

General Trends: Future of Work Post Pandemic in Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

This research paper focused primarily on remote working as a recent trend in Cambodia, driven by the pandemic and how it affects businesses in the Cambodian service sector. A population sample (n=219) of randomly selected participants that includes business owners, managers, staff members, and policymakers in Cambodia responded to the survey questionnaire. The key findings shows that more than a year into the pandemic, remote work and physical separation have prevented employers and employees from feeling closer to their co-workers, and most employees say circumstances surrounding the pandemic have negatively influenced their productivity. However, for every worker who says their well-being has declined, two say it has gotten better (2X). We see this phenomenon in the comparison between younger and older workers' productivity. Millennials (people with dates of birth from 1981 - 1996) and Generation Z (people with dates of birth from 1997 - 2015) are both more likely than older generations (Generation X) to say they have been more productive since working remotely. Furthermore, the majority of the Cambodian service sector workers want to work from the office but not make the office their home. So, many believe offices with hybrid schedules will perform better than those without, mainly if business owners cater to the individual needs of their workers. As a result of the findings, the call to action include company leadership should communicate very well with their employees, managers should demonstrate an interest in the personal well-being of their workers, that implies workers having access to the resources and the trainings they need to do their job effectively (e.g., materials, equipment, technology, and support services), and from on-demand space to occasional face-time, young employees cited access to office space when needed and the ability to meet up with colleagues in person when needed as changes that would improve remote productivity for them the most. Given the popularity of remote working, more research is needed to better understand the impact that it has on the future of work in Cambodia..

Key words: Future of work, remote working, pandemic, millennials, generation Z, and X

INTRODUCTION

The future of work has constantly evolved. Technological or economic forces were the initial drivers. However, something distinct from the previous factors will change the way we work. Work has long been acknowledged as necessary for the livelihood, dignity, and happiness of humankind. Work helps us meet our basic and complex needs. It also provides a path towards financial security, mental and physical health, dignity, and purpose in life (Cairnduff et al., 2018). Work and workplaces had come a long way, from when work was shaped by shifting demographic trends, the pace of technological advances, and economic globalization. Besides, the formulation of sound labor policy requires an understanding of how work-related trends evolve and affect the size and composition of the labor force, the features of the

workplace, and the compensation structures provided by the business owners. COVID-19 pandemic is unlike any other because it has brought very sharply into focus the notion of physical proximity and made that a factor that determines how we will reshape work and the new kinds of roles that will grow in demand or decline in need in the future (Tonby et al., 2021). There are many perspectives on the future of work. Still, it is an understatement for the pending wave of disruption to job markets courtesy of a range of complex forces such as advanced technology, the internet, Artificial Intelligence (A.I.), and the advent of industrial automation (Disparte & Tillemann, 2020). Teevan (2021) suggested that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, "a lot about the way we know work has been emphasized: It is uniquely complex, quickly changing or shifting, and increasingly technology-driven (p. 2). Moreover, we will see many more occupational transitions required in the

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future as an impact of these. According to Tonby et al. (2021), a partner at McKinsey Global Institute based out of Mumbai, India, “there are about 100 million more occupational transitions across the countries we have looked at” (p. 2). We see changes in composition and skillset in both developed and developing countries’ future workforce. Tonby et al. (2021) further argued that we could experience global labor displacements, especially in developing countries where we could experience a shift towards new and different jobs and new skill sets. However, though different studies are available to show various changes in dynamics on the subject of the future of work in a global or regional setting, studies concerning the case of Cambodia are not available. This research focuses primarily on remote work as a more present trend driven by the pandemic and how it affects Cambodian service sector businesses. The study investigates how the workforce (business owners, workers, and policymakers) in Cambodia responds to it. Furthermore, the research sheds light on three main trends: remote work, digital channels, and automation.

THREE TRENDS: REMOTE WORK, DIGITAL CHANNELS, AND AUTOMATION

COVID-19 has accelerated the three trends, remote work, digital channels, and automation. Similarly, they are shaping the future of work around the globe, including in Cambodia. If there is any trend that we experienced the most, that would be remote work or virtual meetings. For example, countries like Japan have been promoting remote work for quite some decades, making slow progress. Nevertheless, the pandemic has moved the needle in a few months, something they could not achieve in the previous decade (Yamamura, 2020).

