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Social distancing could create 15 million jobs in the next decade. Career experts predict which industries and workers stand to benefit the most.

Shana Lebowitz 12 hours ago



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Remote-job opportunities could help caregivers and other groups of flexible workers. [Courtney Hale/Getty Images](#)

Employees practicing social distancing have been working from home since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak.

Companies can reduce unemployment in the impending recession by applying what they've learned during this period.

If employers hire remote workers, they'll gain access to a wider talent pool — and create about 15 million job opportunities for people who have long sat on the sidelines of the labor force.

Those people include newly unemployed workers, caregivers, semiretired people, and those with disabilities or health conditions.

Join Business Insider on Thursday at 12 p.m. ET for our digital live event "[Leading From Home](#)," where we'll be talking with WorkBoard founder Deidre Paknad and Chatbooks founder Nate Quigley about how to lead remote teams during the coronavirus crisis.

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In the past month, the coronavirus pandemic has upended the traditional office.

Employees practicing [social distancing](#) to help slow the spread of the virus have traded boardroom meetings for videoconferences that more often than not involve glimpses of colleagues' pajamas or unfinished basements. And companies have learned that people can still get their work done, even in less-than-ideal conditions.

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Eventually, the pandemic will pass. But it will leave in its wake a [global economic recession](#) and a chunk of the US working population out of a job. Nearly 3.3 million Americans filed for unemployment *just* in the week ending March 21, [the Labor Department reported](#).

One strategy to increase US employment levels is for companies to apply everything they've learned about remote work during this period of social distancing. If companies are willing to hire remote and flexible workers, they'll open up opportunities both for newly unemployed professionals and for groups of workers who have traditionally sat on the sidelines of the labor force.

Julia Pollak, a labor economist at the employment marketplace [ZipRecruiter](#), said an increase in remote work could boost overall US employment by as much as 10%, or about 15 million jobs in the next decade. Pollak told Business Insider that bump would be the result of both eliminating real-estate costs associated with hiring and bringing groups like semiretired people and stay-at-home parents into the labor force.

As for employers, they'll gain access to talented professionals who don't necessarily live within commuting distance of company headquarters.

It could be a win-win scenario.

Remote work could create new career opportunities for some professionals

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smartphones — remote work has gotten easier and more popular.

The coronavirus outbreak is only "accelerating" the shift to flexible work that many companies were already making, Jake Schwartz, the CEO of the adult-education school [General Assembly](#), said. General Assembly is headquartered in New York City and has employees all over the world, many of whom train other teams on best practices for remote work.

Some major employers [have pushed back](#) on the shift toward remote work. In 2013, [Yahoo mandated](#) that all employees must work on-site; in 2017, [IBM, a remote-work pioneer, announced](#) the same.

But now that the new coronavirus has forced many companies to shift to remote work, it will be hard to reverse course. On the employment marketplace ZipRecruiter, job seekers' search queries that include the term "online" increased 339% between February and March.

The stigma around hiring working parents may fade after the pandemic passes

A "bright light" at the end of social distancing is that when things go back to some semblance of normal, "companies are going to be more open to people working flexibly," Erica Keswin, a workplace strategist and the author of "[Bring Your Human to Work](#)," said. These are workers who can't or would prefer not to sit in an office all day and have had a hard time finding jobs — including parents, caregivers, people in semiretirement, and people with disabilities or health conditions.

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dream industries. Daniel Chait, the CEO of the recruiting-software

company [Greenhouse](#), used the example of someone who lives in middle America but has always wanted to work in the entertainment industry. There are likely some job functions they can handle, even while sitting miles away from Hollywood's glittering lights.

Parents could be some of the biggest winners in the shift toward flexible work. Young professional women in particular are [often seen as flight risks](#): Some employers assume that those women will soon start a family, after which they'll prioritize kids over work. That's possibly why mothers [earn less](#) than women without children. (Men tend to [earn more](#) than their childless counterparts.)

Chait said that was all about to change.

"Everyone's a stay-at-home parent now," he said. And many of those parents are still effective at their jobs, even if they have to take calls and answer emails after their kids go to sleep. (Chait said he's led a few virtual meetings recently with his 8-year-old son sitting on his lap.) Many employers who had previously been wary of hiring mothers, or parents in general "are going to see working parents as a good fit for different types of jobs," Chait added.

We could soon see an 'explosion' in remote businesses

Certain job functions and industries are going to become more accessible to flexible workers. Pollak, the ZipRecruiter labor economist, pointed to telemedicine as a prime example of a relatively new industry that's open to

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[been wary of going to a hospital or a doctor's office, some have consulted medical experts virtually instead](#)

medical experts virtually instead.

Schwartz, the General Assembly CEO, predicted that the US was about to see an "explosion" in telemedicine companies and other remote businesses. (Schwartz is also a cofounder of the telemedicine company [Brave Health](#), which doesn't have a headquarters, so the team is entirely distributed.)

Pollak said these telemedicine roles could be suitable for a semiretired physician or a healthcare professional who wants to work flexible hours. A surge in telemedicine hiring could help alleviate the labor shortage in medicine and would benefit consumers too, since a virtual appointment is typically more affordable than an in-person visit. "That shift could be a really positive thing for the economy and for people's pocketbooks," Pollak said.

The return to normality may look different everywhere. But the results of this accidental experiment in flexible working will inform the way things get done in every company and industry.

"Nearly every business is learning a whole new set of behaviors right now around remote work," Chait said. "When this all gets past us, those remote-work lessons will still be with us."

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The US now has the [world's biggest coronavirus outbreak](#) — its case total just surpassed China's. More than 1,000 people in the US have died from the coronavirus.

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