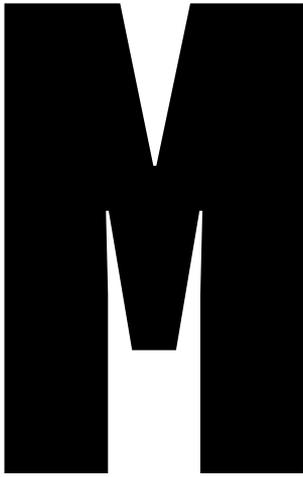


BY GRETCHEN GAVETT

**DO WE
REALLY
NEED THE
OFFICE?**

What the WFH boom means for the future



My desk at HBR is a chaotic place: covered with books, stacks of folders, gifts from colleagues (mostly involving cats), and dozens of pens that no longer contain ink. I also quite like it. My boss and a colleague sit on either side of me, their desks a bit more pristine. Zooming out, the rest of our digital team sits in an open space, while our print colleagues tend to work in cubicles. It's not perfect: It's often freezing cold, and it's hard to find quiet places to edit. But we have working internet, coffee, and a printer. Big windows look out over a highway. And as I commute from work to home or the gym each day, I do a mental transition exercise in which I crumple up parts of the day and “throw” them out until tomorrow (it's weird, but it works).

I'm typing this in my sweatpants, in my living room, because our offices have been closed since mid-March as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. My internet goes out approximately twice a day. I exercise in the same space in which I answer emails and Slack messages. I sort of mentally crumple up my day as I move from the living room to the kitchen for dinner. I am just a small part of an accidental grand experiment: Do knowledge workers really need the office?



Gretchen Gavett's home "office" (aka the couch)

As summarized in a June New York Times magazine article by Clive Thompson, anywhere from 5% to 15% of Americans worked from home before the pandemic. As of April, half of Americans who were employed pre-Covid now report working from home, according to early research by a group from MIT, NBER, and Upwork. Even as U.S. government workers begin heading back to the office, growing outbreaks across the country (and new evidence of indoor airborne transmission) may keep many other offices closed for an indeterminate period of time. In other parts of the world, the situation may differ; a colleague at HBR China reports that, despite a recent outbreak in Beijing, many offices have remained open since late February, largely due to widespread monitoring and aggressive testing and tracking. But office workers in India have been instructed to work from home as much as possible. And according to a recent article in Fortune, Covid-related restrictions are still largely in place in office buildings across Europe.