Remote work spiked during the pandemic across the globe. While it was of sheer necessity, what it has revealed to all workers and businesses is that there are longer-term benefits that include flexibility and greater ease of work in some ways. Teaching, medicine, mental health, and other professions previously thought to be near impossible to do remotely have abruptly moved to online and hybrid mediums. All kinds of workers have needed to find new and creative ways to do their jobs. For many, the boundary between office and home has become a thin, blurred line. These changes have not been small, and they have not been without pain (Teevan, 2021).

The second trend is the increase in the use of digital channels. Before elaborating on this trend, it is worth stepping back to explain this phenomenon. Urbach and Roglinger (2019) defined digitization as “the use of digital technologies to change a business model and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities; it is the process of moving to a digital business” (p. 3). So a digital channel is a sales or business channel that is electronic as opposed to physical channels. The following are common types of digital channels - web - websites including social media and video sharing sites, search - search engine results, and communication - communication tools such as email or messaging apps. App - mobile apps including apps launched by brands or e-commerce sites to drive sales, online events - events that allow users to participate such as a webinar, digital media - digital media such as streaming video and music services.

Digital channels have proliferated and surged worldwide during the pandemic. Tonby et al. (2021) stated that Asian economies are tops in e-commerce growth in the year during the pandemic and was two to five times more than what people would expect if they looked at the average growth over the past few years before the pandemic. Furthermore, this is not just with shopping. There are hordes of new users, first-time adapters, and then businesses figuring out how to manage the whole delivery economy as part of e-commerce. There is also an increase in online food delivery, online grocery shopping, telemedicine, and, of course, remote learning. Further, the concept of a cashless economy or the availability of data and new businesses or new startups taking advantage of those data flows.

The third trend is automation and A.I. Automation describes a wide range of technologies that reduce human intervention in processes. At the same time, A.I. refers to intelligence demonstrated by machines, unlike the natural intelligence displayed by humans and animals, which involves consciousness and emotionality. As the pandemic continues, businesses are almost forced to embrace automation in selected areas. They do so because many manufacturing plants have to keep the plants open but manage less workforce density. As such, the meatpacking industry, for example, experienced a slow adoption of automation because of the nature of the work but suddenly saw a surge in that because workplace density is an issue. In other cases, there are spikes in demand for various kinds of things during COVID-19, and the only way companies can respond is through

automation. Automation levels will rise, and we already see plenty of signals of that in things like automatic shipments worldwide and the rise in the stock prices of companies who produce automation-related products. There is an anticipation that this will be a more remarkable shift or trend going forward globally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Take the U.S. for an example. According to a 2004 publication - the 21st Century at work - 'Forces shaping the workforce and workplaces in the United States' (Karoly et al., 2018). They posed two key questions then; first, what are the significant factors that will shape the future of work in the current Century, and how will those factors likely evolve over the next 10 to 15 years? Secondly, the implications of these future trends for crucial aspects of the future workforce and workplace, including the workforce's size, composition, and workforce skills, the nature of work and workplace agreements, and worker compensation. The answer a continued growth as they shifted toward a more balanced distribution by age, sex, and race or ethnicity. Moreover, the pace of technological change, through advances in information technology (I.T.), biotechnology or such emerging fields as nanotechnology and, of course, the synergies across technologies and disciplines accelerated advances in research and development (R&D), production processes, and the nature of product and services. Thirdly, the new era of globalization marked by the growing trade in intermediate and final goods and services, expanding capital flows, more rapid transfer of knowledge and technologies, and mobile populations is partly the result of inexpensive, fast communications and information transmission enabled by the I.T. revolution. As a result, globalization will continue its record to date of contributing economic benefits in aggregate. Although market share and jobs are lost in some economic sectors with short-term and long-term consequences for affected workers, the job losses will be counterbalanced by employment gains in other sectors.

