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Permanent Home Office -CURSE or BLESSING for professional project management careers? A first investigation.

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Abstract: In the modern working society, the amount of employees who work from home grew fast during the last years, especially since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Now, as the world moves slowly back to normal, companies have to decide how to move on. Many enterprises insist again on co-located work on site (meaninghome office is only an exception), others offer a hybrid model, and a third group of companies wants their employees to work from home one hundred percent. This paper describes how people evaluate a permanent home office solution for project managers from a career development perspective. Based on an online survey and in consideration of demographical information it can be noticed that there is not a single solution, which fits for every culture, industry, employee age, seniority level and gender.

Keywords: Career Development, Home Office, Project Management, Remote Work, Virtual Collaboration

I.   Introduction

Recently more and more companies allowed or even asked their employees to work from home. The latter one has been the case specifically during the Covid-19 pandemic (Niebuhr, et al. 2022, 1). During that time, it has also been recognized that a lot more people than expected can work at home successfully (Fana, et al. 2020, 3). Nevertheless, the number of individuals working remotely will probably not remain as high as it was during the pandemic, but it will continue on a higher level than before 2020 (McDonald, et al. 2022, 183). Currently, from a global perspective, 46 percent of all desk-based employees work in a hybrid model and 18 percent work fully remote (Future-Forum 2022, 15). This article focusses on personnel which belongs to the last group.

Working one hundred percent from home could bring some career related challenges with it. For example, the lack of visibility can create concerns as employees feel a risk to be overlooked when advancement opportunities come up (Richardson and Kelliher 2015, 127). In addition, managers often interpret telecommuting as a lack of dedication to one's career (Golden and Eddleston 2018).

The objective of this paper is to investigate, if it is an advantage or disadvantage for professional project management careers if employees work from home permanently. In the following section the author summarizes existing literature with focus on home office and career development. Afterwards the research strategy and subsequently the findings will be described. The article will be closed with a discussion and finally with a conclusion which also contains inspirations and directions for future research.

II.   Theoretical Background

In the past most people were required to be physically present in an office to perform their job, but this changed during the last years (Beňo 2021, 13). Researchers reported already in 2018 that approximately every sixth company

worldwide operates one hundred percent remotely, which means there is no headquarters or common workspace available, and employees decide on their own where they want to work (Owl Labs 2018).

In 2020 Covid-19 became an accelerator for home office permissions (Lund, et al. 2020, 10) and even employees who did not show interest in working from home as well as people who were not allowed to do so before, have been sent home to work from there (Chamakiotis, et al. 2021, 2). The pandemic affected, especially due to the lockdown(s), all industries and service sectors in the same way (Herath and Herath 2020, 277) and almost half of all company leaders plan to allow permanent remote work in the future (Gartner 2020). This will not be possible for all professional roles, but Lund et al. estimate that 20 to 25 percent of all employees in advanced economies could work from home up to five days per week without a loss of productivity (2021, 7).

There are advantages for companies but also for their employees if remote work is permitted. Companies see for example the possibility to reduce costs compared to traditional offices as less workspace is required (Ipsen, et al. 2021, 1). Furthermore, enterprises become more flexible. If they are open for virtual collaboration, they canstart to look for the right employees outside the city or even outside the country in which the company is based. On the other hand, employees who had to commute to work can save money as well as time and are often more balanced and less stressed (Kamir, et al. 2022, 24). In addition, personnel have the possibility to accommodate family life and private interests which can lead to higher job satisfaction, creativity, and innovation (Tomei 2021, 261). Nevertheless, there are disadvantages as well, as mentioned further up (e.g., lack of visibility).

One must differentiate between three different levels of remote work, depending on the amount of time employees spent physically together with their peers (McDonald, et al. 2022, 183).

> Level 1 - Working at employer's premises while remote work is more an exception
> Level 2 - Hybrid mode, working regularly from home but also at the employer's site
> Level 3 - Fully remote workers, located anywhere in the world

Whereas employees who work in level 1 or 2 have the opportunity to influence their career progression by taking advantage of personal interactions with managers, mentors, coaches etc. at the workplace, it is more difficult for those belonging to the third group as they are less visible which can in worst case even cause fears of job losses (Richardson and Kelliher 2015, 127). The intention of this paper is to determine how this third group sees the situation after many months spent in home offices due to Covid-19.

