

Crisis Conversations: The Transformation of Work

April 24, 2020

BRIGID SCHULTE, HOST: Welcome everybody to yet another Crisis Conversation Live from The Better Life Lab, live from my home office where I'm socially distancing like everyone else. We created these conversations to create space for all of us to come together to try to understand this fast-moving crazy crisis that's really upending how we work and live and gender equality and social policy. Now we're actually trying to figure out not only understand it as we go but what are we learning while we're in the middle of it because this is going on for some time and how can we emerge better.

Today, we're going to be talking about remote work. I am thrilled to have all of the people that we've got here to share their stories and their expertise. We'd love to hear from you and your stories. If you've got questions, I'm going to pitch them to Cali and to Heejung because I'm not sure that I've got them. Let me start with you, Cali. I got an email from a friend of mine this morning. She said, "I'm really looking forward to this conversation because I'm still in my pajamas. My back hurts because I had a crappy chair yesterday."

I know, I read, I research a lot about remote and flexible work and I'm doing everything wrong. The seven weeks in, just tell us about what are you hearing? You're trying to work with people, this is harder than people tend to do to think, oh, remote work, it's easy. You got a phone and a computer and off you go. This is tough.

CALI YOST, PANELIST: Well, what I'm hearing, Brigid, is a couple things. First, we were thrown into the flexible and remote work deep end overnight. As I like to say to people, if you do this the right way, you have a whole pre-work where you're looking at how things are going, you're training people, you're giving them a chance to practice, then you're giving them a chance to review and then you're helping them even close any gaps.

It's a very thoughtful, organized process, and there is a pilot in that process. Well, everybody was thrown into pilot together overnight, no training, there was no

readiness building, you're just in it. I think what we're finding is-- oh, and it happened in a crisis. I'm sorry, I should have added that.

BRIGID: Right. Where we're afraid to go outside [unintelligible 00:02:17] to go to the grocery store.

CALI: Yes. One thing that I am hearing is people are surprised at how well it's going, honestly. I think I have leaders who were just like, I got to tell you, if you asked me beforehand, if these jobs can be done remotely, I would have told you no way. I am shocked at how people are able to adapt and are doing what they're doing. Now, are they as productive as they were being before? Have they figured out exactly how to switch up the work processes and the workflow so that people are able to get their jobs done as maybe fluidly as they were? No, but that is coming along.

Again, I think there's an awareness and openness. I think people being impressed that we're able to keep things going. Now, that being said, obviously there are a whole group of people who can't necessarily work remotely for full time, and that's why we have to stop talking just about remote work. We have to add flexible work into that because there is an ability to be flexible with time and with teaming and that we can put in place with those jobs that are maybe not able to be done remotely, but can still keep people safe and allow an organization to operate again, perhaps not optimally where they can keep the business going.

BRIGID: I want to go to Katie next. Be on deck, Katie, because she's got one of those jobs that you didn't think you could ever do remotely. Cali, one of the things that I didn't do was introduce you because I'm having one of those days. I'm lucky not to be in my pajamas right now. Introduce yourself. One of the things I would like you to do before we go to Katie is talk about-- When we first started talking, you've been helping people do remote and flexible work for a long time and there's been a lot of resistance to it. Tell us who you are, why you're an expert, and then how we got here, and then we're going to switch to Katie real quick.

CALI: Long story, very short. My name is Cali Williams Yost. I am the CEO and founder of the Flex Strategy Group and we are flexible workplace strategist. We go and we help leaders reimagine how, when, and where work can be done, and build cultures of high-performance flexibility. I have been doing this work for almost 25 years. It's a very long time, I've seen it. I've seen every single iteration and evolution of it. The

resistance has come from just culturally entrenched ideas about the way work needs to be done.

I have been very blessed over the years to work with truly visionary leaders who for a variety of reasons just saw that they needed to rethink their business model, whether it was their ability to attract and retain the best talent or to be the most productive or to just be able to leverage their resources more effectively. They saw the need to make that change happen. Once they were able to make that commitment, and they understood that it was a culture shift, it was about giving people a new set of skills, a new way of thinking, a new way of planning, a new way of coordinating.

