Transcript of IMF podcast:

**Jeffrey Polzer: Rethinking Work During and After Lockdown**

Jeffrey Polzer:

What I do is I study people at work. I focus on collaboration and teamwork, I've been studying that for a long time. Obviously, COVID dramatically affected the way people are collaborating and doing their work.

Jeffrey Polzer:

My name is Jeff Polzer, I'm a professor in the organizational behavior department at Harvard Business School. My coauthors and I got together and decided to try to gain some insight into whether the patterns had changed. We hear lots of anecdotes, but have things really changed at a large scale? If so, in what ways? That motivated us to conduct a study.

Bruce Edwards:

Welcome to this podcast produced by the International Monetary Fund. I'm Bruce Edwards.

Bruce Edwards:

In this program, while our work environments changed literally overnight, the impact of lockdowns on the nature of work is likely to last well beyond the pandemic. In a study recently published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, scholars from Harvard and Stern business schools looked at the ongoing challenges for organizations and workers struggling to adapt and perform amid the global pandemic. Jeff Polzer is a coauthor of the study.

Bruce Edwards:

So people are complaining about spending their days in Zoom calls now. Are they, in fact, spending more time in meetings?

Jeffrey Polzer:

What we found across over three million people, across 16 cities, in over 20,000 firms, so that's the scale we're talking about, in aggregate, people are, on average, having more meetings per day. But, these meetings are shorter, again on average, so the net effect of that is that the average amount of time spent in meetings per day has actually declined, a little bit, across this large sample. When I say declined, I'm comparing the eight weeks pre-lockdown in cities that had government mandated lockdowns, to eight weeks post-lockdown. One other pattern is that the
Jeffrey Polzer:

So you've got this interesting mix of more meetings, bigger meetings, but shorter duration.

Bruce Edwards:

So how did you collect the data for this study? Where does the data come from?

Jeffrey Polzer:

We were already collaborating with an information technology service provider that licenses their digital communications platform and solutions to organizations around the world. This allowed us to jump into this study with COVID data right away, because we had already done the work of putting into place the data security measures, and the privacy measures, legally and in terms of what we wanted to have in place to protect people's data.

Jeffrey Polzer:

We already had access, or were able to get access quickly, to de-identified, aggregated data, based on people's digital email and calendar use for this big sample of people. With that ability to tap into that data, we decided specifically to focus on 16 cities that had very specific lockdown mandates put in place on specific dates. That allowed us, across the 16 cities, to identify a period when we could be confident to say, "Okay, after the lockdown people really are working from home, because they are mandated to do so." Then, to specify an eight week window before the lockdown, and an eight week window after the lockdown, to do this comparison.

Bruce Edwards:

So to what extent has email traffic changed during the pandemic?

Jeffrey Polzer:

Email was interesting, in that we absolutely saw a spike, an increase of activity, when the lockdowns occurred. In fact, it's interesting because we picked this lockdown date to be our focal point, but the increase started before the lockdown occurred. Which makes sense, the virus was spreading in these different localities, at different times.

Jeffrey Polzer:

Email spiked, both internal emails sent among people within companies, external emails sent by people in a company to those outside the company. They spiked around the lockdown, the week after the lockdown, even two weeks. And then, we saw the pattern start to return to the baseline, with emails. Meeting activity, on the other hand, had remained different across the whole window of our study, but emails came back to baseline.

Jeffrey Polzer:

You could imagine lots of possible reasons, and we don't have access to what was in these emails, so we speculate. But, you can imagine lots of coordination and company-wide announcements about what the plans are, and what we're going to do, and how we need to change things.

Bruce Edwards:

Yeah. So with almost a month, or at least over three weeks between the earliest lockdown in Milan, in early March, and then, in Washington, DC at the end of the month, or almost at the end of the month, was there any difference in the way that these lockdowns were managed? Did the later lockdowns learn anything from the earlier ones, do you think?
We haven't formally tested that. My sense is, though, is even though there is a difference of a little less than a month between our earliest and latest lockdown, I think so many firms ... This is just my speculation. But, so many firms were focused inwardly on what do we need to do? Individually and collectively, how are we going to set up our home office? How do we do this? The fact that some of these different cities were across the globe, with that compressed a timeline, I'm not sure there was time to learn, and even to see the results from early lockdowns, within firms.

