

BUSINESS

# World’s most distracting coworkers: kids

Parents working from home also have to toggle with demands of their children

By Cynthia Koons  
BLOOMBERG

On Monday, Amanda Goetz found herself stuck alone inside her 1,000-square-foot Manhattan apartment with three kids under 7. The coronavirus had canceled school for her 2-, 4- and 6-year-old and left her without her nanny to fill the gap. Meanwhile, Goetz, a VP in marketing at The Knot Worldwide, had her workday ahead of her.

One of her first tasks was a 90-minute conference call. An hour in, she was amazed with how well it was going, one child playing an iPad game and another doing an art project. Then, in a scene any parent of young children can relate to, a fight broke out between two of her kids over a Dr. Seuss book. “It was like the world was ending,” she said. Thankfully, she’d been on mute, but it didn’t make it any easier to focus on her meeting.

And so it goes in households across America where employees attempt to work remotely while managing children whose schools or day cares have been closed to prevent the community spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. Optimistic parents have created schedules with “academic time” and “creative time” to manage their children’s time. They’re also



John Moore / Getty Images

**Most workers in the U.S. can’t do their jobs remotely, but the swath that can aren’t operating under ideal conditions, especially if they have kids and full-time jobs.**

flocking to virtual learning programs that promise precious hours or even minutes of distraction. But a week into the new normal, many are already panicking over how to sustain round-the-clock child care and their workloads.

Most workers in the U.S. can’t do their jobs remotely, but the swath that can aren’t operating under ideal conditions, especially if they have kids and full-time jobs. By midweek, some 92,000 schools had closed or are planning to close in the U.S., 69 percent of the country’s public and private schools, according to the Corona-

virus and School Closures map from the independent K-12 news publication Education Week. That leaves at least 42.1 million students without a classroom. That doesn’t account for all the preschool and day-care-aged children now at home, too.

At best, workers will see a productivity dip, but some may have to step back from their jobs either partially or entirely. Congress passed a relief bill with paid leave for those home sick with the virus and allows workers in companies with fewer than 500 people to use a combination of unpaid days and reduced pay to care for children

who are stuck at home from school. The daily pay will be capped at \$200. It leaves about half of working Americans without relief, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“While I am happy to see protections for families, I am concerned that this doesn’t cover enough employees,” said Terri Rhodes, chief executive officer of Disability Management Employer Coalition. The Family Medical Leave Act, for example, covers any employer with 50 or more people, a bigger pool of workplaces.

During the best of times, work-

ing parents have to manage an imperfect child-care system. Day care can cost almost as much as rent, and school and day care hours don’t align with a 9-to-5 workday. A televised BBC interview of a father in Korea being interrupted by his dancing child and scooting baby became a viral sensation in 2017, as parents collectively laughed at the struggle of balancing children and work.

But with the probability of quarantines stretching weeks or months for many employees in single-parent households or dual-working-parent families, the humor of the situation is already starting to fade. Goetz got a surprise work call when she was trying to hold a morning meeting with her kids while they were eating their waffles. “Taking that call caused a full tailspin in the house,” she said, after being forced to pause an activity for her kids. “There are definitely some rules that need to be put in place.”

For now, the desperate are flocking to digital solutions. Age of Learning, maker of education programs called ABCmouse and ReadingIQ, has made its content free for families whose schools request access.

“There’s also this issue of a potential learning loss if they’re at home too long,” said Kathryn Green, a spokesperson for Age of Learning. The company has seen a tenfold surge in usage from the company’s own subscribers and an influx of new users, with high demand slowing ABCmouse’s site down multiple times in recent days, she said.

# The fragile system supplying food to world is under dangerous strain

By Millie Munshi, Megan Durisin and Corinne Gretler  
BLOOMBERG NEWS (TNS)

Global warehouses are stuffed with frozen cuts of pork, wheels of cheese and bags of rice. But as the coronavirus snarls logistical operations, the question becomes: How does all that food actually get to people?

Despite the inventories, grocery stores are looking almost apocalyptic with aisles of empty shelves. Panic buying has made it nearly impossible for retailers and suppliers to keep up with the unprecedented spike in demand. In just one example of the constraints, there’s a finite number of trucks that can load up at warehouses to bring in the chicken or ice cream or toilet paper that people want to buy.

There are limits on how much time can be spent stocking shelves or filling rail cars. Then there’s this weird knock-on from the outbreak in China: Fewer goods were shipped out of Asia last month, and now there aren’t enough empty containers in countries like Canada to send peas out to the world.

“There’s a complicated web of interactions we don’t often think about that’s all part of the food-supply chain: truckers, rail cars, shipping, plant workers,” said Jayson Lusk, head of the department of agricultural economics at Purdue University. There are “big buckets of possible disruption,” and it’s possible the whole thing “is more fragile than we think it is,” he said.