In his paper 'Valuing the work of the future,' Rider (2018) stated that several accounts of the Future of Work predict that technology will replace people and bring an "end to work" (p. 23). He says that changes in business models, technology, and the global integration of economies profoundly impact an essential aspect of society known as work. He claims that the evolving temporal and spatial organization

of work will lead to more people working at any time from anywhere, raises questions about how this affects our individual lives and societies. Adding these changes can widen our choices, improve our working lives' quality, alienate us from each other, and purposive and meaningful activity. He then concludes by saying that "the outcome depends on the choices we make and the policies we adopt to shape the Future of Work" (p. 25).

Widespread interest in the future of work often centers around how this one major external force, technological change, has affected the types of jobs we do. We will look at prior studies to learn more about trends in employment and how they are affected by this 'mega-driver of change.' Sorensen (1996), in his review essay 'Of Men and Machines - Technology and Working Life Discourses,' talked about how skills are likely to become more specialized with the development of the latest generation of technology. To begin with, one should note a few features of the traditional discourse on technology and work. Its main features can be traced to 19th-century political economy, particularly volume 1 of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. If we look at the significant contributions to this discourse in the 1950s and 1960s, e.g., Walker and Guest, Friedman, Blauner, and the Tavistock school, they were conversant with the Marxist concern for the conditions of the working class and the ambiguous nature of modern technology. Sorensen argued that a sustained worry of new technology in the shape of automation would lead to a degradation of working conditions and undermine workers' ability to act collectively, but also hoped for a more positive outcome. That explains why the impact of technology has long been a concern to the future of work. Fast track to today's arguments relating to work and the fourth industrial revolution, digitalization, automation, and A.I. The arguments are regurgitated.

'Gig Work and the Fourth Industrial Revolution,' De Ruyter et al. (2018) identified several distinguishing features of the predictions associated with the work revolution. Their first claim is that there will be changes in the skillsets of today's workers and therefore job displacements because of the shift towards new and different jobs. Secondly, there will be a change in the very nature of work and workplaces. The point of their claim is that there will be more work located away from designated workplaces.

Furthermore, more work involves interaction with information and communication technologies that

will give rise to regulatory challenges for governments on employment, as work will become “invisible and geographically dispersed through online and subcontracting arrangements” (De Ruyter et al., 2018, p. 37).

Technology, the emergence of industrial automation, and varying degrees of workforce readiness for the so-called jobs of the future came at us fast during the pandemic. “When COVID struck in March 2020, several million Australians were retrenched or had their working hours reduced. At the same time, 4.3 million people or 32 percent of working Australians began working from home digitally” (Bessant & Watts, 2021, p. 3). We expect to see a significant change in pace on how work will be viewed from now on. The COVID-19 pandemic has been like no previous episode of transformation in the way work is done, especially in the notion of physical proximity. Research by the McKinsey Asia chapter suggests that 20 percent to 25 percent of the workforce could work remotely in the long term. While this is not the entire workforce, it is four to five times the level of remote work before the pandemic (Tonby et al., 2021). This rise in the percentage of the workforce will have significant implications for the workforce and the way companies set up their workspaces. This research investigates a similar trend in Cambodia.

Moreover, an RSA journal in 2020 on ‘Transforming the future of work - Who is at Risk?’ states that changing consumer trends, public health measures, and labor costs in the pandemic are all aiding the rise of robots and increased automation. The report also explored how the pandemic might accelerate technological change and forever alter the future of work (RSA Journal, 2020).

As the pandemic continues and we hear terms like lockdowns, social distancing, stay at home policy and so on, new technologies thus have the potential to transform work and workplaces, displace jobs, create new jobs, and generally impact living standards. The pandemic has exposed the long-standing tension between traditionalists or the old guards for whom productivity must be seen as requiring a physical presence at an office or work location. The new generation or the modernists have been clamoring for broader acceptance of remote work and workplace flexibility. With social distancing norms required in the workplaces, video conferencing services such as the nine-year-old upstart, ZOOM, succeeded in doing in months what other platforms have taken decades to achieve. They gain ubiquity as a utility

for remote workers, learners, and many others who turned to these services for a semblance of normalcy. “Indeed, the onset of the future of work was so rapid that habitually itinerant business travelers turned to ZOOM, making the platform more valuable than all U.S. airlines combined” (Disparte et al., 2020, p. 4). The Indo-Pacific and the whole of Asia are trending in the same direction as the U.S. and Europe. However, more recently, Cambodia has seen a steady rise in the distribution of employment from the agricultural sector to a more services-based sector in the last ten years (Figure 1). Hence, remote work will test workers in this sector on their resilience and adaptability to the new normal in Cambodia.