Actually, it's amazing what happens, the increase in productivity and engagement in the ability to get, keep, and retain the best people, or attract and retain the best people really does increase. My hope with all of this is that this awareness that has come from this overnight pilot that we're all in is that leaders then see, "You know what? I'm going to take it to the next level, and I am going to do the work to actually shift this culture permanently and not only come through this crisis but actually come through it in position to actually thrive." That's what I'm hopeful to do it.

BRIGID: I am as well, I think we all are. Heejung will be able to address some of that but first, let's go to Katie. Katie Kleeman, we just met this morning, we have amazingly bizarre small world, close friends. You are a high school science teacher. Now, talk about a job that you would never imagine could be done remotely. Tell us about what you're experiencing. You're joining us from Colorado, right?

KATIE KLEEMAN, PANELIST: Correct. Hi, thanks for having me, Brigid. I'm Katie Marie Kleeman. I am a high school science teacher, it's my 35th year, and never in my wildest dreams would I think that I would be teaching students remotely.

BRIGID: How's it going?

KATIE: A learning curve for me to say the least. When we came back from spring break, my plan was to do gas laws for chemistry, for example. I had liquid nitrogen ordered and can crush and all kinds of fun activities for the kids to do to learn the different types of gas laws, and now we're doing it remotely. It's changed things a lot.

BRIGID: What about just even in terms of your own life? A lot of times people I think the Bloomberg just had a piece that came out today that said people's work their days

are 12 to 15 hour days, it's hard to know when to turn off. There are no boundaries anymore. What's that like now for you?

KATIE: That is definitely true. My days have been extremely long, partly because instead of teaching a class of 34 students all at one time, many students will send the emails, how do I do Charles' law? How do I change pressure from millimeters of mercury to atms or something like that? I'll go through an email and try to help them out and explain it and stuff. Sometimes I'll do FaceTime with the students.

Every week I do a Zoom to try to go over practice problems but instead of just one class of doing it, it's multiple, multiple times, and then some kids can't get through on the internet, or they can't pull up the video that I had made. I've become really good at doing YouTube videos with different concepts, because I need to show them the steps of how to do these. I've made quite a few YouTube videos.

BRIGID: Yes, it's amazing. Cali, the point that you were making is that we are all thrown into this pilot, and we're all figuring it out as we go and that our hope is that there are things that we can learn from this. You talked about the resistance. Heejung, let me turn it over to you. I'm going to let you introduce yourself. I'm sorry, I've been bad about that today. Like I said, I'm having the day. I'm not doing so hot myself today.

Heejung, you've done an awful lot of really excellent work. If you can see in the chat, we're posting some links about remote work, some tips as well as ways to understand it. I'm hoping that we're going to get to some tips because I could so use them today. Heejung, we talked about things that we can learn that there's been this resistance. It's pretty clear that the resistance to flexible and remote work has really disadvantaged women over time. You've looked a lot at remote and flexible work in gender and what are you thinking that we're going to be learning through this pilot as Cali says?

DR. HEEJUNG CHUNG, PANELIST: First of all, I'm Heejung Chung. I'm associate professor in Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Kent in the UK, so it's six o'clock right now for me. A lot of the things that I've done over the years, so I was principal investigator for a project called Work Autonomy, Flexibility, and Work-Life Balance, which we look at the positive and the negative consequences. Some of it, the unintended consequences of flexible working, including working from home. I see that, again, a lot of people without any preparation have been pushed into this situation.

One thing that hasn't been mentioned is that the schools are shut, childcare is shut, as well as a lot of the things that enabled women to be able to actually go into the labor market, has been completely clawed back. A lot of women were able to actually go into the labor market in full-time work only because there are childcare facilities, schools, afterschool clubs, and then what we consider a network of care, as well as outsourcing of housework that we relied very heavily on, including going to have their meals out, but also the seniors for these middle-class families, et cetera. That's all been dismantled in the situation that we're in.