That’s just the start of it. As the virus spreads and cases mount, there are seemingly countless ways the food system will be tested and strained in the coming weeks and months.

There’s the possibility of worker shortages as employees are forced to stay home because they’re ill or they’ve come into contact with someone who is. As schools close, plants may slow production because parents need to prioritize child care. Restrictions on migrant labor are increasing all over the world, stifling workers who are key to making sure tomatoes get picked and slaughterhouses run efficiently. Port closures and limits on



John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune

**Panic buying has led to high-volume purchases of certain food items, resulting in a shortage.**

trade could end up disrupting the flow of supplies and ingredients.

“We do not see a supply shock in the sense of the availability,” said Abdolreza Abbassian, a senior economist at the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization. “But there could be a supply shock in terms of logistics, not being able to move it from point A to point B. ... It’s that uncertainty that right now is the biggest danger.”

Farmer, retail and trucker groups in countries including Brazil, the U.S. and France are ringing the alarm over major disruptions that can develop from quarantine and lock-down conditions, along with the possibility of a labor crunch. Government officials in Australia, Germany and Kazakhstan are worried about strains amid panic-buying and logistical hurdles.

A drawn-out crisis could lead to “real shortages” starting with fruit and vegetables before impacting staples, German Agriculture Minister Julia Kloeckner said.

For consumers, the fallout will vary depending on where in the world they are. In the U.S., it could mean your favorite brand of potato chips is out of stock, but basic staples like rice or bread are available. In countries dependent on food imports, the situation could be more dire.

In every part of the world, you’ll probably be paying more for food than you did just a few months, or even weeks, ago.

“It’s inevitable that you’ll see food prices go up,” said Adnan Durrani, chief executive officer of frozen-food company Saffron Road, who’s worked in the food industry for three decades. “This is unlike any crisis

I’ve ever seen. If this continues for another two months or longer, the stress on food supplies is going to become more acute.”

At Saffron Road, which makes frozen entrees like chicken tikka masala and vegetable pad thai, Durrani has been increasing production for two months to beef up inventories in anticipation of a demand boom because of the virus. But even he didn’t expect to see sales explode as they have in the last several weeks as Americans rush to stock their homes and empty out grocery stores. Sales at key retailers have more than doubled in some cases, he said.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has safety inspectors at all manufacturing facilities. Employee temperatures are being checked to make sure workers with symptoms aren’t coming in, he said.

“We haven’t seen blowback from that yet, but it could be impacted at some point,” Durrani said.

Christine McCracken, an analyst at Rabobank, estimates that some U.S. meat companies are already seeing a 20 percent to 30 percent slowdown in processing lines as employees stay home to recover from illness or take care of family members.

There’s also the whole intricate way that food moves across the world, which is likely to be thrown off balance by port closures, government regulations and fears of contamination. Many countries have positioned agricultural production toward exporting a few key products, rather than for food sufficiency. That makes people within those nations more vulnerable if imports slow.

Shipments of things like almonds into Italy have already been postponed.

The flip side is that in some instances a handful of countries, or even fewer, make up the bulk of exportable supplies of certain commodities. Disruptions to those shipments would have global ramifications.

Christian Gloor, a managing director at Zurich-based trading house Heinz & Co., cites Serbia as an example of the latter. The nation recently put bans on its exports of sunflower oil. “If several countries start doing that, the market will go crazy,” Gloor said.

Vulnerability will also be heightened in those countries that had food problems even before the virus outbreak, Abbassian of the U.N. said, citing areas like sub-Saharan Africa. With currencies plunging against the dollar, some nations will also see their buying power limited.

And of course, this is all happening against the background of climate change and the unpredictable weather patterns that have been wreaking havoc on global food production. Drought has already been hampering crop output this year in parts of Uruguay, New Zealand and Vietnam.

Matt Billings is a fourth-generation farmer in California. His operations at Billings Ranches go from grove to spoon – harvesting almond crops, processing the nuts and manufacturing them into AYO Almondmilk Yogurt. Every part of that process is being impacted by the virus.

Workers on his 1,000 acres of almond groves can’t access enough of the face masks they use on a daily basis to protect against things like dust. Processing and manufacturing is starting to slow as worker absences creep up, and he expects that will likely get worse. In-person meetings with stores set up to market the yogurt have been canceled or postponed indefinitely.

“As farmers, we’ll figure out a way to get through this. But there’s probably a million different ways that this is impacting us, and we probably don’t even know the full extent of that,” Billings said. “Everything you think of as business as usual is just evaporating.”



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