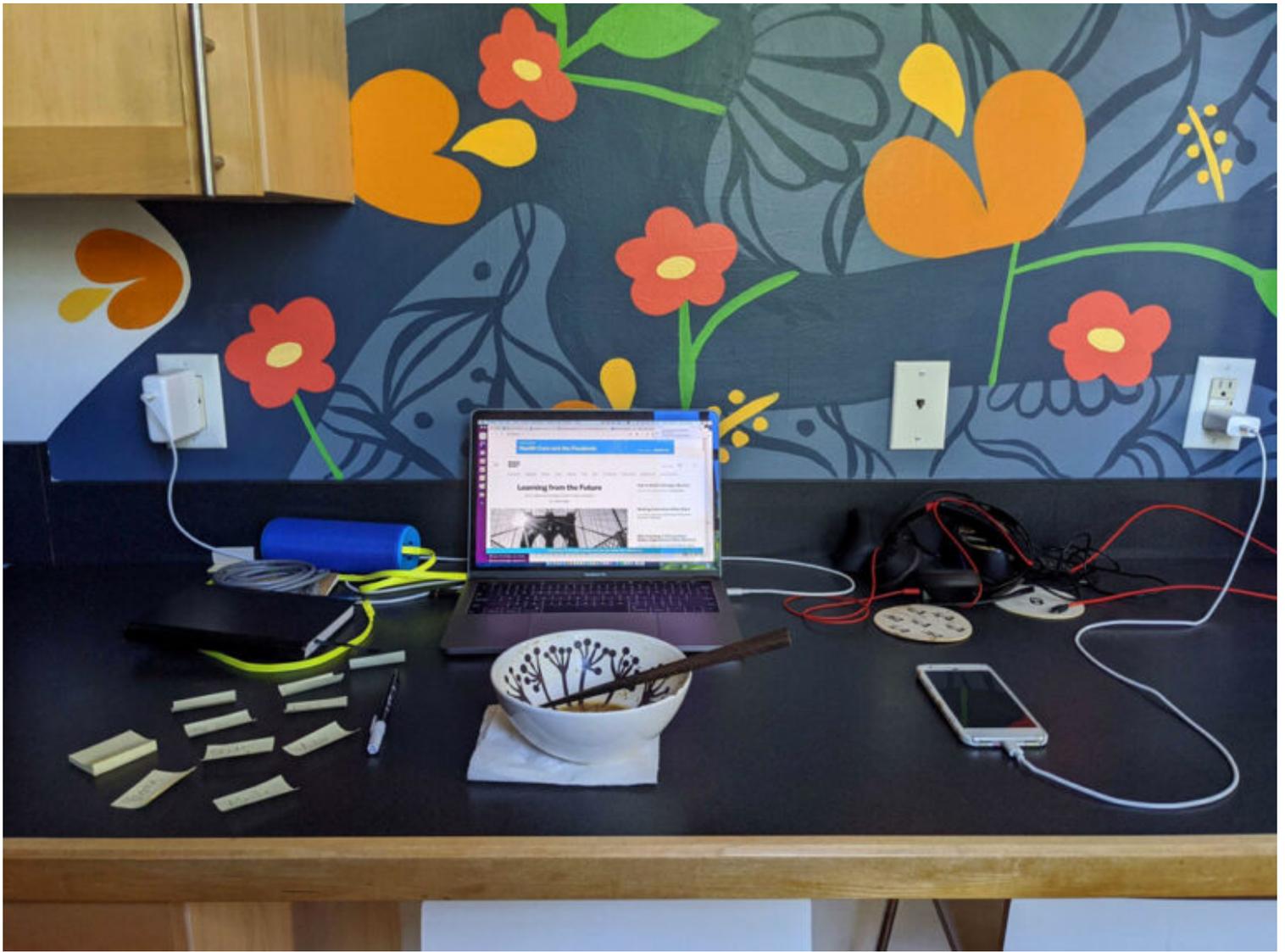
While this WFH shift may seem sudden for some, the trajectory toward more remote work for knowledge workers has been accelerating for years. As Derek Thompson writes in The Atlantic, "The share of the labor force that works from home tripled in the past 15 years, according to the Federal Reserve." Now that Covid-19 has turbocharged this trend, both the

possibilities and the perils are becoming clearer. True, plenty of research demonstrates that remote work benefits productivity, but this wholesale shift is forcing us to recognize, call out, and reject dangerous norms, such as the “ideal worker” fallacy that disproportionately affects parents and, primarily, women (Joan Williams and Brigid Schulte both wrote smartly about this topic early in the pandemic, though new data is revealing a bleak picture of how forced remote work is impacting U.S. mothers in heterosexual dual-career households). It also has implications for the “gigification” of knowledge work, the WFH experiences of Black employees (“professionalism” is always coded, even on Zoom), the ways people grow and evolve their careers, and even how to negotiate. Basically everything.

At HBR we’ve been covering offices spaces for years, largely from the perspective of how they shape productivity, collaboration, and the environment. We know, for instance, that open offices had plenty of unintended consequences and that spaces can be designed to produce specific performance outcomes. We are also learning much more about how to create safer spaces for employees in the future, what steps employers should follow when planning for reentry, how to help employees mentally prepare for their return, and how to have a conversation with your boss if you want to make WFH a more permanent reality.







