

AN INTERVIEW WITH

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*A personal perspective on working from home
during COVID-19*

Working from home: readjusting to the blending of roles

Flexible working and trading floors are not thought to go hand-in-hand. In a highly pressurized and time-sensitive environment, the idea of working from home seems obscure. Five months ago, I would never have imagined that the 'work-life balance' would be put to its greatest test.

The values I bring as a COO to the Global Markets teams at HSBC Singapore are structure, support and coordination. These are the same key values I also bring to my family at home.

This is the first time in my banking career that I have worked from home for such an extended period of time – and while the road hasn't been without its bumps, I am seeing a number of benefits in efficiency and productivity, at work and at home.

Looking back over the last couple of months I realise there are real benefits to working from home, but it's taken initiative and proactivity to adapt to a new way of working.

At the office, we are reliant on fast-paced technology and infrastructure, but I've realized I can be highly efficient despite not physically being in the same room as these systems. Surprisingly, I am closer to my colleagues now because we have needed to focus on talking a lot more than before.

I struggled with time management at the start; I found myself working all hours due to disappearing boundaries between work and home. Despite being physically at home, my family started to say that I was not present. This comment made me realise I needed to step back and reevaluate my approach to work-life balance to support both roles.

By readjusting I've been able to prioritise and plan my days with limited interruptions, I can be more flexible when it comes to my family's needs whilst also focusing on my career goals, measuring results in terms of quality and output rather than time spent on tasks.

Technology has kept our work and personal lives ticking throughout this unprecedented situation, yet technology alone cannot replace human interaction, which I have missed.

At home, I plan when to speak to family and friends online so I have something to look forward to. Similarly at work, I've found the need to make a concerted effort in speaking to my team on a regular basis.

Just like at home, this keeps us connected as a team. It has also helped build greater trust between us and enable open and transparent conversations. For example, I encourage colleagues to submit weekly summaries of their achievements, rather than focus on hours clocked.

Retreating to home-life has also brought about a sharp focus on mental well-being. Everyone has differing resilience levels, both within families and in work teams. I have not stepped out of my apartment in three weeks as I support my senior parents, yet that has not deterred me from practicing yoga and mindfulness within the confines of home.

Communication and technology have another role to play in this respect; having regular catch ups makes it easier to get a sense of how people are truly feeling. As we can't speak in person though, we often don't see the signs of people being exhausted, so it's also crucial to encourage team members to take time off.

The 'one size fits all' approach to managing well-being does not work; we should provide options for our teams where possible and ensure we are listening to their needs.

It is impossible to predict how the situation with COVID-19 will develop but it is certain that it will change the way we work going forward. The pandemic has shown me that there are positives to working from home.

The divide between personal and professional life is no longer clear cut; there are many takeaways from both sides that we can learn from to better develop the roles and responsibilities we have.

Fatema Bookwala

Fatema joined HSBC in 2005 and has held a number of positions in Mumbai and latterly in Singapore across the Global Markets division including in treasury finance and business management. In her current role, she is COO for Global Markets at HSBC Singapore and Regional COO for the division in Vietnam, Thailand and Philippines. Fatema has a degree in accountancy from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India, and is holder of the CFA.