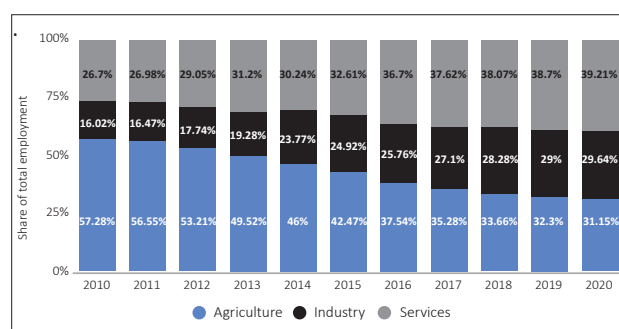


Figure 1: Distribution of employment by economic sector from 2010 to 2020 in Cambodia
Source: World Bank (October 2020)¹

METHODOLOGY

The actual number of workers in the different sectors of the economy is easily accessible in developed countries where government or private corporations’ databases provide this information. However, information on the number of employers and employees in the different sectors, especially in the service sector, is not available in developing countries such as Cambodia. We, therefore, collected data as part of a comprehensive survey from mostly private sector company owners, employers, and employees on the primary trend (remote work) regarding the future of work in Cambodia.

SAMPLE

The sample consisted of 219 responses from CEOs/business owners, managers, and staff members from the private sector businesses in Cambodia. The majority (40 percent) of the responses were from company managers, 27 percent company staff members, 23 percent CEOs/business owners, and 10 percent others that include student interns, teachers, and NGO workers.

DATA ANALYSIS

The survey questionnaire aimed to identify the effects of remote work as a future trend in Cambodia post-pandemic. Below are the results of our findings:

Workplace as a community

More than a year into the pandemic, remote work and physical separation have prevented employers and employees from feeling closer to their co-workers.

58.4 percent of workers in Cambodia feel less connected with their co-workers than before versus 16 percent who feel more connected (Figure 2).

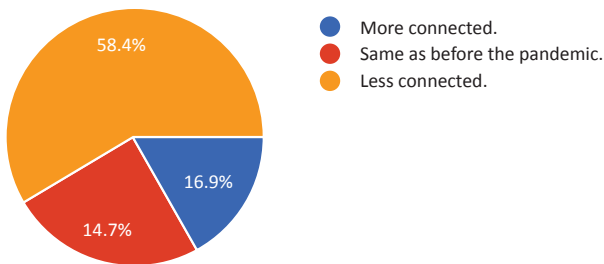


Figure 2: Extent of connection with co-workers and community while working remotely

Finding meaning

Most employees (56 percent) say circumstances surrounding the pandemic negatively influenced their productivity. The organization’s purpose resonated with them before the pandemic than it has now in the pandemic. Besides, the in-person office experience still appeals to employees. Any future work plans in Cambodia must help employees gain access to diverse perspectives and ideas. Here are the top things employees say they missed while working remotely during the lockdowns (Figure 3):

- Simply being around other people.
- Exposure to a diversity of perspectives and ideas
- Spontaneous interactions with colleagues
- Others, like - ease of communicating ideas with sketches, monitoring what staff does and checking off what has been accomplished, and managing workflow and so on).

