

# TECHNOLOGY AT WORK

Digitization is increasingly changing the way people do their jobs and redefining the workplace

By **ALFRED ROMANN**  
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For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

**H**o Ting Yee, a Hong Kong-based writer for a financial news portal, starts work at 7 am every day. His commute is non-existent, as most days he works from the comfort of home.

"I have to hand in all my stories between 1:30 pm and 2 pm every day, and working from home saves traveling time and money. It also makes it easier for me to meet my deadlines," said the 30-year-old.

"It makes it easier to focus and results in better productivity when I work alone and in a relaxed environment — be it my home, a coffee shop or my brother's office."

Ho still checks in to team meetings by teleconference from his laptop or mobile device, and his work mobility also allows him to continue working while traveling. He recently went to Australia and Japan and still managed to meet his deadlines from abroad.

"Working remotely does require high discipline because there are no supervisors checking your progress every minute. So you rely on self-discipline to get all the work done on time," said Ho.

Ho's work situation is increasingly common in China — but also around the world. It is a sign of the increasing digitization of work across many occupations and the ongoing changes in the way people work.

In a randomized study last year, Ctrip, China's largest online travel services provider, found significant benefits in allowing employees to work from home, particularly in and around Shanghai.

With a workforce of 16,000, Ctrip carried out a trial with 500 staff members over nine months. The company found savings of \$1,900 per employee in office costs over the course of the trial, while telecommuters increased their productivity by 13.5 percent, with shorter breaks and fewer sick days.

There were also some downsides, however. When the trial ended, about half of the telecommuters were ready to return to work at the office to avoid feeling isolated or due to spending too much time with family.

And that was among the youngest and lowest-level staff at the company. Data from other sources show that higher level executives are also increasingly changing the way they work, with more of them taking advantage of new technologies



**Commuters** join the morning rush hour on the Shanghai metro on July 19, 2017. Technology may allow more workers to work from home, cutting costs and increasing productivity. AFP

and work methodologies in their approach.

According to data from Regus, an international provider of workspaces, as many as 65 percent of businesspeople in China worked remotely 2.5 days a week as of 2017. This is higher than the global average of 54.3 percent.

The rise of the digital economy likely has much to do with that. This year, China's digital economy will overtake that of the United States to become the world's largest, according to the Digital Economy Compass from market intelligence portal Statista. China's digital B2C (business to consumer) market revenue forecast is at \$765 billion for 2018, compared to the US' \$698 billion.

"Building a community of common future in cyberspace has increasingly become the widespread common understanding of international society," President Xi Jinping told the 4th World Internet Conference held in Wuzhen, East China's Zhejiang province, in December.

By 2021, research firm IDC China expects as much as 55 percent of China's GDP will come from the digital economy. Consultancy McKinsey & Company estimates that the current value of China's e-commerce transactions is already larger than that of France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the US combined. And digitization is affecting the way people in China work.

Workplace mobility is just one of the conveniences and considerations brought on by advances in technology.

James Manyika, chairman and director of the McKinsey Global Institute, said advances in artificial intelligence and shifting job roles create many issues worth thinking about.

"First, there's the question and discussion around the impact of artificial intelligence, automation on work and jobs, and whether we'll have enough work and jobs left after that," said Manyika during a McKinsey Global Institute podcast on the future of work.

"A second part of the conversation is around the changing models for work and work structure," he said. "This involves questions around independent work, the gig economy, and what people sometimes refer to as fissured work — whether people work as outsourced services or not."

Looking to the future, he said there are questions surrounding "those kinds of evolved work models ... and whether people can work effectively and sustainably and earn living wages with enough support, in that kind of world of more varied types of work."

Last year, the International Labour Organization (ILO) set up its Global Commission on the Future of Work.

"It is fundamentally important that we confront these challenges from the conviction that the future

of work is not decided for us in advance," said Guy Ryder, director-general of the ILO, at the launch of the commission.

"It is a future that we must make according to the values and preferences that we choose and through policies that we design and implement."

The Global Commission on the Future of Work currently consists of 28 members, including Wang Xiaochu, vice-chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of China's National People's Congress.

Transforming the workplace through technology is not just about the employees. Clearly, there are benefits for companies too.

In a study by Dimension Data, gaining a competitive advantage and improving business processes were among the top goals in undergoing a digital transformation. This was cited by 40 percent of 800 organizations surveyed in 15 countries on five continents.

Enterprises are also turning to new workplace technologies to drive increased customer service, with 45 percent of Dimension Data's respondents reporting improved customer satisfaction as a result of digital workplace technology.

"It's no longer enough to simply implement these technologies," said Kane Steele, general manager of end-user computing at Dimension Data.

"Organizations have grown their use of analytics to understand how these technologies impact their business performance: 64 percent use analytics to improve their customer services, and 58 percent use analytics to benchmark their workplace technologies."

According to Dimension Data's study, around 30 percent of organizations are far along in their digital transformation initiatives and are already reaping the benefits.

Steele said one factor that could be holding companies back from implementing a digital workplace is corporate culture.

Corporate culture often inhibits, rather than encourages, change in the style of work. Participants in Dimension Data's research cited organizational issues hindering such change.

IT issues were the No 1 barrier to the successful adoption of new work styles, according to the report.

"The complexity of the existing IT infrastructure can present a major hurdle to implementing new collaboration and productivity tools to support flexible work styles. Successful transformation implementations are achieved when IT works closely with line-of-business heads," said Steele.

Meanwhile, all of this connectivity does have a downside — the potential for burnout among employees constantly 'tethered' to work by mobile devices. A report by consultancy Deloitte said that people may feel unable to fully disengage from work or may feel tracked by their company if they cannot disconnect.

According to a global survey of nearly 3,000 employees across eight nations conducted by human capital think tank The Workforce Institute at Kronos Incorporated, making it easy for employees to negotiate basic work-life demands is key to preventing a global employee burnout crisis.

Simon Porter, a board member of The Workforce Institute, said that "in many respects, the traditional 9 am to 5 pm working day is disappearing."

"Organizations that build a culture of trust — especially those that empower employees to work at the times or locations they find most beneficial — will benefit from stronger employee engagement, higher productivity, and improved retention.

"Engaged employees often recognize flexibility is a two-way street, which is why they will also be more willing to adjust their own schedules to accommodate times of high demand that require extra or discretionary effort (and) off-hours work," he said.