On one hand, it's amazing that actually so many people are able to carry out a lot of the work that we initially thought was impossible to do at home. We also see that it's actually some of the jobs that, again, a lot of employers, if you ask them, they always say this type of job doesn't allow for working from home is actually being done in a relatively good way, in a very productive way.

The thing that I worry slightly about is what kind of expectations employers and managers have, because if you were to try to compare the productivity and the amount of work people are able to do compared to when they were in the office, I think this is a really bad time to compare it like that because everybody we're grieving. We're in a crisis and pandemic where things are not normal for anybody to do, even remotely, close to what they were doing in the office in normal circumstances. At home at the moment is beyond what employers should be expecting at the moment.

The comparison shouldn't be what we were doing in the office, but the comparisons would have been that no one would have been able to do anything at all. If this pandemic was in the 1990s, for example, majority of us would not have been able to do the kind of work that we're doing now. [crosstalk]

BRIGID: Let me go back to you-- I'm sorry, Heejung, finish your point and then I want to go back to Cali, because you've been working with some people who have been experiencing some of that, it sounds like. Heejung, what was the point that you wanted to make?

HEEJUNG: I was just going to talk about some of the positive, but also the negative. It's great that we're working, but also what they worry about is that a lot of people trying to do as much as they were doing in the office, are doing very boundaryless work where you're ending up putting in very long hours all the time, and not being able to have your private home's time or your family time because you feel like, "Oh, I was just

trying to go and do," because your work sphere and your family sphere, your private sphere has been very much blurred.

I see, especially women with care responsibilities, feeling a very high level of conflict because they feel they're not able to do neither of the roles that they feel they are meant to fulfill.

BRIGID: Now, I want to go to you Cali, but Katie, I see you nodding. You also, on the other end of the spectrum, you've brought your mother home to live with you. You took her out of independent care, so that's another stress that you've now gotten your life as well.

KATIE: Yes, it is, but I'm so grateful that she's here. She would have been in seclusion in her room at the place where she was living, and that would not be good for her mental health at all.

BRIGID: Like you're saying, Heejung, where this isn't business as usual. We've got so many other things that we're trying to juggle. Cali, you've been working with people. You had a story that you were going to share of somebody who might've been a little skeptical but then it's seeing that even in these emergency and crisis situations, is possible. Can you tell us a little bit more about some of the people you're working with?

CALI: I have an interesting story I was telling Brigid. Unfortunately, this person was not comfortable enough to come on today. She is what I like to call a longtime prospect of mine. She's been interested in my work for a while. She would admit she is a dinosaur, and how she runs her department. She runs a department of 450 people in a larger service organization. She's been intrigued, but has never really been able to take the steps to make change happen.

This comes along, and she reached out to me recently and she said-- I have to tell you, she's one of the leaders. It's like, "I am shocked." She's followed the principles, because I've been talking about the principles of re-imagining work in life in crisis. They're very specific. It's you have to keep it simple. You have to start where you are. It's about intention and not perfection. You have to prioritize, communicate, and recalibrate, and then do it again, and then do it again, and then do it again. Then you have to leverage that learning.

She started doing that, and she has been really smart, in that, she's communicated that they don't have the same performance expectations that everybody needs to fulfill. She's

been really, again, surprised how people have been able to step up. They have taken on other work from another department actually, because people had some open space in their schedules. They've been very understanding of the caregiving responsibilities that people have, and I think that goes to the communication.

There's a lot more open communication amongst managers and employees about, "Okay, so here's my reality. This is how I'm intentionally trying to work in this period of time, but this is when I have to be with my kids. I'm available." There's just a lot more coordination and collaboration and a clarity in terms of the protocol of communication, leveraging the technology that they had. It's interesting; I feel they're all these organizations that were transitioning to Microsoft Team at the beginning of the year. Now they're diving in, and they're using all the components of Microsoft Team, that perhaps they hadn't used before.