Jeffrey Polzer:

The one exception to that, that would be very interesting to look into ... Again, we haven't done this. But, to look at global firms that have offices across different countries and cities, that were experiencing these lockdowns. Within those firms, one could imagine a real ripple effect of adjusting in different places, and trying to learn from that.

Bruce Edwards:

Yeah, so the global aspect of this, are multi-country meetings happening more now? Do you think people are more tolerant of the timezones that they were, perhaps, pre-lockdown?

Jeffrey Polzer:

We were able to get a measure of multi-country meetings from the data provider, and we did see an increase in the three or four weeks after the lockdown. But then, those multi-country meetings actually declined, when you get into week six, seven, and eight past the lockdown. You can imagine, some of this is driven by global companies who are, again, doing coordination across their locations in different countries.

Jeffrey Polzer:

We also heard some anecdotes. We don't have systematic evidence on this. Of where offices in one country that were going through traumatic lockdown activities were handing off work to other countries, who were picking up some of the work to help their colleagues in other countries.

Jeffrey Polzer:

In terms of tolerance for different timezones, it's a really interesting question. I think it's part of a more general phenomenon that we're seeing of adaptability to different, not just timezones, but different time situations in people's home offices. So imagine pre-COVID, or in lots of organizations traditionally, there are nine-to-five work hours, and we can count on people being in the office and being at work during those times. That's part of the reason that flexible work arrangements, or work from home arrangements had been tricky because if you want flexibility and want to work later, how do people know when you're available and when you're not? With this really strong norm, of a traditional workday.

Jeffrey Polzer:

Even across timezones, you could still estimate that well, let's just look at what timezone they're in and what the normal workday is there, and we'll look for the overlap. Or, accommodate it if there isn't enough overlap. Then we're really sensitive, and we know that we need to adapt. That adaptation, I think, has really taken hold everywhere, even within the same timezone, to say, "Okay, what's your situation? What's my situation? When are you available, when am I available?" Now, we need to recalibrate and re-coordinate that we're going to get our work done, and when we're going to do any kind of collaboration we need to do.

Bruce Edwards:

Do you think workdays are, in fact, getting longer?
Jeffrey Polzer:

We have a good proxy of that. It's not perfect, but we measured workday length, with the data that we had available to us, by looking at the first instance for each person, the first instance of an email or a meeting, the timestamp of that email or meeting, and the last instance each day, of a meeting or email. We simply looked at the length, the number of hours between the first and last email or meeting of the day. We didn't have the individual data, but we got to aggregate measures of this workday length, according to that measure.

Jeffrey Polzer:

The workday, across over three million people, on average, the workday has increased, by 48 minutes, from an average eight weeks pre-lockdown, to eight weeks post-lockdown. And then, when we look at that on a week-by-week or day-by-day basis, we also see that it didn't simply spike during the lockdown and then come back down, it has stayed higher across the eight weeks of data that we have after the lockdown.

Jeffrey Polzer:

Now, important and immediate caveat, that we don't know what people are doing during those hours between their first and last email or meeting. So we don't know if they're working longer or harder, we just know that the extent of their workday has increased. But, there's a lot of variation around this.

Jeffrey Polzer:

Imagine that one person is simply working more hours than they were before, and it extends into the evening or the early morning, and doing just more work every day. Other people may be having, be taking breaks in the middle of the day for meals with their family, or to take care of someone whose unhealthy during this pandemic. Or, for all sorts of other reasons, to do some of the normal work that they do in the evening. Maybe they have a colleague who can only meet in the evening, so they rearrange their schedule accordingly. We know that the workday has been extended, and anecdotally at least, for sure some people are working more hours overall, and others are working more flexibly.

