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LIFESTYLE • CAREERS

Remote Work Is Making It Harder for Grads to Find (and Keep) Jobs

New research argues that frustration among employers over remote work may be leading them to cut back on hiring young workers

By Owen Tucker-Smith

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ALEXANDRA CITRIN-SAFADI/WSJ



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After two years and 150 job applications, Kylie Klapp settled for something she hadn't initially sought out: a company with no office.

The 24-year-old's colleagues are scattered across living rooms around the country, dealing in Slack messages and emails, but never chatting by the water cooler because, well, there isn't one. She goes days without hearing a co-worker's voice or seeing one's face. When she does, the interaction is to-the-point: "You give me a task," she says, "I give you an output."

In the back of Klapp's mind is the fear of getting left behind. "The job market is so bad right now," she said. "I need to network."

And if that isn't enough? Remote work "has ruined my social life," she says.

Six years ago, the pandemic sent Klapp and her peers home from their high schools months before their graduations. Now, much of Gen Z remains alien to the American office. And while executives like Jamie Dimon and Andy Jassy have launched high-profile campaigns to get workers back to their desks, remote work remains a staple of the workplace, leaving plenty of recent grads Zooming into conference calls from their couches.

Those workers sometimes struggle to connect with mentors or shadow senior employees. Training junior workers remotely is “very expensive,” said startup founder Jason Crawford. “It becomes this silent tax on senior time.” Crawford’s top employees would be *more* productive at home, he said, but junior ones aren’t.

Recent grads are already fretting that artificial intelligence is shrinking the junior job market. Compounding those worries is fresh economic research arguing that frustration among employers like Crawford over how working-from-home policies have played out might have caused them to cut back on hiring young workers altogether.

A study last month from researchers at the London School of Economics noted that the amount of hiring devoted to entry-level roles across a handful of countries has fallen more than 14% since 2019. The study, based on more than 400 million online job postings, found that firms that stayed remote after the pandemic were more likely to cut back on junior hiring. Recruiting an entry-level worker, the researchers say, is a bet on the employee’s future skills. So a company’s return-on-investment hinges on the rate at which that young employee learns.

Since remote work slows that process, the researchers argue, companies see young talent as a less attractive value proposition, preferring to invest instead in older workers.

As a result, remote work doesn’t just dampen young employees’ day-to-day experience. It also makes it harder for them to find a job in the future.

“The implication is stark,” the researchers wrote. “A persistent contraction of this kind hollows out the pipeline of future experienced workers, causing declines in aggregate productivity as well as imposing cohort-specific scarring.”

Less than a quarter of Gen Z wants a fully remote workplace, according to a Gallup poll last year, compared with more than a third of the older generations. Software developer Darby Vernon used to work at a company

that allowed workers to stay home, and only a small cohort of young, mostly single workers would come into the office.

On the surface, Vernon said, remote work seemed attractive: “You can roll out of bed five minutes before your morning meeting.” But she started to miss socializing. An introvert, Vernon would realize she had gone a week without talking to anyone besides a waiter at a restaurant. She is now a month into an in-person role—and she feels sorry for young workers who are stuck at home.

“Sending someone a Slack message admitting ‘I don’t know what I’m doing’ is harder than leaning over at lunch,” she said.

Some also worry that remote work limits the development of the “soft skills” needed to succeed in workplace social situations. There is a whole cottage industry for it now: Amazon and Live Nation hired influencer Grace McCarrick to improve their workers’ social skills in the workplace.

McCarrick has recently started selling her services directly to workers, teaching them what to say when your boss’s boss approaches you at happy hour, for a few hundred dollars a month. She calls it “the Soft Skilled School” and said there is significant demand from young

people. This month's theme?
Charisma.

Young workers can't expect to flex these skills at home, she added. "You can have convenience when you're 45."

Not everyone buys that. A camp of Gen Z has clung to the dream of work-life balance. Only 6% of Gen Z and Millennials say achieving a leadership position at their company is a primary career goal, according to a Deloitte survey last month. More than 40% said flexible work arrangements would be a top factor influencing their decision to take on a leadership role.

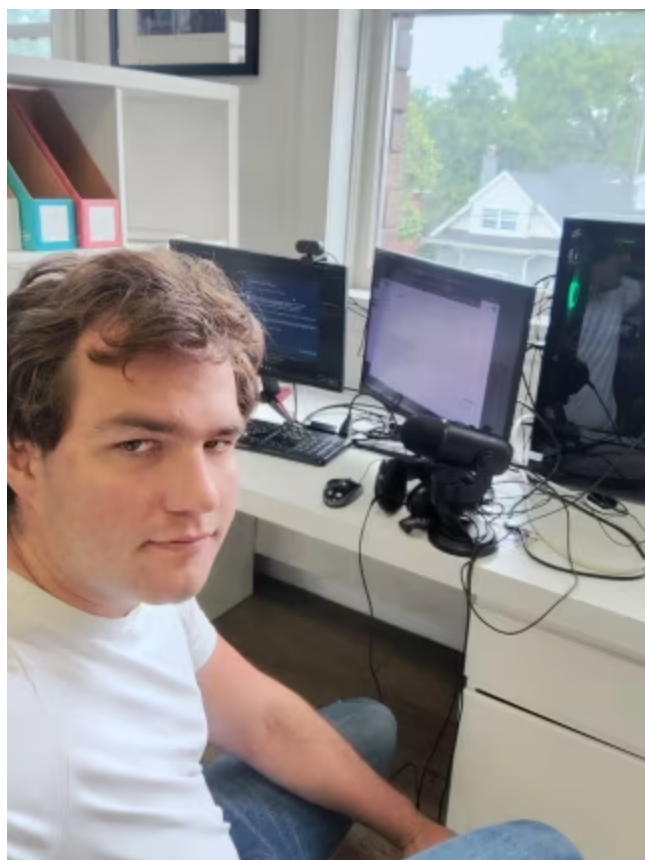
That spirit has led an army of young people to push back against the back-to-work crusade. Part of the problem, Klapp said, is that the emerging factions of Gen Z are now leading completely different lives: "I have a really hard time relating to peers that don't have the same experience as me," she said.

A thousand miles away from Klapp in Canada, 24-year-old software developer Chris Stevers doesn't mind coding from his family farm outside of Stratford, Ontario.

Yes, it was awkward when a cow interrupted one of his Zooms, and he realizes he could be missing out on networking by surrounding himself mostly with farmers. But Stevers likes that he is able to get his tasks done while tending to his herd of cattle and being near family.

Economists say the remote-work theory of entry-level hiring might be *good* news, especially if it means the effects of AI aren't to blame for the hiring slowdown. The inconveniences of Slack and Zoom are fixable problems, the LSE researchers argue, which corporate America could work to address. On the other hand, if the slowdown is AI's fault, they say, then there isn't much that can be done easily, given the technology's unstoppable force.

And yet the workforce doesn't seem to have reached that point yet. Matthew Manning, already on his third remote job in three years after graduating in 2023, has never shadowed another employee.



Chris Stevers's work station. CHRIS STEVERS

Manning, like others, enjoys the flexibility of remote work. But he also realizes he hasn't been in a job long enough to go through a promotion cycle. He was laid off of both of his previous roles.

"I've never really gotten to know my co-workers," he said. "And I think it's easier to let someone go if you don't have a physical relationship with them."

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