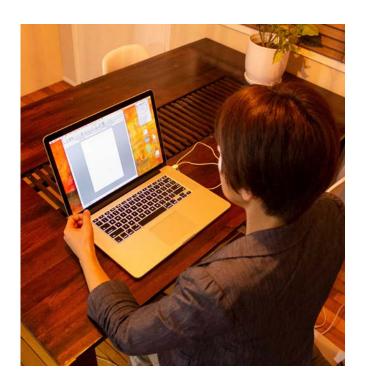# LESSON 1 NATURE & SCOPE OF REMOTE WORK

Although not a new concept, remote work has become more commonplace and there are different ways it can be applied across workplaces in different goods and service industries.

INTRODUCTION

Working remotely has been part of some people's jobs for years, but it is also something which has evolved quickly in recent times. The recent covid-19 pandemic forced many businesses to insist on large swathes of their workforce spending a considerable amount of their working hours conducting work from home. For some this transition was relatively straightforward, but for others it posed a significant challenge. Many workforces were not set up to cope with the difficulties of working remotely, employees may not have had suitable working environments at home, or they lacked the equipment needed.

Since working remotely is likely to be something which continues and expands into the future, many businesses are looking at ways they can adapt to ensure working remotely does not interfere with the daily operation or profitability of their business. While there are some businesses that require on-site labour (primary industries, production), many aspects of secondary and service industries can be completed in a remote environment. Indeed, larger companies with multiple offices have been using remote work solutions for decades.

NATURE OF REMOTE WORK

Before considering the scope of remote workplaces, it is prudent to ask what exactly is remote work? Sometimes referred to as telecommuting, remote work can refer to any work undertaken outside of a business or institution's premises. This can include work undertaken by employees who need to work from home due to other factors (e.g. disability, injury, remote location). It can also include work undertaken away from the premises by employees who attend the premises for some or most of their working hours.

The potential impact of implementing work from home and remote work contracts is large – particularly in the wake of the 2020 COVID-19. The increased flexibility of remote work has the potential to reduce lost time (e.g. commuting, unfocused meetings) while also increasing focus, productivity, and access to employee talent.

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Suggested Tasks

Ask two other people how they would define "Remote Work"or "Working Remotely"".

Do this face to face, away from the computer. Also ask them what sorts of jobs are best suited to remote work.

You might ask friends, neighbours, colleagues or anyone else.

The aim here is to reveal similarities or differences between how different people perceive remote work. Spend no more than 10mins on this discussion with each person.

Definition of Remote Work

Remote work is sometimes divided into two types:

Homeworking - employees work from home, though some may also opt to work out of a coffee shop, library, or other space with a focus on maintaining an individual and independent schedule.

Hub working – employees work from hubs in their community where they may work with others and collaborate with workers outside their own organisation. Hubs provide services e.g. hot desks, meeting rooms. Hubs can go by different names e.g. enterprise centres, innovation centres or digital hubs.

For the purposes of this course, remote work is interchangeable with the concept of 'telework'. Telework has been defined as:

"A form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/ relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis." (European Framework Agreement, 2002).

"To work at home, while communicating with your office by phone or email, or using the internet: He teleworks just two days a week. If you can check your work email from home, it's likely you can telework." (Cambridge English Dictionary)

"To work from home while maintaining contact with colleagues, customers, or a central office by the use of home computers, telephones, etc." (Collins English Dictionary)

In the context of this course, this means that remote work refers to work completed outside of the main company or business site.

Location, Location, Location

Offices once provided a way to centralise information; this centralisation, and the needs of an office building, drove many businesses into city areas. As a result, city real estate is at a premium – the cost of an office in a central location or CBD is significantly higher than the cost of real estate in the suburbs, or the cost of maintaining a basic 'work at home set-up' for many employees.

In the 21st century, information is available from almost anywhere in the world. Cloud services allow employees to access material from home; the internet provides a rich source of data for research, testing, and more. Communication channels can be passive (email, which can be read asynchronously) or active (phone calls, video calls). Meetings can be held in several formats and across time zones. Together, this means the general need for an office is reduced.

Of course, this does not mean all office spaces are redundant – many companies still require a physical space for client meetings or showing materials. While people can buy kitchen fixtures unseen, many still prefer to touch cabinetry; similarly, many people prefer to meet colleagues or clients before

they sign up for larger contracts. A well-designed office can also help create a positive impression while providing an optional workspace for employees.

The On-Going Shift Toward Remote Work

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened a shift to remote work around the globe, the concept of remote work for white collar jobs has been slowly edging its way into the mainstream. Before the advent of home internet and email access, remote work was limited to people with access to multiple phone lines, a fax machine, and perhaps a mobile phone. Until the late 1990s, this technology was prohibitively expensive for the average worker. Prior to the 1990s, remote work was so uncommon for the average household that a well-to-do home might have additional family space or a den, but rarely a home office.

Of course, this does not mean home offices were previously unheard of; wealthy estate owners often maintained an office in their homes through the 18th and 19th centuries. Storekeepers and merchants may have used a backroom desk or had a desk in the home. The work as we think of it in the 21st century – the type of work that takes place in city centres, offices, and other hubs such as retail centres – is still quite new, a post-war, industrialisation-driven shift that likely occurred due to the necessity of maintaining a centralised information source and access to necessary (and often expensive) technology.

In short: technology drove the initial shift to working in an office; today, technology is driving the shift toward working outside of the office.

"Traditional" Forms of Remote Work

Although idea of working remotely may seem relatively new, there have always been some jobs with offsite aspects.

Jobs which have traditionally involved off-site work include:

- Nurses doing home visits

- Door-to-door sales representatives

- Long distance truck drivers

- Trade workers (e.g. plumbers, cabinetmakers)

It is important to note, however, that the off-site or remote component of these jobs is essential to the actual job – a home nurse cannot complete her tasks without visiting patient homes. A plumber cannot fix an individual bathroom in their workshop; instead, they must travel from their base to each client home. The necessity of travel to these types of work has made their off-site nature acceptable; few office employees would say "wow, I really envy how you don't have to work in an office everyday" to a plumber, home nurse, or sales rep.

Industry and Employment

Many types of work already occur remotely; every time some piece of work is contracted to an outside service, people engage in remote work. Think about a small to medium enterprise (SME). Few SMEs keep a lawyer or chartered accountant on staff. Some may have a small marketing department but contract independent graphic designers, while others may have graphic designers on-staff but contract social media marketers. The nature of most work requires a mix of skill, training, and experience, which means that many specialist or boutique firms have popped up to fill specialised needs.

All this means that while remote working may still feel quite new, we've been skirting the edges of it for decades. The true difference in the 21st century employment landscape is that rather than exploring remote work in a contractor context, where contractors are also working in an office, we're now exploring remote work as an option for all, with staff working outside of an office context.

Although some industries require on-site work, it is rare that all jobs in a specific area require on-site work. The Australian National Skills Commission groups work into the categories listed below:

- Agriculture, forestry, fishing
- Mining
- Manufacturing
- Electricity, gas, water, waste services
- Construction
- Wholesale trade
- Retail trade
- Accommodation and food services
- Transport, postal, and warehousing
- Information media and telecommunications
- Financial and insurance services
- Rental, hiring, and real estate services
- Professional, scientific, technical services
- Administrative and support services