote work practices, associated perceptions and challenges in implementing it across the Dubai Government.[60]

'Policy-making is a two-way process and we are constantly engaging our employees asking for their feedback through surveys and / or focus group discussions,' she says. 'Their input assists us in gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and provides valuable insights into the policy's application.'

'We also engaged first-line managers and directors to understand their perspective about applying remote work and challenges related to implementing it across different levels,' she adds. 'Their feedback was crucial in generating various recommendations and initiatives aimed at improving the current policy and system.'

The results of their feedback have been embedded into formal policy, through the Executive Council Resolution Concerning the Telework System for the Employees of the Government of Dubai, which was officially published in November 2020. But according to Ms. Iman Bin Khatem, the real drive behind the formalisation of remote working is an attempt to change the way we work and focus on results and corporate agility rather than the traditional ways of working.

'We persist in our efforts to shift the mindset around employee visibility and the inequity that it might create, through constant awareness sessions around the policy,' she says. 'We also continue to review and assess the programmes and policies that we launch to improve them and make them more effective and we are currently in the process of reviewing the remote working policy to address any gaps that have come up after its initial implementation to enhance it.'

Effective communication is the cornerstone for building a conducive environment for remote work, she adds.

'You need to get buy-in from management and work against inequity in terms of implementation. We do that by educating employees and managers, creating more awareness around the system, and leading by example.'

Ms. Iman Bin Khatem further mentions that 'managers and employees may feel that they are not as connected to the team when working remotely as opposed to working in the office. Remote workers might experience a sense of isolation and disconnection from their co-workers, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and disengagement. That means managers must communicate often to increase empathy levels, they have to provide tools and methods not only for the efficient exchange of information and connectivity, but also to ensure employees' engagement and active participation in different activities.'

Good use of feedback and communication in a remote working context helps build better organisations, she concludes. 'Remote work is now part of our Employee Value Proposition and considering the changing dynamics of the workplace all over the world, it is critical to attracting and retaining talent. We as the Dubai Government are committed to exploring methods to maximise the potential of remote work, particularly in the context of talent, essential for sustaining Dubai's growth and success.'

63. https://www.dghr.gov.ae/DGHRTT/Remote%20Work%20Study-Final-Eng.pdf

2. Detailed legislative planning

Governments worldwide are in the process of drafting regulatory amendments or new legislative packages to govern the increase in remote working. Outstanding issues include both worker and employer rights and obligations, including federal entity employers where remote work is defined according to Article 6 of the Federal Decree Law No. (49) of 2022 in the UAE.

- Many legislative initiatives include a requirement for remote working to be governed by written contracts and rules detailing what equipment and what remote working-specific training employers should provide, as well as specifying what operating costs, including power and connectivity costs, employers should cover.

- Legislation may set rules on whether shifts to remote working require worker consent and what proportion of work done remotely is defined as demanding remote working contract protection.

- Powers to inspect remote workplaces may be granted to competent national bodies, while employers may also be required to assess remote workplaces; limitations on remote working hours have also been introduced in some cases.

- Automatic rights to work remotely may be granted to eligible employees.

Freelance visas are transforming remote work

As companies seek to use remote and hybrid working models to capture top talent and key skills – both at home and abroad – they need supportive residency and work-permit regulations that match the flexibility of hybrid work. This includes freelance and 'digital nomad' visa options, such as the UAE freelance visa introduced in 2019 that frees workers from the need to have a single employer and employment contract,[64] and the one-year residency permit for remote workers introduced in 2021.[65]

Ease of application and low administration costs are the key characteristics of a successful freelance visa programme. Policymakers should be aware that freelance visas are advantageous not only for workers but also for employers, who see remote working as the employment model most likely to fill emerging skills gaps. While 89% of regional professionals surveyed in the Bayt.com poll 'Freelancing in the MENA' plan to do more freelance work, 86% of respondents say that their company is planning to hire freelancers in the current year.[66]

Freelance work is characteristic of some of the fastest-growing sectors in the UAE economy: the Bayt.com survey shows that freelance work is growing fastest in digital marketing and information technology. A continually evolving freelance visa scheme is likely to be critical to supporting that growth.

64. https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/visa-and-emirates-id/residence-visas/residence-visa-for-working-in-the-uae
65. https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/2021/07/01/dubai-is-second-most-popular-global-city-for-digital-nomads/
66. https://www.bayt.com/en/blog/29473/bayt-com-poll-freelancing-in-the-mena/

7.
CONCLUSION

Conclusion: Implementing an enabling framework

The burden of evidence from this report and many external sources is that remote working in a hybrid setting confers powerful advantages on organisations. It helps them to capture a wider set of skills from the global market, promotes inclusivity and workplace equality, lowers costs and increases productivity.

Yet, a true hybrid work approach will not self-generate. It needs numerous enabling factors to be in place, starting at the top of each organisation. Drawing on the insights of senior public and private UAE contributors to this report, we believe there are four main dimensions to hybrid and remote work enablement:

1. Leadership
At the centre of the transition to hybrid working is leadership. Organisations seldom achieve significant transformations in their way of working without strong leadership in place. Leaders have to communicate why and how the organisation is transitioning, they must empower the organisation to achieve new targets and they must win buy-in from all relevant stakeholders.

2. Trust
Secondly, remote working only succeeds in an atmosphere of trust, where staff are empowered to work proactively with less in-person supervision. Trust requires empathy for differing individual needs and is built on a sense of community reinforced by the celebration of that community.

3. Skills and tools
Remote working also needs new skills and tools. These include networking and digital tools for collaboration, and it demands a digital-first culture and a readiness to work and upskill with new and unfamiliar platforms.

4. Policy
A final success factor for the hybrid work model is clear organisational policy on the rights and obligations of workers in any workplace setting. Procedures should be transparent, targets should be clear and contracts governing the new work model should respect privacy and be based on mutual consent.

The overall direction is clear: remote working is a much bigger opportunity than it is a threat. Governments need to consider how to effectively apply the proposed remote enabling framework to capitalise on this opportunity; reimagining a more productive and balanced employee culture, workforce and society that will thrive into the future.

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