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What did the perfect day look like in the different stages of the pandemic? What does it mean for future productivity at work?

I wake at 5am. By the dim landing light, I throw on the sports kit I left out the night before and head up to the spare room. As I stand at my desk, I feel refreshed. Ideas that my overnight brain has conjured from the fog that went in the previous night emerge clear and whole. I jot these thoughts down and begin to work through them, supplementing with new lines of investigation, occasionally looking something up to check my understanding. I work in this way until shortly before 7:30am, when I print out the children's schoolwork and head downstairs. I greet my wife, who is starting her workday from her home-crafted standing desk of a chair on the kitchen table, and the dog, who is flatteringly delighted to see me. The dog scampers excitedly between front door and kitchen as I prepare for our morning run. Lockdown suits her well – constant companionship, two long walks a day, and extra rations due to the increased exercise. She bounds joyously around the park as I plod out a couple of laps. I return home, shower and breakfast just in time to start lessons with my son at 9:15am in the kitchen. Before lessons begin, the children do a Joe Wicks together in the front room. My daughter has online classes through the morning, which she does in her bedroom, but my son has just one at 10am, with Maths after lunch at 1pm.

As we begin lessons, I cajole him through some of the reliably easier pickings - the Maths and Spelling worksheets - before his 10am class. It is interesting watching him interact in the online classes. He started a new school in September, so had only a few weeks face-to-face with his new classmates and teacher before the second lockdown. But he speaks confidently, and I am proud of the perceptiveness of some of his answers. After the class he has a short break and a snack with his sister, before we get into some of the work that I know will take more negotiation. On a good day like today we bond over the Music lessons, examples of music from Africa that I supplement with some favourites of my own, and we quickly reach a compromise on how much writing is sufficient. He does not even protest at doing spelling corrections. Lessons over, I steal away for a quick half hour, relieved to be free of my most onerous duty of the day. I do some admin, clearing out the inbox, or just spend the time catching up on what is going on in the world, before returning to the kitchen to have lunch with the family. At 1pm my son starts his second online class of the day. It is one he looks forward to as he can stay on afterwards to chat with his friends. Allowing him to do this is typically my greatest leverage in our negotiations, but in truth we are glad he has the opportunity.

I take myself off again to do some afternoon work. It lacks the intensity of the morning effort and is often more about putting questions and sources in mind to be worked on by my subconscious, but nevertheless feels profitable and productive. Meanwhile at 2pm, after her early start, my wife's workday ends. She gets the kids and dog ready and sets off for a walk to another local park, the one with the good playground. No formal arrangements are made to meet, but it becomes the norm for a number of local families to follow a similar pattern and the children enjoy spending time with friends, while the parents walk around the park or stand around having socially-distanced conversations. As it gets to 5pm I start to get dinner ready for

their return. We eat together around 5:30pm and chat companionably about our day. By 6:30pm the children are bathed and we watch some TV together as a family, debating the relative merits of bakers, or the match-making of stray dogs with new owners. The children go upstairs and one parent supervises teeth-brushing and a bedtime story while the other finishes tidying downstairs. With the children down, my wife and I do a yoga class together in the front room, before settling onto the sofa to enjoy a carefully selected programme on catch-up. By 9pm we are upstairs and having baths of our own. I read a few pages of a book in bed and find my eyelids heavy. Lights are out by 10pm.

What might any of this mean for future productivity at work? Consider this 'perfect day' a month later. I wake at 5am, but I feel listless and sluggish. I take a seat in the spare room and become distracted by an article appearing on my browser. This leads to more. By 7am, I have not completed any productive work and I feel frustrated so I decide I need to get some time back and that I will not walk the dog this morning. When I do descend to the kitchen at 8:30am, I am grumpy, having not got much done. This feeds over into the lesson where I readily lose my patience, and the three hours become a battle. My wife, who is more irritable than normal having slept badly, shifts to a room next door, less well-appointed for work but at least free from the arguments of her husband and child, and the whines of the insufficiently exercised dog. My son's afternoon class has been moved to 11:30am, reducing the morning time available to get schoolwork done and compromising my most useful bargaining chip. By midday, I am done. I grouch off to the spare room, away from the family. I think about the work I need to do, but instead start reading interesting articles about international relations, or AI governance, or, ironically, productivity. I am not hungry, having not run that morning and skip lunch with the family. By the end of the afternoon, I find myself watching youtube clips. After dinner, my wife and I squabble about whose turn it is to supervise bath and bedtime. And later I cannot be bothered with yoga. Rather than spend more time with my tetchy wife, I watch TV after she has gone up for her bath and crawl into bed at 11pm.

So what ought we take from that? In the form of a brutally repurposed aphorism, no man's work is a productivity island. It is not clear exactly what caused the family to fall off the productivity wagon, it might have been my laziness in not doing the nightly yoga, or my wife's poor sleep, or my son's belligerence in a particularly fractious lesson. Any of these and many more could have nudged us into this more negative cycle. We will never know. Likewise, there had been a time when a virtuous cycle pumped in the other direction as we set ourselves into that perfect daily routine. But the point is that something small happened to our productivity in some aspect of our shared life, whether that be with respect to work, health, or family time, and this impacted the productivity of all of us and in all the realms of our lives – my wife was exiled from her preferred working location, my son learnt less, we spent less quality family time together. For sure one part was that my own work productivity dipped but that was both a symptom and a cause.

Any office worker will be familiar with the communal rhythms of productivity - the high then low of the team coffee break, or the motivating rush of a new project or client, but the office provides buffers to the highs and lows of personal productivity. Work productivity cycles are tied to those of co-workers. It is possible then that the move to increased remote working has an extremising effect. Some in the office environment were already able to achieve higher productivity by imposing a greater order on what they did, and others got dragged up by their proximate expectations and practices. With more remote working some constraints on both ends of the spectrum are released. The more productive can bolster their personal productivity through the benefits of not commuting, by optimising their work set-up to their personal specifications, or by being able to move more seamlessly between work and other activities,

such as exercise and family. On the other hand, some will find it harder in a remote working environment, with competing demands more immediate and productivity-inducing colleague expectations and norms less so.

In summary, the move to remote working offers opportunities and challenges to work productivity by tying it more closely to a different set of associated productivities – those of our households and the other aspects of our lives – and less closely to the work productivity of colleagues. The challenge of managing this in an equitable manner will be one for us all.