Bruce Edwards:

Yeah. That brings up an important point, where people have different home environments. Some more conducive to work than others. Some have very difficult home environments, with young children, elderly parents, or whatever. Do you think, are people being left out of some of the day-to-day activity that goes on in their companies, because of restrictions on their time and their home environments?

Jeffrey Polzer:

I think there's a big risk of people being left out of important organizational decisions, and meetings, and the like, because of challenges in their home environments. In fact, some of my colleagues have done some survey research, with scientists for example, and one of the big variables that came out in terms of affecting the productivity, in this case of research scientists, was the presence of children at home. Obviously during the pandemic, lots of these children are not at school, so they need to be taken care of.

Jeffrey Polzer:

So, absolutely, people's home situations, including childcare, or care for members of their family, or even their home office set up. We've seen the anecdotes, and heard the stories of people working from their closet, or certainly their bedrooms, as they try to scramble together some sort of home office. And by the way, people working from their cars in the parking lot of somewhere that has WiFi, so people are trying to adapt in all kinds of ways.
Jeffrey Polzer:

But, this is a recipe for people with more challenging home environments being left out, not even intentionally. But, being left out, potentially, of some of the core work activities, especially around collaboration, and decision making, and information sharing that are occurring through this meetings and other forms of communication.

Bruce Edwards:

Do we need to be worrying about inequality caused by the work environments?

Jeffrey Polzer:

I think the risk is real that inequality across people's home environments could start to affect their progress and their success in their companies, to be sure. It's another dimension that can, often, layer on to previous sources of inequity.

Jeffrey Polzer:

I think there's also, though, some potential good news here. If we think about pre-pandemic life, now it seems like a long time ago, people who wanted more flexible work arrangements, or who wanted to work from home, there was some evidence that some of those people were more productive. But the people choosing to do that, some were choosing to do that because they had a great home environment for working, and found more distractions at the office. So you saw increased productivity, among that particular sample of people. You saw other people who wanted to work from home because they had all of these responsibilities at home, and a long commute just added to the challenge of the typical day. In that situation, you had a set of people at the office, working normal hours, and some people then working at home, or anywhere, wherever they were. That situation could really instill a divide between the people at the office and the people at home. There might be a silver lining, these days, that when everyone in the company is required to work from home, it normalizes that situation.

Jeffrey Polzer:

Think about those instances where somebody's working from home, and we all expect everyone to be very professional, and if they're on video, for their background to look very professional. Heaven forbid if, pre-pandemic, if someone's child ran through the background of their office when they were in a work meeting, that was such a big deal.

Bruce Edwards:

Yeah, we're seeing a lot of that now. Yeah.

Jeffrey Polzer:

That has all gone out the window, maybe for the better. To say that hey, we're all working from home, the idea that we have challenges working from home has now become almost a norm, it's commonplace. People get it, and I think managers get it, that it's not that somebody's choosing to work at home so they can slack off, it's that we're all required to work at home, and we're all doing the best we can.

Jeffrey Polzer:

I think, in a lot of companies anyway, in good companies with good managers, we're seeing lots of accommodations, and we're seeing new norms emerge. In the best case, where people trust each other, to work hard, and communicate about what their challenges are, and to help each other. In some sense, the fact that everybody's at home, I think has potentially opened people's eyes to the challenges of this type of work, and helped companies recalibrate, and helped managers recalibrate. Not just as a one-off situation, but by instituting new collective norms about how we're going to work together.
Bruce Edwards:

Yeah, and that brings up an important point, the work life balance, which is something that we've been hearing about for many years now. Is the line between work and life harder to distinguish now?

Jeffrey Polzer:

I think the line between work and home life has, in many cases, been obliterated. You can even start to make fine grain distinctions between does somebody have an office space in their home, that's separate from the rest of their home where they can, literally, go to work in the morning? Maybe the commute is walking from your kitchen, up the stairs to your home office. That's better, psychologically, to have a specific space that you're using for work, that's different from the rest of your home life, where you can close the door and be at work. But even then, psychologically the idea of being at work, to the extent that we associate that with a place, that allows us to then be at other places that are not at work, and helps us disconnect.

