

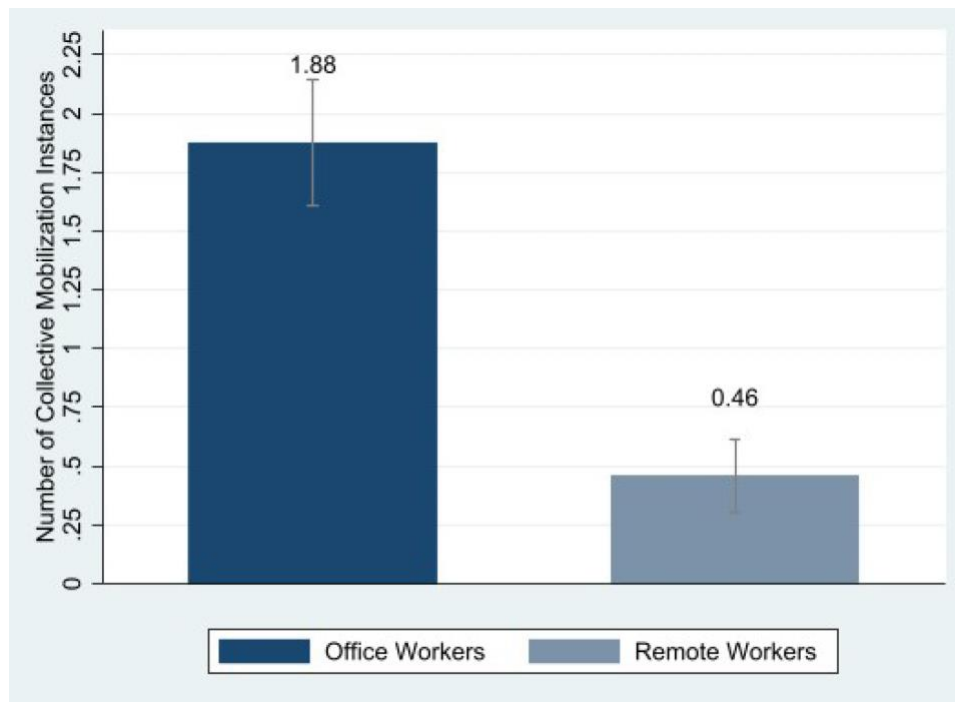
Home Team Disadvantage: Remote Work, Solidarity and Collective Mobilization

Remote working today is commonplace, with post-pandemic return-to-office schemes often facing an ambivalent response. Improved work-life balance, creativity, and access to a broader talent pool have cemented the shift remote, leaving many wondering if this change has any meaningful downsides. In their paper, Professor Aruna Ranganathan and Aayan Das posit that differences in collective mobilization can be a potential cause for concern, and one that is of interest to both employers and employees.


Collective mobilization is a fundamental institution of the workplace; throughout history, social movements have driven civilizations in the positive direction of justice and equity, bettering outcomes for populations at large. On the individual level, a worker's ability to "voice" their grievances can affect their engagement and experience, or in the face of particularly poor conditions, a choice to "exit" the group. Varying organization structures can moderate one's ability to exercise voice. These factors make it essential to understand how remote work will transform workplace collective mobilization, in order to form a holistic opinion on the growing trend.

The researchers conducted a field experiment with 128 participants in India employed in a week-long internship. The interns were split into two groups and given a data entry task; some worked in-person in an office environment and others worked remotely under the same set of managers. Each group was further divided into teams of four or five such that members of the team were either all in the office or all remote, and every team had at least two women. Leveraging a full-cycle research approach, quantitative metrics were layered with qualitative observations for a deeper understanding of remote work and its relationship with solidarity, attendance, productivity and worker voice.

The most important variable tracked was workers' collective mobilization, defined as any time two or more members of a team jointly brought up a grievance with management. Grievances ranged from concerns about workload and performance pay to issues pertaining to work scheduling and requesting breaks in the middle of the workday. Interns raised these issues with their managers through a variety of modes: via Slack, during daily mandatory check-ins and optional "open hours," and even through signed petitions. The results show that office workers collectively mobilized four times as much as remote workers did (see figure below). This difference is large and meaningful, but also statistically significant.



Further identified was a key reason for office workers' greater propensity to mobilize – the solidarity they felt with their teammates. Solidarity within each team, as measured by self-reported surveys as well as in-person accounts, was a significant mechanism driving collective action. Quoting a participant, "One of the reasons that I continued this internship and went to the manager [to mobilize] was...the camaraderie... If it wasn't for the relationship with my team, I don't think I could have continued with it [the mobilization]."



The results, while offering a novel take on remote work, are not surprising when considering historical sociological research. Scholars posit that a critical ingredient to building solidarity in successful mobilization is having access to “free spaces.” When applied to the workplace setting, these are areas “that are isolated from the direct observation of defenders of the status quo and allow for interaction among reformers apart from daily work” (Kellogg 2009: 657); examples include voluntary employee-only meetings, break rooms, lunch outings, bathrooms and water coolers. Workers have ample access to such free spaces in an office-based environment, but they become harder to access when working remotely and pose as an impediment to building the solidarity needed to mobilize.

It has become clear that remote work is becoming a permanent fixture of the labor market landscape. But its adoption is likely to change not just *how much work* individuals perform, but also *how much voice* they have at work. Concerns have been raised about the disruptive effects of remote work to the foundations of labor organizing (Birch, 2022). This project, drawing on a field experiment, finds that remote employees are less likely to mobilize to voice grievances than their in-person counterparts, an important finding, especially in light of reports suggesting that worker disgruntlement is rampant in today’s world of work with increasing employee surveillance and encroachment of work into family life. For workers to address these and other concerns, they need to be able to use their voice collectively. How to bestow those working remotely with voice is an important policy question that deserves attention going forward, to prevent remote workers from feeling disconnected from their company and colleagues.

References

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