III.   Research Strategy

To investigate how employees with a different demographical background evaluate permanent home office solutions from a career development perspective, a public "one-question" survey has been conducted for two weeks. During that time the survey was availableonline on LinkedIn and people have been asked "Permanent Home Office - Is it CURSE or BLESSING for professional project management careers"? The idea of the survey was to keep it simple for respondents to share their opinion and by raising only this key question, it was ensured that participants will not require more than a few seconds for sharing their opinion.

IV.   Findings

In total 111 people replied to the question and LinkedIn supported the activity by providing demographical information about the participants. The replies have been categorized into countries and industries as well as age, seniority level and gender of the respondent.

Almost 56 percent of the survey respondents see a permanent home office as a disadvantage when they evaluate it from a career progression perspective. This means, on the other hand, that ca. 44 percent of the participants recognize it as a blessing (Table 1).

Table 1 - Curse/Blessing evaluation by country

Participating Countries	Curse	Curse (%)	Blessing	Blessing (%)	Total	Total (%)
Belgium	1	0.9%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%
Croatia	3	2.7%	1	0.9%	4	3.6%
Denmark	1	0.9%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%
Finland	0	0.0%	2	1.8%	2	1.8%
France	0	0.0%	5	4.5%	5	4.5%
Germany	26	23.4%	18	16.2%	44	39.6%
India	1	0.9%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%
Israel	1	0.9%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%
Italy	1	0.9%	2	1.8%	3	2.7%
Lebanon	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	1	0.9%
Morocco	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	1	0.9%
Netherlands	2	1.8%	2	1.8%	4	3.6%
Nigeria	1	0.9%	1	0.9%	2	1.8%
Poland	1	0.9%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%
Slovenia	1	0.9%	1	0.9%	2	1.8%
Spain	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	1	0.9%
Sweden	10	9.0%	6	5.4%	16	14.4%
Switzerland	1	0.9%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%
United Kingdom	6	5.4%	3	2.7%	9	8.1%
USA	6	5.4%	5	4.5%	11	9.9%
Σ	62	55.9%	49	44.1%	111	100.0%

The majority of the survey participants comes from Germany (nearly 40%), followed by Sweden (14,4%), USA (almost 10%) and UK (8,1%). In all these countries more people saw the home office as a curse and not as a blessing for their professional career. It is the opposite in Finland, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Spain, and France. Especially in the latter one the respondents seem to have a clear positive opinion about the relationship between full-time home offices and a successful career development. As the preferences differ a lot between the individual countries, it can be assumed that the cultural background actsas an influencing factor.

If the responses are looked at from an industry perspective, it is difficult to get an unambiguous picture for all industries (Table 2).

Table 2 - Curse/Blessing evaluation by industry

Participating Industries	Curse	Curse (%)	Blessing	Blessing (%)	Total	Total (%)
Agriculture	1	0.9%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%
Automotive	2	1.8%	3	2.7%	5	4.5%
Construction	2	1.8%	0	0.0%	2	1.8%
Consulting	12	10.8%	6	5.4%	18	16.2%
Education	4	3.6%	3	2.7%	7	6.3%
Electronics	7	6.3%	7	6.3%	14	12.6%
Energy	3	2.7%	3	2.7%	6	5.4%
Food & Beverage	1	0.9%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%
Health Care	1	0.9%	1	0.9%	2	1.8%
Industrial Market	18	16.2%	17	15.3%	35	31.5%
Information Technology	3	2.7%	7	6.3%	10	9.0%
Manufacturing	5	4.5%	1	0.9%	6	5.4%
Marketing	2	1.8%	0	0.0%	2	1.8%
Transportation	1	0.9%	1	0.9%	2	1.8%
Σ	62	55.9%	49	44.1%	111	100.0%

There are responses from some industries which are not showing a clear preference but there are also industry replies worth to be described in detail. For instance, twice as many survey participants from the Consulting industry (12 vs. 6) see a permanent home office as a curse, when it comes to their personal career development. Looking at it from a Manufacturing industry perspective this opinion is even stronger. Five out of six participants evaluate a permanent home office as a disadvantage for their career in manufacturing.

It is different for the Information Technology industry as the number of respondents who perceive a permanent home office as a blessing from career perspective is more than twice as high as the amount of people who see it as a curse. In terms of the Industrial Market, from which 31,5 percent of the replies came, curse and blessing are almost balanced. While 51,4 percent of the Industrial Market respondents noticed it as a disadvantage for their career to work from home permanently, 48,6 percent see it as an advantage.