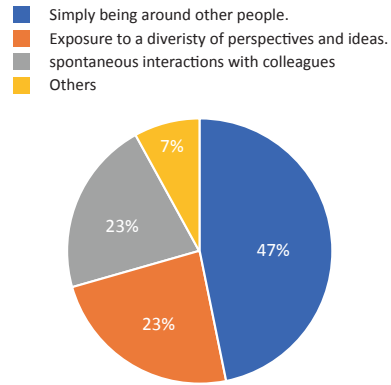


Figure 3: Top things employees missed while working remotely

Productivity and well-being loss

Productivity loss

51 percent of workers believe they are less productive working remotely, and 27 percent believe they have been more productive working remotely. In contrast, the remaining 28 percent say nothing has changed (Figure 4).

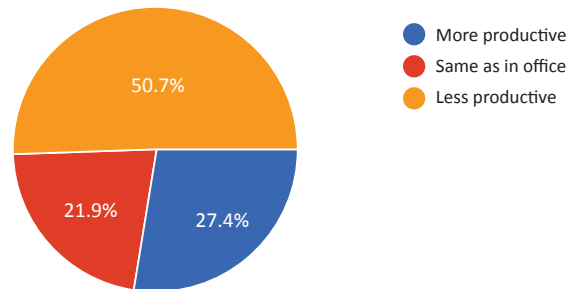


Figure 4: Percentage of productivity gains or loss of employees working remotely

Well-being boost

For every worker who says their well-being has declined, two say it has gotten better (2X). We see this phenomenon in the comparison between younger and older workers’ productivity. Millennials (people with dates of birth from 1981 - 1996) and Generation Z (people with dates of birth from 1997 - 2015) are both more likely than older generations (Generation X) to say they have been more productive since working remotely. However, the graph also suggests that millennials, who are the majority of the Cambodian workforce, are less productive working remotely. Poor Information technology skills and not being supported by their organizations could explain why. The other two age ranges used in the survey are not represented in the graph- Baby boomers (1946-1964) and the Silent generation (1930- 1945) because

there were no respondents from these groups. Another great point here is that Cambodia currently has a younger working generation, born between 1997 and 2015, who are probably technologically savvy and can work well remotely (Figure 5 and Figure 6).

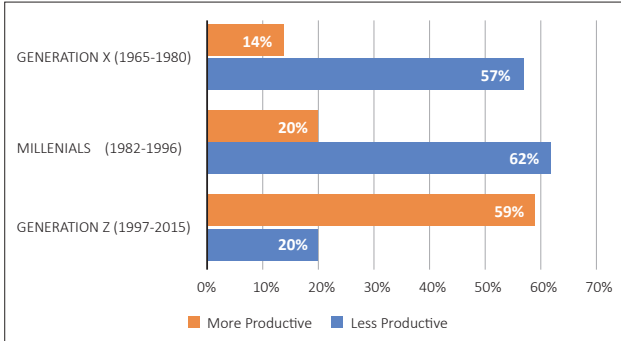


Figure 5: Generations having different productivities since working remotely

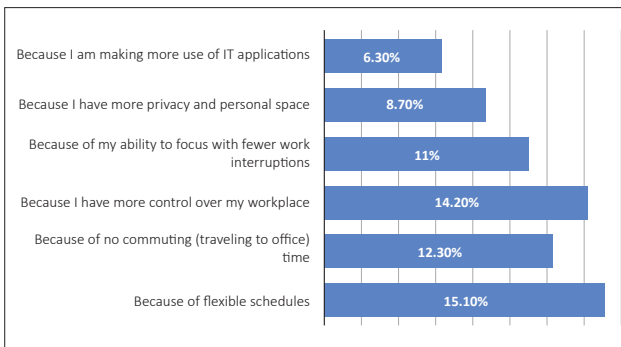


Figure 6: Reasons of higher productivity as perceived by workers

Ease of working remotely

The ability to travel, move, and live away from the office while still working gave many a greater flexibility than they might likely give up after the pandemic is over. 56 percent of our respondents said remote work was essential to them, but then 84 percent of the same respondents reported that the flexibility of getting back to the office is equally important to them post COVID-19. What this means is that the majority of the Cambodian workforce is not very ready to work remotely. Our earlier analysis stated that 51 percent of workers in Cambodia believe they are less productive working remotely. The workers we surveyed are almost twice as likely to work from the office compared to working from home.