Again, I think we're going to come out on this on the other side. I love your story, Katie because would you have ever stopped and taken the time to learn how to do a YouTube videos, to do your classes? You never would've done that. You might not use that as your primary way of teaching going forward, but think about these young people, they love stuff like that. They love being on social media. Maybe from now on, you'll do a few YouTube videos and throw it out there to the class.

Again, it's just opening our minds about how we can work differently. Now, is it perfect? It is not, and that's why it is intention, not perfection. We're all BBC dad now, which I love that phrase. You know what? My husband took my senile dog, who is not doing well with all of this, out of the house, because otherwise, she would have sat here and barked at me the whole time because that's what she does. He just have to roll with it.

We're doing our best, and we're going to keep getting better and better and better. That's where the prioritization, then the communication and then the recalibration, it's just going to get a little bit better and a little bit better. Ultimately, I think we're going to be in a good place, where we're going to keep things going. I loved what Heejung said. If this were the '90s, we wouldn't be doing anything. If that's our bar that, between we're doing nothing and now we're basically keeping it moving, that's a lot. We're just going to keep building on that.

BRIGID: What I'd love to do is go back to you, Katie. You were saying that before this, you had never really used Zoom. You'd never made a video, and now you are. What

are some things that you think you could take forward with you? I'd like to talk to all of you about where we move forward with this. Then I do want to end with, okay, but what do we do now? How do we figure out how to keep every day not feeling like Groundhog Day Tuesday with no boundaries? How do I get out of my yoga pants one of these days? Katie, what have you learned, and how do you think that's going to change what you do in the future?

KATIE: One of the benefits, I think one of the things I learned is how to make short little videos, showing clips to students of how to make organic compounds, for example, or how to do Charles' law, for example. I have those little videos now, so if I do have a student who's absent or sick or for some reason, not at school, I have those that I've uploaded to YouTube so I can use this as reference. I've thought it's been really beneficial.

Then also Cali, I wanted to say something, you talked about communicating as part of this. My mom is living with us, and there was a science department meeting that was earlier this morning, but that's the time that I get my mom up and help her to bathe and get dressed and get ready for the day and I was not able to make that. Simply communicating with my coordinator was so great, because then we met separately after that when there was a time. I think people have been much more flexible. That's something that's been a good positive thing for me, is the communication, the videos, and things.

I do worry a little bit about all of the support systems that we have at schools. because we really do support kids in so many different ways. A library for example, or my special needs kids that need additional supports, the mental health piece, the nurses, even kids being involved in clubs and sports and activities National Honor Society, all those things help those kids. Study groups that I have for biology or chemistry. Those pieces of school were not able to do right now and so I think all of us teachers are trying our best to provide those extra supports where it was other people who did it before, is that right?

BRIGID: Yes, absolutely.

KATIE: The mental health piece is something that I am very worried about, in particular, some specific students, and this is hard for them. They don't understand it, we as adults don't understand it, you can't really expect 15, 16-year-olds to necessarily

understand as well. That piece I am concerned about it, I know my district is doing a lot to help our students, I'm sure everyone else's too.

BRIGID: Yes. We've got a question, shall we go to Linda? Do you have a question and a comment that you wanted to add?

LINDA, CALLER: Yes, thank you so much, I'm really enjoying the conversation. I was kind of thinking more about when Heejung was speaking about daycares and schools, there was a recent article by Bloomberg that came out basically stating that American working parents want to be back in the office that they're working on average three hours longer.

When some of my fellow colleagues shared it with me, my question to them was, is it that we want to return to the office, or is it that we working parents want to continue working remotely just with open daycares and schools?

Because I think that article could totally be used for people who are saying, "We need to always be in the office together, that's the most productive way." I just wanted to make a comment out there and also hear your thoughts on that article. Thank you.

BRIGID: Yes. Heejung.