When the age of the survey participants is brought into the investigation, it becomes obvious, that especially older employees (between 45 and 64 years) are more concerned about their career development in permanent home offices (Table 3). Out of 56 people from that age group 39 (almost 70%) see permanent work from home as a weakness for their career and only 17 see it as an advantage. It is the opposite for individuals between 35 and 44 years. Almost 60 percent of these people perceive permanent home offices as beneficial for their career.

Table 3 - Curse/Blessing evaluation by age

Age of respondents	Curse	Curse (%)	Blessing	Blessing (%)	Total	Total (%)
25-34	2	1.8%	1	0.9%	3	2.7%
35-44	21	18.9%	31	27.9%	52	46.8%
45-54	34	30.6%	16	14.4%	50	45.0%
55-64	5	4.5%	1	0.9%	6	5.4%
Σ	62	55.9%	49	44.1%	111	100.0%

In addition to the three criteria mentioned further up, also the seniority of respondents (Table 4) and their gender (Table 5) have been considered. In this paper seniority describes the management level of the individuals. Taking this level into account, it becomes visible that especially low- and mid-level managers (almost 65% of that group) are worried about working from home permanently. High-level managers are less stressed, even though only 55,1 percent (of that group) see it as a blessing for their career to exclusively work from home.

Table 4 - Curse/Blessing evaluation by seniority level

Seniority of respondents	Curse	Curse (%)	Blessing	Blessing (%)	Total	Total (%)
Low	4	3.6%	1	0.9%	5	4.5%
Mid	36	32.4%	21	18.9%	57	51.4%
High	22	19.8%	27	24.3%	49	44.1%
Σ	62	55.9%	49	44.1%	111	100.0%

Although the total number of female participants is significantly smaller (16 female participants versus 95 male participants), it can be observed, that most females prefer a permanent home office.

Table 5 - Curse/Blessing evaluation by gender

Gender of respondents	Curse	Curse (%)	Blessing	Blessing (%)	Total	Total (%)
Male	56	50.5%	39	35.1%	95	85.6%
Female	6	5.4%	10	9.0%	16	14.4%
Σ	62	55.9%	49	44.1%	111	100.0%

In total 62,5 percent perceive it as an advantage for their career development to work from home. Compared to responses given by male participants (41,1% see it as a blessing) this number is considerably higher.

V.   Discussion

The results of the above-described investigations are important for researchers but also for companies employing remote staff, even though there is no clear answer to the survey question "Permanent Home Office - Is it CURSE or BLESSING for professional Project management careers" at first glance (44,1% blessing vs. 55,9% curse). Nevertheless, when demographical data is brought into the analysis, interesting observations can be made.

One example is the Consulting industry. As seen in the results, most consultants prefer not to work from home. They would rather work on site, where they are seen by their management as well as their clients and have personal interaction with both stakeholder groups to positively influence their career. In addition, it is important to mention that the research determined that older employees are more concerned about their career when working from home. This might be caused by a too radical change from co-located teams to virtual ones (due to Covid-19) and missing trust in digital collaboration tools. A third example is the different feedback from male and female respondents. The latter ones see a permanent home office as a blessing, probably due to the fact that it supports an easier combination of family and career.

The findings described in section 4 allow enterprises to get a better understanding of their employees' preferences related to career development and remote working. The present paper clearly indicates that there are differences, which depend on five criteria (cultural background, working industry, employee age, seniority level and gender).

VI.   Conclusion and future research

The main finding of the described research activity is, that different people prefer different working environments to positively influence their career development. Companies must not force their employees into a working environment which fulfils the enterprises requirements in the best way. They should rather remain flexible and share the outcome of this paper with their leaders to make them aware of the different employee preferences. Depending on the five criteria mentioned further up, people should be allowed to choose the workplace that fits best for them and their career progression.

The intention of this study was to do a first fundamental investigation to determine if permanent home office work is seen as an advantage or disadvantage for personal career development in project management. It should be taken as an inspiration for future long-term and more comprehensive research. Apart from this, also focused studies should be conducted to further close this research gap in the area of (virtual) collaboration. For instance, the cultural influencing factors could be explored as global companies might have to offer different workplace solutions for different countries in which they are present to support career development based on individual cultural preferences. In addition, this article indicated that the age could affect working environment preferences. Due to the demographic change, that results in a rising average age of employees (Cylus and Al Tayara 2021, 1), this area deserves further research as well.

Furthermore, the outcome of this paper contributes to the performance of the individuals, as it emphasizes the importance of providing the right working environment to ensure a career development, as striven by the employee. When this condition is met, it leads to a higher job satisfaction which increases the employee's performance (Paais and Pattiruhu 2020, 577).

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