Pandemic migration

The pandemic migration may be permanent for large swatches of global employment. Nevertheless, for Cambodian services sector workers, who moved during the lockdowns placed by the government at

the peak of the pandemic, more than half plan on moving back to the office one way or the other (65 percent hybrid and 33 percent fully working from the office). Compare this to the 6 percent who would ultimately work remotely. Moreover, mobility among the younger workers was especially pronounced. Younger workers (Millennials) workers born between 1980 to 1996 and Generation Z workers born between 1997 to 2015 at 44 percent and 29 percent respectively were much more likely to work from home during the pandemic (Figure 7).

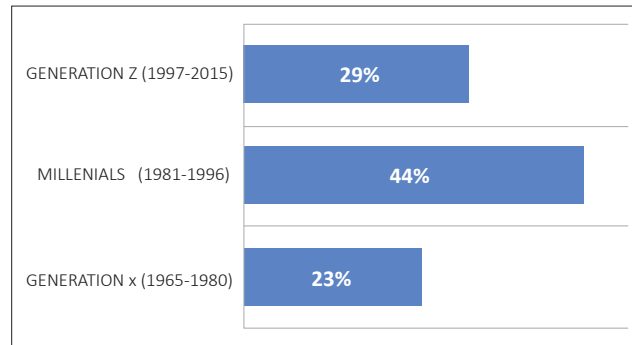


Figure 7: Percentage of different generations worked from home during the lockdown

For the 72 percent of workers who left at the height of the pandemic and lockdowns, here are the top five reasons why they left:

- “To be closer to family and friends.”
- “I just felt ready for a change.”
- “To be somewhere with more space.”
- “I want to upsize my residence.”
- “I am not held there by work anymore.”

The changing role of the office

From our survey responses, most of the Cambodian service sector workers want to work from the office but not make the office their home. While the pandemic intensified with lockdowns, many workers (many for the first time) enjoyed malleable work schedules, private and personal “office” space, more time with family, and time back than they usually would have spent commuting. While most workers do not want to work from home exclusively, the consensus is clear: they also do not want to give that up completely. Many believe offices with hybrid schedules will perform better than those without, mainly if business owners cater to the individual needs of their workers (Figure 8).

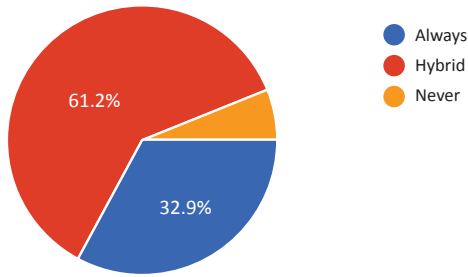


Figure 8: Response to the question “How much do you want to work from the office post-pandemic?”

The status quo

Generally, workers want to be in the office some or most of the time after the pandemic. Only 19 percent want to work from the office full-time, but the fewest of all (3 percent) want to work from home full-time. The vast majority (37 percent) want to work remotely sometimes. For at least 1- 2 days a week (Figure 8).

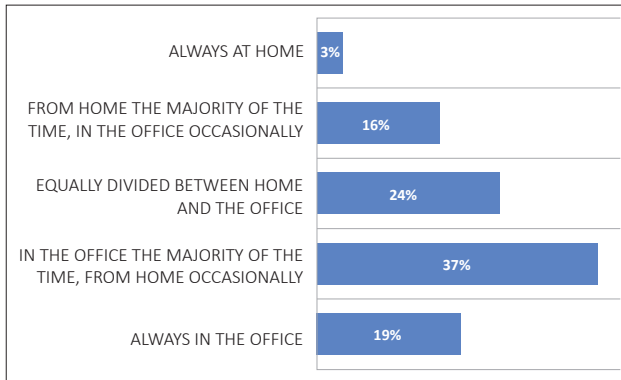


Figure 8: Preference of work setups by workers after the pandemic

Business owners, executives, and managers, even more than individual staff members of companies in Cambodia, prefer a hybrid work schedule.