The home workspaces of HBR's Andy Robinson, Ania Wieckowski, and Christine Liu

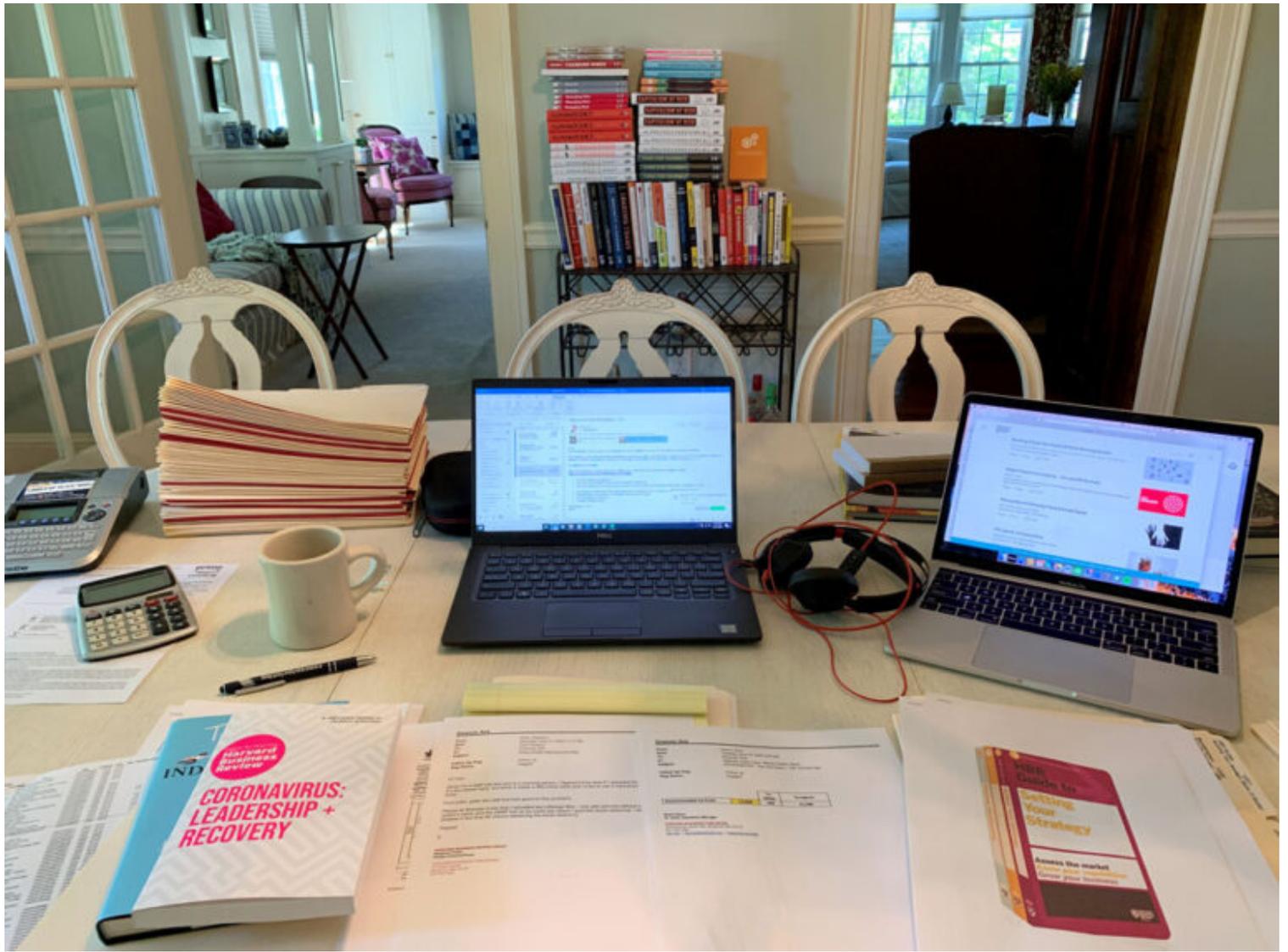
As companies move past the initial stages of our Covid-19 WFH lives, we wanted to gather and add to this work by asking experts on organizational behavior, workspaces, collaboration, and other disciplines what leaders need to look out for next. Decisions must be made about how long employees will work from home (some companies, like Twitter, say “forever”), whether a “hybrid” or rotational working environment is effective, and whether or not your (largely empty) office space is best serving your needs. These decisions are financial, surely; but they’re also deeply personal and will affect how people work together and identify themselves for years to come – and how successful your business or career will be as a result.

By covering everything from early research on how people are adapting to WFH life, to how workers have experienced past office innovations, to more existential questions about what an office is truly for and what people may lose if these spaces go away, we hope to continue contributing to ongoing and creative conversations about the future of the office.

At HBR, we recently found out that we'll be WFH until at least September. I don't know if my desk looks as I left it, covered in dusty remnants of the "worker" version of myself. Or if it's been wiped clean and disinfected, ready for me to start anew (someday). I'm nostalgic, sure, and maybe relying too heavily on the "clean slate" metaphor that keeps popping into my head. But I'm also trying to be open to what else might be possible for how I work, and where. We hope this series helps you do the same. | **THE BIG IDEA**

About the author: Gretchen Gavett is a senior editor at Harvard Business Review.







The home workspaces of HBR's Karen Player, Rick Emanuel, and Courtney Cashman

Office building photography by Mariyan Atanasov