HEEJUNG: I agree with you, though I think it's not that we want to be in the office per se. It's just that being able to have a dedicated time and space just to do work and not worry about family and all sorts of the housework and et cetera is what people I think want to do. Again, what we need to see is that a lot of people are chuckling additional housework, additional care, additional not just childcare but also elderly care and care for family and friends that might be vulnerable at this point.

I wasn't able to get on your point Brigid going forward, but one of the great things about this whole blurring that happened which really induces the feelings of conflict between work and family life, but it's just that the idea that we are all BBC dads is that I think our employers have to see many of us in the context of family and us outside of work because there was no other way but to.

I'm hoping that that kind of conversation about being able to see that person more holistically in the context of families and all the other demands that they're facing may open up new conversations in the future about what makes workers better workers. It's not just for now but also in the future and I just wanted to answer that.

BRIGID: The notion that the ideal worker doesn't have any caregiving responsibilities. I was always struck by this one survey that was done that of like CEOs and C-suite managers around the world and they said, "Who's the ideal worker?" More than three-fourths of them said someone with no caregiving responsibilities. Well, that has absolutely no women, and right now like Cali as you said we're all BBC dads. That's very few people. You've either got childcare responsibilities or like Katie you've got your eldercare responsibilities, we all have some kind of care.

Cali, what do you think? Do you think this is also something that could help people bring a more, I guess, authentic sense of themselves to work in the future? Do you think that managers will shift their view of who an ideal worker is?

CALI: Well, I think we're witnessing the real-time destruction of the artificial boundary between work and life. It's just gone. Because think about it right now, I'm seeing Brigid's office. I love Brigid's office.

BRIGID: Thank you.

CALI: I'm wondering like what are those pictures, and I'm looking at Katie's beautiful mugs, I'm like, "What are those mugs from? Looking at Heejung and I'm like you're in England? Oh, how cool is that? I love England. I'm thinking about these things in the back of my head. You're seeing people for their whole lives and I know David the producer of this podcast I wanted to ask him like, you obviously played violin, David? This is a good thing. I think it is a very good thing. I think it's going to be very hard to put that genie back in the bottle.

I think we are all enjoying that on some level, it is definitely difficult and I am not minimizing the unusual challenges that parents and caregivers and even just going to the grocery store is so hard. This is unusual and that will pass, and I think that's where I want to talk about where we're going to go. It could take two years, it could take 18 months, we're ultimately going to get beyond this and so now we have to start to think about the next phase.

We get past this very extreme Safe at Home period, then we start to begin the evolution where it becomes a hybrid, on-site, remote work, dialing it down, dialing it up, depending upon what's going on with the virus and that's really the next phase. There was an article in The Washington Post by Jena McGregor who I think does a great job of covering the workplace and she started to talk about what that's going to look like and

you can see already companies are saying they have to keep all the desks further apart and they have to have people stagger their time coming in.

That means you are actually not going to be able to have everybody on-site, you're just not. It's just not going to work. Then you also have the fact that schools and camps are not going to be open probably until the fall. You're going to have to accommodate the fact that you can't get everybody on site and you have to accommodate the fact that the caregiving is just not going to be there.

I think the next thing we have to move into is how do we create that culture of flexibility? What are the skills and tools that managers need to manage? How are the skills and tools that teams need to coordinate with each other in this way? What are the skills and tools that individuals need to put those good boundaries up so that they aren't just working all the time?

We didn't know had to do that so we're all kind of doing this in real-time and I think the next phase when things calm down a little bit it's less intense and we're less scared perhaps. We can begin to say, what are those skills and tools? What is that framework of operation? It's not enough to give people a platform. I'm getting a little nervous that we're talking a lot about technology and technology is a tool. Technology is not the way we need to work. That's the next phase. How do we have to work and how do we have to make this happen together?

BRIGID: We're down on time. I was going to bring in Rajiv. You made a really great point in the chat so we'll have Rajiv, and then Heejung we'll go to you the thought that you had, so hold on to that. Rajiv, we'd love to hear from you.