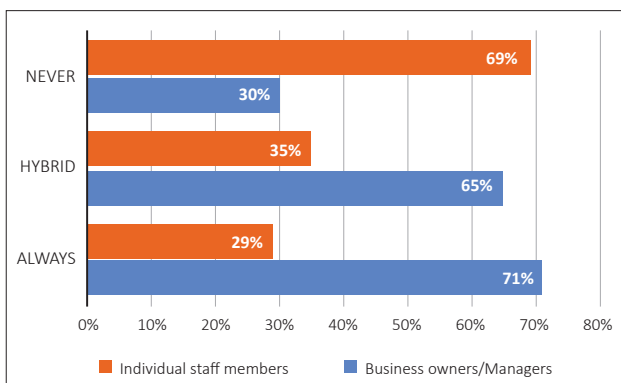


Figure 9: Response of individual staff members vs. business owners/managers to the question “how much do you want to work from the office?”

Better office space management

Returning to the new normal will offer a chance to upgrade the work experience: Most workers who responded want to see the layout of their office space change significantly following the pandemic (Figure 9). These are the top priorities they included:

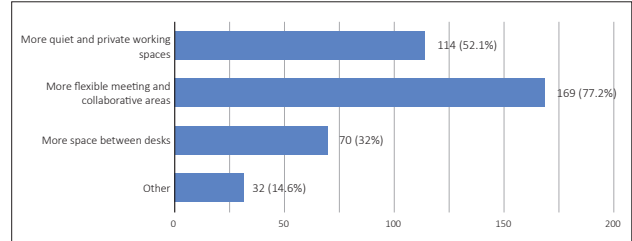


Figure 9: Top priorities workers would like to have after the pandemic

- a. More flexible meeting and collaborative areas- 77 percent
- b. More quiet and private working spaces - 52 percent
- c. More space between desks- 32 percent
- d. Other- 14.6 percent

Challenges

When challenges come, we feel the pain, we fail, we learn, and then we grow. The pandemic has given the world a chance to change where it should and go back to normal when it can. For most developed countries, frequent business travelers are eager to get back on the road or in the sky, and customers want some pandemic-era changes to stay. As the world moves forward, experiences and data will lead the way.

Ready to travel

After a year and a half of empty airports, demand is building as business travelers look forward to getting back on the road and in the air. Many Cambodians want to return to their previous amount of travel. More than half (53 percent) of the respondents would like to travel even more than before (Figure 10 and Figure 11).

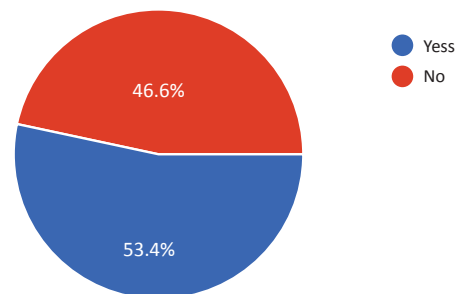


Figure 10: Respondents’ likeness to travel more after the pandemic

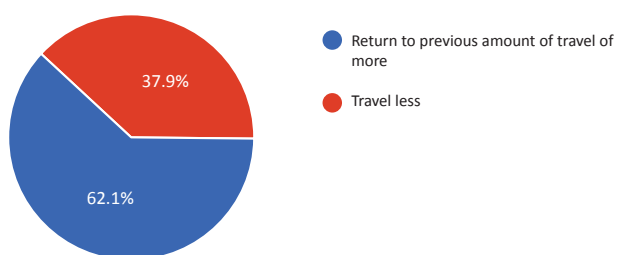


Figure 11: Response to the extent to travel after the pandemic

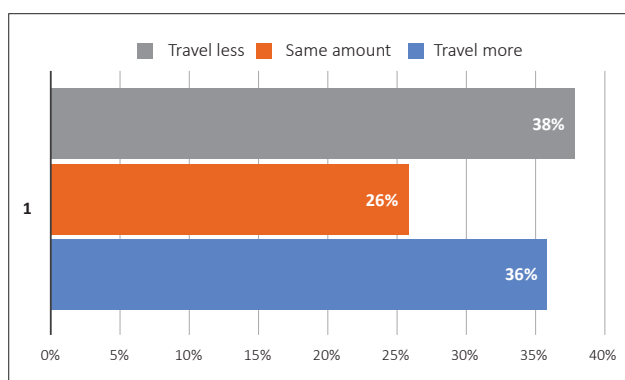


Figure 12: Response to the survey question “Going forward, how much would you like to travel compared to pre-pandemic?”