Jeffrey Polzer:

So there's real risk there that, as much as people have been really stepping up, and being productive, and even feeling energized by these new challenges and demands, as this drags on, there's a real risk of burnout. Especially with the new school year starting, if kids aren't going back to school ... The reason we're doing this is to stay healthy, and that's the priority, no doubt. But, in terms of being able to stay engaged at work, without burning out by always being at work, that's a really big risk right now.

Bruce Edwards:

If the nine-to-five thing is a thing of the past, what do you think the longterm impact of that will be? How do you see the nature of work evolving from this experience?

Jeffrey Polzer:

It's interesting to listen to some companies who are saying, "This remote work experiment has changed our thinking." Some companies are already announcing that, "Our employees can work remotely forever." While hearing other companies chomping at the bit to get back to their office, and wanting to reopen as soon as the safety protocols can be put in place. We have a lot of learning to do, as we see how these different scenarios play out.

Jeffrey Polzer:

The question for me, with the nine-to-five work day, is why is that important to a company to have in place? Let me paint two different pictures. One is because we're worried about whether our employees are actually working hard. Are they actually at work, and being productive? We like people being in the office, because we can monitor them. There's a very different possibility, in other companies, that the reason nine-to-five is helpful is because we're doing a lot of joint work. We need to talk to each other, we need to collaborate, and it's easier to do when we know where people are, and when they'll be there.

Jeffrey Polzer:

The former monitoring scenario, and maybe it's important to come back to work. In fact, we've seen an uptick in software applications that allow managers to see what people are doing on their computer, as they're working remotely.

Bruce Edwards:

Wow.

Jeffrey Polzer:

You can take that all the way to a dystopian future.
Bruce Edwards:

Yeah.

Jeffrey Polzer:

Where we're shackled to our computers, and somebody's monitoring our screen. I don't mean to paint that for all companies, by any means, but the possibility is real.

Jeffrey Polzer:

But on the other hand, you could imagine a scenario with a collaborative company, where managers trust their employees to work hard to say hey, we need you to produce, and we care less about how you do it, or when you do it. But, there is a benefit, we understand, to being able to collaborate seamlessly and efficiently. So let's, then, arrange ourselves to look for maybe its certain days of the week, maybe its certain hours of the day, when we have a commitment, wherever we are, to be available because the work we're doing is so interdependent.

Jeffrey Polzer:

I think there are a lot of possibilities to learn from this giant global experiment in working from home. I think the best companies will learn how to operate, and communicate, and collaborate in new ways that actually take the best of what's possible working from home, or working from anywhere, and combine it with the best of gathering together, and being in an office. Through that, make things better both for the individual employees and their wellbeing, while still being productive in ways that benefit the company.

Jeffrey Polzer:

One of the reasons we wanted to do this large scale study was because of all the different types of stories we were hearing. For all the stories of overwork and huge challenges at home, there are also stories of people who really love the new arrangements they have, and who feel like they're more productive than ever. And by the way, who love the fact that they don't have an hour commute every morning and every night. So trying to take the best of what's happening, while really being careful that we're sensitive to people's different home environments, and that we're not creating second-class citizens of the people with more challenging home environments, to figure out how we can craft from that a revised organizational culture, and a revised set of expectations about how we're able to do our best work, individually and collectively, and carry forward some of the good parts of what's happening out there.

Bruce Edwards:

Harvard Professor, Jeffrey Polzer, thanks so much for sharing this important research.

Jeffrey Polzer:

Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure to talk to you.

Bruce Edwards:

Jeff Polzer is a professor in the organizational behavior department at Harvard Business School. You'll find their study on the impact of COVID-19 on the nature of work at nber.org.

Bruce Edwards:

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