RAJIV, CALLER: Hi, Brigid.

BRIGID: Hi.

RAJIV: Hi, Cali. The question I had was just I have noticing I've been working independently for so long, it's just second nature but I noticed more and more people thrown into this overnight they discover after a few weeks that they're missing those really tiny human interactions, the watercooler conversations, everything online is always very formal. How do we mitigate that? I wonder if Cali and Heejung with their work have come up with tips and techniques for people to do.

CALI: First, hi Raj. It's nice to see you. I love that question because I do think while we're in this phase where it's the safe at home where we're mostly remote, you really have to be much more intentional about how you're having some of those moments. Now I'm an extreme extrovert so I have to tell you I've talked to other extroverts who actually have just gone on Zoom, have Zoom open, and are just working together. They're not even talking, they're just like, hey, and that works. You can also have slack open and just be connecting people to slack if you're okay with the technology but start with where you are, don't start adopting all sorts of new ways to communicate.

You can even just pick up the phone and call people. However, this next phase that we go into, that's why people ask me, "Are we all going remote?" I don't think so. I think people still do want to be together but it'll have to be in a very intentional way in the workplace, not full time, I don't think. It'll be that hybrid model again, but in the meantime, be creative about how you are intentionally connecting with people to have those moments because Raj, you're right. People do need that.

BRIGID: Absolutely, so Heejung, let's give you the last word here.

HEEJUNG: All right. Just on Raj's point, we used up WhatsApp as well just as a casual conversation at work with some of my colleagues who are in larger companies setting but my husband who works in the smaller company even when they are working in the office because they had different offices with software engineers in different locations, they just always had a chat going and all sorts of things happening there.

One of the things I want to mention about when we go back what's going to happen, what's the next steps? One of the things we need to be worried or we got to be very cautious about especially employers is that what I've noticed is that we still need more data on this but a lot of the caregiving work, a lot of the additional housework burden have been falling on women and also is because employers in a way assume that we'll be falling on women.

I've heard stories about some women not being given the opportunity to work from home. I've heard a lot of those stories in the previous time before COVID work. That was one of the biggest reasons why employers did not let especially female-dominated workplaces but also women work from home even when their male counterparts were given the same opportunity.

Now due to this COVID virus, a lot of people were given the opportunity and I'm hoping that the employers now can see actually give women the opportunities to work from home so that they could actually manage. What happens is if employers don't see men and father, not just fathers, but men with all sorts of other families and friends who might need that care, not as carers, is that they don't give the people opportunities to have those discussions or have that reshaping their work to fulfill it.

Even if they want to, if their employers don't ever give them the opportunity they'll end up shifting that burden onto their female spouses and a lot of the women having had that double burden or triple burden if you even consider the emotional labor of having to worry about family members and worry about your children's well-being, they're going to be really not only conflicted but they might have to withdraw a lot of their labor market activities the longer the school closure and the COVID goes on, and it is a bit of a worry. Again, the key thing is that both men but also employers need to understand that that kind of responsibilities have to lie with both men and women.

BRIGID: Absolutely, and that is a great way to end this conversation. I think that's a really important point that workplaces and managers need to expect that, as Cali said, we are all the BBC dad and we all have caregiving, and that when we have workplace expectations that understand that and value care, that's when we can one potential really great opportunity to have real gender equality out of this in a really real way.

I want to thank Katie and Heejung and Cali for joining me today and having this great conversation. I want to thank all of the participants with your great quotes and comments and perspective. We do have some remote resources that we'll be sending out. Cali, I want to hear your principles and I want to learn them, so if we can get them from you we'll share those out as well.

I also want to thank my Better Life Lab team, The New America Events team, my producer David Schulman. Everybody's great. Thank you so much for helping me put this together. Next week we're going to be talking about childcare in the time of corona. We hope that you all will join us again. Thank you all. Wash your hands, and stay safe, and we'll get through this.