Figure 12 presents the comparison between pre-pandemic and post-pandemic travel expectations of the Cambodian workers. It suggests no significant difference in the results between the travel pre-pandemic and the plan to travel post-pandemic.

Experiences consumers want to keep after the pandemic

The pandemic forced the Cambodian service sector to innovate or find good-enough alternatives to doing business and selling products. While some of these approaches may be costly to adjust to, many of them will have a post-pandemic future. According to some of the participants who gave their thoughts on the question, “what are the experiences you think consumers want to keep after the pandemic?”:

We think that household shopping will return to normal, with people going to the markets. However, we believe restaurant and coffee shop dining will reduce by 5-15 percent in favor of online orders. Also, we believe that it is human nature that people like to join together with friends for meals. After the pandemic, there will be many unemployed delivery drivers when the demand goes down. Some entirely virtual businesses may close down in favor of businesses that are hybrid (Respondent 19).

Work from home will be more prominent. The use of Virtual apps like ZOOM for hosting company and branch meetings. The urgency for self-development and probably learning new technology for work (Respondent 42).

Online purchasing and delivery. The ability to use ZOOM meetings for conferences instead of traveling for conferences (Respondent 25).

Less enthusiasm for in-store visits. There will be more work from home and contactless payments. A whole lot on personal growth or self-improvement (Participant 60).

Food delivery, flexible schedules, multi-engagement (doing other things while attending online meetings)- (Respondent 187).

Ultimately, the general feeling from Cambodian workers is that life would never be what it was pre-pandemic, and we have to make changes, adapt, recognize and accept the new normal.

CONCLUSION

Remote working is one leading future of work trends in Cambodia. A shift in this trend is reshaping the Cambodian active services-based sector during this pandemic. The pandemic has been extended, complicated, and devastating, but it has also created an opportunity to reflect and experiment in ways we otherwise may not have. As a result, business owners, managers, and employees have discovered better ways to work. We have realized that flexibility is the future and that different people work in different ways. As a result, organizations across Cambodia are innovating, changing their approach to work, and those successfully undergoing this transformation will look, with deep empathy, at workers’ needs and expectations. Furthermore, as businesses in Cambodia continue to adapt to remote work strategies, one approach will not fit all. Still, they can create these better experiences by continuously listening to their workers, then taking action on the feedback they receive- now and in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations will be in the context of taking action. For employees whose well-being has declined due to the pandemic and a new remote working experience, here are 5 ways they say employers can offer meaningful help:

1. Having conversations with peers about the difficulties workers are facing.

2. Having conversations with managers about the difficulties workers are facing.
3. Workers having access to the resources they need to do their job effectively (e.g., materials, equipment, technology, and support services).
4. Company leadership should communicate very well with their employees.
5. Managers should demonstrate an interest in the personal well-being of their workers.

Uncertainty is a bad experience. Something as simple as the communication of plans can help Cambodian workers in cascading ways.

If you have remote employees (or plan to continue having remote employees), hardware and software tools are the most important resources they say they want from the company.

From on-demand space to occasional face-time, young employees cited the following as the changes that would improve remote productivity for them the most.

1. Access to office space when needed.
2. Ability to meet up with colleagues in person when needed.
3. Access to physical resources in the office when needed.
4. Ability to meet with clients, customers, and other external parties in person.
5. Being able to plan more reliably.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Aaron O’Neill. “Employment by economic sector in Cambodia 2020” Details: Asia; World Bank © Statista 2021.

The statistics show the distribution of employment in Cambodia by economic sector from 2010 to 2020. In 2020, 31.15 percent of the employees in Cambodia were active in the agriculture sector, 29.64 percent in industry and 39.21 percent in the service sector.

Accessed June 24 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/438733/employment-by-economic-sector-in-cambodia/>

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